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A New Era for Malaysia-Singapore Relations: Closing the People-to-People Gap

Zaim Mohzani | Senior Director of External Affairs

When organising one of Malaysia's biggest ASEAN conferences, I was struck by the absence of a Malaysia-Singapore Chamber of Commerce. Given the deep ties between our nations, this gap prompted me to reflect on the rich and complex history of Malaysia-Singapore relations, especially as Singapore celebrates its 59th National Day on 9 August 2024, and we approach the 60th anniversary of our diplomatic relations next year.

The relationship between Malaysia and Singapore has been dynamic and evolving since the separation in 1965. This separation, driven by significant political and economic differences, marked the beginning of a challenging yet intertwined journey. The early years post-separation were particularly tense, with disputes over issues such as water supply and territorial boundaries. These tensions were exacerbated by the differing leadership styles of Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew during the 1980s and 1990s. Their often contentious relationship highlighted the deep-rooted historical and political complexities between the two nations.

Despite these challenges, the relationship saw significant improvements with the leadership of Abdullah Badawi and Lee Hsien Loong, who worked towards mending and strengthening ties. This era of improved relations was further solidified during Najib Razak's tenure, with notable projects like the proposed Malaysia-Singapore High Speed Rail, which, despite its eventual cancellation, symbolised a commitment to deeper bilateral cooperation.

Recent years have seen a continuation of warm relations under the leadership of Malaysian premiers Muhyiddin Yassin, Ismail Sabri, and now Anwar Ibrahim, all with Hsien Loong. Significant developments include the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone and the Johor Bahru-Singapore Rapid Transit System (RTS), scheduled for completion in 2026. These projects underscore the potential for economic synergy and deeper integration between our nations. Additionally, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and Singapore's new Prime Minister Lawrence Wong have discussed various initiatives, including the idea of Singaporean volunteers teaching English to Malaysian students, which, despite its controversy, highlights a willingness to explore new areas of cooperation. We welcome Prime Minister Wong's call to "identify new areas of cooperation beyond the civil service" to include the private sector, NGOs, civil society, universities, and teachers.

While state-facilitated programmes like the ASEAN Youth Fellowship (AYF) and the Singapore-Malaysia Youth Leaders Exchange Programme (SMYLEP) have successfully fostered closer youth-to-youth relations, there remains a gap in grassroots, non-state-led initiatives. The absence of a Malaysia-Singapore Chamber of Commerce in Singapore, as highlighted by former Deputy Minister of International Trade and Industry Prof Ong Kian Ming, underscores the need for more institutional frameworks to support bilateral collaboration.

To address these gaps and build on our strong foundation, I propose the establishment of the Malaysia-Singapore Leadership Dialogue (MYSG). This independent, non-profit initiative aims to nurture relationships, promote engagement, and incubate collaboration between leaders from various sectors in both countries. MYSG seeks to be the premier initiative for connecting, developing, and nurturing leaders, particularly young leaders, dedicated to strengthening Malaysia-Singapore relations.

Our mission is to foster long-term, mutually beneficial relationships through people-to-people linkages. The activities of MYSG will include an Annual Leadership Forum, exchange programmes, and monthly leadership dialogues. These platforms will facilitate high-level discussions, hands-on learning experiences, and continuous engagement among leaders from both nations. The Malaysia-Singapore Annual Leadership Forum can be held as a sideline event during the Malaysia-Singapore Leaders' Retreat—this year in Malaysia and next year in Singapore—and can be dubbed as a Young Leaders' Retreat where young political leaders, corporate captains, prominent entrepreneurs, civil society figures, and community leaders can meet, exchange ideas, and build meaningful connections.

Drawing inspiration from successful models, MYSG aims to enhance Malaysia-Singapore relations through similar frameworks. For instance, the British American Project (BAP) fosters transatlantic collaboration by bringing together leaders from the United States and the United Kingdom for annual conferences and networking opportunities. The Australia New Zealand Leadership Forum (ANZLF) promotes closer economic and strategic ties through dialogue among business leaders, government officials, and policymakers. Additionally, the British-Irish Association organises conferences and events to discuss political, social, and economic issues, fostering understanding and cooperation among stakeholders. The National Committee on U.S.-China Relations (NCUSCR) encourages dialogue, education, and collaboration through initiatives like the Young Leaders Forum.

As we approach the 60th anniversary of Malaysia-Singapore relations next year, it is essential to focus on strengthening people-to-people ties. The Malaysia-Singapore Leadership Dialogue offers a unique opportunity to drive this agenda forward, fostering a future where our bilateral relationship is not only strong but also deeply rooted in mutual understanding and collaboration.

Countering Narratives: Context & Strategies

Luqman Al-Hakim | Research & Communications Executive

Recently, I had the privilege of joining the Peace Lab for Religious Leaders & Thinkers (PLRT) program, an initiative by Initiate.My aimed at equipping religious leaders and thinkers with the tools and insights necessary to combat extremism effectively. The program, which concluded with a summit on July 28th, brought together a host of experts from the fields of communications and security. Through a series of in-depth sessions, participants, including myself, were trained in the nuances of crafting effective counternarratives against extremist ideologies.

However, while the program was rich with learning and collaboration, it sparked a deeper contemplation on my part. What if there's a more organic, intrinsic way to advocate for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and the Prevention of Violence and Extremism (PVE)? This question has opened up a pathway of exploration into how we can more naturally integrate these critical initiatives into our societal fabric, moving beyond structured programs to something more deeply ingrained in our daily lives and interactions.

The idea of a counternarrative isn't new, though its widespread application in fields ranging from literature to political science is a more modern development. At its core, a counternarrative serves as a means to challenge and offer an alternative to a prevailing narrative, which is often established by those in positions of power and influence. Historically, counternarrative have played crucial roles in movements for social justice, helping to reshape public perception and policy by providing alternate viewpoints and voices that are typically marginalized.

The term itself has roots in critical theory and literary criticism, where it was used to highlight stories and perspectives that contest dominant cultural narratives. For example, during the civil rights movement in the United States, activists used counternarratives to challenge the prevailing stories told by segregationists and to illuminate the systemic injustices faced by African Americans.

Strategy of Counternarrative

A successful counternarrative isn't merely about opposing a dominant narrative; it involves understanding the intricate layers and contexts of the prevailing stories within a society. It requires a deep engagement with the socio-cultural contexts that shape and sustain the dominant narrative. This understanding allows counternarrative strategists to craft their stories in a way that they not only oppose but also resonate deeply with the audience, subverting the grand narrative to align with their advocacy goals.

In practice, crafting an effective counternarrative involves a delicate balance of subversion and persuasion, ensuring that the new narrative is both compelling and credible. By aligning the counternarrative closely with widely held values and concerns, advocates can more effectively challenge the status quo and encourage broader support for social change.

Counternarrative vs Propaganda

While counternarratives can be seen as a form of propaganda, they typically diverge in their underlying intent and impact. Propaganda is often used to reinforce existing power structures, frequently at the expense of truth and openness. Counternarratives, on the other hand, strive to dismantle unfair power dynamics and foster a more inclusive and understanding society. They aim to enlighten and liberate, rather than manipulate and control, offering alternative viewpoints that encourage critical thinking and empathy.

The Malaysian Context

In Malaysia, the shift towards utilizing counternarratives has gained momentum as more individuals recognize the limitations of seeking change predominantly through institutional channels. The Malaysian societal fabric, with its rich diversity and complex interplay of cultural, religious, and ethnic identities, presents unique challenges and opportunities for counternarrative strategies.

In recent years, we have seen a significant move from top-down approaches to grassroots-level activism, reflecting a broader understanding that societal change often starts at the community level. The general public has shown a tendency to prefer the comfort and predictability of established structures, which makes the job of counternarratives more challenging yet also more crucial. These narratives must resonate on a personal level, connecting with individual experiences and local contexts to effect real change.

This grassroots shift is evident in various sectors, from environmental campaigns to advocacy for gender equality, where counternarratives are empowering communities to voice their concerns and challenge the status quo. The success of these movements often hinges on their ability to craft narratives that do not merely confront but also construct - proposing new ways of thinking and living that align with the values and aspirations of their audiences.

Scrutinizing the Malaysian Political Narrative

To truly grasp and effectively counter the dominant narratives in Malaysia, one must first go through an examination of the country's political ontology. Understanding the intricate fabric of political narratives requires more than a superficial analysis; it demands an in-depth exploration of the foundational elements that shape and sustain power structures within the country. This approach challenges the common assumption that the Malaysian populace has a homogeneous understanding of politics, which is often mistakenly believed to be strictly divided along racial and religious lines.

The Complexity of Power Structures

In Malaysia, the real challenge lies not in the lack of manpower or operational capability but in a profound understanding of the narratives that uphold existing power dynamics. The oversimplified view of Malaysian politics, predominantly viewed through lenses of race and religion, overlooks the nuanced and complex nature of how these narratives evolve and influence society. To address this, a detailed, laborious investigation into the political ontology of Malaysians is essential.

Evolving Politics

A poignant illustration of this dynamic is the evolution of the narrative surrounding political Islam in Malaysia. Historically, dominated by pan-Islamism, this narrative has undergone significant transformation, gradually merging into a broader ideology of Malays suprematism. This shift underscores the fluid and amorphous nature of Malaysian politics, where the overt narratives often mask deeper, driving forces of change. Such transitions, in political narratives demonstrate the complexity and adaptability of ideological frameworks within the country, challenging the static, simplistic, views often held by both local and external observers.

Dual Nature of Politics

The work of thinkers like Walter Benjamin and Emilio Gentile offers valuable insights into the dual nature of politics, which is characterized by both its esthetic projection and its deeper, unchangeable core. In extreme political environments, esthetics - through myth-making, religious symbolism, and other forms of public display - serve to project subversive intentions while masking the fundamental ideologies that drive these movements.
Confronting these esthetic projections without addressing the underlying ideological cores can render counternarrative efforts futile. The real battle lies in engaging with and deconstructing the core beliefs and values that garner public support for these political narratives. Without this deeper engagement, counternarratives risk merely skimming the surface, unable to effect meaningful or lasting change.

The Politics of "Permissibility"

The most insidious aspect of extremist politics is its transformation of ordinary citizens into radical agents of violence. The inconvenient truth is, harmful rhetorics in extremist ideologies, constitute what we can call politics of "permissibility". It operates under the guise of empowering individuals but instead manipulates them into endorsing and committing acts of violence against perceived enemies. It is a cunning strategy that turns "jiran" and "sanak sedara" against each other, fostering division and hostilities.
The root causes that drive ordinary, well-intentioned people towards such extremism are predominantly socioeconomic. Issues such as unemployment, income inequality, lack of education, and limited access to resources create fertile ground for extremist ideologies to take hold. Extremist politics capitalizes on these vulnerabilities by offering a false dichotomy: portraying complex societal issues in terms of us-versus-them and providing simplistic solutions to deeply ingrained problems.

Illusion of Solution in Extremist Narratives

Extremist groups often promise quick and decisive solutions to the problems faced by ordinary Malaysians, exploiting the desperation and hopelessness felt by many. However, these solutions are illusory and do not address the underlying issues. Instead, they exacerbate divisions and create cycles of violence and retaliation, further destabilizing society and detracting from genuine paths to peace and prosperity.

Leveraging Counter-Narrative Techniques

To combat extremist politics effectively, it is crucial to employ advanced communication strategies that not only reshape public perception but actively undermine the allure of harmful ideologies.

Strategic Communication

Strategic communication involves a careful, calculated use of various media and digital platforms to reach and influence a broad audience. This strategy includes:

- Content Development: Creating high-quality, factual content that directly challenges the claims of extremist narratives. This could involve documentaries, articles, podcasts, and social media posts that expose the realities and consequences of extremist ideologies.
- Narrative Framing: Framing stories in a way that highlights the positive outcomes of rejecting extremism. For instance, showcasing success stories of communities that have thrived through inclusive practices can serve as powerful counter-narratives.
- Engagement Strategies: Interactive platforms such as forums, webinars, and workshops can engage individuals more deeply, allowing for real-time discussions and personalized responses to concerns and questions about extremism.

