

**CRISE** ● Centre for Research on Inequality,  
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# **Making ethnic citizens: The politics and practice of education in Malaysia**

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### *Abstract*

This paper examines the politics and practice of education in Malaysia within the context of ethnicity and nation-building. Public education in Malaysia – particularly, but not exclusively, at the pre-university level – is promoted as a nation-building tool, seeking to inculcate a sense of Malaysian-ness and patriotism. Simultaneously, however, public education – particularly, but not exclusively, at the university level – is used as a tool for the promotion of ethnic Malay interests. These two objectives are not necessarily contradictory; indeed the assertion that a vital ingredient in the creation of a ‘Malaysian nation’ is the eradication of inter-ethnic economic disparities has been at the heart of the Malaysian regime’s discourse on nation-building since the ethnic riots of May 1969. Hence, in this view, preferential policies for the economically disadvantaged but numerically dominant Malays are a necessary component of the nation-building project. Nonetheless, there are at least clear tensions between these two functions of education – tensions which, I shall argue, help explain both the particularly sensitive politics of education in Malaysia, and the discursive stance the Malaysian regime has adopted within the educational field.

Through an analysis of the dynamics of the politics of education, I argue that non-Malay educationalist activism has been characterised by a broad acceptance of the regime’s strategic objectives, whilst simultaneously seeking to ensure that educational opportunities for non-Malays do not suffer as a result of these policies. I argue that whilst the expansion of private tertiary education during the 1990s has largely ameliorated non-Malay concerns on this level, pre-university schooling remains a politically sensitive issue on all fronts, which continues to threaten precisely the inter-ethnic harmony it seeks to promote. Here, I argue that the Malaysian regime has sought to resolve the tensions between nation-building and ethnicity through a didactic and pedagogical approach to educational development, which promotes a concept of nationhood that, rather than transcending ethnic allegiances, is explicitly based on ethnic stratification. I argue that these ‘ethnic citizens’ are encouraged to participate in the Malaysian nation uncritically through the virtual worship of development symbols and unquestioning deference to political leadership.

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# Making ethnic citizens: The politics and practice of education in Malaysia

By Graham Brown<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I examine the politics and practice of education in Malaysia within the context of ethnicity and nation-building. The starting point for the paper is the following observation: Public education in Malaysia – particularly, but not exclusively, at the pre-university level – is promoted as a nation-building tool, seeking to inculcate a sense of Malaysian-ness and patriotism. Simultaneously, however, public education – particularly, but not exclusively, at the university level – is used as a tool for the promotion of ethnic Malay interests. These two objectives are not necessarily contradictory, indeed the assertion that a vital ingredient in the creation of a ‘Malaysian nation’ (*bangsa Malaysia*) is the eradication of inter-ethnic economic disparities has been at the heart of the Malaysian regime’s discourse on nation-building since the ethnic riots of May 1969. Hence, in this view, preferential policies for the economically disadvantaged but numerically dominant Malays are a necessary component of the nation-building project. Nonetheless, there are at least clear tensions between these two functions of education – tensions which, I shall argue, help explain both the particularly sensitive politics of education in Malaysia, and the discursive stance the Malaysian regime has adopted within the educational field.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2, I analyse the dynamics of the politics of education since independence, particularly in the post-1969 period. I argue that non-Malay educationalist activism has been characterised by a broad acceptance of the regime’s strategic objectives, whilst simultaneously seeking to ensure that educational opportunities for non-Malays do not suffer as a result of these policies. This acceptance, it must be stressed, may be indicative of a similar acceptance of the regime’s discursive logic about the necessity of preferential policies, but may also be attributable to the direct and explicit coercive threats ranged against critics of these policies: questioning Malay ‘special rights’ is an imprisonable offence under the wide and ambiguously defined powers of the Sedition Act. Nonetheless, non-Malay – particularly Chinese – politicians and social activists have pursued their case both offensively and defensively. Offensively, they have fought for greater educational opportunities for non-Malays in the tertiary sector. Defensively, they have sought to protect the autonomy and distinctiveness of the Chinese schools system, which many view as having been the subject of a concerted campaign of disestablishmentarianism by successive governments. I argue that whilst the expansion of private tertiary education during the 1990s has largely ameliorated non-Malay concerns on this level, pre-university schooling remains a politically sensitive issue on all fronts, which continues to threaten precisely the inter-ethnic harmony it seeks to promote.

Section 3 turns attention to the discursive practice of education in Malaysia through an analysis of the detailed curricula for public schools produced by the Ministry of Education. Here I argue that the Malaysian regime has sought to resolve the tensions between nation-building and ethnicity through a didactic and pedagogical approach to

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educational development, which promotes a concept of nationhood that, rather than transcending ethnic allegiances, is explicitly based on ethnic stratification. I argue that these 'ethnic citizens' are encouraged to participate in the Malaysian nation uncritically through the virtual worship of development symbols and unquestioning deference to political leadership. Section 4 concludes by contextualizing this discourse in the broader political programme of the BN regime.

