Unity and Harmony in Malaysia: Problems and Challenges

Dr Osman Chuah Abdullah
International Islamic University Malaysia
Department of Comparative Religion.
Address: Jalan Gombak , Selangor, 68000 Malaysia
Phone: 0178892448
email ochuah1948@yahoo.com or ochuah@iium.edu.my

Abstract

Malaysia is very much a diversified nation with a population of about 28 millions from different ethnic groups and with a variety of religions. Despite having no significant nor violent racial and religious conflict since 1969, there have been signs of emerging ethnic tension and sensitive issues every now and then in the nation. This study demonstrates how the political, economic, social and educational issues are contentious to unite or divide the people. The main ethnic group in Malaysia consists of the Malays who constitute the majority of more than half of the population, who are mostly Muslims. This is followed by the minority groups of Chinese and Indians. Islam is the official religion in Malaysia and of the Malays while there are other religious faiths of Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity and Hinduism. In the states of Sabah and Sarawak, there are natives of smaller ethic groups such as Kadazan, Dayak, Iban and others. The various ethnic groups celebrate their festivals throughout the year and their customs and value systems too are different from one another. The Malays and the natives are known as *bumiputra* whereas the Chinese and Indians are non-*bumiputra*. This research seeks to study the problems and challenges on the subject of unity and harmony in Malaysia with regard to the diversity of languages, religions, cultures and how the dimensions of politics, economics, education and social affect them.

Key terms: Malaysia, unity, majority, minority and diversity

Introduction

Malaysia is a diversified nation strategically located between the sea routes of China, Japan, India and the European nations. Historically, it has been the meeting place of various religions including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and others. Nearly all of the world's well-known religions are represented here. The Malays is the largest ethnic group covering 50% of the nation's population and all of them are Muslims. In 2003, the total population of Malaysia was 23.5 million with Malays consisting 12.6 million, non-Malay *Bumiputra* 2.8 million, the Chinese 6 million, the Indians 1.8 million and others 0.3 million. (*Year Book of Malaysian Statistics* 2003, pp. 36-37.) However, the total Malaysian population increased to 27.75 million in 2008, with the Malay population increasing at a very rapid rate while the Chinese and Indians at slower rates. The Malay population was 13.87 million, the Chinese 7 million and the Indian 2.3 million in 2008.(*Year Book of Malaysian Statistics 2*008, pp. 20-26) The citizens of Malaysia are further divided into *bumiputra* and non-*bumiputra*. The Malays and the native people of Sabah and Sarawak are called *bumiputra* whereas the Chinese and Indians are non-*bumiputra.* Despite the many races found in this country, since May 13, 1969, there had not been any major ethnic conflicts among the main ethnic groups. It is under this condition that this article about national harmony and unity is being researched.

Research Methodology

This article is done through library and field work. Library work concentrates on the gathering of concepts of a pluralistic nation for ethnic harmony and unity. As an independent nation, national harmony and unity are necessary. Harmony and unity of a nation are subject to different definitions and interpretations. There are three perspectives of national unity defined by Ting (1973 p. 129) assimilationist, amalgamationist and cultural pluralist. In the assimilationist context, the minority group gradually loses their cultural distinctiveness and acquires the culture of the majority community, finally becoming part of the majority group. (Ting Chew Peh : 1973 p.130) This does not happen in Malaysia though, as the minority groups do not become Malays, the majority group or community. Ting also mentions amalgamation which means the massive intermarriage of the citizens, resulting in an amalgam, a new group and culture representing the combination of the original groups. That is a new breed of Malaysians. Unfortunately, this too does not happen, as intermarriage does not occur on such a big scale in Malaysia. Finally, cultural pluralism means cultural heterogeneity where all ethnic groups are allowed to carry on with their ethnic and cultural identities. Cultural pluralism emphasizes on accommodation. (Simpson G.E. and Yinger :1985)

The pluralistic society is however full of all kinds of situation. One is the hegemony introduced by Antonia Gramsci. He is a supporter of communism. Antonia Gramsci claims that the dominant class inside a nation is prejudiced to various other classes or tribes. An example of a pluralistic nation is Switzerland where the different cultures are accepted as equal by all. (Simpson G.E. and Yinger 1985. p. 17.) French and Italy do not have many minority groups, nor have the groups given up their lingual and cultural differences. However, a strong political and economic unity overrides the ethnic cultural differences. (Simpson G.E. and Yinger 1985. p.8.)

