

## **COMMENT | Lessons from Singapore on uniting Malaysia**

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COMMENT | As Singapore approaches its general election on May 3, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong has made a definitive statement: foreign interference and identity politics will not be accepted.

This assertion arises in light of reports indicating that external actors, including Malaysian politicians, have attempted to influence public sentiment along racial and religious lines through social media.

The Singapore leadership has conveyed a resolute message: politics should remain separate from race and religion, and the future of Singapore should be determined solely by its citizens.

This situation serves as a pivotal learning opportunity for Malaysia, which, as a diverse society with its own history of racial and religious tensions, shares vulnerabilities similar to those currently faced by Singapore.

However, Malaysia grapples with more entrenched issues of discrimination, as

highlighted by the 2023 State of Discrimination Survey conducted by Architects of Diversity.

This survey reveals a concerning truth: 64 percent of Malaysians have reported experiencing various forms of discrimination over the past year, including ethnic, socio-economic, gender, and religious biases.

The most prevalent areas of concern were the workplace (59 percent) and social media (32 percent), the same platforms being used in Singapore to incite division.

### **Identity politics: A double-edged sword**

Singapore's unequivocal dismissal of identity politics, which involves appealing to voters based on their race or religion, should serve as a cautionary signal for Malaysia's political leaders.

For an extended period, various factions within Malaysian politics have relied on racial and religious narratives to rally support.

Although this strategy may yield immediate political benefits, its long-term repercussions are detrimental. It fosters distrust, exacerbates divisions, and engenders a zero-sum mentality among communities.

Wong's comments highlight this peril: "When one group aggressively seeks to assert its identity, others will respond in kind."

The outcome is an increase in hostility, social disintegration, and a deterioration of the collective national identity.

In Malaysia, Generation Z (43 percent) has reported the highest instances of ethnicity-based discrimination, a troubling indication that our youngest citizens and future leaders are already experiencing the ramifications of a fractured society.

If political figures persist in capitalising on these divisions rather than working towards reconciliation, the social cohesion of Malaysia will continue to unravel.

### **Foreign interference and national sovereignty**

Singapore's proactive approach to foreign influence serves as a significant model. Foreign entities, through means such as cyber influence, social media manipulation, or subtle endorsements, pose a direct threat to national sovereignty by attempting to sway domestic political outcomes.

In Malaysia, while foreign interference has traditionally been less overt, it remains a concern. More alarmingly, there is often a lack of awareness and

readiness to respond effectively.

Wong's assertion that "Singapore's politics must be determined solely by Singaporeans" serves as a crucial reminder that political autonomy extends beyond merely avoiding colonisation; it encompasses resisting manipulation from both friendly allies and adversaries.

As Malaysian political discussions increasingly transition to online platforms and local elections gain greater significance, young politicians must remain vigilant.

They must prioritise transparency and independence, resisting the allure of foreign validation, even when such support aligns with their ideological perspectives.

### **Discrimination at home: A deepening divide**

The AOD survey findings indicate that systemic inequality remains a significant issue within society. In Malaysia, individuals of Indian descent reported elevated instances of discrimination in job applications (51 percent) and housing (35 percent).

Furthermore, Hindus experienced the highest levels of religious discrimination at 40 percent, surpassing Muslims (20 percent), Christians (26 percent), and

Buddhists (22 percent).

Alarmingly, 55 percent of those who faced discrimination chose not to report their experiences, highlighting a prevalent belief that reporting mechanisms are ineffective, unreliable, or carry a stigma.

This situation serves as a crucial call to action for Malaysia's future leaders: to establish robust, independent institutions that not only tackle discrimination but also foster public trust in the pursuit of justice.

In contrast, Singapore exemplifies a model with clear legal boundaries and unwavering principles separating politics from identity.

Although not without flaws, it illustrates the potential of a state that prioritises social cohesion and long-term stability over populist gains.

### **Lessons for Malaysia's next generation**

Future political leaders in Malaysia face a critical decision.

They can either persist in the entrenched practice of ethno-religious politics, which may yield immediate electoral gains but jeopardise national cohesion, or they can embark on a more challenging yet ultimately fulfilling path: fostering a

political environment grounded in meritocracy, justice, equal opportunity, and a collective Malaysian identity.

This pivotal choice should commence with education, extending beyond formal academic settings to encompass political training, party frameworks, and civil society engagement.

Emerging leaders must be instilled with the understanding that genuine patriotism transcends the defence of a single race or faith; it is fundamentally about safeguarding the integrity of the nation as a whole.

Furthermore, they should advocate for reforms aimed at effectively reporting and addressing discrimination, ensuring that every Malaysian, irrespective of race, religion, or geographic origin, feels included in the nation's aspirations.

Given that 44 percent of survey participants express dissatisfaction with the current governmental initiatives, there exists both an opportunity and a necessity for courageous leadership.

Most critically, Malaysia must adopt a progressive national identity that acknowledges and celebrates its multicultural and multi-religious populace while transcending communal divisions in the quest for a unified future.

A moment to reflect and to reform

The situation unfolding in Singapore serves as a significant cautionary tale rather than a singular occurrence.

The dynamics of division, once set in motion, prove difficult to restrain. Similarly, foreign meddling, once accepted, becomes challenging to undo.

Discrimination, once ingrained, evolves into a systemic issue. Emerging leaders in Malaysia must recognise this reality.

They should understand that true unity does not equate to the absence of differences, but rather embodies the principles of justice, inclusion, and mutual respect.

It is only through this understanding that Malaysia can prosper not only as a democratic entity but also as a resilient and harmonious society.

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