

Are Malaysians territorial?

By Tengku Nur Qistina Petri

HOW does territorialism explain racism, migration or the problem of thousands of foreign workers, legal and illegal, on our shores?

Immigration issues are not foreign to us. In recent months, migration issues have overwhelmed us, both on the international and domestic fronts.

Be they the migration of refugees, migration issues have centred around the United States presidential race, even the Rohingya refugees and that of the Bangladeshi workers — all these have invited the response of many.

There is no denying the fact that Malaysians have a loud voice, and one that we are proud to use because we have a right to be heard. However, it would be interesting to know more of what fuels our voices, and perhaps even a psychological or sociological approach to it, other than the political or economic motivations of our stance.

Going through the comments section of a Facebook article will uncover the diversity of opinions that exist among Malaysians.

Given the differing backgrounds, some express disgust at the refusal of the Malaysian government to accept Rohingya refugees.

Others applaud, while there are a few, like myself, who try to think more of the situation than meets the eye — it may have been due to an overbearing dependency that it would create if we were to take them in, or it can be because of diplomacy.

Either way, it sounded very “conspiracy theory-like” because it is all mere speculation.

Fast forward to a few months ago, the social media went on a frenzy at the news of possibly 1.5 million Bangladeshi workers joining our labour force.

The news itself was met with response from everyone. Again, a very diverse response. But, more or less, of the same. But, nothing of which did not make one wonder, what were the sociological explanations behind them? Could it be due to our territorial psychological needs?

“Territorialism” in itself is defined as preferring, and prioritising those with geographical significance to one over another.

Simply put, it’s the same reason for our unpleasant feeling when someone takes our favourite parking spot. In the world of academia, there are branches of territorialism — the private, semi-private and public. In this context, would it be safe to say that our practice of territorialism concerns a public territory?

There is something about the thought of a foreigner coming in and making use of our amenities that scares us. Albeit, it is obviously an economic call that had resulted in the initial call for foreign labour.

But, it could be argued that Western foreigners have been and worked here, but, our feelings of fear are not the same.

Maybe, it could be that we fear of what is the unknown, and, the Western life in itself is something that is known, familiar, and even imitated by our society — one that was once highly influential, seeing that they had a lasting influence in the Malaysia that we live in today.

However, the same could not be said of the Bangladeshi workers, or even the Rohingyas who, at the thought of their presence in our country, “scares” us.

Territoriality. Apparently that holds the key explanation for our behaviour towards migration. We feel a sense of ownership towards our homeland and logically, it makes sense that we should feel a sense of ownership towards Malaysia — as it is, we have army men guarding our borders and intelligence units protecting our land.

Evidently, the Lahad Datu incident a few years ago would be an example. A more layman analogy would be: guarding our favourite spot in our favourite coffee shop.

It gives us a sense of uneasiness or discomfort, and possibly, disappointment to think and find that “our place” could be occupied, despite the fact that it is a “public space”. Our “public space” is for us to freely roam about, but it is not a public space meant for anyone from the outside.

As said, it might not be as complicated as fearing the unknown, but the economic and political unrest that it might cause.

Obviously, it would affect the demographics, and possibly crime rates, however, the fact remains that this stands merely as a possibility.

It is by no means, the only solution, but it may just be one of the factors that exist together with the apparent political and economic reasons.

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