

Challenges of Nation-building and the Formation of *Bangsa Malaysia*

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ABSTRACT

This article is an analysis of contending views on nation building and the nature of the multiethnic society in Malaysia, among analysts and scholars as well as among a selection of key informants from various backgrounds and positions. The paper's main objective is to investigate whether nation-building since 1991 following the launching of Vision 2020 by the fourth prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been successful in forging a common nationhood towards *Bangsa Malaysia* among Malaysians of all ethnic groups. A qualitative research in the form of interviews with nine key informants and library research of relevant literature shows there are divergent views regarding nation-building and Malaysian multiethnic society as well as *Bangsa Malaysia*. This paper argues that although the country has made great strides economically, Malaysia is still fraught with serious challenges in terms of moulding the various ethnic groups into a united nation. Bearing in mind the contending views and the realities of the Malaysian multiethnic society, this article posits that *Bangsa Malaysia* should be conceptualised as a multiethnic nation which has evolved historically with a shared vision that upholds the inclusive spirit of the Malaysian Constitution with the characteristics and capacities of a developed nation, sharing the fruits of equitable development, transcending ethnic boundaries and identifying themselves as Malaysians.

Key words: nation-building, plural society, Bangsa Malaysia, ethnic identity, national consciousness

Introduction

As a dynamic developing country, Malaysia has put forward its development plans with both medium and long-term strategies to move forward in its endeavor to be a developed nation by the year 2020. Almost three decades have passed since the launching of Vision 2020 in February 1991. The current Prime Minister Mahathir, who became prime minister the second time after the 14th general election on May 9, 2018 but under the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, has admitted that Vision 2020 cannot be achieved by 2020 due to the mismanagement and corruption of the Barisan Nasional (BN) regime which PH defeated in that election. However, the substantive issue here is not so much the date, but whether Malaysia is anywhere near in achieving the most important challenge in Vision 2020, i.e., the formation of a united Bangsa Malaysia – the latter often viewed in the context of ethnicity and the relationship between ethnic groups as well as their ethnic self-identification, rather than identification with the Malaysian nation. While it is widely acknowledged that the country has made significant strides in various dimensions of nation-building, such as developing its economy, the education system and generally in improving the quality of life of its people since Independence from the British in 1957, the most complex dimension, perhaps, is still the question of managing diversity effectively, i.e. moulding the various ethnic groups and sustaining their cohesiveness over the long term through nation-building. Recognising this complexity, the paper attempts to investigate the contending views on nation building, the multiethnic society and *Bangsa Malaysia* among analysts and scholars, as well as among key personalities drawn from various ethnic groups and social backgrounds.

For the purpose of analysis, the paper is divided into two parts: the first part is an analytical discussion of varied views on nation-building and the nature of the multiethnic society in Malaysia among analysts and academics; the second part consists of an

analysis of views on nation building with specific reference to *Bangsa Malaysia* based on a qualitative study of nine key informants who are important personalities drawn from various ethnic backgrounds, regions and social positions. Although the interviews for the qualitative study were held before the change of government in May 2018, the views could be regarded as valid and relevant until today.

I: Debates On Nation-Building and the Nature of Malaysian Society

Writings on ethnicity and nation-building after the Second World War and especially following the independence of many countries from the Western colonial rule have been quite an industry. This also includes writings on Malaysia, with much emphasis on ethnic issues, and an added subtheme, that is, *Bangsa Malaysia*, occupying a lot of space in Malaysian studies (Abdul Rahman 2018). The process of nation-building is often referred to as the effort of developing the spirit of patriotism and solidarity in order to create a country whose people share a common identity and destiny. Nation-building has been associated with various processes of change, including economic, social, cultural and political development. The major aim of nation-building is to foster national unity by developing a new national consciousness and an integrated nation.

