Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies 48 (1): 79-83, 2011 ISSN 1511-4554

A Review: Rethinking Ethnicity in Malaysia

Adam D. Tyson[1]
Universiti Utara Malaysia

Introduction

In June 2009 the *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* released a special issue on ethnicity in Malaysia. This was the result of a broad collaborative effort from distinguished University of Malaya faculty members. Guest Editor Kee-Cheok Cheong (2009: 3) hoped that this compilation of articles would help shape the future of Malaysia by challenging ethnocentrism and encouraging a new national political consciousness. The general thrust of the argument seems to indicate that the authors collectively support a liberal view of universal rights based on *jus soli* and equal citizenship. By logical extension, this is a call for the de-racialisation of Malaysian politics, the gradual erosion of Malay special rights, and the eclipse of pseudo-democratic, ethnically-segregated political party coalitions. No one would dare say this directly, of course, for fear of breaching perennially 'sensitive' issues.

This special issue contains seven original articles penned by a combination of ten scholars. Given the institutional centrality of ethnicity in Malaysian political life, Cheong (2009: 1) argues that the government has lost sight of the primary goal of national unity through social integration. Using historiography and thick description, the functional continuity of ethnicity is examined by Kay-Kim Khoo (2009). In order to plug gaps in our understandings of the ways in which data collection shapes government policy, statistical analysis of census data is provided by Kee-Cheok Cheong *et al*. (2009) and Shyamala Nagaraj *et al*. (2009). Surveys of university students are used by Nai-Peng Tey *et al*. (2009) to gauge the extent to which ethnocentrism is perpetuated through higher education. Finally, interviews with mixed-marriage families conducted by Beverly Siaw-Yuin Chong (2009) and Shyamala Nagaraj (2009) provide a lens through which to examine and challenge racial obsessions at societal and institutional levels.

Colonial Legacy

Khoo's (2009) evaluation of the historical antecedents of the New Economic Policy (NEP) begins in the 1860s. As the title of the article suggests, it is little more than a historical 'note' offering some thick description transected by five chronological sections. As for the actual NEP, less than ten per cent of the article deals directly with this policy. Section Five, labelled 'the contemporary scenario', ends with a docile and unremarkable assertion about the magnanimity of Malaysian universities and the glory of the new class of Malay millionaires.

[1] College of Law, Government and International Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia.
Email:*adtyson@hotmail.com* or *adam@uum.edu.my*

Far from contributing to Cheong's (2009: 3) future vision of a unified, cohesive national identity, Khoo's (2009: 105-106) conclusion reinforces the legitimacy and sanctity of pro-Malay policies.

Quantifying Ethnicity

Nagaraj *et al*. (2009) examine the nature and quality of 'counting ethnicity' through censuses, surveys, registries and official statistics. It is found that information on ethnicity is collected by nearly every institution in Malaysia, whether public or private, from birth and death certificates to bank accounts, hospital records and educational transcripts. What this actually means, however, is less clear given the lack of consensus about how to measure ethnicity and how to account for changes in perceptions and criteria over time. Given the complexity of collecting ethnic data, the authors – all five of them, if we are counting – highlight the 'creativity' of official agencies in defining and redefining ethnicity in congruence with social change. This matters because it has a direct bearing on public policy and social relations. Problems arise not from the gathering of ethnic data *per se*, but rather how this data is used and how it influences policy formulation, implementation and monitoring.

Section Two concerning 'ethnic diversity in Malaysia' provides background and context. The first-rate work of Charles Hirschman (1987) is frequently cited, although this is merely embroidered on the lengthy intervening discussion. Data on ethnic groups is borrowed from the Malaysian Department of Statistics and compiled into neat tables for further analysis. Based on the United Nations Statistics Division, some 49 countries chose to omit any questions related to ethnicity in their enumerative censuses (Nagaraj *et al*. 2009: 11). In France, we are told, the issue has triggered 'strong debate'. This is largely taken at face value, and the authors do not bother engaging in any such debate, nor do they question the persistence of intrusive ethnic profiling and coding in mainstream Malaysian life. Rather, they seem content to trace this practice back to the late 1800s in a highly descriptive manner. Devoid of political analysis, we are exposed to the problems of measuring ethnicity in a literal sense: self-identification being inconsistent, definitions being imperfect, race and religion being difficult to separate, and so forth.

