

54th Merdeka in the shadow of ethnic distrust
Malaysiakini.com
August 31, 2011

As Malaysians mark the 54th anniversary of the country's independence, the usual pomp and pageantry comes at a time of increasingly tense ethnic and religious ties.

Malaysia prides itself on its thriving multicultural society and the freedom of religion against the backdrop of a majority-Muslim population, but racial tensions have always simmered under the surface.

A survey conducted by independent polling group Merdeka Centre this year revealed that the number of Malaysians who felt that ethnic relations were good had dropped to 66 percent from 78 percent five years ago.

The poll also showed a particularly high level of distrust among Malaysians of different ethnic backgrounds.

"In our view, the survey findings reflect a significant shift in Malaysian public thinking - the optimism of the mid-2000s appears to have given way to increased insecurities and distrust, which is in part due to the current competitive political environment," the centre said this month after its survey results were announced.

Race and religion have always been sensitive issues, but interracial clashes in recent years have exacerbated the growing ethnic divide.

Last year, the Home Ministry appealed against a High Court decision to allow non-Muslims to use the word 'Allah', a ruling that had riled most Muslims.

Metro Tabernacle church after the firebombingThe case led to at least eight churches being attacked, including one in Kuala Lumpur city centre which was firebombed.

No casualties were reported in any of the attacks, but many observers noted that the incident brought to light the fragile and tense relationships within multi-religious Malaysia.

Despite Prime Minister Najib Razak's stated commitment to closing the racial divide since he took office in 2009, Malaysia's political, education and economic structures continue to be deeply entrenched along racial and religious lines.

The worrying level of ethnic tensions of late has been blamed largely on irresponsible politicians playing the race card.

'1Malaysia just lip service'

Government policies on almost every area - from education to economic and electoral reform - continue to be "articulated from an ethnic framework, rather than seeking to find commonalities," said Denison Jayasooria, a lead researcher in ethnic studies in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

"This articulation and the attempt to champion ethnic policies has had an impact on contemporary Malaysian society," Denison said.

A poll conducted by the Merdeka Centre in August also revealed that Najib's popularity has suffered, with his approval rating dropping 6 percentage points over a period of three months from May.

While the rising cost of living and continued concerns of a high crime rate were some of the major reasons for the drop, observers noted that Najib's handling of racial and religious issues in recent times may have also contributed to his lagging support.

His '1Malaysia' campaign, which aims to break down racial divisions and create a single, unifying Malaysian identity, has been criticised as hypocritical vote-grabbing after his ruling coalition suffered badly in the 2008 general elections.

"I don't believe in Najib's 1Malaysia. It's just lip service," said journalist Maria Hasan.

"The reality on the ground is that there is an increasingly wide racial divide," she said.

Denison said that while Najib had put in place positive reform policies, he continued to "remain silent" in addressing racially tinged statements coming from members of his ruling Umno.

But despite the grim outlook for ethnic and religious harmony, Denison said he remains hopeful that the growing number of moderate Malaysians would respond rationally to sensitive situations.

"In the long run, Malaysians will reject extremism of all kinds," he said. "The Malaysian spirit ... will draw us towards balance."

- dpa

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/174494>