

RSOG Leadership Forum:
“Multiculturalism in Malaysia: Are things as they should be?”
with
Prof. Emeritus Tan Sri Dr. Khoo Kay Kim
Chancellor, KDU University College

When

Wednesday, 20 March 2013

Where

Razak School of Government

Who

Prof. Emeritus Tan Sri Dr. Khoo Kay Kim

About The Seminar

Malaysia has often been referred to as an exemplar multiracial society, not just because the country's population consists of various ethnic groups and religions, but because people are free to profess and practice their respective religions and manifest any aspect of their culture without compromising on the peace and stability of the nation. According to Nobel- Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, Malaysia has much to teach the world about how to construct a vibrant, multiracial, multi-ethnic, multicultural society. The 1Malaysia concept introduced by the Prime Minister has successfully integrated the vision and needs of various ethnic groups into the country's policies and programmes. However, as society becomes more complex and vulnerable to foreign influence, it is challenging to ensure that the various races continue to live in harmony without jeopardising national unity. Furthermore, it has not been uncommon for politicians to make racially-charged statements for political mileage that will further create disharmony. It is important for the younger generation of Malaysians to be more educated on the unique characteristics of the various races and religions. The forum presented and discussed issues affecting Malaysia's multicultural society and the various initiatives that should be undertaken to ensure the country enjoys continued peace and prosperity.

Summary

Prof. Khoo Kay Kim remarked at the beginning of the seminar that the topic is an interesting one and raises many issues and perspectives on the Malaysian society. He further elaborated that the Malaysian society is complex and unique and requires effort and commitment from each segment of society to ensure continued peace and stability. However, he lamented that the younger generation are not aware of the cultural differences of Malaysia's multiracial society. This is a hindrance to promoting an understanding of other religions and cultures.

He gave an example of the Telugu race and mentioned that the majority of the non-Indians would not be able to differentiate the Telugus from other Indians. It is evident that there exists a gap between the various races in the country. One of the issues highlighted by Prof. Khoo is the common perception among the people that is not able to differentiate between the meaning of ethnicity and nationalism. He explained that ethnicity refers to a person's origin or race while nationalism refers to the national of a country. For example, a Malaysia citizen of Chinese origin is ethnically Chinese but a Malaysian by nationality.

Prof. Khoo recounted past personal experiences about living in a multiracial society. He added that, until about three decades ago, life was simple and the various races lived in harmony. He noted that in the early days since independence, ethnic-based political parties were not formed to defend for their own communities' rights in the cohesive fight for the independence of Malaya. For instance, he said that the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) was formed to fight for India's independence from the British. It was noted that Malaya was a hotbed for anti-British movements.

He further noted that although Malaysia is a multiracial society, it is challenging to integrate national interest with radical perspectives. He emphasised the importance of eliminating radical and fanatical views on race and religion, and instead, focusing on integrating one's beliefs and culture with national interests. For example, although each person is free to practice their religion, nonetheless, they should also take pride in identifying themselves as a Malaysian national. Malaysian society should find a balance between preserving ancestral cultures and being proud of their collective national identity.

Prof. Khoo also expressed disappointment with the behaviour of some of the politicians in the present generation who make racially-charged comments and speeches that threaten to further divide people instead of uniting them. There are small groups of people who are ignorant of the past and make statements that are dangerous and detrimental to Malaysia's multiracial society. This is different from the political scenario during the pre- and post-independence which was more united as politicians from the various ethnic groups worked together to provide a better future for the citizens of Malaya.

As a conclusion, Prof. Khoo emphasised the importance of education especially history to educate Malaysians, especially the younger generation, on the historical perspectives of the formation of Malaysia and the sacrifices made by the country's past leaders of various races to ensure continued peace and stability. This is important in creating awareness among the

younger generation of the importance of preserving Malaysia's unique identity for many years to come.

Issues Raised

1)

It is important to understand the meaning and differentiate between ethnicity and nationality. Ethnicity refers to a person's race while nationality refers to the country a person is a citizen of.

2)

The younger generation should be educated on the importance of understanding the unique characteristics of the different races and religions, in order to eliminate stereotypes and promote greater understanding between the various ethnic groups.

3)

The concept of multiculturalism is unique and an integral part of Malaysian society. In this regard, it is important to preserve and strengthen the relations between the various groups through initiatives and programs.

4)

It is vital for each citizen of the country to appreciate and value the freedom of religion and cultural practices as enshrined in the Federal Constitution.

About the Speaker

Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dr. Khoo Kay Kim is a highly regarded national historian and academic. He has written and co-authored many books, articles and papers including the Rukunegara. He has held various important positions in the academia including History Professor at University of Malaya, Nanyang Technological University and University of Brunei. He also served as a Director/Board member of various national committees including the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, the Integrity Institute of Malaysia and the National Education Advisory Board. He is currently the Chancellor of KDU University College.

Contact

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