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Daunting task to check polarisation in national schools

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OUR society has become increasingly racially polarised in recent years and nowhere is it more evident than in the national education system.

There was a time when national schools were a microcosm of society at large, places where children of all races studied, played and matured together.

But no longer. These days, national schools are overwhelmingly Malay with a mere sprinkling of Chinese and Indians.

That is because some 90 per cent of Malaysian Chinese children are enrolled in Chinese vernacular schools while almost half of all Indian children are in Tamil medium schools.

And, as if that were not bad enough, more and more Malay parents are also opting to send their children to privately-run Islamic schools.

Clearly, this sad state of affairs has serious implications for the future of this multiracial, multicultural, multilingual and multireligious country.

The situation is now so critical that the Prime Minister has taken it upon himself to put matters aright.

Not only has Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad appointed former Education Ministry Director-General Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor to head a committee to restructure the entire national school system, but he is also going to chair it personally.

The committee will be working on the creation of a new curriculum for national schools that takes into account the needs of students of all ethnic backgrounds.

And, to ensure that the committee does a thoroughly professional job of it, Dr Mahathir has not set a specific time frame for it to complete its mission.

Instead, he is giving the committee as much time as it deems necessary to come up with workable solutions.

"It will take time. There are many considerations as we want to ensure the syllabus for Islamic studies in national schools is in line with the true teachings of Islam," Dr Mahathir said.

He believes that some Muslim parents are sending their children to private Islamic schools because they feel guilty about not having attended religious schools themselves, while others are convinced that it will cleanse them of their sins and win them a place in paradise.

He says the Malays will not find it necessary to place their children in privately-run religious schools if enough emphasis is given to Islamic studies in national schools.

Dr Mahathir also stresses that he does not want Chinese and Indian students to stay away from national schools because of the perception that they are too Islamic or are only meant for the Malays.

"We also do not want Chinese or Indian families rejecting national schools and sending their children to national-type schools, thinking that national schools are only for the Malays and are emphasising Islam.

"At the same time, we also do not want the Malays to resort to Sekolah Agama Rakyat because they claim that religious studies taught in national schools are insufficient," adds Dr Mahathir.

Universiti Malaya Education Faculty Principals' Institute director Prof Datin Dr Rahimah Ahmad says some Malay parents are enrolling their children in private religious schools because they want their children to

grow up in a thoroughly Islamic environment that gives them the opportunity to imbibe all the right values.

"I think many parents feel that three or four periods of agama are not enough. They fear that national schools are only teaching Islam as a subject rather than as a way of life.

"They want their children to be in an environment which enhances traditional Malay and Islamic values.

"But sometimes what you want and the results you get are quite different," she adds.

Rahimah says the preference among some Malays for private religious schools may also be due, in part, to increased affluence.

"As society gets more affluent, parents want to have more alternatives. Fearful of negative influences from the environment around them, Malay parents don't want their children to fall into bad company.

"They don't mind paying so that their children will learn traditional Malay and Islamic values."

Rahimah also observes that Malay parents are put off by the fact that national schools are overcrowded and teachers have little opportunity to give their charges personal attention.

"It's not because Malay parents don't like national schools or because they don't want their children to mix with Chinese and Indians. It's because they want the best for their children. They want them to get personal attention from the teacher."

"For the Malays... `It's not that I love Caesar less but that I love Rome more.'"

"There are an average of 45 children in each classroom and each period is 40 minutes. So each child gets less than one minute of personal attention from the teacher.

"But if you have money, the classes in private schools are much smaller," she adds.