

National unity narrative essay



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CPPS Policy Factsheet: National Unity CPPS is pleased to bring to you its “CPPS Policy Fact Sheet” on national unity. In this factsheet, we will look at government policies which affect national unity and explore their effects on social cohesion and integrity in Malaysia. BACKGROUND Malaysia is one of the most plural and heterogeneous countries in the world, with three major ethnic groups — Malay, Chinese, and Indian — plus several other indigenous tribes. It has a checkered history, having been under four different colonial powers at one time or another since the 16th century.

This ethnic and cultural diversity is reflected in the wide variety of languages spoken and religions practiced in Malaysia; even within the same ethnic group, various traditions prevail. Modern Malaysia is increasingly forced to confront the tensions arising from this fount of diversity, and the politics of race and religion. Malaysia has been free of ethnic bloodshed, but there remains much room for Malaysians to understand one another and to see each other as equal parts of an indivisible nation.

National unity is a key target of government policy; the Department of National Unity is tasked with promoting greater integration amongst the country’s various communities. However, numerous government policies and laws differentiate between Malaysians on the basis of ethnic background, to the point that many feel they have been the target of discrimination. Overall Malaysians are pleased with the progress the country has made in coming to terms with its plural and diverse nature. Yet, there is still significant room for improvement and ensuring that every Malaysian believes there is a place for them under the Malaysian sun.

FLASH POINTS The Department of National Unity defines national unity as " a situation in which all citizens from the various ethnic groups, religions, and states live in peace as one united nationality, giving full commitment to national identity based upon the Federal Constitution and the Rukunegara. " Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020), a government policy targeting developed status for Malaysia by the year 2020, names national unity as a key component of a developed country. The " Bangsa Malaysia" (Malaysian Nation) policy emphasises " people being able to identify themselves with the country, speak Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language) and accept the Constitution. " Prior to Bangsa Malaysia, the government's main thrust towards national unity was the National Culture Policy implemented in 1971, which defined the " indigenous culture" and Islam as two important bases for the national culture. The 2006 National Education Blueprint targets racial polarisation in the school system, aiming to use classes on the Constitution and other such activities to bring students together, while promoting Mandarin and Tamil classes in national schools.

In 2008, the government announced new quotas for government scholarships, with 55% allocated to the bumiputra and 45% for non-bumiputra; previously the quota stood at 90% to 10%. The old ethnic quota system in university admissions was abolished in 2004. The National Service programme which commenced in 2003 is meant to address racial polarisation and encourage national unity by bringing youths from a variety of backgrounds together in one setting.

The New Economic Policy and other associated affirmative action programmes have helped dampen Malay fears of falling behind the rest of

the nation socioeconomically, but also led to concerns of government-backed discrimination amongst the non-Malay communities. BASIC STATISTICS and FACTS Malays and other bumiputra comprise 65% of the population; Chinese make up 26%, and the Indians 8%. (2000 census) 60. 4% of Malaysians are Muslim, 19. 2% are Buddhist, 9. 1% are Christian, 6. 3% are Hindu, 2. % follow Confucianism/Taoism/ another traditional Chinese faith, and 2. 4% practice other faiths. (2000 census) 93% of Malays attend national schools, 90% of Chinese attend Chinese vernacular schools, and 70% of Indians attend Tamil vernacular schools. (Prime Minister's address to the 2004 Malaysian Education Summit) Bumiputra corporate equity stands at 19. 4%. (Mid-Term Review of the 9th Malaysia Plan) 41% of Malaysians either describe national unity as “ superficial” or “ imposed”, or believe there is no national unity at all in Malaysia. Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) 25% believe that Malaysians from different ethnic groups are drifting apart rather than becoming more united, and 15% believe that the situation will only worsen over the next decade. (Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) There is a clear correlation between age and mixing outside one's own ethnic group; younger Malaysians are likelier to say they find it difficult to relate with those not from their own racial background, and less likely to say they like mixing with people of a different race. CPPS Minda Muda study) 22% do not have any friends from ethnic groups other than their own. Of those who do, 60% rarely or never take meals with their friends from other ethnic backgrounds. (Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) Roughly 2/3rds of young Malaysians' close friends are primarily from the same ethnic group or religion as them. (CPPS Minda Muda study) Only 57% of Malaysians believe that government policies should focus

