



The Call for Malaysia to Revive its National Ego

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In our day-to-day conversation, ego explains the state of the behaviour of someone who is being proud, pompous, arrogant, never felt defeated, etc. While egotism, egocentrism and big fat ego, explain one being self-centred, selfish and not bothered about the common good of the society. Diametrically opposite to the preceding meanings, ego in psychology and philosophy is referred to one's identity, inner qualities, personality, the 'Self' or the 'I-am-ness' of an individual.

Compared to the physicality of a thumbprint, ego is something intangible but it explains the quality of that entity being in existence and alive. Iqbal (1877-1938) the philosopher says that the ego is the 'life force' within a living organism that leaps to the external world to indicate its existence.

Metaphorically it explains the action of an organism that tries to say that "this is me and I exist and need to be respected". More to say, that individual ego is trying to show its uniqueness and for that matter, it has its own pride and dignity. As such, it demands to be respected. Since the focus of this article is not centred on the mystic understanding of ego, we would rather leave such a discussion for another time.

National Ego

The term national ego refers to a common feeling among citizens of a particular country. Having a national ego is not proving to the world that your country alone has the right to exist while others do not. In a way, the national ego depicts a collective feeling of love, patriotism and an attachment to the soil in which citizens of a country were born. It is a natural feeling that is dormant within us and shows up when our nation is participating in sporting events, championing a good cause for humanity, rendering humanitarian help to countries devastated by war and tragedy either in cash or kind.

To have a national ego is not purely the right of the rich and powerful nations of the world. The country in which one lives could be a tiny dot on the map, but he/she should feel proud of his/her nation. At times, national ego comes to the surface and calls for a triumphant victory when one's country is contesting against all odds of winning another nation which is the favourite team to win the game or competition. No matter how good is the contending nation, we always hope that our national team would be able to defeat it. Besides that, the national ego also explains the feeling and yearning of our hearts to return to our motherland even we are away for our educational and economic endeavours.

What comes under the purview of a national ego are things like language, literature, national costume, national philosophy, national heritage, culture, etiquettes, food, delicacies, etc. In the modern context, having a national ego should in no way resemble the likeness of what was displayed by despotic leaders like Joseph Stalin (1878-1953), Adolph Hitler (1889-1945), Mao Zedong (1893-1976), and others who sowed hatred and committed atrocities in their countries and around the region.

There is a possibility for the national ego to be a missing thing in the lives of the masses when the country is ruled by an oppressive regime that carries out torture of the worst kind and genocide. It is pretty normal for people living in those countries to seek asylum elsewhere and talk bad about their own country. Simply put, national ego makes us feel proud of who we are, and gives us the confidence to stand tall with the rest of the world.

The Malaysian National Ego

Though more often, as Malaysians we might have read and heard about many great nations around the globe having their own national egos; like the American ego, Indian ego, Chinese ego, etc., but we have failed to realise that in the past, immediately after getting our Independence from the British, we did have a national ego of our own. Back then, that ego solidified us as a nation and gave us our identity as "Malaysians". Prior to Malaysia's Independence, many from the outside world predicted that Malaysia with its diverse ethnic population is doomed to fail. Despite the odds and skepticism on Malaysia, the country with its national ego at that time, successfully proved to the world that it prevailed as a nation by adopting the philosophy of "Unity within Diversity".

With that ego, we took the forward march in life heralding to the world of a novel philosophy that we would like to share with the rest of the world. Compared to many warring nations of the past that liked to invade, attack, subjugate and plunder the wealth of other countries, Malaysia had and still believes in a foreign policy of non-subjugation and non-interference in the internal affairs of the countries within its borders and elsewhere in the world. As a nation that believes in peace negotiations, anti-war, humanitarian help and global peace, Malaysia joined as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Later, in its effort to provide a good life for its people, Malaysia transformed itself from an agrarian country to one that embraced modern science and technology. It is Malaysia's belief that the two should be used for improving the living conditions of the people and for yielding positive results not only for herself but also for others around the globe. In dealing with its neighbours, Malaysia adopted the policy of "prosper thy neighbour", a philosophy that explains a win-win situation between her and others around the region. By applying that outlook, Malaysia allowed labour force from neighbouring countries and elsewhere to come in and generate income for their families they have left behind in their own homeland.

Malaysia's Glory of the Past

Malaysia's Independence that was achieved through a diplomatic means without any bloodshed, painted a positive image of itself in the eyes of other nations. Besides that, the patriotic feeling of the people was one of the reasons why the communists were defeated completely. Based on the principles of the "Rukun Negara" (Pillars of the Country or National Principles), Malaysians of all races and religions learned to co-exist as one nation.

As a nation struggling to achieve excellence, Malaysia tried to excel in many areas. In the 60s and 70s, sports and games were the avenues for us to display our national ego. Around that time, we had great shuttlers, footballers, hockey players and others that fought very hard at the regional and international competitions. Players like Punch Gunalan (1944-2012), Ng Boon Bee (1937-), Mokhtar Dahari (1953-1991), Soh Chin Ann (1950-), Santokh Singh (1952-), M. Chandran (1942-2019), Arumugam (1953-1988) who is better known as "the Spiderman of Malaysia", will be a few to state here with regard to badminton and football in the two decades after Independence.