Psychological Insights

Understanding the psychological underpinnings of why individuals gravitate towards extremist groups is fundamental in crafting effective counter-narratives. This involves:

- Behavioral Analysis: Studying the common psychological patterns and triggers that lead to radicalization. This can include feelings of disenfranchisement, identity crises, or a desire for belonging, which extremist groups often exploit.
- Cognitive Dissonance: Introducing information that creates cognitive dissonance can lead individuals to question their beliefs. Counter-narratives that highlight the contradictions and failures of extremist ideologies can encourage reevaluation of these beliefs.

Cultural Relevance

For counter-narratives to be effective, they must be culturally relevant and resonate deeply with the target audience. This requires:

- Cultural Competence: Understanding and integrating cultural values, norms, and practices into the narratives to ensure they are respectful and relevant to the audience's daily lives.
- Language and Symbolism: Utilizing the local language and culturally significant symbols to ensure the message is not only understood but also feels familiar and persuasive.
- Media Localization: Tailoring content to fit local media consumption habits, whether it be through traditional media like television and radio or digital platforms like WhatsApp groups, YouTube, or local social media networks.

Implementing KESBAN Policies

KESBAN (Keselamatan dan Pembangunan, Security and Development), which has been a cornerstone of Malaysia's national security strategy, can provide valuable lessons for contemporary counter-narrative strategies. Originally designed to integrate civil and military efforts to maintain security while fostering development, KESBAN's principles can be adapted to counter extremism:

- Integrated Approach: Combining efforts across various sectors—government, security forces, community organizations, and the private sector—to provide a cohesive response to extremism.
- Community Engagement: Strengthening community ties and resilience by involving local leaders and organizations in the design and implementation of initiatives that address the root causes of radicalization.
- Socioeconomic Development: Pairing security measures with development initiatives to improve living conditions, thereby reducing the socio-economic grievances that extremist groups exploit.
- Surveillance and Intelligence: Enhancing intelligence capabilities to identify and disrupt extremist networks while respecting the rights and freedoms of citizens.

Strategic communication, psychological insights, and cultural relevance are the pillars of this strategy. These involve not only disseminating factual, engaging content but also understanding and addressing the psychological needs and fears that drive individuals toward extremism. Furthermore, ensuring that these narratives are culturally resonant and sensitive to the local context is crucial for their success.

Additionally, the integration of strategies such as those outlined in Malaysia's KESBAN policies can provide a holistic approach, combining security measures with community development initiatives to address both the symptoms and root causes of radicalization. This comprehensive method acknowledges the socio-economic drivers of extremism and seeks to improve the overall resilience of communities against such ideologies.

Ultimately, the goal is to create a more harmonious and understanding society by offering narratives that not only counter extremism but also constructively contribute to the discourse, promoting values of inclusivity, diversity, and mutual respect.

Painting with Propaganda

Elisha Patmon | Research & Communications Executive

“The term may be new – it was first used barely 80 years ago, at the beginning of World War II – but the actions it describes are as old as warfare itself, as old as humanity.”

The rise of propaganda and its current forms in technology, media, and politics, paint a wayward picture in society's dysfunction and falsified lack of interest in subjects that were once considered the cornerstones of periods of time. When the art stream is defunded, when it becomes part of the normal to not put in any time, money, and effort into art, history, music, and literature, a conundrum is created. Art in various forms, plays a crucial part in thinking, fostering critical opinions, empathy, and cultural awareness, and most importantly, gives people the ability to not only question people’s motives and subjects but also look at different perspectives. A decline in these endeavors only endangers individuals, leaving them more susceptible to simplistic narratives and manipulative information.

While the relationship between the decline of the arts and the rise in susceptibility to propaganda is complex, the connection lies primarily in the role that arts play in fostering critical thinking, cultural awareness, and media literacy. Contrary to some sentiment, propaganda is not a Western myth, it does not have its origin in some Western philosophy that is now being exported through our screens after. Propaganda is a masterclass of fear. It preys on the irrational, which is wayward and taps into a deep subconscious of made-up worry by creating a problem with ill intention or furthering it; it does not matter if the facade is real or not. Anger is a very powerful thing, and it being channeled in a certain direction is not difficult, but masterful in its execution. Propaganda is a long-standing game that has roots in history, politics, psychology, sociology, and journalism.

Propaganda and persuasion often go hand in hand; you need persuasion in order for propaganda to work. We can see this in the example of an orange. Persuading someone means trying to convince them that oranges are delicious because of their natural sugars. You could be deterred by this however, and still think that the taste of oranges is something horrible, but persuasion gives a rational counterargument: that although you may not like them, they still hold good things that give you benefits. Propaganda then takes the methods of persuasion that are used and twists them. It can cite how oranges are a great source of nutrients but also will cure an incurable disease. This then starts a chain of diminishing the respectability of what the orange can actually do and showering it with an unattainable health benefit. When we look at these two examples, there is no concrete evidence that the one using propaganda will actually work. Propaganda takes normal, and often truthful talking points, warping them into something new and presenting it as fact.

Persuasion is a skill used in language, it is meant to inform the audience and give advice based on that information about whether or not there is any truth or semblance to a decision or matter. The two can be easily mistaken as one as Propaganda always employs the laws of persuasion to tally out information but persuasion is not always propaganda.

Propaganda is often laced with discrimination; and fictitious claims to promote an argument, in order to pedal or dissipate ideas roughly and thoroughly. There is habitually no sensible doubt or reason; where persuasion usually offers a counterargument.

Propaganda is extremely popular in politics, and there is no exception to the rule when it is used today. The historic Uncle Sam posters of World War 2 are gone, but the slight and prying world of social media and the new internet trove of vast information should come under careful inspection. In a new timeline, it is intersecting with propaganda to bring out different forms of media that are being easily absorbed. Traditional media has always been contentious; whether it be newspapers or television news, there is always an agenda and one that has been heavily scrutinized and argued by scholars, people, and journalists alike.