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on promoting interests common to all Malaysians, with 25% believing that government policies should focus on the interests of specific ethnic groups. Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) 75% of young Malays can say they have never been treated unfairly on account of their race; however, only 45% of their Chinese peers and 49% of the Indians say the same. For religious discrimination, the same figures stand at 82% for the Malays and 53% for others. (CPPS Minda Muda study) Recent polls suggest that ethnic inequality is the 2nd-most pressing issues faced by Malaysians, at 17%, with only price hikes and inflation considered more pressing, coming in at 20%. 3% are somewhat or very dissatisfied with government efforts to address ethnic inequality. (Merdeka Centre Voter Opinion Poll 4 th Quarter 2007)

Article 153 of the Federal Constitution states: " It shall be the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article. " Article 153 has been used to permit quotas in the provision of public scholarships, civil service positions, and business licences.

EDUCATION POLICIES Young Chinese Malaysians are considerably dissatisfied with the state of the education system when it comes to promoting national unity. (CPPS Minda Muda study) 64% of Chinese parents feel the education system is preparing students to be tolerant towards those of other races and religions, as opposed to 78% of Malay parents and 83% of Indian parents. (Merdeka Research Centre Education System Perceptions Survey) 86% of Malaysians believe that the time has come for a national education convention involving all races to review various aspects of our education

policies. Merdeka Centre Education System Perceptions Survey) 42% of Malaysian youth reject a quota system for admissions to public universities. (Merdeka Centre Youth Expectations Survey) 37% of Malaysians believe that the streaming of primary education based on mother tongue will negatively affect ethnic relations in the long run. (Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) 12% believe that the best way to improve ethnic relations in the country is to standardise on one education system. (Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) Incidents of intolerance in the school system are often publicised in the media. Recently, a teacher told her students Indians were monkeys and children of prostitutes. The government's response in such cases has been unsatisfactory; in here, the teacher was only transferred, with no further apparent penalty. Students often attend different primary school systems according to their mother tongue, curbing opportunities for interaction between young of different ethnic backgrounds.

At the secondary level, many bumiputra students opt for one of the MARA junior science colleges or other bumiputra-dominated boarding schools, further reducing young Malaysians' exposure to peers from different backgrounds. Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) is exclusively attended by bumiputra students; suggestions by Selangor Chief Minister Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim that it take in 10% of non-bumiputra was protested violently by students. A former Minister of Higher Education publicly declared that he would never see non-bumiputra students set foot on the campus.

Although the quota system for university admissions has been abolished, there are regular calls from within the ruling party (Umno) for its restoration.

Suspensions remain that the quota system is still in place by de facto, as the proportion of admitted bumiputra continues to hover between 50% and 60%. The quota system for government scholarships remains, and moves to increase the non-bumiputra quota or abolish the quotas entirely have come under fire. National Service is a popular remedial programme for racial integration; 73% of youth believe it has a positive effect on national unity, and 87% say it ought to be retained. Merdeka Centre Youth Expectations Survey) ECONOMIC POLICIES The NEP has ended but broadly refers to affirmative action for the Bumiputera in social, economic, corporate, distributive trade, and educational aspects. Its relevance has been debated recently, with some groups calling to replace this with a non-racebased affirmative action policy, focusing instead on need and meritocracy. A key target of the NEP was to have the bumiputra control 30% of corporate equity by 1990; when this target was not met, successor policies continued with a variety of bumiputra preferences.

The 30% goal remains a key target in economic policy, and claims that it has already been attained have met with withering criticism Under the Industrial Coordination Act, the state has wide-reaching powers to achieve the 30% target. This power was most frequently used in the 1970s, when vast restructuring of numerous private enterprises took place. Public corporations must have a bumiputra equity stake of at least 30%, although there are exceptions granted. Tax breaks for companies with 30% or more bumiputra ownership are common.

The state has taken over several foreign enterprises and established numerous government-linked corporations (GLCs) with the explicit purpose

of increasing the bumiputra equity share. Loose employment quotas apply to large establishments, which must employ staff in the same proportions as the overall ethnic composition of the country. Similar quotas also apply to the boards of directors for a number of firms. Civil service positions are subject to even more stringent quotas; a common and targeted ratio is 4 bumiputra to 1 non-bumiputra. There are overt bumiputra preferences in public procurement, where construction contracts, etc. are frequently given to bumiputra-controlled firms without an open tendering process. Government policy is to encourage GLCs to follow government procurement procedures, extending the preferences to the commercial sector. In a controversial move, Maybank in 2007 announced it would only utilise law firms with a bumiputra ownership stake of 51% or more; after public outcry, the policy was rolled back. Price discrimination, whereby the government subsidises bumiputra contractors' bids, is also a frequent practice. All new real estate developments are required to provide a certain discount for bumiputra buyers.

