

Politics getting in way of education reform, Singapore daily suggests
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By Ida Lim

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 15 — Malaysia's dream of boosting its education standards through an ambitious overhaul of the national school system will not happen as long as politicians continue to be involved in drawing up its policies, a Singapore daily suggested today, citing analysts.

Wan Saiful Wan Jan, chief executive of a local think-tank IDEAS who was among those who had attended talks leading to the recently-launched education blueprint for 2013-2025, was reported by the Straits Times to have said "the need to keep politics out of education" was raised during meetings but never "spelt out".

File photo of children lining up on their first day of school. Putrajaya has launched a new education blueprint to inculcate six attributes in children — knowledge, thinking skills, leadership, bilingual proficiency, ethics and national identity.

The analyst reportedly said getting a non-politician to serve as education minister, echoing similar remarks yesterday by a former deputy prime minister, Tun Musa Hitam, who has said education policies should not be determined by politicians or political parties.

Another political observer, Dr Kua Kia Soong, was cited in the Singapore paper as saying a decentralisation of powers would make education policies less political, and pushing for local government elections as a step towards that goal.

Kua, a former head of a Chinese private college, was reported by the paper as saying local education officers had more power in the past to decide on schooling matters for their local community.

He was reported by the Straits Times as saying education policies in the country started taking on a more political tone from 1965 when the federal government gained greater control of power after local government elections were abolished.

"The problem is that the blueprint uses fluffy language," Kua was quoted as saying, indicating a lack of interest to make education less political.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak was reported calling for education to be depoliticised at the launch of National Education Blueprint (NEB) 2013-2025 last Tuesday.

The Straits Times cited the reversal of the policy to teach mathematics and science in English as an example of political interference in Malaysia's education system.

In 2009, the current administration led by Najib had retracted the policy after it was introduced six years ago by the then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Musa had said that if national education policies continue to be determined by politicians or political parties, the "future will be very bleak", although he did not mention anyone.

He said that feedback from the federal opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) over the education blueprint may cause partisan issues.

“There’s nothing wrong if the opposition wants to give feedback, but the problem would be when the plan is thought of as a Barisan Nasional plan and automatically some people begin looking for faults.

“Then, when the opposition gives an opinion, it would be then considered an opposition plan. When such happens, it automatically creates a partisan situation instead,” Musa said.

In the new education blueprint, Malaysia aims to be in the top third of the Programme For International Student Assessment (PISA) test within the next 13 years. The country is currently ranked in the bottom third.

The education blueprint comprises of 11 strategic “shifts” to inculcate six attributes in children — knowledge, thinking skills, leadership, bilingual proficiency, ethics and national identity.

The blueprint report is available for free from the Ministry of Education’s website.

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