

Embracing Malaysiana

Instead of questioning the political correctness of the term *Bangsa Malaysia*, it would be more beneficial for all parties concerned to savour the cultural, religious and racial unity which Malaysians have fostered over the years, which others can only dream about.

■ By Khaldun Abdul Malik

THE ISSUE of *Bangsa Malaysia* has again been resurrected as an occasion for inter- and intra-political chicanery. Much of the current debate has revolved around whether the use of the term *Bangsa Malaysia* is constitutional, the extent to which the term corresponds to perceptions of national identity (as opposed to communal, ethnic, religious identities and so on) in general, and whether it can and should form the basis for the creation and sustainability of national unity.

The concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* is notoriously difficult to define. The word *bangsa* can be understood in different ways, and often means different things to different people. It can be used to describe, similar to the term 'race', those sharing a common descent, but its *Sanskrit* origins suggest lineage, or caste. Furthermore, the term is also commonly used to describe those of low birth. Of course, traditional uses of the term are not necessarily conscripted by a static definition – by and large, its meaning is equally defined by its use.

The debate is not new; the various issues involved have been the source of some of the most vigorous cultural and political discourse which goes back many years prior to independence. Though some

commentators prefer to limit discussion around the subject in terms of its legal veracity, this would, in practice, alienate the context in which the constitution was drafted – essential because the meaning of a text is anchored in its context; historically, culturally and politically. To deny that, is to lose any sense of the possible meanings inherent in any written text, and devalue the principles on which the text was written.

Some may consider this as being excessively complex, but if some measure of seriousness is to be attached to our notions of citizenship, nationhood and so on, then semantic concerns have to be brought into play generally, and in this case, specifically. To ignore it, is to imperil some of our most cherished values, and the principles which are the basis for these values.

Politicians and their cohorts often take advantage of concepts such as *Bangsa Malaysia* because it's an easy target. Sloganeering of such ilk often provides sensational publicity – something which can easily be utilised for political purposes. Of course, it doesn't help when any attempt to engage with the issue seriously is (after the initial excitement has died down) usually dismissed on the grounds that it may stimulate negative sentiments between different ethnic groups, or more precisely, issues interpreted as having to do with race. What we end up with is the kind of abject

political maneuvering so beloved by our politicians.

The historian Bernard Cohn in his works discusses the fundamental role played by colonial discourse in developing categories of self understanding in colonised societies. The different forms of understanding, through the use of particular categories, concepts and distinctions, are enumerated in ways which correspond not to local traditions and sensibilities, but primarily utilised in order to aid colonial control and consumption. This is best illustrated in the kinds of ideas related to race and ethnicity that are espoused by European colonials in their process of classifying the various communities they encounter in the colonies. The significance is not merely in terms of how it has affected colonial policy, but perhaps, more importantly, by providing an epistemological framework which greatly impacted itself on local self knowledge, often leading to the de-legitimatisation of traditional cultural, religious and political systems.

What Cohn terms as the 'colonisation of knowledge' becomes the basis on which definitions of colonial and anti-colonial discourse is expressed. And as the history of colonialism in general, and ours, specifically, has shown, it is in these terms that the whole discussion

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pertaining to identity, ethnicity and nationhood is borne. Local traditions, histories and forms of knowledge are, at best, nominal factors in the ensuing debate.

But why is this necessarily a problem? The answer to that is the fact that many of the kinds of problems we face today stem from a limited understanding of the past, and the way these issues have played themselves out in the present. The current controversy over *Bangsa Malaysia* is a classic example of this. Historians of the Malay Archipelago have long recognised that modern notions of identities – derived in part from the Linnean classification of species – have long corrugated local understanding of self-hood that are fairly unrecognisable in communities around the region for much of its history.

Questions surrounding ethnic identity, nationhood, citizenship and so on, only became more widespread during the latter stages of colonial rule – often accompanying the discourse of anti-colonial political struggle. For example, though colonialists and local scribes (such as Stamford Raffles, who mentioned the existence of a ‘Malay nation’ as early as the beginning of the 1800s, and Abdullah Munshi, who described *Bangsa Melayu* as an ethnic identity during the 1840s) have been writing about ‘Malayness’ for some

time, it was only towards the end of the 19th Century, when the rise of modern anti-colonialism became the dominant feature of the political landscape, that the term gained widespread currency in directing notions of identity and ethnicity amongst local communities.

The current debate, couched in the language of political expediency, attempts to ignore the complexity of this history, often trying to establish the debate in simplistic forms, with the hope that credibility can be established through a populous appeal. However, the idea of national identity, nationhood and citizenship are intimately intertwined with notions of value, ethics and tradition – all of which are grounded in a sense of the past, and the myriad ways it interacts with the present.

Newly formed nation states are often fraught with questions to do with identity, political rights and so on. All of these might be best viewed as questions of legitimacy – on what basis is a country formed? And, can that, which is accepted as the basis for the existence of the country, be legitimately sustained over time? For example, some of the main reasons why the issue of *Bangsa Malaysia* is, and has been raised, are to do with a number of important assumptions:

■ the idea of ‘national unity’, in that the kinds of social organisation currently in place creates,

■ ‘division’ among the different ethnic groups in the country, and therefore, efforts should be made to create the basis for a more common identity,

■ to what extent does this go against the constitutional provisions already provided, and whether it is constitutionally legitimate to ratify such an identity, and

■ what institutional ramifications such a move would have on pre-existing institutional frameworks – be they legal, economic, political or otherwise – within the state?

Perhaps, what we should do is to take the debate a step or two back. A more critical exploration of the kinds of assumptions which bind these opinions together might prove to be more fruitful for our understanding of these issues. So, instead of passively accepting the commonly held view that ‘national unity’ must be fostered, we should instead rejoice in the fact that Malaysian society, as a general rule, has been able to foster the kinds of cultural, religious and racial bridges which most other countries have attempted but failed. Not because of but rather despite politically inspired attempts to foster ‘national unity’. **mb**

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