Shares in initial public offerings (IPOs) meant for bumiputra ownership are also frequently sold at a discount. No government policy has ever set explicit targets for inter- or intra-ethnic income inequality. The government monitors the incomes of various ethnic groups, but reducing income disparities or uplifting the poor in general is not a major priority. Studies indicate significant dissatisfaction amongst the Chinese population with the government's economic policies, which a substantial number perceive as detrimental to national unity. CPPS Minda Muda study) 39% of Malaysian youth believe that Malay preferences in government assistance ought to be

abolished. (Merdeka Centre Youth Expectations Survey) Source: CPPS Minda Muda study Policies for a Particular Group Only Statements on Econ Policies good for Economic unity Policies 1. 17 1. 04 1. 96 0 1 2 3 4 5 2. 17 1. 93 2. 48 4. 01 3. 4 4. 2 Indian/Others Chinese Malay NEP good for unity RELIGION and the LAW Amongst non-Muslims, concern is growing that Islamic law as practiced in Malaysia impinges on some of their rights.

The Lina Joy case in 2007 ended with the apex Federal Court ruling 2-1 that Malaysians legally defined as Muslims cannot convert out of Islam without going through the Muslim Syariah court system. In 2005 Maniam Moorthy (also known as Mohammad Abdullah) was buried as a Muslim because official records indicated he had converted from Hinduism to Islam; his family protested as he had never given them any indication of conversion, and continued to practice the Hindu faith. The civil courts refused to hear the matter, and referred the Hindu family to the Muslim Syariah courts.

In 2005, T. Saravanan converted from Hinduism to Islam, and filed an application in the Syariah Courts to dissolve his civil marriage and gain custody of his children. His wife, R. Subashini, insisted that only the civil courts could dissolve a civil marriage, but the civil courts held that they had no jurisdiction over the matter because as a Muslim Saravanan was now subject to Islamic family law. 2007 saw the case of Revathi Massosai, whose parents had registered her as a Muslim at birth, but had been raised as a practicing Hindu by her grandmother.

When she filed an application to change her legal status from Muslim to Hindu, she was detained by Muslim religious authorities and sent for

rehabilitation, where she claimed she was forced to consume beef and follow Muslim religious traditions. Numerous non-Muslim places of worship, primarily Hindu temples, have been demolished in recent years as illegal structures on public land. Non-Muslim activists claim that as historical landmarks, many of these buildings should have remained standing, and allege government discrimination in targeting non-Muslim places of worship.

Interfaith dialogue has often been attacked as a challenge to the position of Islam, which is the official religion of Malaysia. Attempts to set up an Interfaith Commission have been rebuffed as a non-Muslim attempt to regulate Islamic beliefs, and civil society-organised forums on Muslim religious issues such as conversions have been forced to a premature close by vocal protests. Top government officials, including the present Prime Minister and his predecessor, have declared Malaysia an Islamic state although no related amendments to the law have been made.

It is not clear what ramifications this has in store for the non-Muslim communities, but some fear this is an implicit justification for perceived injustices like the aforementioned cases. Mean Ranks Respondents were asked to rank on a 5-point scale the following statements, with " 1" as " Fully Disagree" and " 5" as " Fully Agree. The statements here read: " Government policies to help the poor should be for a particular group of Malaysians only. " " Government economic policies are good for national unity. " I think the NEP has been good to unite the country together. "

IDENTITY and POLITICS 45% of Malaysians see themselves as Malaysian first, with 42% (including over half the Malays) identifying primarily as members of their respective ethnic groups. 12% believe they are equally Malaysians

and equally members of their own ethnic communities. (Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) Young Malaysians have different orientations; 40% say they see themselves as Malaysian first, but 39% — mostly Malay — identify primarily as the member of a religious group. 0% of Chinese Malaysian youths see themselves as a member of their own ethnic group first, as opposed to 7% each for the Malays, Indians and non-Muslim bumiputra. (DiGi Snapshot: MERDEKA Youth in Focus) Ethnic stereotyping is prevalent, with 58% of Malaysians saying Malays are lazy, 65% saying Chinese are greedy, and 58% saying Indians cannot be trusted. (Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) 70% of Malaysians believe they should help those from their own ethnic group first before helping others.

