

'Bangsa Malaysia means united nation'

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Is the debate over the Bangsa Malaysia concept a misunderstanding over terminology, or does it point to how far Malaysia is from being truly united? Universiti Malaya's History Department Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Khoo Kay Kim tells DEBORAH LOH that Bangsa Malaysia is more than just words.

Q: What do you make of the Johor Menteri Besar's rejection of the Bangsa Malaysia concept?

A: The MB is confused by the term *bangsa*. In the past, *bangsa* used to mean race, as in when we talk of *bangsa Melayu*, *bangsa Cina* and *bangsa India*.

But from the time Malaysia became a member of the United Nations, *bangsa* has come to mean "nation". The Malay translation of the United Nations is "Persatuan Bangsa-bangsa Bersatu". It does not translate as "united races".

What is a nation? It is the total citizenship of a particular state. All citizens of Malaysia form the nation of Malaysia. Therefore, there can be no such thing as a Malaysian race, which is what I think the MB is thinking of in the Bangsa Malaysia concept. It makes no sense to have a Malaysian race; you would have to be so many per cent Chinese, so many per cent Malay, and so on.

By the way, social anthropologists in universities have been using the Malay word *ras* for race. This has been the academic practice for 10 to 15 years already but not many people outside know this.

Q: Your reasoning sounds logical but will the grassroots, whom the MB was addressing, buy it?

A: Malaysians must take the trouble to understand terminology. Terminology must be precise or there will

be confusion. In the case of Bangsa Malaysia, we mean a united nation of people and not a race.

Malaysians should be more questioning and not depend on what politicians say, which is calculated to seek political mileage instead of clarity. Malaysians should stop being like schoolchildren, learning everything by rote without understanding.

Q: The Bangsa Malaysia concept has been around for some time, why do you think people still misunderstand it?

A: When Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was then prime minister, announced it in 1991 together with his Vision 2020 policy, he never explained it. That's the problem. He meant nation, he was talking about a united Malaysian nation, but it was not clearly defined.

It is very disturbing when terminology is misinterpreted as it can result in friction between races. Lately, politicians seem to be stoking ethnic sensitivities when they should be helping to build national unity instead.

In 1956, the Razak Report on Education in Malaya stated that the main objective of Malaya's education policy was national unity. So at this juncture, when we are still a long way off from achieving a Bangsa Malaysia, we have to go back to the schools. Unless the education system truly adopts what was recommended in the Razak report, that national unity

be the main emphasis in education, we won't be producing future generations that are truly united.

Q: Is it really necessary to give names to such concepts since it causes confusion?

A: The term is perfectly fine but it has to be explained to people. The problem with Malaysians is that they react to things they don't understand. It has to be properly emphasised that there is a Malaysian nation. People still don't understand the term "nation", thinking it means race. When you say it in English, somehow it seems okay, but in Bahasa, it seems to have a different meaning.

Q: What about attempts by other countries to integrate different ethnic groups without each group losing its own culture or identity?

A: Indonesia and Thailand insisted all nationals use local names. Malaysia has never done that. The Malaysian way is fine, but people should be made more aware of the fact that they belong to one nation and not different ethnic groups. The confusion is between political identity and cultural identity.

We should emphasise the political identity. I'm not saying we should forget traditional cultures, but you have a responsibility to the country in the context of being a citizen. We all live in one country, so we cannot insist on living separately in our cultural en-

claves all the time.

Q: Do you have a recommended definition for a common Malaysian identity?

A: When our leaders came up with the Rukun Negara, the idea was to bring people together. The Bangsa Malaysia concept essentially adheres to the same principles as the Rukun Negara.

Q: Is our race-based politics getting in the way of realising the Bangsa Malaysia concept?

A: Yes. The kind of cohesiveness that we want as a nation, we've not reached yet. We are more concerned with cultural identity. Since our politics is tied to cultural identity, the political parties all tend to emphasise separatism and race and not cohesion.

There seem to be, usually before the general assembly of each ethnic party, attempts to give emphasis to cultural identity. I have observed this over the years. The same goes for any

party because each gets its support from largely one ethnic group. Even the non-communal based parties are still dominated by one race.

Perhaps we should look back to the Alliance in the pre-Barisan Nasional days. The Alliance in the 1960s introduced the Alliance Direct Membership Organisation or ADMO, to allow people to join without first having to join any ethnic party. But there were politicians who didn't encourage that. Maybe we should revive this idea.

Q: So Bangsa Malaysia is not about "reinventing a national identity", as the Johor MB claims?

A: There's no need to reinvent anything. This nation is called Malaysia and we are all the people of Malaysia. We *are* Bangsa Malaysia. Where fears about language are concerned, that Bahasa Malaysia will be supplanted by English, politicians and the public must realise that we need both a national language and an international language (English) to survive globalisation.