

RSOG-KITA-JPNIN Forum on National Reconciliation Through Inclusive Development

When : 28 June 2013

Where : Razak School of Government

**Moderator
& Lead** : **Datuk Dr. Denison Jayasooria**
Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA),
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah
Former Deputy Higher Education Minister

Panelist : **Professor KS Nathan**
Principal Fellow, Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), UKM

Professor Datuk Yusof Kassim
Director, Universiti Utara Malaysia Kuala Lumpur Campus (UUMKL)

About The Forum

Discourse on National Reconciliation has taken a front seat since the GE-13 Elections Results. Various attempts have been made by civil society and members of academia to find meaning, depth and understanding of the concept. The term has been widely used used to denote the establishment of so-called 'national unity' in countries faced with political problems.

Central themes of an initial series of discourse on this include strengthening institutions and substantiating engagements, both seen as climacteric in achieving the National Reconciliation Agenda, as announced by the Prime Minister, Najib Tun Abdul Razak.

With a changing socio-economic demography and socio-political landscape, National Reconciliation requires a thorough understanding of Malaysia's rich history, current realities and future trends. This forum discussion provided insights to on how inclusive development and human rights is seen as central towards National Reconciliation. As such, this session aims to solidify the concept of reconciliation. It will also identify

sustainable measures towards reconciliation, meaningful programmes and policy recommendations.

Summary

Datuk Dr. Denison Jayasooria began by informing the audience of the various nationwide dialogues that are taking place to discuss national reconciliation and inclusive development. The result of the dialogues will form part of policy recommendations to the government, in the form of a paper presented by the Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN) to the cabinet.

Dr. Denison stressed that there is a need to recognise the new socio-political realities which are changing the landscape of Malaysian politics. Largely fuelled by new media like online social platforms, the shift of public discourse was apparent especially after GE-12 and more so after GE-13: "We have moved beyond ethnic or race-based discussion to inter-generational gap, rural-urban divide and so on", he said.

Therefore there is a need to review the current development paradigm towards one that is holistic, comprehensive and integrated. Socio-economic development must be parallel to the development of civil society, in-line with the aspiration of Vision 2020 and the spirit of Malaysia's 2013 budget. In this regard, there is a need for major institutional changes like public democratic space, greater parliamentary democracy and media freedom to strengthen the nation's inclusive and participatory profile.

However and above all, repentance or admission of mistakes must begin from the political level before any talk about national reconciliation can take place. Public trust and confidence need to be rebuilt. The existence of independent mediating institutions like SUHAKAM, can help by acting as a mediator between civil society and the executive branch of government. This is particularly important when 71% of Malaysia's urban population is represented mainly by Members of the Parliament and of State Legislative Assemblies that are not in the ruling government.

Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah stressed the importance of national reconciliation processes, which in fact had been in existence for a long time but became more urgent and apparent after GE-13. By echoing Dr. Denison's idea of participatory development, Datuk Saifuddin evoked Graham Smith's participatory democracy, where Malaysians now demand more voice in the public sphere as opposed to the 'culture of fear' (of discussion).

Datuk Saifuddin proceeded to lay down a few crucial prerequisites to ensure the success of the national reconciliation process. In order to gain the trust of the people, the body entrusted to see through national reconciliation must be one with integrity and seen as independent, objective and apolitical. There is an urgent need to approach national reconciliation using innovative approaches and progressive thinking. For example,

current trends show that single-stream schools are no longer focused on fostering unity but have become more about uniformity. Instead of talking about abolishing vernacular and religious schools, we should be talking about harnessing the strength of a diversified school system.

Similarly, **Professor KS Nathan** concurred with the need to recognise and respect for Malaysia's diversity in all forms. "We must fully embrace and accept the diversity in order to produce something of a higher quality. Therefore, this is a question of managing – instead of unpractical talk about wiping out the nation's diversity and pluralism" he said.

The direction of policy making and implementation should also move from race-based to needs-based, couple with a good governance system. The recent GE-13 has shown that the race-based political model is no longer relevant and seem to be rejected by all races. Currently there are more Indian-ethnic MPs from DAP than from MIC. On the other hand, by having a good governance system will enhance the democratic processes and civil society participation. Herein lies the responsibility of civil society – the community must be able to empower themselves to empower the government to do more.

Professor Datuk Yusof Kassim concluded the panel presentation by acknowledging Malaysia's tremendous socio-economic achievements. For instance, income disparity among Malaysians have been greatly reduced since pre-independence period, and currently we have no more than 3% of Malaysians living in poverty.

However, there is a worrying trend of intra-ethnic division among Malaysians of various ethnicities. There is a need to enhance the development inertia, as Malaysian has shown that they are capable of crafting good development policies but implementation has remained a challenge.

Issues Raised

- National reconciliation may divert the energy and focus to other and more pertinent national issues.
- There is a need to have a clear definition of what national reconciliation means, before discussing about its problems and possible solutions. This is worsen by lack of relevant data and information accessible to the public.
- It is unclear that which institution or government agency owned the national unity agenda.
- The top-down development approach is still prevalent, limiting democracy and voices being heard. Due to the lack of both enlightened leaders and followers,

Malaysia trapped in the state of contempt, instead of moving to state of competence.

- There is a mis-conception among some of us that race-based policy is no longer relevant. Race-based policy should be seen as complimenting need-based and other policy.

About the Panelists:

Datuk Dr.Denison Jayasooria is Principal Research Fellow of the Institute of Ethnic Studies at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). He was on the National Economic Consultative Council from 1999 to 2000, the Royal Police Commission from 2004 to 2006 and the Human Rights Commission from 2006 to 2006. Form 2010 to 2011, he was attached to the Prime Minister's Department. He was conferred the Panglima Jasa Negara by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong in 2006. He has a PhD in sociology from Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom.

Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah is the Former Deputy Higher Education Minister. He was elected to Parliament in the 2008 election, and was immediately appointed as a deputy minister. He was previously the Secretary-General of the Malaysian Youth Council and has written four books on Malaysian politics.

Professor KS Nathan is the Principal Fellow, Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), UKM. He is also the current President of the Malaysian Association for American Studies(MAAS), and has served on the Editorial Board of the Australian Journal of International Affairs. He was Deputy Director of the Institute of Occidental Studies (IKON) as well as Head of the Centre for American Studies (KAMERA) in IKON, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi.

Professor Datuk Yusof Kassim is the Director of Universiti Utara Malaysia Kuala Lumpur Campus (UUMKL).

Contact

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