

## **PERCEPTIONS OF ETHNIC RELATIONS AND UNDERSTANDING OF OTHER CULTURES AFTER THE 1MALAYSIA CAMPAIGN**

Suhida Hani Suid<sup>1</sup> and Siti Maziha Mustapha<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Malaysia has unique compositions that are based on multi-racial, multi religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual population. This creates challenges in forming national unity, getting every member of the society to understand other cultures and build strong ethnic relations. YAB Dato' Sri Najib Tun Razak launched the 1Malaysia concept in 2009 with the aims of building a united and progressive nation where the multicultural features of this country are used to form the 1Malaysia identity. Even though the 1Malaysia concept has been massively publicized via various modes of communication, there has been very little research on perceptions of ethnic relations and understanding of other cultures after 1Malaysia campaign especially from the perspectives secondary school students. Thus, this study attempts to close that gap. Questionnaires were distributed to 1700 secondary school students in Malaysia using stratified random sampling method. The findings showed that majority of the students felt that the relationship between different ethnic groups in Malaysia was very important, but they perceived the current situation of the relationship as moderate and they were neutral in terms of their level of satisfaction regarding the relationship. The Malay culture ranked first in terms of being understood by the secondary students, while the Chinese culture ranked second and the Indian culture ranked third. In addition, there is a significant relationship between students' ethnicity and their level of trust of other ethnic groups. Thus, it is hoped that the findings from this study will serve as indicators for the 1Malaysia campaign planning unit to strategize towards changing secondary students' perception of ethnic relations and their understanding of other cultures to further improve the level of trust between different ethnic groups.

### **Keywords:**

*1-Malaysia Concept, Ethnic Relations & Cultural Understanding*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Prime Minister's personal website (1Malaysia, 2009) describes 1Malaysia as intending to "...provide a free and open forum to discuss the things that matter deeply to us as a Nation. It provides a chance to express and explore the many perspectives of our fellow citizens. What makes Malaysia unique is the diversity of our peoples. 1Malaysia's goal is to preserve and enhance this unity in diversity which has always been our strength and remains our best hope for the future."

1Malaysia became an extensive public relations campaign on September 16, 2008, the day it was first announced by the Prime Minister. All government agencies and civil servants were instructed to put priority on ethnic harmony, national unity and competent governance. However, even though the government has always been consistent in executing this concept by

promoting the concept in various modes of communication, Malaysians are still facing a problem to understand the concept and end up interpreting it differently. Regardless of the massive publicity and coverage of the 1Malaysia concept, there has been very little research on perceptions of ethnic relations and understanding of other cultures after the 1Malaysia campaign especially from the perspectives of the younger generation like the secondary school students.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

1Malaysia concept was introduced by the present Prime Minister of Malaysia, YAB Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Tun Razak with the aim of developing one nation. With the motto; "1Malaysia, People First, Performance Now", the government stressed on promoting the concept where people think and act as united Malaysians. The implementation of the 1Malaysia concept is supposed to strengthen ethnicity relationships thus uniting Malaysia as a whole. Najib Razak (2009) has explained that 1Malaysia concept would annihilate discrimination.

In his speech to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> day of being Malaysia, Prime Minister Dato' Sri Najib Razak explained that the introduction of the 1Malaysia concept was the backbone of his vision to move Malaysia towards achieving a developed country status. He strongly believed that unity is pertinent in creating a peaceful country with plural society like Malaysia. Citizens of Malaysia were likened as a *keluarga besar* (big family), which consists of people from various races, cultures and beliefs, are the important components in determining the successful future of the country (Mohd Najib Razak, 2009). He mentioned that the plural society in Malaysia is an 'asset and competitive advantage that has and will continue to put us head and shoulder above our global competitors.' (Mohd Najib Razak, 2009).

