# Malaysia: Ethnic Issues and National Security

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## Abstract

*Malaysia society consists of multi ethnic citizens. Solidarity, harmony and unity between ethnic is a vital agenda for the country's stability. The ethnic relationship in Malaysia had been shaped by the British and Japanese during their occupations and the impact can be seen until today. The 13 May 1969 riot is the proved of the ethnic issue in Malaysia. After the incident, government had come out with a few public policies to overcome the ethnic issue but it was found that the policies are not comprehensive enough to overcome the ethnic issues. The Non-Bumiputra had perceived the public policies are lack in diversity and inclusiveness which are more favour to Bumiputra. The ethnic issues or tension can affect the country by causing an economic down turn; threaten national security and country's image. This study fills this void by reviewing literature from research that ethnic issues seem important and give the impact to national security government policies. National security is everyone's responsibility whether as a leader, security forces or ordinary citizens. Every citizen must understand the important of solidarity, harmony and unity concepts or policies formulated by the government. National security is the determinant of economic growth and it will ensure the safety of the country as the allocation to the assets for national security can be further enhanced to maintain the security and sovereignty of the country. Harmonious ethnic relation is the key to the progress for the country stability. Malaysian citizens need to really appreciate and understand the eight values of 1 Malaysia which is a culture of excellence, perseverance, humility, acceptance, loyalty, meritocracy, education and integrity. Thus, our country urgently needs all communities to unite, irrespective of religion, ethnic and race. Any distrust, suspicion and dissatisfaction between the communities or ethnic will only create insecurity and conflict.*

**Keywords:** solidarity, harmony, unity, security, perseverance

## *Introduction*

Globalisation in information technology has a certain impact. This is due to the ability and availability to access any issues and news. The news and issues across the world could be viewed in real time. In addition, the spread of news nowadays is very fast with the mediums such as Whatsapp, Telegram, Facebook and Twitter. The negative aspect of information technology is that, it could be used to arouse ethnic anxiety and hatred. Those who propagate this issue were not thinking about the consequences and those who receive the news, will continue to believe without first investigating the truth. The government must seriously look into this matter. Social polarisation, fragility of ethnic relations and possible religious intolerance could be exploited and lead to ethnic conflict. National security can be defined as a set of values that are really important for state protection (H.Singh, 2004). Security is about state survival to protect its sovereignty and territorial entity. The security concepts of a country are covering military, political, economic, social and environmental (Buzan, 1998). All these factors are related each other towards national security. The natures of threats to national security are military action, political threats, economic threats, and social and ecological threats (Alagappa, 15-16) National security is the determinant of economic growth. National security and economic growth are closely related to each other.

Safe country would guarantee the country's economic growth as investors and tourists from abroad will generate the country's income. While healthy economic growth will ensure the safety of the country as the allocation to the assets for national security can be further enhanced to maintain the security and sovereignty of the country. Ethnicity could be defined as a form of ideology referred to as the power structures used by a particular society to resolve or to some extent suiting own interest or an interest of a group (Stephen, 1990). The existence of an ethnicity does not depend on what others perceive but more towards own group awareness. In relation to this, ethnicity is a complex phenomenon. In Malaysia situation, the issues such as language, culture, religious, citizenship and economics are often being the issue by the politicians for a specific purpose. The way the politicians behave to manipulate the issues will give a negative impact to the people. Therefore, every ethnic will protect their right to obtain an equitable condition. As an example, some political parties will try to take advantage by inducing uneasiness among the societies and spreading propaganda regarding ethnic issues. In extreme cases, ethnicity could become a powerful factor that propagates conflict. In multiethnic society's country, there will be a conflict if there is a problem in the relationship within them. But the harmonious relationship among them will strengthen the national sovereignty and development. The harmonious situation that resulted from the unity among Malaysian is a privilege and will attract the foreign investor to invest in our country. Security issues in ethnic's tension are different from the traditional state security issue. In ethnic's tension, the security issues are the group's identity of inequality or unsatisfaction among them. In the economic security, the threats are more difficult to identify. National economies have a great impact on state survivability but rarely being a threat. Social security is about to sustain traditional patterns of language, culture, religious and national identity within acceptable conditions.