The analysis of this study probes into the political, economic, cultural, social and educational way of the Chinese and the Malays to seek if the two ethnic groups can be united since the Malays are the largest *bumiputra* group and the Chinese are the largest non-*bumiputra* group. If the two groups can live in peace and harmony, there will be very few problems for other ethnic groups. We shall look at the Malaysian interethnic group relationship and compare it with other countries to find a harmonious and united nation for Malaysia. The ethnic theory of hegemony is used for the analysis.

Malaysian Parliamentary Division and Malay Ethnic Group

Frequently, a pluralistic nation with various ethnic groups gives rise to problems of building that nation. Usually, the pluralistic ethnic groups will compete and conflict with each other which hinder the unity of the nation. The conflict will result in one ethnic group dominating and controlling other groups. (Connor Walker:1972. P.329.) Ethnic consciousness is a very important issue in any nation. Based on this context, ethnic study is the statement of problem of this study and hegemony here refers to UMNO, the United Malay National Organization as the strongest political party that uses the concept of hegemony to dominate other ethnic groups and the moral leadership. It means the political, economic and cultural dominations by the Malay UMNO. Since the dismal event of May 13, 1969, UMNO had designed many policies of domination control to marginalize other ethnic groups. The hegemony has also resulted in the erosion of influence of other ethnic groups and their dissatisfaction of each other. (Thock Ker Pong: 2005. p. 5)

The May 13, 1969 event was the watershed of politics in Malaysia. The failure of the Perikatan to win the election in Selangor, Perak, Penang and Kelantan caused UMNO to feel a threat to their dominance in

politics. They felt that the Chinese was the big threat to their dominance. (Vasil, R. K.: 1980, p.177. , Stephen Chee. 1991,pp.53-86.) The UMNO Malays also saw the Alliance of Tunku's leadership as irrelevant. Tun Razak then designed a system of hegemony; Perikatan was expanded to Barisan Nasional to include Gerakan and other parties. It was to ensure UMNO will continue to rule and the unity of the Malays and Malay nationalism remain the relevant national agenda. (Milne R.S. & Mauzy, Diane K : 1982. p. 225)

Then the *Akta Hasutan* was passed in which the Malay Language as the national language, the Malay privilege, the position of the Sultan and the rights of other nationalities such as citizenship were consolidated. These issues were declared sensitive and could not be questioned. (Thock Ker Pong:2005. p.75.) Tun Abdul Razak also invited all opposition to join Barisan National. Many parties from the opposition joined Barisan as "co-optional with UMNO". This is because MCA and MIC had no say or chose which party to join except the Barisan. (Heng Pek Koon : 1998. pp. 51-82.) With the new set-up, the rights of the non-Malays were not represented by MCA and MIC but by many parties. UMNO became the dominant power. UMNO did not have to listen to others.(Vasil R.K:1980.p.73.) The forming of Barisan Nasional again regained the confidence of the Malays. Now, it is no longer the permanent coalition of UMNO, MCA and MIC as represented by the Alliance or Perikatan but a new system provided by UMNO, representing the Malays while all other parties are acceptable only by UMNO. (Vasil.R.K. 1980. p.73)

With the formation of Barisan Nasional, the parliamentary boundaries of Malaysia were redrawn. This is to ensure Malay domination over other ethnic groups.