Countless American superhero films that employ the Department of Justice, CIA, and FBI in their semi-fictitious worlds to create, usually, a positive presence that hinges on doing good. Countless films around the world employ these same tactics - using government bodies and organizations as a stream for good that can only be overcome by the abominable human spirit, and will be the last stand against the bad. We could look at this as propaganda because it goes past our levels of persuasion. We know the adverse effects the rapid militarisation of armies is causing the planet and the escalating geopolitical tensions because of them. It fails to string the notes of persuasion together and instead becomes more invasive; propagating an us vs them mentality that exudes control as an attempt to maintain a power balance that is only advantageous to the propagandist.

It is getting worse. In India, in response to sexual assault charges against the president of the Wrestling Federation of India, far-right Hindu Nationalists are trying to discredit the claims of the wrestlers by using demonization and fake images. This is all because the president, Bhushan Singh, is a member of parliament from the ruling party. Using dirty methods to try and wipe the slate “clean” by having a smear campaign so that the regular people can do the bidding of one entity. This political propaganda is associated with a clear political figure - one from a party that many support. What we can see here is a heavy entity that associates the figure and the party together, instead of looking at them as separate entities.

Political propaganda is information, usually false, in an effort to be distributed to cause unrest and advance a political cause. When this is present, we fail to understand the mass influence these people and ideologies have. This stream can maintain power and even exceed it, becoming dominating and starting to dictate how only they see things. In this case, because they are now not a separate entity, which is the goal when it comes to political propaganda and pandering to further a political cause, it reflects the morals and values of many. An obstacle is then present as it becomes more difficult to believe that what they have been accused of or done, is viable in any way. When a figurehead and the party they associate with come together as an individual identity, an attack on the person, is an attack on the party, and an attack on the party, is an attack on someone's moral principles. That itself is a trigger that many will deeply feel affects them, even though it has nothing to do with the figurehead they are avidly protecting.

In the United States, bots were used so heavily during the 2020 election that out of 240 million tweets that pertained to the presidential race, especially within the Democratic and Republican primaries, bot activity dwarfed humans, having dire consequences for the rise of misinformation. If a bot is honing in on the same "problem" over and over again, creating a disturbance in the algorithm to have certain objectives be pushed out, more people will be influenced because of the susceptible nature of some and the trusting minds of another. The effects are catastrophic with being used to try and sway an election, trick constituents with false promises or information, and create obvious dissent in the political community, making people confused. Propaganda thrives in that confusion and grabs onto anybody's fringe ideals in the smallest way to help snowball a narrative that is beneficial to one, usually without a scientific backing of tangible theory. There is a deliberation to try and skew people's understandings and take advantage of them by relying on an incapability to do mountains of research to debunk a certain theory. All share the same contentious aftermath; once these claims are debunked by the dedicated people who fact-check, they have already caused shockwaves of harm that are almost impossible to undo. Even mass messages of false tidings do not have the desired effect - they barely work because people have already formed opinions based on a cheap fallacy. This is a lesson in propaganda domino into media literacy; having the ability to evaluate, analyze, and critically think about various forms of media. An acute understanding of how the media works and the media messaging behind things. Being gullible is not just based on something as simple as knowing right from wrong - especially when something that is furthering an agenda - does not overtly present itself as nefarious.

Malaysia's atmosphere cannot stray away from these difficult conversations. The country has a tattered history with the way that they use and manipulate certain offices to get what they want. The biggest scandal of them all was 1MDB - through throes of lying and political manipulation to keep funneling money to personal accounts. "Foreign investments" included funding the likes of the blockbuster movie The Wolf of Wall Street, and laundering money for Red Granite Pictures to produce further films. It becomes unbecoming to think that one, the Malaysian people would be okay with this endeavor and two, that funding Hollywood movies is in the interest of the country. Raising billions of dollars for investment in Hollywood movies, instead of projects to propel Malaysian society, people, and infrastructure into the future, sounds like make-believe. Our eyes were covered and we were left scampering around in the dark, whilst the parties in power banked on an oxymoron, abusing the blind trust of people's support, in an untrue facade.

When propaganda is woven into the fabric of the laws, the lines are harder to color in, often becoming messy in the name of a political agenda. There is some luck here where independent organizations still exist, but it is still not enough under the guise of censorship laws. "Under the penal code of Malaysia, Cambodia, and Vietnam allow for the criminalization of what authorities deemed to be false information or information that may disrupt public order or national security." At a glance, this seems to make sense; to stop the malicious and unfair falsification of information. This becomes a black hole though, because there are not enough stipulations and regulations in place that actually define what this is, and it is quickly becoming a game of hurt feelings instead of facts and mishaps that people in high positions, responsible for certain facets of the country's outcome, need to answer to. In Singapore for example, Amnesty International reported that lawyer M Ravi had to pay a fine of SGD 6,000, after the comments he made about his client, refused to be rescinded.

A specialization in death penalty cases, he had criticized the government for their overarching prosecution of his client and called for them to make an apology when he was taken off death row. The court responded by asking him to renounce his statements criticizing the government and when he didn't, they stripped the human rights lawyer of his license for five years. This is intimidation. Asking the government to apologize for wrongdoing on their behalf, to only be bartered with an ultimatum that refutes what he has done in the first place.

The government's tight control over artistic content further exacerbates the situation. The censorship laws in Malaysia are among the strictest in the world, often justified on the grounds of maintaining public order and national security. The Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) and the Film Censorship Act enable authorities to ban publications and films deemed sensitive or a threat to national security. Not only does this hinder artists themselves, but creates a dangerous dissuade into using this as an excuse, in order to justify the banning of media and perspectives that challenge the cultural and religious norms in the country. Bans on critically acclaimed authors such as Faisal Tehrani do not have a place in society when it reaches a normal of censorship based on sensitivity. With responses from 79 creators being faced with violations of their artistic freedom, multiple cases of censorship processes that include the expanded role of religious-based departments, and the policing of the Malay language, It cannot be denied that censorship is controversial. This then becomes justified under the guise of maintaining public order, national security, or moral values, leading to a suppression of works that address controversial topics.

Exposure to diverse artistic expressions encourages people to think critically, question established norms, and appreciate different perspectives. When funding for the arts is cut or when the arts are devalued in education and public life, there are fewer opportunities to develop these critical faculties. The exploration of complex social and political issues is seen as taboo then, not giving a space for reflection and discussion that is essential for a healthy democracy.

