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Multi-racial Malaysia

I have been asked “What is the meaning of a multi-racial Malaysia to me?”

Being multi-racial does not mean the same thing to every multi-racial country e.g. Singapore claims to be multi-racial but basically it is a predominantly Chinese State.

Because of the refusal of the descendants of migrants from China and India to be assimilated by the indigenous people we have to accept the retention of the identity of Malaysian citizens of Chinese and Indian origin. The people of Indonesian origin chose to be assimilated by the indigenous people, so they don't constitute a separate entity.

Multi-racial countries are usually unstable. Racial conflicts occur frequently. If Malaysia is to avoid racial conflicts it must try to reduce the differences between the different races.

We cannot change ethnicity. So we have to accept the ethnic differences. Religious differences also cannot be changed.

However, various aspects of the cultures can be made common. Chinese food in Malaysia reflect the influence of Malay and Indian tastes. We can celebrate each other's festivals etc. etc.

But economic disparities pose a major problem. Yet this is one area where corrections can be made and can reduce tension in a multi-racial society.

If we care to look we would notice that even in a single ethnic country, disparities in wealth distribution lead to conflicts. The principal reason why the Socialist and Communist ideologies were formulated and then espoused by the working class is because of the extreme disparities of wealth between the workers and the employers. But Socialism and Communism tended to reduce economic growth, causing not only the rich to suffer but also the poor.

Trade Unions also tend to stunt economic growth, as they are often abused as for example the holding of nationwide strikes for political reasons.

These confrontations between workers and employers, basically between poor and rich, happens quite often even in single-ethnic countries.

Now if the workers and the poor are made up largely of one race in a multi-racial country and the employers are rich and are of another race, then class

confrontation would be amplified by racial animosity. That was the basic situation in Malaysia pre-1969, and we know the results.

The Malay, Chinese and Indian leaders of that time agreed that the disparities in wealth between the races must be corrected. That is why we introduced the New Economic Policy which proposes to eliminate the identification of race with economic functions.

Unfortunately the affirmative action we have to undertake must result in discrimination against Chinese and Indians in favour of the Bumiputera. This caused resentment because even the economically prosperous race must have a fair number of poor members. These people will feel the discrimination more acutely.

The other leg of the NEP is to eradicate poverty irrespective of race. From surveys it is clear that there is more poverty among the indigenous people than among the Chinese. It is therefore more likely for poverty among the Chinese to be self-eradicated than among the Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak. Unfortunately the Indian leaders did not address the problem of Indian poverty.

If we are going to correct the imbalance it is necessary to try to reduce poverty among the indigenous people more than among the Chinese. However, where the Chinese poor show exceptional abilities, as for example getting brilliant examination results, they should not be deprived of help simply because they belong to a more prosperous race.

The affirmative action of the NEP is good in principle but along the way there were misapplications and failures. Nevertheless since 1969 we have seen no major racial conflicts in Malaysia. Also despite the NEP and its imperfections, Malaysia has remained far more stable than most other multi-racial or even single ethnic countries. And economic growth in Malaysia belie the assumed negative effects of the NEP.

I feel sure that if we can reduce economic disparities between Malaysians they would not be too conscious or too insistent on being identified by their racial origins. They would still be Malays, Chinese, Indians, Muruts, Bajaus, Dayaks etc. but they would be less hostile and critical of each other.

Malaysian races are symbiotic and they really complement each other. Even though multi-racial Malaysia will still be ethnically multi-racial, Malaysia would remain relatively peaceful, capable of good economic growth and exhibit relative harmony between races if the leadership of the country understands this problem and knows how to manage.

That is as much as we can hope for since we are opposed to the adoption of a single mother tongue and culture and to dropping the identification with the countries our ancestors came from.

