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Unshackling the Malay-Muslim mind

THE committee to restructure the national school system has the Herculean task of making it attractive to all races in the country. That the national primary school is no longer the school of choice is underscored not just by its enrolling only two per cent of Chinese and four per cent of Indian pupils, but also by the large numbers of Malays who have deserted it in favour of religious schools. Thus, the challenge for the committee is to formulate a system that not only liberates the school culture from the conservative Malay-Muslim ethos, which suffocates it and turns off non-Muslims, but also to find an alternative model of Islamic education that would satisfy Malays.

To appeal to non-Muslims, the committee will have to consider introducing Mandarin and Tamil in national schools because these are important markers of identity to the respective communities. More non-Malays should be appointed to decision-making positions in both the education departments and schools to provide different multicultural perspectives as counterpoints to the prevailing mono-ethnic, religious viewpoint characterising schools at present.

In refashioning Islamic education, the committee should look beyond the existing models of Islamic education in the country - and abroad - because, almost without exception, they have been responsible for forging the manacles that have shackled Malay-Muslims into ossified, orthodox frames of mind. The progressive Islam that the Prime Minister advocates does not feature with them because they have been shaped by the world-views of obscurantist traditionalist ulama.

Given the enormity of the undertaking, it is understandable that the committee has been given no time-frame because, as Dr Mahathir pointed out, "it will take time" as "there are many considerations" to be taken into account. However, it should work as speedily as possible to come up with the right formula to stop the national school system from tearing young Malaysians apart and to bring them together in a tolerant multilingual, multi-cultural tomorrow.