

Rethinking national integration and unity



KEY TO NATION'S SUCCESS: *Unless efforts are made to checkmate divisive tendencies, the long expected oneness and indivisibility of Malaysia will remain an utopia*

It may seem somewhat pretentious to write an article on national integration and national unity since the scope of the topic is seemingly endless, and since millions of words have been spoken and written on this subject.

Many scholars (sociologists, political scientists, etc.) argue that national integration is not a unidimensional concept. Rather, it is a multidimensional one. Because of its multidimensionality, it has been divided into four types of integration:

CULTURAL INTEGRATION - consistency among cultural standards;

NORMATIVE INTEGRATION - the society's values are institutionalised in structural elements of the social system;

COMMUNICATIVE INTEGRATION use of mass media in achieving consensus; and,

FUNCTIONAL INTEGRATION - mutual interdependence among the units of a system of division of labour.

In sum, national integration is the process whereby people of a particular nation are linked together by a force - be that values or functions - so that resources are made available or accessible for all the people, regardless of their status in the social hierarchy. It is a constellation of social values, norms, social organisations and institutions.

The image of Malaysian unity cannot be built merely of eye-catching laces and frills: it must also have the supporting "stays" of harder material. It would need painstaking efforts over a long time and establish carefully administrative and economic measures.

News of growing inter- and interracial tensions and interfaith segregation over the years can no longer be ignored. Unless efforts are made by the authorities to checkmate these divisive tendencies towards national integration, the long expected and loudly proclaimed oneness and indivisibility of Malaysia will remain an utopia.

In the context of pre-emptive measures against the manifestation of this extreme negative scenario, there is a whole host of options of intervention points that can possibly redirect the course of future history away from such a tragic trajectory.

The following is a selected list which may mitigate the effects of such wild-card scenario: These intervention points also represent a part of the recommended paradigm and policy framework.

These points are neither exhaustive nor are they mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, they are meant to shed light on possible paradigms, policies and practices that can influence national integration and social cohesion within the context of Malaysia's future.

FIRSTLY, if it means anything at all, national integration means the creation of a mental climate in which everyone will place "national interest well above communal, religious, linguistic or local interests". This is only possible when each group feels that they will get a square deal and have no fear of domination by others. That such a mental climate prevails when the majority is tolerant and minorities have shed their fear and inferiority complex.

This is partly a matter of education and partly of political maturity, and fair play on the part of the leading political parties in the country. We need to reformulate our education system. National schools must be truly national in their syllabi and in their ethnic composition of pupils and teachers. If kids learn together, they will know how to live together. Schools must promote interfaith studies. Universities must strengthen the Ethnic Relations Module.



Students of SMK Seksyen 24 Shah Alam during a discussion session. National schools must be truly national in their syllabi and ethnic composition of students and teachers.

SECONDLY; a particular vision needs to be shared by the top leadership. A re-awakening/re-orientation/awareness phase ensues, and is shared and spread to all levels of political leadership.

The relationship between the behaviour of the political leaders and political stability is one of the central questions in political science and political sociology. Arend Lijphart argues that democratic stability in multi-ethnic and multi religious societies is due to cooperation and "accommodation" within the leadership circle.

The political leaders of all shades must condemn hate speech and acts of intolerance. This is a sphere of influence and of power. Therefore, at this stage, a new form of culture has transformed every inch and space of Malaysia. A new inner psyche of national integration and social cohesion, the desirable yet dialectically evolving target for transformation has been created.

THIRDLY, the role of the media comes in this process. Instead of highlighting pernicious acts of prejudice, the media should celebrate acts of inter-communal harmony. There is heroism everywhere. Every day, thousands of ordinary citizens perform extraordinary acts of love and compassion that transcend race and religion. The press rarely notes these.

National unity is one of the very vital keys to Malaysia's success. We need to look beyond 2020 and start a discourse to formulate a new vision, programmes and activities for nation-building. We should be more conscious of our role and contribution towards national unity, which is paramount to the nation's growth and development.

Ultimately, the key to positive transformation of ethnic integration in Malaysia requires us to move from "problem-oriented policymaking" towards "future-directed, ethic-centred, vision-oriented, policymaking centred, and capacity-building oriented".

The writer is a senior analyst in social policy at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia