The Future of Malay–Chinese Relations in Malaysia

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Malaysia, with a population of 26.75 million, is a multiethnic society comprised of Malays (54.2%), Chinese (25.3%), Indians (7.5%), and others (13.0%) (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006–2010). Together with the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak, the Malays are collectively known as *Bumiputera* (sons and daughters of the soil). The Malays, however, make up about 82.3% of the *Bumiputera*. While the terms Malay, *Bumiputera*, Chinese, and Indian are generally used as if each denotes a homogeneous group, each group in fact is highly differentiated. All the groups have their separate languages, cultures, and religions. Malays are Muslims, while Chinese and Indians belong to various denominations, notably Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. While Malay is the national language, English is taught and widely spoken in the country.

In this chapter, the Malay–Chinese relation is examined by considering the history and nature of the relationship, the ensuing intergroup conflict, and the steps taken by the government and civil society groups to address the conflict. Finally, a psychocultural approach to building peace between the two groups is proposed.

History and Nature of the Malay–Chinese Relations

Historically, the Malay Archipelago was a trading route spanning India, Arabia, and China for centuries even before the founding of Malacca in 1402 (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). Since then the Malays, Chinese, and Indians have been living and working in Malaya (now West Malaysia). This cultural pluralism was an integral part of the local reality and laid the grounds for a flexible cultural terrain capable of absorbing other layers of pluralism to come, even colonialism (Zawawi, 2004).

Prior to the British, Malaya was colonized first by the Portuguese in 1511 followed by the Dutch in 1641, but these two colonial powers did not interfere much with the local culture or structure of the society as their main aim was the monopoly of trade. But when the British colonized the country in 1726, they used their "divide and rule" policy across different cultural groups. The plural society turned into a

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culture divided along labor lines, laying the foundation for communal divisions in Malaysia.

The British, spurred by its need to consolidate raw materials for industrial capitalism at home, appeased the indigenous Malay aristocracy by conserving their position as the traditional rulers in matters concerning their religion and customs before doing anything else. The majority of the Malay peasantry, however, were kept on agrarian subsistence level and given only rudimentary education. In the process, British colonialism subjected the majority of the Malays to a position of economic and educational backwardness, contributing to the later ethnicization of poverty (Zawawi, 2004).

The British also encouraged unrestricted and large-scale immigration of Chinese and Indians (known generally as the non-Malays) to exploit the tin mines and open new lands for rubber estate cultivation so much so that by the mid-1930s their population swelled to virtually equal in size to the indigenous Malay population (Snodgrass, 1980).

During the British colonial period, two distinct and parallel methods of production were discernable in Malaya, the large-scale production and commercial activities of the English and the traditional methods of peasant agriculture and fishing practiced by the rural Malays. These economic distinctions sowed the seeds for structural violence. While the Europeans and non-Malays belonged to the modern capitalist sector of the economy, the Malays were mostly engaged in unwaged traditional peasant sector. Therefore, the plurality of the population and the dualism of the economy fell neatly within ethnic demarcations, with Malays and Chinese structurally isolated from one another.

When the British under the MacMichael Treaty wanted to create a Malayan Union where, among other changes, the status of the Malay rulers, the autonomy of the states, and the rights of the Malays would be abolished, the Malays united to form the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in 1946. The Chinese founded the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) in 1949, and similarly, the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) was formed in 1946. It should be noted that in contrast to UMNO, MCA and MIC rested on narrow class bases, comprising only of the wealthy Chinese and Indians. These three, UMNO, MCA, and MIC, formed the Alliance Party (a multiethnic but Malay-dominated coalition) and evolved a working relationship which has become the landmark of Malaysian politics ever since, that is, a power-sharing system based on the division and balance of responsibilities: the economic prominence of the non-Malays and the political supremacy of the Malays. The heart of this balance was the "Bargain of 1957," a social contract or agreement between the Malay and the non-Malays, where in return for recognizing Chinese and other immigrants' "...legitimate interests (economic rights), their rights to citizenship ... and residence as well as their ... freedom to preserve, practice and propagate their religion, culture and language" (Halim, 2000), the Malays retained the major symbols of their nation, that is, their sultans, their special position, their language (as the official language), and Islam as their religion (Halim, 2000). As long as the balance struck by the "Bargain of 1957" was kept, the system worked.