Dato' Sri Najib Razak explained that the 1Malaysia concept has its uniqueness as it is not trying to assimilate the various cultures and create a national identity, but it celebrates the diversity of cultures and considers it as an asset. The 1Malaysia concept focusses on the acceptance of other cultures (most prominently the Malays, Chinese and Indian) in Malaysia. Therefore, eight core values which should be practised by all the different races in Malaysia; in order "to preserve and enhance this unity in diversity which has always been our strength" were identified and listed (1Malaysia Booklet, n.d.). The eight values are perseverance, acceptance, education, integrity, meritocracy, humility, loyalty and culture of excellence.

Inter-ethnic rivalry and suspicion have been present since the British colonial rule as the local Malay population was concerned that the Chinese and Indian migrant population might outnumber the Malay population in numbers. This will put the Malays in a minority position. The Malay states (9 in total ruled by Sultans) and 3 Straits Settlements (Penang, Singapore and Malacca) made up Malaya at the time of Independence (Omar, 2009). Independence was reached in 1957 and since then, Malaysia's ruling governments were for and by parties drawn along ethnic lines. Malaysia then was ruled politically by Malay aristocrats. The economy was dominated by ethnic Chinese while the Indians worked in the rubber estates or took up administrative jobs (Saravanamuttu, 2009).

The social issue of racial harmony is being rebranded in a new way in the 1Malaysia Concept by means of advertisements on billboards, television and radio networks in a very visible manner. In addition to that, a dedicated website was set up by the Prime Minister himself so that the sense of unity can be seen and felt for the greater and more economic reason of making business and economic advances. Rahman (2009) comments that race and religion based policies have resulted in the socially divisive modes of consciousness and behaviour.

Thus, the 1Malaysia concept has been massively publicized to ensure that the message reaches everyone regardless of his or her geographic location.

Research on 1Malaysia concept has increased recently. According to Borneo Post (2012), a series of survey on 1Malaysia were been conducted in 2009, 2010 and 2011 to gauge the support of people toward 1Malaysia concept mooted by Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak in 2009. Most of the researches focus on the level of understanding and awareness about 1Malaysia concept among public, concept and values, acceptance and appreciation of the concept and media roles in promoting the concept. However, these researches concentrated on the public in general. There has been very little research on perceptions of ethnic relations and understanding of other cultures after 1Malaysia campaign especially from the perspectives of secondary school students.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Instrument**

The survey instrument was a two-page questionnaire. The questions relevant to this paper were in two sections consisting of nine questions. The first question was about how the respondents perceived the relationship between different ethnic groups in Malaysia. The second question asked about the respondents' level of satisfaction regarding the relationship between different ethnic groups. The third question focused on the importance of the relationship between different ethnic groups. The fourth question asked about whether Malaysian can discuss racial issues openly. The fifth question in section 1 focussed on the respondents' views on ethnic relations in Malaysia in next ten years. Section 2 began with a question on respondents' understanding of the Malay culture, Chinese and Indian cultures and customs. The last question concentrated on the respondents' level of trust towards other ethnic groups.

The completed questionnaire was pre-tested through a pilot survey using 200 respondents. The objective of the pilot survey was to test the content and clarity of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was produced in two languages, which are Malay and English. The alpha coefficient for all the items is 0.829, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency.

The final version of the questionnaires was distributed to 2200 secondary school students all over Malaysia using stratified random sampling method. Out of which, 1700 questionnaires were received and used in the analysis of the data. Table 1 presents the characteristics of respondents.

