

My response to Rafizi Ramli
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"Diversity and independence are important because the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and contest, not consensus or compromise."

- James Surowiecki (The Wisdom of Crowds)

COMMENT I would like to thank the honourable gentleman from Pandan for responding to my comment piece on his response to Dr Lim Teck Ghee's dissatisfaction with his (Rafizi's) stand on Titas (Islamic and Asian Civilisation Studies).

As someone who has had his fair share of heckling from the comment section of Malaysiakini, the best I can offer Rafizi is to remain true to his principles and articulate his agenda without fear or favour.

I would also like to state for the record that my criticisms of this issue should in no way be construed as an attack on Rafizi's record of service to the oppositional forces in this country. As with most issues in the alternative media, everything seems to be reduced to a simple black and white duality. I may not agree with the gentleman from Pandan on this issue but there is whole range of issues that we do agree on.

Please keep in mind that the same caveat applies to this response as it does the previous piece; that this opinion is my own. Let me start with a point of agreement. I do not have any issue with the idea of cross learning in a multicultural society. The main issue of my piece was the manner in which Rafizi chose to engage with Lim's criticisms.

NONEFirst off, Rafizi (right) is right not to feel offended by my remark that his response was "symptomatic of the intellectual poverty of many in the Malay intelligentsia". This is because anytime the anti-Malay/Islam rhetorical weapon is used (especially against someone with a public record of activism on behalf of that community) it does display a lack of depth and a willingness to engage.

I choose my words carefully, I said "many" not "all". In my pieces I have referenced Dr Azly Rahman, Dr Azmi Sharom, Dr Shad Saleem Faruqi, Dr Nasir Hashim, Said Zahari, Nurul Izzah Anwar, Amir Muhammad, M Bakri Musa, Zaid Ibrahim, Art Harun, Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, Burhanuddin al-Helmy (a former Kuala

Besut seat holder) and Raja Petra Kamarudin, amongst others. I may not necessarily agree with everything they say but I have used what they say as a starting point or (departure point) for my own perspective on certain subjects.

'Irresponsible quarters'

Rafizi may think that the choice of my words would be used by "irresponsible quarters" to fuel the divide in this country but the reality is that those irresponsible forces to suit their own agendas would subvert my words and indeed any reasoned argument. This is why it is imperative that politicians like Rafizi who wish for a better tomorrow, desist from using the rhetorical weapons of those irresponsible quarters.

Similarly, the remarks applied to Rafizi hinting at his supposed Umno pedigree in lieu of addressing the issues raised is the kind of partisan nonsense that further makes dialogue even more difficult. Ad hominem like these are the kind of bloviating excuses in the "halal" bak kut teh vein.

NONERafizi may think that Lim's (right) objectivity when it comes to Titas has been compromised because of Umno's decade's long malfeasances but it was Rafizi's own words that Lim cited which demonstrated his crude political opportunism. In the piece, I responded to here is what Rafizi said: "We cannot reject the subject politically as it would create the perception that non-Muslims totally reject Islam."

I did find it odd though that Rafizi welcomed open debate and criticism but warned component members of Pakatan Rakyat that "to tread carefully on the Titas issue in order not to be seen as anti-Islam. He said Pakatan should have an open stand on this matter and not speak as if portraying the interest of a particular race."

Rafizi's response though gives me to the opportunity to add my own voice to the chorus on this issue that was perhaps muted in my piece defending Lim. Rafizi begins with the premise "I do not see anything wrong if we compel our youngsters to learn more from each other and about each other." However, his example of his tertiary level studies does not support this premise.

Rafizi chose to embark on a course that brought him into contact with another culture. Boarding schools in England like everywhere else are subject to their own traditions and you embrace these traditions by voluntarily enrolling in these establishment. In this case, Rafizi did not learn anything by compulsion by the state but rather by his own free will.

And this is really the point, in nearly every discussion about Malaysians learning

about the different cultures that make up this land, what we get is the theme of people learning about each other through their own free will. The narrative that usually emerges is of people learning about each other through everyday interactions brought upon by a specific context - either school or work.

