

## The Value of Moderation in the Context of National Unity in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** A country with a pluralistic society like Malaysia constantly faces issues on unity and racial harmony which becomes increasingly complex from time to time. A conscientious society and the monitoring by the government of interracial relations are needed to safeguard and maintain the nation's stability. This study intends to identify strategies that reinforce the value of unity among the people of Malaysia which is pivoted on the understanding of historical values and the present reality that exist in the country.

**Key words:** Value of moderation, national unity, ethnic relation, society, Malaysia

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### INTRODUCTION

Racial heterogeneity is one identity that Malaysia is proud to project. Heterogeneity reflects the diversity of culture, language, religion and so on. One thing for sure, this pluralism is bound to the spirit of national unity among all races and in the absence of this factor Malaysia will surely face human and racial conflicts. In fact, Malaysia experienced some radical movements throughout its history (Yusoff, 2010).

Cooperation from a positive aspect is comprehensive and transverses the boundaries of religion and race. This principle is prominent and its appreciation and implementation is urgently needed in a country with a pluralistic society like Malaysia. The society needs to consolidate cooperation for the good of the country without considering their religious differences. Among the forms of cooperation that could build a common good for all races in Malaysia are in the fields of administration, economy, finance, insurance, health, information technology, education, communication, defence and aspects related to administrating a nation, such as programs related to eradication of poverty, retrogression, disease, aid groups that need financial assistance to generate expertise and provide career opportunities.

### PROBLEMS IN ETHICS RELATIONS

Generally, this country is seen by the outside world, as a peaceful and developing country, although it has a

multiracial population. However in reality, racial relations in Malaysia still need a specific approach that is more comprehensive and realistic towards present needs (Collins, 1998). Briefly, racial relation problems are centred on the claiming of rights between bumiputera and non-bumiputera's or more specifically between the Malays and non-Malays. These claims are grounded on 2 matters which are the privileged rights of the Malays that are enshrined in the Federal Constitution, as the rightful and original inhabitants and the rights of non-Malays as Malaysia citizens that need to be treated impartially.

This dispute has to be taken seriously, as it has been continuing since the demand of independence from the British and this is the main factor that caused the separation of Singapore from Malaysia. The call Malaysian, Malaysia is a slogan that is used to voice non-Malay dissatisfaction towards the privileges given to Malays. This slogan translates into Malays and non-Malays being equal and a call for the abolition of special rights to Malays enshrined in the constitution.

Based on the research done, the problems involving ethnic relations in this country is founded on the differences that exist among each ethnic group, especially the Malays, Chinese and Indians (Hirschman, 1986). The differences can be categorized into 2 parts which are differences in interest and value. Ethnic significance can be referred to aspects in political power and economy. Since these 2 aspects are interrelated, hence the struggle to

control both these aspects occurs. The situation deteriorates further when negative stereotypes are attached to Malay-Chinese ethnic conflicts. The ethnic Malays are seen, as holding political power and using it to do anything for the Malay interest. They are said to formulate national policies and strategic implementations for the benefit of the ethnic Malays. The ethnic Chinese are perceived to be holding economic power and responding for the benefit of ethnic Chinese so much, so that some are of the view that the failure of government economic policies is an act of sabotage by ethnic Chinese.

The differences in values are more towards the aspects of religion, culture or the way of life. However, this aspect is not as bad, as the differences in interests because all ethnic groups duly have their own religious and cultural values and they will not want to encroach or adopt other ethnic cultures. This differs with political and economic powers where every ethnic group will want to cease every opportunity to acquire it and if they are successful, they will hold on to it for, as long as possible. Therefore, the difference in values actually brings 4th problems when it is associated with a conflict in interests and in the Malaysian context, it often happens. For example, the joint Raya celebrations and the raid by the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) on a Methodist Church in Selangor. Thus if closely observed, the conflicts or debates are politically motivated. The practice of joint Raya celebrations is pictured, as the government being not conscientious enough by neglecting religious obligations just to be portrayed as tolerant. While the raid by JAIS is pictured, as the Selangor government being subservient to other ethnic groups for political survival, although Islam was threatened with the issue of apostasy (murtad) (Kortteinen, 2008).