The concern is, what are the foundations needed to develop a national identity which is an important cornerstone for the new nation? In many plural societies, the state has a problem when it attempts to build a viable nation and national cohesion and development. In this context, the process of nation-building has always been viewed as bringing together diverse people, i.e. people of different ethnic groups, languages, cultures, religions and other ethnic markers, and moulding their orientations towards a unified nation. It is a process of national integration that pulls together the heterogeneous population – the culturally and socially diverse groups – into a single territorial unit and the establishment of a national identity.

Given such a task, various scholars are of the view that the process

of nation-building could be seen as an architectural design or a mechanical model that could be built based on authority, needs and plan of the designer (Deutsch 1966: 3). But in order to achieve unity as a prerequisite for nation-building, it requires the strengthening of the citizens' loyalty towards their country of domicile and should reduce their prioritizing towards their own ethnic group (Emerson 1966: 91-98). The goal of building a harmonious society would be even more complex to achieve because the ethnic groups are keen to compare each other from the aspects of race such as skin colour, tradition, original language or even arts, which make ethnicity a fundamental fact of political, economic and social life.

There are a few scholars who define nation-building as a process of bringing isolated communities into intimate contact with each other and as a process of making the population loyal and committed to the state (Deutsch 1966). As an outcome of this process, the communities become integrated, and turn their loyalties towards the larger national entity. For instance, Deutsch (1966) define nation-building as a process of social mobilisation and cultural assimilation, bringing together regional, religious, caste, linguistic, tribal and other cleavages together. This process also produces the necessary complementarity of social communication and the creation of linkages between centres and regions (Smith 1991). In the same vein, Lijphart (1977) suggests that nation-building is a process of political development and that it must be seen as a prescription for the leaders of the developing state in their policy-making.

Several scholars also suggest that besides nation-building being conceived as a process – a long and complicated one – it should also be seen as an unfinished agenda (Abdul Rahman 2007), inherited from the colonial era, an agenda to engage with and mould different ethnic groups and religions to strengthen ethnic relations and foster national unity. However, a few other scholars such as Horowitz (2007: 20-37) opt for the term 'inter-ethnic accommodation' instead of 'nation-building', when they refer to such issues. This is because, as Horowitz puts it, inter-ethnic accommodation is a more modest goal while nation-building is far more ambitious and less readily achievable (2007: 20). However, the reality of post-colonial countries

such as Malaysia makes it imperative that these countries deal with nation-building as part and parcel of the encompassing agenda of national development rather than merely managing the more specific and focussed agenda of inter-ethnic accommodation (Abdul Rahman 2007: 13).

Having dealt with the divergent views on nation-building, let us now examine the various views regarding Malaysia as a multiethnic society.

In Malaysia, nation-building has often been viewed as a great challenge since ethnicity has characterized the very basis of its society and politics, while the people are constantly reminded which ethnic community they belong to and identify with. The high security identity card which is mandatory for all Malaysians specifies both ethnicity and religion. This is a clear example of this constant reminder because it displays all the crucial facts regarding each person's ethnic identity including ethnic basis, and the tendency of most political issues to be perceived in ethnic terms, something which has existed since Independence as illustrated by Zakaria (1989) and Crouch (1996), and even earlier. Oftentimes, ethnicity is politicized when the political coalition is organized along ethnic lines, or when access to political or economic benefit depends on ethnicity. In Malaysia, where ethnic issues are so crucial, Malay-Chinese relations are perceived as the most crucial and tend to dominate the politics of nation-building. The ethnic divide between the two ethnic groups is perceived as important because it illustrates the delicate demographic balance between them which could affect the process of nation-building and therefore development (Shamsul 1996). Indeed, ethnicity has dominated all aspects of Malaysian life and as a result, ethnic cleavages are found at almost all levels. In fact, the ethnic or race paradigm has been the dominant paradigm in Malaysian policy making, public life and Malaysian studies since even before Independence until today (Milner, Abdul Rahman & Tham 2014).