Rafizi says that "it is dangerous to send a signal that any move that compels or encourages the cross-learning of religions and cultures among our young people is bad" which is a bit of a straw man because neither Lim nor I advocated any such move.

Who's in the driver's seat?

In the context of Rafizi's analogy of "it is akin to objecting the use of car because it carries a risk of accident!", my issue (and Lim's) would not be objecting to the use of the car but rather who is driving the car.

For example, the state has already in place a mechanism for young people to learn about each other's culture. I am referring to the History (sic) subject as taught to our young people. Various academics and researchers have shown that the subject is riddled with inaccuracies, distortions and the hidden narrative of fulfilling certain political agendas. As I said, it is not the car but the driver.

If Pakatan has trouble influencing policy decisions on a federal level, what kind of scrutiny could they give on a vast subject like this? As it is the implementation of this subject in private educational establishments, came as a response to religious provocations that are a creeping phenomenon in this new partisan landscape.

The idea that the state would like to spread its influence into this private sphere should be worrying not only to the average Malaysian but also to anyone who believes that smaller government means a more independent citizenry.

The fact is that I have read the syllabus as it is implemented in public higher educational institutions. Students, lecturers and professors have sent me copies of the syllabus and it does on the surface seem innocuous. However as one academic pointed it, it serves no purpose. Nobody takes it seriously. As I stated in my previous piece, the course lacks intellectual and moral weight.

For instance, as far as Islamic and Asian civilisations is concerned and fidelity to cross learning in a multicultural society, what is PKR's stand on the issue (as far as Islam is concerned) with the inclusion or exclusion of Shiites influence, Sufism and the numerous other extremely important Islamic concepts/ideologies in the Titas syllabus.

Considering the recent banning of Shiite teachings in this country, how does this fit into the general philosophy about learning of Islamic civilisation, not to mention historical integrity.

In other words, nobody is approaching this in good faith, neither the people proposing this course nor the students who are supposed to benefit from it.

Rafizi may lament the fact that in my response or Lim's original piece, we did not contribute any of our ideas to the idea of cross learning, but this was not the aim of my piece. However, in my opinion "cross learning" happens naturally every day, which Malaysia despite the perceived polarisation, is one of the few success stories of "multiculturalism".

I might add that this concept seems to be going out of favour in many parts of the world, simply because governments wish to impose specific values on their rakyat.

Promoting divisiveness

The reality is that young people in Malaysia have been extremely open-minded about learning about each other's culture.

What has hampered this process is when the state attempts to impose a very specific value system on young people or Malaysians. These indoctrination programmes like the BTN (Biro Tatanegara) courses, state-sponsored media and numerous other initiatives have been created to remind Malaysians of their very specific roles in the pecking order.

Rafizi may think that in order to decrease the level of racial polarisation in this country, the government of the day should "interfere" with private institutions. However, this begs the question of how effective has this course been in reducing the level of racial polarisation in this country since its implementation in public universities?

Furthermore, why is it that the definition of "young people" always mean those carrying out their tertiary level education? Surely, the size of this demographic is insignificant when compared to the size of young people who for whatever reason do not qualify for tertiary level education but are in the formative stages of making their way in the working world.

By all accounts, what hampers racial cohesiveness when it comes to the how the educational system promotes racial unity is the various racial quotas system that

reminds Malaysians of their race. Alternatively, the championing of the vernacular school systems that are part of the racial social contract perhaps is something that should be reconsidered.

What the state should do if it really wants to encourage cross learning is to rein in organisations that promote divisiveness such as the various religious departments, ensure that laws are not applied selectively, allow dissenting voices to be heard without sanction, privatise communal educational imperatives and encourage a plurality of voices.

In my experience most often when we talk about racial polarisation, it is normally in the context of some agenda-driven demagogue hoping to spark off a clash of culture and the public fall out that occurs. This naturally happens in a democracy but this does not mean that the state should indoctrinate its citizenry into responding in a certain way.

In other words Rafizi, for the most part the kids are all right.

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