The Riots of 1969

On May 13, 1969, however, this balance was violently upset by communal riots or direct violence between the Malays and the Chinese, which erupted in Kuala Lumpur and elsewhere in the country. The violence was only the tip of the iceberg of a far more serious and deep-seated problem of a structural nature confronting the society as a result of its past. Ethnic plurality, economic dualism, and inequality were too ingrained in the fabric of the society, a result of the colonial era (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). In other words, the riots were a direct consequence of the structural violence that had gradually been building over the years. While The Bargain of 1957 provided a balance in previous years, this precarious balance broke in the run up to the 1969 election (Faaland, Parkinson, & Saniman, 2003).

Both Malays and Chinese had their own grievances that led to the eruptions of direct violence. From the perspective of the Malays, they felt that these so-called immigrants were economically much better than them, the locals. The Chinese, together with the Europeans, controlled the country's economy. Poverty among the Malays, especially in the rural areas, was rife though the country was now independent. The daily state of affairs for most Malays had not changed much, while newly granted citizenship status had made the Chinese politically stronger. In short, Malay grievance was basically economic; at that time the economy was totally in the hands of the Chinese and Europeans.

From the perspective of the Chinese, they were unhappy with Malay political dominance, where Malays were given special rights with the use of Malay as the national language, Islam as the state religion, and the maintenance of the functions and status of the Malay rulers (Halim, 2000). These special rights, especially the use of Malay as the national language, were the primary bone of contention for the Chinese.

While the riots of May 1969 were inevitable due to past structural income and sectarian imbalances between the Malays and the Chinese, the immediate trigger was the outcome of the federal election. With their newly given citizenship status, the Chinese were able to increase their political strength by giving more support to Chinese opposition parties, and these parties made significant gains compared to the Malay-dominated Alliance Party. It was said that members of the winning party marched through Kuala Lumpur through some largely Malay areas, carrying brooms that symbolized "sweeping" the Malays out of Kuala Lumpur as well as questioning the special rights given to Malays. The official report was that the Malays resented these acts, and riots ensued (Al-Mukmin, 2005; Hwang, 2003). From the perspective of the Malays, increasing Chinese electoral victory was a disaster, as Malay political control was seen as the Malays' counterbalance to their own impoverished economic situation. Malays were not only offended, but deeply humiliated because they saw that the Chinese benefited from their part of the bargain that gave equal political rights to Chinese, while Malays remained poor and now seemed to be losing their political dominance.

Actions Following the Riots

Following the riots, the government came up with a new formula for political rule. First, to address the lack of Malay economic progress, the government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP[1]) in 1971 to eradicate poverty and correct for racial economic imbalances. The essence of this affirmative action scheme favored the Malays, who were seen as economically disadvantaged (Abdullah, 1997). The Malay-dominated government asserted the need for some affirmative actions to build a more economically equitable society and to uplift Malays from economic backwardness.

Second, as open political competition had led to riots and bloodshed, "politicking" was limited, by the Constitution (Amendment) Act 1971 and an amendment to the Sedition Act that limited dissent and the questioning of sensitive issues (Zawawi, 2004). The Internal Security Act, which permits detention without trial, was also amended at this time to support "intercommunal harmony," and anyone found to instigate racial tension could be detained under this Act (Khoo, 1995). These amended acts gagged civil society groups.

These government actions were aimed to make Malays and Chinese more economically equitable, but sharpened political inequalities between the two groups. The implementation processes not only intensified interethnic tensions but also highlighted intraethnic inequities (Singh & Mukherjee, 1993). The amendments to the Sedition Act and Internal Security Act slowed down the process of democratization and governance in the country, silencing legitimate and peaceful protests by politically marginalized groups.

Present Scenario of the Malay–Chinese Relation

Currently, after 38 years since the implementation of the NEP, many Malays are still unhappy with the economic power of the Chinese and their dominance in the corporate sector. Malays fear that the Chinese will use this economic power to wield a political edge at their expense. While overall income inequality and interethnic and rural–urban inequality between the groups have declined, Malays still earn less than Chinese. Overall, Chinese businesses have not been worse off as a result of the NEP. New connections and alliances have emerged between Chinese and Malays as a result of the NEP. By creating business and political ties with Malays, Chinese businessmen have been able to profit from the NEP and avoid its pitfalls (Heng, 1997; Omar, 2005).

