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Revisiting Lee Lam Thye's Ideas on Racial Polarisation in Malaysia

[Guest Submission](#) [September 19, 2021](#) [No Comments](#)

By Mohd Abbas Abdul Razak

Malaysia is a great country with a diverse population. It might not be the perfect or best country in the world, but definitely the best in the Muslim world. Foreign experts in the area of Sociology find Malaysia to be a classic role-model for countries that are embroiled in racism, sectarian violence, terrorism, class and caste systems.

At the personal level, I find Muslims in Malaysia having the highest level of tolerance in living side by side with other religious groups. Researchers from South Africa, Australia, and America come over to Malaysia to conduct research on how race integration works in the country. Particularly, they are interested in learning Malaysia's secret recipe so that it can be applied in their own homeland.

Although the vast majority of the people are Malays, they have accepted the fact that the other ethnic groups that came along with the coming of the British to Malaya (now Malaysia) have become part and parcel of the larger Malaysian society. It is a beautiful country with sunshine and sandy beaches mainly on the east coast of the peninsula. Here in Malaysia, we only have two seasons, either it rains or shines.

Despite the aforementioned good qualities of the country seen by others, there are some within the country that differ in their perspective looking at Malaysia. Their critical observation calls for the betterment of what is presently good within the people of the country. One among the many Malaysians who had been observing the Malaysian society and culture for a very long period of time is none other than Lee Lam Thye (1946-). Unlike the outsiders' perspective, Lee's observation calls for more profound qualities in the Malaysian people as the nation tries to grapple with the latest development that is happening around the globe.

Lee Lam Thye

Over the past decades, Malaysians have observed many politicians come and go in the political arena of the country. Among the many, only a few have captured and stayed in the hearts of the people. This small group of sincere and towering personalities is remembered for their great ideas and contributions to the nation. One among those who still actively contribute to the well-being of the people and nation is none other than Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye. Lee jumped on the bandwagon of politics by joining the Democratic Action Party (DAP). After two decades of being elected as a state legislative assemblyman and a parliamentarian, he opted to retire and become a social activist.

Upon leaving politics, Lee became a member of the board of trustees in many government agencies. Previously, as a politician and now as a social activist, Lee has shared his wisdom and given his best service to the nation. Regardless of his Chinese background, Lee presents himself to all race groups in the country in the true spirit of being a Malaysian. In addition, in his character, he is a humanist who champions issues that are of vital importance to the country and for the common good of all people. It is not an exaggeration to call such a personality like Lee the "People's Voice". For many of his great social contributions, he has received many prestigious awards and honorary and life titles from the government and other organisations. The

Racial and Religious Polarization

As a true Malaysian, Lee wrote many articles calling for greater unity, cooperation, understanding and harmony among the various races living in the country. Articles like; "Reject Racial Polarisation", "Be Prepared to Reduce Sense of Ethnicity", "Let's All Continue to Strengthen Unity as We Mark National Day", will be a few to state here. Besides the newspaper articles, Lee has several book publications under his name. As a versatile writer, he writes on a wide spectrum of subjects; like environment, human rights, family, ethics, social ills, morals and citizenship, etc. But the most oft-repeated themes in his writings are racial and religious polarisation.

In analysing the issue of racial polarisation that is happening in the university campuses, Lee is of the opinion that such a thing has existed for some time already and the issue has not been adequately addressed to bring a positive change. He feels that students at the tertiary level should be given the awareness that there is a need to overcome religious and racial barriers. This is very important to them as they will be the future leaders of the country. As leaders in the making, they should be properly nurtured and moulded so that they will be responsible for building Malaysia to be a strong and united nation.

Furthermore, Lee also calls for the inculcation of religious tolerance, mutual respect and understanding among university students. According to him, one positive way through which racial polarisation can be avoided is through sharing hostel rooms among students of different ethnicity. Besides that, other ways of overcoming the problem are by organising projects involving undergraduate students in community services. Engaging students of different races and religions in such projects will induce them to answer the call and importance of volunteerism which is an essential element in bringing up a caring and loving society. He believes that understanding and knowing one another's religion, culture and way of life will lead the youth of this country to be better citizens who are truly Malaysians in their outlook.

