

Dangers of miniaturising our identity
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Malaysia is a peaceful, stable, prosperous and diverse country. This observation is often invoked but seldom examined. Malaysia is rightly credited in achieving successive years of economic growth espoused by political stability over almost five decades since its independence from Britain.

Take a list of macro-economic indicators and compare the performance of Malaysia to other Commonwealth countries in Africa or Asia since independence.

Malaysia is among the few countries that has done exceptionally well in terms of economic growth, physical infrastructure, investment in technology, attracting foreign investment, privatising formerly loss-making government enterprises, enthusing the spirit of industrialisation, manufacturing a national car and engendering a 'vision' of a developed country status by 2020. Credit must be extended to the Barisan Nasional government for its commitment to creating the climate of 'Malaysia Boleh'.

However, these achievements are not without fallibility. The successes of Malaysia must be scrutinised.

Often the harmonious diversity of races and religions in Malaysia is invoked to show-case its political stability and economic prosperity to the rest of the world, particularly to developing countries. Malaysia may deserve to do this, but not before exploring and reflecting on some deep-seated questions about itself. Malaysia's economic policies encapsulated in the New Economic Plan (NEP from 1971 to 1991) and various National Development Plans (NDP, 2nd to 8th) champions the classification of Malaysians into race to the exclusion of all other identities.

This is the foundation on which an economic diagnosis is made and its benefit disbursed. Similarly, political strategy is based on classifying the varied identities of Malaysians exclusively into racial category for the purpose of winning political votes. Forming coalition is not an unusual strategy in winning votes but the real danger is in the vigorous indoctrination of our racial differences into successive economic development plans since Malaysia's independence from Britain. These differences are rooted in the positive discrimination policies which favour the majority of Malays. The positive discrimination policies may have been devised with good intentions, but this calls for open and frank debate.

Young pupils are segmented into different schools based on their race and pride of learning their language well before they are conscious of the differences between the races. Employment function is narrowed because it's stigmatised along racial lines well before one's skills are tested. Political voice is expressed and solved through the medium of race well before its cause and consequences are analysed. Moral codes of conduct are drafted and implemented based on race and religion instead of universal values.

Access to capital inflow, purchase of discounted housing, bidding for government tendered projects and accessibility to tertiary education are some of the many sectors subjected to racial profiling. There is no doubt that the racial discrimination policy in Malaysia is one of the most comprehensive systems of denial of opportunity.

Suppressing freedom

Let us now explore the impact of racial categorisation on suppression of our rich identity as Malaysians.

We're often led to believe that, in order to achieve speedy economic prosperity, freedom has to be curtailed. This need not be the case. Malaysia need not be an example of development to the other developing countries by suppressing the freedom of its people. The 1998 Nobel Prize Winner in Economics, Amartya Sen, argues that unimpeded political participation and dissent are constituent parts of a broader economic development.

The process of development must be viewed as enhancement of human freedom which calls for enriching individual intrinsic potential complemented with expansion of rights, opportunities and entitlements. The pursuit of economic development as enhancement of human freedom need not be hostile to political interest. Politics may have a bad name in economics but this does not have to be the case in Malaysia.

Malaysian policy makers have excellent reasons to shift their view from a narrow racial identity policy to a broader freedom-based development. This requires concerted political and economic freedom, guaranteed transparency and social opportunities amongst others for all Malaysians.

The well intended positive discrimination policy instituted in the 1970s to favour the Malays is no longer a concern for the Malays. Instead it has become an obsession. It's an obsession to zealously protect their privilege which is often invoked by drawing on the 'Ketuanan Melayu' (with little clarification on what exactly it means) and by selectively abstracting the role of Malays in Malaysian history.

Not surprisingly, symbols like the 'keris' (a Malay dagger) are used to evoke and draw the support of the Malay masses. The pandering to racial categorisation not only alienates other races but it's also confrontational in form and implication. Our sense of identity can be a source of pride and confidence but it can also be used to feed discord between groups to exact violent conflict.

The narrowing of our rich identity into a single category is precisely what invigorates those with extreme right-wing views into fulfilling their political agenda. The reductionist approach will especially foster the political class to present all social, economic and political problems through the prism of race.

The viewing of Malaysia in such a unique rigid line of race undermines the diverse values that we as Malaysians share, celebrate and enjoy. These include our values: for living in a corruption free country; for enjoying good quality of health care; for demanding better and higher quality of education (primary, secondary and tertiary); for probing the level of defence spending; for questioning the worrying rate of crime; for expressing discontent on the increasing level of income inequality; for insisting on efficiency from state institutions; and for resisting the suppression of our identity into an impoverished little box of race.

Malaysia is populated by Malays, Chinese, Indians, Dayaks, the Orang Asli and hundreds of other tribal groups. The richness of each of these identities dwelling in one country should be the envy of other countries. Instead the richness of our identity has been crudely narrowed to 'race' to the exclusion of others. For the moment at least the many different races have the freedom to choose their religion according to reason and argument.

Global inclusiveness

However, the same cannot be said of the majority Malay race. Their freedom to choose their religion of choice is barred. A Malay in Malaysia is not only born into an Islamic religion but also has to succumb to being a Muslim giving him/her no freedom to investigate and reason his/her choice of religion according to Article 160 of the Constitution (even if he/she chooses to stay as a Muslim).

