

## **Our school children are sacrificial lambs**

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COMMENT Over the past year three controversies have arisen from regressive policy decisions of the Education Ministry, which have set our educational system backwards.

These revolve around:

1. The teaching of science and mathematics in Malay instead of English for students in Form 4
2. The use of 'Interlok' as a compulsory textbook in schools.
3. The decision to make history a compulsory subject as well as a pass requirement for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) certificate

All three - though simmering for some years now - are rapidly coming to a head during the tenure of Muhyiddin Yassin as education minister.

The controversies are not over minor or insignificant issues in the national education system. They are not sparked off by politicians with an axe to grind or by groups wanting to score points against the minister. They do not relate to narrow communal interests nor are they espoused by extremist organisations having their own agendas.

Rather they are the concern of parents and educators from all communities at grassroots as well as at mainstream society level.

They involve important pedagogical principles and ultimately, they raise the key question of whether the future of our younger generation is being made the sacrificial lamb for narrow political and bureaucratic interests.

Upon their wise resolution will rest the ability of our school children to compete with the rest of the world as well as the knowledge that they will receive at school which will shape their adult mindset and values.

Teaching of science and mathematics in English

In the case of the campaign led by the Parents Action Group for Education (Page), the minister has not only refused to meet with its leaders but has also stated that providing parents and students the choice to use English "will result in chaos in our educational system".

There is an unfair attempt to beat down the campaigners and the more than 100,000 online supporters with wild claims about the potential negative impact of a policy reversal.

In fact, it is the ministry's policy decision to insist on Malay only that is causing chaos and even worst, condemning students - especially Malay students - to a bleak future in undermining their capacity and ability to progress in an English language-dominated global system.

'Interlok': Crude and rude propaganda

In the case of 'Interlok', the minister has similarly refused to meet with the campaign organisers led by the National Interlok Action Team (Niat), who have argued that the novel is unfit for use by schools even going by the standards and guidance on compulsory school texts issued by the ministry.

The clear danger that the book poses in heightening crude racial (and cultural) stereotyping, bias and prejudice and its threat to a harmonious communal understanding among our young has been completely ignored with the decision to proceed with the book as a text for the literature and compulsory Bahasa Melayu language paper in the SPM examination.

The book's biased understanding and unmitigated prejudice against minority races has already legitimised the name-calling of pariah and Cina babi in secondary schools, with several cases ending up not only at the discipline master's door but in the local police station as well.

The ministry's stubborn and unreasonable position has left Niat - now joined by over 60 other multiracial civil society organisations - no choice but to take their appeal directly to the Malay rulers and to intensify and make national the campaign to remove 'Interlok' from the school use.

#### History as a tool for brainwashing

With the History syllabus review that is taking place, it is not clear whether this is another whitewash and public relations exercise aimed at preserving the ketuanan Melayu and Islamic orientation of history teaching, or whether the ministry is seriously embarking on a reform process that will see a balanced and representative history (both Malaysian and world) as the outcome, and with racial and religious bias and prejudice reduced to a minimum, if not eradicated from the syllabus and textbooks.

Meanwhile concerned parents, educators and civil society organisations are not holding their breath, or thinking that the swing of the pendulum back to a liberal, progressive and culturally balanced history education will happen naturally.

Over 10,000 signatories have signed a petition calling for reform of History education and the group, Campaign for a Truly Malaysian History or Kempen Sejarah Malaysia Sebenar (KemSMS) has been hard at work preparing and collating scholarly reports and articles for presentation to the authorities and public.

#### Parochial politician or principled leader?

In all of these developments, we have seen vacillation and procrastination by the education minister rather than real and visionary leadership.

Instead of ensuring that our national educational system can provide the right kind of educational knowledge and skills, Muhyiddin, and the bureaucratic-academic-political coalition of policy makers advising him and calling the shots, are burdening our school children with language handicaps and distorted views of the world, our society and themselves that will negatively impact the children and the country.

There is still time for the minister to reverse the two policy decisions announced and to ensure that the History teaching reform process has substance and is not an exercise in futility.

For this to happen he has to reject the guidance from his out-of touch advisers and supporters and take a different tack on the three controversies. He must take heed of the public and professional feedback provided to which the ministry has turned a deaf ear.

The choice is there for Muhyiddin to seal his reputation as a politician playing up to narrow and parochial interests or as a principled leader who has the best interests of our school children and their parents at heart.

All stakeholders need to encourage him to make the right decisions that can help raise the quality of our educational system.