

The measurement of national unity

The issue of national unity needs to be studied as there are indicators showing that Malaysia is moving away from rather than towards national integration, writes
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FOR a country as ethnically diverse as Malaysia, integrating the various ethnic groups is the overriding objective of development.

As we celebrate 50 years of independent development, we should take a hard look at the fundamental issue of national unity or national integration. Making sense, and making headway, in assessing the progress that has been achieved towards national integration, is difficult but resources and time must still be channelled to this challenging and important task.

As all rational beings require a rational basis for their behaviour, views and decisions, we need to build up a corpus of knowledge on where we stand today on national integration. The consensus at this juncture appears disheartening as most indicators, however imperfect, show that the country is moving away rather than towards national integration.

Ethnicity still appears to be a fundamental fact of political, economic and social life and a widespread criterion of identity in Malaysia. Class consciousness, it seems, has not taken deep root after 50 years of development. Amartya Sen in his book *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* stressed that "many of the conflicts and priorities of the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity", and the recent trend of communitarian philosophy has stressed the importance of community-based identity.

Sen notes two forms of reductionism: The first form is of "identity disregard", which ignores any sense of identity with others, and the second is of "singular affiliation", which assumes that a person belongs pre-eminently to only one collectivity. In reality, an individual is a member of more than one community or group, and his identity is plural rather than singular.

Over the past 50 years, economic growth in this country has averaged about six per cent per annum. Poverty has been reduced. Income inequality was narrowed but has widened



The government's overriding objective of development is unity and integration among the various ethnic groups.

again in recent years; ethnic economic imbalances still remain sizable. Overall living standards have been raised, but social ills, in various forms, have taken root.

Religious fundamentalism and extremism have been growing. Contests for political power within political parties have increased and there has been growing divisiveness within political parties. There has been no record of any major ethnic conflicts since 1969.

Undoubtedly, beneath these broad trends of growth and modernity, there have simmered discontents not captured by the traditional statistics. In the interest of enlightenment, and in the belief that enlightenment leads to more rational behaviour, efforts need to be directed at assessing the state of integration in the community. The key areas of integration needing more attention have to do with where we are educated, work, live and socialise. In assessing the extent and trends in national integration in these selected areas, we need to measure and to add some appropriate *numeraire*.

In education, evidence on the nature and trends in segregation will need to be compiled

and assessed. In employment, we should look out for cases of *extremities*, or where the labour in establishments or economic sectors are overwhelmingly sourced from one ethnic group.

Evidence of one ethnic group being crowded into certain occupations should also be assessed. Evidence of employment and wage discrimination will need to be monitored. In residential areas, information should be compiled on the trends in residential segregation, especially in the urban areas. Compiling trends in integration in the social spheres would be more problematic and require more thought and consideration. These tasks will provide us with some key indicators of integration. If they are sufficiently reliable, we could consider devising an index of national integration.

One must also be aware and appreciate that there are limits to rationality and the instruments of integration, especially of quotas. Exercising free choice in education, workplace and residence may not lead to desirable outcomes if a balanced outcome is what we are after. Proportionality — that is, representation according to an

ethnic group share in the population — can be considered as the desirable outcome. The market is dynamic; the forces of demand and supply will not, in all likelihood, produce a balanced outcome and excessive use of quotas to correct the anticipated outcomes can lead to inefficiencies.

Agents in the market may want to exercise their sense of belonging or security in a plural community, other than maximising profits. Employers may have a taste for discrimination and indulge it by employing only, or mostly, labour from one ethnic group. Residents from one ethnic group, like birds of feather, would prefer to flock together, and their choice of residence would be determined by the relative share of their own ethnic group in a locality.

There could be a tipping point when the share of an ethnic group in an area reaches a certain level, causing other ethnic groups to leave the area; a case of human capital flight. Some parents would prefer to send their children to schools that maximise the use of their language, or where more attention is given to their religion. However much integration is desired, the workings of personal and communal choices can undermine these intentions and lead to segregation.

The failure of the market to value integration as a public good would provide a continuing case for state intervention to correct market failures. Even so, reality and pragmatism must guide intervention by the state. The costs and benefits of integration and the instruments of integration will need to be carefully assessed, monitored and adjusted.

All the areas of integration that have been cited are manifestations of external integration and focus on physical proximity. Even more critical are the internal forces — the mental attributes, which are the foundation for integration.

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