All these make a discussion in this paper on the nature of the Malaysian society very relevant. What then is the nature of Malaysian society? Based on some of the literature on the subject, this paper identifies at least three dominant views. The first view argues that

Malaysia is a plural society in which each group holds on to its language, culture and faith or religion and continues to pursue its own culture and language, ideas and life ways. In such a society which had experienced an exodus of in-migration during the colonial period, the immigrant groups tend to live in enclaves without the feeling of being part of a nation in the new land which is their host country. This view is championed by writers such as Furnivall (1939) and others. To Furnivall, a plural society comprises of two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit, meeting only in the market place, buying and selling, mixing but not combining. Although this concept of a plural society refers to the colonial context, post-independent Malaysia has segments of the population which retain cultural distinctiveness and isolation between the different ethnic groups. Certain ethnic groups 'loyalty' to the state has often been considered as problematic as they may only want to be recognized as part of the larger community in political and economic terms, but insist on remaining distinct culturally. Ratnam (1965) saw that such situation clearly prevailed in the early years of Malaysia's Independence. Each ethnic group continues to maintain their own interests and identities without nurturing common shared values and national identity (Bendix 1964; Pye 1965; Tilly & Ardant 1975; Lijphart 1977; Hippler 2002).

The second view seems to suggest a revisit of the notion of Malaysia as a 'plural society', because what exists in post-Independence Malaysia is 'plurality' which is a new kind of pluralism under new conditions. Various scholars such as Ongkili (1985), Shamsul (2008) and Mansor (2000) have argued that things have changed and that Malaysia is 'unity in diversity'. Ongkili (1985), for example, suggests that Malaysia has achieved unity and disagrees with Furnivall that this country is still 'one plural society with races living side by side' without intermingling. The country has been peaceful except for the tragedy of 13 May, 1969 which is considered as peculiar and extra-ordinary in the history of this country. In other words, Malaysia is not a 'plural society' in the classical Furnivallian sense. While some remaining traits of the colonial past whereby diverse groups exist side by side without intermingling and converging, and

without shared values or the absorption of aspects of the other, much of these traits have been transformed through social engineering and evolving social change.

This development is in keeping with the nature of contemporary Malaysian multiethnic society, in the context of democracy and modernity, which has been influenced by local and global forces where the boundaries between groups are impacted by economic, social and political processes as argued by the second view. In such a modern society, although they exhibit different identities but various ethnic groups – while maintaining certain socio-cultural boundaries between them – these boundaries are fluid and some have melted, allowing for crossing of boundaries and integration (Mansor 2000). They have become more fluid because of development and modernization, facilitated by the construction and adoption of a ‘national ideology’ (Rukunegara) imbued through education, in addition to other social and political means. These groups exist in what some scholars such as Shamsul (1992; 1996; 2008) calls, a ‘state of stable tension’, and that what Malaysia experiences is not ‘national unity’ as such, but ‘social cohesion’.

The third view is a variant of the second which maintains that Malaysian society exists as ‘unity in diversity’. This view postulated by Abdul Rahman (2002: 49) presents a model of ‘community of communities’ that evolves in a larger national state-based community. According to this view, the Malaysian social reality indicates that the various communities cherish their own identities, as well as common historical and cultural memories. But these communities exist and interact within the broader framework of the Malaysian national community whose fundamental principles, or ground rules, are generally accepted by the various communities. These communities accept the legitimacy and place their loyalty and commitment in the national community, while at the same time maintain their own distinct ethnic and local communities. The Constitution, the flag, the King, the national ideology and other symbols which are accepted as binding rules for the various communities, represent their shared values (Abdul Rahman 2002). Sub-groups inter mingle with each other at the workplace, in the residential areas and in

social spaces. Many are able to speak the national language and enjoy each other's festivals and so on. But these commonalities are not a sufficient condition to transform the Malaysian multi-ethnic society into a melting pot. This is so because the various communities still maintain their identities. They are evidences that each community contest or compete for their language and culture and for education in their mother tongue and have enviously guarded their cultures and religions. Despite all these, this third view argues that one can still become part of a nation and yet not dissolving one's ethnic identity, because they hold to key shared commonalities between the ethnic groups.

