

## **LETTER | The Malaysian Dilemma**

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LETTER | According to World Bank's data, Malaysia's GDP in 2019 was US\$365 billion and Singapore's was US\$372 billion.

With little fanfare and reportage, the tiny island has already surpassed Malaysia in terms of absolute output. But what is even starker is the per capita GDP.

The population of Malaysia in 2019 was 32 million and Singapore's population was 5.7 million.

In terms of productivity, that translates to an average Singaporean roughly equals to five Malaysians.

And we haven't even taken into account the vast natural resources at the disposal of Malaysia which Singapore does not possess.

There were nearly a million Malaysians working in Singapore. So, Malaysians contributed a sizeable portion of Singapore's GDP.

However, lest anyone is quick to blame those Malaysians as unpatriotic, it is not a simple zero-sum game.

If those Malaysians were to return to Malaysia, those productivity will not be accrued to Malaysia. First of all, those Malaysians may not find similar jobs back in Malaysia, either because of racial discrimination or those jobs simply do not exist in Malaysia.

Secondly, even if they are able to find similar jobs in Malaysia, they may not earn as much or are hampered by red tape and bureaucracy.

Every year those Malaysians repatriate huge sums of money into Malaysia. So, Malaysians working in Singapore actually benefited both countries.

If those workers were to permanently emigrate to either Singapore or other countries, it would be a tremendous loss to Malaysia in terms of lost talents and fund inflow.

Anecdotal evidence shows that racial divide and mistrust in Malaysia is

worsening. The minorities do not trust the majority Malays will ever be fair to them and the majority Malays find the minorities to be little more than useful servants to be tolerated.

This is in large part due to the institutionalised racial policies enacted by the Malaysian governments.

Because Malays are by definition also Muslims, racial supremacy is compounded by and inseparable from religious supremacy.

The concept of halal and Syariah compliance has become ever more pervasive in Malaysia; it has seeped into judgement about people.

Conservative Malays have internalised this value so much so that they refuse to interact with the minorities for fear of getting infected by an invisible disease.

When politicians or religious leaders talk about promoting unity and at the same time promoting exclusivity, they do not notice the inherent contradiction, because to them, unity is predicated on uniformity.

Once the minorities renounce their culture and identity and assimilate into the Malay community, only then can unity be achieved.

Never mind that there is no evidence to show that uniformity leads to unity or diversity is an impediment to unity.

Nevertheless, unity is a convenient cudgel to bash the minorities with for wanting to preserve their culture and identity.

However, assimilation cannot be demanded or imposed. People willingly accept and adopt a foreign culture when they perceive it to be superior, just as Malays accepted Hinduism and later, Islam a few centuries ago.

### Liberal-minded Malays

For five decades since the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP), Malays have been indoctrinated to think that Malaysia belongs to them and they are the master of the land.

Like the master of the household, they get to make all the decisions and all family members must accede to his authority. All family members benefited from his largesse and benevolence.

What happens when the head of the household is unfair, incompetent or cruel?

What if the head of the household is doting on 51 percent of his children and

cruel to 49 percent of his other children?

But most right-wing Malays do not accept the minorities as part of the family. In their mind, the minorities are mere interlopers.

The only way to be part of the family is assimilation. That makes discriminating against the minorities morally palatable, even desirable.

For, how dare those tenants demand equality? The tax they pay is just like the rents tenants pay to the landlord.

Metaphorically and literally, they are rent-seeking. NEP is no longer just about helping the disadvantaged Malays, it is about benefiting the Malays, period.

And liberal-minded Malays are often lumped together with the minorities and actively ostracised for being a traitor to the family for siding with outsiders.

Elections do not necessarily guarantee fairness or accountability. The “winner-takes-all” system means the winner does not need to get 100 percent of the vote, nor even 60 percent of the vote. He just needs 50.1 percent of the vote.

And when election boundaries are drawn in such a way to tilt in favour of some constituencies at the expense of others, one can win with even lower approval.

And if all else failed, Malaysian politicians have a penchant for subverting election results through backdoor means.

The fact that Singapore can be five times more productive than Malaysia means a lot of Malaysians are simply unproductive. This is no hyperbole. Almost the entire cabinet of Malaysia can be removed and Malaysia would not be worse off.

During the emergency period, a majority of the cabinet did not perform any useful function despite drawing full salaries.

In fact, some may argue, Malaysia would be better off without them. The cabinet is but the tip of an iceberg of a larger malaise.

One does not need to be a rocket scientist to see this situation is unsustainable. Anyone with a modicum of brain function can see what's coming.

But no one has the courage to bell the cat because to do so would mean all benefits that flow so easily to the majority must cease.

As the situation worsens and becomes direr, the need to reform is greater but the improvement will not come quick enough to incentivise the majority to act.

At least two generations who were raised with silver spoons in their mouth will have to swallow bitter pills before Malaysia can dig itself out of this conundrum.

Any politician who tries to do this or even utters it would be suicidal. Thus perversely, they will be incentivised to extract as much as they can before the impending collapse, further hastening the collapse.

The minorities are also seeing the writings on the wall and will seek to emigrate if they can, again hastening the brain drain.

Once there is not enough minority to support the insatiable largesse, unless you are well-connected, the next in line to be exploited could be you.

The tragedy of Malaysia is that everyone can see the impending abyss, but no one has the will and courage to change course.

Malaysia needs leaders who are fearless to lead and not be led by popular sentiments.

Malaysia offers an object lesson to the world on how easy it is to squander a promising future and descend from being a tiger economy to an also-ran.

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