Malaysia's education system needs to make more of an effort when it comes to funding these subjects. Through the trials and tribunals of the education system, and the clear backbone that it does not have when it comes to the toppling of the curriculum consistently, another problem of only promoting one pathway and one type of academic studying needs to be discussed. The arts are not funded in tandem compared to the sciences. Malaysian schools should prioritize the arts stream to challenge the stigma that it is inferior to the science stream. This perception pushes students away from their passions, perpetuating stereotypes about limited career prospects in the arts. A re-education is necessary when it comes to students and parents, as well as educators in the schools themselves to what they are consistently pushing out. There needs to be an active expansion in the subject selection process and promotion of arts subjects. The goal is always to inspire students and elevate the status of the arts education system, fostering creativity.

This then leads to a lack of overall funding for the arts, deeming it not as important when arts and culture are a vital part of this country and what it is made from. There is nothing short of Malaysian pride when looking at our architecture, literature, culture, and the multitude of heritages present in the country.

However, the constant propaganda in terms of censorship, over-policing, and defunding makes the appreciation for these factors harder to maintain and doesn't allow people and spaces to grow. Our society will start to fall behind as the world progresses and connectivity is valued more than ever.

Instead of being used for good, it is again being used for something to control, manipulate, and create disarray. This is the birth of something new - bathing in advancement for the world but has become sullied and fatigued with the amount of information pumping out that does not care for media literacy, using shock value to make a point, and is ripe with agendas.

We as a population are more susceptible to false information, and an inability to analyze sources and recognize biased or false narratives. A decline in the arts can lead to a reduced public discourse on important issues, making it easier for propaganda to fill the void with oversimplified and often polarising messages; a frail veil of misinformation is spread to achieve a goal. There is a thin line where propaganda does not have ill intentions and arguably, can be used for good, but has lost neutrality because of the way it has been employed for purposes that have been less than savory. The word is associated with lying, psychological warfare, manipulation, deceit, and distortion. With how fast news spreads and the lack of critical thinking present when mindlessly processing and absorbing information - a recipe for disaster unfolds in the form of bite-sized information and a lack of social awareness as propaganda continues to influence our laws and our daily lives.

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Accelerationism

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The recent spate of riots and violence in the UK attributed to far-right groups represents a troubling escalation in domestic unrest. These incidents have been characterized by a disturbing intensity and have targeted vulnerable communities, particularly migrants and Muslims, following false attributions and xenophobic provocations.

Overview of Recent Events

1. Riots in Southport and Beyond: The trigger for a series of violent episodes was the stabbing deaths of three children in Southport, which were wrongly blamed on Muslims and migrants, fueling far-right anger. This misinformation spurred riots across various cities, including Rotherham, Sunderland, and Leeds.
2. Targeted Attacks: Hotels housing asylum seekers and other migrant facilities have been specific targets. Rioters have smashed windows, set fires, and clashed violently with police forces, indicating a level of premeditation and coordination among far-right groups.
3. Response from Law Enforcement: The police and government have been forced to respond with increased presence and emergency measures. High-profile incidents have necessitated Cobra meetings, typically reserved for severe crises, highlighting the severity of the threat.
4. Public and Political Reaction: The violence has drawn widespread condemnation from political leaders and civil society. Prime Minister Keir Starmer and other officials have vowed to bring rioters to justice and have emphasized the non-representative nature of these acts regarding the broader British public.
5. Community Impact: These events have deeply affected the UK's Muslim communities, prompting increased security measures at mosques and a palpable rise in fear and anxiety among British Muslims. The violence has been described by community leaders as a direct result of unchecked Islamophobia.

Analysis of Motivations and Implications

The motivations behind these riots are primarily fueled by far-right ideologies that exploit economic uncertainties, cultural fears, and political grievances. The use of accelerationist rhetoric among some rioters suggests an intent not just to protest but to actively destabilize society in hopes of catalyzing a broader political and cultural shift.
This strategy of tension reflects a dangerous trend where far-right groups are not merely expressing discontent but are seeking to enact a vision of societal transformation that is exclusionary and often violently realized

This surge in violence, exemplified by riots targeting migrants and Muslims, has been particularly shocking. Notably, these acts, though often labeled simply as hate crimes, share characteristics with terrorism—especially in their ideological underpinnings and motivations, which starkly differ from those typically associated with Islamist terrorism. Such extremism has found philosophical fuel in a concept known as accelerationism, notably advocated by groups like the Order of Nine Angels, which promotes hastening societal collapse to bring about radical change

Accelerationism is a philosophical and political concept that has intrigued and perplexed thinkers for decades. Rooted in radical critiques of modern society, it suggests that the forces driving capitalism and technological change should be accelerated to bring about new socio-economic order. This article explored the nuanced contours of accelerationism, its intellectual origins, its branches, and its co-optation by extremist ideologies.

Accelerationism?

Accelerationism posits that the prevailing systems and structures of society, particularly capitalism, should be pushed towards collapse or radical transformation by accelerating their inherent processes. Rather than reforming or gradually improving these systems, accelerationism argues for their intensification to catalyze significant change.

Historical and Philosophical Origins

Accelerationism's roots can be traced back to Marxist theory and the cybernetic cultural wave of the late 20th century. Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari introduced concepts like "deterritorialization" and "schizoanalysis", which critique societal norms and propose fluidity in personal and social identity as a form of resistance against structured power. Meanwhile, Zizek's interpretation often reflects a critical take on the global capitalist system, highlighting its contradictions and unsustainable nature. Nick Land, perhaps the most radical proponent, views capitalism as a sort of artificial intelligence that, once unleashed, will inevitably remake the world in an entirely new image, for better or worse.

Left Accelerationism

Left-wing accelerationism advocates for the exacerbation of capitalism's dynamics to hasten its self-destruction and the rise of a post-capitalist society. This approach is underpinned by a belief that the escalation of capitalist crises will mobilize the masses to revolutionary action, leading to systemic change. Unlike other forms, it explicitly aims to repurpose technologies for emancipatory potential, aligning technological advancement with socialist objectives.

