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Defining and redefining 'Malay'

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IDENTITY: Is a Malay with liberal thinking or one who is secular less of a Malay?



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WHO or what is a Malay? Every now and then, and especially now when Arabisation is creeping in, the answer to that question could vary and provocatively stir up debate. Just like last week, when it was said at a forum in Petaling Jaya, which discussed *Melayu dan makna-maknanya* (Malay and its meanings), that there was a worrying tendency to dump a person out of the

"club" for thoughts deemed too liberal and even for political reasons.

That may be ridiculous, but at the same time, it underlines a common trait of Malays today of having a siege mentality, which happens to be one of the swift answers I got when I threw a "What is a Melayu?" question to a group of people through social media recently. It is quite strange, come to think of it, that many people place importance in the description and definition of a Malay, since there is none of the sort for, say, an Englishman or a Javanese or a Bugis, other than for the broad purpose connected to nationality.

I suppose the whole Malay thing revolves around the Federal Constitution, which, in establishing provisions for special privileges of Bumiputeras under Article 153, spells

out the definition of a Malay under Article 160: A person born in the Federation, or of a parent who is a Malaysian citizen, who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, adheres to Malay customs and is domiciled in Malaysia. Therefore, controversial lecturer Professor Dr Mohd Ridhuan Tee Abdullah is, by definition, a Malay, though he was born Chinese.

I was not at last week's forum organised by Projek Dialog, but reports on the event came out with interesting thoughts by some of those who took part on not only who, but what, is a Malay. For instance, lawyer Syahredzan Johan said he was told in the past that because of his liberal views, he had betrayed Islam and Malays, and was, therefore, no longer Malay. He said there was a general feeling that all Malays should conform to an official set of characteristics to be called Malay.

But, who has the right to decide whether a person is more Malay or