A Concept For National Unity In Malaysia[1]

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Caused by the Bumiputra policy, the basis was laid for growing symbolic racism, and because of the maintaining ethnic segregation ethnic prejudices and aversive racism could creep into society. Since the late 1970s there is a tendency towards inter-ethnic income equality and the eradication of poverty.

Accordingly to W.I. Thomas a whole lot of programs were set up trying to achieve an inter-ethnic social environment to overcome ethnic prejudices. But because a well-balanced share of power between all ethnic groups was denied ethnic affiliation still remains. Thus efforts given towards a structural change have to be reinforced.

According to the census of 1970 there are 46.8% Malays, 34.1% Chinese, 9.0% Indian and Pakistani, 8.7% other natives and 1.4% others living in Malaysia. The Malays together with aboriginal and tribal people of the category "other natives" are included in the term "Bumiputra" which slightly make up 50% of the population. But ethnic groups in Malaysia like the Indians, Malays and Chinese are no homogenous groups at all. As the official definition of a Malay is to practice the *Malay adat* (Malay custom), to speak the Malay language and to profess Islam, to be Malay is not defined by race. So an Arab is as well an Arab as he is a Malay if he wants.

There are also inter-ethnic marriages especially between the Indians and Malays and within the Malay community which consists out of Arabs, Indonesian, and Indian Muslims who practice the *Malay adat*, the so-called *Jawi Peranakan*. To distinguish "immigrant Malays" from "indigenous Malays" the term "Melayu jati" (pure Malay) was invented. Also Chinese and Indians originate from different parts of their country and acculturated to different degrees and therefore aren't homogenous either.

Each ethnic group is defined by a large set of characteristics which makes it possible for members of a group to divide in subgroups. It sometimes depends on self-defim

Special Rights

In the late 1960s the Malays saw the Chinese community controlling the economy and likewise the Chinese believed the Malay community controlling the government, although only a small number of each group really was in the position to control these sectors. These circumstances and the significant loss of votes for the ruling coalition at the elections in May 1969 led to the escalation of the May 13th riots.

Two years later a New Economic Policy (NEP) was installed to eliminate ethnic tensions caused by disparities in income, employment and ownership of wealth between the Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra. It was a change in policy from "growth" to "redistribution with growth" to achieve national unity. The Bumiputra should be uplifted to get 30% (2.4% in 1970) share of the corporative sector to enable them to compete with the non-Bumis (mainly Chinese) who were to get 40% (34.3%) while another 30% (63.3%) were foreseen for foreign residents. So the New Economic Policy brought into focus economical inter-ethnic disparities but it was neglected that even if the Chinese control one third of the national economy they are not represented in the financial and traditional capitalist sectors like banks, international trade and primary production (which was shifted from the British to the Malaysian government on behalf of the Bumiputra) and thus their economical influence was limited.

The NEP was carried out by trusteeship. These trust agencies decided independently on the distribution of financial aid without effective control. So a system of corruption and self enrichment could develop in advantage of the Malay elite involved in these agencies. Thus one can notice a further increasing gap between the rich and the poor within the first five years after implementation of the NEP. This increase was perceived as caused by the opponent ethnic group. The poor of the Malay community saw their poverty caused by the rich non-Malays and contrary the poor non-Malays were in anger of the government giving all its attention to the Malays[2] which still are present images. Although in contrast to the sixties one can observe an immense ascendant of the annual growth rate and a decrease of inter-ethnic income disparities.

The government efforts in the agricultural sector were given to large farms and to the introduction of oil palm and cacao to accelerate capital accumulation in a developing capitalist agriculture, neglecting the peasantry. The increasing poverty among the peasantry led to several demonstrations, especially concerning the Baling area in Kedah in 1974.[3] This expresses the rare phenomenon of class conflict within the Malay community between the peasantry and the government elite.

In most cases class conflict is drifted into ethnic conflict between Malay labor and Chinese capital as the increase of Malay labor was faster than the increase of Malay bourgeoisie and thus labor and capital mostly are located in different ethnic groups.

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2   Chandrasekaran Pillay, 1974, p.74.
3   Demonstrations occurred against Malay poverty and alleged peasant hunger and starvation in this area.

The precondition of Malay labor increase is the mobility of the Malays who traditionally lived in rural areas whereas technical development with its rising need for labor is located in urban settings. With the NEP a quota system was installed to reserve adequate places for Malays in factories, administration and universities. But the development of a new urban Malay middle-class again caused problems between the Malays and the "traditional" Chinese city dwellers.