Only 56% are more concerned about other Malaysians than their Muslim, Chinese or Indian counterparts overseas. (Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) 75% view their own culture as superior to other Malaysian cultures. However, 92% say they are happy to live in Malaysia because they get to enjoy different cultures. (Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) 67% of Malaysians want each ethnic group to maintain its own cultural identity; however, 10% of the Malays prefer all people to practice Malay cultural traditions.

A further 25% of Malaysians would like to see different cultures mix and give birth to a new unique set of traditions. (Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) 90% are proud to be Malaysian, and 93% have never thought of emigrating to another country. (Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) 40% of Chinese and Indians believe they are second-class citizens. A vast majority of Malaysians — 94% — however say that no matter

how difficult ethnic relationships sometimes get, Malaysians should consider themselves lucky to live here. Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) There is a clear divide about the political direction of the country. Non-Malays are nearly unanimous in hoping that all cultures and religions will be given equal rights, but this is shared by only 38% of the Malays. 16% favour a Malay-dominant country, while 43% would like a more Islamic country.

(Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) While 46% of Malaysians, most of them Malay, believe that Malaysian society is mature enough to discuss racial and religious issues openly, 49% think that these issues are too sensitive to merit an open discussion. Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) 55% of Malaysians believe that politicians are to blame for segregating the people through racial politics. A slim majority of the Malays, however, disagree. (Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) The most popular of five different proposals to improve national unity was the implementation of just and fair government policies, favoured by 34% of Malaysians, especially 59% of the Chinese. The next-most popular suggestion was to hold more programs such as National Service and Rukun

Tetangga, garnering support from 22%. (Merdeka Centre Ethnic Relations Perceptions Poll) Not Harmonious at all 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Malay Chinese Indian/Others 0 10 20 30 40 race q7a_1 Very Harmonious Percent Source: CPPS Minda Muda study Respondents from the Malay ethnic group rated religious harmony significantly higher than did those from Chinese and Indian/ others ethnic groups. This is visible from 22% of Malays giving high ratings (9 and 10 on a 10-point scale) to religious harmony, compared to 13% of Indians/others and only 1% of Chinese.

The mean Malay rating for religious harmony was 7.3, as opposed to 5.5 for Chinese respondents and 6.8 for Indians/Others. POLICY

RECOMMENDATIONS The government's focus should be on the initiatives to promote Malaysia's domestic entrepreneurial capacity. As history has indicated, entrepreneurial capacity cannot be cultivated primarily through selective patronage and easy access to bank loans and government concessions. The need now is for the promotion of policies based on merit.

Immediate implementation of a more merit-based public personnel system in the civil service for enhancing equality of opportunity in recruitment and career advancement. The various public service commissions should be made more representative in order to enhance public confidence in their guardianship of the merit system. Annual intake of fresh recruits should comprise 60 percent of Malays and 40 percent of non-Malays. Terminate the policy and practice of having some public tertiary institutions open to only specific ethnic groups.

Set out clear and transparent criteria of admissions applicable to all public tertiary institutions. The criteria should include a weighting for socio-economic and geographical/regional background to compensate for socio-economic and geographical/ regional disadvantage. Introduce/expand the provision of scholarships for academic excellence, to be applied to the top 5 per cent of applicants/ enrolees in selected fields assessed as critical to Malaysia's social, cultural and economic needs and future.

Introduce a provision for scholarships to the next 5 per cent of applicants/enrolees in selected fields assessed as critical to the civil service.

Introduce/ expand a loan scheme for all others that will be discounted in proportion to academic achievement, that is, achievement of highest honours will result in a conversion of 80 per cent of the loan to ascholarship, and so on. This addresses issues of affordability, while simultaneously factoring in an incentive to performance.

End all explicit or implicit quotas in the recruitment and promotion of faculty as it is ridiculous to entrust the higher education of our young to any but the most qualified. Consideration should be given to the establishment of a special department or agency to look after non-Bumiputera ethnic minority affairs, and especially to provide oversight in the fair and unbiased implementation of government programmes. Such an agency should be broad based and include representatives from government, interest groups, ethnic minority communities and NGOs.