## 2. The Politics of Education

Malaysia is one of the most multiethnic and multireligious countries in Southeast Asia. Formed in 1963, the Federation of Malaysia joined together peninsular Malaya, itself independent since 1957, with the British possessions on Borneo – Sabah (formerly British North Borneo) and Sarawak – and Singapore, which had been self-governing since 1959 and which left the Federation again in 1965. In the former Malaya, now known as West Malaysia, the politically dominant ethnic group are the indigenous Malays, who form a slight majority of the population. The remainder of the West Malaysian population is mostly ethnically Chinese, with a smaller Indian minority. The Borneo states, now known as East Malaysia, comprise more diverse indigenous ethnic groups, including some Malays (particularly in Sarawak) and a smaller population of Chinese and Indians. Together, the Malays and the East Malaysian indigenes constitute the *bumiputera* (lit. Sons of the Soil), who enjoy certain constitutionally enshrined 'special rights', initially justified at least in part as a counter-balance to the local economic dominance of the Chinese community, as encapsulated in the widely acknowledged 'bargain' of Malayan independence – 'Politics for the Malays, Economy for the Chinese' (Case 1996).

Constitutionally democratic, Malay[sia] was ruled from independence until 1969 by the Alliance, a coalition of three ethnic parties – the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). After the Alliance performed relatively badly in the 1969 general election, Malaysia descended into serious ethnic rioting and parliament was suspended. Upon its restoration two years later, the Alliance had been expanded through the cooptation of most of the opposition parties, and was later renamed the Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front). Increasingly dominated by UMNO, the BN has won every subsequent election with at least a two-thirds majority. The post-1969 period has also seen a significant shift in government policy towards the management of Malaysia's ethnic 'problem'. The government argued that the 1969 riots were caused by the undoubted economic backwardness of the Malay population, a legacy of British neglect during the colonial period. The broadly *laissez-faire* consociationalism of the early decades of independence was thus abandoned in favour of a series of economic and social measures designed to improve the socio-economic standing of the Malays and the *bumiputera* more broadly, including ethnic quotas in public institutions of higher education. At the same time, the 'incremental authoritarianism' (Crouch 1996) of the BN saw democratic freedoms increasingly undermined. Under the long tenure of prime minister Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003), many of the economic privileges enjoyed by the *bumiputera* were loosened in favour of a programme of rapid modernization and industrialization (Khuo 1992) but politics remains quintessentially ethnic.

On the eve of independence, the necessity of nation-building and the centrality of education to that project was clear both to Malaya's departing colonial masters and the new elites preparing to take over administration of the country. These sentiments were manifest in two government reports, the Barnes Report and the Fenn-Wu report, both published in 1951 on the status and potential reform of, respectively, Malay and Chinese school-level education. The Barnes Report stated explicitly that its approach was 'governed by the belief that the primary school should be treated avowedly and with full

deliberation as an instrument for building up a common Malayan nationality' (Malaya 1951b: 20). These words were echoed by the slightly later Fenn-Wu report which noted that it was 'only natural that Malaya's educational policy should be directed consciously and consistently toward... an ultimate Malayan nation', although cautioning presciently that 'care must be taken not to prostitute education to political purposes' (Malaya 1951a: 7).

The formation of a committee on Chinese education so rapidly in the wake of the publication of the Barnes Report was largely a product of the furore the latter awoke in the Chinese press (Chai 1977). The Barnes Report recommendations were aimed at the creation of a national public school system based on bilingual education with the particular promotion of a national lingua franca – either Malay or, as the report clearly favoured, English. Of most concern to the non-Malays was the explicitly stated implication of the report's recommendations that 'Chinese and Indians are being asked to give up gradually their own vernacular schools, and to send their children... to schools where Malay is the only oriental language taught', although affirming that 'they must do this under no kind of pressure' (Malaya 1951b: 23-4). The Fenn-Wu Report on Chinese education took the opposite approach to the Barnes Report, recommending the continuation of own-language schools (or vernacular schools as they are usually termed in Malaysia) with Malay and English to be taught alongside. Acknowledging this as a 'heavy load' that effectively demanded trilingualism of the Chinese, the report noted that the Chinese 'are more likely to resent any effort to restrict them to one or two languages than the necessity which requires them to study three' (Malaya 1951a: 6). In 1956, a third committee report on education, this time chaired by Abdul Razak bin Hussein, who later went on to become Malaysia's second prime minister, proposed that vernacular education was to be allowed to continue both at primary and secondary level, but that a common curriculum be instituted, recommendations which were accepted and given effect by the 1957 Education Ordinance. A later review of education policy, however, saw the languages both of tuition and examination in secondary schools restricted only to Malay or English. Existing Chinese-language secondary schools were faced with the hard choice of switching to one of these languages or losing any government assistance (Comber 1961; Roff 1967).

What is most remarkable about all these reports and the broader educationalist debate of the time is how far they considered language issues to be the main barrier to national unity. These concerns, however, must be contextualized in the broader politics of the period and, in particular, the politics of decolonization, which, as Lee and Heng (2000) note, was not just a negotiation between a nascent nation and its erstwhile colonial masters, but also an internal negotiation between the major ethnic groups of the new state. The issue of language and the 'national language' was a key issue of contention here, with non-Malay elites predominantly favouring English (or English and Malay) as the national language and the Malay nationalists of UMNO favouring Malay only. The compromise that was eventually struck was for Malay to be adopted as the national language with provisions for English to be used for ten years after full independence was attained in 1957.