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[1]The NEP, which took the form of five-year development plans, was given a period of 20 years to achieve its restructuring targets and in 1991, was replaced by the National Development Plan (NDP). The NDP placed less emphasis on setting targets for income redistribution, and more on growth and income raising policies (Henderson, Hulme, Phillips, & Nur, 2002; Heng, 1997).

On the other hand, the Chinese still resent the Malays' political dominance, their monopoly of the public and government sector, pro-Malay affirmative action policies that Chinese feel institutionalize discrimination against them, and the more recent announcements made by the leadership of the country that Malaysia is an Islamic state. To the non-Muslims, while they acknowledge that Malay identity has always been equated with Islam, the prevailing pressure toward greater Islamization of the society is seen by many to curtail their religious liberties. For example, a man who marries a Muslim woman must adopt Islam. Proselytism of Muslims is forbidden by law, and what might count as such proselytism is rather broad. In addition, decisions of Islamic religious courts have the force of national law, a sensitive issue when one spouse in an existing marriage converts to Islam and makes the other members of the family subject to Islamic law on matters such as child custody (Heim, 2004).

Because open discussions on these sensitive issues are not allowed, the discontent between the two groups can be seen on the Internet, where members of both groups vent their hostility against one another. Prejudice and discrimination are felt by both. For example, Malays are less likely to be employed in the private sector which is predominantly Chinese based. A similar discrimination exists against the Chinese in the government sector which is largely made up of Malays. At present, one finds a society divided by ethnicity, language, religion, and culture and, to a lesser extent, by education, occupation, and rural–urban differences.

The government recently admitted the precipitous state of ethno-religious tensions and conflicts in the country and set up a 55-member National Unity Panel on July 11, 2007 (Hamidah, 2007). The sudden emergence of this national unity panel indicates something is not right. In the first meeting of the panel, the police revealed that there had been 950 ethnic clashes, a 15% increase in the number of ethnic "fights" in the past one year (Hamidah & Lee, 2007). From the scant report provided, 70% of the cases started with fights between groups or individuals from different races. Despite the paucity of information about these events, the fact that they occurred shows that something is amiss. These are preconflict conditions (Christie, 2005) which need to be addressed if a repeat of the 1969 violence is to be prevented.

The Politics of Ethnic Identity

National politics in Malaysia is based on ethnic identity, closely linked with the official ethnic categories. This politics of ethnic identity is intertwined with a politics of difference (e.g., Yuval-Davis, 1997), where differences are based on the notion of differing power relationships. In positioning ethnicity within such a framework, the state-imposed ethnic labeling of Malay, Chinese (also Indian), and the political categories of *Bumiputera* and non-*Bumiputera* carries with it different forms of political, economic, and social powers. There are special privileges available through the affirmative action program for the *Bumiputera* group. There is a symbiotic relationship between the ethnic collective of Malay and Chinese within the political

and economic spheres. In addition, the Malay ethnic identity has always been tied with Islam, which brings in another angle to the politics of ethnic identity based on power differences. In their daily living, Malays and Chinese carry with them these ethnic and political labels, each accentuating its "Malayness" or "Chineseness" in the interactions.

These differences are highlighted because each group is determined to retain its cultural and religious identity for fear of the other. The Malays fear that "... if it opened up too much to the non-Malay, non-Muslim communities, especially in matters pertaining to Islam – its most potent identity symbol – 'the others' would gain control over the land, given their perceived economic superiority" (p. 5, Muzaffar, 2002). In contrast, the non-Malays "... are afraid that if they do not protect their identity, expressed through language more than religion, the Malay majority, which enjoys political preeminence, will emasculate them totally" (p. 5, Muzaffar, 2002).

Such fears are capitalized by the government (more so by the Malay leadership than the Chinese) to further perpetuate the politics of ethnic identity. For 50 years, the government's divisive policy of ethnic identity kept party leaders in power by instilling fear in both groups.