Co-option by the Right

Accelerationism has also been co-opted by the extreme right, manifesting in a dark and twisted mirror image of its leftist counterpart. Right-wing accelerationists adopt the theory as a rationale for sowing chaos to destabilize the political order, aiming to rebuild it according to reactionary principles. This pernicious form of accelerationism has, alarmingly, been linked to acts of terrorism, with perpetrators using the guise of hastening societal collapse to justify their atrocities.

"Accelerationism" as a Rationale for Terrorism

In the hands of the extreme right, accelerationism becomes a justification for violent action intended to accelerate societal breakdown.

This interpretation leverages the theory's esoteric jargon and radical proposition to cloak hateful ideologies in a veneer of intellectualism, making it a potent tool for radicalizing individuals and justifying violent extremism.

Despite - or perhaps because of - its complexity, accelerationism has lingered at the fringes of philosophical discourse. Terms like "schizoanalysis" and "deterritorialization" illustrate its departure from mainstream thought, embracing a language that is both exotic and esoteric. Its appeal to the extreme right can be attributed to this complexity, which obscures more straightforward, often dangerous interpretations under layers of radical theory. The superficial simplicity perceived by some, laden with underlying dogwhistles, has made it an attractive ideological tool for those wishing to disrupt and dismantle current systems.

Accelerationism challenges the conventional pathways of political change, advocating for a radical acceleration of processes to achieve revolutionary ends. While intellectually stimulating, it poses significant risks when misinterpreted or maliciously applied. As it continues to evolve, both its adherents and critics must vigilantly consider the implications of its radical logic, ensuring it serves to illuminate rather than destroy.

The Perversion of Patriotism

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“Patriotism is when love of your own people comes first; nationalism, when hate for people other than your own comes first.”
Charles De Gaulle

With Malaysia set to chair ASEAN in 2025, the example that needs to be set is more than tangible; it has to be exemplary. Through the tricky and chaos-inducing moments that have happened in South East Asian history, Malaysia has been largely seen and gone unscathed. We are nothing short of lucky; pillared in times of uncertainty and surrounded by violence and confusion that their neighbours had to unfortunately experience or are experiencing.

From the beginning of its conception, Malaysia has always been a country with a throng of citizens from different ethnic backgrounds, languages, and cultures. That is what makes Malaysia so unique; the blend of Malay, Chinese, and Indian is consistently part of Malaysia’s identity.

Since gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia has had moments of harmony and pockets of insurgency and separation. Consequently, with the departure of Singapore in 1965, more lines were drawn in the sand as to what was actually Malaysian identity and who benefited from it.

There are secular, distinct, and very slim examples of nationalistic fervor that are in favor of sovereignty: using democratic traditional values of freedom, tolerance, equity, and individual rights - nationalism is not typically seen in a positive light and it is integral to know the difference of where it is applied, and in what context. There are two main types of nationalism that have created the backbone of groups, foundations, and even societies, having their roots in either ethnic nationalism or civic nationalism. Both have their place, but there are obvious consequences to one more than the other; ethnic nationalism in particular can become aggressive and radical very fast, mainly coinciding with expansionist nationalism in their midst.

Political terms are fluid and flexible meaning that they change. Nationalism can be hard to define, as the term has changed languidly over the years; different parties have used it for different reasons, and the way it is looked at in people’s individual context regarding their own memories and experiences. However, looking at it historically does not pertain to the conversation anymore; we as a people must look at the word and the connotations associated with it. The ideology is now ridden with points of exclusionary language and isolating themes that don’t reflect the idea of true and bred nationalism that was the cornerstone of much of Western democracy

Nationalism is exclusive. It makes way for one group and one group only, to ride the helm of an identity that is created in superiority to another. The interest of one or one secular, specific group sits at the top, whilst their ideology of what they believe in trickles down to the hierarchy. It includes an opposition that helms the idea that what they believe in, is a threat to their own principles of what should be considered in their society.

A problematic frame in nature but a common one that we see quite consistently. It does not do us any good to point and laugh at others when the principalities of the structure exist in our backyard.

On the other hand, patriotism is a devotion to one's country. There are different examples of what these mean but the principle of both stays the same; nationalism is a defining factor when it comes to tradition, language, and sometimes history and religion. It shares a commonality that is expressed through those things on an individual basis, not thinking of everyone and everything as a whole. This differs from patriotism which is loyalty and love to one's country, regardless of those factors because the basis for those things, only matters to an individual or individual idea. That includes race, ethnicity, and socio-economic standing. Patriotism encompasses devotion to the country as a whole – including all the people who live within it. Nationalism refers to devotion to only one group of people over all others.

My point is not to talk at length about the way that patriotism can evolve or the different types of nationalism, it is to talk about the origins of nationalism in this country, and how that word isn't worthy of a society that has much pride in who they are and wants to launch itself into rapid globalization. There is a disconnect because of how loosely the word is used, especially when it comes to just describing groups of people with similarities. It is, unfortunately, more complicated than that togetherness that is based on individualistic thinking to speak for the masses.

When it comes to Malaysia's case, there are two capacities that we need to understand. First, it is defined that Malay nationalism is a branch of nationalism, not the same as patriotism. If a movement only champions an individual's idea of what an entire collective should be, then it does not come from a place of fairness. It is one way of doing things, regardless of what others think about that idea, at the expense of those people to implement what they think is just and fair. Although we share an identity through language, culture, history, and sometimes religion, we do not completely have the same experiences that encompass each specific thing. We have to look at identity; race, ethnicity, community, and socio-economic backgrounds; things that offer a very different perspective even though the former has been established as a commonality. We have a different experience than within our history when we intersect the two that determine actions, outcomes, and causes. We are then not defined or associated with something that only a few agree on, we are defined by how all these factors made the country what it is and how everybody's experience needs to count.

Second, we need to take a step back into history and look at Malaysia's colonial roots. The beginning of Malaysia's conception was a need for sovereignty and independence, away from the 167 years of British rule. Through that, the British adopted their plan called The British Forward Moment that included the four Federated Malay States, five less regulated Unfederated Malay States, and the directly ruled settlements of Penang, Singapore, and Malacca. Riddled with inconveniences, the first steps to Malay nationalism were conditioned within the rulings of the elite and the alliances it brought forth for the British when it came to keeping a level of "peace" within their colony.