The ethnic riots of 1969 forced a radical reappraisal of ethnic relations on the government, and it responded with a programme of affirmative action for the Malays and bumiputera through the New Economic Policy (NEP). Originally designed to run for twenty years until 1990, the NEP constituted a range of measures and objective designed to increase bumiputera participation in the modern economy, including restrictions on the floatation of share capital and the awarding of government contracts. Education was another key area addressed in the post-1969 period. National integration and unity became, in the government's own words, 'the over-riding objective' of the education system (Malaysia 1976: 384). Education was seen as a key medium through

which the socio-economic backwardness of the Malays could be corrected. English language tuition was phased out of the national education system, making Malay the only language of tuition, and public examinations were likewise restricted to Malay. Private Chinese secondary schools were allowed to continue but their examinations were not recognized by the government, thus denying pupils in these school places in public higher education or jobs in the public sector. State-funded vernacular education was allowed to continue at the primary level, but has apparently received significantly lower funding than the Malay language school; in 1984, Chinese primary schools constituted 27.3 per cent of all primary schools, but received only 3.4 per cent of the government allocation for primary schools (Heng 1997: 277). In higher education, state institutions were allotted quotas for the intake of bumiputera. Government funding for places at university, both in Malaysia and abroad, was almost entirely restricted to bumiputera; between 1980 and 1984, over 95 per cent of the successful applicants for overseas study grants were bumiputera. An initiative by the Chinese educationalist Dongjiaozong organizations to set up a private Chinese medium university was constantly blocked by the government; a legal challenge by Dongjiaozong and the Chinese-based opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) eventually reached the Supreme Court, Malaysia's highest court, which ruled in favour of the government.

Through the early years of the NEP, Chinese discontent was relatively contained, largely due to the acceptance across most ethnic group that some form of affirmative action was necessary for lasting stability, and the high growth rates of the period, which mitigated any potential 'loss' by the non-bumiputera communities (Jomo 2004). In the mid-1980s, however, against a backdrop of economic downturn, increased societal protest and tensions within the BN coalition, education issues became the focus of more vociferous ethnic discontent and mobilization. The first round of protests came in August 1987, when Universiti Malaya instituted a ruling limiting the use of Mandarin, Tamil and English in the teaching of elective subjects. The decision provoked demonstrations from non-Malay students, who interpreted the ruling as an attempt by the administration to boost the academic performance of the Malays compared to the other ethnic groups. The ever-belligerent Youth wing of UMNO soon waded into the controversy, criticising the demonstrators but doing nothing to prevent counter-demonstrations by students supportive of the university's move. As the protests continued, police were forced to keep the contending groups of demonstrators apart. By October, the DAP had become involved in the protests and the police were making numerous arrests.

The Universiti Malaya uproar was soon overshadowed, however, by a national level dispute, also concerning language and education, when the Education Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced the promotion of around ninety teachers who were not educated in Chinese-language schools to senior positions in government-aided Chinese-language primary schools. The promotions caused a storm of protest from the Chinese community, which has traditionally placed a strong value on its vernacular education system. The promotions were seen as an attempt to 'change the character of the Chinese schools', and perhaps ultimately pave the way for their disestablishment (Tan 2000: 244). Although Anwar quickly backed down over the appointments, Chinese opposition parties and educationalist groups continued to protest, demanding the instant withdrawal of the appointees. The Chinese parties in the BN were clearly pressurised by the protests into adopting a more chauvinistic position, for fear of losing ground to the DAP. In a sensational turn, members of Chinese components of the BN, led by MCA deputy president and minister of labour Lee Kam Sai, joined a protest rally with the DAP and other Chinese-based opposition parties, calling for a boycott of the schools involved. The boycott saw over thirty thousand children kept away from school by their parents.

The cycle of protest was intensified by a series of counter-demonstrations organised by various groups with UMNO. On the same day as the MCA-DAP joint rally, some five

hundred UMNO members also held a demonstration, but the primary target of their anger was their coalition partner the MCA, rather than the DAP; demonstrators burnt MCA flags and posters. Subsequently, on October 17, UMNO Youth held a rally at a disused stadium in Kampung Baru, a large Malay district in Kuala Lumpur. The rally, attended by some six thousand people, was highly chauvinistic, and the target of the protesters wrath was again the MCA rather than the DAP. Banners called for the resignation of Lee Kim Sai, and urged the MCA to 'go to Hell' (pergi Jahanam). Other banners expressed broader and often violent anti-Chinese sentiments: 'May 13 has begun', a reference to the race riots of 1969 (Government of Malaysia 1988: 17). The UMNO Youth president, Najib Tun Razak addressed the crowd, reportedly holding aloft a traditional Malay kris (a ceremonial dagger) and called for Lee's resignation, demanding that the MCA acquiesce to government policy, or else leave the BN.

