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**INTER-ETHNIC TOLERANCE AND COMMUNALISM IN PRE-  
INDEPENDENCE MALAYSIA**

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***Abstract***

The main objective of the study is to analyze the influence of the spirit of tolerance in dealing with Malaysia's racial issues. Studies show that it is of utmost importance for this pluralistic society to practice tolerance in order to foster unity and understanding among the different races living in Malaysia. This is supported by the government's role in eliminating racial segregation, respecting religious rights, and allowing each ethnic group to retain their cultural identity. As a result, racial tension between ethnic groups has dissipated, and through the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP), the economic gap between ethnic groups has also decreased. This study focused on the period during the eve of independence, since it is considered the most critical period in the nation's history. The findings reveal that the spirit of tolerance played a significant role in the process of securing independence for the Federation of Malaya as evidenced by the formation of the ALLIANCE, a collaboration among the three major ethnic groups in Malaya – the Malays, Chinese and Indians – through the formation of the *United Malays National Organization* (UMNO), the *Malayan Chinese Association* (MCA) and the *Malayan Indian Congress* (MIC).

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**Keywords:** Principle of tolerance, inter-ethnic tension, communalism, independence of the Federation of Malaya.



## 1. Introduction

Tolerance is one of the principles integral in a democratic system (Weldon, 2006). It encompasses the traits of patience, peace and sincerity when faced with sensitive issues dealing with religious, cultural, traditional, economic, political and social diversities. It is also premised on the level of readiness and acceptance of every individual in establishing harmonious cooperation and appreciation of the disparities between ethnic groups (Tamring, 2008; Abdul Halim, 2008; Jaffary, Agius & Ambrosewicz, 2003; Avery, 1988, Wan Norhasniah, 2010 & 2011). Hence, for a multi-racial nation like Malaysia, the government reveres the principle of tolerance as the basis of the national agenda as revealed by former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad (Zainul, 2003: 538);

*“... building a nation out of a diverse people with differing historical, ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural backgrounds is something more than just fostering consensus on the basic character of a nation. It involves the fostering of shared historical experiences, shared values, a feeling of common identity and shared destiny that transcends ethnic bounds, without undermining ethnic identity”*

In Malaysia, even though a racial strain only occurs whenever there are actions or speeches deemed provocative, such incidents are defused by the government through the instilling of the spirit of tolerance within the society backed by specific laws such as the Internal Security Act (ISA). However, racial issues do appear when an ethnic community is concerned about protecting their own rights, tends to disregard the sensitivity of other ethnic groups as shown in the episodes involving the use of the term *Allah* by the non-Muslims communities (MStar, 11 Jan 2010), and the act of tearing down a Hindu temple in Section 17, Shah Alam by the Malay Muslim community as it was viewed as a disturbance for the call for prayers (*azan*) (Malaysia Kini, 9 September 2009).

Using the textual analysis method, this paper has analysed and debated the racial issues that emerged during the eve of the independence of Malaya. A review of previous works indicate that most of the studies on this issue focused on the spirit of tolerance among the different communities in Malaya within the scope of certain dimensions and locations. These included a study by Fazilah (2008) that analysed the role of religious personalities and the cognition towards inter-ethnic tolerance among youths in the state of Selangor. Scholars like Ezhar (2006) also studied ethnic tolerance among youths in terms of the influence of mass media on the actions of youths. Meanwhile, a study by Nazri (2014) shows that, even if the level of tolerance was satisfactory among students of higher learning institutes with regard to the issues of language, culture and religion, sensitivities did exist among Malay youths if issues of religion were questioned. Meanwhile, the study revealed that Chinese and Indian students were not exactly happy with the policy of Malay special rights as accorded in the Malaysian Constitution, even if it was enacted as a privilege to the Malay community as the native community.