To summarise, suffice to say that Furnivall's idea of a plural society is more appropriate to describe Malaysia during the colonial era and to some extent the early years of Malaysia's Independence. It is a society created and maintained by colonial policy and objectives, with no serious attention to developing national identity and consciousness as a nation, but only having different groups living side by side and only meeting in the marketplace, where they meet but do not combine. On the other hand, in the modern post-independent Malaysia, although the society is 'plural' in the sense there are culturally different identities, many Malaysians of different ethnic groups share common social spaces between them as a result of rapid development, urbanization, modernization including the construction and adoption of a national ideology (Rukunegara). This paper is more inclined to take the second and the third position which maintains that there are various elements of shared interests of nation building but on some occasions, the ethnic groups prefer to maintain their distinct identities for economic and political reasons to be discussed in the next section.

While there are differing views regarding the nature of Malaysian society, there are also different understandings of *Bangsa Malaysia*. As indicated earlier, in February 1991, when announcing Vision 2020 with the aspiration to be a developed nation, prime minister Mahathir Mohamed stressed that a united *Bangsa Malaysia* is the first and most important challenge. This 'Vision 2020' and *Bangsa Malaysia* has triggered intense intellectual debates and discussions among scholars

and analysts such as Rustam (1993), Shamsul (1992; 1996), Ghazali (1995) and Abdul Rahman (2006). It is observed that the term *Bangsa Malaysia* has drawn several interpretations among them and also among the common people. However, as an operational definition for this paper, it is argued that *Bangsa Malaysia* is not Malaysian 'race' (as commonly said in the English media), nor a reinvention of a national identity, but rather a new nation of Malaysians of different ethnic groups unified by a common desire to be Malaysians sharing a common destiny.

Let us now briefly go into the debate of becoming a developed nation and *Bangsa Malaysia*.

Vision 2020 aspires for Malaysia to be a developed nation by 2020, complete with an economy that would be eightfold stronger than the economy of the early 1990s. In order to achieve this goal, it was proposed that Malaysia would need to grow at seven per cent per year over the projected thirty-year period from 1991 (Mahathir 1991). Thus, it is very important that various policies should respond sensitively to this projected plan. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Mahathir envisaged that Malaysia should not be a duplicate of any developed country but instead be a "developed country in our own mould" (Mahathir 1991: 2). Vision 2020 has been officially promoted as the ideological pillar of the National Development Policy (NDP) which was promulgated in mid-1991 to succeed the New Economic Policy (NEP). Vision 2020 was supposed to serve as the overarching national framework to announce Malaysia's entry into the 21st century. Some critics, however, were cynical of the substance of Vision 2020 which was regarded as largely familiar rather than novel, and that the substance of Vision 2020 had been mostly drawn from the core components of 'Mahathirist' ideology which involved nationalism, a freer capitalism, a universalizing Islam and populism (Khoo 1995). Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the first challenge of Vision 2020 lies in 'establishing a united Malaysian nation' possessed of 'a sense of common and shared destiny' shored up by a full and fair partnership, and 'made up of one *Bangsa Malaysia*' (Khoo 1995).

Notwithstanding the polemic of Vision 2020, this paper only

addresses the issue of *Bangsa Malaysia*, and takes the view as proposed by one of the scholars (Abdul Rahman 2007) that *Bangsa Malaysia* should be conceptualised as a multiethnic nation which has evolved historically with a shared vision of a future in common, a multiethnic nation that upholds the inclusive spirit of the Malaysian Constitution with the characteristics and capacities of a developed nation, sharing the fruits of equitable development, transcending ethnic identities and identifying themselves as Malaysians.

Guided by this concept, the second part of the paper will examine the various views of the key informants regarding the challenges of building *Bangsa Malaysia*, and to conclude the debate by relating them to nation-building discussed earlier.