To progress as a nation, however, contentions and unfair differences between Malays and Chinese have to be disentangled. Because the political leadership cannot be depended on to do this job, the onus lies on the people themselves. If group members can go beyond these vested political interests and work on the shared/common values between their groups, they may realize that their fear of the other is unfounded, and open up possibilities to reducing the power differential that had kept them apart all this while. In doing so, dialogue and contact can be initiated. The literature on intergroup contact shows that bringing conflicting groups together can improve intergroup relations. For example, contact through cross-group friendships has been shown to be consistently and negatively associated with a range of prejudice measures (Pettigrew, 1997). Research also shows that contact works because it provides knowledge about the out-group, induces empathy and perspective taking, creates more inclusive group representations, and diminishes intergroup anxiety and the perception of threat (Tausch, Kenworthy, & Hewstone, 2005). Of course, this will be no easy task in the Malaysian context because ethnicity has been part and parcel of being and knowing since colonial times.

A Psychocultural Approach to Peacebuilding

In this section, a psychocultural approach to peacebuilding based on the shared or common values within the cultures and religions of the Malays and Chinese is proposed. It should be acknowledged that a mere understanding of these shared values may not change the course of history (as the differences between the groups have been entrenched for too long), but it may make a modest contribution to reducing intergroup conflict and pave the way for the groups to come together. At the very least, these similarities should beget some thoughtful, sympathetic, and appreciative feelings for the other, even if they do not end the conflict. In addition, this approach

will need to be complemented by a number of other approaches simultaneously at the different levels of society (interpersonal, group, and societal), as suggested by the multilevel model of peacebuilding proposed by Christie, Tint, Wagner, and Winter (2008) with its many possible entry points.

Shared Cultural Values

Storz (1999) pointed out three similarities within the cultural belief systems of the Malays and Chinese that have implications for their values and behavior in business settings. While Storz limited her discussion only to this setting, I would like to argue that they are also relevant to everyday interpersonal and social settings. The three similarities relate to the view of self, epistemology, and the notion of time.

Both the Malay and Chinese belief systems contain an indigenous notion about inner human goodness. The Malay's *budi* (kindness, good deed) (Dahlan, 1991) and the concept of *ren* (goodness, humanity) from Chinese Confucianism (Tu, 1979, 1987) describe the self as holistic and as socially constructed and dependent on others. As such, reciprocity and mutuality are strong values, and this is apparent in people's attitudes and social relationships. People engage with others as total personalities, focusing more on the social and relational aspects of the transaction rather than on the contents. These values also point to a negotiation style which leans toward a win–win outcome, where what is important is how much both sides have gained in terms of human rewards (the assurance that the social relationships will continue is long term, with both feeling satisfied with the result). These values of reciprocity and mutuality also imply an orientation toward consensus and cooperation, where conflict avoidance is more likely than confrontation. Hence, results are often slower when compared to the more assertive and individualistic Western negotiation styles (Storz, 1999).

The second similarity is with respect to epistemology. Both Chinese and Malays share the view that knowledge comes from the head and the heart; thus, importance is also placed on the subjective. In making decisions and solving problems, solutions from other realms such as the spiritual may also be sought. Both systems also imply a cooperative and harmonious alliance with nature, to work with it rather than against it.

Third, for both Malays and Chinese, time or how people relate to the world is subjective, relative, and closely tied to the self. It can be used to define who one is and how others are to be defined. Thus, if one is a higher status person, it is common to keep the lower status person waiting (Storz, 1999).

Common Religious Values

The common values in religions refer to certain standard or principles that people uphold or adhere to, not to the theologies, philosophies, and doctrines of the religion (Muzaffar, 2002). These common values include attitudes and orientations

which have positive (e.g., honesty, compassion, sacrifice, patience, modesty, etc.) and negative (e.g., selfishness, arrogance, greed, corruption, stealing, etc.) impact on the individual and society, values associated with institutions or the human being's larger environment which serve to enhance the moral aspect of human existence (e.g., institutions such as the family, marriage, and community), visions associated with the meaning of life and life processes (e.g., while the rites and rituals to some of life's major milestones may differ, there are similarities in the meanings attached to them), and finally, the human bond, where all people all go through similar life processes.