On the international front, studies on inter-ethnic tolerance have also been debated by many foreign scholars. Sekulić (2006) who researched the ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia believes that inter-racial tolerance in that nation was almost impossible to be nurtured, as a result of a war that tore the nation apart from 1985 to 2003. As a result, each ethnic group was prejudiced towards each other,

especially regarding religious issues. The same scenario can be witnessed in Southern Sudan, where each community cannot tolerate one another, as each ethnic group's main concern is to safeguard their claim and culture. Thus, it appears that, in such cases, it was not viable to promote ethnic unity. On the other hand, Antonina et.al. (2010), found that when the multi-ethnic society in Bulgaria practised tolerance, they managed to live side-by-side in harmony without any conflict. However, although the Bulgarian people were found to be respectful towards the divergence in their society, they were not interested in getting to know the differences of other ethnic groups' cultural traits. Mridulla's (2011) research in the Ukraine discovered that it was difficult to instil the spirit of tolerance in the society due to the severe socio-economic crisis that caused unemployment. The principle of tolerance was put aside when discrimination towards minority ethnic groups in the economic sector existed. In another study by McAlister (2000), the importance of promoting the spirit of tolerance focused on the use of a prepared model. In relation to this study, the findings show that if the spirit of tolerance was nurtured among school students, it could diffuse conflicts in the school.

Based on the research conducted, it is indeed important for the spirit of tolerance to be instilled to achieve better understanding among different ethnic groups living in the same country. Hence, this study will analyse whether the principle of tolerance played a significant role in the process of achieving independence in the Federation of Malaya.

## **2. Research Questions**

The main question of this study is; can inter-ethnic tolerance be achieved and hence, communalism reduced if every ethnic community practices tolerance towards other communities as transpired during the eve of independence in Malaya?

## **3. Purpose of the Study**

Malaysia is well-respected by other nations and has a very good reputation worldwide in preserving harmony within its multi-ethnic society. However, it has not been an easy task and with the divergence in religion, culture, traditions, language and education, a massive dose of tolerance, understanding and cooperation were required to maintain peace and harmony. In fact, the potential to incite serious conflicts is apparently quite high of late, with the existence of certain factions that try to politicize issues related to religion, culture, language and education. Even though serious inter-ethnic conflicts like the worst ethnic conflict in the history of Malaysia which erupted on 13th May 1969 between the ethnic groups after the Malay-based party lost the majority in the election has been avoided, a few disturbing incidents have taken place. The most significant events in recent times was the Kampung Medan ethnic clash in 2001, involving the Malay and Indian community (Shamsul Amri, 2008). Religious tension also flared up in debating the usage of the term *Allah*, which led to arson attacks on a church in Seremban (MStar, 11 Jan 2010) and a mosque in Muar, Johor (Malaysiakini, 23 Jan 2010). A similar incident took place in Shah Alam when the Malay community rejected the decision of the state government to move a 150-year-old temple from Section 19 to Section 23, based on the argument that the

area has a majority of Muslim residents (Malaysia Kini, 9 September 2009). In a nutshell, racial issues are still vibrating in the country.

Based on the premise above, the purpose of this study is to determine the influence of the spirit of tolerance in ethnic ties in Malaysia by focusing on certain incidents that occurred during the period of independence in 1957.

## 4. Literature review

### 4.1. The demographic background of Federation of Malaya

- Before British colonization, the Malay Peninsula was populated by the Malays, who embraced strong Malay-Islamic values that were assimilated in their way of life as families, society, state and nation. However, the Malays' standing as the natives of the land was at stake with the arrival of the British. Through the separation of territories into three divisions comprising the Straits Settlements, Federated Malay States, and Non-Federated Malay States, a change in ethnic composition occurred with the British policy that allowed the influx of Chinese and Indian communities during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1934. Even though some of them were repatriated during the depression years of 1929-1932 (Emerson, 1970), the number of immigrants continued to rise. Hence, the composition of the Malay Peninsula transformed from a Malay-dominated community into a plural society that had contrasting cultures and traditions being practised side by side.
- The divergence of the different ethnic groups began to cause unity problems, as each ethnic group was adamant in upholding their cultural and traditional values. Even though the political coalition of UMNO, MCA and MIC were willing to compromise in easing the sentiments to fight for their ethnic group's rights, the public were not easily influenced. Their actions and conduct played a significant role in the process of nation building