The NEP ended in 1990 but the special rights system still is part of the national policy. Even in 1994 ABIM[4] still agrees on the maintenance of this system, at least for a certain time. "The privileges are necessary for the time being because there are still a lot more poor Malay compared to the Chinese. There are very few poor Chinese and they can be helped by the rich Chinese... For us it is the responsibility of the rich men to help... When some of the objectives have been achieved I think everybody must be given equal rights... I don't feel good when I get something not because of the merit but because of your race..."[5]

But it is not only the Malays who took benefit out of the special rights. Also some non-Malays took possession of this regulation "...through political access, through patron - client linkages, or through some 'Ali-Baba' relationship with Malays who are willing to trade their legal preferences for immediate benefits through acting as a front for non-Malay enterprises".[6]

A stand against the privileges takes PAS in Kelantan, where it forms the state government. PAS sees ethnic barriers built up by these special rights. PAS urges the Malays to live according to Islam instead to carry on with racist policy. Then the non-Malay communities will follow to overcome ethnic discord.[7]

The Education System
This paragraph will examine the effects of the NEP's "positive discrimination" on the education system.

The primary schools are divided in Malay-, Tamil-, and Mandarin-language schools and accordingly are dominated by the respective ethnic group. This language oriented differentiation originates from colonial times. Secondary school is in Malay-language and most of the classes are ethnically mixed. Those who attended a non-Malay primary school have to undergo an extra year in Malay language training before they can change to secondary school. After secondary school pre-university classes have to be attended with an examination afterwards. If this examination is passed the real course of study can be started. All exams are held in Malay language. Lectures at university are held in Malay or English.

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4   The Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia) was founded in 1971 at the National University of Malaysia. The most prominent president of ABIM was Anwar Ibrahim from 1974 until 1982, who then became a member of parliament as a candidate of UMNO and who is now Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. In 1994 ABIM had 50,000 members and a certain influence on government policies as most of its members - former students - now are government servants working in the ministries.

5   Interview with the Secretary General of ABIM, Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman, 6 September 1994.

6   Means, 1991, p.313.

7   Interview with the Press Secretary of PAS - Kelantan, Hj. Husam b Hj. Musa, 21 September 1994.

The first challenge to the pupils in the age of 12 is the change from an ethnically divided primary school to secondary school with its ethnically mixed classes. At this stage it might be already difficult to overcome those prejudices which arose during the six years of ethnic isolation as they are like these: "Chinese like to work eight days per week and twenty-four hours a day", "I don't like Chinese because they don't eat with their fingers, they even eat pork and I don't like Malays because they look like apes with their flat noses", "If you want to get along with Chinese you need to have something to give to them, otherwise they are not willing to help you", "They [Chinese] don't care for their culture but don't touch their money!"

The second challenge is the change from secondary school to university. Even if inter-ethnic friendships could be established, anger will arise when friends become aware that their Malay mates get easy access caused by ethnic affiliation and the non-Malays have to attend pre-university classes for one year longer with hard exams at the end and additional difficulties to get scholarships. After this career it is not surprising to see students sitting in the dining halls at University Malaya in Kuala Lumpur again divided by race.

This separation still maintains on the student's way from the dining hall to the lectures. When these students finish their study they pass over into job places again regulated by an ethnic quota system where qualification is of secondary importance only. Thus from the very beginning of the school career onwards ethnic categories are a dominant factor in the people's life.

Symbolic Racism

Special privileges became the source of symbolic racism, as worked out by Louk Hagendoorn, which "is based on the argument that the outgroup gets more than they deserve and that they should make their own achievements in society... It is a veiled form of racism, in which it is argued that government policies for improving the social and economic position of ethnic minorities - for example by quota - are perceived as unfair because they give collective opportunities and rights to ethnic minorities that the majority are denied".[8]

In the case of Malaysia the model of symbolic racism has to be adjusted to the specific social situation. As the Bumiputra are the majority who gain benefit of the quota system, the rise of symbolic racism might be within the non-Bumiputra communities. But without the implementation of the special rights policy after the riots in 1969 it would have been the Bumiputra communities feeling to be at disadvantage. So to expand Hagendoorn's definition of symbolic racism it can be based also on "not-improving the social and economic position of the ethnic majority" which can be perceived as unfair because government policies maintain existing advantages of ethnic minorities.

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8   Hagendoorn, 1993, p.29.