Reducing Conflict, Increasing Contacts, and the Role of Civil Society Groups

Muzaffar (2002) argued that while these common values can be used to propagate ethnic integration, religious and cultural differences do exist and must also be understood more deeply in order to dispel interethnic fear, suspicion, and distrust of the other. He proposed interfaith dialogue as the forum where people from the various faiths can meet, talk, and listen to one another to try to understand the other's faith and culture. As noted, while there are differences in the belief and practice of other faiths, the objective is not to "correct" but to hear and listen and to understand each other's side. Because members of both groups have been socialized differently from the other according to their respective cultures, realizing that they do share some common cultural and religion values may force them to reconsider their differences. While Muzaffar (2002) proposed interfaith dialogue to do so, dialogue may not necessarily have religious overtones. It can just be a conversation or a discussion that involves people coming from many levels of society, from community leaders to the grassroots. The important point here is that members of the two groups meet in a face-to-face context to exchange points of view or just talk with one another because the existing norm is for both groups to remain within their own cocoons. Through contacts, discussions, and some joint activities, individuals and groups may come to a better understanding and respect of the other in the hope of gaining trust and building more lasting relationship. The meta-analytic study by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) showed the positive effects of intergroup contact on attitudes in a variety of intergroup contexts.

How can these shared values reduce intergroup conflict and bring the groups together? By emphasizing shared values, this psychocultural approach aims to modify people's perceptions of their differences and expand the level of category inclusiveness (Dovidio, Gaertner, Saguy, and Halabi, 2008). To put it another way, the ethnic groupings of Malays and Chinese are salient social identities, and categorized in this manner, differences between the groups become magnified. Much of this social categorization can be traced to colonial legacies subsequently reinforced by the government's divisive policy of power differences between the Chinese and Malays. However, social categorization is a dynamic process, and people at any one

time possess many different group identities and are capable of focusing on different social categories. Therefore, by altering the way people think about members of the in-group and out-group, the proposed psychocultural approach is directed at changing the nature of social categorization or how the Malays and Chinese see one another, which may be done via decategorization or recategorization (Dovidio et al., 2008). In each case, reducing the salience of the original group boundaries is expected to decrease the intergroup bias and conflict, though they do so in different ways. Whereas in decategorization, members of the two groups reduce bias by decreasing the attractiveness of former in-group members, in recategorization in-group and out-group members reduce bias by increasing the attractiveness of former out-group members to become members of a more inclusive group (Dovidio et al., 2008).

Such contacts are especially important in a multiethnic society where religious difference can be a potential source of conflict. While religion is not necessarily conflictual, like ethnicity, it can serve to distinguish one's self and one's group, further accentuating the power difference between the groups. Often, the group with less power is more aware of the tension than the privileged group. Currently, there is no formal institution in Malaysia that is taking the initiative to develop within the populace an appreciation of the shared values between the different cultures and religions. However, a number of NGOs and civil society groups such as the Movement for a JUST World, Cultural Development Center, Malaysia Youth and Students Democratic Movement, *Aliran*, Malaysian Interfaith Network, Interfaith Spiritual Fellowship, Center for Civilizational Dialogue at the University of Malaya, and Institute of Muslim Unity at the International Islamic University are now taking up this challenge. These groups are increasingly becoming more active in organizing activities geared toward increasing public awareness on the issue. While many have their own websites, a few like *Aliran* and JUST even have their own newsletters and host regular programs for the public.

Will this sharing of common values of the cultures and religions of the Malays and Chinese reduce the present intergroup conflict and bring the groups together? It will take time, but given the results of the recent March 2008 election, I am optimistic. For the first time in Malaysia's 50-year history, many Malaysians regardless of ethnic groups voted for an opposition political front made up of a loose coalition of three parties, a pro-Chinese party, an Islamic party, and a moderate people's justice party, calling for change in the social and political arenas and to work together as one nation rather than be divided by ethnicity or religion. The opposition was further buoyed by having a charismatic populist leader seen as capable of bridging the gap between the different ethnic and religious groups and providing a viable alternative to the current flagging leadership in the government. The country's long-standing multiethnic coalition, the National Front (previously the Alliance Party which was renamed after the 1969 riots), lost its two-thirds majority of parliament due to its failure to tackle the grievances of the non-Malays. At the same time, the younger, more-informed Malays also voted for the opposition because of governance issues that have over the years transformed the ruling party into an elected dictatorship. In addition, they criticized the NEP for creating a cosseted Malay elite who have

amassed considerable wealth at the expense of the poor whose impoverished condition the NEP was expected to address in the first place. While the government continues pitting the fears of each group against one another, the election results showed that many educated Malays and Chinese, especially those living in the urban areas, are no longer buying the ploy. While the National Front still won, they are now seen as being parochial, chauvinistic, and out of touch with the hopes and aspirations of the younger generations.

