

MY SAY: When will racial demagoguery end?

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Article

The Edge - 10/20/2008

As the US presidential race hots up, concerns have been raised that being black could allegedly cost Senator Barack Obama as much as six percentage points on election day. This is based on a new poll conducted by Stanford University, probing the effect of the Democratic presidential candidate's race on his historic campaign for the White House.

"There's a penalty for prejudice, and it's not trivial," Stanford University political scientist Paul Sniderman was quoted as saying. In a close contest, racism "might be enough to tip the election", he adds. Meanwhile, nearly three-quarters of the blacks polled say white people have too much influence on US politics. More than 70% of the population in the US is white, while only 13% is black.

A more recent AP-Yahoo survey found that 40% of all white Americans and a third of white Democrats hold partially negative views of African-Americans [Financial Times, Oct 8]. Admittedly, assessing the impact of racial prejudice is extremely difficult because many are unprepared to admit race could affect their vote.

Gary Werner, a professor at the American University Intercultural Management Institute, remarked: "There are some white Americans who will not vote for a black person. It is unlikely they would admit this publicly, but they might admit this in anonymous surveys." The so-called "Bradley effect" — referring to Tom Bradley, the African-American mayor of Los Angeles who suffered a shock defeat when he was vying to become governor of California in 1982 — is a testimony to this.

These random anecdotal occurrences demonstrate how complex race relations are — and it's even worse when it comes to politics. Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim came close enough when he said recently that the deteriorating race relations (in the country) can be attributed to politics and politicians. "Every time there is an election, they will instigate by raising racial issues," he said.

Thanks to Khoo, it looks like some light has been shed on where to look for the root causes of declining race relations in Malaysia. His statement resonates with the opinions of many others, including senior politicians. That's indeed a departure from targeting the students of tertiary institutions, who have been the favourite punching bags when it comes to issues of ethnic polarisation.

At times, some even accuse an entire university and turn it into a convenient scapegoat, allegedly for failing to "bridge" the ethnic divide among the students and also staff. Other forms of polarisation (based on regions, departments, programmes, courses and so on) are somehow deemed unimportant.

It is therefore not surprising that for the first time, the Cabinet was involved last year in directing the compilation of a book on race relations intended for use in all Malaysian universities. Such an unprecedented measure indicates not only the seriousness of the government in managing race relations at institutions of higher learning, but also, subtly, hints at "too much love, but too little trust" towards universities in dealing with such a seemingly sensitive issue.

This somewhat reinforces the (mis)perception that the university is in fact the cause of poor race relations. The view is further strengthened when it all started in one university, which failed to contain the issue quickly enough. As with many things, some were swift to politicise the incident (the book on ethnic relations compiled by a Universiti Putra Malaysia academician that was allegedly biased), forcing the Cabinet to act hurriedly. The rest is history. Needless to say, the episode did little to reverse the "mistrust" of universities.

So, each time a similar issue crops up, the universities are blamed without giving them many avenues to "counteract". Although there are studies to vindicate them, not many are willing to listen or worse still, challenge the prevailing thinking. The perception is already too engrained, particularly when there is no one else, including politicians, who want to take the blame lying down.

So, it is refreshing that academia has finally struck back, as it were. When Khoo spoke out, the tables were suddenly turned on the politicians. To many, though, this does not come as a real surprise. Universities, after all, have long been known as the hunting ground for politicians to recruit new cadres. Virtually all political parties have their proxies in the campuses. This is where the young minds are literally "coloured" by narrow political slants and chauvinistic tendencies inherent in them. This ranges from the blatant to the subtle, but all serve as an unhealthy influence on impressionable and uninitiated captive minds.

So, is there any wonder why the students are eventually being made to appear as the "black sheep" when in fact, the campuses are a mere reflection of the "racial" politics habitually practised in society at large? This is not an accident, of course. From casual observation, there seems to be a conscious plan to "infiltrate" the minds of students as part of the parties' political strategy, if not their survival.

Student elections, for example, are always viewed as a proxy war among the national political parties. This is evident from the manner in which the mass media reports the students' election results as "pro-this" and "anti-that" without any qualms, despite protests from universities and students alike. Alas, to unshackle all this will not be an easy task.

Would a Race Relations Act be able to work some magic? The success of similar Acts has been highlighted in other countries. Can it do the same here, regardless of the social context? While the proposed legislation may have won approval from some, others feel it is redundant as there are other laws to safeguard racial relations in the country. If those do not work, why would this new law? Yet others, ironically, argue that the proposed Act could serve to further discourage racial integration.

To be sure, the proposed Race Relations Act is not a fool-proof instrument. One can envisage the level of ambiguity that would plague its implementation given the subjectivity of the issue at hand. For instance, when a politician addresses only his/her race, almost to the exclusion of others, can this be construed as harmful to race relations per se?

Sure, there may be nothing overtly racist about it, but it can prove to be a clever disguise to stoke racial prejudices. Like it or not, the long-term impact of such a practice is nothing more than encouraging the "us" versus "them" mentality, akin to the racial politics of divide and rule. Like ticking a box each time you are required to state your race, it tends to remind us how different we are!

Another glaring recent case was the much publicised "pendatang" (immigrant) episode. At the end of it, a leader of an ethnic-based political party commended his own ethnic community for rendering support to the party in "resolving" the issue. That other Malaysians were also against the remarks made and lent equal support was brazenly left out, most likely because they did not belong to the same ethnic political grouping! Logically, they do not deserve to be recognised, let alone commended or congratulated. Is this not racial demagoguery at its finest?

It is this kind of myopic act, albeit inadvertent, that is sending mixed signals on creating better race relations in this country. More so if it manifests itself as deep-seated chauvinism despite the political rhetoric of insisting on the importance of unity. Unfortunately, this is more widespread than we think.

Self-proclaimed multiracial parties in Malaysia are equally guilty — for example, when it comes to officiating at party functions ironically dedicated only to one ethnic group within the party. What's worse is when the person officiating at the event comes from the same ethnic group.

At the other extreme, the election of a senior politician to a party post of one self-proclaimed multiracial party has been referred to as "difficult" because the elected person is deemed unable to speak the language of the dominant ethnic group in that party.

Moreover, in almost all national elections, such multiracial parties invariably nominate candidates based on the dominant ethnic group in the particular constituency — hardly a departure from race-based political party practices. Over time, these habitual practices will significantly impact the state of race relations in Malaysia. The question is, how much of these unhealthy long-standing practices will be changed by the Race Relations Act?

We have not even begun to talk about the fragmented education system where the practice in general is almost similar, that is, virtually reinforcing the divisive "us" versus "them" mentality for the sake of some political expediency. This is in spite of the ultimate consequence that our society will remain racially dysfunctional when the bigotry that is learnt eventually expresses itself at a later stage. Yet, we vote to have politically sponsored universities.

In summary, therefore, the way towards improving race relations is beyond any form of legislation, not unless it stems from a genuinely trusting heart with no trace of political hypocrisy. This is only possible through an act of sincerity.

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