Table 1 Number of Parliamentary with Malay Majority Voters in Peninsular Malaya

Year	Total Seats	Malay Majority	Malay Seats (%)	Other Seats (%)
1964	104	60	57.7%	42.3%
1969	104	60	57.7%	42.3%
1974	114	79	69.3%	30.7%
1978	114	79	69.3%	30.7%
1982	114	75	65.8%	34.2%
1986	132	92	69.7%	30.3%
1990	132	92	69.7%	30.3%
1995	144	100	69.4%	30.6%
1999	144	100	69.4%	30.6%

Source: Michael Yeoh (1988: 27)

The information in the table above shows that the Malay majority areas were only 57.7% in 1969 but with the rescheduling of parliamentary areas, it had increased to 69.7% of the total seats. This rearrangement ensures the Malays continue to control the parliamentary majority in the elections. With the Malay majority parliament boundary seat of 69.4%, it indicates that the Malays would command 2/3 majority of Parliament and so they could amend the constitution as and when they like. (Sia Keng Yek: 1997. p.63.)

With the start of 1971, MCA had not been able to retain their hold on the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and the Ministry of Finance in the new cabinet; the two important ministries were then under UMNO. Meanwhile, UMNO held other important ministries such as defence, education and security in the nation. (Thock Ker Pong:2005 p. 75.) In the field of economics the hegemony of Malay politics also gave rise to the intervention of economics by the government through *lasses-faire* where non-intervention is the

best free economics. Intervention was the norm in the era of Tun Abdul Razak compared with the non-intervention of Tunku Abdul Rahman al-Haj. (Abdul Ghapa Harun & Nik Annuar Nik Mahmud : 1996. p.11.)

Economic Interventions and Responses from the Chinese

Before the DEB or NEP (New Economic Policy), the Chinese controlled the stakes of various businesses in different fields such as banking, transportation and others. With a new economic policy, government intervention and control over its policy were very frequent. In 1967, Khoo Teik Puat, owner of Malayan Banking Berhad faced some serious problems. Bank Negara was forced to intervene and PNB became the new owner of the bank. In 1976, depositors at United Malayan Banking Corporation founded by the Chinese faced withdrawing problems; it too fell and became the property of a Malay corporate business entity in 1984. Meanwhile, in the arrangement of business equity of United Asian Bank, priority was given to the unbalanced equilibrium share of ownership based on ethnic groups. (Shamsul Amri Baharuddin :1986) In 1990, the share of (uity was 30% for *bumiputra*, 40% for non-*bumiputra* and 30% for foreign enterprises. The government took several strong steps to implement this. Among this was the formation of governmental bodies (*perbadanan*). Some of these governmental bodies existed since independence but did not function during the era of Tunku Abdul Rahman. (Gale, Bruce. 1985. P.34) In the era of Tun Abdul Razak, with the interventional of new policies, the governmental bodies were not only given the responsibility to implement the job but also new governmental firms were formed to assist in various fields including agriculture, construction, industrial executives, finance, production, services, transportation and others. Their numbers had increased from 109 in 1970 to 1,149 in 1992. The RM4.6 million expenses for the First Malaysian Plan (1966-1970) increased to RM57.5 billion for the Fifth Malaysian Plan (1986-1990).(Gomez, Edmund T. & Jomo, K.S:1997, p.31,) Among the well-known *perbadanan* are HICOM (Heavy Industries Corporation of Malaysia), UDA (Urban Development Authority), Petronas, and *Perbadanan Nasional* or Pernas besides the various state development corporations. Besides, there are also trustee bodies such as *Permodalan National Bhd* or PHB and its subsidiary *Amanah Saham Nasional* (ASN). (Thock Ker Pong,:2005 p.78.) Meanwhile, the Development and Commercial Bank founded by Henry H. S. Lee, its first Finance Minister aiso came under Malay ownership under Rashid Hussein, a Malay businessman. (Thock Ker Pong : 2005, p. 61).

The setting up of these firms (*perbadanan*) was a good idea. However, with governmental funds, they started to grab and compete with other firms within the nation usually with Chinese merchants in the fields of transportation and construction and others. (Lim Mah Hui & Canak, W.P: 1981 pp. 37; 63.) For example, Satriya Utara Bhd, a company registered under Pernas obtained the monopoly to import Mandarin oranges from China in 1985 for the Chinese New Year. (Means, Gordon P. : 1986) This, of course, raised disagreement from among the Chinese communities.