Then in the 80s came the Sidek brothers; Misbun (1960-), Razif (1962-), Jalani (1963-), Rahman (1965-), and Rashid (1968) all coming from the same family brought glory to the nation in badminton. After that came Lee Chong Wei (1982-) and Nicol Ann David (1983-) taking the nation to greater heights in badminton and squash. Chong Wei and Nicol are internationally well-known Malaysian personalities. Both have won more international titles than all others in the country.

All the above players have drawn the interest of Malaysians of all walks of life to throw their undivided support when they represented the country internationally. Regardless of who they are in their ethnicity, the nation has supported and celebrated them as its national heroes.

Malaysians Need to Feel Proud of their Country

It is of human nature that sometimes we tend to look and marvel at other countries and systems available there, and at the same time, we lament as to why such beauty and orderliness are not available in our own countries. This natural feeling that comes to all of us has something to do with the proverb that says, "The grass is always greener on the other side". Practically speaking, although it should be okay for us to admire others for a little while, we should not take our contrastive analysis to a level that is negative which leads us to condemn our own countries.

As an academician of the International Islamic University Malaysia, teaching students of different countries and ethnicities, more often I have heard students praising countries like the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea, etc. for their beauty, the system of politics, prosperity and their advancement in the areas of science and technology.

Upon listening to them, as a response, I would quote the following saying: "No man is an island and no country can exist on its own". Like everyman, every country needs other countries around its borders and elsewhere for bilateral and multilateral relationships. Countries that are rich cannot simply exist on their own. Such countries need those in the Third World to supply them with natural resources. Without the oil from the Arab world, automobiles and industries will come to a grinding halt in many countries in the West.

Moreover, I call upon my students to look at the brighter side of life in their own countries. Other than that, they will be made to understand that God Almighty does not provide everything to an individual or nation. Some countries might be gifted with natural beauty and at the same time, they

can be lacking in natural resources. Although the Middle East can be gifted with a vast reserve of oil and gas, and petrol could be extremely cheap in that region compared to other parts of the world, yet it faces a great challenge in making freshwater available for human consumption and vegetation.

A country can be economically affluent and at the same time, people can be suffering from a high level of stress and other mental illnesses that may lead many citizens in that country to commit suicide. In most instances, media reports and documentaries are manufactured only to highlight the good part of any country. So, one should not feel elated to fantasise upon watching the visual images of a particular region of the world. As seekers of knowledge and truth, I ask my students to go beyond the visual images to read or travel to understand the actual realities in the countries they admire the most. After a lengthy argument and counterargument in comparing situations in many countries of the world, my anchoring point will be, there is no one country that is ideal and perfect for human inhabitation.

Having said that I would drive home the point, that all countries have something special and positive as a selling point. On the personal level, I truly believe that if we fail to train our eyes to see beauty, we are never going to see beauty in people, things around us, in our own country and the world at large.

What Hampers the Blooming of the Malaysian Ego?

Unlike in the early days of Independence, the present geopolitical, social and economic conditions in the country pose a tremendous challenge in the blooming of the Malaysian ego among the new generation of Malaysians. Although there are quite a number of factors that hamper the process, here we would like to highlight some of the more important factors only. The following will be some of the factors that block the birth of the Malaysian ego:

1. System of Education

Different school systems at the primary level prevent students of different ethnicity and religion from mingling freely in the true spirit of Bangsa Malaysia, 1Malaysia and now Keluarga Malaysia. Education which should have been an agent to bring unity among students of diverse ethnicity and religion in the country, at the moment, cannot perform this vital task in the absence of a common curriculum.

The different school systems take the students in different directions in terms of their goals and aims in education. Moreover, such schools will fail to inculcate a common aspiration for their motherland. It has been highlighted by many academicians in the country that the different language-based education has the tendency to give some exclusive feelings to the students in such schools that they are different from their peers in the other language-based schools. As a consequence of failing to mould the students at the primary level, it will be an uphill battle to drive home the idea into the psyche of the students at the secondary and tertiary levels, as to why as Malaysians they need to feel the togetherness and co-exist with people of other race and religion.

From the psychological perspective, patriotism and love for fellow Malaysians can be best inculcated in students when they are at the initial stage of their formal education.

2. Politics

Politicians and political parties also pose a threat to the blossoming of the Malaysian ego. Self-centred politicians and political parties for the sake of winning an election and gaining power

instigate and divide the masses along the racial divide. Not only that, but at times they also go internationally to make some damaging remarks about the country for cheap publicity. Such politicians should learn lessons from the US and other countries that all differences and conflicts should be resolved within the country.

In Malaysia, the parliament house should be the right place for opposition parties to trash out matters with the government pertaining to the public interest. As for the people, the ballot box during a general election will be the right forum to decide on its desired government to rule the country. In a peaceful country like Malaysia where democracy is pretty much alive, what is most needed for its further growth is for its people to practice less politicking and more thinking.

