tackling the roots of racism

William Hay
Youth Lead

Malaysia suffers from a lack of social cohesion brought about by the tensions between the different ethnicities, cases of discrimination and the common subtle racism. Historical, social and economic factors have effectively allowed these issues to remain despite the government's active effort to address them. The following piece offers a range of recommendations that will tackle the multi-faceted causes of racism in Malaysia.

With a dedicated commission and education reform, the government can effectively tackle the social origins of racism. In addition, union and welfare reform will be an effective first step in tackling the economic roots of discrimination in Malaysia

Existing State of Racism

While Malaysia has made significant progress combating racism, its effects on social cohesion are still very much present today. The 2024 Malaysia Racism Report (Pusat KOMAS) noted that there were 73 cases of outright racism and xenophobia in 2023, several of which became violent. The 2018 Sri Maha Mariamman Temple riot (Leong, 2018) was a high-profile example of such racially motivated violence. The 100 year old Hindu temple was forcibly removed by Malay enforcers leading to rioting and the death of a firefighter. In the weeks following the riot racially charged accusations would be levied between both groups. The quick escalation into violence demonstrates that racism within Malaysia still has a detrimental effect on social cohesion and wider society.

While instances of outright discrimination and violence do occur, racism in Malaysia is often more subtle and subliminal that nevertheless still have effects on wider society. Crude and negative stereotypes exist like the Malay being seen as lazy, the Chinese being greedy and the Indians being more unlawful, despite the widespread and daily intercultural interactions between races. These perceptions whilst not outwardly explicit, very much lead to more subtle forms of discrimination and can be seen in all levels of society. Indian Malaysians face 45% of rental listings explicitly banning them (Ang, 2020), with countless more likely refusing to consider tenant applications based on this behavior. The more subtle discrimination caused by racial stereotypes no doubt negatively affects social cohesion. Unlike cases of physical violence, this discrimination is much more widespread and rarely acted against.

This demonstrates that while ostensibly Malaysian society is one in which the three groups exist harmoniously with adequate protections in place, the reality is subtle acts of discrimination remain widespread with race-based violence being a known occurrence.

Causes

Racism is a multifaceted issue with no single cause being responsible for it, however it can be said that within Malaysia it has its roots in colonialism but has been entrenched by the current economic conditions faced by each group. Scholars like Daniel Goh (2012) and Syed Hussein Alatas (2010) agree that race relations in Malaysia are colonial in origin and were largely artificially constructed, it can be seen that because of the structures colonial administrators put in place, racism and discrimination persists to this day. Charles Hirschman (1986) largely views this as a product of social engineering and a “coercive labour system”, noting that ethnic groups were separated into economic roles. The Indian and Chinese were mainly cast into the roles of labourers in colonial society, with the latter additionally being favored as entrepreneurs and traders. By contrast ethnic Malays were largely left out of industry and instead kept in their rural roles, in addition educated Malays would be put into civil service roles in the later years of colonial rule. This would have a significant effect both economically and socially, with Indians and Chinese being central to early economic development in the country, leading to the ethnic groups being historically and remaining economically better off. Ethnic Malays being excluded from economics but included in administration has resulted in a group with significantly more ruling power but an income gap. In addition, the colonial stereotypes born out of such systems have similarly remained, by being kept in such positions of relative economic prosperity, the Chinese in Malaysia gained an image of greed; excluded and in their position of relative poverty the Malays have a perceived stereotype of laziness. While both stereotypes are false and artificially constructed over a hundred years ago, such impressions have remained in society today.

After 67 years of independence, these perceptions still exist causing the lack of social cohesion we see today. There are many causes of racism in Malaysia, but a key factor is the economic conditions faced by Malaysians, the economic inequality as well as the uneven distribution of government support has entrenched the racist ideas and tensions formed during the colonial period. In Malaysia, the ethnic Chinese hold a disproportionate share of the wealth; a 2022 report estimated that ethnic Chinese households had the highest average income, earning over 3000 RM more per month than Bumiputera households (Ministry of Economy, 2023).

This significant earning difference has caused tensions between the two groups, with many Malays and Indians believing they hold too high a share of the national wealth.The government does recognize that an income and wealth disparity exists between the races and has taken steps to rectify this: The New Economic Policy and most recently the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, aims to uplift the Bumiputera with economic programs and social benefits in an effort to close the inequality gap. Policies range from mandating university quotas, preferential access to Bumiputera owned companies and housing subsidies among other things. While there is no doubt that these policies are well intentioned in their effort, current ones entrench the negative views other races have towards Malays. Being the recipients of such programs creates the false perception to some that Malays are entitled, significantly impacting social cohesion. Furthermore, it could be seen that the policies have yet to eliminate inter-ethnic inequalities, further reinforcing the Malays negative prejudices of other races who still feel economically left behind. It can be suggested that current policies artificially entrench the divide.

