THE BINARIES OF MODERN-DAY NATIONALITY:

ATHLETES AND NATIONAL LOYALTY IN MALAYSIA

Opinion

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With the recent conclusion of the Winter Olympics in Milan-Cortina, a spirited debate has sparked online bringing a type of fascination to the discourse surrounding national identity - what it means, who it is reserved for and its validity in representation. Inundated opinions run rampant with every ethnically ambiguous person that gets a spotlight of attention, but one mark in the train of thought seems to have more of a providence; whether or not they count towards the national identity of where they are from, or who - and what they represent.

The virality of the pop song "Stateside" spurred on by Alysa Liu's trending figure skating routine, many American viewers became increasingly fascinated by the ethnically-mixed background of the women's figure skating gold medalist. Born in California via an anonymous egg donor and surrogate, Liu grew up in a Chinese household and attended Chinese school for three years. Immersed in Chinese culture throughout her life, she ultimately chose to represent the United States, having permanently resided in the country.

A very different story was occurring in Livigno, where in the free-style skiing event, Eileen Gu retained her half-pipe gold medal. Also growing up in California with a Chinese parent, Gu, having lived her entire life in the United States, chose to represent China instead.

Although both winter athletes had very similar upbringings—raised in America under a culturally Chinese household—their national allegiance lie worlds apart, one representing their country of birth, another representing the country of their cultural heritage, but both widely accepted and celebrated by their country of choice.

In the modern era, with the prevalence of migration and the globalisation of culture, nationality is not a binary that is permanent; it can be negotiated, flexible, and malleable, never restricted to a certain group of people or archetype. In the case of Liu and Gu, their personal connection and feelings draw them to represent their respective countries, however in some contexts, their decisions reveal who is allowed flexibility—and who is not.

As mentioned by the United Nations, nationality is "the legal bond between a person and a state, establishing [them] as a subject of a sovereign state and granting them specific rights and duties." This may come in the form of an identification document, passport, or ethnic lineage (ie. Germany, Ireland, Greece). Moving beyond the legal definitions however, nationality becomes complex when viewed in practice. Notions of belonging, recognition, and societal acceptance are key markers for an individual to identify themselves as a certain nationality, and features such as language, cultural understanding, and residency do impact an individual's ability to feel strongly regarding the notions. Nationality should not solely be interpreted in legal terms, but also be cognizant of the power society has in determining whether an individual is "accepted" as one of their own. Nationality becomes inextricably linked with societal validation.

In a circumstance where nationality is socially granted, "conditional national belonging" may occur. This term gives way to an understanding of a type of belonging that is granted or withheld depending on usefulness, perception, or political context. With Liu and Gu, as successful athletes, their allegiance becomes solidified—becoming useful to society. However, everyday people navigating the sea of national identity without clear signals of usefulness or worthiness can prove difficult.

As a multiethnic, multireligious country, Malaysia sits at a position of privilege. The mix of Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures form a distinct identity that differentiates the country with its neighbours—proud of its heterogeneity, and peacefully coexisting together. However, it is this diversity that can sometimes cause tension, often flamed by political actors with ill-intent, within society. In a country with such a plethora of personal beliefs and customs, there is one thing that unites all: sport.

Thus, when the Malaysian National Football Team qualified for the AFC Asian Cup by merit for the first time in 42 years, many became excited for the first time in a very long time. To bolster the squad for the next edition of the Asian Cup, the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) decided to bring in reinforcements in the form of seven foreign-born players—through naturalisation. From March to June of 2025, footballers from the Netherlands, Spain, Argentina, and Brazil were awarded Malaysian nationality by the government. Although some fans were unsure, the vast majority had their concerns erased when the National Team were able to win against Vietnam, Singapore, and Palestine convincingly through the help of these new players. Welcomed and celebrated, these players, once belonging to a foreign nationality, became Malaysian overnight, not because of their shared culture or ethnicity, but because of the value they offered. South American and European players were rapidly accepted as "Malaysian" with minimal scrutiny over authenticity or heritage—starkly contrasting the realities many locals face today.

