

Managing Ethnic Relations Using Local Wisdom Approaches: The Case Of Malaysia

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Abstract

In the period of the 20th century we witnessed the new shape of the pattern of Malaysian society. The British developed the peninsular Malaysian economy on a pattern based on the production of raw materials for export such as rubber, timber, oil-palm, iron ore and tin, while foodstuffs and manufactured goods were imported from the metropolitan centres. Ironically, it has been argued that the local Malay population for political, cultural and other reasons was not interested in selling its labour force in these export oriented industries and therefore cheap immigrant labourers from China and India were brought in large numbers. Thus a multi-ethnic society was created; the Malays, the Chinese, the Indians and others working in different jobs but living side by side in apparent harmony. One of the least known developments of the period was the growing political consciousness among both the indigenous and the immigrant population. Islamic reformists (a West Asian and Indian phenomenon) and Chinese revolutionary ideas found enthusiastic support among segments of the people here. Most of the Malay reformists confined their campaign to the press and the few religious schools, better known as Sekolah Pondok (or Huts School) which they had established. Until now most Malaysians have categorised themselves and others by communal categories, which usually take preference over class, regional, and employment basis, among other things. To explore and identify these communal issues we shall look at and examine some of its indicators such as the profile of ethnicity, inter-communal relations, organisation of communal politics, the use of symbols system, the language issue, and the economics growth and its distribution. This paper, which is the analysis of the Malaysian style of the conflict management process, will survey the methods and techniques used to overcome the problem. This is necessary if we are to understand the nature of the conflict management process in Malaysia. This paper will look at how the government institutionalised and socialised the local wisdom values (particularly at the community level) as a mechanism in conflict management and how it has developed. Management of the conflict and promotion of ethnic unity as well as national integration cannot be achieved just by ad hoc experiments but through careful planning in the various aspects of the social life of society.

Keywords: Local Wisdom, Ethnic Relations, Conflict management, Government, Non-Governmental Organisation.

Introduction

This paper will discuss about the issues of inter-ethnic management in Malaysia, and will do two things. Firstly, it will look at community-based initiatives, particularly by non-governmental organisations which complement government initiatives of ethnic conflict management. Secondly, this paper will analyse government and non-governmental organisation initiatives in addressing the issues of ethnic relations using the values of local wisdom. Although this paper is not about how non-governmental organizations tackle ethnic divisions explicitly, it is about inter-community and cross-community relations at local levels which includes many NGO initiatives as well as government policies. The aim is to illuminate the scope for complementary relations between government and local community based initiatives, and we will be using some of the Mari Fitzduff's 1 typology to illustrate this point. Analysis of Inter-ethnic conflict management efforts by the government and community-based initiatives: a local wisdom perspectives.

¹ Mari Fitzduff is one of the leading peace activist who made a tremendous effort particularly in the community relations field trying to promote understanding between the antagonist groups in Northern Ireland. With the research and practitioner background and training in conflict resolution, she generated a "Typology of Community Relations Work" in 1989 in order to assist in the development of community relations work in Northern Ireland. This typology is derived from a survey of different kinds of approaches to the community relations work in Northern Ireland. The typology that she has formulated provide a guide to shows where the theory is applied into practice at community level. For this reason this typology gives a direction of the possibilities that the situation in Malaysia can be applied

The discussion takes this exploration a stage further with an assessment of government and local-level (especially NGOs) initiatives of ethnic conflict management. These assessments are based within the frameworks of three of Mari Fitzduff's typology of cross-community relations work under the spectrum of local wisdom (i.e., Anti-Sectarian Work, Cultural Traditions Work (CTW), and Conflict Resolution Work (CRW)). The conflict management process will be analysed according to three broad descriptive account as follows: i. Rationale, ii. Examples of Work, and iii. Analysis,

Anti-Sectarian Work

Rationale: The core practice of ethnic relations management in Malaysia is equality, and a fairer share of the national wealth, irrespective of ethnicity.

Examples of work: The New Economic Policy (NEP), language and religious policies, and the Rukunegara.(or National Ideology).

