

Figuring out our country

By Dina Zaman

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A BELATED Happy New Year, everyone! And Happy Chinese New Year!

I spent a good part of 2023 talking to Malaysians and jotting down their thoughts on multiculturalism, acknowledgement, and whether unity was just a dream for many of them. Some views were expected and some were unexpected. A burning question was whether racism is an urban phenomenon and if it is confined to a minority or appears across different groups.

For me, it really depends on who one speaks to.

For example, some skinheads we met at a punk rock concert last November were all for racial unity. But the kids we met at another concert in December – which was bigger, hotter (the weather that day!) and had more people attending – did not like migrant workers, refugees and non-Malays. “They need to know their place. This is a Malay country,” they ranted.

During the year of meeting Malay youth below 35 from different economic backgrounds, I veered a bit to explore the idea that Malaysia’s multicultural makeup was at stake. My exploration focused on Peninsular Malaysia’s multiculturalism facing a threat from post-2018 general elections to during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and the present time. If readers are wondering why Sabah and Sarawak are not included here, it is due to the fact that they deserve a separate report, and rightly so.

For this project, I spoke to Malaysians of all ages and races, including the transgender community, who were based in the peninsula. Some of the findings elaborated are as follows:

> *Many are at the end of their tether and do not see any hope for an inclusive Malaysia.*

> Racism is an equal opportunity sport: everyone feels shunted by everyone else, everyone believes the others have better lives, and that most, if not all, Malaysians have experienced racism at work and in their personal lives.

> Race and religion were once the weapons of some politicians; today, racism and hate have become mainstream.

> Many Muslims enjoy and want all the races to get along, but feel that non-Muslims refuse to engage with and accept their Islamic faith.

> Definitions are fluid and not definitive. As the nation watched the so-called green wave arrive triumphantly in urban Malaysia, we need to be mindful of the following terms: “Malay nationalism” and “Islamist populism”. While both claim to be about ethnic Malay and Muslim rights, there is a distinct demarcation between the two.

With Islamist populists, it is tied “... to power-grabbing elites who are facing a diverse Malay

electorate. These populist elites may operate within a democratic framework, but their commitment to democratic values is unpredictable.” (Malay political polarisation and Islamic populism in Malaysia by Syaza Shukri, Stratsea.com, July 5, 2021.)

As we know, Islamists’ worldviews override ethnicity, as they claim, and dealing with ethnic nationalism is a new game all together. However, Islamists groups are not easily flustered: combining Malay dissatisfaction with religion is a shrewd strategy to shore up their powerbase.

As I waded through the interview findings, I came across something interesting (well, at least to me): our housing policy.

Interviewees, who included those who attended Islamist schools, urged that we take another look at this and cited the following 2003 study by Ahmad Hariza Hashim, published by the then Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, titled “Residential satisfaction and social integration in public low cost housing in Malaysia”.

The study still holds true today; while more urbanised areas see communities integrating better than rural towns, “... ***Ethnic groups prefer to stay in areas where they are the majority***”

because they feel more secure and are more likely to integrate with each other”.

The paper goes on to say that this is prevalent among Malays as they tend to live in low-cost housing areas, due to the housing allocation ratio setup by the government. And that, “Malays can more easily accept other ethnic groups with their communities compared with Chinese or Indians”, though they would prefer to live in an all-Malay enclave. This is due to the societal nature of the Malays – religious activities at the mosque, communal programmes – and because for the non-Malays, the residential aspect is not an important factor determining their behaviour for social integration.

Most residential areas are still dominated by one ethnic race today, and schools are far from these residences, worsening racial ties. Hence, interracial neighbourliness is almost non-existent in many housing areas.

Now, before you get your knickers in a twist, think: Could integration and assimilation only be achieved if you come from one social stratum?

I would like to quote an excerpt from Preeta Samarasan's novel, *Tale of The Dreamer's Son*

(2022): "... People knew how to be friends. By which we mean that most of us knew how to express our real opinions behind each other's backs and some of us knew how to swallow our bile and keep smiling when we encountered real opinions in unexpected places." (Page 125.)

Perhaps true friendship all over can only be achieved through a similar class and demographic.

Values? Shared hobbies? No. Therefore, we are friends with each other because we speak the same language, went to the same school, earn the same income levels, are from a similar professional class and live in similar neighbourhoods.

As I have said before, we need to investigate the behaviours behind social and economic classes to really understand each other. But for now, I don't think we will in the long run. **The elites will always see the B40 low income group as losers and wastrels and politicians will harp on the injustice of it all, while the normal Malaysian, the average Uncle, Makcik, will just manage their lives the best they can.**

Dina Zaman is co-founder of Iman Research, a think tank studying society, religion and perception.

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