Even withholding the existing statelessness crisis in Sabah, many fifth or sixth generation Malaysians still do not feel this level of inclusivity to this day, relegated to the fringes of society and subject to societal marginalisation. Long-established Malaysian Indians and Chinese are faced with the slur "pendatang", meaning "immigrant" in Malay, in both online and offline spaces as a way of delegitimising and diminishing the national identity of ethnic minorities. According to a 2023 survey by the Malaysian-based Architects of Diversity, 32% of the population had experienced racial-based discrimination in the past 12 months. In a country where inclusion and unity is nominally promoted, the reality faced is a far cry.

Reflecting on the swift acceptance of foreign-born footballers as Malaysian, while a little less than a third of the population suffer from discrimination, individuals able to contribute to instant, tangible success for the nation are granted a type of societal acceptance that prioritises utility over identity, highlighting the immense conditional nature of national belonging.

In a shocking twist of events, it was found out in October of last year that these seven foreign-born "Malaysian" players, did in fact forge their documents to falsify their link to the country. Riddled with embarrassment and shame, even with clear evidence presented by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), Malaysians across the country still rallied their support for the seven football players, with Astro (the national broadcaster) even posting graphics titled "Anak Malaysia" overlaid on images of the accused football players. The irony is startling—the government and society are so willing to accept those that create short-term benefits, but ignore the ones that contribute to that same identity they are so quick to guard.

Nationality in the modern world is fluid and negotiable, but in Malaysia it is applied conditionally and asymmetrically, expanded when useful, yet restricted through racial and institutional structures.

This asymmetry becomes most visible in the ethnic boundaries that shape who is recognised as fully Malaysian in nationality and who remains conditionally included. This "conditional national belonging" cannot be claimed as a natural course or process of historical events or contexts, and it cannot be accidental—it must be produced and maintained in order for such othering to survive. In Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution, it enables the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to "safeguard and protect the special position" of Bumiputeras in Malaysia. A core component of the foundation of Malaysia, abiding by Article 153 does not mean to promote "conditional national belonging" in the way we see ethnic minorities. As a matter of fact, in the same constitution Article 8 "prohibits the discrimination against citizens on the grounds of religion, race, descent, place of birth, or gender. How can we contend with these two seemingly contradictory clauses? A distinction between legal protection and political practice suggests that while Article 153 was intended as a targeted mechanism for socioeconomic equity, its implementation has been transformed into a tool for cultural hierarchy and politicking.

Bringing back the idea that "conditional national belonging" must be actively maintained in order for it to continue, the institutionalisation and politicisation of race are the structural foundations that create such exclusion of marginalised groups. Although nominally most ethnic minorities are by legal definition, Malaysian, it should be reiterated that nationality is not simply a legal label. Instead, it is formed through societal validation. When society and politicians flame tensions between racial groups, not only does it prolong the feeling of exclusion felt by ordinary ethnic minorities, but it also reinforces divisions and conflict. At schools, research conducted by Sekolah Semua found that 9 in 10 Malaysian Indians felt discriminated against based on their ethnicity alone. Structurally, this is a failure on the part of the state to provide a safe and supportive environment for children to thrive. More complicated than that, the additional layer that contributes to horrendous outcomes is social toleration of such discrimination based on decades of institutionalisation. According to a YouGov Omnibus survey in 2019, 62% of Malaysians have seen rental advertisements with racial requirements, with 32% of them believing that such stipulations were justified. Although years of normalisation of racialised behaviour by the state has played an influential role in shaping the societal perception of racial profiling, society and its stakeholders need to take some accountability, being aware of the ways in which we propagate conditional national belonging.

