

Ethnic relations institute can promote unity

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It was the late Professor Syed Hussein Alatas who first proposed the establishment of a research-oriented Institute of Ethnic Relations way back in 1968. The idea has now found favour with the National Unity Advisory Panel (NUAP).

One of the reasons why Alatas felt that an independent institute should undertake research into ethnic relations in Malaysia was because the only university in the country at that time – the University of Malaya – was doing very little work on the subject. Today, the situation is different.

Researchers in a number of universities are studying various issues related to ethnic relations. In certain universities, ethnic relations is an academic discipline.

However, Malaysian universities could do much more to strengthen ethnic relations both as a subject of study and as an area of research. After all, Malaysia, given the complexities of its multi-ethnic mix, is one of the finest laboratories in the world for studying and researching into ethnic relations. More post-graduate programmes in ethnic relations should be introduced. Post-graduate scholarships should also be increased.

Post-doctoral fellowships should be offered to both Malaysians and non-Malaysians to pursue new research themes in ethnic relations. Both the public and private sectors should be encouraged to contribute to the establishment of a special ethnic relations research fund which would be administered jointly by those universities that run courses on ethnic relations.

In this regard, it should be emphasised that the control and management of ethnic relations research should be in the hands of the universities.

The government, or the NUAP which operates under the Prime Minister's Department, should not make any attempt to direct or dictate research. Since the government and its policies have a huge impact upon the pattern of ethnic relations, it would not be possible to evaluate these policies and their consequences in a fair and objective manner if a government related agency like the NUAP is in charge of the research agenda. Besides, one's research findings will have much greater credibility if they are presented in the name of a university rather than through a government related agency. In areas such as ethnic relations, if the institution or outfit that engages in research is respected for its independence and autonomy, it would be easier to convert its findings into policy measures.

If research should remain the prerogative of the universities, what would be the role of the Institute of Ethnic Relations that the NUAP intends to set up? For a start, the institute should be independent of the NUAP and directly answerable to Parliament. It should focus upon reducing ethnic polarisation in the country and bringing the communities together. To do this, the institute should organise courses which would

help raise awareness among the people about the history and evolution of the Malaysian nation from the pre-colonial period to the present and, at the same time, provide them with a deeper understanding of how relations between the communities are shaped not only by the domestic political, economic and cultural milieu but also by the global environment. Within this framework, the underlying causes of ethnic polarisation and its remedies should be explored in a sincere and candid manner.

In a nutshell, the institute, as it is envisaged, will attempt to educate people from all walks of life about the multi-ethnic reality that is Malaysia. Since all Malaysians will be encouraged to enroll, the courses will have to be simple and succinct. They will also be for short stints.

Given the magnitude of the undertaking, schools, universities, government departments and private corporations will have to play their part. One cannot emphasise enough the importance of religious, cultural and community institutions and organisations in this mass education endeavour.

Political parties, trade unions and civil society organisations will also have to be mobilised. The cooperation of both the traditional and the new media would be vital.

Mass education on ethnic relations has become imperative largely because ethnic polarisation today is more serious than ever before. Even in professional bodies such as the Bar Council and within the judiciary polarised attitudes are apparent. This is why the most urgent need of the hour is the creation of more bridge-builders: men and women who are not only conscious of the aspirations of one's own community but are also at the same time deeply sensitive to the apprehensions of the other.

One hopes that the Institute of Ethnic Relations will be the womb that will give birth to the bridge-builders of tomorrow.

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