The Education Problems of the Chinese

Education is a very important field for building a united nation. There is the aim of creating an image, identity and dynamism of a nation. In a pluralistic society, it is more difficult because of the language policy. The use of language which reflects certain ethnic groups can cause conflict among the people. However, the application of an official language of an ethnic group could also unite the various ethnic groups in the nation. Thus, the language policy of the nation is also a way to solve inter ethnic relationship of a pluralistic society. (Thock Ker Pong, 2005.*, p. 101.)

In the context of conflict, education can function as power and influence to reduce social conflict and bring changes in a systematic order. Thus, education is very important in nation building. (Haris Mohd Jadi, 1990)

When deciding on the language policy of a pluralistic community, assimilation of the pluralistic groups is one of the considerations. Others include the maintenance of all languages of different ethnic groups and continuity of these languages. Sometimes, a certain group may want the languages of all the ethnic groups to be eradicated. (Haris Mohd Jadi, 1990. P.57.) This can cause problems as all groups exist side by side in Malaysia. (Chai Hon Chan 1971)

In Malaysia, the advocator of Malay as the official language in the Razak Report had mentioned the ultimate aim was to have Malay as the sole medium of instruction in all schools. However, the Chinese educationist, Dongjiaozong had advocated that in the early 1950s, an alternative vision of a democratic multi-ethnic nation in which there would be place for minority languages and cultures. From this, alternative, Dongjiazong leaders had challenged the legitimacy of the Malaysian policy on language, education and culture because this conflicted with the ideals of a fair and just society. (Tan Liok Ee, 1992. p. 197.)

The Razak Report and the Talib Report both suggested to the Ministry of Education to change the education system into one type, that is *Sekolah Kebangsaan*. The educational act of 1961 under Article 21(2) gave power to change *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan* to *Sekolah Kebangsaan* at any suitable time. This made the Chinese educationists worry about their education. On 9th October 1974, Dongjiaozong gathered 3,400 *huatua* in Malaysia and sent a memorandum to the Ministry of Education to have the mother tongue to be prominently used in the school. Another event was the rejection of Merdeka University proposed by the Chinese community to the Malaysian government. (Thock Ker Pong, 2005., p. 105-6.) Another event occurred in 1984 where a directive was sent to all Chinese schools which insisted on the use of Malay language in all official functions including the assembly of students. This provoked Loot Ting Ying, Vice President of Dongjiaozong and he received substantial support from the Chinese. (Jiazong. 1987, *Jiazong Sanshisannian* (*Jiazong 33 Years*), Jiazong. p. 646.)

The Chinese schools also lacked qualified teachers. *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina* was recognized by the government in the 1957 Education Ordinance and later Acts. However, the training of teachers, building of new schools and funding given were in very sad conditions. On 25th March 2011, there was a gathering to protest the problems. (Nanyang San Pau, 26th March 2012.) In 1999, a shortage of 3,111 teachers was recorded. The situation had become worse and worse. This is due to the fact that the ministry had not trained teachers for minority ethnic schools. (Dongzong 1999. p.20)

Cultural and Social Way of Governance in Malaysia

The amendment to the National Cultural Foundation (*Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan*) by the Congress of National Culture on 16th -20th August 1971 was a symbol of a new era for the state culture. There were three Malay principles in the fundamental culture of the states. The spirit of *Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan* was based on the absorption of native culture to build a national culture. (Abdul Ghapa Harun, 1995, p.7)With this, the Chinese associations in Malaysia believed it would force assimilation of Chinese into the ways of the Malays. (Huatuan Utama: 1983. P.135) The three Malay principles were said to be fixed without the consultation of other ethnic groups in the nation. (Kua Kia Soong (ed.,) 1990, p.3)

Because the Malaysian society is pluralistic, the individual ethnic culture and social way should not exclusively belong to any one ethnic group. The various characteristics of the different ethnic groups must be incorporated into the national culture. That is why Huatuan opined that *Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan* is against the *Rukunegara*:

> The nation and state of Malaysia verily had very rich and customary extraordinary culture and we hope and aim to create the diversified culture which benefits us and makes of its resources a strong nation and state of Malaysia. (Huatuan Utama 1983. p. 135)

However, the statement above had not taken into consideration the minority culture in the *Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan*. It seemeds that the elite politicians in charge of the political force of Malaysia wanted to exclude other ethnic groups and take them as foreign 'immigrants' and not ready for national culture. It seemed that after May 13, 1969 Malay political hegemony had allowed this to happen. In 1976, the *Dasar Kebudayan* (Milne, R.S. & Mauzy, Diane K. 1982) One example was in 1978 when the management of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia ordered the graduates at the university's convocation to wear a *songkok* for male graduates and a *tudung* for female graduates. This gave rise to the non-Malay graduates to protest. The protest had caused the convocation to be postponed. (Thock Ker Pong, : 2005 p. 13.)

Besides, the ruling government also restricted the use of Chinese languages in the application of advertising signboards by reducing the size of Chinese writing on them. This is to show that Malay is the official language. Many signboards or cloths with Chinese writing were taken down by enforcement officers whereas signboards with four languages were replaced to only Malay language. The ministry also had insisted that any show or play must have Malay traditional dance and Malay musical instrument. This was conceived as marginalizing the Chinese language by certain scholars. (Abdul Ghapa: 1995, p.7; Kua 1987)

In addition to the issue of culture and language, the Chinese had 452 new villages across the country but most of them were not given attention by the government and were marginalized in development. There were cases of owners who do not have individual title to their lands, areas that lacked infrastructure, high student drop-out from schools and increase in population. The Chinese population increased three-folds from 1954-1995. (Lim Hin Fui and Soong Wan Hin, 2002,p. 51.) This has divided the diversified Malaysian citizens into three dichotomies of races.

The national culture and social way of life for the Malays are the exclusives of the native but not `immigrant' groups. The cultural and social ways of the Chinese and Indians were perceived by the Malays as a threat and one of the reasons for the formation of United Malay National Organisation in 1946. The slogan `*hidup Melayu*' did not only attract many Malays but also demand Malay language and culture as the only national identities. (Haris Mohd Jadi, 1990, p.67) The independence of 1957 was a victory for the Malays and so the Malay language replaced English. This was followed by the National Language Act of 1967 passed by Parliament. Similarly, the Malays were also fighting for a national culture. The organization of the First Malay Cultural Congress from 30th December 1957-2nd January 1958 made a clear resolution announced by Tunku Abdul Rahman al-Haj indicating the importance of a national culture. ()Ahmad Adam, 1994 pp.40-41) So the basic national culture is the building of a monoculture based on the origins of the citizens. (Abdul Ghapa 1995, p.7).

Chinese Involvement in Politics in Malaysia after Independence

The implementation of the government policy to fulfil the rights of the Malays in politics, economic, culture and social had made the Chinese felt that their rights had been eroded. The Chinese in Malaysia were of the opinion that they were not justly treated. They had fought for Malaya's independence with UMNO and MIC. They respected the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman al-Haj who had treated all races equally during his administration. Subsequently, the implementation of the New Economic Policy was not in favour of the Chinese especially after 1971. The Chinese regarded this as "the agony of coalition" in the ruling Alliance Party and later in Barisan Nasional. (Thock Ker Ping:2005. p.163.) This is because the minister and deputy ministers could not fight for their interests. This forced *Huatuan* (the alliance of Chinese registered associations) to be directly and indirectly involved in politics; this however, did not solve the problems. Instead, it resulted in the forming of Huazi, or Malaysian Chinese Resource and Research Centre. (Thock Ker Ping p. 164.) Huazi received countless support from the Chinese community, 160 academicians and other professionals who joined this organization. They had high hopes on Huazi and this was indicated by Ting Chew Peh, an MCA Minister who said:

> Already ten years after the political and economic crisis, the position of Chinese community was getting worse and worse. The Chinese community was disappointed and pessimistic. The community had lost its direction and the founding of Huazi, the Chinese Research Center was very imminent. It also acted as the think tank for the Chinese communities. (Tan Bee Ping: 1995, p.61)

Now in 2012, under Prime Minister, Najib Abdul Razak, the various crises faced by the Chinese communities have not yet been solved. Najib Abdul Razak, however, launched his 1Malaysia to unite all ethnic groups. The first thing is sincerity and respect for each ethnic group where the slogan is "citizen is given priority, achievement first". (Syed Mahadzir Syed Ibrahim, 2010. P.3) Based on the definition of 1Malaysia, it is more on harmonizing the citizens of various ethnic groups besides looking after the importance of all ethnic groups. According to Najib, 1Malaysia is not a new concept but one which has been worked on by all previous Prime Minister since Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj. 1Malaysia aims to promote true integration and increase unity of all ethnic groups, however, no details have yet been given.

Conclusion

We have spoken of two kinds of pluralistic nations. One contains diversified ethnic groups that are accepted as equals and live in harmony and united as a nation, as in Switzerland. The other is a pluralistic nation which is dominated by one ethnic group while all other groups have to accommodate the dominant group. It is true that in Malaysia, since independence, in the time of Perikatan until now, the Barisan Nasional under UMNO is the dominant power even though all other ethnic groups are represented in the government cabinet. However, the Malays are a very powerful group with some of the state constitution guaranteeing the posts of the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister of the majority of the states to be held by the Malays. They control the Parliament house, military, navy, police and civil servants in the nations making 90% of the civil servants and chief staff. The official language of Malaysia is the Malay language which is the medium of instruction in all schools and universities. The religion of the Malays is Islam. Thus, in Malaysia, there is a hegemony that the Malays are the controller of all fields such as politics, economics, education, culture and social; they are well represented and their group identities are seen everywhere.

Meanwhile, the other ethnic groups like the Chinese, the Indians and other ethnicities are only the subservient groups. There may be represented in the government as ministers but their authority is only represented in some fields. Their languages, their cultures, social ways and education systems are represented in Malaysia only within their sub-ethnic groups and only reflected as certain parts of their own ethnic way but not as one of the official national identities.

In reality, there are certain degrees of integration among the various ethnic groups; all the ethnic groups mix well socially in the sports fields, play games together, work in factories, governmental departments, in the markets and respect one another, their religions, culture and festivals. However, the divide is that the Malays never attend the independent Chinese schools, non-Muslim Chinese and Indians never go to the *madrasah* or Islamic schools, the non-Muslim Chinese and Indians also seldom go to the mosques and the Malays do not go to Chinese and Indian temples or Christian churches. To celebrate the festivals, they invite each other to their homes and treat them to good food. The food served is usually Islamic food. In short, they enjoy certain level of harmony and unity.

The causes of divide are too many: non-*bumiputra* and *bumiputra*, the language and the political, economic, cultural and social policies. Even the Malays are not of one political opinion, there are divided in their support for the United Malay National Organisation, Party Keadilan, and Pan Islamic Party whereas the Chinese are divided in their support for the Malaysian Chinese Association, Gerakan Party Rakyat, Democratic Action Party and others. Even for the Indians, it is not only the Malaysian Indian Congress which champions their rights; many Members of Parliament, state assembly men and women are not all from that party. Malaysia is now more than fifty-five years old after independence. There has been great rise in literacy rates and now there are also many intellectual scholars from among the Malays, Chinese and Indians. It is not as simple as in 1957 where all the people were united under Tunku Abdul Rahman. It is now possible to be politically united under diversified views.

Alternatively, Malaysians can be united under the hegemony of the Malays. However, there would not be a true unity as minority ethnic groups may not be happy under this situation. The Malays who are with authority would also be challenged by other Malays. Thus, a true united Malaysia should be based on sincerity of all the people. Besides, all racially different groups must be happy with the economic, culture and educational policies of the country.

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