## *Causes of Ethnic Conflict*

Ethnic conflict has one of the most prominent issues in the country where there are multi ethnic citizen and also become a global concern. It is difficult to resolve ethnic conflict due to the differences in issue and background. Sometime conflicts can lead to physical violence and may last long without solution.  There are a few factors that can cause an ethnic conflict. Generally ethnic struggling for political, cultural, ethnic identity, religious and equity in economic distribution. Therefore, according to Michael (1997), the causes of ethnic conflict can be categorised as state structural, political, socio-economic and cultural factors (p.5).  The state structural factor is a weak state structure and ethnic's geography. Most of the scholars categorised this as the main factor in ethnic conflict. Uneven ethnic distribution and demography will cause difficulty for ethnic cooperation and cohesion. Weak state structures are susceptible to both internal and external threats. Weak state means that state is weak in power and can become an easy target for strong powers (Alaggapa, 1987). During the colonial time, British had placed certain ethnic to different economic sectors. For example, the Malays are normally works as farmer in agricultural sector, which requires a lot of efforts in physical energy and low technology. For the Chinese, they were normally involved in trading or business sector which requires high technology, while the Indians are working as a farmer in rubber and oil palm estates. This distribution had resulted the income gap between ethnic become obvious and unbalanced The Malay and Indian will still dealing with poverty while the Chinese continually seeking a business opportunities to strengthen their wealth.

The dissatisfaction among the ethnic will exist and consequently will lead to ethnic groups to defend their right and equality. The process of maintaining these rights will impair their relationship because each of them wants to win the struggle. Malaysian citizens are consisting of three major ethnics Malay, Chinese and Indians which have different mother tongue language and own school systems. These factors simultaneously causing the students to separate based on their native language. For example, national schools will use Malay language as the language of instruction. Thus, majority of Malay students will study in Malay schools, while Chinese and Indians students will prefer to their own national (type) school. This situation will leads to very limited interaction among the students in different ethnic. Since the arrival of the Chinese to Malaya in 19th century, instead of to seek for wealth, the Chinese people will not forget their social responsibility of educating their children so that they will inherit the Chinese language and culture. Thus, the establishment of Chinese vernacular school becomes an important agenda to them In addition to that, the decision to send their children to national (type) school which they feel the structure is able to guarantee their children academic excellence and not confidence in national schools also avoiding inter ethnic relations.

This education system will create a feeling of prejudice among the students towards different ethnic groups (Khalim & orshidah, 2010) with this feeling of prejudice; it is difficult for the students to interact with others especially when the others are using their own native language not understood by the students.

## *The Impact of the Policies*

### New Economic Policy

The New Economic Policy (NEP) (1971-1990) was implemented during the Second Malaysia Plan (1970-1975) to promote national unity which focusing on specific economic goals. The plan had two prong policies for development. The first is to reduce and eradicate poverty by raising the income levels and also increase the employment opportunities to all Malaysians, regardless of ethnic background. The second is to restructure the Malaysian society for better economic balance, to reduce and eliminate the race identification base on economic. The NEP also proposed a 30:40:30 on the share of economic wealth that is 30% for Malays, 40% for Non-Malays and the other 30% for national investors (Ahmad, 1990). Although the government had promised that no particular ethnic would feel loss or deprivation with the implementation of NEP, but the Non-Bumiputra felt otherwise the NEP is seen to be lack in diversity and inclusiveness in improving inter-ethnic relations. The incident in Kampung Medan in 2001 between Malays and Indians is termed officially as racial clashes caused by poverty. However, NEP had been proven its success in reducing the economic difference but there is still a lack in promoting better ethnic relationship between Bumiputra and Non-Bumiputra.