By the end of October 1987, ethnic tensions in the country were reaching critical levels. As news spread of a freak shooting incident when an army sergeant ran amok killing one Chinese and wounding another Chinese and a Malay in the Chow Kit area of Kuala Lumpur, the centre of the 1969 riots, many people rushed to stockpile food, fearing the outbreak of rioting. Increasing public attention was focussed on a mass rally planned for 1 November to celebrate UMNO's fortieth year, postponed since 1986 (the actual anniversary) and relocated from Johor (UMNO's birthplace) to Kuala Lumpur. Up to a half million Malays were expected to join the rally, in what was seen by many as a show of strength by Mahathir against the UMNO dissidents. With ethnic tensions running high, however, it was feared that the rally would prove to be the spark point for fresh riots. In such a context, there was little doubt that the government needed to take action to calm sentiments and prevent an escalation of conflict. The form this response took, the 'Operation Lalang' crackdown that began October 27, was far beyond what many expected or deemed necessary. Over a hundred politicians and social activists were detained without trial under the notorious Internal Security Act (ISA), several newspapers were closed down, and all public demonstrations and rallies were banned. Among those detained were a number of prominent educationalists, including the leader of the Dongjiaozong organizations. The 1987 crackdown effectively stifled social discontent for years to come.

In any case, the politics of education shifted radically from the late 1980s onwards as the government reduced its redistributive fervour – although educational quotas remained in place – and embarked on a liberalisation of the private education sector. The 1980s and early 1990s saw an explosion in private tertiary education in Malaysia, driven by limited number of places at public universities combined with the increasing education rates of the population as a whole and the increasing cost of overseas education. But this growth in a private tertiary sector was limited by two factors: firstly, even private colleges were obliged to conduct their core tuition in Malay, driving many students looking for an English or Chinese language education overseas; and, secondly, private colleges were unable to confer degrees, although many developed "2+1" or "2+2" twinning programmes with overseas universities (Lee 1999).

The 1996 Education Act greatly liberalised the tertiary education sector, allowing for instruction in languages other than Malay and for the establishment of private universities. As has often been the case in Malaysia, this process of privatisation had strong political links. Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR) was one of the first beneficiaries of the privatisation policy, which was set up under the 1996 Education Act at the invitation of the Ministry of Education and started operations in December 1997. The company that operates UNITAR, Universiti Tun Abdul Razak Sdn. Bhd., is fully owned subsidiary of the listed company KUB Malaysia Bhd., a company with strong political links to UMNO. The chairman of both companies and largest shareholder in KUB is Hassan Harun, who also sits on the Supreme Council of UMNO and, indeed, at

the time the university was set up, also sat on the UMNO Education Bureau; other directors of both companies are also active in the upper echelons of UMNO. Even more blatantly political was the invitation by the Minister of Education in 2001 to the MCA to set up another private university to cater particularly for Chinese students, which took the eventual form of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR); the first director of the University's council, Ling Leong Sik, was then President of the MCA and Minister of Transport.

The private tertiary sector quickly flourished, however, and has taken much of the ethnic pressure off national university system. Nonetheless, the quota system continued to cause political problems and foster ethnic tensions. Whilst private education has provided an escape valve for much of this tension, this clearly only applies to students whose families are able to afford to send them to private institutions. For poorer Chinese, the quota system remained a major obstacle to tertiary education. In 2001, 'Education Ministry statistics showed that 560 top scorers in the SPM examinations... failed to get university places'. All were Chinese.

Secondary education also remains a divisive issue. Underpinned by the powerful Dongjiaozong organizations, the Chinese educationalist movement is deeply suspicious of government intentions towards vernacular primary education. In 1997, the government proposed the construction of 'Vision Schools', in which a Malay-language primary school would share a compound and some facilities with Chinese and Tamil schools. Tuition would remain separate, but pupils would share a canteen, hall and playing field. On face value a positive proposal that may help promote ethnic interaction and integration, the proposal was met with outraged protests by the Chinese educationalist movement which discerned a 'hidden agenda... to have a single medium of instruction in all schools'.

More recently, education issues proved divisive enough to drive wedges between the normally disciplined BN component parties. In 2002, the Ministry of Education, at the suggestion of Mahathir, proposed that Maths and Science be taught in English in all schools in an effort to improve skills in that language. Widespread grassroots Chinese opposition to this move resulted in a rare fracture in the BN public façade, with the MCA and other Chinese-based parties openly expressing their opposition to the policy, provoking an increasingly ethnicized debate between newspapers owned or controlled by the respective BN parties; Awang Sulung, a columnist in the UMNO-controlled Utusan Malaysia newspaper accused the Chinese parties of 'arrogance' and of suffering from a 'superiority complex' (quoted in Brown 2005). As the accusations and counter-accusations increased, the government raised the spectre of the Operation Lalang arrests, threatening to use the ISA against 'education extremists'.