II: Challenges in Building Bangsa Malaysia: Views of Key Informants

Malaysia today is indeed at a crossroads to build its own identity as a nation where each ethnic group strives for their rights to practice their traditional cultures such as rituals, language, educational system, politics, economics and arts. It has been the practice of the government to avoid touching on these issues such as the languages and cultures of the various ethnic groups as part of conflict management. But Malaysians need to be moulded and become one despite the diversity. The introduction of *Bangsa Malaysia* as the first challenge in Vision 2020 is certainly a new dimension of integration in the hope it will enhance the process of nation-building in the country.

With building *Bangsa Malaysia* as the first challenge not only of Vision 2020 but nation building, the proponents of *Bangsa Malaysia* would like it to be viewed as a catalyst to nation-building, a unifying factor among the various ethnic groups. However, in the process to achieve this vision, there are also feelings of anxiety especially among the Malays who are worried that their historical rights and 'special privileges' would be affected. The state- or authority-defined *Bangsa Malaysia* while stressing the need for unity of all ethnic groups and sharing the Malaysian consciousness and identity, also emphasizes

competitiveness, to prepare the people towards becoming a developed nation in the twenty first century. But the 'people-defined' *Bangsa Malaysia* contains a perception that with all ethnic groups being regarded as 'equal', this could be a 'threat' to the more economically disadvantaged ethnic groups such as rural Malays and the indigenous communities such as the Orang Asli and those in Sabah and Sarawak. However, on the other side, there are also feelings of dissatisfaction among non-Malay ethnic groups that the state policies tend to favour one ethnic group, i.e. the Malays, thus making the task more complicated. These views can be gleaned through the interviews with key informants below.

In an interview conducted some years ago with a Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) member of parliament, an ethnic Chinese, he acknowledged Mahathir for the *Bangsa Malaysia* concept. However, he voiced his reservation with certain ethnic leaders who, according to him, were only concerned with ethnicity and narrow ethnic interests, and ignore differences along class lines, and of gender and region. In his own words:

Malaysia has no nation-building programmes and we tend to leave it alone (while) the nation was built through negotiations, with the assumption that the only groups participating in the negotiations are the ethnic leaders. The consciousness of the nation is only ethnicity; (thus) we did not see class, gender and regional differences as an issue. In many other countries, negotiations in nation-building happen in multiple dimensions between regions like Australia, New South Wales versus Victoria and others, and they also have, ethnic, gender and class. In Malaysia, the only consciousness is ethnic representation that dominated every aspect of our lives. We have been independent for more than 50 years, (yet) we still deal with fundamental issues. We haven't gone beyond what Almarhum Tunku (the first prime minister) and Dato' Onn were debating. (Interview, 6 August 2010).

The idea of *Bangsa Malaysia* is not only a concern among politicians, but also among legal circles such as a former Chief Justice of Malaysia. Sharing his concern regarding the issue of *Bangsa Malaysia*, he wondered if it was against the Constitution. He said thus:

When we talk about Bangsa Malaysia, do we mean ethnicity or do we mean nation or do we mean Malays? If we talk about Malaysian nation, I agree, (because) when we talk about ethnicity, we mean culture. However when you talk about race no matter what nation you call, the race remains the same, a Pashtun remain Pashtun and Malays [remain] Melayu (Malays), we must defend the rights within the nation. (Interview, 7 August 2010).

He also cautioned that in working towards *Bangsa Malaysia*, the government's 'liberalization' tendencies in the post-1990 period – a period of transition towards a more liberal and multi-cultural Malaysian society – could ultimately pave the way towards achieving that end. However, the reality is that this may not be too easily attained, so long as the Malays still feel any move in that direction may eventually put them in a very vulnerable situation. Furthermore, many Malays tend to believe that the issue of Malay special rights and their position as *Bumiputeras* are 'non-negotiable,' and therefore should not be raised. He then cautioned about the Malay rights again, and said in his words:

Regarding the Malay rights, that is the promise made by the Reid Commission to us. They [meaning] the British wanted to change after 15 years but UMNO rejected it. So, it remained, those were the bargain. We gave them [non-Malays] citizenship which to me is much bigger and then education, and economy. What will happen to us if [there are] no Malay rights? (Interview, 7 August, 2010).

