

Dr M: Give rakyat poor education to stay popular
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Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad has lamented that the country's populist policies in education have created a widening racial and wealth gap among schoolchildren.

"It seems that poor parents must accept poor education for their children, so that politicians can be popular," Mahathir said in a blog posting today.

Even all his grandchildren now go to international schools or study abroad, Mahathir said, even though his own children had gone to national schools.

"They (his grandchildren) do speak the national language but their kind of schooling widens the gap between races as well as between the rich and the poor," he said.

Mahathir related that when the country first mooted to convert all schools to national schools, with bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction, it would have seen Malaysian children of different cultures come together.

However, he said, after the Chinese community protested, it prompted the government to make a "political decision" by allowing Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools to exist.

Mahathir said the then education minister decided to abolish English secondary schools under the government in 1971.

These two developments ultimately set the education system on a path of racial polarisation, he said.

"The net results was an exodus of Chinese students to private Chinese secondary schools.

"With this, the children of different races lost all opportunities to grow up together. The Malays went to national schools, the Chinese to Chinese primary and secondary schools and the Indians to Tamil primary schools," he said.

Mahathir said this was later followed with another form of polarisation, this time along the lines of wealth.

'Ministers' children go to private schools'

This trend, he said, came about with the growth of English-medium international schools, which were initially not intended for Malaysians due to the high school fees.

"Then the ministers' children, against national policy, started going to private schools and

international schools, which largely use English as the medium of teaching.

The ministers also send their children to public (actually private) schools in the United Kingdom. So followed the children of the rich.

"The result is that the rich go to private schools in Malaysia and the UK, while the poor go to national schools at home," he said.

Mahathir lamented that the rich now spoke English while the poor spoke their respective mother tongues, even though jobs often favoured English speakers.

"All these will result in the separation of the races and the separation of rich, high class English-speaking people from the poor, less privileged national language-speaking people.

"There will also be a loss of the knowledge of modern science and higher mathematics among national school students," he said.

Strangely, Mahathir said, the language nationalists were not protesting about this, like how they opposed his policy to teach Mathematics and Science in English.

"Incidentally, the Malay language nationalists also helped promote the use of the Chinese language in Chinese schools and in business.

"Even Malay parents like their children to go to Chinese schools. And in Sarawak, the natives prefer Chinese schools," he said.

Mahathir's policy to teach Mathematics and Science in English was introduced in 2003 but was reversed in 2009 after Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak came to power.