### National Cultural Policy

The National Cultural Policy (NCP) was formulated in 1971 with three important elements, which are greater emphasis on cultural programmes to enhance national identity, promote national integration, unity and maintain ethnic harmony. NCP has achieved its objectives and goals satisfactorily; however it will take a couple of future generations to fully success in generating National Culture (INTAN, p.95). The INTAN (1997) report also stated that the creation of national identity, ethnic integration and Islamic noble values had already been established. This statement can be seen through the display of Malaysian national culture and identity in festival, sports and celebrations either in national or international level. The report also highlighted that there are still a few citizens who have questioned how far this NCP succeed in creating and integrating the Malaysia's National Culture. The Non-Malays viewed that this policy which was implemented after the 1969 riots by the Malay-dominated government in order to reconstitute the public cultural landscape is more favour to Malay culture and Islam in the country. In other words, the issue of Islamic influence in the Malay identity and the government's response had created ethnic insecurity feeling amongst the Non-Malays. Non-Malays would normally be anxious to any government policies that would increase the Islamism in the society (Lee, 2000). Therefore, is can be concluded that the NCP had constrained ethnic relations even though it is seem to be successful in achieving its objectives and goals.

### National Education Policy

The issue of Malaysian Education was started as early as in 1951 with the Barnes Report with the purpose to unite all ethnic during the colonial time but it was unsuccessful. It was then was replaced according to Razak Report in 1956 followed by Rahman Talib Report in 1960. The Education Act was then established in 1961. Education can have a strong force to promote unity and integration or the other way (Wan Hashim, 1983, p.72). The government viewed that the Razak Report and Rahman Talib Report are able to integrate the students of different ethnic group, which can aspire the students to be more ethical, knowledgeable, balanced to contribute to harmonious and progressive societies (INTAN, 90-93). Since then, there are many changes and revise on the National Education Policy for the improvement in the education system. However, the changes in the education system and policy can had brought to more ethnic insecurity instead of enhancing the relationship amongst ethnic in Malaysia (M. Bakri Musa, 242-244). There was a contradicting statement between the INTAN Report and others in the view of promoting unity amongst ethnic. Furthermore, in the INTAN Report also, it was stated that the government is not so sure whether the National Education Policy has successfully unite the Malaysian ethnic as education is not the only factor in contributing to the unity of ethnic.

### National Language Policy

In 1967, Bahasa Malaysia was established as the only official language of the country and the use of English has to be terminated.

The objective of this policy is to make national language as the main medium in the national education system. From the government view, if Bahasa Malaysia was promoted as national language and also as the common language of all the Malaysians, the use of English as official language had to be stopped. The government feels that if English was made available in schools, the Non-Malays will always prefer to use English as their primary language rather than Bahasa Malaysia. The aim of this policy was to have an education system with common syllabus content, by using a common language that can promote the growth national unity (Alis, 2006). Prior to decide Bahasa Malaysia as National Language, there was a period of uncertainty and fear to choose Bahasa Malaysia for academic purposes (CP Khong & KH Khong, 1956-67). The Non-Malays were scared that Malay nationalism and the imposition of Bahasa Malaysia as the national and official language would cause the loss of their own cultural heritage. Recently, there were a few changes in the usage of English as the medium in education system. Some scholars saw it as might be dangerous to the national unity and the Malay society if it is executed without a proper discussion or research. It can be observed that the language policy had restrained the Malay and Non-Malay communication with there is still a feeling of anxiety on the implementation of this policy. The National Language Policy is seems to be lacking in diversity and inclusiveness.

**Vision 2020**

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he was Prime Minister had launched Vision 2020. Vision 2020 is not a typical policy but more than related to a response to the political, economic and social current issues nationally and internationally which gave great challenges to the country. The main objective of Vision 2020 is to establish Malaysia as a fully developed country by 2020 that covers all aspects of life: political, economic, social, spiritual, psychological and cultural (INTAN, p.8) There are nine challenges identified by the government to achieve the above objectives. In terms of ethnic relations, the challenges in Vision 2020 is to create a society that practices a matured understanding and tolerant, which the public interest is more important than their own interests. In economic, the challenges of Vision 2020 are to ensure the implementation of the distribution of national wealth fairly and equitably in which there is full partnership by every citizen in economic development.

