RE-EVALUATING RACE AND RACIAL CONFLICTS: AN INSTRUMENTALIST VIEW OF RACE RELATIONS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

In a multiracial society like Malaysia, racial unity and harmony is one of the most crucial essences to the survival of the nation. Despite the relative success and the image of racial tolerance often perceived by the international media and projected locally through official slogans and symbols, at the deeper layers of Malaysia’s plural society, there is still a feeling of prejudice, mistrust and apathy towards “the other”. This paper presents the historical background, the trends and developments of racial conflicts through a literature analysis in the areas of race relations in the Malaysian context. Is Malaysia’s race relation heading for the better or worse? More importantly, how do we bridge the racial divide?

Field of Research: Multiracial, National Unity, Race, Racial Conflict, Race Relations

1. Introduction

Malaysia, being a multiracial country with various ethnicities, cultures and languages, has always pride itself as a moderate, progressive and a model of a peaceful Muslim-majority multiracial country. There is no doubt that one of Malaysia’s greatest strength lies in its diverse multiracial society. Yet on the other hand, Malaysia’s plural society also poses a great challenge to the survival of the nation. At the heart of achieving socio-economic well-being and political stability is a united, unified and peaceful nation - a nation that is built upon the ideals of moderation, tolerance, acceptance and empathy towards the cultural, religious and socio-economic differences and sensitivities of the various ethnic groups.

Managing and balancing the various demands and needs from different ethnic groups has never been an easy task for any sitting Prime Minister. Malaysia has had several racial skirmishes and conflicts in the past but the good foresight and wisdom of Malaysia’s past leaders ensured that law and order is quickly restored before any serious escalation of a violent racial conflict.

Nevertheless, comparatively and objectively, if Malaysia were to be judged with other plural nations in the world, it must be duly noted that we have done considerably well in terms of managing our racial harmony, especially when one look at the composition of Malaysia’s diverse population which consist of 60.3% Malays and other Bumiputras, 22.9% Chinese, 6.8% Indians and 10% of other ethnic groups (Mahari, 2011). Apart from the bloody May 13 tragedy in 1969, there have been very few major incidents of racial conflicts. The most recent was the Kampung Medan racial clash in 2001, which involved the Malays and Indians in the poor sub urban neighbourhood of Petaling Jaya.
Race and Racial Conflict

A general understanding of ‘race’ would mean a group of people that is being defined according to one’s culture, customs and language. Sociologically, a race defined as a socio-political designation in which one is assigned to a specific racial group based on a presumed biological and visible characteristic such as skin colour, physical features and in some instances, language (Carter, 2007).

Constitutionally, Malaysia is perhaps one of the few countries in the world that legally defines the ethnic majority group, the Malays. According to Article 160 (2), a person is defined as a ‘Malay’ if he or she meets the following conditions; i) a Muslim, ii) follows Malay customs, iii) speaks the Malay language and iv) has roots in Malaya or Singapore by either birth in Malaya or descent by one parent who was born in Malaya/Singapore before Merdeka Day (Faruqi, 2012). Consequently, even an individual who is born to a Malay parent, but chose to leave Islam, by legal definition he or she is no longer considered a Malay. Likewise, a non-Malay who fulfills all the four requirements will qualify as a Malay, at least in Malaysia.

In a diverse society like Malaysia, differences and dispute are bound to happen, especially on issues pertaining to education, economy, religion and culture among others. Thus, what is important is to manage and to mitigate such conflict to ensure it does not escalate into a major violent outbreak.

In theory, the literatures and reviews of racial conflict are huge and extensive. However, one explanation of a racial conflict theory by Caselli and Coleman (2011) is that of a combination of two broad categories: “instrumentalist” (or rationalist) and “primordialist” (or consummatory). Accordingly, instrumentalism emphasises on the fact that participants in conflict hope to derive some material benefit from the conflict such as jobs, wealth or power, while the primordialist views focus on the visceral dimension of a conflict, which is interpreted as an eruption of a mutual antipathy between two or more racial groups (Caselli and Coleman, 2011).

An instrumentalist view of a racial conflict is in Caselli and Coleman (2011), who argues that the principal point of a racial conflict is a conflict over scarce resources, noting examples of racial conflicts in sub-Saharan African countries. Another view combines both primordialist and instrumentalist elements. In an analysis, he explained the role of self-esteem that individuals derive from seeing members from similar racial group to succeed in business or politics.

Thirdly, in a racial conflict model developed along the principles of instrumentalism, it is suggested that the reasons and motivations for racial conflicts to be reduced is through a structural economic development and modernisation (Caselli and Coleman, 2011).