### **3. The Practice of Education**

This section examines how the Malaysian government deals with issues of ethnicity and ethnic-relations within the content of the educational curricula at the primary and secondary level. Political theorists concerned with multicultural societies broadly concur that education – particularly the fields of citizenship and history – plays a vital role in promoting good interethnic relations, but quite what form this education should take is a matter of dispute. Learning about the structure and processes of governance is generally accepted as a critical element, but there is more debate over what level and form of normative content citizenship education should include. William Galston (1991: 244) argues for the inculcation of positive attitudes through a 'moralizing history: a pantheon of heroes who confer legitimacy on central institutions and are worthy of emulation'. Kymlicka (1997: 14-15 & 21), however, takes issue with this, preferring instead a concept of 'personal autonomy' which involves 'the willingness to hold political

authorities accountable... [and] a certain sort of critical attitude towards authority', although admitting a role of 'inculcating particular habits, virtues, and identities'. The problem boils down to one of liberal concerns over the entrusting the state with 'inculcation': on the one hand, scholars of multiculturalism recognize that in divided studies, some degree of 'sanitization' of education may be necessary in promoting a national identity; on the other hand, instinctive liberal suspicions of the motives of the state make them reluctant to entrust it with any role that might allow political manipulation. These are precisely the concerns that the Fenn-Wu report identified when it expressed concerns about the 'prostitution' of education.

### **3.1 Moral Education (Pendidikan Moral)**

As noted above, the importance of education as a means of promoting national unity and a Malaysian identity has long been recognized. Prior to 1969, this largely meant the adoption of Bahasa Malaysia as the main language of education, which, it was assumed, would constitute both the grounds for a common Malaysian identity and provide the social mobility necessary for disadvantaged groups to improve their standing. Following the 1969 ethnic riots, however, which forced the government to radically re-evaluate its policy towards ethnic relations, the content as much as the medium of education became more of a concern. One of the initial reactions to the crisis was the formulation of a 'national ideology', or Rukunegara. Clearly inspired by Indonesia's successful promotion of Pancasila ideology (Ramage 1995), the Rukunegara constitutes five elements:

- i. Faith in God;
- ii. Loyalty to King and Country;
- iii. Respect for the Rule of Law;
- iv. Upholding the Constitution; and
- v. Morals and Good Behaviour.

Teaching of the Rukunegara was made compulsory in primary and secondary education and a Civics course introduced to instil its value, with the following specific objectives (Fatimah Hamid Don 1977: 33):

- i. to foster loyalty and love for the country;
- ii. to cultivate consideration for others of different racial origins and creeds;
- iii. to develop self-reliance;
- iv. to develop an innovative attitude; and
- v. to develop correct social conduct, good behaviour and morality.

In reviewing the development of Civics education in the 1970s, McGregor (1977: 66-7) noted students receive an emphasis on 'loyalty, and charity towards groups and races other than their own' but that '[m]uch that would form an obvious part of any full course of moral education is, therefore, omitted'. Rahimah Ahmad (1998) further argues that the formulaic nature of the curriculum encourages 'a futile exercise of reciting the values [promoted in the curriculum]... teachers mention what values they want to integrate, which neither interest the students nor leave a lasting impression'. More recently, the Civics course has been replaced with a broader course of Moral Education (Pendidikan Moral), which covers the main areas of citizenship education. The Moral Education curricula in primary school are organised around five 'fields' (bidang) of values, which are:

- i. Values relating to self-development;
- ii. Values relating to self and family;
- iii. Values relating to self and society;
- iv. Values relating to self and the environment; and
- v. Values relating to self and country.

From the first year of primary school, a heavy focus of the Moral Education curriculum is the role and responsibilities of the individual in a multi-ethnic society through activities such as singing songs themed on 'unity' and talking about friends from other ethnic groups (Ministry of Education 2000b, Tahun 1: 27). By middle school, a whole field of values is dedicated to 'values relating to peace and harmony', but aspects of multiculturalism are promoted throughout the curriculum, such as sections on 'tolerance' and 'moderation' (largely defined in religious terms) in the field of self-development (Ministry of Education 2000a, Tingkatan 4: 12-15).

Lying alongside this relatively positive agenda of cultural and religious tolerance in the Moral Education curricula, however, is a rather more insidious agenda of, for want of a better term, political indoctrination. From the first year of primary school, pupils are taught that they have a moral obligation of 'respect and loyalty (*setia*) for leaders, king and country' (Ministry of Education 2000b, Tahun 1: 26). In year six, the field of 'self-development' contains a element dedicated to 'gratitude' (*berterima kasih*), in which pupils are taught that 'national leaders are the pride of the people'; prescribed activities include writing 'thank you letters' to national leaders and writing poems on the theme of 'the people's support for their leaders' (Ministry of Education 2000b, Tahun 6: 12 & 15). In form four of secondary school, under the section on 'trustworthiness' (*amanah*), pupils undertake activities themed on the slogan 'clean, efficient and trustworthy' (*bersih, cekap dan amanah*) – one of the BN regime's main campaign slogans of the past two decades (Ministry of Education 2000a, Tingkatan 4: 10).

