

**A perverse directive to suppress English**

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**Letter to the Editor**

From M Santhananaban

Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob has, some six decades after the nation's independence, made a rather strange, stupefying, and startling statement.

He has directed his entire government machinery to communicate in Bahasa Malaysia with foreign individuals, institutions, international organisations, and countries, and provide English translations of their communications.

For a country grappling with the most adverse socio-economic effects of a considerably serious and sustained Covid-19 pandemic, a depreciating ringgit, the repercussions of a billion-dollar embezzlement scandal that has caught international attention, and the realisation that three Asean countries have in the past decade overtaken Malaysia in GDP terms, this seems to be a perverse development.

This policy directive seems to go so much against the grain of what Malaysia has traditionally stood for.

It is uncharacteristic, unusual, and shocking for most Malaysians because both their largely all-embracing Islamic outlook of brotherhood and the people's enormous wealth of goodwill to welcome foreigners is legendary.

Usman Awang, an acclaimed Malaysian poet-laureate had decades ago composed a poem to describe Johor Malays. The theme of his work was the capacity of Johoreans to welcome, accept, include, and embrace migrants of all kinds from many countries who took up residence and made Johor their home.

This unique quality of making a Johor Malay from so many strands of immigrants has enriched, energised, and ennobled Malaysian society.

An important and integral facet of such acceptance and inclusiveness was the compassion, communicability, and hospitality of the average Malayan and Malaysian.

The rudiments of Bahasa Malaysia which these migrants quickly acquired enabled their smooth integration into Malaysian society.

But from the very early days, successive governments, especially after independence, encouraged Malaysians to learn and master English.

While Bahasa Malaysia has been used as the main medium of instruction and has become entrenched as the official and primary language, no previous prime minister has attempted to suppress, sideline, or stigmatise the use of English.

The alumni of the earliest institutions established to educate the Malays, beginning with the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar and Maktab Perguruan Melayu Matang in Taiping, which was a precursor of the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) in Tanjong Malim, were all encouraged to acquire fluency in English.

Two notable SITC grandees were Abdul Ghafar Baba and Senu Abdul Rahman, who rose to occupy high government positions.

They recognised that the use of English was not a disability, a defect, or an act of treason.

These wise men and women who learned and acquired high qualifications in English were the avenues, assets, and enablers who equipped the country to communicate with not just the rest of the world but with our neighbours.

One of our learned and illustrious jurists, Suffian Hashim, served the Brunei public service on secondment to draft their constitution.

Given this history, the English language has been a positive, productive, and useful tool for Malaysia.

If our academics, educationists, diplomats, as well as finance, trade, investment, military, medical, science, and research people can communicate easily and effectively in English, it is an asset for the country.

They often have to communicate important points of view precisely, promptly, and in person. Such communication is not something negative or nugatory to our national well-being, development, and growth.

English provides that most vital lifeline to pursue our goals of enhanced development, diplomacy, and discourse with the rest of the world, and its use by Malaysians should not be construed or perceived as an act of disloyalty or disrespect.

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