However, in an interview with a senior Malay politician on 2 August, 2010, he stressed that the idea of *Bangsa Malaysia* is not about losing the Malay special privileges, but about "living in harmony." He said:

The special assistance to Bumiputeras is valid. Until the [provision in the] Constitution is met, then we still need assistance. We must know the definition of Bangsa Malaysia, however politicians tend to make their own definition. 'Equal rights'? It is not about that. It is about 'living in harmony'. We have given them [non-Malays] citizenship and we protect their languages and religions and we also protect the Malays because this is Tanah Melayu (Malay Land or Malaya)... One of the conditions for Malaya was to absorb all non-

citizens into citizens and Bumiputera rights must be guarded and we Bumiputeras must be given the thirty per cent.

His support for affirmative action for the *Bumiputera* revolves around the need to address the socioeconomic imbalance between ethnic groups which should be corrected.

A similar view can be found in the interview with another former Malay senior civil servant, who voiced out his disappointment at the socioeconomic imbalance among the ethnic groups in the country. He said:

Although we have been independent for decades, we [meaning Malays] are still unable to compete fairly with other ethnic groups especially the Chinese because we are not in the same level of fair play. Since we are left far behind, we must no longer say the words “Berdiri sama tinggi, duduk sama rendah”, (translated roughly it means we stand tall as equals). The Bumiputeras must rise, we must change, statistics is just statistics, it does not reflect the truth. (Interview, 28 May, 2014).

In another interview, this time with a senior Malay Senator on 12 September, 2013, he pointed out that although the challenges of Vision 2020 did not have the order of priority, it is obvious that all other eight challenges must be accomplished first, since these challenges are the characteristics of *Bangsa Malaysia*. His view seems to go beyond socio-economic imbalances. In his own words:

The idea of Bangsa Malaysia is a noble one but if all the other eight challenges in the Vision have not been fulfilled, we cannot achieve Bangsa Malaysia and the Malays and other Bumiputeras will continue to be left behind.

In an interview with a Chinese social activist and former politician, he maintained that *Bangsa Malaysia* was a symbol of nationality. In his opinion, the Malaysian ‘race’ [he used the term ‘race’] should not be looked at in terms of ethnic groups but more as a ‘nation.’ He argued that the two concepts have one thing in common with both working towards unity. However, he was very concerned because everywhere he went, people tended to talk about race. He said in his

words "... people tend to talk about race, we, the Chinese, we, the Indians and we, the Malays and *Bumiputeras*."

How could the different ethnic groups be moulded together as one? Education is seen as a critical medium but it is not without problems. This can be seen in the interview with a Malay historian, interviewed on 12 July, 2010, who argued strongly that education is one of most important factors in creating *Bangsa Malaysia*. In her own words:

Students cannot be shaped into mind and spirit because they go to different school systems and did not integrate at an early age. As a nation, the country must have one [school] system that everyone can go [through] together. It is not assimilation but rather it will act as bonding. The Razak Report [presented in 1956 which became the blueprint for the education policy of independent Malaya, later Malaysia] has suggested that ten years after independence [achieved in 1957], we must have one school system. However, the idea cannot be realized because of political reasons and at the same time the people are very protective against the idea of one system. Countries like Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia all have one education system. In achieving Bangsa Malaysia and Vision 2020 all ethnic groups must respect the Constitution because it is not about being 'equal', rather it is about being 'equitable'.

The various views – often divergent – as shown above indicate the serious challenges that need to be tackled towards building *Bangsa Malaysia*. These challenges have been underlined by one of the scholars, namely Shamsul (1996b), who cautioned prime minister Mahathir regarding his proposition of Vision 2020. He argued that the government must realize the country is still saddled with a number of historical-structural impediments in the nation-building process, either in education, socio-cultural and economic spheres as well as Malaysia's modern electoral system. He proposed that the government should not compare the success in nation-building and Malaysia's overall performance with that of other multi-ethnic countries which were once considered to be 'success stories' but were later riddled with ethnic strife, such as Sri Lanka and the former Republic of Yugoslavia.