By secondary school, the Moral Education curriculum contains an entire field of study devoted to 'patriotism'. Activities undertaken here include 'discussing ways of showing gratitude to the government for its efforts to develop the nation and the people' (Ministry of Education 2000a, Tingkatan 4: 23). In examining 'freedom of speech', pupils are encouraged to discuss the 'bad effects' (*kesan buruk*) of political demonstrations, clearly aimed at the massive reformist demonstrations of 1998, which were universally criticised by the compliant and fettered newspaper industry (Ministry of Education 2000a, Tingkatan 4: 30). Indeed, it is noteworthy that in a curriculum much of which is devoted to promoting the use of information technology as a learning aid, pupils are here specifically instructed to use the (government-dominated) newspaper industry as a source for their discussions, rather than the Internet, which proved to be one of the main vehicles for the dissemination of the reformist agenda (Abbott 2001; Brown 2004).

### **3.2 Local Studies (*Kajian Tempatan*) and History (*Sejarah*)**

The second set of curricula I will discuss are the History curricula or, as it is called at the primary level, Local Studies (Ministry of Education 2000c; Ministry of Education 2001; Ministry of Education 2002). A country's history, and how it is taught in schools, is clearly an important issue relating to citizenship. The political and academic debate over the teaching of Second World War history in Japanese schools and the Vietnam War in American schools are exemplary of these issues (Hein and Selden 2000), but the links between history, history teaching, identity and nation-building run deep in all contexts. Malaysian educationalists are clearly aware of the importance of the subject as a source of citizenship ideals and 'patriotism'. Even more than the Moral Education curricula, 'patriotism' is paramount in Local Studies and History; every topic and subtopic is explained in terms of its contribution to patriotism (*unsur patriotisme*). Indeed, the

curriculum unabashedly states that the ‘main focus of the History curriculum is directed towards instilling a patriotic spirit’ (Ministry of Education 2002: 5), which is then defined by the following characteristics:

- i. Pride in being Malaysian;
- ii. The spirit of loyalty to the nation;
- iii. The spirit of ‘we-ness’ (kekitaan);
- iv. Discipline; and
- v. Industriousness and productivity.

Local Studies is introduced in Year 4 of primary school, when pupils are around ten or eleven years old. In contrast to the Moral Education curriculum, where the same ‘themes’ are taught in every year, Local Studies is taught incrementally, with the first year focussing on sub-national studies, the latter two years on the nation as a whole:

Year 4 (ages 10-11):

1. Home and Family
2. The Neighbourhood
3. Our School
4. Local Affairs

Year 5:

5. Knowing Our Nation
6. The Beauty of Our Nation
7. The History of Our Nation
8. Malaysian Society

Year 6:

9. National Resources
10. National Economy
11. Nation-Building
12. Successes and Achievements of the Nation

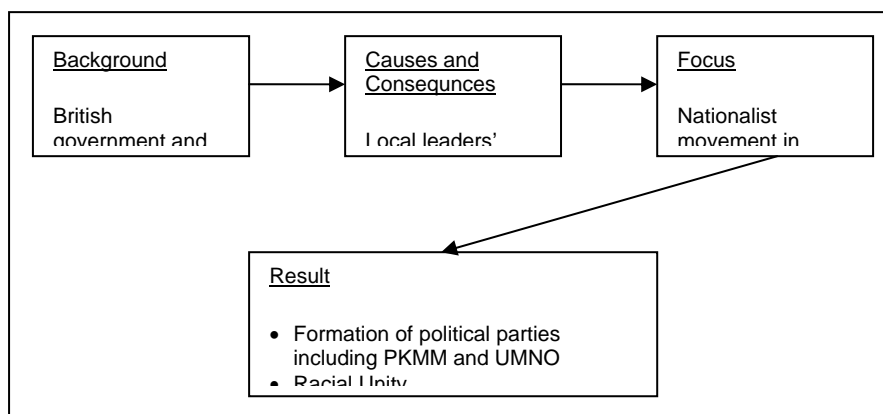
As with the Moral Education curricula, the Local Studies curriculum focuses heavily on the nature and demands of a multi-ethnic society. In ‘Neighbourhood’, the second module of the first year of the course (Year 4), pupils begin learning about ethnic and religious diversity and, in the fourth module on ‘Local Affairs’, are encouraged to share their own customs and rituals with other pupils (Ministry of Education 2001, Tahun 4: 33 & 65). In Year 5, the module on ‘Malaysian Society’ is almost completely devoted to developing awareness of and respect for different cultures and religions in the country. In Year 6, pupils begin to learn about the particularly Malaysian features of ethnic relations, including Malay ‘special rights’ and the position of Islam and the Malay language in the Constitution (Ministry of Education 2001, Tahun 6: 52-53). Certain stock phrases emerge here that reoccur throughout the curricula: pupils are encouraged to respect ‘the special rights of Malays and bumiputera and the legitimate interests of other races’; the Malay language is promoted as a ‘means of unity’ (Ministry of Education 2001, Tahun 6: 52-3). As in the Moral Education curricula, this emphasis on ethnic or racial ‘harmony’ is paired with a more political agenda, promoting ‘political stability’ as well as the virtual worship of the development ‘mega-projects’ associated in particular with the Mahathir administration: the Petronas Twin Towers (the tallest buildings in the world), the Penang Bridge (one of the longest in the world), the Sepang Formula One circuit and so forth. The section of the curriculum that deals with the process of independence is very much reflective of ‘history according to the winners’, with an exclusive focus on UMNO, MCA and MIC – the original Alliance triumvirate that still forms the basis of the BN – to the exclusion of other Malayan organisations. Pupils

gather information and write essays about 'important leaders' of these parties, and are encouraged to visit their websites; no such interest is afforded other political parties.

