

BN grappling with resurgence of Chinese schools

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KUALA LUMPUR, April 9 — When Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin announced last week that the government would bow to demands to transfer out of Chinese national-type primary schools teachers who were not Mandarin-proficient, it was an acknowledgement of the community's deep-seated discontent with the Barisan Nasional (BN) government.

And nowhere is this more apparent than in the education system where government Chinese primary schools have become the choice of most parents from the community when enrolling their children because of the relative autonomy of these institutions and the perceived superiority of the environment.

Chin said Chinese parents were not choosing national schools because of the growing Islamisation of the schools and lower standards.

This preference has made it more difficult for the Barisan Nasional government to ignore the demands of pro-Chinese education groups and has put the survival of the MCA at stake.

Malaysia's over century-old Chinese school system, once seen to be on its last legs in the 1970s and even into the early 1980s, received a new lease on life thanks to widespread perception that national schools are of lower quality and non-Muslim fears that the schools are being used for Islamic proselytisation.

Chinese education issues also now threaten the political fortunes of Barisan Nasional's second largest component party — the MCA — which has been widely blamed for the problems plaguing Chinese schools — from lack of teachers to the alleged glacial pace of approvals for new schools to the non-recognition of private Chinese secondary school exams despite recognition in countries such as the UK and the US.

It has also intensified the debate, which has spanned more than half a century, of whether vernacular schools hamper national unity as students from different racial groups spend their formative years separated from one another.

Chinese schools, which use Mandarin as the medium of instruction, are a legacy of Malaysia's colonial history and now make up part of a complex educational landscape which parents have to navigate.

Figures from the Ministry of Education show that there are now 1,291 government Chinese primary schools, out of a total of 7,709.

They make up the second largest number of primary schools after Malay-medium national primary schools which number 5,949.

The picture changes drastically however when it comes to secondary education as there are no government Chinese secondary schools.

All 60 Chinese secondary schools in the country are private and managed by Dong Jiao

Zong (United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia) compared with 1,906 government-funded national secondary schools.

There were 603,192 pupils enrolled in Chinese primary schools in 2010 compared with 2.18 million in national primary schools.

The first Chinese schools were informally established by Chinese migrants to Malaya in the 19th century and existed alongside schools established by the colonial British government and Christian missionaries which constituted the most prestigious learning institutions at the time.

In the run-up to independence, Chinese schools faced an uncertain future and battled against proposals to turn them into English-medium schools.

Most of the Chinese schools eventually agreed to a compromise and those that refused proceeded to operate as private institutions.

Many pro-education Chinese groups still harbour deep suspicions that the Malaysian government has not given up hope of eventually doing away with Chinese primary schools as was proposed by the 1951 Barnes Report, the pre-cursor to the 1956 Razak Report which greatly influenced the development of the current education system.

In the years before and immediately after independence, graduates of the English-medium schools were generally seen to have better job prospects and these schools were the first choice of most parents.

Several developments however — mainly the change of medium of instruction from English to Malay and the apparent increasing Islamic character of national schools — deterred the new generations of ethnic Chinese parents from choosing national schools, and Chinese primary schools benefited by default.

The perception that Chinese primary schools have stricter discipline, placed a heavier emphasis on academic excellence and the economic rise of China have also persuaded growing numbers of non-Chinese parents to choose Chinese primary schools.

Pua said the apparent substantive decline in the quality of national schools was the cause for the rise of Chinese schools.

The trend of most Chinese parents and some non-Chinese parents to shun national schools could lead to longer term consequences including new generations of Malaysians growing up with two different worldviews.

“Chinese parents are not choosing national schools for two reasons — the growing Islamisation of the schools and lower standards,” said James Chin, head of the school of social science at Monash University Sunway.

“The implications will be that students can’t get together and they will have different perspectives and worldviews.”

DAP lawmaker Tony Pua, who has a keen interest in education matters, said that while nobody would begrudge the government from trying to make national schools the schools of choice, it should not come at the expense of Chinese schools which was a right.

“There is no question that there is such an objective (to eventually do away with Chinese

schools)," said Pua. "That's the only reasonable explanation for the problems facing the schools despite there being such a high demand for Chinese schools."

Pua concurred with Chin that the apparent substantive decline in the quality of national schools was the cause for the rise of Chinese schools.

"Parents in the 1970s and 1980s sent their children to national schools," he pointed out. "Over the last two decades, the quality has consistently deteriorated and there is now a loss of confidence."

The DAP MP said that the government should focus on improving the quality of national schools while also meeting all the requirements of vernacular schools.

"You make national schools the schools of choice by making them top quality not by denying (the demands of) vernacular schools," he said. "It is a right to be able to choose a vernacular school."

