General

Nation Building in Malaysia

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Nationalism is a key foundation in developing nation-building.

By taking into account of one factor that has always been used to categorise a country and its people, which is the language, it is not only seen as an identity of the nation but also a force that can unite the people.

Language also denotes the peoples' identification to the country, their acceptance of the country's interests and aspirations.

According to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)'s Institute of Ethnic Study (KITA) and Institute of Malay Civilisation (ATMA) Distinguished Fellow, Professor Dato' Dr. Teo Kok Seong, language had proven to be a force to be reckoned with throughout the history of mankind in the world.

"For example, during the ancient days of China, Emperor Shih Huang Ti had successfully used language, in the form of having a common spelling and writing system, to unite the people of China, a country of diverse dialects.

"It is the same in the modern era, for language especially the native language or mother tongue, has been used as a tool of unity. This has been demonstrated to be successful in the West and some good examples that are often highlighted are those displayed by two European countries, Italy and German.

"In this region, Indonesia is seen as having effectively united its people, said to consist of some 1,500 ethnicities and speaking thousands of different dialects. And not only that, the Indonesians are very articulate in their language. They love their language and are proud and faithful to it," he said during an intellectual discourse held at Universiti Malaysia Pahang.

The intellectual discourse, Program Bicara Cendekiawan Mulia Siri 5, was organised by the Vice-Chancellor Office and Centre for Human Sciences.

It was held at the Banquet Hall, Tun Abdul Razak Chancellery in UMP Pekan Campus on December 19, 2019.

Professor Dato' Dr. Teo said Malaysia had been determined to use the Malay language, already enshrined as the country's national language, to integrate its multi-racial people.

"The use of the language as a tool of unison was stated in the Razak Report in 1956 which later became the foundation for the Education Ordinance 1957 and eventually, the Education Act 1961 and 1996.

"In Part 17 of the Education Act 1996 (that replaces the Act of 1961) and under the title 'National

Language as the Main Medium', it stated that 'The national language must be the main medium of language in all learning institutes in the National Education System.

"Since 1957, the Malay language has already played the role as a language to unite the people, in the context of it being the national language," he said.

On how far this sovereign state had advocated the Malay language and whether it had successfully reflected the national identity and united its people, his reply was: 'No'.

He said in the context of the Malay language being appreciated as a nation language that could be used around the world, one that could produce a united nation and reflect the nation's linguistic identity, it had failed in Malaysia.

"It is time for us to rationally scrutinise the reasons behind this failure. To me, the main reason is that some of the citizens in this country cannot speak the language fluently, the language of the country.

"There should be a ruling or an edict that every citizen must know the country's language very well and have excellent command of the language.

"It is not only about not having a good command of the language that has become a problem, there seems to be a movement to reject the Malay language, an unwillingness among the Chinese society for example, to not to identify themselves with the Malay language," he said.

However, the government had tried for so long to overcome the problem of misunderstanding relating to the Malay language, he added.

"This can be seen from the efforts taken by the government to improve Malay language skills in vernacular schools by recommending the increase in hours of teaching the language, from 180 minutes to 270 minutes every week for pupils of Year Four, Year Five and Year Six.

"Another is to streamline the syllabus at national schools (Sekolah Kebangsaan) and vernacular schools (Sekolah Kebangsaan Cina/Tamil).

"However, these efforts were met with strong objections by the Chinese, seen through the articles by Chinese education activists. This objection can be clearly seen from issues involving the teaching of Jawi through khat lessons in idioms which was raised in early August of 2019, with objections emerging again in the middle of December the same year," he said.

He also said the government appeared to 'concede' to the pressures of these vernacular education activists as the Malay language learning material had been reduced from six pages to three pages from the total pages of 164 for Year 4 and by making it an elective subject for teaching and learning.

"However, the Chinese-stream education activists, Dong Jiao Zong, continued to mount pressure on the government, asking the Ministry of Education to appoint them, through the Board of School, so they can have the final say on choices to be made by parents or Parents and Teachers Association in matters involving teaching Jawi writings to Chinese children.

"This kind of attitude is anti-national in nature as they are going against the national interest, of the Malay language being the nation's main language and of the Malay language being the national aspiration and a tool of unity.

“This is especially so after the matter was already mutually agreed in the Agreement of Independence or popularly known as the Social Contract.

“Based on these examples, it clearly shows that we are not united, we are not united in our heart and soul, in the context of the Malay language being the national language,” he added.

In other words, there was no solid support from a group of people to accept or in making good the national interest and aspiration, in fulfilling the meaning of the Malay language as a national language and a tool of unity.

“A negara bangsa generally refers to a sovereign country that has gained independence, and the citizens living in unity.

“A united citizen, be it a homogenous one – that comprises only one race such as Japan or a heterogeneous one – that comprises many races such as Malaysia, exists because of various factors that are eventually progressed into the country’s policies.

“These policies are drawn up because the country and the people have the same language, history, culture and value,” he said.

The intellectual discourse is a monthly programme that features prominent figures within the country and abroad who speak and discuss about current issues.

Among those invited to share their ideas and views included veteran politician and former minister Tan Sri Dr. Rais Yatim and Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr. Nik Safiah Karim who spoke on a topic titled, ‘The Malay Language and Challenges in Strengthening the National Identity in Malaysia - the New Era.’

The guests present at the talk were UMP Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dr. Wan Azhar Wan Yusoff, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic and International), Professor Ts. Dr. Mohd. Rosli Hainin, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation), Professor Ts. Dr. Kamal Zuhairi Zamli and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Student Affairs and Alumni), Professor Dato’ Dr. Yuserrie Zainuddin.

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