

Can Malaysia Continue To Be At Peace?

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By Adelene Teo

I will never break your trust!

Since Independence in 1957 from the British, Malaysia has generally been a peaceful country except for the Communist insurgency between 1948 and 1960, and the racial conflict in 1969. It may have indirectly supported several wars but it has never gotten directly involved in any, and except for Konfrontasi which Indonesia started, had always existed harmoniously with its neighboring countries.

Occasionally, gruesome crimes are reported but these were often, though not always, resolved by the relevant authorities. The national Street Crime Index showed a decline by 40.6% since 2009, and the government also reported a reduction in society's fear of becoming a victim to crime. Thus, it came as no surprise that Malaysia was ranked 20th by the Institute of Economics and Peace (IEP) in the 2012 Global Peace Index (GPI). As urged by Prime Minister Najib Razak, Malaysians should take pride in this success.

Why then are Malaysians still casting doubts over GPI's 2012 report?

High profile cases of individuals being thrown off building, burnt to ashes and exploded to pieces have yet to be satisfactorily resolved. At the lower end of the hierarchy, news of violent street crimes in public and in housing areas appears to be on the rise. Despite the additional 500 CCTVs installed by the government, Malaysians are now watching their backs even more closely, holding on more tightly to their handbags and are paradoxically double or triple-locking their doors.

What is the cause of this paranoia which contradicts the published figures by both the IEP and the Malaysian government?

First, there is a possibility of a gap between experts theorising about peace and the reality of the citizens. The weightage of the index variables and the perception of criminality as determined by the GPI experts may not reflect the reality on the ground as perceived by individuals on the street. Besides, safety and security is not the only composition of the index – the other two broad themes are 'the extent of domestic and international conflict' and 'the degree of militarisation'. Given that Malaysia is a neutral country with minimum allocation on militarisation, Malaysia's ranking in these two broad themes could easily overshadow any poor performance in the 'safety and security' sub-category. This could be one explanation why the GPI ranked Malaysia ahead of Singapore and Australia, countries that Malaysians themselves often say are safer.

Second, the Positive Peace Index (PPI), newly introduced in the GPI was ignored by Malaysian media, thus painting an incomplete picture on the country's state of peace. The PPI ranks a country's sets of attitudes as well as its institutional and structural capacity in creating and maintaining a peaceful society sustainably. Instead of measuring the number of crimes and the state of safety, the PPI draws on the institutional capacity of a country to improve its level of peace. Unfortunately, Malaysia did not perform well in this index, but little did the public know.

Whilst excelling in the GPI, Malaysia's performance is mediocre in the PPI. Ranked 47 out of 108 countries and scoring only 2.595 (in the range of 1 to 5, with 1 being most peaceful), Malaysia trails Singapore (ranked 19th globally), South Korea (26th) and Islamic countries such as Qatar (32nd) and United Arab Emirates (37th) in the PPI. In fact, Malaysia is the only upper-middle-income country in the top 10 positive peace deficit countries alongside Sub-Saharan African countries, Bangladesh and Indonesia. Experts warn that countries with unfavorable PPI face the consequences of seeing an increase in violence and remain vulnerable to external shocks.

The question then becomes, "Is Malaysia heading in that direction?"

The PPI measures the following variables based on publically available sources from inter-governmental organizations, research institutes and civil society organizations i.e. World Bank and Transparency International:

- Well-functioning government i.e. quality and quantity of the public services and the government's credibility in committing to its policies
- Sound business environment
- Equitable distribution of resources
- Acceptance of rights of others
- Good relations with neighbors
- Free flow of information
- High level of education
- Level of corruption

On closer observation, one recognises that these variables are also part of the institutional and structural reforms that the Najib administration had promised to improve through its Government Transformation Plan (GTP), New Economic Model (NEM) and the Economic Transformation Plan (ETP). How then does Malaysia perform poorly in the PPI and yet have strings of 'A' in the GTP and ETP's report cards? Could it be that one of these measures is incorrect? Could it possibly be that these plans' key performance indicators (KPI) or the New Key Result Areas (NKRA) are incorrect in reflecting the actual impact of the country's transformation plan as experienced by Malaysians?

Second, how will the Najib administration react to this poor result in the PPI? More importantly, how will the Najib administration address these difficult institutional and structural challenges knowing that any shortfall in achieving improved performance in these areas will see public support eroding further for the ruling coalition at the 13th general election?

Lastly, what could possibly be the ripple effects of this result be on investor confidence in Malaysia? How will this result impact on the country's economic, social and political situation? The Najib administration is desperately trying to attract foreign direct investments to boost the Malaysian economy. Will these results dampen his efforts?

According to the 2011 Global Competitiveness Report, Malaysia's ranking on crime and safety is still far from satisfactory. Despite forging ahead of South Korea to be the 21st most competitive nation in the world, Malaysia only ranked 63 in the 'Business Costs of Crime and Violence', 53 in 'Organised Crime' and 39 in 'Reliability of Police Services sub-category'.

Can the Malaysian government afford to ignore these results?

Fragile political institutions coupled with poor economic fundamentals are catalysts to instability and are often associated with internal violence. Looking at Malaysia, will its institutional and structural weaknesses be an impediment to peace and security as well as its economic performance?

And most importantly, can communities in Malaysia continue to be at peace with itself, if the economy goes further south? - New Mandala

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