

# Why "GDP by race" is the wrong question to ask

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**AS** educators in Malaysia, we have spent decades in lecture halls observing patterns that are frequently discussed in passing but rarely examined with care. In many of our classes, the racial imbalance among students is immediately apparent to the naked eye. These demographics reflect "upstream" differences in schooling quality, household income, and geographic access. They are the visible results of decades of national policy design and historical circumstance.

Yet, a fundamental shift occurs the moment a lecture begins. Once inside the classroom, those historical or structural advantages cease to dictate how a student is taught or measured. We do not teach "groups;" we teach individuals who have come to learn. Assignments are graded strictly on merit, and consultations are offered without the slightest regard for a student's surname. Expectations are applied uniformly across the board to ensure that academic standards do not shift or soften based on a student's ethnicity.

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This is a professional obligation that defines a university; a functional institution operates by enforcing equal rules within an unequal system. This distinction is vital because acknowledging structural imbalance does not require us to assign moral virtue or economic superiority to any specific group. The same logic must apply to our national economy. Economic outcomes are shaped by institutions and policy choices rather than inherent racial productivity. Unfortunately, this principle is being erased by a viral infographic currently circulating across Malaysian social media.

### **The fabrication of ethnic GDP**

The infographic claims that one racial group, despite being a minority, contributes the overwhelming majority of Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It suggests that economic value is racially concentrated and that certain communities are carrying the rest of the nation. This claim is not merely provocative; it is statistically indefensible. GDP is an aggregate measure of production, consumption, and investment across various sectors of the country.

In Malaysia, the Department of Statistics Malaysia measures this output by industry and value-added chains. It is not, and has never been, measured by the race or religion of the participants. No official data from any recognized institution attributes GDP output to ethnic groups. Such a metric would be functionally useless for any serious national economic planning. The infographic does not simply misread official statistics; it fabricates them to suit a divisive narrative, treating the national economy as a racial contest rather than a complex, integrated ecosystem.

### **The ownership fallacy**

The central error behind these claims is the "Ownership Fallacy," which is the mistaken belief that business ownership is the sole determinant of economic contribution. Factories and businesses do not operate as sovereign islands; they rely on workers from every community, public infrastructure, and regulated financial systems.

A manufacturing plant may be privately owned by a person of one ethnicity, but its output is inseparable from the public roads that carry its goods. That value is also tied to subsidized electricity, water supplies, and the legal framework that protects corporate assets. To assign the full value of that output to the race of the shareholder is an analytical failure. It collapses a multi-layered economic system into a single, shallow identity marker. This narrative ignores the "invisible enablers" of growth, as millions of Malaysians contribute in ways that are never captured in a private company's shareholder ledger.

### **The real economic drivers**

By framing economic output as a racial contest, these narratives obscure the genuine drivers of growth. Doctors, teachers, and regulators do not merely "support" the economy; they make it possible. If you remove legal certainty and infrastructure maintenance, economic output collapses

regardless of who owns the capital. The question of "which race contributes more" is fundamentally the wrong question for a nation to ask.

Malaysia's economic challenges are structural and systemic, rooted in stagnant wages and regional development gaps rather than racial productivity. Our problems lie in how wealth is generated and shared, not in how it is racially labelled by social media provocateurs. Reducing these issues to a racial scoreboard only serves to distract us from the difficult task of reform. It replaces policy analysis with resentment and transforms governance failures into long-standing communal grievances that hinder national progress.

### **Toward a shared future**

When fabricated statistics are repeated often enough, they begin to sound like truth. When shared by community leaders, these lies gain a false legitimacy that hardens prejudice and erodes trust. We must return to the principles of the classroom and learn to recognize inequality without weaponizing it against one another.

Students arrive carrying unequal histories, but the rules of engagement remain uniform. Malaysia's economy, much like its classrooms, is a shared system where the outcomes are ultimately collective. If we are serious about progress, we must abandon these racial myths and return to a focus on evidence. Only when we stop keeping score by race can we begin the work of building an economy that works for every Malaysian.

Progress requires acknowledging that our prosperity is inextricably linked to that of our neighbours. We must reject the narratives that seek to profit from our divisions and embrace our shared success. By focusing on reforms that benefit all citizens, we can move toward a more equitable and productive future. Let us commit to an economic discourse that is as fair and rigorous as the classrooms we strive to maintain.



**Dr. Mohd Zaidi Md Zabri**

**A Research Fellow at the Centre for Islamic Economics, International Islamic University Malaysia &**

**Prof. Datuk Dr. Ramzah Dambula** Chief Executive Officer of the Institute for Development Studies (Sabah).



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