

Don't blame parents for national unity woes
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It was reported that the National Unity and Integration Department director-general Azman Azmin said the "parents' tendency to send their children to vernacular schools instead of national schools" was the "most probable" cause for the issues relating to national unity.

By pin-pointing vernacular schools as the main cause of the lack of national unity is akin to the recently withdrawn ethnic relations guidebook for our university students which placed the misguided blame on "Indian youths" as the main cause for the Kampung Medan riots in 2001. The National Unity and Integration Department has failed to take into consideration the larger context and hence the underlying cause of national disunity in Malaysia.

If vernacular schools are even at fault for the lack of national unity, then surely the government's policy of promoting ethnic-centric Mara Junior Science Colleges (MRSMs) and Matriculation Colleges will be equally at fault for the problems. If vernacular schools result in the lack of racial interaction, then surely, by placing the top bumiputera students in ethnically centric schools is only perpetuating the problems.

Azman has failed to take into consideration the fact that we live in a multi-cultural country. Even Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein has argued that "multi-culturalism is an added advantage and a strength for the country." By treating vernacular schools as obstacles to national unity is akin to the fallacious argument that national unity can only be achieved through cultural assimilation.

On the other hand, the lack of national unity in Malaysia is bred by the persistent unfair and discriminatory practices which marginalises Malaysians of non-Malay descent. For example, the government's disbursement of RM1.4 million to 248 Chinese primary schools - or a meagre RM6,000 per school - as hyped by Deputy Education Minister Hon Choon Kim in the vernacular press, pales in comparison to the RM709 million allocated to building 15 new MRSMs, and more for upgrades and repairs of existing MRSMs.

In addition, despite the consistent claim by the government that it will build more vernacular schools in accordance to the needs of the people, the number of Chinese primary schools have declined from 1,333 in 1957 to 1,288 today, while enrolment has more than doubled from 310,000 to 636,000.

At the same time, the number of Tamil primary schools has been reduced from 526 in 2001 to 523 in 2006 despite a 12.7% increase in enrolment from 88,810 in 2001 to 100,142 in 2006. It is hence not surprising that the non-Malay community in Malaysia feels threatened and discriminated against.

The continued discriminatory policies in education also fails to take into account other policies which discriminates against non-bumiputeras, contributing significantly to the lack of racial integration and national unity.

Hence, the emphasis of mother-tongue education in vernacular schools should not colour our judgement of their national unity contributions. Instead, its contribution to society should be judged by the quality of students, their patriotism to the country and in turn, their future contributions back to Malaysian society.

It is critical for the government to have faith in its own rhetoric, that not only does vernacular education contribute to the richness of the Malaysian education system, it weaves the very fabric of our diverse multi-cultural identity.

On a separate point, parents can definitely not be blamed for choosing schools based on academic standards and quality. If vernacular schools are at fault for the lack of national unity, then surely, our national school system will be equally at fault for providing weak and poor quality education. Malaysian parents are wise to choose the type of education for their children to they will maximise their potentials to ensure international marketability in their future careers.

Azman should immediately retract his statement which blamed the existence of vernacular schools as well as the millions of parents who send their children to these schools as the main cause for the lack of national unity in Malaysia. On the other hand, the continued neglect of the vernacular education system may ironically sow the seeds of national disunity, the very outcome which our government has been seeking to avoid.

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