This situation shows that problems in ethnic relations in this country (and in other countries too) is centred on values associated with the encounter of customs, focusing on the differences in the aspects of interests or value (Peres, 1971; Yegar, 2006). In the context of forming national unity in Malaysia, it has to move in the direction of how society can best manage these differences. All parties are aware that these differences will not disappear because they are the laws or commands of Allah. What is important is how moderate values can be assimilated or reinforced, so that differences that exist among ethnic groups give a positive impact and not lead to altercations and misunderstandings. Among the steps to establish societal unity are:

- Attaching importance to Malaysia and not to a particular race
- Safeguarding racial sensitivity

- Implementing fairness across the racial divide
- Use dialogue, as an instrument for propagation

#### **ATTACHING IMPORTANCE TO MALAYSIA AND NOT TO A PARTICULAR RACE**

To seek and reinforce similarities among races. Malaysia which is characterized by diverse races such as the Malays, Chinese, Indians and other bumiputera races, needs to find a point of similarity among them. Without comprehending this value of similarity, unity will be difficult to achieve. This is because if it does not look at the similarities, the society in this country will concentrate at the differences and this value usually leads to conflicts and raises tension among races in Malaysia. They, either consciously or not, may be influenced by sensitive issues pertaining to pigs, use of the word Allah, house of worship and so on which can jeopardize the harmonic situation in society. Hence, the point of similarity has to be emphasized so that society's perception is diverted to the main issues on unity and beneficial to the whole society (Zook, 2010).

Malaysian society, regardless of which race has to understand that they citizens of an independent Malaysia. Their rights, as citizens have been proclaimed in the written constitution of the country. They also have to be aware that these rights were not obtained without any responsibility or role to be played for the sake of the nation's prosperity. The importance of Malaysia has to be given priority compared to the importance of race whether it is the Malays, Chinese or Indians. Without the role and cooperation from all races, Malaysia is a ship unable to ride the high seas with all its trials and tribulations. All races have to be aware that if the ship capsizes, they will also drown and parish.

Thus, it is important that all parties understand that the rights that they are claiming have a big responsibility. In other words, there are no rights without responsibilities. Mahatma Gandhi in 1947 when asked to comment on the draft Declaration on Human Rights chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt said:

My illiterate but wise mother taught me that you cannot have rights without duties. Any attempt to emphasize rights without duties will come to grief (Muzaffar, 2008)

Therefore, all races in this country have to put an effort and work, as one for the importance of Malaysia. Thus, to ensure the stability and peace in this country will be the greatest contribution of the people to Malaysia. The positive impact achieved through the prosperity and development of the nation is surely for the people of

Malaysia. The people have to understand this responsibility because we only have one Malaysia whereby the good or the ensuing detriment will be decided by us.

#### **SAFEGUARDING RACIAL SENSITIVITY**

In a pluralistic society, safeguarding racial sensitivities is the pillar of societal and national unity. Mutual respect is one principle that should be adhered and practiced by all, so that the value of sensitivity is not want only abused or personal interest violated by certain parties. Racial sensitivity usually involves aspects related to religious practices and cultural traditions of communities that have been accepted and practiced by society for a very long time. In the Malaysian context, every race, specifically the Malays, Chinese and Indians has its own sensitive area that should not be violated by others. This fact has to be understood and appreciated well by all parties.

The conflict of values is a result of differences in believes, culture, way of life, customs and so forth and they have given rise to certain inhibitions and prohibitions among the races. For example, the Malays dislike and revolt against pigs and dogs because according to Islam, these animals are considered forbidden and a sacred prohibition. On the other hand, pork is a favourite among the Chinese while dogs are well liked by the Chinese and Indians as pets. The Indians do not consume beef, as the cow is considered sacred in their religion but it is relished by Malays and Chinese. Hence, these different prohibitions and inhibitions not only cause misunderstandings among the ethnic groups but also impede the socialization among members of these races. Indirectly, these prohibitions and inhibitions asunder and isolate the members of society according to ethnic and cultural lines.

