

Time to end National Service
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This year marks the fifth anniversary of Malaysia's version of a National Service programme better known as Program Latihan Khidmat Negara ('PLKN'). Unlike most countries, the objective of the PLKN is not for national defence but for the following objectives:
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- * Develop a young generation who are patriotic and with love for their country
- * Enhance unity among the multi-racial communities in the country
- * Instill a spirit of caring and volunteerism among society
- * Produce an active, intelligent and confident generation
- * Develop positive characteristics among the younger generation through good values

Since its inception, the PLKN has been hit by waves of problems ranging from logistical issues in sending the trainees to the respective camps to unfit living conditions in some of the camps. One of the ironic complains received is the insensitive attitude of certain camps towards the dietary needs of the respective trainees. Ironic because the main reason that the PLKN was introduced was to foster 'racial integration'.

The most serious complains about the PLKN is the tragic loss of lives during or shortly after the PLKN and it has been reported that another NS trainee had died recently.

The government has called on NS trainees to give an honest and accurate health declaration to mitigate any 'health complications' or 'accidents' that may arise during the PLKN. However, most if not all of the NS trainees and their parents may not even be fully aware of own their 'health conditions'.

The government has also said that 'full health checks' will be conducted in the future. Two questions will come to mind - one, why were 'full medical checks' not conducted in the past and two, will the 'full health checks' be detailed enough to detect all hidden health ailments in NS trainees?

Most medical professionals will agree that the conditions of NS camps are a fertile ground for outbreak of various forms of disease or medical complications. Cramping hundreds if not thousands of people from various locations without any medical checks and providing accommodation and food of questionable hygiene. The closest comparison to an NS training camp is a prison but even in a prison, full health check-ups are conducted to prevent an epidemic.

In addition, as the objective of the PLKN is not for national defence but to foster 'racial integration', NS trainees must not be compelled to do strenuous physical exercises. Who is going to compensate the NS trainees if they are injured? The length of the PLKN programme is also questionable. How many of the objectives can be achieved in just three short months?

The polite critics will see the PLKN as nothing more than a 'summer camp' whilst the more vocal critics will see the PLKN as a 'money-making scheme'. Either way, the PLKN will not be able to achieve its objectives in just three short months.

Further, based on the objectives of the PLKN, one has to conclude that the current education system is a failure as the many objectives of the PLKN should have been learned through the formal education system. If the government is serious and sincere about fostering racial integration, it must revamp the education system first.

The government must ask itself why most non-Malay parents who grew up in the national schools do not want to send their children back to these national schools. Learning the mother tongue is only one of the many reasons. To most non-Malay parents, the education system is a reflection of what is wrong with the government and among the reforms that the government should carry out next is to reform the education system so that we can be the cream of the region again.

Until and unless the government can guarantee the health and safety of all the NS trainees, the PLKN should be scrapped. How many more 'accidents' or loss of life do we need before the government realises that it still cannot manage the PLKN in a safe way even after five years of experimenting? There are various other safer and cheaper ways to achieve 'racial integration'. The government should not gamble with the lives of the NS trainees as their parents have too much to lose.

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