The psychocultural approach proposed is only one of many strategies that will need to be implemented simultaneously with other peacebuilding activities to bring the groups together. This approach involves changes in the attitudes and perceptions of the Malays and Chinese toward one another. The responsibility for making this approach work lies with the people, notably the educated and conscientized groups who are empowered and are able to see beyond the politics of ethnic identity espoused by the political leaders. They will be the voices of the people using the many civil society platforms that are available. These civil society groups can also pressure the government to revisit and reconsider existing documents that have been drawn up that deal with the issue of a united nation. One that is especially relevant is Vision 2020. Vision 2020, drawn up by the government in 1991, has the goal of making Malaysia into "... a united nation, with a confident Malaysian society, infused by strong moral and ethical values, living in a society that is democratic, liberal and tolerant, caring, economically just and equitable, progressive and prosperous, and in full possession of an economy that is competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient" (http://www.wawasan2020.com/vision/p2.html), by 2020. The nine central challenges outlined in the document are extremely important because until members of the different ethnic groups are united as one nation, Malaysia cannot hope to be a developed nation. This document, while important, was not discussed nor debated regarding how the goal was to be achieved. As such, many people either are oblivious to the document or question its usefulness and relevance to them. This is a major weakness within the Malaysian system of governance; state apparatus like the media or the education system is not put to proper use to promote and openly discuss matters that are related to the people. Some have criticized and belittled the "relevance" of Vision 2020, while others see it as another government gimmick. But I believe that Vision 2020 may successfully reduce intergroup conflict if its policies are transformed into action.

Conclusion

It is easy to explain intergroup conflict in terms of majority–minority relations, where the majority group is viewed as discriminating and insensitive because it is numerically larger and more powerful, and the minority group is discriminated against and stereotyped negatively. Though there is some truth in this, such a view may trap Malays and Chinese in exaggerated and rigidly stereotyped perceptions of each other and lock us in a battle of group blame and bias that is difficult

to escape. In the Malaysian context, due to the legacy of the past, the picture is more complex because while the Malays are politically more powerful than the Chinese, they are economically more disadvantaged. The affirmative action policies taken by the government after the race riots of 1969 to assist the Malays are seen by many Chinese as discriminatory. However, had the government not taken this position, the structural problem confronting the society may have resulted in more economic injustice to the majority of the Malay population. To a large extent, the NEP can be considered a positive action with respect to peacebuilding because it aims to restructure the society for a more equitable and balanced economic system. However, the NEP's implementations have been problematic, further distancing the groups, accentuating their differences, and increasing intergroup conflict.

Each group, while having a strong desire to preserve its individual identity and tradition, is also fearful of the other, a point recognized and put to good use by the government to maintain its grip on power. This is one of the biggest challenges to the Malay–Chinese relation – how to get the groups to move beyond ethnic (and religious) lines so that they can work together toward having a sense of national collective identity.

A psychocultural approach based on shared values within the cultures and religions of the Malays and Chinese is proposed to this end. By modifying the way people think about members of their in-group and out-group, the approach aims to change the perception that each group holds of the other; in creating more inclusive group representations, anxiety and the perception of threat can be reduced. The work of propagating this idea to the people will need to be taken up by concerned conscientized individuals and civil society groups via dialogue or forums. Hopefully, an increase in the right type of contact processes can reduce intergroup conflict. While this psychocultural approach will take time, I am hopeful that it can work if accompanied by other appropriate economic and political approaches. By having something in common, people will be more likely to start to communicate, hold dialogue, and learn to trust and live together as Malaysians, rather than as Malays or Chinese.

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