Wan Saiful Wan Jan, chief executive of the think-tank Institute of Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), said the "mistake" that Chinese schools made was to give up their independence and accept government aid.

"Anything to do with government aid will be linked to political considerations," he said. "By accepting government aid, they put themselves at the mercy of the government."

Wan Saiful said he disagreed that the government should seek to eventually do away with Chinese primary schools, adding that a variety of education systems should be encouraged instead.

"We should celebrate differences," he said. "The government should do as much as they can to make sure parents have the right to choose the type of education they want for their children."

The think-tank chief said he was even worried that the government was not building enough Chinese schools.

"If I have an option, I would like to send my kids to Chinese schools as they are known for their quality," he said.

The United Chinese School Committees Association (Dong Zong), at a recent rally to protest a shortage of Chinese primary school teachers, accused the Education Ministry of compromising Chinese education by "deliberately" not training enough Chinese school teachers.

Dong Zong president Yap Sin Tian said the ministry's apparent motive was to cause a gradual change of identity of Chinese primary schools by shifting the language of administration and medium of instruction.

Pro-Chinese education parents and groups see Chinese schools as a way to root the next generation in Chinese culture and fiercely resist any attempts to water down the character of the schools.

The teacher shortage is only a catalyst for the larger fury that the community feels over the MCA's perceived inability to represent their interest and could spell trouble for the founding

party of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

"The Chinese school issue could be an explosive issue if the opposition knows how to use it," said Chin. "There is every reason to think that this issue could be a slam dunk for the opposition."

Chinese education in Malaysia started out with migrants from China just educating privately in temples and associations.

In 1898, the "Man Ching" or "Ching" government in China started education reform and set up new halls of learning and the movement was subsequently brought to Malaysia with the first formal Chinese school — Lok Yuk — in Kudat, Sabah established in 1903.

Before the 1900s, informal Chinese education existed in Malaysia using Chinese dialects and in 1904 the oldest Chinese school in Peninsular Malaysia — Penang's Chung Hwa Confucian School — was started and was the first to use Mandarin.

At the end of 1920, the Federated Malay States had 181 Chinese schools while the Straits Settlements had 313 Chinese schools.

By 1938, Sarawak had 144 Chinese schools and by 1939, Sabah had 59 Chinese schools.

The British started providing financial aid to Chinese schools in 1924.

Wan Saiful said the 'mistake' that Chinese schools made was to give up their independence and accept government aid.

The Barnes Report of 1950 recommended that all vernacular streams (Malay, Chinese and Tamil) be abolished and be replaced with schools using Malay as the medium of instruction for primary level and English for secondary level but the report was fiercely opposed by many in the Chinese community.

As a result, the Fenn-Wu Report in 1951 recommended that vernacular schools be kept, while at the same time supporting the national school system.

As a compromise, the Razak Report in 1956 recommended recognition of the three vernacular streams, with each using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction and sought to make Malay the national language, while at the same time preserving and aiding the development of the language and culture of the non-Malays.

One of the terms of references of the Razak Report was the ultimate objective of bringing together the children of all races under a national education system using the national language as the medium of instruction.

However, bowing to protests, the ultimate objective of a single stream and single language national education system was not included in the Education Act 1957 but was later added to the Education Act 1961.

The government nevertheless encouraged Chinese secondary schools to receive government aid and to convert to English secondary schools.

Before 1957, some Chinese secondary schools in Penang, Negri Sembilan and Johor agreed to become national-type secondary schools with English as the main medium of instruction with Penang's Chung Ling High School the first to do so.

Following the 1960 Rahman Talib Report and the Education Act 1961, it was announced that starting from 1961, secondary school exams using the Chinese language as the medium of instruction would be abolished and any secondary schools refusing to conform would no longer receive government aid.

Dong Jiao Zong's website claimed that the Education Act 1961 was enough to spell the demise of Chinese primary schools and Chinese secondary schools.

After the Education Act 1961 was passed, 54 Chinese high schools accepted the new conditions but 16 refused and became Chinese independent high schools.

In 1967, it was announced that only students with government-recognised certificates could study abroad, a move which Dong Jiao Zong decried as an attempt to cut off the path for studies abroad for Chinese independent secondary school students.

Dong Jiao Zong responded by attempting to set up a private university which became a hot issue during the 1969 general election.

While the Alliance government approved its registration two days before the elections, the May 13, 1969 racial riots and subsequent state of emergency halted the plans for private universities.

The Majid Ismail Report 1971 recommended that entry into national universities be apportioned based on population ratio — and the so-called "quota system" — was implemented by the government.

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