Therefore, ethnic conflicts cannot be avoided completely because each ethnic group has its interest to safeguard but more importantly, it is how these conflicts are best managed. Since sweeping the problem under the carpet is not a wise option, a better way will be to handle these conflicts by confronting them and not avoiding or hiding them. Confronting the crises through dialogue is the best solution that satisfies all parties and the positive effects are long term. While hiding ethnic issues would create a situation that is akin to a fire in a haystack that will burn and destroy the ethnic relations when the time comes. Thus, the various acts of parliament related to security in the country, such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) and the Official Secrets Act (OSA) should be used prudently with the intention of preventing acts that

could jeopardize national stability but not to safeguard the interests of a few. Complaints and dissatisfaction cannot be avoided but have to be channeled well and ethically.

For example, issues on divinity such as Trinity and pardoning of sins by the powers vested in a priest such that happens in the Christian faith. Conflicts pertaining to divinity have been confronted by prohibiting Christian followers from questioning the confusion that they are experiencing. As a consequence of this prohibition and the inability of the elite authorities of Christendom to offer satisfactory answers, it has caused a conflict in beliefs and confidence among followers towards their religion. This has caused those who are presumptuous about the religion to turn to another religion, especially towards Islam (Shahid, 1999). Hence sensitive issues need a platform for dialogue, as a main step towards the road to a solution or at least a decrease in conflicts and tension among races (Kortteinen, 2008).

#### **IMPLEMENTATION OF FAIRNESS ACROSS THE RACIAL DIVIDE**

Fairness is pivotal to national stability. Implementing fairness towards the citizens is crucial in a multiracial and multi-religious country like Malaysia. In the context of Malaysia, ethnic dissatisfaction, other than those involving the Malays is centered on social equality problems. Other ethnic groups, actually question the implementation of the social contract which is enshrined in the Federal Constitution. It is as if the Malays are using the privilege to fulfill the interest of the Malay race only and sidelining the other races that have rights, as Malaysian citizens (Osman-Rani, 1990).

Equality must be based on truth and not favoritism. Some of the non-Malay ethnic groups have alleged that they do not have the rights based on inequality among the Malays and non-Malays in certain aspects, such as scholarships, career opportunities in the public sector and financial aid. This inequality has become an excuse for them to say that the Malays, especially the ruling elite are taking advantage of the privileges enshrined in the constitution. When these allegations were scrutinized, it is found that there is some truth and some untruth as well in them.

The truth is there are differences in allocations and receipts among Malays and non-Malays. The untruth is in the justification associated with the inequality. It is generally known that the Malays, through the divide and control policy implemented by the British during the colonization era were forced to live in the interior and be involved in the agriculture and fisheries industry which

was far from the desired standard of living compared to the Chinese who were involved in trade and mining and lived in urban areas. Using the privilege with the intention of equaling or minimizing the differential gap among the Malays and non-Malays at a reasonable rate cannot be seen, as taking advantage but it a task that has to be undertaken. It is in reality, a move towards ensuring the success of Lord Reid's plans (Hirschman, 1986).

What has become a problem and a tree of contention is, since independence until today, the plans to increase the equity of the Malays to 30% has not been successful. In addition, only a few individuals can be listed, as successful and they are seen to have a staunch relationship with the nation's leaders. This explains that although, the government has made an effort towards achieving Malay bumiputera equity but admittedly the failure lies in the implementation aspects or the approach that has left a small group of Malays gaining priority and benefits from the government. Hence to create social justice that is desired by the whole of society and to ensure national stability and harmony, an approach and a measure of integrity by the government is needed.