3. Internet & Social Media

Like all other parts of the world, Malaysia too immensely benefitted from the coming age of the Internet and social media. In most instances, they facilitate people in the country in positive ways by providing fast communication, connectivity, social interaction, fundraising, business deals, employment opportunities, etc. Although they made the country and the people move forward in many ways, nevertheless they also contributed in some negative ways like; dissemination of anti-government propaganda, character assassination gossip, racial and religious slurs.

Since technology stands on neutral ground, the blame should be referred to irresponsible users in the country. Sometimes the misinformation and disinformation on historical facts and the government policies spread through social media can cause people to hate the country and the government.

What Malaysians can be Proud of their Country?

Sometimes, by looking at far of countries, Malaysians forget the little good things around them that provide peace, comfort, safety and security for them and their families. Their disillusioned way of looking at those countries is just focused on the monetary gains one could get. After all, life is not all about money. Life is much broader and larger than our bank balance.

Below here are some of the things Malaysians can be proud of:

1. Malaysia is relatively a peaceful country. Up until now, there are no war or terror attacks that happened in the country. As such, it provides peace and security not only to its citizens but to all others who come to visit and work here. Though by nature Malaysians do not smile much, they are good at heart people who don't mean harm to others. Malaysians are respectful of the privacy of others be they local or foreigners.

2. Even though Malaysia is categorised as a developing nation with a small economy, nevertheless, it tries to help within its means countries that are facing humanitarian crisis. It has sent humanitarian missions to Palestine, Rohingya Refugee Camps in Bangladesh, Aceh, Syria and other countries. As a member nation of the United Nations, Malaysia had participated in many peacekeeping missions in countries like; Congo (now Zaire, 1960), Namibia (1989), Cambodia (1991), Somalia (1993), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1993), Timur Timor (1999), Ethiopia (2000) and Timor Leste (2006). Among Muslim countries of the world, Malaysia's voice and recommendations to world peace have been well received at the United Nations.

3. The law in the country bans civilians from carrying firearms. Such a law makes people feel secure to move around conducting their daily business. Compared to the situation here in Malaysia, in the United States and some Western countries, people do not feel safe as someone can pull out a gun all of sudden and go on a shooting spree killing innocent people at a park, school or on a public transportation.

4. Women in this country feel safe to drive on their own, go to work, go to shopping malls, etc. Incidents of rape and sexual harassment are not that rampant as those in the US and some European countries.

5. The vast majority of the Malaysian population binds a harmonious relationship with their fellow citizens of different race and religion. Isolated incidents of racism and racial slurs only happen once in a while during election campaigns. Even that, the authorities will be quick to tackle the issue amicably.

6. Major festivities like Hari Raya, Deepavali, Chinese New Year, Christmas and Hari Gawai are all celebrated in the spirit of 1Malaysia. Open-House held during such celebrations brings people of different religion and race together enjoying food and delicacies. The whole idea of organising an Open-House is to call all Malaysians not only to mix and mingle but to blend into forming one integrated society. The philosophy behind the Open-House is to inculcate in people a common identity as Malaysians and feel attached and loyal to the future aspiration of the nation.

7. Health care services are cheap compared to many other countries in the world. In those countries, one cannot get treatment in hospitals without having health insurance. Here in Malaysia, even those who do not have any health insurance can get treatment at government hospitals at a very cheap rate. The hardcore poor and those who are physically incapacitated are given free medical treatment.

8. As a democratic country, Malaysia allows freedom of speech. It is not total freedom like what one finds in the West but the freedom that goes with responsibility. As a multi-racial and multi-religious country, Malaysia allows the rights for people of all race and religion to practice their customs and rituals. People of every religion have their own house of worship. At the same time, they are not allowed to vilify one another's race and religion. Unlike in countries administered by military regimes, Malaysia as a country run by democratic principles, allows public opinions to be heard that can help it to improve its public services to better serve its people.

Ways to Bring Back the Malaysian Ego

The school and educational system in the country can be a great help in reviving the Malaysian ego. Subjects like History and Citizenship Studies will be able to provide the people with factual information on the conditions prior to the birth of a modern Malaysia. Very particularly, History as a subject can better explain to the new generation of Malaysians the era before the coming of the European colonisers, the nation's struggle during colonial time, the Japanese Occupation, the process Malaysia had to go through in getting its independence from the British, post-independent era, etc.

While Citizenship Studies can instil values in the students like tolerance, inclusiveness, active participation in the nation-building agenda, the cohesiveness of the individual with the society, how to be a law-abiding citizen, patriotism, and prioritising public interest over self-interest, etc. Teachers teaching these subjects should be well-trained and possess a high level of patriotism and competency.

In realising that Malaysia had a national ego of its own in the past, an effort to revive that ego is only possible when the present generation of young Malaysians are taught and reminded of the many great qualities and contributions of the nation at the national and international levels, the beauty of its diverse population, the philosophy of co-existence adopted by Malaysia within the country and around the region, etc.

Since Malaysia's path to becoming an advanced nation is still a long way to go, young Malaysians should join forces with the rest of others in the country to contribute in whatever ways possible. ***

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