A study by the Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore found that ethnicity was still the key factor in voter preferences in Malaysian Federal Elections, with more than 80% of non-Malay voters supporting the ruling Pakatan Harapan coalition, whilst the same percentage of Malay voters opposed the coalition from 2020-22. While it could be argued that these results show that each political party is representative of a race's political preferences, mature, democratic politics should not need to exclusively rely on race in order to gain votes. Policy and socioeconomic ideology should take centre stage, and with politicians persistent in employing charged racial rhetoric, it makes society a lot less tolerant and risks alienating minorities.

These issues display the root cause of selective nationalism and opportunistic unity that occurs frequently in Malaysia. In moments of gain, such as international visibility, national pride narratives take precedence, with race, religion, and other characteristics ignored for the "sake" of the country. However, in everyday life, nationality and identity intertwine, experiencing a contraction, in education, employment, and political representation, when exclusionary practices may serve to benefit the ruling strata while relegating minorities to a space of ambiguity and national rejection. Minorities receive conditional inclusion, while people that hold a level of prestige can bypass these constraints whenever strategically valuable. National identity becomes performative, not substantive, with belonging not based on time, contribution, or citizenship, but rather alignment with dominant identity frameworks.

In hindsight, why this matters gives way to a larger umbrella of answers. For one, the exclusion of a certain segment of the population from decision-making processes, but most importantly, belonging, deprives Malaysia of what makes its identity unique; the multiculturalism and harmonious coexistence of differences.

In order for the Malaysian national identity to exist, it requires the inclusion of minorities. However, by conditionalising nationality, it robs our country of what makes it special and desirable to so many countries around the region.

In a more pragmatic sense, conditional national belonging directly leads to very real consequences: an increase of brain drain. In the past 50 years, Malaysia has seen 1.86 million of its own citizens (or around 5.6% of its population) renounce their passports in favor of other countries, substantially higher than the global average of 3.6% of a country's population. The key reason for citizenship renunciation was for "economic reasons", with Singapore being a notable receiver of ex-Malaysians due to its higher salary and more egalitarian opportunities. When we uncover the deeper implication of renunciation efforts, it can be understood as an effort to relocate to a society that fosters a greater sense of belonging and recognition.

In a society of conditional acceptance, identity becomes fraught, insecurity ensues, and a diminishing incentive to identify as Malaysian takes root. Some of the most notable Asian figures abroad have Malaysian roots, including Lip Bu Tan, Michelle Yeoh, Penny Wong, Ronny Chieng, and Dato' Shake, with all but one (Yeoh) renouncing their Malaysian nationality for their host country.

Broad acknowledgement of this issue must be echoed by all members of society before productive measures are taken. Understanding that ethnic minorities *do* face a difference in inclusion is an effective start, but also understanding that nationality is malleable and does not always have to adhere to strict, binary standards. Structural change should also be considered at the government level to better reflect the Constitution in the modern day. As times change, institutions should also adapt to the pressing needs and situations of its citizens by drafting more inclusive policies.

More tangibly, and less controversial, however, should be the conscientious rejection of everyday practices that normalise division, regardless of the race. From discriminatory advertisements, to racially charged rhetoric at schools and online spaces, the stigmatisation of exclusionary language must happen in order for peoples' rights to be respected. Equally important, but also related to society is the shift in political discourse. Moving away from race-based mobilisation to issue-based governance that prioritises shared national interest over communal ones, as politicians are meant to help all Malaysians, not any one specific race. Ultimately, fostering a more nationally inclusive Malaysia requires both structural change and individual accountability, reimagining nationality not as an exclusive privilege, but as something inherently shared.

Needing to prove oneself as worthy of "being Malaysian" should not be conditional on the benefits they bring to society -rather a grounding in an equal and unconditional recognition of belonging, independent of utility, ethnicity, or political convenience. If nationality can stretch across continents for athletes like Alysa Liu and Eileen Gu, then surely it can—and must—expand unconditionally for those who have called Malaysia home all along.

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