Among the most prudent steps that can be taken is the concept of giving handouts based on needs. In the context of financial assistance and sponsorship, for example needs to be prioritized according to those who are academically excellent and coming from poor families. This approach is able to stifle and avoid what is known, as the whole-sale approach which will surely be disputed because students coming from well-to-do families are also given scholarships on the pretext of being bumiputeras. This is one aspect of unfairness that needs to be avoided, as this would surely create dissatisfaction and disappointment among other ethnic groups. There are non-bumiputeras who are just, as poor as some bumiputeras but are denied sponsorship assistance because they are non-bumiputeras, even though their children have excellent academic achievements. With the approach of giving handouts based on needs, excellent students from not-well-to-do families will receive assistance, regardless of being bumiputera or not. Other forms of assistance should also be looked into from the needful aspect of the party applying such as housing, textbooks and so forth. These handouts should not involve censorship based on political inclinations, as this is against the principle of fairness.

Thus, if there are parties that assume that the giving of handouts based on needs denies the special rights of bumiputeras, then the ethnic Malays need to understand that the begotten special rights have to be in the context of fairness and due consideration. The privileges are limited to those who belong to the group that needs assistance. This is in accordance with the intention of

giving privileges which is to safeguard the balance among the races where the capabilities of the bumiputeras are not at par with other races. Nevertheless, if there is any bumiputera group that has surpassed the boundary of need, hence the privileges in the context of handouts should not apply to that group.

Subsequently, if there is a notion that giving handouts is giving in to demands by other races (non-bumiputeras), hence on the principle of fairness and if the demands are reasonable whoever voices the demands should be entertained or the demands accepted with decency. However, if this situation gives the impression of being emotional, surely the Malays will feel challenged and tetchy. Researchers should actually imagine being a minority in another country. Will researchers be submissive if the majority (bumiputera) in that country divided the country's wealth unequally among the citizens just because we are a minority, even though we are citizens of that country too? Well, off cause the answer will be no. Researchers will also hope that the handouts are fair and based on need and not centered on race.

The ethnic Malays must also be mindful, as to whether Islam recognizes racially based handouts. In this context, the Malays are in a dilemma as either to uphold Malayness or Islam. It is clear that upholding Islam will assure the authority of the Malays. Hence, upholding Malayness would not only discommode Islam but also instigate the strength of Malays, as history has proven that unfairness can destroy the fort of an empire (Shamsul, 2001). The caliphate of Umawiyah fell because of racial fanaticism and this is one example that should be avoided.

#### **DIALOGUE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF RELIGIOUS PROPAGATION**

Malay Muslims in Malaysia need to accept the reality that various races under the tutelage and governance of Malaysia are target groups of religious propagation. The privileges of Malays under the Federal Constitution appear to be a gift from Allah, the Almighty. This gift is a trust or responsibility that demands the Malays to uphold Islam in an esteemed position. Islam has to be the pivotal source of all actions because Islamic principles are universal and conducive to be practiced in a context of a multiracial society, like in Malaysia. The proclamation of Malaysia, as an Islamic state should be another point of strength for the Malays since other races can openly accept the concept of Islam. Indirectly, one major constraint which is the identification and proclamation of the nation based on Islam or secularism has already been decided and overcome.

Racial unity in Malaysia is closely associated to the issue of religion because a majority of Malaysians professes to a particular religion and has strong religious sentiments towards their religion. Since the issues related to religion are extremely sensitive, hence the best approach would be through dialogue (Sharma, 1987). Dialogue is important, given the history of religious development in this country, although generally it can be considered as good and peaceful at times but certain black patches that have occurred have influenced the perception among the races. Among the examples are the bloody Natrah incident in 1951, burning of Hindu temples in Batu Caves (2000) and the threat by Hindu followers on a mosque in Penang. The latest case which is still under investigation is the raid by JAIS on a church based on allegations of activities associated with apostasy and Muslims. Hence, it is appropriate that this historical reality is understood and taken cognizance in order to avoid future incidences. A reminder like this can be seen in the remarks of Kim, a majority of Malaysians do not understand the meaning of religion because when practicing religion they only know the ritualistic aspects but rarely the core teachings of the religion. Therefore, they are unable to compare one religion from another in this country. Consequently, priority is given to religious rituals instead of its core teachings.