The system that the British had set up only catapulted a more severe divide using an "othering" method that had fear at its forefront to rally and suppress. This a departure from policy that singled out and had given favor to the elites instead of the working class, and was met with understandably, bitter backlash. In the aftermath of WW2, with the constant uprising of other colonies within the empire, Britain, like any other empire that wanted to prolong its hierarchy, only thought about what would be best for them. With how much it had lost during WW2, they wanted to implement sham ideals that then used the tin and rubber industries to help with their own reconstruction. Instead of the decision to peddle a united front and more inclusive appeal to all the factions, races, ethnicities, and religions in the country, it was fueled by their desire to exploit industries of the past and warrant the one thing that spoke to them the most: power.

No one could have foreseen what those ideals could have done for the future at that time, nor was it relevant. Malaysia was a brand new country that had to implement its own foundations in a world that was still recovering from one war and being sent into another. The wave of nationalism that came out of a desperation to form an identity so they wouldn't get left behind is understandable, but that does not mean it was right. Through innocent ignorance, the claws of colonialism convinced the elites that they could further prosper on crumbling ideologies that were set in motion by their predecessors. That shaky foundation introduced a crumbling hierarchy and a harsh reality began to bloom as it exposed a reality of economic strife, social struggle, and political marginalization befalling many Malaysians.

There are many arguments for how nationalism in the beginning was needed; to protect culture, traditions, and language, but we are far past the pedagogies of the past and need to look towards the future to solidify us in place as not only a progressive country, but a fair country to all who have been here and come here further. Malay nationalism did not come from the welfare of a religion that was predestined to become a minority, it came from the combover of colonial thinking that only wanted to pedestal a more lucrative deal so that it could b enefit the British empire. It had nothing to do with the independence that so many fought for in the face of adversity, it had everything to do with the British's ode to power, and how in the aftermath of WW2 and their colonies vying for sovereignty, what they could do to hold onto that authority for as long as possible.

A more historical definition of nationalism is not prevalent in Malaysia currently; Malaysia is not experiencing an all-out conflict that is level to where there needs to be a militant form of nationalism as people's way of being is being violated. However, this does not dissuade from the conversation of the ethnic and nationalistic tendencies that this country was founded upon, nor the way that definition has changed over time and what it has created. Unfortunately, there has been a steady influx of nationalism, but not in a sense where in the past it has been encouraged as a form of colonial liberation. It exists as a point of discrimination that cannot be excused by the lens of contemporary history and the definition that has come before.

Malaysia was founded and liberated on the principle that Malays needed to be protected - excluding the compounding factors of the inclination of rulers, coloniality, and individualistic party understandings.

Although Malaysia has achieved points of harmony, it is harmful to assume that they do not participate or allow fragrant displays of nationalism committed by people belonging to the majority, steeped into false levels of fear and miscomprehension about a situation that does not call for it.

Patriotism does not just take the form of an individual thought or process, it is the duty that we have to our nation and the good or bad that are placed within it. Patriotism is a love for one's country, not just serving in the government or military, but through teachers, doctors, artists, and farmers: people that contribute to society, out of love, to help and be part of their community and country. Simply saying "That is how we do it here" is not accurate, not enough, and also does not do anything in the long term when it comes to defining the country, what it stands for, and how we move forward together in a fair and just society.

Politicians can make narrative changes that are not steeped in such separation through our politics. Anti-nationalist attitudes often emphasize global cooperation, multiculturalism, and the reduction of nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments. We have to champion these goals to ensure that Malaysia does not fall into political disarray or civil unrest. Key policies to focus on are within education, our local economic regulations, and immigration policies. In particular, when we focus on Anti-Discrimination laws, there is a gap that is concerning between implementation and the written word. According to the

Even though the constitution states that anti-discrimination law is in the Federal Constitution under Article 8: that discrimination is prohibited based on religion, race, descent, place of birth or gender, there is still a gap that is now filled with patchy framework to continue and justify discrimination. Writing a law is one thing, but the stipulations in place have to exist to make implementation part of the present and not an ideal. When "the majority of Malaysians (64%) reported having experienced some form of discrimination in the past 12 months." it doesn't seem like the law has taken implementation as seriously as it should have. With backdoor weak reasoning that contributes to discrimination relating to "socio-economic status (38%), age (33%) and ethnicity (32%)." Statistics like these are worrying, especially knowing and understanding Malaysia's history when it comes to nationalism and how it still has roots in the country at present. Although there is no affirmative way of knowing if these statistics directly link to negative nationalistic attitudes, it still does not have a place in society as it show different perspectives and identities that are not based on unity. Strengthening anti-discrimination laws to protect minorities, and marginalized communities from xenophobia and nationalism-driven policies, should be at the forefront of our thinking when we want to do away with any behavior that may influence these numbers.

As Malaysia starts to go into a world that encourages international cooperation, global education, and true diplomacy, it will get harder to navigate such waters if we continue like this. We cannot champion one thing whilst doing another; as the position of the ASEAN chair in 2025 looms closer, telling our peers that Malaysia is inclusive and a melting pot with many cultures and opportunities galore, cannot be supplemented with negative statistics in our own borders.

Nationalism does not do anyone any favors. We have to promote a new mindset; growth does not happen overnight - it happens through change, which may take weeks, months, or even years. Conversations, good-natured debates, and an intensive interest in knowing the difference between patriotism and nationalism stand at the forefront. The country deserves more, and we do as well.

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Educrisis: The Politicization of Malaysian Schools

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Malaysia is a multilingual nation, yet the intersection of race and politics has unfortunately led to the politicization of education, with children bearing the consequences. The Ministry of Education, overseen by the Minister of Education, is responsible for organizing the educational system in Malaysia. However, despite its long-standing presence, it is clear that this system is fundamentally flawed.

Recent reports indicate a growing distrust among Malaysian parents towards the national education system, leading to an increasing preference for international and private schools, particularly among those who can afford it. This distrust has not emerged overnight but is the result of years of disappointment and perceived governmental inaction.