Analysis: The NEP has tried to promote equality in the country 's socio-economic distribution. Under this NEP program, the technique used is to help the poor group without jeopardising the interests of the rich group. The objective is, to equalize the opportunities and interests of all groups (Lee Hock Guan, 2013, Gomez and Saravanamuttu, 2013). Dr. Chandra Muzaffar (1997), on commenting this issue says;

"As a society which was underdeveloped economically during colonial and feudal era, thus, the bumiputera need a special help and protection. The protection was given through several phases in the Constitution, which is known as "Bumiputera Special Privilege". Without this privilege, there is a high possibility that Bumiputera cannot develop in several economic and social areas, including higher education, become the member of a professional, business and industrial body. Even though the government has ascertained that the bumiputera's special privilege cannot be threatened by any parties, they also make sure that non-bumiputera will also have the opportunity to venture in all economy sectors, through open market".

A fair approach to the use of language was also implemented. As the result from the Musyawarah by community leaders, who represented their community interest, Malay language was accepted as the lingua franca and as the official language since it is the most dominant one and originated from this part of the world. However, other languages are also used freely. Similarly, in terms of religious practice, Malaysian citizens are also given the freedom to practice their own religion. This freedom and the right to practice is secured by the constitution. According to Chandra Muzaffar (1997),

"Islam has a close relationship with the history and evolution of Malaysian society, therefore it is declared as an official religion. Meanwhile, other religions practiced by majority of other ethnic within the Constitution. The equalization in practicing their own religions is fair to both Muslim and non-Muslim".

As far as the work relevant to anti-sectarian areas is concerned, Chandra suggested that community leaders in general and community relations officers in particular must develop a more profound understanding of ethnic trend in the post 1970s. There are major developments which are taking place in both the Malay and non-Malay communities as far as ethnic relations go. Within the Malay community for instance, the following factors have resulted in a psychologically more secure response to ethnicity: (a) the resolution of the language and culture issue; (b) the stronger position of Islam; (c) greater economic security and mobility for the middle and upper classes; (d) a stable political position; and (e) expansion of the Malay middle-class. Consequently, an influential stratum of Malay society feels that it is now in a situation to come to grips with ethnic questions. This is particularly true to certain young Muslim groups. Similarly, among non-Malays, one of the major obstacles to communicate with the Malays in the past was the absence of a common language. According to Chandra, this is fast disappearing among young non-Malays. As Malays and non-Malays develop a common basis for communication, he suggested that certain common values and ideals can now be nurtured which can hold both parties together. To equip them for the challenges ahead, he referred back to his idea of 1980, which suggested the need for more comprehensive training programmes to be held.

"There should be a permanent community relations training institute in which short-term and long-term courses on ethnic problem and

how to deal with can be conducted. Priority should be given to the people involve in community relations work".

The Rukunegara Project is also relevant to anti-sectarian work. Faaland, Parkinson and Saniman (1990; 2003) stressed that;

“The political statesmanship and foresight of this approach (Rukunegara) to nation building by means of consensus instead of confrontation and through frank but closed door discussions of sensitive national issues, has been demonstrated by the uninterrupted political stability of the country from 1969 to recent years”

According to Faaland (et.al), the New Economic Policy was formulated by the government after the riot of 1969 as ‘the economic foundation’ of the Rukunegara¹. The importance of the Rukunegara as the pillar of social stabilization was stressed by Tun Abdul Razak. He argued that “important though the ideals of Rukunegara and consensus building might be, the battle for unity would be won or lost in the economic and social restructuring of the nation. The NEP was therefore designed with the intention of giving content and substance to the new Malaysia ideology of nation building as embodied by the Rukunegara. It was based on the construction of new alliances of moderate political elements within the society and on a new formula”

The implementation of several policies, such as the NEP as well as action plans taken by the Department of National Unity is aligned with the objective of providing an equal opportunity to all parties in all life aspects. Community-based organisation also played their role to help bolster the government effort. This is the anti-sectarian work coincides with the anti-sectarian activities described by Fitzduff, which are to decrease discrimination at the individual, group and institutional levels.