In this context, dialogue among religions need to be given due attention. Ethnic Malays should not consider religious issues, as a threat to their privileges or that other ethnic groups are not appreciative of what they have. Although some criticisms can be considered, as extreme and testing the patience of ethnic Malays, thus looking upon these criticisms rather emotionally will not help either (Lent, 1979). Reasonable, sensible and continuous explanations via dialogue should be done constantly. This is where ethnic Malays should take the opportunity to propagate Islam to other races. Considering the technique and approach that is suitable with the historical reality and position of Malays against other races, a strategy for Islamic propagation can be formed. The emphasis on freedom of religion is one significant element that needs to be understood by other races. As religious missionaries, ethnic Malays should duly understand the apprehension that haunts other ethnic races which is the worry that their inherited religious values will not be protected considering the freedom of religion and Islam being the official religion in this country.

Through the platform of dialogue among races, discussions and explanations based on knowledge, the reality in this country, courtesy and mutual respect pertaining to speaking calmly, solemn intention of understanding the problem at hand and an effort to

engage in the best solution will surely portray the essence of Islam to the non-Malay ethnic groups. Therefore, a few points need to be given attention in religious propagation such as:

Islam, as the official religion of this country needs to be seen, as the best instrument to unite the Malaysian society because of the universal values it possesses.

Islam cannot be seen, as a racist religion because this presumption usually causes Islam in this country to the get attention it does not deserve. Connotations, such as Islam-Malay and Malay-Islam need to be corrected because Islam never condones racism but on the contrary, it transverse race to the extent that freedom of religion and rights of religious practice of followers of other religions are protected.

Religious issues cannot be deemed exclusive in the context of a multiracial and multireligious society. If Islam is deemed exclusive to the Malays and cannot be touched at all by other races, hence it can be logically deduced to 2 points. First, Islam is not seen as a universal religion. It indirectly denies one main trait that characterizes Islam as how it was delivered by the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The perfectness of Islam needs to be held incisively and it has been tested since its invocation. With this element of perfectness, Islam is able to withstand and fend all forms of criticism and accusations. The Malays need to understand well that to deem Islam as exclusive is not the way to advocate Islam, on the contrary it could tarnish the perfectness and essence of Islam itself. So here, Islam is not the problem when facing other races due to its strengths and perfectness but rather the problem is the practice of Islam. This weakness in the practice of Islam needs to be addressed. Fairness and equality, as an example not only needs to be entrenched in the people but also to be heard, seen and felt by them.

Consequently, national leaders who are directly involved in sensitive issues have to be well equipped with Islamic knowledge and have a personality and character that reflects the essence and splendor of Islam. In this context, the religious propagation using the real life examples needs to be maximized. The national leaders have to realize that their personality and actions greatly influences other races. In other words, the perception towards Islam will be influenced by the ways and panache of national leaders. The Islamization of Melaka by the Malay Sultanates is an example and it is no surprise that Melaka is not only famous for its trading policies but also, as a center for dissemination of Islam (Wahid, 1990).

Besides, ethnic Malays who form the majority of the population of Malaysia need to consider their future.

From a national political perspective, the strength of a party is based on the number of votes, hence implementing Islam with the intention of attracting other races in Malaysia towards Islam is a strategic move. It does not mean that religion is used for political interests but rather it means using the favorable factors in Islam, such as Islam being the official religion and using that to disseminate Islam as best as possible. Islamic propagation needs to be understood, as a means to save human kind from blasphemy and infidelity. Therefore, indirectly the increase in dissemination of Islam in this country will give an advantage to the Malays in terms of an increase in votes.

### CONCLUSION

Although, there are numerous conflicts and encounters among the ethnic groups in Malaysia, hence the elements for a solution actually exist. Islam, as the official religion with its incisive universal values, the Federal Constitution that is favorable to all ethnic groups and the various acts of Parliament regarding security is actually enough to counter the problems related to ethnic relations in this country. What is needed is improvement in weaknesses and limitations in implementing these elements. Besides, all parties need to be honest, sincere and work within their means to envisage national unity in this country.

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