It can be suggested that the Malaysian education system contributes to racist attitudes. The current system consists of what amounts to a de facto segregation, with the majority going to schools attended by almost exclusively those of the same race. It needs to be noted that the segregation in the Malaysian education system is not a deliberate move by the government but is rather an unintended result of policy, additionally the decision to have vernacular schools comes from the bottom up, rather than from the top-down, filling a vacuum created within the education system. National Schools in Malaysia are taught in Bahasa Malaysia and while in theory meant for all ethnic groups, it simply is not the case. With a significant percentage of the populace made up of non-Malays they look for alternatives that better fit their educational needs, opting instead for vernacular schools. This enforces a de facto segregation, as the percentage of Bumiputera in National Schools was 95% in 2024, whilst Bumiputera in Tamil vernacular schools comprises only 0.5% of the student body. With such contrasting racial makeup in schools, it would be fair to say that many do not see significant interaction with those of other ethnic groups at this early stage, in fact a Merdeka Center report in 2024 found that 33% of Malay youths admitting they did not have friends or even acquaintances outside their ethnic group. Which contributes to the formation of attitudes and negative stereotypes, as scholars believe a key source of origin for racism is lack of inter-cultural exchanges, especially in childhood before prejudices are cemented.

Racism can still be seen to be very much present in Malaysia with its consequences hurting social cohesion be it through violence or acts of discrimination. While its origins stem from the systems put in place by colonial powers, its endurance in modern society stem from the economic and social conditions faced by the people of Malaysia. To combat this the government should begin altering current policies that divide citizens based on race and begin implementing policies that foster unity, this can be done with a shift away from race and towards class.

Recommendations

Causes of racism and its effects on social cohesion are multi-faceted, the following policies are made to root out both the social and economic causes. Being such a deep rooted issue, simply combating one aspect of racism does little to solve the broader problem, by addressing all sides the government can effectively challenge the systemic structure of racism. It needs to be stressed that the following proposals do not challenge the principle of Ketuanan Melayu, the proposals explore how to foster further social cohesion and tackle the economic challenges whilst maintaining the Bumiputera's status in Malaysian society.

A key policy involves the creation of a new "Nation Building Commision", a dedicated commission for the issue of race and national unity. While there currently exists commissions within Malaysia that have race within their purview of investigation, there is yet to be one solely dedicated to the task, leading to a gap in knowledge between racism on the ground and what is empirically measured. A dedicated commission will be far more effective in investigating levels of racism and discrimination, this will assist in closing the knowledge gap between known cases of discrimination and the real levels that exist in society, a notoriously difficult figure to quantify, in doing so policy makers will have a more accurate understanding of the state of racism in Malaysia. Furthermore, once established the commission can be given greater powers of oversight once its effectiveness is proven rather than being a purely advisory body. With a dedicated and qualified staff, such a commission can not only effectively research and investigate but also create policy as well as oversee its implementation. The challenge of creating such a commission will be its make-up, members of it should be from a range of backgrounds in order to not only ensure impartiality but also effectiveness. With the causes of racism being a multi-faceted issue members should be chosen from a range of fields to assist in their investigation, this includes not only academics but also members of the private, legal and NGO sectors among others. It should also involve prominent members not only from racial minority communities but also that from the Bumiputera communities, such as Muftis, this will provide a more nuanced understanding of the issues rather than purely a top down academic view. With such a diverse group of members, the government will be able to get a clearer picture of the nuanced issue of racism in Malaysia, combined with adequate powers of oversight effective policy can begin to be formed and implemented.

To combat the de facto segregation seen in the education system the government should transition away from the vernacular school system and begin forming multicultural schools. Within Malaysia there is precedent for the existence of Multicultural schools, there are roughly 170 international schools today, these schools generally have a more diverse student body than local national and vernacular schools. While these schools generally do not represent an accurate ethnic makeup of Malaysia's population, with a disproportionate number of Chinese and international students, it nevertheless demonstrates that students of all ethnic backgrounds can attend the same schools without significant issues, challenging the need for separate schools. The government should begin a program of integrating national and vernacular schools into single multi-ethnic schools, in order to break down the artificial barriers created by divided schools. This comes with its own set of challenges, one major obstacle being the medium of instruction. Being the National Language, integrated schools will likely have to be taught in Bahasa Malaysia, reflecting the country's primary working language. However, being a multi-ethnic and diverse state, strong emphasis will have to be placed on the additional education of Mandarin and Tamil. These policies come with numerous benefits such as breaking down the racial barriers in education, promoting early childhood relationships between Malaysians of all ethnic groups, something that could not be guaranteed under the current system. Another benefit is the practical effects of widespread fluency in Bahasa Malaysia as well as in Mandarin and Tamil, often nuances can be missed when communicating in second languages, this has knock on effects in both businesses as well as in social conversations. The benefits of widespread fluency ensures better communication between ethnic groups breaking down some of the barriers seen within the country. Critics will point out that these policies are highly unfeasible to implement with parents from all ethnic groups being wary of participating in such integration programs. Thus early implementation will have to come with several incentives such as higher levels of funding and perhaps tax incentives to ensure early engagement by parents. As the benefits of such integrations become more obvious to parents and students, the government can then begin a more widespread implementation. With such an ambitious goal, implementation will likely take decades especially as it requires the support and acceptance from the populace, meaning it could take 20 years or more to see the full integration of schools.