But is there no way forward for *Bangsa Malaysia*? Is there no experience of integration and acceptance among the ethnic groups, of the diverse people living together and putting aside ethnic differences? A number of those interviewed felt there are such experiences, and pointed to Sabah and Sarawak.

This can be gleaned from the interview with a former senior civil servant who headed a think tank. He expressed the view that Sabah and Sarawak consisted of various ethnic communities, and that it was not difficult for them to understand the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*. He maintained that both these states are 'perfect examples' of *Bangsa Malaysia*. Although history revealed that both states and their people were head hunters in the past, they were willing to put aside the historical baggage. "To forgive and forget the past' is something that Malaysians should follow in order to inculcate the spirit of *Bangsa Malaysia*." To him, Sabahans and Sarawakians have always had good relations with other ethnic groups. In fact there are about 40 ethnic groups in each state. He was of the view that certain sections of the people in Peninsular Malaysia were the ones who 'poisoned' the feelings of unity because the Malays tend to often feel 'threatened.' (Interview, 22 July 2010).

This informant was also of the view that ethnicity or religion were not obstacles towards *Bangsa Malaysia* in Sabah and Sarawak. It is socio-economic imbalances that constitute a big challenge. He said that poverty eradication continues to be an obstacle and a major challenge in both states to ensure that nation-building is on the right track and all the ethnic groups there could compete fairly in the quest to be a developed nation.

In an interview with another Malay senior civil servant, he proposed three 'recipes' towards unity and development – political stability, good governance and the people's role and support. There can be achieved because there is a good spirit of integration between Sabah, Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia. He further said that the government encourages greater integration between Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak through various official national unity programmes between the states. This includes yearly trips from Sabah and Sarawak to Peninsular Malaysia and vice versa. At the national

level, *Hari Malaysia* [Malaysia Day] is celebrated on 16 September every year to note the birth of Malaysia. (Interview, 10 Jun 2010).

Conclusion

Differences in perceptions of *Bangsa Malaysia* have triggered debates and arguments among the ethnic groups in Malaysia after its introduction. However, it has also been shown that the people are able to work and live together under conditions of the Malaysian economy registering a healthy growth and growing prosperity, while living conditions have been generally favourable. The spirit of integration is present among Malaysians at large who have remained united and supportive of the initiatives by the government to build a more prosperous nation and to bring a better quality of life for all. In this regard, we can agree that *Bangsa Malaysia* should be seen as a **nation-in-the-making**, grappling with problems of integrating the rural and the urban, intra and inter-ethnic, and promoting inter-class solidarity, and of the construction of national identity and national integration (Shamsul 1996).

While there are challenges in building *Bangsa Malaysia*, empirical reality shows that Malaysians have been living in harmony, and that ethnic diversity has not been an issue especially in Sabah and Sarawak. The challenge seems to be the urgent need to address structural inequalities between regions (Sabah, Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia), between rural and urban, and between ethnic groups and classes, only then the aspirations of moulding the diverse peoples into one united *Bangsa Malaysia* can be better realized.

In short, despite the challenges of nation-building namely the concerns over ethnic issues, rural-urban divide as well as class and regional imbalances, lending evidence of Malaysian society being a 'fractured' or 'divided' society – a term used by various political scientists such as Zakaria (1989), Horowitz (2007) and others when studying this subject – there is a way forward towards a united *Bangsa Malaysia*. As highlighted by a number of those interviewed, for *Bangsa Malaysia* to emerge, structural imbalances – ethnic, rural-urban, and region – must be effectively addressed in a fair and just

manner based on the principle of inclusion. At the same time, serious efforts towards uniting the people from an early age particularly through a system of education guided by the principles of Rukunegara that promote national identity towards a unified *Bangsa Malaysia* is absolutely necessary.

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