Public and private data collection based on pre-coded ethnic groups helps authorities monitor the progress of *bumiputeras* (sons of the soil) in relation to non-*bumiputera* segments of the population. Statistics can be readily deployed in order to justify policies and regulations aligned with the goals of successive economic plans. But these same statistics are withheld by authorities, with confidentiality seen as an official 'rein on ethnic sensitivities' (Nagaraj *et al*. 2009: 23). Such an assertion surely warrants more than a passing, neutral remark. Unfortunately the authors seem content to strive for better quantitative methods, greater consistency and transparency in ethno-barometers, rather than the marginalisation of ethnic categories in favour of national identity and trans-ethnic solidarity. Once again Cheong's (2009: 3) aspiration for a socially inclusive Malaysian future appears to have been relegated.

Fortunately a degree of redemption is found in Cheong *et al*. (2009). Strong assertions are made about the primacy of ethnicity over national identity, leading to a dichotomous society of *bumi* and non-*bumi* where access to benefits, opportunities, subsidies, scholarships, licences and resources are unhealthily determined by ethnicity (Cheong *et al*.

2009: 44). The common thread running through this article is that affirmative action in education has led to segregation, identity has become monetised, and the New Economic Policy (and all subsequent policies) failed to achieve social integration. Greater economic parity has levelled the field, although there are doubts about the sustainability of an economic model that valorises inability and fails to engender a dynamic entrepreneurial spirit. In a clear and refreshing manner, the authors correctly indicate that economic urbanisation and modernisation would have occurred regardless of the implementation of the ethnocentric and socially damaging NEP. National redistribution according to needs is an obvious, favourable alternative.

One critique is the avoidance of any serious discussion of power in Malaysia. A persistent eggshell syndrome forces the authors to tiptoe around formative issues such as cronyism and UMNO's continued domination of Malaysian politics. Security imperatives based on fear mongering and obedient patriotism continue to shape elite ethnic bargains and ensure the 'survival' of Malaysian society. Such dominant narratives are met with discontent by the authors, although this is expressed in highly guarded tones. While nation-building suffers, Malaysian politics has 'not been remiss in engendering social stability' through the creation of a single identity (Cheong *et al*. 2009: 40). The authors offer prescriptive conclusions without any real closure. Social integration remains elusive, we are told, and unless a shared destiny is cultivated Malaysia will fall behind the curve in an increasingly competitive world. Exactly how this is to be cultivated remains unanswered.

Higher Education

Building on the themes of this special journal issue, Tey *et al*. (2009: 54) note that the imperatives of harmony and stability continue to trump social integration and nation-building in Malaysia. There may be a global correlation between higher educational attainment and tolerance, leading to reductions in chauvinistic feelings between ethnic groups. In Malaysia, however, evidence suggests that ethnocentrism remains strong amongst university students (Tey *et al*. 2009: 70). Research conducted at the University of Malaya reveals several factors hindering social integration, including cultural and religious differences, dietary and language preferences, participation in extra-curricular clubs and student societies, residential allocation, study habits and trends towards mono-ethnic faculties. Other variables include economic status, rural and urban background, gender and familial ties.

Tey *et al*. (2009: 56) argue that universities are a microcosm of a larger society. Therefore if a lack of meaningful interaction prevents complex learning and socialisation amongst students from different ethnic backgrounds, then this deficiency can be scaled upwards to represent society as a whole. As a point of departure, the authors lay some of the blame for increasing ethnic polarisation on 'extremists' in the ruling party in Malaysia. By extension, the efficacy of the traditional consociational model of elite governance is being questioned, but only indirectly and with no specific names mentioned.

There are several omissions in this study. First, dominant damaging stereotypes amongst youth are not mentioned, perhaps because they are too noxious to reproduce in a respectable journal. Second, the impact of new media and social networking technologies on student interaction, consciousness and perception is not touched upon. Third, not enough is done to address youth suffocation resulting from the post-1969 order in Malaysia. During this

period political activities were banned and restrictions imposed, culminating in a variant of what Syed Hussein Alatas (1972) called the 'captive mind' and what Meredith Weiss (2009) calls 'intellectual containment'.