In order to eliminate the racial divide and improve social cohesion, policies should be implemented that allow Malaysians to start seeing themselves as part of the same class rather than that of separate ethnic groups. One policy that allows this is Trade Union reform. At its current moment, the laws in place are insufficient in fostering class unity, the 1959 Trade Unions Act prevents cross industry and broader unions to be formed. While these policies were necessary during the Malayan emergency, these laws are now out of date as Malaysia has evolved as a society. By preventing broad cross-sector unions, Malaysians are unable to connect and cooperate with those of other races within the same class and effectively form class unity. It may seem like this is not the case as trade unions officially, are meant to be secular and non-ethnic based, in practice different sectors within Malaysia are often dominated by a single race leading to unions being disproportionately formed of one race, for example, 85% of civil service jobs are staffed by Bumiputera, because of this, it is significantly harder to foster class unity between civil servants and employees in similar professions of different ethnic groups who see little cooperation on economic issues. By reforming labour laws to allow broader and cross-sector unions, Malaysians of different races and of the same social class can cooperate to improve their economic conditions. Rather than viewing other ethnic races as economic competitors, they will begin to view them as allies for a similar goal. Through this, not only will overall economic inequality be reduced for lower income Malaysians, but social cohesion will greatly increase as racial barriers are broken. Such law changes are unlikely to see much pushback from citizens within Malaysia who are set to benefit from the greater bargaining power. The main resistance will come from lawmakers who oppose union strength, implementation will require significant popular support and may take several years before a significant portion of the electorate call on their representatives to institute such changes.

The Malaysian government should begin the process of moving away from a race-based benefits system towards a needs-based welfare system; the current system of benefits favour the Bumiputera. At the current moment while Malaysia does have an existing welfare program, critics argue it is underfunded and inadequate for the needs of Malaysian citizens. A reformed system will see many of the benefits currently afforded to the Bumiputera transferred to the general welfare program, with higher earners from this group no longer eligible. The savings made from high earners exemption can then be transferred to the general welfare program improving the overall quality of Malaysia's system, as finance will no longer be redirected to those less in need. Transitioning towards a needs-based system means ending negative sentiments of non-Malays towards the Bumiputera, especially from those less advantaged - many then may no longer feel like second class citizens. This policy will face significant opposition from both citizens and policy makers alike, implementation of such a transition will likely have to be staggered, slowly transferring Bumiputera benefits to the welfare program over the course of several years. In addition, in order for proper implementation such a policy will have to be adequately communicated with the citizens of Malaysia, especially the Bumiputera.

If the Bumiputera understand the welfare transition and its implications, their support will allow the policy to be viable in the long term. Sceptics may argue that this effectively hurts efforts to raise living standards of the Bumiputera but a needs based system still prioritizes assisting those who need it rather than a ethnic background. Implementing such a policy will still see most of its support going towards the group who still face lower incomes across Malaysia and thus does not contradict the principles of Ketuanan Melayu.

tackling the roots of racism

William Hay
Youth Lead

references

Leong, T. (2018, November). Cars set on fire as clash breaks out over relocation of temple in Petaling Jaya. The Strait Times. https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/riot-breaks-out-over-relocation-of-temple-in-malaysia

Hirschman, C. (1986). The making of race in colonial Malaya: Political economy and racial ideology. Sociological Forum, 1(2), 330–361. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01115738

Alatas, S. H. (2010). The myth of the lazy native: A study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of colonial capitalism. Routledge.

Goh, D. P. S., Gabrielpillai, M., Holden, P., & Khoo, G. C. (Eds.). (2012). Race and multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore. Routledge.

Liew, Y. (2024, January 11). Race becomes a rental obstacle. StarProperty. https://www.starproperty.my/news/property-news/race-becomes-a-rental-obstacle/127092

Ang, M. V. (2020, November 17). M'sian uses local property website data to prove blatant racism in rental market. SAYS. https://says.com/my/news/m-sian-uses-property-website-data-to-prove-blatant-racism-in-rental-market

Malaya Corporate. (n.d.). The advantages of Bumiputera status. https://malayacorporate.com/article/the-advantages-of-bumiputera-status/

Pusat KOMAS. (2024). Malaysia Racism Report 2024. https://komas.org/download/Malaysia-Racism-Report-2024.pdf

Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2020, July 10). Household Income & Basic Amenities Survey Report 2019. https://www.dosm.gov.my/portal-main/release-content/household-income-%26-basic-amenities-survey-report-2019

Ministery of Economy. (2023, July). Household Income Survey Report 2022. https://www.dosm.gov.my/site/downloadrelease?id=household-income-survey-report--malaysia--states&lang=English&admin_view=

56% of youths trust current government: Merdeka Centre survey. (2024, September 9). Business Today Malaysia. https://www.businesstoday.com.my/2024/09/09/56-of-youths-trust-current-government-merdeka-centre-survey/