Religion

Islam

As Islam is the official religion and about half of the population are Muslims, the role of Islam can't be neglected. There are two aspects to be examined. One is the inter-ethnic aspect, another is the role of Islam within the Muslim community. These two aspects represent the balance which has to be taken into consideration by the government. "Too heavy-handed Malay-Muslim chauvinist rhetoric and policy endangers the maintenance of the coalition and possibly national stability. At the same time, it is necessary to hold the loyalty of a Malay-Muslim constituency that remains deeply conscious of its ethno-religious roots and fears the encroachment of other races and cultures".[9]

The interrelationship of Islam and being Malay led to a perception of an integrated whole which includes lifestyle, values, language and religion. The attack on one of these elements means a threat towards the whole system.

A consequence of this perception is the exclusion of Indian and Chinese Muslims from the *ummah* (Muslim community) by the Malays. If Indians or Chinese convert to Islam they are neither accepted by the Malay-Muslim community, nor by their original ethnic community since they left for a different faith. The Malay Muslims only cooperate with other Muslims if they are in the minority as they are in Penang, where Malay Muslims cooperate with Indian Muslims to become a strong opposition against the Chinese political dominance there.[10] Thus it becomes evident that ethnic identity is above religious affiliation although most of the Malays say they are Muslim first and then they feel being Malay.

Despite this inter-ethnic conflict there is a dichotomy within the Malay-Muslim community between the mainly rural and economically backward Malays who form the PAS electorate (which is the Islamic opposition party) and the urban and economically advanced Malays forming the UMNO electorate (which is the dominant party in the ruling coalition). Thus PAS uses the term *mustazaffin* (the oppressed) for the rural Malays who are neglected by the government and describes those in power (that is UMNO) with the term *mustakbirin* (the oppressor). Here again an intra-ethnic class conflict occurs which is transferred to a religious level.

So another consequence of the Bumiputra policy is a strengthening of Islam as a source of ethnic identity. These two aspects made Islam an important factor in the Malay community.

While PAS propagates an Islamic State with equal rights for all citizens regardless of race and religion and to stop the special rights for Bumiputra, the Malay middle class is in favor to maintain the special rights as they have to compete with the non-Malays in the economic sector. Hence the UMNO - PAS dispute is a religious as well as an intra-ethnic class conflict between the Malay bourgeoisie and the Malay proletariat.

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9   Von der Mehden, 1987, p.183.
10 Interviews with Dr J.R. Daniel, 8 September 1994, and Dr Shamsul A.B., 9 September 1994.

The Non-Muslim Communities

The rising consciousness of an Islamic identity within the Malay community and a growing *dakwah*[11] movement urged UMNO to react in form of an Islamization policy. Because of the Malay political dominance and since Islam is seen as a Malay religion the Islamization policy is perceived as another manifestation of Malay political hegemony by non-Muslims. Thus the non-Muslim communities became more conscious of their religions, too. The revivalism of Theravada Buddhism among Chinese and of Hinduism among the Indians act as a counterweight to the threat by the strong emphasis on Islam within the Malay community. In addition to the ethnic segregation religious particularism appears. In 1983 an inter-religious organization was founded by dissatisfied non-Muslim representatives on the government-sponsored National Unity Board.

National Integration

National integration is discussed on two different levels. On micro-level there is an approach to eliminate inter-ethnic prejudices by establishing an inter-ethnic social environment. On macro-level inter- and intra-ethnic economic disparities have to be eradicated because they are seen as the basis on which inter-ethnic prejudices are formulated and therefore the vertical class structure of the Malaysian society has to be changed into an egalitarian system.

The Cultural Approach

In the writing of Tan Chee Beng an inter-ethnic social environment is crucial for national integration. Under the circumstances of ethnic separation in most parts of Malaysia ethnic prejudices can occur easily.

The anthropologist's explanation of how prejudices occur is, when the behavior of outgroup members is not evaluated on the basis of its own cultural meaning but on the basis of ingroup values which are different. Misunderstanding of each others behavior and intention is its consequence and stereotypes and prejudices may emerge. "The functional aspect of stereotypes can be elaborated in showing that they not only evolve from, but also preserve the values of the ingroup by differentiating the ingroup from negatively evaluated outgroups".[12] Aversive racism[13] may support, or might be the result of, this process.

The evolving system of differences between groups leads to a hierarchical representation of the inter-group relations in society. A rank-ordering takes place of outgroups closer to or further away from what is morally acceptable and thus add to a positive self-evaluation. The *Malay adat*, a mixture of Hindu elements and Islam in early times, might explain the relatively smooth relations of Malays and Indians in

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11 *Dakwah* originates from the Arabic word *da'a* which means "to call". In the 1970s and 80s *dakwah* became the meaning of "to call people to the Islamic faith" or "to remind Muslims of their faith".

