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## ***A healthy dose of race relations***

By: *Husna Yusop* (Fri, 02 Feb 2007)

*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Prof Datuk Dr Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, the chief coordinator of the Ethnic Relations teaching module for public universities, has just finished working on the module. The social anthropology professor, who is also director of UKM's Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation and Institute of Occidental Studies, talks to **Husna Yusop** on his experience.*

***theSun: Congratulations Prof for completing the task. How do you feel now?***

*Shamsul: Thank you, but it is only the beginning. There is a lot more to come. I have to conduct the training of trainers (TOT) programme. It is very tough because I am dealing with 300 academicians and all of them have got ideas, like me.*

***Another round of sleepless nights, I guess?***

*Well, this time it is not that bad because this is about discussions. We don't change any more of the contents. We just talk about interpretation. One of the things I want to do in the TOT is to change the way we analyse things in Malaysia. This is what I have in mind. How do I empower Malaysians to look at their own society from various angles? This course does not hope to achieve a lot but the teachers must know what we want to achieve. So, the work is not over yet. I am still thinking about it.*

*How best to deal with the 300 lecturers, with 300 different opinions. And I don't know how many political parties they belong to. I have to deal with that too. I have to confront them as if I'm confronting every member of parliament. That is my attitude.*

*During the teaching process, we try to combine all these things we already know. Little bits and pieces from history, geography, we try to put them together. If we can excite the students to start talking, I consider the job done. The most important thing is for them to ask questions.*

***What kind of stories or experience you expect coming from the students?***

*I expect to hear a lot of stories like very simple everyday experiences. For example, there would be a lot of Chinese students who would be very unhappy over the New Economic Policy (NEP) or the scholarship bit. These are bread and butter stories. But then, how could he or she locate this in a wider context? The course will try to explain it.*

*In the constitution, we maintained the traditional elements like the special privileges. Why? It is not meant to discriminate against you personally because there are stories of Malays who don't get scholarships too,*



*but in another context. Not because of the constitution but because of some political situations. We discuss this.*

***You have said polarisation starts in school and these are first year students fresh from school. Do you think they would raise these issues?***

*I never under-rate students. This is one thing I learnt in the university. I may not be a first class student, I may be a very bad student, but there are a lot of better students than I am that have come to the university. It is my job to notice them. And they will be able to be very sensible, very sensitive about this. I expect many of them would be able to bring their own issues and experiences which they could not bring in other subjects, except in social sciences. In the medical or engineering faculties, they don't talk about this. That alone is a success for me because more people now will be engaged in talking about this, not simply those in the arts and social sciences. In that sense, first year or no first year, the medical students will have no choice.*

***Things which were omitted from the final module, like the Kampung Medan clash and the Suqiu's questions, are these important to be discussed?***

*I have had a lot of debate about this - among us, the people involved, including the cabinet. Why do I only discuss May 13? Why don't I include other things? Why do we decide not to include them? People have failed to realise that the implications of May 13 are much much larger than Kampung Medan or Suqiu.*

*In fact, May 13 is the mother of all these reactions. It involved policy - the NEP, the 30% bumiputra equity. It involved all Malaysians. It changed our life. It changed the whole scholarship system.*

*Tell me, what has Kampung Medan done to us? It is full of foreigners too. How can you equate Kampung Medan with May 13? That is a very, very uneducated question as far as I am concerned.*

*If they knew the differences between the two, they would know the more important part is the May 13. You ask Malaysians about Kampung Medan, many of them do not know about it except for those in Kuala Lumpur. It is quite a localised activity. What was its consequence? Was there a new economic policy after Kampung Medan? We have to discuss the most critical issues. Otherwise, we will keep on focusing on all these quarrels.*

*For me, the question to ask is shall we focus on a person's pimples or her nutritional system? She cannot eat durian, but she keeps on eating durian, so the pimples keep coming out. So, do we study the pimples? No, we cannot do that. We have to study the kind of nutrition she is having. That is the issue. The May 13 is about that. About the nutrition of this country. About how we survived. It is not about what is more or less important. The issue is, the impact of May 13 is really a watershed in our society. It is a paradigm shift in some ways. You look at Tun Dr Ismail's book *Reluctant Politician*. You can see how critical it was. I don't see any analysis or book on Kampung Medan until today. I am waiting for one.*

