

The first step towards unity

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MALAYSIA, it is said, subscribes to the *rojak* approach in defining national identity.

To make *rojak*, all types of fruit are mixed with thick prawn paste and peanuts. Everything might be jumbled together but the ingredients retain their individual characteristics.

Bar Council National Young Lawyers' Committee deputy chairman Wong Fook Meng said: "Under this approach, Malays, Chinese and Indians are integrated into a common society but the various races preserve their distinctive cultural identities.

"Malaysians celebrate the cultural diversity of the various races living in the country. We have a kaleidoscope of languages, dialects, food, arts and way of life. Cultural diversity is not a threat but a unifying force, and it is the social glue that keeps us together."

But is that an accurate portrait of the country? Young Malaysians at a recent roundtable discussion on national unity felt integration among the races was still very much a "work in progress". They said several areas demanded attention — and change.

Wong, a speaker at the roundtable opened by Raja Muda of Perak Raja Dr Nazrin Shah, agreed that there was an urgent need to grapple with sensitive issues of race, language and religion, in an open, sensible manner.

Other participants shared his view and proposed changes to close what they said was an expanding schism between the races. The two areas that required scrutiny were education and politics.

Racial integration is still very much a work in progress, participants at the recent Young Malaysians Roundtable Discussion on National Unity tell CHOK SUAT LING



Azmi Shahrin says action more important than dialogue

Associate Prof Dr Azmi Sharom of Universiti Malaya's faculty of law felt the current dual entry system into public universities should be abolished.

Graduates now can seek entry using either Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) results or via matriculation. Educationists, parents and students have said it is unfair to put the STPM and matriculation in one basket in the competition. Besides the difference in the grading system, matriculation, which is only for Bumiputera students, is perceived as easier as part of it depends on course work.

"If we insist on having a huge number of undergraduates, all



Sarah Chen wants vernacular schools to be abolished

we are going to get is a factory assembly line."

As it is, there is a high number of unemployed graduates.

The Islamisation of national schools, Azmi said, was another issue of concern as it was scaring away non-Malay students.

In academia, the perception among non-Malays that they lack opportunities for promotion had caused many brilliant Malaysians to seek work elsewhere, said Azmi.

"Forty per cent of lecturers in the National University of Singapore's law faculty are Malaysians. Our good people are working in top universities abroad as they feel they do not have any op-

portunities here."

Unity cannot be built if the people continue to avoid "divisive" issues. "We cannot sweep everything under the carpet," said Tony Pua, who runs a popular education blog.

One such issue, said the economic adviser to DAP's secretary-general, was the continued existence and development of vernacular primary schools:

"The existence of various types of schools should not be viewed as a hurdle, but as one of the country's strengths."

Sarah Chen does not agree. She said the existence of vernacular schools worked against national unity.

"We should not segregate children. If we put them together, they can learn from each other," says the senior member of the Young Achievers' Club, which was set up in 1996 for youth who excel academically and are also active in community work.

Some participants felt the various ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak were not given sufficient prominence. For instance, in the "Malaysia Truly Asia" advertisement, only the major ethnic groups in the peninsula were portrayed.

HELP University College lecturer Dr Oh Ei Sun said the languages of the various ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak such as Iban and Kadazan should be promoted. "The use of

their language is on the decline. Young Kadazan and Iban children now converse in Bahasa Malaysia."

The country's race-based politics also came under the spotlight. While calls were made for it to be discarded, others dismissed such suggestions as unrealistic.

Some participants pointed out that in the 1960s and 1970s, politics was less race-based and more focused on issues. For instance, although Chinese-dominated, the socialist Labour Party often tackled issues from a non-racial perspective.

Open Dialogue Centre executive director Mu'az Omar said if Malaysia is to move forward towards "actual racial unity", race-based politics would not survive.

"It would have to give way to more inclusive participation from the ground. This is a dynamic country and we have to be ever evolving."

Housewife Lim Swee Bin agreed: "All Malaysians should have equal rights in all-spheres."

Lim, who brought her two sons to the discussion to "open their minds", said: "As Raja Nazrin said, all Malaysians should have equal rights under the Malaysian sun."

Dynamic Speakers Training Centre principal trainer Azmi Shahrin said nothing will come out of "just sitting around and talking".

"The question we should be asking is what we are doing as individuals to change things. We need to challenge the norm and where better to start than by doing something ourselves."