12 Hagendoorn, 1993, p.34.

13 Aversive racism is expressed in keeping social distance from members of any outgroup, be it defined in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, politics or morals, be it at work, in the neighborhood, at school or with respect to friendship and marriage. Thus it is an even more general form than symbolic racism. See L. Hagendoorn, 1993, p.28f.

terms of culture,[14] despite the fact that the Indian community is a quite small minority in Malaysia. Instead Chinese culture has almost nothing in common with the *Malay adat* and thus it is at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy. Another factor in building this hierarchy is the dichotomy of indigenous and immigrant groups, with the former often better being able to function as a comprehensive society satisfying all the social needs of its members.

If there is only one category, group distinctions can be made easily. This aspect of stereotyping comes close to a conflict approach to prejudice in which stereotypes are assumed to legitimize differences in power between ethnic groups. To overcome those prejudices W.I.Thomas proposed that positive attitude change would occur through increased inter-ethnic association.

A consequence out of these considerations is a policy directed towards assimilation or acculturation to bridge the gap of different cultural meanings and to achieve national unity. But there are different aspects of adaptive policies concerning the handling of minority groups which effects their future position in society. These aspects are examined in the writing of Akerman and Lee.

a) Through a policy of assimilation with preservation of selected aspects of minority cultures, the majority can commoditize the cultures of minority groups.

b) A policy of positive discrimination is usually implemented with the intention of sponsoring the social mobility of minority groups whose members are given a headstart in the professions and higher education through a quota system.

c) In many ethnically heterogeneous countries, various government-appointed and voluntary bodies have been established to monitor changing levels of inter-ethnic tension and to defuse local level conflicts on an ad hoc basis.

In Malaysia the variants b) and c) are practiced. The Bumiputra, seen as the economic minority, are supported by the government to reduce inter-ethnic economic disparities and in addition some effort is made to defuse ethnic tensions.

The Structural Approach
The establishment of an harmonious inter-ethnic social environment is not the sole means in achieving national integration in Malaysia. Tan Chee Beng urges the reexamination of socio-economic policies since ethnicism in Malaysia has its roots in the political and economic structures.

By the policy of positive discrimination a second category became part of group identity. Besides ethnicity new economic classes appeared. In the case of cross cutting categories members of a certain group are simultaneously members of outgroups in other respects. The ethnic categories are divided into economic subgroups which may become more important than ethnic categorization was before the introduction of a positive discrimination policy.

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14 Interview with Mr. Patiban, Executive Secretary of the MIC, 14 September 1994. According to Mr. Patiban the *Malay adat* is, historically, Indian culture. Thus there is no need for the MIC to set up a concept of national culture on their own but to support the UMNO position in this debate.

The race relations cycle by Robert E. Park describes the development of race relations in a multiethnic society as a change from competition to conflict, to accommodation, to assimilation. The conflict over the access of resources along ethnic lines decreases when new distinctions on achieved instead of ascribed status emerge. During the period of accommodation and assimilation class affiliation becomes more important than ethnic group membership.

Another approach leads to the prediction that each subgroup becomes the status of a group by its own to reinforce positive self-definition. Stanfield, who criticized the race relations theory of Park, argued that even in the accommodation and assimilation process ethnic minorities are excluded from participating in decision making processes. Therefore assimilation doesn't mean the share of power automatically and thus ethnic affiliation still remains.

As Roosens worked out that the choice of signs for differentiation of groups is arbitrary and the flexibility in changing from group to subgroup and vice versa as shown by Nagata, ethnicity is not a clear category but a social construction which is used to legitimate access to economic resources and political power for certain groups.

The creation of the term Bumiputra caused an ethnic split in the population into an economic backward majority which has to be uplifted by positive discrimination and an economic dominant minority whose participation in decision making processes still is limited as shown in the case of the Islamization-debate and the discussion on national culture (see next paragraph). The legitimation of this policy is achieved via ascribed status and the reality of ethnic groups "...is asserted and maintained through the formulation of ideologies and the mobilization of political power".[15]

To achieve national integration both aspects, the cultural and the structural approach have to be recognized. This comprises intensifying inter-ethnic contacts accompanied by frankly discussed issues concerning national culture, as well as a change in politics from positive discrimination towards government assistance for the poor regardless of race and religion. To succeed in this the government has to convince the Bumiputra of not being disadvantaged against other economic forces. These ideas are not only discussed within the non-Malay communities but also within certain Islamic oriented organizations under the premise of an Islamic State.