This is especially so in the context of Malaysia in the 1990s, which marked the decade its strongest economic growth - averaging almost 8% annually, which was the second fastest after China - correlated with, or possibly resulted in, a relatively peaceful and politically (and racially) stable nation.

2. Race Relations in Malaysia: A Brief Historical Background

Racial conflict is not something that is unique to Malaysia alone, but has occurred in almost every part of the globe affecting every nations and states and is still a major concern to some other countries in Asia, Africa and even in Western Europe. In some of the worse cases, conflicts have often ended up in a
violent racial clashes, bloodied civil war or systematic racial discrimination like the South African racist Apartheid policy which officially ended in 1994.

Although Malaysia too had its own shares of racial clashes in the past such as during the Malayan People’s Anti Japanese (MPAJA) brief rule in 1945 and the May 13 riot in 1969; comparatively, Malaysia is still ahead of its neighbours and is always regarded as one of the most peaceful countries in Asia (Adam, 2004). The 2012 Global Peace Index (GPI) is a clear testament to this proposition, where Malaysia is ranked 20 out of 158 countries (Global Peace Index, 2012).

In order to understand the trend in race relations today it is important that we first understand the history of the land, of how the nation that is known as Malaysia today has evolved from a Malay-Muslim polity (Muzaffar, 2010). Historically since the era of the great Sultanate of Malacca in the 15th century, the Malay-Muslim features and characteristics of its successor sultanates has remained so for more than 500 years.

The present multiracial outlook of Malaysia began as a result from the British economic policy before Second World War which encouraged mass Chinese and Indian immigration to the then British Malaya. At first, they were not yet being regarded as fellow “local citizens”, but merely a transient worker. However, things began to change dramatically after the Second World War when a lot of Chinese and Indian immigrants were conferred citizenship (Muzaffar, 1996).

The principle of conferring citizenship on a very liberal basis or jus soli continues as part of the Merdeka racial bargain or more popularly known as the “Social Contract” which among others offers birth right citizenship to Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent, in return of a special position for the Malays (Muzaffar, 1996). This form of political accommodation among Malaysia’s founding fathers is being regarded as one that is needed in order for Malaysia (then Malaya) to quickly achieve its independence.

It is significant to note that one of the crucial factors that led Malaya towards an early Independence – Malaysia’s first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman’s initial target for achieving Independence was 1960 – was due to the fact that the then Alliance party, a coalition of UMNO, MCA and MIC, were able to present themselves as a unified alliance to demand and force the British for an early independence for Malaya.

The results of the first General Election in 1955, of which the Alliance won 51 out of 52 parliamentary seats, were further evident that the Alliance party, led by the Tunku, had overwhelming support from the majority of the Malayan population from across all racial backgrounds, who wish to see an independent and sovereign state of Malaya (Carnell, 1955).

3. Race Relations in Post-May 13 Racial Riot

Chandra Muzaffar (1989) argued that Malaysians in post May 13 1969 racial riot have been living in a “live and let live” attitude in which he described it as being afraid of provoking anyone from another ethnic community lest it would lead into a racial conflict. In rationalising the “live and let live” attitude, he Analysed the Malaysian multiracial society with how the Japanese feel about the danger of earthquake (Muzaffar, 1989).
However, in spite of that, he noted that race relations have deteriorated in the past few decades. Chandra observed that there were less social interaction among different ethnic communities, increasing distrust, prejudice and suspicion than ever before. The same sentiment is echoed by Teo Kok Seong (2009) in which he argued that race relations in Malaysia is merely superficial – “appears good on the outside, but not on the inside” – and that suspicion among the multiracial society is still high (Teo, 2009).

The observations by the respective scholars aforementioned were supported by empirical data gathered through an opinion poll survey conducted by the Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research which found that the public confidence in ethnic relations has shown a decline by 12% from 78% in 2006 to 66% in 2011 (Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research, 2011). While the findings in the survey scored high on the number of respondents who polled that they were “happy to live in multi-ethnic society like Malaysia”, on the other the overall level of trust towards other races is still low across all racial groups.

In explaining the cause of the deteriorating of race relations in Malaysia, Chandra (1989) outlined several major factors, of which some of them were due to divisive public policies in education, discrimination in the private sector, manipulation of ethnic sentiments by political parties, lack of understanding of each other’s position, interests and sensitivities and a number of other factors. On the other hand, in a recent publication, Chandra argued that there is very little of empathy within community X for the hopes and fears of community Y (Muzaffar, 2010). He cited an example of how the non-Malays do not appreciate why the Malays feel they way they do about the history of the land and likewise there is a lack of understanding among the Malays about the aspirations of the Chinese and Indians who has recognised Malaysia as home for generations.

