

RSOG Seminar :

Managing Peace in Malaysia: A Case Study in Developing an Early Warning System of Ethnic Relations

With

Anis Yusal Yusoff
Principal Research Fellow, Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA)

When : 25 February 2014
Where : Razak School of Government
Speaker : Mr. Anis Yusal Yusoff

About The Seminar

Contrary to popular belief, the failure to manage ethnic sensitivity does not cause ethnic conflict, but rather it is the disregard to ensure justice, equality and inclusiveness of all citizens - irrespective of race, religion and socio-economic status that causes ethnic tension. In this seminar, Mr. Anis Yusal highlighted the background, conceptual framework and preliminary findings of a research project which monitors ethnic relations and creates an early warning system on the 'health' level of ethnic relations in Malaysia. He also elaborated on the positive indicators based on the foundations of quality of life and good governance as guides to understand the nature of ethnic relations in Malaysia.

Summary

The session was divided into 3 parts: History; Her-story; and the People's story.

In the 1st part, the speaker gave a brief background of the demographic history of Malaysia in the context of social groups and cultures. He stated that Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy and federal parliamentary democracy. He quoted the research done by Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (Managing Peace in Malaysia: A Case Study, 2011) who stated that the history of Malaysia is divided into 3 phases. Phase 1: Era of Conflict (1945-1960), Phase 2: Era of Stable Tension (1961-1970) and Phase 3: Era of Social

Cohesion (1971-2014). The era of social cohesion was an integral part of the establishment of a peaceful and stable society. He added that social cohesion is not unity but a path towards unity. Malaysians, in general, are a peace-loving society and prefer to discuss and resolve conflicts rather than taking to the streets and acting violently towards others.

In the 2nd Part, the speaker talked about the process of cultural interaction and fusion in Malaysia. There are four processes. The first is assimilation: process of the majority group gradually adopting the culture of the prevailing culture; eg. the Peranakan community adopted Malay culture but remain non-Muslim. The second is accommodation: reconciliation, acceptance, settlement of opposing cultural views and practices, co-existence of various religions and their celebrations. The third is acculturation: adoption of behaviour and practices of other cultures; eg. food and clothing. And the fourth is amalgamation: a consolidation or merger; eg mixed marriages. He further illustrated that cultural diversity and social cohesion in Malaysia is based on the strong traditions of social alliance: forging loosely structured cooperation for general and specific purposes; social alignment: forming informal and temporary organisations or groupings for certain common goals; social bonding: creating formal organisations or grouping for common causes for the community; and social consolidation: various groups joining together for a common goal. It is strongly motivated by social mobility and quality of life. He added that the formula created to achieve social cohesion is Bargaining and Negotiation (BN). However, it is influenced by several key factors such as ethnicity, class, religion, gender, spatial factors, political factors, generational factors, education and language.

In the final part, the speaker narrated the concept behind the KITA's Malaysian Ethnic Relations Monitoring System (MESRA) initiative. It is a tool to monitor; provide an early warning mechanism; as well as for policy intervention to strengthen national unity. The framework for the study is based on a few criteria such as ethnic composition, urban/rural communities, geographical location, social class and political support. A few indicators are used to monitor the Quality of Life (QoL); income, housing, education, health, transport & communication, environment, social participation and safety and security. The research team has developed a smart phone/tablet application to facilitate data collection.

In his concluding remarks, the speaker reaffirmed his stand that creating a stable and united society comprising of various races and religion is a long-term effort. It involves the process of acquiring knowledge about how to understand Malaysia and manage the various challenges, either positive or negative. He emphasised the need to achieve 'social mobility' through education as it is the vehicle that dominates and influences the majority of the Malaysian family in terms of priority and expenditure. He stressed the importance of raising the bar for schoolteachers to be recruited, including the need for international exposure and the best tertiary qualification.

Issues Raised:

- 1) National unity is an integral part of the government policies. However, achieving unity remains the ideal and it requires the commitment and sacrifice from all Malaysians to strive for it.
- 2) Since Malaysia's independence, the Alliance government, which comprise of race based political parties has uplifted the socio-economic status of the individual communities, but inadvertently has also been a contributing factor to polarisation.
- 3) The 1 Malaysia slogan introduced by Prime Minister Najib has received its fair share of critique. However, it cannot be denied that the 1 Malaysia slogan has its merits in creating a sense of unity among the various races, but there is still much to be done in terms of implementation to take the concept beyond being a mere political slogan.
- 4) The concept of identifying a person based on his/her ethnicity has become a norm in Malaysian society. The education system, parents and community leaders have an important role to play to create awareness of and appreciation for the unique characteristics of different cultures. The ultimate goal is to shed the differentiating factors to form a strong bond of friendship among our multiracial society.

About The Speaker

Anis Yusal Yusoff is a Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), The National University Malaysia (UKM). He was formerly the Founder Director of Political Sector of the Malaysian Institute of Integrity and a former Assistant Resident Representative of UNDP Malaysia. His scholarly work focuses on issues related to people and development; and have been published as chapter in books, and as articles in a number of journals and newspapers. The national media refers to him as an analyst of Malaysian socio-politics to discuss areas related to corruption, money politics and ethnic relations. To name a few, his main published works are Political Integrity in Malaysia: Towards a Better Understanding; Producing Seeds of Integrity: From Roots to Fruits and Strengthening Integrity and Reinforcing Trust (International and Regional Cooperation): Proceedings of ASEAN Integrity Dialogue.

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