The Actual Policy

In 1971 the National Culture Congress described national culture as: (a) National culture of Malaysia should be based on the indigenous cultures of this region. (b) Suitable other cultural elements may be accepted as elements of national culture. (c) Islam is an important element in the development of national culture. This definition is a very vague one and not very satisfying for the non-Bumiputra ethnic groups.

Another event rising uneasiness among non-Bumiputra was the speech of Prime Minister Mahathir at the conference on "Meeting the Malay World" on 18 December 1982 in Malacca where he mentioned that "...unity and stability should be

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15   S.E. Akerman and R.L.M. Lee, 1988, p.134.

built and nurtured through one language, that is the national language based on the Malay language, and through one culture, that is the national culture based on the culture of the indigenous people of Malaysia".[16] At a press conference Mahathir explained that also non-Malay cultural elements will be included in the national culture. Although non-Malays don't have to face an outright policy of assimilation they still don't know how far and what kind of elements will be included in the national culture.

According to the "contact hypothesis" of W.I.Thomas the Department of National Unity tries to eradicate negative racial attitudes and to smooth ethnic relations by establishing close contacts between ethnic groups under pleasant circumstances.

- Potential problem areas are registered and examined by a Social Relations Monitoring System (SRSM) to prevent serious ethnic tensions. It also serves as an intermediary between ethnic groups with conflicting claims.

- New housing schemes are developed with an reservation of thirty per cent for Malays to guarantee an ethnically mixed neighborhood instead of maintaining the established separation in ethnic quarters. "Our aim is a caring society with a balanced mix of multi-ethnic Malaysians staying together harmoniously".[17] To overcome the urban problem of social distance festivals are organized and religious holidays are handled as days of open doors where neighbors can come in for a chat and to taste the others food.[18]

- The Education Department organized a one-week integration camp for Standard Six pupils to "instill patriotism and unity among the younger generation of the various races".[19]

- Organizing committee chairman for the 37th National day celebrations Datuk Seri Sanusi Junid said cultural dances and traditional games should not be practiced by a single race but should also be introduced to other communities as it can foster better understanding and promote national integration.[20]

These programs are part of an "...established 'race relations industry' in Malaysia which is decontextualised from the more sensitive concerns and volatile aspects of Malaysian ethnic politics".[21]

With the introduction of the NDP (New Development Policy) in 1991 an attempt was made to distribute government support regardless of race and religion. This could be a first step to dismiss the primacy of ethnic identity leading towards a development according the race relations cycle of Robert E. Park. But still the main focus of UMNO is on the Bumiputra community. "...in the restructuring of society, priority will be given to the development of BCIC (Bumiputra Commercial and

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16 *New Straits Times*, 19 December 1982.
17 Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh, quoted in *The Star*, 11 September 1994.
18 Interview with Mr. Patiban, Executive Secretary of the MIC, 14 September 1994.
19 *The Star*, 9 September 1994.
20 *New Straits Times*, 22 August 1994.
21 S.E. Akerman and R.L.M. Lee, 1988, p.140.

Industrial Community), where in terms of achievement, it has been the least success-ful".[22]

Conclusion

People forming ethnic groups try to achieve their economic or political goals. As the boundaries of ethnic groups are arbitrary, they can change their characteristics and thus policy can transfer ethnic categorization into other frames of reference like nationalism by articulating the right ideology which attracts the various ethnically defined groups.

The maintenance of the special rights system plays a big role for people to identify themselves in terms of ethnic categories. Instead groups should be defined by their achieved status to reinforce attempts of eradicating inter-ethnic income disparities and poverty. Also political participation of all groups has to be ensured to overcome old ethnic boundaries and prejudices.

The result of the last general election in April 1995 may indicate a growth of national unity as DAP, the Chinese based opposition party, lost 11 of its 20 parliamentary seats which it claimed in 1990. But it can't be neglected that the Malay dominated government started the election campaign out of an advanced position because

- the date of the elections is choosen by the Prime Minister and was announced less than three weeks before elections took place
- this date happened to be three months after both coalitions of opposition parties broke up and
- just in time to get the Annual report of the national Bank Negara, which examined the ascending growth of the Malaysian economy in 1994, published as one of the best advertisement for government politics
- the television and main newspapers are controlled by the government
- government parties have much more recources to spent on campaigning than opposition parties have

So political participation and transparency should be improved to prevent anxiety among certain groups of being at disadvantage.

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22 *Sixth Malaysia Plan*, Kuala Lumpur, 1991, p.31.

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