Cultural Traditions Work (CTW).

Rationale: Pluralism within and between the multi-ethnic society should be respected. Differences such as that in culture and religion should not be regarded as a threat to one another.

Examples of work: Rukun Tetangga, 2 Unity Kindergarten, School, Mass Media.

Analysis: Most of the aspects highlighted by Fitzduff are similar to the ethnic conflict management practice in Malaysia. The neighbourhood methods (particularly through Rukun Tetangga organisations) of informal interactions has contributed to closer inter-ethnic co-operation. According to Wan Halim (1996),

“ this is because of the informal nature of neighbourhood interaction and its intimate social and emotional environment which is rarely

found in other fields such as the work-place. Relationship within a neighbourhood tends to be more personal and informal. When

compared to the work-place, it is more relaxing and natural and the relationship, whether positive or negative tends to be more durable.

Since neighbourhood interaction also involves not just individuals but families as a whole, it is potentially more important in

promoting inter-group understanding.”

The CTW activities are geared towards a spirit of tolerance amongst children and have had an effective impact. The Unity Kindergarten programme has attracted voluntary participation at all levels from the parents and teachers as well as from pupils of different ethnic groups and background. In fact the Unity Kindergarten is the most effective parameter in combining the participation from the government and private sectors and also the public in the form of cross-ethnicity. (Government of Malaysia, 2014)

The mass-media also played a major role in the CTW. According to Wan Halim, inter-ethnic relations are “influenced by the kinds of information that are generated, evaluative statements made concerning the ethnic groups, and model of behaviour towards in-group and outgroups.” The electronic media (such as internet, television, and radio) and printed media (such as newspaper, magazine and book) play an important role in developing the society, and at the same time functions

¹ The words of the Rukunegara are perhaps better understood and appreciated by those with a fluent command of Bahasa Malaysia. It has sometimes been translated into English as the National Ideology which is not a very accurate or indeed helpful translation. Rukunegara should be regarded as the pillars of the nation. The nation must be firmly established upon all the pillars of the Rukunegara which it would be the duty of everyone to uphold and defend. All the pillars are equally inviolate, all are necessary to maintain the equilibrium and structure of the nation (Ghazali Shafie)

² The Rukun Tetangga (Neighbourhood Organisation) scheme was introduced on 29th August 1975, under the Essential (Rukun Tetangga) Regulation 1975, (P.U (A) (279/75). Through this scheme, the government aim was to monitor the unity among the population in the residential areas using neighbourhood based activities.

as a major agent in the socialisation process. Therefore, we can utilise the media to promote unity, "as primary face-to-face social contact" declines in frequency and intensity, particularly in a modern urban society, secondary sources of information through the media increases in relative significance (Utusan Malaysia, 2014). However, it is important for us to accept the fact that a totally free media is rare. The media will play a positive or negative role, depending on the situation such as political influences in the society. This is due to the media's own orientation and objectives.

Being optimistic, Wan Halim argues that it is important that mass media is made aware of its potential role and responsibility in the society. The policy maker has come out with certain rules and regulations in order to safeguard offending ethnic sensitivities (Chandra Muzaffar, 1986) These rules and regulation, though essential, constitute the passive aspect of inter-ethnic promotion. Therefore, they need to be complemented with the active efforts in terms of constructive social themes in media reporting. Wan Halim suggested that 'research and analysis needs to be done on how the 'role and regulations came into being, and whether they are based on correct assumptions or merely ad hoc inventions'. Furthermore, he suggested that content analysis of mass media coverage should be carried out for all levels of society in order to 'identify the degree to which mass-media is helping to produce future generations who are proud of their Malaysian identity'.