**1 Malaysia**

1 Malaysia concept was introduced by current Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak on 3 April 2009 with the aim is to retain and strengthen unity of all ethnic in various aspects. The idea of 1 Malaysia is to harmonize citizens of different ethnic without changing their identity. A 1 Malaysia concept aspiration is to improve the ethnic relationship that can ensure a greater unity among the Malaysians. This concept will also create a government that gives priority to the people as stated in its slogan "People First Performance Now". To achieve country's progression, an acceptance among ethnic which lead to strong unity should be practiced. When unity is achieved, the development of the country will progress smoothly. Thus, to realise the concept of 1 Malaysia, it must be exposed to all Malaysian especially the youngsters in their early life of educations. Malaysian youngsters especially students must understand the concept of 1 Malaysia because they are the future leaders. Education is one of the best elements to promote good contact among different ethnic groups (Khamim& Norshidah, 2010).

*Discussion and Analysis*

For inter ethnic peace, there must be a moderate and balance on politic and economic between the ethnic who produced from a good social arrangements and moderate leaders (Shoup, 2008, p.10). On the other words, it has to produce a win-win situation between the ethnics. British and Japanese occupation in the past has affected the relationship between ethnic. The divide and rule policy had physically separated the ethnics geographical location and occupation. Their administration and management system had created the ethnic relationship polar in Malaysia and the effects still remain until now. The emergence of ethno-nationalism in the pre-independence period has also shaped ethnic relations in Malaysia. The British and Japanese policy had manipulated the Malay and Non-Malay ethnic insecurity. The Malay had viewed the Non-Malay as the greater threats at that time. Although the divide and rule policy is successful in the British and Japanese era in dealing with ethnic relations because of their control, but in reality the feeling of suspicion and discontent still exist. In addition, the impact of the 13 May 1969 riot is still can be feeling until today. There are many factors that can lead to the ethnic conflict. They vary from one society to another. In general, ethnic relations or conflict is dependent on the history of their relations in the past and it is categorized into political, social and economy which are closely related and dependent on each other.

Different factors have made it difficult for the government or a country to resolve the issue of ethnic relations in a country. Ethnic-based politics is the cause of the separation between ethnic groups. Sensitive issues were politicised by political leaders in seeking popularity can trigger uncontrolled tension. Political leaders are still being selfish regardless of the feelings and the impact on society as a whole. Ethnic based politic can influence uneasy feelings and lead to racism if their action taken were not get consensus from the others. The issues such as language, culture, education, religion, nationality and economy if used for political purposes, of course, it will not contribute to a cohesive society. The implication is, all ethnic groups will strive to maintain the identity of their own people either from the language or cultural aspects, and they will try to defend their equal rights. Moreover, the spirit of loyalty to the country may not exist among ethnic groups as each group is more loyal to their ethnicity rather than the country.

The differences in ethnic location due to geographical and occupation as during the British and Japanese occupations era  is an unhealthy factor in fostering better ethnic relations. It only will increase the sense of belonging or ethnocentrism which means the perspective observation of other ethnic group from the eyes of ethnic itself. This situation will only lead to prejudice stereotypes and perpetuate ignorance among the ethnic members against the other ethnic groups. The different values in social and culture will lead to inter ethnic tension if the issues were not handling wisely. Every ethnic had their own culture and identity and will protect it for their young generations. The ability to adapt and respect other ethnic cultures will determine inter ethnic relationships. The economic control showed varieties in economic for each ethnicity. Majority of the Malays works as a farmer in the agricultural sector, which requires a lot of effort on human resources and low technology. For the Chinese, they generally work in more advance sectors such as business, trade and using a modern technology. Meanwhile, the Indians are mostly works as a rubber tapper an as a palm oil estates workers. We can conclude that there are significant income disparities and imbalances in the Malaysian economy. All ethnic groups are competing in economy to get their right and bigger profits.  The differences in economic domination and unequal income gap as during the colonial time caused the instability in multi ethnic society, resulting the dissatisfaction implications for all ethnic groups. Integrity and uniformity of the economy of a country is determined by the relationship between ethnicity. The justice and equality in enjoying the country's economy is a channel in determining more friendly ethnic relations. Unfairness in economic distribution will cause dissatisfaction. Good and proper economic distributions will create harmonic relationship and improve solidarity. Each ethnic group has its own education system. It is means that, Malay students studying at the Malay schools which use the Malay language as medium of instruction, Chinese students studying in Chinese schools which using Mandarin as the medium of instruction, whereas, Indian students studying in Tamil schools and using Tamil language. The education system that splits students by native language and ethnic differences will lead to difficulties for the government to promote integration among students. The students interaction will limited only between their same ethnic. The implication for this type of ethnic relations will bring a negative impact to the country.