**Table 1: Characteristics of the Respondents**

| <b>Categories</b> | <b>Characteristics</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| Gender            | Male                   | 49.6              |
|                   | Female                 | 50.3              |
| Ethnicity         | Malay                  | 67.6              |
|                   | Chinese                | 20.2              |

|       |                 |      |
|-------|-----------------|------|
|       | Indian          | 6.4  |
|       | Others          | 5.8  |
| Age   | 13              | 15.4 |
|       | 14              | 11.2 |
|       | 15              | 8.8  |
|       | 16              | 21.9 |
|       | 17              | 31.9 |
|       | 18              | 5.6  |
|       | 19              | 5.8  |
| State | Kuala Lumpur    | 22.9 |
|       | Selangor        | 12.8 |
|       | Negeri Sembilan | 9.6  |
|       | Pahang          | 10.0 |
|       | Kelantan        | 8.4  |
|       | Johor           | 5.8  |
|       | Sarawak         | 6.0  |
|       | Sabah           | 6.6  |
|       | Perak           | 5.9  |
|       | Kedah           | 11.9 |

## **RESULTS**

When the respondents were asked about how they perceived the relationship between different ethnic groups in Malaysia, 39.9% of them felt that the relationship between different ethnic groups in Malaysia was neutral and 13% felt that the relationship was bad. 36.8% of the respondents felt that the relationship between different ethnic groups in Malaysia was neutral.

When the respondents were asked whether there are satisfied with the relationships between different ethnic groups in Malaysia, majority of them were satisfied. Table 2 presents the findings.

**Table 2: Relationships between Different Ethnic Groups in Malaysia**

|                       | <b>Valid Percent</b> |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Very Satisfied        | 10.9                 |
| Satisfied             | 15.8                 |
| Slightly Satisfied    | 20.0                 |
| Neutral               | 36.8                 |
| Slightly Dissatisfied | 9.3                  |
| Dissatisfied          | 3.7                  |
| Very Dissatisfied     | 3.4                  |

10.9 % of them felt very satisfied, 15.8% satisfied and 20% slightly satisfied with relationship. 16.4% felt that they were dissatisfied with the relationship between different ethnic groups. 36.8% of the respondents felt that they were neutral about the relationship between different ethnic groups in Malaysia.

**Table 3:Chi-square Gender and Students’ Satisfaction**

|   | <b>X</b> |
|---|----------|
| Gender and student satisfaction of the relationship different ethnic groups | 0.001    |

The results of Chi-square test in Table 3 indicate that gender has a significant relationship with students’ satisfaction regarding the relationship between ethnic groups.

**Table 4:Chi-square Gender and Students’ Perception**

|  | X     |
|--|-------|
| Gender and students' perception of the importance of good relationship between different ethnic groups | 0.000 |

There is also a significant relationship between gender and students' perception of the importance of good relationship between different ethnic groups (see table 4). 57.4% of the respondents had an opinion that good relationships between different ethnic groups in Malaysia were very important. Only 15.5% of them felt neutral and 4.4% felt unimportant.

53.6% of the respondents responded that Malaysians can discuss racial issues openly. The other 46.4% believed that Malaysian cannot discuss the racial issues openly.

The respondents of difference races were asked regarding what they think of the ethnic relations in Malaysia in the next ten years. 76.2% of the Malay respondents answered that ethnic relations in Malaysia will improve, meanwhile 40.3% of the Chinese respondents answered the situation will worsen. Majority of the Indian respondents answered that the situation will remain the same while the others answered that they did not have any opinion.

**Table 5: Understanding of different cultures**

| Malay culture and customs | Valid Percent | Chinese culture and customs | Valid Percent | Indian culture and customs | Valid Percent |
|---------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| Good Understanding        | 60.7          | Good Understanding          | 36.4          | Good Understanding         | 20.8          |
| Neutral                   | 28.5          | Neutral                     | 30.1          | Neutral                    | 31.4          |
| Lacked Understanding      | 10.7          | Lacked Understanding        | 33.4          | Lacked Understanding       | 47.8          |

From Table 5, it was clear that majority of the respondents showed good understanding of the Malay culture and customs. 28.5% of them were neutral and only 10.7% lacked understanding. When it comes to the Chinese culture and customs, 36.4% of the respondents claimed to have understanding, 30.1% were neutral and 33.4% lacked understanding. Understanding of Indian culture and customs was really lacking as only 20.8% of the respondents said that they had understanding, 31.4% were neutral and 47.8% lacked understanding. From the findings, it was evident that the Indian culture and customs were the least understood by the respondents and the Malay culture and customs were the most understood.

