

Malott painted only half the picture of racism
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John Mallot has waded into the debate on Malaysian race relations with half an analysis when obviously a fuller one would have been of greater service to the discourse. Granted, his piece was intended more than anything else to be a critique of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's handling of the current situation in the country.

However, in doing so, he has highlighted only the non-Malay responses to what is described as Malay racism. This is very misleading and the reason for my saying that he had written only half an analysis of the situation.

A more robust and honest assessment of race relations in Malaysia would take into account the fact that what appears to be Malay racism is in itself a response to non-Malay racism against Malays.

Yes, two wrongs do not make a right. But as the saying goes, "It takes both hands to clap". That is to say, Mallot's article runs the risk of completely absolving non-Malays from any responsibility in the racial predicament that the country is in. That is nothing less than avoiding reality and counter-productive to any effort to improve race relations in Malaysia. Malays have their grievances, too, against the Chinese. The fact that they seldom get aired does not make those grievances any less legitimate or valid.

Education for the very young is one obvious area where racist attitudes can be nipped in the bud. The importance for racial integration to begin at a young age is recognised, so much so that in the 1960s and 70s, the US supreme court sanctioned the forced busing of students in order to break down the racial segregation between white and African-American schools. That was in America.

In Malaysia, a different approach towards early education was adopted. In concession to the non-Malays, especially the Chinese, vernacular education was retained as part of the national school system. The liberalism was well-intentioned and in line with the spirit of Malaysia's constitution whereby minority communities are given the right to use and develop their own languages.

In practice, and perhaps this was unforeseen by Malaysia's founding fathers, the national-vernacular dichotomy in the school system has resulted in precisely the kind of early-age racial segregation that the busing laws, upheld by the U.S. supreme court justices, sought to eradicate in America. While desegregation of schools may or may not result in greater racial integration, segregation virtually guarantees that there will be no racial integration.

The racial polarisation that we see so shamelessly capitalised on by politicians in Malaysia today is partly, if not wholly, attributable to that segregation in the school system. When you see not a few non-Malays unashamedly, even proudly, declaring that they cannot properly speak Malay, the national language, you can bet your life that these are the ones who graduated from the vernacular schools. This is forty-four years after Malay was declared the national language.

The Chinese community jealously guard the existence of the vernacular schools, implicitly

reinforcing the message of their racial and cultural separateness and exclusivity, but yet insist that they should not be looked at as the 'other' by Malays. For many Malays, including this writer, that smacks of having your cake and eating it, too.

Often the excuse given by the Chinese for insisting that their children go to vernacular schools and for more such schools to be built is the poor quality of national schools. Surely the solution is not to build more racially-segregated schools but to join hands with Malays and Indians in insisting and ensuring that the quality of national schools be improved for the benefit of children of all ethnicities. Perhaps that is considered such an outlandishly 'out-of-the-racial box' thinking that I have never heard any Chinese make that call.

Any sincere and honest effort to improve race relations has to take cognizance of the fact that racism exists in and racial discrimination is practised, to one extent or another, by all the races in Malaysia.

However, my own honest observation is that the Chinese never want to admit or acknowledge their own racism against Malays or other races.

Official and overt discriminatory policies can easily be criticised as institutionalised racism but covert racial discriminations by their very nature are harder to pinpoint. That does not mean they don't exist or any less invidious than the former.

When a "Mandarin speakers only" requirement is stated in job advertisements, even for jobs which do not conceivably require much language skills, that surely is equivalent to saying "Chinese only". But you will be hard put to find any Chinese who would admit that the practice is racially discriminatory.

When Malaysia's most famous blogger, Raja Petra Kamaruddin, related some years ago in his blog how Chinese businesses ganged up to ensure the failure of his motorcycle dealership, none of his Chinese readers cared to acknowledge that he was the victim of racism. His was probably just the tip of the iceberg of similar cases.

And it's always with a mixture of amusement and sadness when I read the many comments on the Internet from non-Malays complaining about the racial policies of the Malaysian government which scarcely conceal their own racism towards Malays in general.

If Mr Mallot doubts the truth of what I am saying, he should read the comments that followed the publication of his recent article in Malaysian news portals.

To many Malays, given the refusal of non-Malays to even acknowledge their own racism, the prospect of a rollback in whatever few affirmative action policies left on the plate appears to be concessions which are unlikely to be matched in a similar spirit by the Chinese in the spheres that they predominate, namely the commercial and economic.

If Najib can be accused of pandering to militant Malay groups, Chinese political leaders in the government and opposition, too, can be accused of pandering to their racial constituency.

In my lifetime, I have yet to hear of any Chinese leader asking that the Chinese to join in and contribute towards the betterment of national schools.

I have yet to hear of one calling for Chinese businesses to assist or at least not to gang up against their fellow non-Chinese businesses or to not practice discrimination in their

employment policies.

Mallot failed to take into account one side of the equation in his brief exposition of the race relations situation in Malaysia. Hopefully, I have managed to redress that and allow a better understanding of why things are the way they are in Malaysia.

It would have been more gracious of Mallot if he had used his relationship with Malaysians during his tenure as a diplomat to impart his country's experience and firm action with regard to vigilance against the emergence of the evil that is racism, than to make things worse by dogmatically adopting the attitude that sympathising with the minority makes one righteous.

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