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National Service camps a mirror of the outside world

Brendan Pereira

HERE is another reason why Malaysians should look closely at what's happening inside the National Service camps: the roller-coaster ride there is a microcosm of everyday life.

The fights. The traces of gangsterism. The lax security. The cavalier attitude of some youngsters towards authority. The number of drop-outs. The cliques built along racial lines.

All these form the mosaic of Malaysian life.

For now, at least, the question should be: How can we tackle some of the problems that have cropped up?

And chief among these has to be racial polarisation. The idea of National Service was conceived at a seminar on patriotism last year.

The participants felt that something drastic needed to be done to drag Malaysian youth from their racial enclaves and make them identify themselves more as Malaysians first, rather than Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Someone mooted the National Service idea from the floor and it was supported by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and embraced by many Malaysians.

Everything then moved at break-neck speed. Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak was put in charge of the programme, and in February, Malaysia's National Service programme was rolled out.

In between, the programme was scaled down due to costs. Instead of 450,000 trainees, only 85,000 would take part. Instead of a six-month stint, it was short-ened to three months.

Parents visiting their children at the camps have been struck by the fact that trainees seem to group along ethnic lines. The few trainees who write journals in newspapers also seem genuinely amazed at sharing space with people of different skin colour and religion.

And yet, nobody should be surprised about racial polarisation in the camps. It is all around. Has been for years.

A letter writer to the New Straits Times wondered: "Does anyone really believe that three months of National Service will instil in the trainees the virtues of discipline, racial integration and patriotism that 11 years of schooling has failed to do?"

A soon-to-be-published 2003 survey on ethnic relations in 12 public universities shows that most undergraduates would prefer not sharing rooms with someone of another race.

More than 7,000 students were polled on a series of questions to find out whether ethnic consideration was the single most important factor in decision-making.

Findings suggest that barriers between the races have broken down, but undergraduates still prefer moving in their own racial circle.

Dr Mansor Mohd Noor of Universiti Utara Malaysia, who conducted the survey, said: "We need to do something. Otherwise, the drifting away of the races will continue.

"We need to reinvent the national school system."

The seeds of division are planted early.

Most parents send their children to vernacular kindergartens, where only one race dominates the enrolment. This pattern of accidental segregation continues all along the education staircase.

An indication of the growing ethnic divide: In 1964, 98 per cent of

Chinese children went to Malaysia's national schools; today, the number is five per cent, the remainder opting for Chinese or private education.

The shift was due in part to a perceived decline in the quality of national education, and in part to the switch to the Malay language as a medium of instruction, from English.

The disappearance of Chinese from national schools has created a cleaving of the races that begins in primary school. National schools have now become over-whelmingly Malay.

The number of Indian students attending national schools has also decreased over the years.

Compounding matters is the trend of Malay parents sending their children to religious schools. The end result: many Malays, Chinese and Indians are growing up without the regular interaction between races, which used to be norm.

Gerakan's Datuk S. Vijayaratnam said: "With regular interaction between races comes respect and tolerance for each other's religious beliefs and culture."

He is spot on.

A university professor marking examination scripts was shocked when a few of his students believed that Malaysia was not an Islamic state because there were churches and other places of worship here.

The three-month National Service training is the equivalent of last-minute cramming for an examination. Sometimes it works, but most of the time, the results are a true reflection of the amount of work put in.

A better way of tackling racial polarisation is by making national school attractive for everyone. One suggestion is to make Mandarin and Tamil compulsory in these schools, thereby encouraging Chinese and Indian parents to place their charges there.

Chinese language teachers can also be brought in from China.

The Government is trying to make national schools attractive for Malay parents who want their children to get a better religious education. The Islamic syllabus is being upgraded to include compulsory Arabic language courses for Muslim students and Quran recital for primary school children.

There are also plans to have comprehensive religious education outside school hours.

Only when there is a true mix of students attending national schools, will it be realistic to talk about tackling racial polarisation. Until then, expect Malaysian youth to behave like strangers.

Strange was how two trainees at the UiTM campus in Shah Alam felt when they came face to face. One is a step away from going abroad for his education and the other has not seen the inside of a classroom for three years.

The latter is a drop-out and a likely candidate for the special camp being set up for National Service delinquents. Again, dropping out of school at a young age is not a rarity in Malaysia.

A study by the MCA showed that 24 per cent of students from Chinese primary schools did not complete their secondary education. They work as waiters, in factories and stay on the margins of society.

National Service Council chairman Datuk Ahmad Fawzi Mohd Basri believes that excluding this group will help reduce the number of unsavoury incidents in the camps. His idea must be resisted.

A reader of the NST wrote felt that the drop-outs should be encouraged to take part in National Service. "Shouldn't they be targeted for National Service so that they gain some of the virtues the programme is supposed to bring? If these very youths are marginalised, might they not turn out to be the gangsters, criminals and drug addicts of tomorrow," he added.

Finally, some parents were troubled over reports that some trainees were

members of gangs, had smuggled knives and other small weapons into the camp and were involved in extortion. They wondered which catchment these trainees were picked from.

Here is the news. They came from squatter colonies, middle-class homes and even those with crystal chandeliers.

The latest statistics show that juvenile crime rose by 22.7 per cent last year over the previous year. Last year, there were 3,627 cases or an average of 10 cases a day, compared with 2,955 cases or eight cases a day in 2002.

And judging by the 601 cases reported in the first two months of this year, the upward trend is likely to continue.

The number of youths and students arrested also rose with 5,326 youths arrested last year compared with 4,200 in 2002.

So what's happening in camp is only a mirror of the outside world.