

LETTER | Debunking 'Chinese threats' myths in M'sia

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LETTER | Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society predominantly composed of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous groups from Sabah and Sarawak.

Since independence, policies like the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1971 were enacted aimed at addressing socioeconomic disparities, particularly for the bumiputera by offering affirmative action in education, employment, housing and business opportunities.

These measures were introduced to correct perceived economic imbalances and foster national unity.

However, over the years, narratives have emerged framing the Chinese community as a "threat" to Malay socio-economic progress. This perception is often perpetuated by political figures and interest groups to serve specific agendas. Such rhetoric shifts attention from issues of governance, accountability and systemic inefficiencies.

The myth

The claim that Chinese Malaysians threaten Malay interests is not supported by objective data. Here is a closer look at the realities:

- Economic Participation

The Chinese community in Malaysia is well known for its entrepreneurial spirit. They have a strong presence in the private sector, especially in small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

This success is not necessarily a threat but a result of adaptability, business acumen and hard work. In contrast, bumiputera participation in business has been significantly aided by government initiatives, yet issues such as over-dependence on government contracts and weak competitiveness persist.

- Educational access

While Chinese Malaysians often turn to private education or Chinese-language schools, this is more of a response to limitations in access to public universities, where bumiputera quotas exist.

Despite this, many Chinese Malaysians have succeeded academically, locally and

abroad, through merit-based systems, often financing their education privately.

- Employment and civil service

Civil service employment remains heavily skewed towards the Malay and the bumiputera community. While this has been justified as necessary for bumiputera empowerment, it has led to the underrepresentation of non-Malays in the public sector.

This, in turn, has driven Chinese Malaysians to pursue careers in the private sector or entrepreneurship, furthering the perception that the Chinese dominate business.

Why narrative persists

The continuation of the "threat" narrative is often politically motivated. Key reasons include:

- Deflection of accountability

When certain Malay political elites fail to deliver on economic promises, it is easier to blame "outsiders" like the Chinese than to address internal weaknesses. This tactic deflects attention from corruption, cronyism and mismanagement of

public resources.

- Political survival

Politicians sometimes resort to race-based rhetoric to maintain voter support. By portraying the Chinese as an "economic threat", they rally support from Malay voters, especially in rural constituencies where fear-based narratives resonate more strongly.

- Crony capitalism

The entrenchment of certain Malay elites in powerful business and political circles means that wealth and opportunities are often concentrated among a small number of bumiputera cronies.

This system benefits a select few while the larger Malay population is left behind, creating frustration that is redirected at the Chinese community.

Affirmative action and its limitations

Affirmative action for bumiputera has had mixed results:

- Education: Bumiputera students benefit from quotas in public universities,

yet performance gaps persist. Many Malay students have succeeded but challenges remain in quality and competitiveness.

- **Business and economy:** Various GLCs are headed by bumiputera leaders and bumiputera entrepreneurs are provided grants, loans, and business opportunities. However, issues like mismanagement, corruption, and a lack of accountability have weakened the effectiveness of these initiatives.
- **Housing and wealth redistribution:** Special discounts on housing are given to the bumiputera but housing affordability remains a problem for all Malaysians, including the Malays themselves.

While these policies were designed to lift the socio-economic status of Malays, the question of their long-term effectiveness remains.

Despite five decades of preferential treatment, the wealth gap within the Malay community itself is still significant, indicating that benefits may not have reached the broader population.

Consequences of the narrative

- **Racial polarisation:** The portrayal of Chinese Malaysians as "threats" fuels inter-ethnic tension and mistrust.

- Economic harm: Instead of encouraging collaboration between communities, the focus on ethnic competition undermines economic development and national unity.
- Loss of meritocracy: Overemphasis on race-based quotas risks excluding talented non-Malay Malaysians, forcing them to seek opportunities abroad, resulting in a brain drain.

The path forward

Instead of perpetuating the "threat" narrative, Malaysia could focus on:

- Meritocracy with inclusiveness: Reforming policies to focus on need-based rather than race-based affirmative action. This would ensure that the poor and marginalised of all races receive support.
- Accountability and transparency: Addressing corruption and cronyism would ensure public funds benefit ordinary Malaysians rather than a select elite.
- Unity through economic reform: Encouraging economic collaboration across ethnic groups can lead to stronger, more unified growth. Programmes should be aimed at helping all disadvantaged Malaysians.

Bangsa Malaysia

The claim that Chinese Malaysians pose a threat to Malay socio-economic development is a narrative with little basis in reality.

Instead, the failures in achieving Malay socio-economic upliftment lie in issues of governance, policy mismanagement and cronyism.

Political actors continue to promote this rhetoric as a means of consolidating power and shifting blame. To overcome these divisions, Malaysia must prioritise need-based affirmative action, foster a culture of accountability, and promote economic collaboration between its diverse communities.

The goal should be Bangsa Malaysia - a unified, inclusive, and prosperous nation.

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