Every ethnic group will maintain their own language and will not accept other ethnic language.  It is because they consider it inappropriate and there is no need for them to learn the language of another people. Furthermore, sometimes each school adopting a different educational system. This will give greater negative impact to the restructuring of the country because of the different educational patterns. It is worth to note that, those who are studying at the school will become leaders in the future which will manage the country. If they do not really understand the culture and behaviour of other ethnic, it will jeopardise the safety and security. These future leaders will certainly have difficulty in communication and obtaining an accord from other ethnic. Malays, Chinese and Indians have a different religion, language and culture which are their identity. Every ethnic will protect their own identity for their future generations. These differences will lead to difficulties when every ethnic is concern about its own language and culture. This situation will give an implication to ethnic member will more emphasis to the same ethnicity in choosing a friend or getting a job. Each ethnicity will have no sense of respect for the religious and cultures of other ethnic groups. The difficulty to live in multi ethnic society might lead to chaos in the society. It is because they will have a problem to communicate with other ethnic groups using the same language. This issue will definitely create discomfort and furthermore, it is hard for them to understand the other ethnic cultures.  The problem to communicate and feeling of discomfort  towards other ethnic will cause hard for them to accept or may be will not accept any changes although it will certainly give a lot of benefits in their daily lives. There are many statements regarding ethnic relations from national leaders in the country. They take seriously the issues of ethnic relations in the country. They agreed ethnic issues and tension if not addressed wisely or resolved will give an adverse impact on national security. History has proven this.

The issues about ethnic relationship raised by the country's leaders could trigger an adverse effect on national security. They are so concerned about the level of inter-ethnic relations. The fragility of ethnic relations can weaken the structure of government, crippling the country's economy, causing tourists and investors reluctant to come to our country. This will cause reduction in country's income. If there is chaos, the country will lose in terms of damage to infrastructure and public property. Traders had to close the business, security forces had to devote more tasks. The government had to allocate more spending to improve damaged infrastructures and properties. Government offices and schools were closed. This will result to the loss and waste in the country's expenses. Why ethnic relations issues remain to be the prevailing challenge to Malaysia's national security when public policies are formulated to address ethnic insecurity. There are many policies and plans have been made by the government to improve ethnic relations, but as we can see and hear, there are still many issues related to ethnic relations in the media. From the literature or survey related to ethnic relations, it can be concluded generally that the policies issued by the government is still not successful in preventing tensions between ethnic. Theoretically, the objective of the policy is very good but perhaps the understanding and implementation of the policies that caused it was not entirely successful. From the surveys that have been done, public policies are still lack in diversity and inclusiveness. The incidents and various statements from the country's leaders as mentioned above were also the proved that the government policies are still not really successful in preventing ethnic tension and create better solidarity and unity. The Non-Malay still perceives the public policies are more favour to Malays. In the survey recommendation, it is suggested that before a public policy is issued, it must pass the social unity impact study so that any shortcomings in public policy can be identified and improved. The disharmonic between ethnic will cause an economic down turn which effect the progressions and country's developments. The people will suffer from the economic down turn. Ethnic tension will threaten national security both internally and externally. The country having a chaos will vulnerable to any threat. The instability in the country due to ethnic relation issues will affect country's image. The world or other country will think twice to collaborate. Foreign investors will hardly to invest. The income from tourism will reduce as the numbers of tourist reduce.