The situation has been exacerbated by the relaxation of regulations in 2012, allowing more local students to attend private and international schools. Numerous articles have highlighted the reasons behind this shift, including the low international reputation of the Malaysian curriculum, the appeal of a more holistic educational approach, and the growing importance of English in an increasingly globalized world. The financial burden is significant, with lower-end international schools costing at least RM 20,000 annually, while top-tier institutions can demand as much as RM 150,000 per year.

Despite these costs, parents are willing to make substantial financial sacrifices to provide their children with the opportunity to study and secure employment abroad. The declining rankings of local institutions have made parents increasingly reluctant to send their children to national universities. Coupled with the relatively low standing of the Malaysian high school certificate, this has fueled a determination among parents to enhance their children's prospects for admission to prestigious foreign universities, often at great personal expense.

In the job market, Malaysian employers continue to view foreign graduates as more qualified than their locally educated peers, allowing these graduates to command higher salaries. A 2008 study by JobStreet.com found that foreign graduates earned, on average, 12% more than local graduates. However, due to a lack of pay transparency in Malaysia, it is unclear whether this wage gap persists.

The "Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025)" aimed to address various issues by setting ambitious goals. Its objectives include increasing enrolment rates across all levels, improving literacy and numeracy outcomes, and enhancing teacher quality. However, despite these initiatives, Malaysia's performance in TIMSS and PISA assessments has remained stagnant or even declined in certain areas. The Blueprint's reforms, including curriculum updates, teacher training programs, and infrastructure improvements, have not sufficiently addressed the core issues impacting test scores. Despite these efforts, which have led to some notable progress, such as higher enrolment and better teaching standards, the Blueprint has not fully reversed the growing trend of students moving to private and international schools.

This continued shift underscores the need for further reforms to ensure that national schools meet the evolving educational demands and retain students within the public system.

Despite Malaysia's significant investment in education, its performance in the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was notably concerning. Malaysia ranked 59th in reading, 48th in mathematics, and 49th in science out of 79 countries. This is particularly troubling when compared to neighboring countries with higher educational outcomes.

For context, Singapore, which consistently ranks among the top globally, spends approximately 3.4% of its GDP on education. This investment is reflected in their impressive PISA rankings: 2nd in reading, 1st in mathematics, and 2nd in science. Vietnam, another neighboring country, spends about 4.5% of its GDP on education and also outperformed Malaysia, ranking 13th in reading, 12th in mathematics, and 12th in science.

In contrast, Malaysia allocates around 4.1% of its GDP to education, a level comparable or slightly higher than Vietnam. Given this substantial investment, the continued decline in PISA scores—31 points in mathematics, 27 points in reading, and 22 points in science—raises serious concerns. The disparity between Malaysia's high expenditure and its relatively poor performance compared to more efficiently managed education systems highlights a significant issue. It underscores the need for a critical evaluation of how educational resources are utilized and the effectiveness of current strategies in improving student outcomes.

While only a small percentage of local students are currently enrolled in international schools—1% at the primary level and 4% at the secondary level—the rapid expansion of these institutions and the rising enrolment rates are significant. According to Education Minister Fadhlina Sidek, Bumiputera student enrolment in international schools increased by 49.4% from 2019 to 2024, while non-Bumiputera enrolment rose by 30.6% during the same period. Malaysian students now constitute 67.1% of the 88,951 students enrolled in international schools.

It is no coincidence that parents make the deliberate choice to enrol their children in international schools. One might wonder if this choice reflects a broader strategy to ensure that their criticisms of the national education system are not only heard but addressed. Malaysian parents are deeply invested in their children's education, yet rather than contributing to the improvement of national schools, many opt to pay for the assurance that their children will graduate with a prestigious diploma from an international institution.

The increasing enrolment of Malaysian students in international schools, alongside parents' willingness to invest heavily in overseas education, underscores profound concerns about the perceived quality of the Malaysian education system. While international schools are widespread across Asia, Malaysia stands out for its exceptionally high local enrolment rates in these institutions.

There is an issue within the system; the curriculum is a domino effect of that - presenting a more tangible outlook when it comes to critiquing the education system, giving validity regarding how the actual system is faring. Though philosophies may seem arbitrary in speech, they provide a solid reflection of the core values that are within a system, and how to adhere to them.

There is no core philosophy in Malaysia's education system and that provides an insight to a weaker foundation that presents itself as a lack of a mission statement. With Malaysia's standing when it comes to the core subjects of English, Mathematics and Science, there should be an outcry because of the low and dismal scores presented. Without a proper foundation, framework, and training, we cease to be part of a rapidly changing world that values and puts education at the forefront. We are instead scrambling to try and fill the gaps, without trying to reconstruct the boat first.

The flaws within Malaysia's education system are not solely a matter of curriculum or teaching methods; they are deeply rooted in policy shortcomings that have allowed these issues to persist. The intertwining of politics and education has stifled meaningful reform and left the system vulnerable to shifts in political power, with each change potentially leading to alterations in educational priorities and policies.

One of the most significant issues is the lack of continuity and qualifications of the post "Minister of Education". This has to do with a lack of sustained focus on long-term educational goals. With the inconsistency impeding the implementation of good policies and reforms, after only a few short years of attempted implementation. Each new administration often brings its own agenda, which may not align with or continue the work of its predecessors. Malaysia needs an overseeing commission that will not be swayed by political power. This provides an unbiased review and more importantly, puts a robust standardization that stays in place regardless of shifting political loyalties and tensions. When this is in place, the curriculum starts to standardize and is properly carried out, focusing on education and education solely. By removing education from the direct control of politicians, Malaysia can develop a more stable and coherent education system that focuses on long-term goals rather than short-term political gains.

The highly centralized nature of the education system in Malaysia limits the ability of local schools to adapt to the specific needs of their communities. Decisions are made at the federal level, often without sufficient input from educators, parents, and local stakeholders. This top-down approach ignores the diversity of Malaysia's population and the varying educational needs across different regions. Decentralizing the education system by granting more autonomy to local schools and education authorities could allow for a more tailored approach to education that reflects the diverse needs of Malaysia's population. Local educators and administrators are better positioned to understand the unique challenges and opportunities within their communities.

For Malaysia to truly excel, it must move beyond superficial fixes and embrace a bold, transformative approach that places education above political agendas and aligns with the diverse needs of its future leaders.

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