The respondents were also asked about their level of trust in other ethnic groups. 40.5% of the respondents were neutral, 33.3% felt a distrust of other ethnic groups while only 26.2% had trust.

There is a significant relationship between the respondents’ race and level of trust at  $p=.000$  and significance at  $p<0.001$ . Majority of the Malay distrust other races, majority of Chinese slightly trust other races, and the Indian respondents strongly trust other races.

**Table 6: Understanding of Other Cultures**

| <b>STATE</b>    | <b>MALAY CULTURE AND CUSTOMS</b> | <b>CHINESE CULTURE AND CUSTOMS</b> | <b>INDIAN CULTURE AND CUSTOMS</b> |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Kuala Lumpur    | Do Not Understand                | Understand                         | Understand                        |
| Selangor        | Understand                       | Do Not Understand                  | Slightly Understand               |
| Negeri Sembilan | Slightly Do Not Understand       | Do Not Understand                  | Strongly Do Not Understand        |
| Pahang          | Do Not Understand                | Strongly Understand                | Neutral                           |
| Kelantan        | Strongly Understand              | Slightly Do Not Understand         | Strongly Do Not Understand        |
| Johor           | Do Not Understand                | Understand                         | Strongly Understand               |
| Sarawak         | Slightly Understand              | Slightly Do Not Understand         | Slightly Do Not Understand        |
| Sabah           | Slightly Do Not Understand       | Understand                         | Slightly Do Not Understand        |
| Perak           | Neutral                          | Strongly Understand                | Strongly Understand               |
| Kedah           | Strongly Understand              | Do Not Understand                  | Do Not Understand                 |

The findings in Table 6 show that respondents from different states had different level of understanding of the Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures and customs. This indicates the racial polarisation in different states in Malaysia.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings showed that majority of the students felt that the relationship between different ethnic groups in Malaysia was neutral. In terms of their level of satisfaction regarding the relationship, they perceived the current situation of the relationship as neutral. Only a small percentage of the respondents, felt that the relationship between different ethnic groups was bad. Respondents' gender has a significant relationship with their satisfaction regarding the relationship between ethnic groups.

Majority of the respondents felt that good relationship between different ethnic groups in Malaysia was very important in determining the successful future of the country. Only a very small percentage of the respondents felt that it was unimportant. There is also a significant relationship between gender and students' perception of the importance of good relationship between different ethnic groups.

The gap between the respondents believing that Malaysians can discuss racial issues openly and Malaysians cannot discuss the racial issues openly was very small. There was only a difference of 7.2%. This indicates that there is almost an equal division between the two opinions. This may be due to the respondents' level of trust in other ethnic groups where the percentages between respondents who felt neutral and those who had distrust of other ethnic groups showed a slight difference only.

The Malay culture ranked first in terms of being understood by the secondary students, while the Chinese culture ranked second and the Indian culture ranked third. The findings on different level of understanding of the Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures and customs in different states indicates the racial polarisation in different states in Malaysia. In addition, there is a significant relationship between students' ethnicity and their level of trust of other ethnic groups.

It is interesting to note that majority of the Malay respondents answered that ethnic relations in Malaysia in the next ten years will improve, meanwhile the Chinese respondents answered that the situation will worsen. Majority of the Indian respondents answered that the situation will remain the same while the others answered that they did not have any opinion.

Thus, it is hoped that the findings from this study will serve as indicators for the 1Malaysia campaign planning unit to strategize towards changing secondary students' perception of ethnic relations and their understanding of other cultures to further improve the level of trust between different ethnic groups. These youngsters will be the future generation and they will be the force in building a united and progressive nation.

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