However, in another perspective, Chandra (2010) offers a balanced view in the sense that though there were certain areas that have worsen - such as the lack of understanding and tolerance of each other’s interest, aspirations and sensitivities among both Malays and non-Malays, the growing segregation of our children from the primary education level, the politicisation of ethnic sentiments by politicians amongst others - it cannot be denied that there were improvements in a number of other areas.

For instance, it used to be a taboo and politically incorrect for a Malay politician to wear a Chinese traditional costume in the 1960s. Another incident is the controversial national identity debate over the lion dance in the late 1970s when a minister was quoted saying that the lion dance – which is part of the Chinese traditional culture – is not part of the Malaysian national identity, suggesting it to be replaced with a tiger instead (Muzaffar, 2010).

Today, such an issue no longer arises as they are both well accepted by the Malaysian society. As a matter of fact today, a significant number of cultural practices and traditions of the Chinese and Indians as well as the Ibans, Kadazans, Orang Asli and other minority groups have been incorporated and officially recognised as part of the Malaysian national heritage gazetted under the National Heritage Act 2005.

According to Shad Faruqi (2012), the turning point of our deteriorating race relations started in the late 1990s. Malaysia, he argued that was for so long – until the 1990s - was being regarded by many Asian and African societies as an example of a successful multiracial society – one that survived politically, economically and socially.
4. Race Relations in the 21st Century: Of “Racial Stability” and “Stable Tension”

Is our race relation getting worse today? If so, when and where was the turning point? More importantly how do we bridge the racial divide? Despite the relative success and the image of racial harmony often projected through the tourism and festive advertisements, patriotic slogans and songs, at the deeper layers of our plural society, there is still a feeling of apathy, prejudice and mistrust towards “the other”.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad once remarked in an interview with a local daily, that the “racial divide is worse now” than during his premiership (TheSun, 2011). For the record, it is worth recalling what Dr Mahathir once stated in 1996, in which he described Malaysia’s race relations then in a frank and somewhat positive note; one that is not racial harmony, but rather “racial stability” (Spaeth, 1996).

A number of other prominent scholars from the respected historian, Professor Emeritus Dr Khoo Kay Kim, Professor Dr Shamsul Amri Baharuddin to Professor Dr Teo Kok Seong concur with Tun Dr Mahathir’s views, that Malaysia’s race relations have gone worse in the past few decades, illustrating terms such as “worrying”, “fragile state” (Shamsul, 2008) and “superficial” (Teo, 2009) to describe the state of our plural society today.

In addition, Shamsul (2001) described Malaysia as always being in the “state of stable tension”. He explained that the potentiality of any kind of conflict to develop into a violent racial clash today were able to be brought under control due to several important factors such as security, racial bargain and development planning. However, the challenges today are different than before, thus greater effort is needed to bridge the gap between different ethnic groups. Post 2008 General Elections - which saw the ruling party of Barisan Nasional suffered their worst ever electoral performance since 1969 and failed to defend their two thirds majority in parliament - has resulted in a great shift in the Malaysian political landscape and saw a heightened increase in racial discourses among the public to the extent that almost every possible issues were seen from a narrow racial lens from both the Malays and non-Malays, to the extent that any average issues is in danger of being racialised and ethnicised.

As a matter of fact, the exact sentiment was observed 25 years ago by Chandra Muzaffar (1987), in that he warned that “ethnic relations have deteriorated to such an extent today that almost any issue can become a heated communal controversy overnight, it is so easy to excite ethnic passions” (Muzaffar, 1987). Judging by that comment alone, it would appear as though there had been very little progress – or possibly worse – in Malaysia’s race relations.

5. Conclusion

Admittedly, managing a complex plural society like Malaysia is never an easy task. The challenge of building a unified nation towards achieving racial unity and harmony - in the real sense of the word - is a continuous struggle for every peace loving Malaysians. Every decade brings in new challenges and opportunities for racial integration and harmony. This paper leans towards supporting the instrumentalist view of racial conflict, where it is suggested that one of the ways and means of reducing conflict is through a structural economic development and modernisation.

Nevertheless, the challenge that our society is facing today is even greater – one that is being transformed and shaped by technology. With the advent of the near absolute freedom of the Internet
technology and all the features that comes along with it, the challenge to bridge the racial gap is even greater than before. With the increase in the usage of Internet technology and the social networking websites, this paper proposed that a detailed analysis on the impact of the Internet and the correlation between race and technology is needed to gauge the sentiment and to understand the underlying trend of race relations and racial conflicts among Malaysia’s multiethnic society.

References