***Why in the first place, did UPM get into its Ethnic Relations book?***

*I don't know. Each university prepared its own module. I don't know how they did it. Sometimes, they simply assigned someone to this or that. So, if that someone felt it was important, they put it in. To the writer of that particular volume, and that particular chapter, probably issues like Kampung Medan are important. Because he or she does not know the difference between May 13 and Kampung Medan. I think that is the reason - they do not understand this too.*

*I have had a lot of arguments with many lecturers about this too, not only with reporters. Lecturers also brought up this issue. I told them they have got everything out of proportion. I think a lot of people got this*

*out of proportion, in some ways. Every university has got their own module. But others didn't have those issues. Perhaps, some were overeager, I don't know.*

***Politics is also a factor here?***

*Yes. Well, the issue of race relations is a political issue in this country. So, you have no choice but to confront it quietly.*

***Dr Lim Teck Ghee said you gave too much attention to cabinet's views which is a political body without the professional expertise to evaluate its content.***

*Of course. He is saying a truism. If the cabinet is doing it, of course it is influential politically. But, the question is, did we include everything the cabinet said and recommended? He doesn't know that. He was guessing. He was expecting us to give the answer. He can keep on guessing, like, we never knew until today, who the members of the Asli research group are, right? I mean, he should know what he is doing. He has to be fair when he makes his comments.*

*I learnt from him. He is my guru. When I was doing my PhD research on the history of Malaysia, he gave me all the help. He showed me how to do it. So, I consider him as my guru. The other one is Prof Datuk Dr Shaharil Talib Roberts (of Universiti Malaya). These two great historians of Malaysia taught me how to read history, literally.*

***You mean Lim was your lecturer?***

*I didn't follow his lectures. But he showed me, this is how to do it in the archive, this is what you have to do, this file you have to see. That is Dr Lim Teck Ghee. So, in a way, he is my guru too. So, I always follow the good guru, right? (sounds cynical)*

***You have said you don't expect an immediate effect from this course but in the long run. What kind of effect do you hope to see?***

*I expect them to start using this as a platform to discuss things that are generally considered seditious or near-seditious. The prime minister has said recently, bloggers can say anything they like but if they go to the extent of being seditious, then we have no choice (but to take action). It is the same thing now.*

*He (Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) said okay, you write this book. Of all the transparency that Pak Lah has tried to show, the policy of having this book has become part of that too. Openness is not only in terms of economy or about corruption. Discussing this is very important. So, the openness has overflowed to this kind of things. For me, this book is trying to open up discussions on ethnic relations.*

***But this is only at university level.***

*It is the first step. You have to target a group first. And the group they want to target here is the university students because it is a transition between school children and full-fledged members of the public. Strategically, that is why.*

*Secondly, the largest number of people who can vote is in the universities, not in schools. So, there is a political reason too. But more importantly I think, it is sort of empowering the people to think in a way they were never taught to before.*

*History cannot be over-simplified. History is complicated. This book is trying to show that you cannot over-simplify a lot of things. When you discuss ethnic relations in Malaysia, it is not only about now, it is not only about Kampung Medan.*

*There are some important things that you have to look into in history. When you talk about ethnic relations in university, you must remember, it started from school. We mentioned very clearly in the book how the vernacular system actually reproduced ethnic differences.*

*At the end of the conveyor belt is the university. You cannot just re-correct that at the end. I want the students to realise, in a way we are already like that but it does not stop us from thinking positively about it. That is all it is hoped to achieve - the realisation, in some sense.*

### ***What about the effect on polarisation?***

*Polarisation cannot be undone just like that over three years. This subject is placed in the University Course section, not the Academic Course. University Courses are meant to provide skills.*

*The skill we want to provide is critical thinking, to think about ethnic relations in Malaysia. That would help them in many ways, not only the social science students but every student, be it engineering, medical or law, who otherwise will not be exposed to social science concepts and ideas.*

*I used to give this example. In order to construct a 20km road in Malaysia, we usually ended up with 30km. Why? The road has to bend around the mosque, cemetery, temple and all that. So, even physically in Malaysia, we have to be very aware of the different ethnic groups and their cultures. Even engineers have to know that. Engineers in America do not teach you that the road has to meander around the cultures. No such thing. They bulldoze their way through and civil society protests.*