The immediate problem here is that his/her Malay race becomes inseparable from her Muslim religion. The identity of race and religion are paired from cradle to grave. There are good reasons to separate race and religion in order to release the richness within each of them.

A Malay can also be proud of knowing that many of the Malay words are borrowed from Arabic, Sanskrit, Tamil, Portuguese, Dutch and certain Chinese dialects and more recently English. Ironically the word 'bumiputera' which refers to the indigenous Malaysians (but specifically Malays) is originally from the Sanskrit word bhumiputra which literally translates to 'sons of the earth' and later in modified Malay translation 'princes of the earth'. The formation of the Malay language through borrowing from other languages need not be embarrassing to a Malay speaker.

It in fact represents the extent of global inclusiveness of the Malay lingua, and more so when it's used by people of other races in Malaysia. Emphasising Malays as only Malays and Muslims and nothing else negates the fact that the Malays are also well travelled people spread across from Australia to Yemen. It's argued elsewhere that the word 'Melayu' means 'migrating' or 'fleeing' which may suggest the high mobility of Malays across the region. The eagerness to travel, discover and seek opportunities are all useful and relevant way of seeing a Malay. There are indeed many richer identities of a Malay.

Unfortunately the heartland of the Malay culture, Kelantan where the rich Malay cultural preserve is so abundant, is also facing the suppression of its creative identity (art and dance) at an alarming rate. This is not surprising, given the Islamic party's (Pas) attempts to justify its rule by narrowing and even obliterating all the other identities to a miniaturised box of race and religion.

This is a disturbing trend. A Malay from Kelantan is not only a Muslim, he is also an Asian, he is also a Malaysian and above all he is also a human being. There is a strong case for breaking the accepted norm that Islam is an all engulfing identity of a Malay.

A Tamilian in Malaysia can indeed be very proud that the Malay world's great man of letters Munshi Abdullah was a descendent of Tamil and Arab. Munshi Abdullah may have been staunchly critical of the Malays but he was also able to recognise their suppression by the Malay rulers and was passionate in liberating their mind through his literary skill. Munshi Abdullah's origin and contribution transcends racial segmentation and demonstrates the need to develop one's intrinsic potential to be free and reason. Indians and others can learn a lot from the writings and observations of Munshi Abdullah.

The categorisation of all Chinese in Malaysia into Chinese and nothing else does little justice to the rich culture within the Chinese dialect groups and the interconnections between them. The predominantly Hokkien speaking Chinese in Penang have a great reputation for their culinary skills, keeping the Fujian Province cooking alive, but the reputation of Penang as food heaven throughout the world is not necessarily restricted to Hokkien hae mee (Hokkien prawn noodles).

Addressing the stereotypes

Undeniably the Penang gastronomic sphere comprises the rich culinary cuisine from faraway regions of China, India, Indonesia, Thailand and even the lacklustre British. The merger and meshing of all these culinary skills is what presents Penang and Malaysia to the rest of the world. And if this is not convincing, one need only look at the culinary legacy of the mixture between Malay and Chinese (Peranakan) from the 19th century to the present day use of 'belacan' to rest the case.

A Chinese cannot be seen as just belonging to a racial category with a capitalist mind. A Chinese could have his/her origins from the Fujian province, speak Hokkien dialect with words borrowed from Malay (it's the other way round!), promote Penang through his/ her masterly culinary skills, be proud of his/her ancestors from the Fujian province, share the same moral values as an Indian, be an occasional vegetarian, a devout Buddhist and a proud learner of Batik textile design. All these give the individual a particular identity, none exclusively so. He/she cannot be exclusively categorised as a Chinese to the exclusion of all other identities.

The reach and extent of all the races should be assessed in the context of art, architecture, food, travel, literature, language, music and many others and not restricted to the explicit category of race and religion. In fact these subjects (the identity of 'who are we?') should be broached and deliberated in mainstream public discussion and not just confined to fusty text books on Malaysian history in schools.

The employment stereotype in Malaysia includes over concentration of the Malays in the public sector, the thriving but restricted Chinese capitalist class, the marginalised but also winning Indians and the largely traditional Orang Asli, Dayaks and Dusuns confined to rural agricultural land. This categorisation may be true, but there are good reasons for breaking down the persistence of this narrow race-employment stereotype.

If such stereotyping persists, then questions have to be asked whether this is desirable to a nation like Malaysia which calls itself harmonious and diverse. The categorisation of our identity into the little box of race has serious implications in the persistence of un-freedom of movement in the labour market. The broadening of state economic policies beyond the identity of race and religion can help to address this stereotype.

The time for challenging the elusive identity of race is urgently needed if we are to call ourselves truly Malaysians. The challenge calls us to be bolder in our argument and constructive in our reasoning. Integration requires broadening our horizon beyond race, religion and the colour of our skin. This requires us to liberate ourselves from being trapped in the little box of 'race'. We can build a Malaysia that is not only free to reason and debate on our plural identities but also resolute to shapes values, ethics and a sense of belonging to Malaysia.

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