

MALAYSIA

# Nation-Building

*Limited national service is launched in a bid to spur racial integration. But it has its critics*

By S. Jayasankaran/KUALA LUMPUR

**IN MID-FEBRUARY**, some 85,000 Malaysian high-school graduates will take part in an ambitious experiment aimed at forging a sense of national identity and boosting racial integration. But while the government has been lauding the merits of its inaugural national-service programme, the opposition claims it is aimed at indoctrinating Muslims to support the ruling coalition and others say it's too limited in scope.

The programme gets under way on February 16 at 44 camps around the country. Recruits such as Maryanne Santa Maria were chosen at random by computer on December 8 from Malaysia's more than 480,000 girls and boys who were born in 1986. They include young people from all Malaysia's ethnic groups.

Santa Maria must report to a rural camp in the western Malaysian state of Negri Sembilan, where she and fellow recruits will undergo three months of physical training, including unarmed military-style exercises, community service and classes on nation-building and patriotism. There are no exemptions for those picked, but more than 1,000 teenagers—mostly ethnic Chinese—have applied for deferments because they are studying overseas or have enrolled in local colleges.

Jail beckons for those caught trying to evade national service. Santa Maria's putting a brave face on it, telling the **REVIEW**: "Well, it could be fun. I might make new friends, you know, that sort of thing."

The 600 million ringgit (\$157.8 million) programme represents Kuala Lumpur's first real attempt at tackling a problem that's been simmering for years. Three decades of affirmative action for the country's majority Malay population, accompanied by an Islamic resurgence, have divided Malaysian society along religious and racial lines. The polarization is potentially serious as Malaysia is a multi-ethnic nation comprising 63% Malays, 27% Chinese, 9% Indians and 1% others.

## BANGSA MALAYSIA

"National service is conceived as a tool for nation-building," Deputy Premier Najib Razak said recently. "Its end objective is the creation of a 'Bangsa Malaysia,' or the single Malaysian race."

Over the years, national service has been suggested by both government and opposition politicians as a way to promote racial integration and curb religious extremism in predomi-

nantly Muslim Malaysia. But, quite apart from cost, the leaders of the United Malays National Organization (Umno)—the ethnic Malay party that has been at the heart of government since independence from Britain in 1957—had always balked at the idea of non-Malay civilians being given weapons training.

There's no danger of that under the pilot scheme. Perhaps because of cost, the initiative will not be a national draft to top up Malaysia's 96,000-strong volunteer armed forces. "There will be no use of guns or military equipment here," explains Khairy Jamaluddin, a member of the newly formed National Service Council and a close aide to Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. "But it's a first step and it's evolving."

That hasn't stopped people from criticizing the scheme. Some have dismissed it as a quick fix that cannot possibly meet its objectives of nation-building because it only involves 18% of those eligible for selection.



**NATIONAL PRIDE:** Young Malaysians on the march

The country's main opposition Parti Islam Se Malaysia (Pas), meanwhile, claims the scheme is aimed at indoctrinating Muslim youth to support the government. Pas has said that before the national-service camps get under way, it will hold compulsory courses for all children of Pas members who have been picked.

"Our programme is aimed at building our children's mental strength to enhance their faith in God," says Salahuddin Ayub, the head of the Pas youth wing. "It will also dissuade them from hedonism."

Umno has denied Pas's allegations, but it seems likely that the national-service programme, which is created by the government, will try to portray the ruling party favourably.

Whether national service will become a permanent fixture in Malaysia is unclear. The programme's cost might prove unpalatable to the administration, which has been trying to cut expenses to counter six straight years of hefty budget deficits. "We'll see how it goes," says a government official. "Nothing has been decided." ■