*But in Malaysia, it is the Chinese school group, the temple association and whatever. Such is the power of ethnic relations involving diverse cultures in Malaysia. Even the simple construction of a straight road can become crooked. I see it that way because that is what my engineering friends told me. It is interesting. All these little details which ordinarily we don't take as important are actually very important in our life. So this is what, in some sense, the book is trying to deal with.*

### ***What can the schools do to play their role?***

*The schools can do a lot. Even though we retain their structure in terms of national, Chinese and Tamil schools, we can do it. We don't have to call it ethnic relations. It can be called Mengenal Malaysia (Introduction to Malaysia) or something like that, which basically tries to explain the little differences in life. It will go a long way.*



***But with the existing structure, we don't have a balanced representation of all ethnic groups in all schools. This does not help in building ethnic relations.***

*Yes, but still ... For example, if you teach Mengenal Malaysia, there would be parts in the syllabus on knowing all the races in Malaysia. In a Malay-majority school, there are also some Indians and Chinese. How do they know each other? In this country, we need to inform ourselves from small, we have to inform our children, diversity is not bad.*

***So, it is okay to have all this different streams of schools?***

*Well, it is not okay but because the constitution is as such, we have to accept, some things we cannot change. But within that, we should not be hopeless, we should be hopeful.*

*After all, I have travelled to more than 70, 80 countries in the world. I always wanted to come back because*

*I know in Malaysia, my colour does not matter.*

*In Germany, I might get marked. The neo-Nazi in Germany do hit people of different colour. Yes, there were cases. They just mark you in the stations. For no reason. Just because they are black. That is why I am so proud to come back here. In other countries you won't know your fate.*

*In the middle of Sydney, on the beach, they also quarrelled. You see the reality television show in England. The very deep-seated ethnic chauvinism against the Indian actress Shilpa Shetty. Quite interesting for me.*

*When we compare at that very ordinary level, then we realise, there is something workable here. But again, there are two ways of looking at it. Either you look at Malaysia from the prophet of doom's perspective that we are just on the verge of quarrel and ethnic riot, or from the consensus perspective where Malaysia is negotiating all the time. Everybody is negotiating all the time to the extent that sometimes the process becomes the solution, not the solution itself.*

### **What do you mean?**

*The process became a solution. In some cases, while we were discussing about it, the problem was already resolved. That is the interesting part about Malaysia. But we never highlight that. We always think this is difficult but for me, it actually depends on your perspectives. Perhaps, in a sense, that was why I was being asked to do this. I am very optimistic about this country.*

### **That was why you dare to take up the risk although it is not an academic work?**

*Yes. I know it is not an academic work. I would be pretending if I said it is academic work. But, it is very academically informed. These are two different things. I can write a general book but very academically informed with all the knowledge. But I can also write a fiction. This is not a fiction.*

### **How do you differentiate between an academic work and an academically informed work?**

*Academic work simply means you have to abide by rules of footnotes, references and all sorts of things. But this book is not about to prove a theory or a hypothesis. This is about a narrative which is informed by debates about the idea in an academic circle. We debated about the concept of Bangsa Malaysia. We rely on those debates. Concepts of Malaysia, what is social contract? We debated about that too. But I don't introduce what the constitution says, what exactly (Lord William) Reid said, what this particular wakil rakyat said. That is not what I am interested in. What I am interested in is, social contract is a form of agreement and that agreement, in Malaysia, takes the form of the constitution. So, when we use the word social contract we actually refer to the constitution. That is what I am saying. We must know the audience is first year students. We cannot assume they are lawyers.*

### **For the practical side of this course, you suggested for the students to visit places of worship of other religions and learn about their rituals and celebrations. Why this kind of practical training?**

*For example, if you go into a Chinese area, you will see the oranges and all. You ask any Malay students, probably they won't know all the symbolism. They can also do research work by studying pictures but they might be interested in something beyond that.*

*For example, we know they pray, showing filial piety with oranges, etc, but how do they pray in the real sense? Why do some Chinese have it, but some don't? Or, there are Chinese who are Christians. But there are some Christian Chinese who still believe in filial piety. So, all these second or third layer understanding will come into play. The students will learn by seeing it themselves, not by looking at the book only.*

*In Malaysia we always talk about this but we actually don't go out and see for ourselves, except during*

*celebrations. So we use this opportunity to explore the celebrations beyond just the surface level.*

***When you said the book is not a formula to solve problems, some were surprised because they think that is the purpose of this subject.***

