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From ethnic to civic nation building

Sharing The Nation
By Zainah Anwar

Civic nation building can help realise the full potential of all citizens.

It is time for Malaysians who love this country to ask ourselves this fundamental question: Do we wish to live together as a nation, with common memories and common dreams? Or do we want to prove the pundits of 1957 right that the ethnic and religious divide of this country would eventually see it fall apart.

That the ethnic and religious faultlines of Malaysia are bursting at the seams cannot be denied. The increasing reports of violence and intimidation against political opponents – be they in party politics or in civil society – and the inability to discuss contested issues on race, religion and politics in a rational and balanced manner are ominous of what is in store in the heat of the upcoming elections.

We are a society polarised and the divide is getting wider by the day – the Rukun Negara, Vision 2020, Islam Hadari and 1Malaysia notwithstanding. Why?

About two weeks ago, I attended the inaugural lecture by Dr Muthiah Alagappa for the Tun Hussein Onn Chair in International Studies, established at ISIS Malaysia and funded by the Noah Foundation.

He spoke on his current research topic which is relevant to the state of our nation – “Nation Making in Asia: From Ethnic to Civic Nations?”

Nation making, says Muthiah, may take several forms but at base, there are two approaches. One is on the basis of ethnic or religious community and the other on the basis of citizenship, equality, and commitment to a political creed. The first may be called ethnic nation making and the second, civic nation making. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive. They share some common elements like historic territory and common culture but they also have distinct features. Citizens’ interests take centre stage in a civic nation. Group beliefs and interests dominate an ethnic nation.

Muthiah made the point that ethnicity has dominated nation making in Asia. And through a survey of China, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Malaysia, he concludes that this mode of nation building is fast running its course.

Much of what he said helped me to understand why we are in the muddle we are in today. More importantly, he offered a way out. To move from ethnic nation building to civic nation building. Actually to return to our history where once political leaders like Datuk Onn Ja'afar and Tunku Abdul Rahman, like other men of their generation, Nehru in India and Soekarno in Indonesia, who opted to build a civic nation out of multi-ethnic states.

Muthiah asserts that nation making on the basis of ethno-nationalism has been the cause of numerous domestic and international conflicts in post-World War II Asia. Core ethnic groups in control of state power engaged in constructing nations and states on the basis of their own ethnic groups. The core ethnic group develops and deploys state power to protect, remedy, and promote its values and interests including language, culture, demographic predominance, economic welfare, and political dominance. Political and other mobilisation, state institutions, and non-governmental organisations are developed to sustain and reinforce the national imagination of the core ethnic group and its domination of the state.

Their "nationalising state" strategies marginalised other populations residing in the country, provoking counter imaginations of nations also based on ethnicity, leading to violence and proliferation of demands for new nation states in China, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.

Ethnic nation making leads to conflict and violence for several reasons, asserts Muthiah.

First, in multi-ethnic countries, constructing nations on the basis of majority communities implicitly or explicitly led to the formation of minority communities and their destruction or marginalisation. These groups became apprehensive about their futures, stimulating alternative conceptions of nation as well as imagination of new states in which minority communities would become the state-bearing nations. The demand for new nations and states led to violence and war as seen in Sri Lanka, Thailand, India and Pakistan.

Second, ethno-national imaginations in homogenous populations were non-accepting of divided nations and of the idea that one nation may support more than one state. The quest for unification of divided nations and the effort to achieve congruence between nation and state were primary causes of inter-state wars in Asia, for example, the Koreas and Vietnam.

Third, ethnic nation making challenged, modified, and in some cases undermined civic nation making, fostering internal conflict in those states.

Fourth, ethnic nation making polarised populations, making them intolerant and unaccepting of plurality and diversity. The forging of a cohesive national community became much more difficult, if not impossible.

Further, Muthiah asserts that if ethnicity continues to dominate nation making, nations will not command the loyalty of all their citizens and national political communities will remain divided and brittle. Asian countries would remain weak as modern nation-states, and unable to realise their full potential. And despite the growing material power of Asian countries, the dream of an Asian century will remain just that – a dream.

Muthiah acknowledges that ethnicity is deeply embedded in political organisation, mobilisation and governance in Asian countries and will not be easily dislodged. Attempts to do so could also provoke counter reaction and violence.

He admits that while civic nation making is not a panacea, it appears better placed to cope with diversity and the challenges of modernisation as well as manage and resolve domestic and international conflicts. He therefore proposes that governments and civil society take mitigating actions by overlaying ethnic conceptions with features of civic nation that emphasise territory, citizenship, and equality.

The civic nation building approach has the potential to enhance the legitimacy of the nation and state in the eyes of disadvantaged and minority groups without negating them in the eyes of the ethnic core. It can help realise the full potential of all citizens. Increased legitimacy of nation and state will help ameliorate conflict, making for increased stability, domestically and regionally.

In countries like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan that are ethnically homogenous and in multi-ethnic states like India and Indonesia, national communities are held together not only by ethnic consciousness but also by political loyalty to a higher ideal, obligations and rights.

Muthiah believes that Malaysia was envisioned as a plural nation with the Malay nation as its nucleus. That conception had ethnic as well as civic nation dimensions. The ethnic dimension related to the special position of the Malays and Malay rulers, as well as the position of the non-Malay populations. The civic dimension emphasised citizenship by birth and naturalisation, democracy, and the constitutional basis for the Malayan nation and state. That blend of ethnicity and civic features in nation making came to be characterised as a historic bargain, the social compact. Over time, however, the plural and civic nation dimensions of nation making in Malaysia weakened, with ethnicity becoming paramount in the post-1969 period.

Apprehension, alienation, mistrust and polarisation grew as emphasis on race, ethnicity and religion dominated the body politic.

Today, 55 years after independence, we are debating the very fundamental foundation of the Malaysian nation: should it be based on ethnicity, religion or be trans-ethnic and trans-religious as advocated by the founding fathers?

For me, the answer is clear. An ethnically and religiously diverse country cannot continue to survive as a nation state in peace and prosperity without all of its citizens feeling a sense of

belonging and pride in the nation, and imagining a common national identity and a shared destiny.

Legitimacy and support for our socio-political order and in our institutions must be grounded in consent, not coercion. As an ever expanding educated urban middle class demand rights on the basis of citizenship, change is inevitable. The challenge is to recognise and manage these new realities by strengthening the civic foundations of this multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. I believe there are enough Malaysians, enough history and enough wisdom here to make civic nation building possible.

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