Education is also one of the vital parameters in CTW. Despite the fact that education has played its role in strengthening ethnic relationships, there are still a lot of unsettled agendas. According to Lee Hock Guan (2013) the Malays were underrepresented in higher education was already recognised by the Carr-Saunders Commission which proposed 'appropriate adjustments' to increase the number of qualified Malay students for admission into higher education but without compromising the merit-based admissions policy. This matter has captured the interests of many scholars and social analysts. Wan Halim, argues that "bringing together the children of the various ethnic groups by itself, does not guarantee the development of goodwill and understanding since it may well produce the opposite result." Wan Halim, who has been involved in a wide range of research in this area, suggested that close scrutiny needed to be given to specific aspects of the educational system such as;

i) Curriculum. The civics and moral education aspects of the curriculum need to be strengthened in order to promote a sense of national

pride. Other subjects such as geography, history and natural sciences should also be geared towards increasing the knowledge of the

students concerning the past, present and future development of the country.

ii) Contact. The Classroom and school environment should encourage inter-ethnic contact and co-operation and efforts at desegregation

need to be a clearly defined policy.

iii) Extra-curricular activities. These should not ignore the need to integrate the various ethnic groups. Through group activities,

subconscious learning can be fostered which will promote more positive inter-ethnic perception and attitudes.

iv) Student-teacher relationship. Teacher need to project a positive and unbiased image of themselves particularly when dealing with

students of other ethnic groups. No amount of preaching on positive values will produce much effect if prejudice attitudes and

favouritism are demonstrated by teachers in their daily contact with the students.

To conclude, the CTW is contributing towards establishing a stable social relationship and should be continued and strengthened.

Conflict Resolution Work (CRW).

Rationale: Within the Malaysian context, conflict resolution work needed to tackle both tangible and intangible sources of ethnic problem.

Examples of work: The New Economic Policy (NEP) and the Department of National Unity (DNU) programmes.

Analysis: Conflict resolution work is referred to the efforts undertaken by the DNU and the NEP to tackle the underlying sources of ethnic problem, in order to achieve positive peace in the society. In this context, the main task of the DNU is to

strengthen "the ethnic relations network". For instance, the cross-community trips, neighbourhood work camp, neighbourhood campaign, integration outdoor activities, recreation, family picnic and gotong-royong have been utilised by the DNU in the process of building and strengthening "the ethnic relations network". At the same time the NEP programs aim to bridge the socio-economic gap between the ethnic groups in achieving the social justice. Thus, in this context both DNU and NEP programs are compatible with the ultimate objective of conflict resolution technique, to change the situation and remove the underlying source of conflict.

To enhance the areas and impacts of the CRW, Chandra Muzaffar suggested that the government should help established an independent, autonomous research institute on ethnic relations. The institute has to be completely independent if it is to function well. This institute has to look at state policies as they affect various spheres of society just as it has to study interaction among communities, conflict-generating situations, ethnic stereotypes, the emergence and perpetuation of prejudice, cultural commonalities and the role of universal ethical values in the nation-building process. Chandra said that in more ways than one, Malaysia is indeed the best available laboratory for the analysis of ethnic relations. He emphasised that research by individual scholars whether local or foreign is no substitute for the sort of institution that is being suggested here for what is sorely needed is a systematic, holistic approach to the ethnic problem which garners the skills of different type of specialists in a gigantic intellectual effort that will span a few decades. From time to time, the institute could of course make recommendations to Parliament to which it would be directly responsible. This suggestions, if accepted, could be implemented by the Community-based organisations.

Conclusion.

From the discussion above it is clear that considerable effort in conflict management related to the ethnic issue in Malaysia has been carried out. These paper also show that Fitzduff's typology of community relations work have a useful function in investigating and analysing these approaches by the government as well as community based organisations in managing inter-ethnic related conflict. The approach taken by the government in handling this issue is mainly through the legislative procedures. This approach coincided with the explanation by Mc Garry and O'Leary (1993), regarding the taxonomy of the macro political form in the ethnic conflict regulation framework. As a third party, the government (who possesses political power) became the main actor and 'arbiter' in order to regulate problems related to inter-ethnic relations. The formation of the New Economic Policy, as well as the establishment of the Department of National Unity are relevant examples of the government's roles.

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