*No. Like I said, subjects under the University Course section are not about solving problems, they are about providing skills. That is what I meant. But if in the end it helped to solve problems, wonderful!*

*This book is not in the Academic Section. If I write it in such a sociological manner, medical students won't understand. So I have to pitch it to a level where every student in the university could understand. That is the difficult part. That was a challenge for us. That is why I don't expect to solve anything at that level, but it will help them to think. Can we re-think about Malaysia? How do we do this?*

***Speaking about challenges, you have been involved in this book since day one, right?***

*No, not since day one. Let me tell you the whole scenario. In 2004, the government decided to introduce this subject. The Higher Education Ministry then asked a group of people in USM to take part in a pilot project to come up with a teaching module. At the same time, it also instructed every university to be ready with lecturers and reference materials for the subject. Two things running at the same time. Later, for some reasons, USM withdrew from the project. I am not quite sure about the history. But I know the project was then handed over to UiTM's Centre of Islamic Thought and Understanding in 2005.*

*At that time, I took part in two or three seminars and conferences related to the ministry's project. They had conferences, seminars, brainstorming sessions which involved lecturers from all universities. Each of them was attended by 300 to 400 people. The private educational institutions and NGOs also contributed their ideas. In May 2006, I was invited to contribute a chapter and I gave them the third chapter on Plurality and Plural Society in the Malay World.*

*In July 2006, suddenly it became an issue because of the UPM guidebook which came from the pool of university-based modules. Then the focus was on the book. And that was when I got appointed (as chief coordinator). At that time, I was in Australia. I could still remember the date, July 18. I was on holiday with my children but I had to go back early. The original flight was scheduled on Sunday but I had to leave Australia on Friday night. I was wondering, what happened? Why is the minister calling me?*

***Why did they pick you?***

*I don't know. I did ask them. You know what they said? They gave me three answers. Number one, you have been writing about ethnic relations and the economic activities and the other side of NEP since 1973. True. My theses - BA, MA and PhD were all on this. In fact, my first book, Rancangan Malaysia Kedua: Tujuan dan Pelaksanaannya (2nd Malaysia Plan: Its Objectives and Implementation) was published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka three times because it became a textbook. I also wrote a thesis talking about corruption and all sorts of stuff.*

*I never used the two words nepotism and corruption, but in the book reviews everywhere, they said this is about nepotism and corruption. So, they thought I have written on this subject quite a lot.*

*Number two, I have written quite a lot in the Dewan Masyarakat magazine. I wrote for my column for 12 years. I have been dealing with society since a long time ago, making sense of the difficult things in the form of writing where Form Five students were also capable of reading it. One of the avid readers was Khairy Jamaluddin himself. He knows me through that. It is quite interesting how powerful writing is.*

*So, they thought I have been writing all this, I can write for the people, I can write both in English and Malay. They said, you speak well in English and Malay. I have seen you speaking on BBC and all this stuff.*

*So the third factor is, I am a global scholar. Well, I don't know ...*

*For me to take this job is a big challenge which I call public advocacy. So far in my life, it has always been about academic analysis. But this is public advocacy. How do I engage with the public through knowledge? It is a challenge for me. And it is a never ending challenge because as long as this book is there, and my name is there, I have to answer to it. But that will be the best thing for me and the best thing for the people too, because questions are what I want to hear.*

*Some people asked, are you not afraid? I said, in this country, people are afraid of one thing - the ISA. That is the worst that is going to happen. You go on long sabbatical leave for two to six years. But, I don't think they would physically slaughter me. This is a challenge which someone has to take up. Since they have chosen me, why not?*

***So, you did not take a long time to accept it?***

*No. It took me three days. I talked to myself. Am I capable of dealing with this? I look at all the ethnic relations books that I have in my collection. I think I can do this.*

***Can you name the people involved in preparing the final module? Who selected them?***

*They were the writers chosen by UiTM. After the conferences, they sat down and chose the best papers for each theme (eight chapters in the module). I was not involved in this selection process.*

***So, you cannot name them?***

*I cannot, because after that, there were corrections after corrections after corrections. It is not fair to name them. There was also a chapter that has been totally re-written.*

***By you?***

*No, I work with a group of people. I cannot do it alone. I have four or five people from different backgrounds to help me, like lawyers, economists. I have to select them, people who can deliver. I have to set up a team that can be called up at 2am in the morning, if I cannot sleep.*

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