Local Studies, then, introduces pupils to a series of historical themes that are carried into the History curriculum of secondary school: ethnic harmony, development, and the importance of leadership and political stability. The historiography presented in the Local Studies and History curricula depicts Malaysian history as a series of ethnic compromises that resulted in the formation of an independent Malay[si]a. In this historical narrative, modern Malaysia finds its roots in the fifteenth century Malay Sultanate of Melaka, which is represented as a kind of glorious Golden Age ('kerajaan yang gemilang', Ministry of Education 2002: 4) and the subsequent formation of the diverse Malay kingdoms. The wealth and success of these kingdoms attracted the attention of the British colonialists, whose economic policies of imported labour in turn gave rise to Malaysia's multiethnic society. After the Second World War, opposition to the British Malayan Union proposal spurred local political mobilisation which resulted in the formation of the Federation of Malaya and, subsequently, Malaysia. Post-independence is then represented as a path of nation-building towards development, national unity and a place on the international stage.

The history of Malaysia as re-told in curricula is thus one of almost teleological progress towards ethnic harmony and economic success. There is a certain degree of fudging, for instance around the distinction between Malay nationalism and Malaysian nationalism at the time of the Malayan Union proposal, which the curriculum interprets as the 'peak of national awakening' (Ministry of Education 2002, Tingkatan 5: 30). The reaction against the Malayan Union proposal was undoubtedly a moment of Malay 'awakening'; as Stockwell (1977: 488) notes, the Malay reaction 'astounded all those convinced of Malay apathy' and set the scene for a reassertment of Malay nationalism, which found institutional form in UMNO, formed specifically to fight the proposals. But the reaction of non-Malays towards the Malayan Union proposal was less clear; the proposals put forward by UMNO which were eventually sealed in the Federation of Malaya agreement saw non-Malays lose much of the standing they were accorded by the Malayan Union proposal, including generous citizenship rights. At the height of the controversy, the president of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), which would later join with UMNO in the Alliance, described UMNO as being 'founded on a narrow fascistic concept of racialism' (quoted in Ampalavanar 1981: 84). A contemporary British commentator noted that 'far from achieving its aim of a closer and more harmonious association between Malays and Chinese, [the Malayan Union] seemed to be accomplishing the exact opposite' (Morrison 1949: 243).

As postmodernists constantly remind us, 'history' always involves the imposition of a necessarily somewhat abstracted 'narrative' on to what is otherwise 'one damn thing after another' and, in this context, the Malaysian state's airbrushing of the ethnic discord surrounding the Malayan Union is at least understandable. Similarly, other ethnically-divisive issues such as the overwhelmingly Chinese character of the Communist insurgency of the immediate post-war period and the often intense debates over citizenship and, for that matter, education are largely underplayed. Instead, an almost linear progression is presented entwining independence, development and national unity (see Figure 1). Nonetheless, the question remains whether the promotion of 'national unity' is best served by airbrushing past controversies or by encouraging students to actively participate in the debates of the time, a problem reminiscent of the debates over teaching of the Holocaust in modern-day Germany.



**Figure 1: Example of flowchart on 'Nationalism in Malaysia' from History curriculum**

As in Local Studies, the History agenda is overwhelmingly leader-focused with a distinct political agenda. In studying the 'features of democracy', pupils learn of 'leadership through (exemplary) example' [kepemimpinan melalui teladan] – another campaign slogan of the BN (Ministry of Education 2002, Tingkatan 5: 41). In studying the local nationalist movement, pupils are taught to 'value the sacrifices and struggles' of leaders (Ministry of Education 2002, Tingkatan 5: 26). Much of the study of the Malayan Union controversy in Form 3 is dedicated to 'understanding UMNO's struggle' (Ministry of Education 2002, Tingkatan 3: 28), which includes watching a film entitled '50 years of UMNO's struggle', going far beyond the Malayan Union period to the current day; the expected outcome of this section is that pupils learn to 'cherish the merits of national leaders'. Needless to say, no other political parties are afforded such an in-depth examination anywhere in the curriculum. In further studying 'efforts towards development and national unity', pupils learn of 'visionary leadership' [kepemimpinan berwawasan] with the expected result that they become 'proud of our capable leaders' [berbangga dengan pemimpin berwibawa] (Ministry of Education 2002, Tingkatan 5: 47).

#### **4. Conclusion: Contextualizing Education and Political Discourse**

We have seen, then, that the school curricula for key core subjects in Malaysia combine a positive social agenda of inculcating cultural and religious pluralism and tolerance with a political agenda that emphasizes loyalty and obedience to the incumbent administration. Within the context of this paper, it might be possible to analyse the benefits of the former approach without attention to the dubious propaganda of the latter. But the argument I will make in this concluding section is that these two pedagogical strands are inherently interlinked, and representative of the broader political discourse of the BN regime.