## *Conclusion*

The instability in the country will be a talking point at the global level. The image of the country in the world will be affected and will become worse when we will be denied to collaborate or making relationship with other countries. The country will be withdrawn due to this instability and without peace and stability; it is difficult for the country to do something that can attract the other countries for collaboration or making investment. On the other hand, if there is unity and harmonious relationship among people or ethnic, the country image will be good. The country will be respected by the others and also be a model or reference. Good collaboration or relationship with other countries will successfully be held and it will be many opportunities for cooperation and bring the benefit to political, economic and social. This will improve the tourism industry when the number of tourist increase and improve the economic development as the investors will invest to our country.

Political and economic relations with foreign countries, western colonialism and the entry of immigrants were the main factors responsible for creating a multi-ethnic society in the country. Malaysia is made up of people who are multi-racial and multi-culture which has a strong fundamental to create a society that is more civilized, high morale, educated and encourage the concept of ideals pure nation state based. Through this concept, all communities supporting one nation and one country that stands firmly on one identity which is manifested by thought, the socio-cultural values and always sticks together for the purpose of highly humanity and spirituality. Civilized nation has its own civilization identity. Members in society play an important part in fostering ethnic relations so that our country will always be peaceful and comfortable. After more than fifty seven years of independence, there are still remains uncertainty and insecurity in ethnic relations. From the facts of history and the way we manage ethnic relations in the country, whether basic education, the distribution of political power or economic distribution, it is difficult for us to see the concept of nation that is actually occurring within the next fifty years. The question on the privileges of the Malays, Islamic affairs and the powers of the Malay Rulers began to dispute. There are many posts on blogs and websites discussing these issues. Historically, the Malays did have sacrificed much and contributed to the development of the country, the Chinese and Indians are no less important, also contributed significantly. So, blaming and belittle the actions of the others contribution is not wise and good action. From the historical and sociological perspective, the factors inherent in ethnic relations that evoked ethnic insecurity and tension in Peninsular Malaysia was determined to have originated from the colonial period.

Although inter-ethnic relations during the early colonial period were deemed harmonious because the British divide and rule policies presented some appearance of unity, this situation was however achieved in a controlled compartmentalised manner. The separation in space and economic functionality cultivated the seeds of ethnic insecurity among the indigenous Malays and immigrant Non-Malays. This was amplified when ethno-nationalism emerged during the pre-independence period. The Malay and Non-Malay relations was in a state of uncertainty as neither group was able to determine the other group's intentions as well as the stressed driven by the perceived fear and suspicious of the other group. This situation will allow the emergence of feelings of prejudice, discrimination and distrust, which are prevalent in today's Malay and Non-Malay relations. Invariably ethnicity became a wedge in Malay and Non-Malay relations rather than for unity. It influence the Malay and Non-Malay to identify loyally with their respective languages, cultures and religions that always created insecurity in ethnic relations and challenged efforts in promoting unity. There are nothing good or positive impacts in due to disharmonic relations between ethnic, but only a bad or negative impact. The national leaders are seriously concern on this matter.  National security and solidarity among ethnic is the main agenda for country's development. Basically, Malaysian citizens feel the importance of having good relations between ethnic. Only a few or some individuals who do not understand or do not want to understand the importance of having good ethnic relations such as politicians and bloggers will use this issue to get support, influence or just to antagonism the people. In conclusion, solidarity is very crucial factor and must be addressed wisely. Ethnic relations among Malaysian citizens are very important in our country's multi ethnic society and to ensure political, economic and societal stability of the country. A harmonious ethnic relation is a key to the progress for the country stability. Therefore, Malaysian citizens need to really appreciate and understand the eight values of 1 Malaysia which is a culture of excellence, perseverance, humility, acceptance, loyalty, meritocracy, education and integrity.

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