Lee strongly emphasises that efforts to overcome racial polarisation should start from primary and secondary schools and later followed by colleges. In order to live up to the expectation that has been outlined in many of the national policies that were enacted ever since *Merdeka* (Malaysia's Independence) which call for greater cooperation among Malaysians to live united, in peace and harmony and in the spirit of willingness to share and care for one another as one "Bangsa Malaysia" (Malaysians) can only be materialised when the issue of polarisation has been tackled adequately. As an important message from Lee, he calls upon all people of the country to address themselves as Malaysians no matter to what religion or race they belong to and not to be too fanatical about their ethnicity.

My Response

In my observation, many of Lee's ideas are well-articulated in inviting Malaysians of all walks of life to ponder and contemplate the issue of racial polarisation in the country. It is hard for any peace-loving Malaysian to disagree with many of his ideas on how the gap between the different races can be narrowed.

In my opinion, he was certainly right that unity and respect among the various ethnic groups living in Malaysia should first be inculcated through education at the primary and secondary levels before proceeding on to the college and tertiary levels. Unity and better understanding as a nation with a common destiny geared towards self-improvement and national development can be easily inculcated and transferred into the minds and hearts of the students at the lower level of schooling. It is believed that the hearts and minds of students at that level are still pure and unadulterated without any racial prejudice.

I strongly feel that Lee's idea on national integration among students of different ethnic backgrounds is still not quite attainable if the students at the primary level attend different types of schools. Since the different school systems in many ways have contributed to the disunity and polarisation of the Malaysian society, it will be a good idea to introduce one common curriculum taught in all schools in the morning, and after lunch-break, the students should be given the liberty to choose the language they want to learn. Those interested in Mandarin can join classes conducted in the school. Likewise, Muslim students can attend Arabic, Islamic Studies, Qur'anic memorization classes, etc. The same goes for Tamil, Punjabi and all other indigenous languages that are spoken in Sabah and Sarawak. All the languages and other co-curricular activities can be conducted at the same school.

Furthermore, mixing of students in the national schools by giving preference to Bahasa Malaysia as the language of unity can foster greater understanding among the different race groups. Besides this, the free mingling of students can nurture a common identity as "Bangsa Malaysia" in the hearts of the students. Correspondingly, the government on its part should maintain its philosophy of "unity within diversity".

National slogans that came about after the country's independence that call for social cohesion like; "Muhibah" (Goodwill), Rukun Tetangga (RT) (Neighbourhood Watch), "Malaysia Boleh" (Malaysia Can), "1Malaysia (One Malaysia)", "Keluarga Malaysia" (Malaysian Family), etc. among its citizens at all levels should be well received by all those who love a caring society.

Looking at Malaysian society from the Islamic perspective, it is of human nature for every ethnic group to love and feel great of its language, custom, culture and ethnicity. Islam only disapproves of one's feelings and

It is interesting to state here that the tradition of having “Open-House” during different religious festivals in the country should be maintained. This is a unique culture and identity of the Malaysian people. During such gatherings, people of different races and religious backgrounds come together to join in the merriment of the occasion, be it Hari Raya, Chinese Year, Christmas, Deepavali, etc. While enjoying food and delicacies, it creates an opportunity to share greetings with those present in such events.

In a way, organising “Open-House” during the festive season also contributes to the unity of the Malaysian society. Moreover, the “Open-House” concept observed in the country is one of its kind in the world that portrays the uniqueness of Malaysian society. Such a concept is not even available in the most developed countries of the world.

Conclusion

Much of Lee's ideas on how to build a dynamic society, maintaining unity, upholding justice, showing empathy, sustaining racial and religious tolerance, etc. within a diverse population are all good to be emulated by today's young generation of Malaysians. Lee's non-racial, non-prejudiced and nonbiased ways of looking at Malaysian society should serve as a beacon to all religious scholars, political leaders, and social workers in the country.

All politicians regardless of which side of the divide they belong to; government or the opposition should not incite people on racial and religious issues for the purpose of winning an election. The May 13 incident that happened in 1969 should serve as a good reminder to all Malaysians, particularly to politicians, to be extra cautious when speaking or writing on racial and religious matters. They should be aware that at times such sensitivities can ignite the “fire” of hatred in the hearts of the people.

Malaysia as a land of many opportunities and possibilities is able to cater for the needs of all Malaysians. I would end with a personal quote that goes this way, “There is no family, friendship, country and marriage without the attitude of loving, caring and sharing”. ***

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