

Ministers' fondness of labels
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In Malaysia, politicians are very fond of labels. We are all conveniently divided into groups, with the basest denomination of race at the forefront of everything in the Malaysian society.

Malays, Chinese, Indian, Pendatang, Bumiputera, non-Bumiputera, Kafir, Muslim, non-Muslim - all Malaysians grow up with this chant ringing in our ears.

This is the mantra of our very being, with the tangible piece of plastic in our pockets to remind us of our differences.

Then there is the matter of religion - that most personal of beliefs - where in Malaysia, how you make peace with your God is information the state deems it necessary to have imprinted into that little piece of plastic one carries in our wallets.

We are not one people but many smaller groups. In a country of only 27 million, surrounded by bigger countries vying for scant resources, politicians go out of their ways, to remind us of our differences, and as politicians usually do, in the same breath exhort us to be united.

Usually, this call is made without much fervour or zeal.

Labels are liberally applied, some would say, to make it easier to govern a polyglot of people in a country like Malaysia. The other more cynical argument is that it makes it easier for the authorities to replicate the successful formula used by our colonial masters to keep the subjects divided, pitting one group against another, to ensure obedience and compliance to British rule.

Recently our Minister of Science, Technology and Innovations Jamaludin Jarjis casually threw around his comments about "dark-skinned" Indians and "light-skinned" Indians to a group of Malaysian students and embassy officials overseas.

He also deduced that dark-skinned Indians are low-class while the lighter skin ones are high class.

Perhaps such statements make the good minister feel good about himself when he is uncomfortably aware of the tremendous advances "dark skinned" Indians are pioneering all over the world.

Despite his claim that he is a learned man armed with a doctorate degree no less, his behaviour while shameful, is to be expected. Why should politicians like him cease using such labels when such actions find resonance within his own political party?

After all, Umno thrives on such labels. While the good minister is surely aware that derogatory labels will anger Malaysian Indians, does he really care? After all, Indians in Malaysia are not a large enough group of influential voters to shake his position.

Increasingly, this kind of thinking is coming to the forefront of Malaysia's political landscape as typified by the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Nazri Abdul Aziz's eye-catching statement a few weeks ago when he blurted out he cannot support inter-faith dialogues

because his voter base is uncomfortable with the concept.

The dearth of intellectualism in the Malaysian cabinet is further emphasized by the obsession with control and brute force to bring Malaysians who are increasingly exposed to the outside world, to heel. The closing of the Malaysian mind nears completion.

Ministers such as Jamaludin who is always making overseas trips to promote Malaysia, are essentially showmen with little understanding of his environment and unfortunately, blessed too with a not-so-glib tongue.

Another minister Zainuddin Maidin has also adopted similar tactics by going on record that bloggers should be divided into two groups – professional and non-professional categories. In his words, such a grouping will make it easier for the authorities to govern that annoying space called cyberspace.

In the good minister's simplistic world, the so-called "professional" blogger carries more weight and credibility while the the so-called "non-professional" blogger are to be viewed as cesspools of rumour mongering and consigned to the dustbins of credibility.

Zam as he is popularly known, described his ground breaking idea as a "mechanism of control". How such labels and differentiation can help regulate cyberspace, we remain in the dark. As I am sure the Minister is as well. It is obvious that this suggestion is the good minister's strategy to effectively counter the growing influence of blogs which has caused him many a sleepless night since he took over the important Information Ministry post.

So, the solution? Divide and rule with a liberal application of labels to segregate and confuse the target group while offering no real solutions to the perceived problems at hand.

With the general elections just around the corner, labels will continue to be splashed without limits. But labels are just what they are – mere words that when used too often, loses its potency to overawe and subdue.

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