

Opinion

## The way forward for national unity

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In response to our previous articles on national unity, published in the local media, some people have said that we should have elaborated a lot more about the role of education in promoting unity. We agree absolutely on the importance of education but reforming or overhauling our education system is for the policy makers, educationalists and authorities concerned to look into. Our 30-year-old think tank unit which has expertise, knowledge and data on many local and international social issues, has in fact, written a full page article published in 2019 in a local daily entitled “Why our education system needs an overhaul”.

Like this article, the two earlier pieces are meant to make our people think harder, be more creative and constructive (rather than just moaning and groaning) on how to improve race relations in our culturally beautiful country in a more holistic or comprehensive manner.

The biggest challenge that Malaysia is facing today in achieving national unity would appear to be getting a general consensus on interpreting the essence and spirit of Article 153 of the Constitution of Malaysia and on the New Economic Policy (NEP), both of which must be supported by all races.

The actual interpretation of these two issues (Article 153 and NEP) may need to be studied carefully, debated sensitively (behind closed doors if necessary) and clarified by the relevant authorities, constitutional experts and historians. They should not be swept under the carpet in order for our national unity to be sustained and strengthened further.

Without a general consensus amongst the leaders of all the various ethnic stakeholders (including the local media) on the real meaning and intent of Article 153 and NEP, power-hungry divisive and destructive forces with hidden agenda will continue to exploit the situation at the expense of the Rakyat of all races (like what's happening now).

This article is an opinion piece of these two important issues related to National Unity.

## Article 153

The full text of Article 153 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.*

The meaning of Article 153 has often been misinterpreted by both the Malays and non-Malays, especially on the so called “privileges” reserved for the Malay Community but there are no such terms (privileges) in Article 153. It only states about protecting the special position of the Malays which one can understand that at the time of

Independence of Malaya (1957) and formation of Malaysia (1963), the Malays as a race were generally lagging behind the non-Malays, especially the Chinese.

Therefore, it is understandable that the special position of the Malays in the past should be safeguarded, meaning that the poorer Malays should be given greater access to education and employment in the civil service. This clause was meant to be only temporary in nature to allow the Malay Community to catch up, according to the drafters (Reid Commission) of the Constitution.

## **New Economic Policy (NEP)**

The NEP was launched in 1971 (after the May 13, 1969 riots). The NEP was succeeded by the New Development Policy in 1991 (basically the same policy under a different name).

The NEP was a two-pronged strategy for eradicating poverty among all Malaysians as well as reducing and subsequently eliminating identification of race by economic function and geographical location. The policy sought to achieve its objectives through rapid expansion of the economy over time and set its target of substantially reducing the incidence of absolute poverty by 1990.

As stated in Wikipedia, concurrently, the policy also called for fairer distribution of opportunities to participate in the widening range of economic activities.

The policy opined that the core problem that stood in the way of national unity was compartmentalisation of racial groups by economic function; particularly the association of Malay and other indigenous races with subsistence agriculture. To dissociate Malay and other indigenous races with traditional agriculture, the policy called on the Malaysian Government to provide assistance to all Malaysians in:

- Finding employment
- Securing participation in economic activities
- Acquiring ownership in various economic sectors

As the Malay and other indigenous races progressed in the modern economic sector, other Malaysians were encouraged to introduce modern agriculture to eliminate the identification of Malay and other indigenous races with subsistence agriculture.

The overarching principle of the policy was the creation of "a socio-economic environment in which individual Malaysians find self-fulfilment within a system which provides for proportional participation, management and control in the economic life of the nation".

Our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has recently come out to imply that the NEP has been grossly abused by the very rich and influential Malays, together with the collaboration of the greedy and unscrupulous non-Malay tycoons to enrich themselves at the expense of the poorer Malays, who are in turn, being instigated by the racial and religious bigots to blame all non-Malays or non-Muslims for their plight.

What is seemingly a progressive policy (NEP) which was aimed at helping the poorer Malays, has been perceived by many people as not being implemented properly and fairly, causing much racial discord.

NEP and its successor, NDP, is seen by many people to be essentially an affirmative or positive discriminatory policy based on helping a certain disadvantaged ethnic community and it has been practised in other countries too.

But such a policy should only be temporary. It is like giving fish to a man to eat to stay alive in the meantime, then teaching him how to fish and let him fish himself as soon as practically possible. Or else, it may create a "crutch mentality" or "dependency syndrome" for the very people that it is targeting to help. Such a policy can also be open to corruption and other abuses.

There seems to be a Catch 22 or paradoxical situation here with a good affirmative policy where the more you help a certain ethnic community, the more you may make them less capable and less self-reliant and they may forever continue to depend on "entitlements" or "privileges" in order to survive in a highly competitive world.

There is a wise saying - "the dead bird under the nest never learned how to fly". It means that the bird died or did not survive because it did not bother to learn to fly.

Let's go back to the original founding principle of the NEP to help the poor and disadvantaged rakyat, regardless of their ethnicity. Give them all the aid and support that they may need and "teach them how to fish" and to be self-reliant as soon as practically possible.

As stated before, for national unity to be sustainable, it must be based on social justice, equality, mutual respect, courtesy, integrity, transparency and using an inclusive approach to give priority to all those in need of help, regardless of ethnicity.

In order for our relatively small, fragile and vulnerable country of 32 million people to be more productive, efficient and successful in a highly competitive world, it is time that we must make promoting national unity a top priority. Any divisive, sectarian and non-inclusive approach will only lead our nation to be a failed state.

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