As we have seen, the official historiography of Malaysia, as taught in the Local Studies and History curricula, is very much based on the central position of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka as the font of 'Malayness'. Modern historical research, however, suggests the Melaka was only one of a number of contemporaneous political entities seeking to exert Malay identity and power and, indeed, much of northern Malaysia was historically more closely linked to the kingdom of Pattani in what is now Southern Thailand than Melaka; the northern Malay state of Kedah paid homage to the Thai empire even into the colonial period (e.g. Andaya 2001a; Andaya 2001b; Barnard 2001). The retrospective hegemony afforded Melaka, which has been much analysed by scholars of modern Malaysia (Chandra 1979; Kessler 1992; Milner 1995) has been attributed to the attractiveness to the BN of the dominant political ideology of the Melaka Sultanate – one of absolute loyalty to the ruler. The classic 'social contract' of the Melaka period embodied in the *Sejarah Melayu*, or Malay Annals, even expressly endowed the ruler with the right to

oppress his subjects with only minimal guarantees in return (e.g. Walker 2004). This discourse continues to pervade modern Malaysian political culture, in no small part due to the heavy emphasis given Melaka in the educational system and inculcation by the government-controlled media. Indeed the vehement reaction of many Malays to Mahathir's dismissal and imprisonment of his erstwhile deputy Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998 is often, ironically enough, attributed at least in part to Mahathir's apparent contravention of one of these minimal guarantees – that the ruler, however authoritarian or oppressive he is allowed to be, will not publicly humiliate any of his officials.

Demands for loyalty to 'king and country' such as those in the Rukunegara are, of course, nothing new in monarchical states; what stands out in the Malaysian case is the way that these demands are being restated in the form of political loyalty to the BN regime. Thus, for instance, after a factional dispute in UMNO in the 1970s, the *New Straits Times* opined in an editorial:

To the Malay mind, to challenge [the Prime Minister] would almost amount to an act of heresy. He is not only the pemimpin [leader] of the party; he is the head of the nation, a father-figure now to whom loyalty, respect and esteem is the traditional duty of the rakyat [people], whatever his social status, to accord.

(Editorial, *New Straits Times*, 28 March 1976, cited in Singh 1998: 246)

This editorial, and the broader discourse of the time, was clearly aimed specifically at 'reminding' Malays of their cultural duty of deference to leadership, but these demands have more recently been extended to Malaysians as a whole, particularly during the premiership of Mahathir (1981-2003). In 1992 Mahathir set out his 'Vision 2020' plan, a programme of nine 'central strategic challenges' that would see Malaysia attain fully developed status by the year 2020 (see Hilley 2001 for a thorough analysis). The first of these challenges is that 'of establishing a united Malaysian nation... made up of one "Bangsa Malaysia" [Malaysian nation] with political loyalty and dedication to the nation' (Mahathir 1991, emphasis added). The promises and demands of Vision 2020 thus reflect the themes identified in the educational curricula. Vision 2020 promised greater ethnic inclusivity, as Heng (1998: 73) notes

Chinese political observers were particularly struck by the unprecedented usage of the term Bangsa Malaysia. Malay leaders previously had employed the word bangsa within a chauvinistic Malay nationalist context... By widening the word's connotation to embrace non-Malay membership, Mahathir appeared to be breaking from the convention of Malay nationalist exclusivity.

But the price of this greater inclusivity is 'political loyalty'. The media discourse of the BN regime is replete with demands for 'loyalty' and 'gratitude'. As one pithy commentator put it,

the government does not consider itself as having any "duty" towards the people – such an idea is the scurrilous propaganda of the opposition. Instead, the government considers itself as the "parent" who has to "raise" us, the rakyat [people]

(Lim 2003)

These demands for loyalty, gratitude and patriotism are inimically linked with the regime's stance that a strong BN government is the only guarantee of a peaceful and harmonious Malaysia. Thus, for instance, in the run-up to the divisive November 1999 general elections, Mahathir stated that it was a 'fact' that

a weak government will bring about chaos and racial rioting... We did not get two-thirds majority [in 1969] and there were riots... If I don't tell the people this, then I am not carrying out my responsibilities.

(Borneo Post, 11 August 1999)

This political discourse is reflected in the educational curricula analysed above. Kymlicka's concerns about impacts of a lack of 'personal autonomy' inculcation in citizenship education is borne out in the Malaysian education system. Short of a being taught a 'critical attitude to authority', pupils are constantly barraged with terms such as respect (*hormat*), loyalty (*kesetiaan*) and obedience (*taat*). The education system promotes a concept of citizenship posits Malaysian 'unity' as constantly under threat and requiring for its protection unconditional loyalty to the BN – the only political force capable of defending 'unity'. Malaysians are defined first and foremost by their ethnicity and, in a truly Hobbesian bargain, these 'ethnic citizens' are offered two polarized alternatives: loyalty and support for the BN as a kind of ethnic Leviathan, with the promise of harmony and development it embodies; or, ethnic mobilization, civil strife and, ultimately, an ethnic 'war of all against all'.

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