

## **Ending preferential treatment**

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**By Eric Loo**

Hamid and I often hung out behind the school canteen during recess. He had mee rebus and cola. I had bread and water. Hamid was richer. He wore a watch and came to school by car. I cycled. Hamid's uniform was always tucked in, crisply starched. Just like his hair, which stayed in place even after PE. Tancho was the hair cream in '71.

Hamid was the only Malay in a class of 35. Bumiputera was not part of our lingo then. More than half were Cantonese, a handful were Tamils (who excelled in PE), Eurasians (the pop singers) and Sikhs (the butt of class pranks). We all got along well, despite the occasional jousts and racial sex jokes that only hormonal schoolboys could conjure.

NONEThen came the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination. The majority of my friends didn't make it past Grade 2. Hamid and I did. That was when our life took separate paths. He went on to Lower Six. I didn't, although Hamid knew I had one distinction and more high credits in all eight subjects than him except for Bahasa Malaysia, which I scraped through.

I enrolled late in a private school after weeks of desperate searching. We had untrained and uninspiring teachers who came and went. But two years of frequent socials and ad hoc studies saw some of us government school dropouts go on to university. A few went to New Zealand and Australia, where Malaysians could study for free under the Colombo Plan. I went to USM Penang.

Hamid might have completed his HSC, got a government scholarship, gone overseas and came home to one of the many jobs offered to him on a platter. He'd probably be among today's bumiputera elites.

Preferential treatment can demean some

I knew Hamid to be studious, introspective and sensitive in a Jesuit high school environment, where Malays were a minority. Today, he may wonder what he'd be if he was born a Chinese or an Indian. Yes, preferential treatment had lifted him. But, he feels, in the eyes of his non-Malay friends, it also demeans what he has achieved from his own hard work, his intellect, his talent.

Hamid can see clearly now how the 'For Bumiputeras Only' policy has gnawed at the foundation of what could be a progressive united states of Malaysia, one that Umno's first president, Onn Ja'afar, attempted to build, unsuccessfully, in 1950 when he proposed to open the party to non-Malays.

one million youth gathering in putrajaya crowdUmno's reactionary politics today and imagined fear of the 'Others', rooted in its Persekutuan Tanah Melayu mindset of the 1950s, have so corrupted a culture of patronage and lowered the standards of public accountability that they have created a polity of bumiputera, raised and taught to see non-Malays as a 'kaum pendatang' rather than as fellow citizens with a shared destiny. I know many of my Malay friends and colleagues completely reject Umno's racialised worldview.

Reading the quotidian online reports of Malaysian politics, I don't remember it being so bad 50 years ago when I played guli and gasing with my kampung Malay and Indian friends. That age of innocence in the early 60s was soon sullied by the drips and drabs of racial politics with each passing year - from 1957 to 1969 under Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tan Cheng Lock and VT Sambanthan, when all communities were seen to be somewhat 'equal', but under Malay authority; to the rise of Malay hegemony, implementation of the New Economic Policy and institutionalisation of preferential treatment policies from 1969 to the late 1990s.

Since the turn of the 21st century to the present day, we witness the very vocal Umno apparatchiks and incumbents reasserting Malay rights, Islamic values and Ketuanan Melayu, while the government attempts to project Malaysia to the world as a clean, progressive, harmonious, multiracial, knowledge-based society and liberalised economy.

Morally wrong to discriminate and deny

Wherever and whoever Hamid is now, he could be amazed by this cycle of paradoxes. But, he can choose to lie with the ruling class, live and prosper with the preferential system and see his children continue to reap the privileges as he did when he was 17. Or, he can choose to walk with his fellow citizens and admit the Malays have had a good ride, that it's time to rein in, review and reinvent a better political and socio-economic system for all Malaysians to excel.

While it is only right to give disadvantaged groups a hand up to start them off, Hamid knows it is morally wrong to discriminate and deny on racial and religious grounds. No longer should admissions to selective schools and universities, employment and career prospects in the public sector, and access to government scholarships be determined by race but by reason and merit. There should be minimum university admission requirements set by an independent body of academicians. Standards should not be lowered to admit a particular racial group to, for example, medical studies and the hard sciences, just to meet the racial quota.

NONETo continue the quota system is to perpetuate the notion that bumiputera applicants are less capable, which may not be completely the case. I know of Malay friends who are respectable public intellectuals. But, to force a numerical representation of racial groups in the profession is to cause further disastrous consequences, as we can see in the dismal state in our public hospitals, clinical practices, schools and university education and in the public sector.

My observations are not new though. I have read the people's angst in their letters to editors and musings in their blogs. My point is that where millions have benefited from more than 40 years of 'For Bumiputeras Only' policies, with many more waiting in line, it would be a losing battle to demand that these privileges be withdrawn. Fundamental change can only occur from within us, from the way we think, which affects the way we feel and act.

Only when Hamid and the bumiputera polity understand and feel a moral need to give up some, not all, but some of their privileges to give their non-Malay neighbours a fair shake will we see real reforms happening. Otherwise, every strident clamour for change will receive - as it has all these years - an equally strident resistance and determination from the bumiputeras to protect their turf.

Meanwhile, the demand for change by non-Malays from outside the system will continue to be framed by the mainstream media and Umno as security threats to the 'national order'. And, they have the apparatus to shut you up. Working with Hamid and his people seems like a worthy alternative to hankering from the fringe and grating on the gates of power.

We may not be able to change where the political wind blows. But we can adjust the reformasi sails to reach our larger goal - to bridge the racial divide and rebuild a society where those who have lots will willingly help those who have none.

We do not become united by spinning vacuous Malaysia Boleh and 1Malaysia epithets, just as we do not become a public intellectual by buying esoteric texts and placing them on the bookshelves just for show. Real change comes from within. Hence, to enact change, Malay elites like Hamid, who have benefited greatly from the preferential system, must choose to walk the streets with the people's movement, and act to ensure the government cleans up its cabinet, purges the system of cronies, sacks the corrupt, self-serving and incompetent bureaucrats, and ultimately revokes those policies that divide rather than unite Malaysians.

It's doesn't take much thinking to know that human relationships are built on the Golden Rule of doing

unto others how we'd like others to do unto us. Imagine what it'd be like if Chinese, Malay and Indian politicians shift their frame of reference to internalise this 'ethics of reciprocity'. We'll all be having the right conversations today. After all, we, the common folk on the streets, get along well, just like me and my buddy, Hamid, in high school.

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