Looking to the future, Tey *et al*. (2009: 60) recommend that university lecturers do more to encourage interactive learning and avoid ethnic segregation. For instance, part of the assessment structure for coursework should include multi-ethnic study groups and oral presentations, justified under the guise of *1Malaysia* if necessary. This is currently being done by some lecturers at the Universiti Utara Malaysia, though only on an *ad hoc* basis. Increasing internationalisation of higher education might also have an impact on the willingness and ability of students to interact across the social divide. Reducing the sense of social distance among students from different ethnic backgrounds will ultimately require a sustained and integrated approach.

Intermarriage

As the final part of the puzzle, analysis of intermarriage is used to critically engage with the intricacies and complexities of the nation-building process in Malaysia (Nagaraj 2009: 76). Official figures from the Housing and Population Census 2000 reveal that only 4.6 per cent of all marriages in Malaysia were 'mixed', meaning inter-cultural, inter-religious or inter-ethnic. In Peninsular Malaysia, it was very low (about 3 per cent), whereas in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak), it was significantly higher (11.6 per cent). The key indicators found to influence the probability of intermarriage in Malaysia include age, gender, education, occupation, place of residence, religion, migrant effects and ethnicity (Nagaraj 2009: 89). Despite some interesting nuggets of information (the rise of the Chindians), there is very little contribution to the wider debate about the dilemmas of social integration and the political remedies needed to ensure Malaysia achieves trans-ethnic solidarity and advanced nation-building.

In Chong's (2009) brief 'note' on mixed parentage in Malaysia, the theme of belonging is central. In a society where obsessions with 'race' are so deeply ingrained, categorised and institutionalised, there is an inevitable crisis of belonging for marginal groups and the children of mixed marriages. On the one hand, many Malaysians simply do not fit into the narrow legalistic categories and classifications preferred by bureaucrats and census statisticians. On the other hand, a majority are content to be confined to an officially sanctioned category, seeking comfort and security in their own (supposedly insular) group or community (Chong 2009: 94).

Conclusion

'Many Malaysians still do not necessarily feel like Malaysians' (Chong 2009: 95). This apt conclusion deserves to reach a wider audience, helping undermine racism, ignorance and complacency. Overcoming this trend, however, has implications for political power and social status and is therefore inevitably deemed 'sensitive'. I would argue the converse. It is in fact highly insensitive to attempt to coerce the Malaysian public with threats of impending riots and mayhem *à la* 13 May 1969 if issues of national importance are discussed openly and critically. It is high time that Malaysian academics heed the call of this special

issue and take seriously Cheong's (2009: 3) call for a reappraisal of national identity, social integration and trans-ethnic imperatives.

References

Alatas, Syed H. 1972. The captive mind in development studies. *International Social Sciences Journal* **24(1)**: 9–25.

Cheong, Kee-Cheok. 2009. Ethnicity in Malaysia: an editorial note. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* **46(1)**: 1–3.

Cheong, Kee-Cheok, Nagaraj, Shyamala and Lee, Kiong-Hock. 2009. Counting ethnicity: the National Economic Policy and social integration. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* **46(1)**: 33–52.

Chong, Beverly S.-Y. 2009. A note on Malaysians of mixed parentage. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* **46(1)**: 93–95.

Hirschman, Charles. 1987. The meaning and measurement of ethnicity in Malaysia: an analysis of census classification. *The Journal of Asian Studies* **46(3)**: 555–582.

Khoo, Kay-Kim. 2009. The New Economic Policy: a historical note. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* **46(1)**: 97–106.

Nagaraj, Shyamala. 2009. Intermarriage in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* **46(1)**: 75–92.

Nagaraj, Shyamala, Lee, Kiong-Hock, Tey, Nai-Peng, Ng, Chiu-Wan and Pala, Jean. 2009. Counting ethnicity in Malaysia: the complexity of measuring diversity. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* **46(1)**: 5–32.

Tey, Nai-Peng, Awang, Halimah and Singaravelloo, Kuppusamy. 2009. Ethnic interactions among students at the University of Malaya. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies* **46(1)**: 53–74.

Weiss, Meredith. 2009. Intellectual containment. *Critical Asian Studies* **41(4)**: 499–522.