#### 4.1.1 *The influence of the principle of tolerance towards the Federation of Malaya nation-building process among the Malays*

- The principle of tolerance was duly observed by the communities that comprised the Federation of Malaya with the aim of achieving independence, and in the process of nation-building. Initially, the principle was adopted by the political leaders of UMNO, MCA and MIC (Ramlah, 1998). As a result, the *Communities Liaison Committee* (CLC) mooted by the British government in 1949 was formed to discuss issues related to the formation of a new nation and nation building, such as the matters of citizenship, language and education system, as well as elections that involved the Town Council and Federal Legislation Council (Ongkili, 1980).
- To achieve the goal of nation building and independence, as natives, the Malay leaders were willing to compromise with the demands by giving up the values of Malay political supremacy, and letting other ethnic groups apply for citizenship through the *jus soli* principle. However, the Malay community then felt that the Chinese and Indians were reluctant to assist the Malays to

improve their economic standing. This negative reaction disappointed the Malay leaders and the Malay community as well. It was reflected by Onn Jaafar's harsh criticism of the CLC's actions that did not emphasize the huge economic disparities between the Malays and the mainly economically well-off Chinese. It is important that in the process of nation building, apart from confirming the issue of citizenship, economic disparity between different ethnic groups should also be addressed to determine whether members of a plural society could live together in peace and harmony (Faaland, 1991). Even though the issue was earlier raised by Onn in the first CLC meeting, the MCA leaders did not respond well to the issue, until the British government was given an ultimatum that the granting of citizenship to the immigrants would only be considered if the Malays were guaranteed the assistance needed to improve their economic standing (Ramlah, 1988). To ensure that the Chinese obtain the right to citizenship status, MCA, and other non-Malay committee members finally relented and agreed with the British to form *Rural Industrial Development Authority* (RIDA) in November 1950 to reduce the poor economic standing and poverty of the Malays, especially for residents in rural areas (Ramlah, 1996).

- As a result of discussion between the ethnic leaders in the 1950s, CLC decided to bargain for several issues, which included the protection of each ethnic group's rights. This included the agreement for the Malays to share political powers, while the Chinese concurred to assist the Malays improve their economy (Ongkili, 1980). However, the agreement and tolerance that existed among the leaders were not replicated at the grassroots level.

- For some segments of the Malay community, the *jus soli*, or automatic right to citizenship was a sore point, as they did not trust the Chinese immigrants' sincerity and loyalty based on previous experience in dealing with the community (Ramlah, 1992). The objection was expressed by the Peninsula's Malay Association and Universiti of Malaya's Student Association in Singapore as they felt that the Malays' status as natives of the land would be compromised. By being granted the citizenship status, the Chinese would have rights to vote, obtain political might, and even get the chance to hold posts in state administration. All these would be sanctioned while at the same time, these people would still be prejudiced towards the economic cooperation offered. In reaction, they protested Onn's proposal as they felt that it was an act of auctioning the dignity of the Malays, which was in contrast to UMNO's principle of leaders who were supposed to protect the welfare of the people. In response, to solidify the criteria to obtain citizenship, it was stipulated that only non-Malay children born in the Malay states whose fathers had been born and held Malayan citizenship in 1948 could be granted citizenship status (Ramlah, 1992). However, with widespread threats from the Communist Party of Malaya (PKM/China), and demands from Chinese associations and changes in the political environment, the Malay leaders relented, and the *jus soli* principle was adopted in 1955.

- For the ethnic Chinese, the fight to safeguard their rights was supported by Chinese associations and MCA. During the initial stage, the associations voiced their dissatisfaction on the citizenship rights that led to the change in legislation in 1952. However, with the implementation of the New ordinance that was in effect until 30 June 1953, the number of Chinese who took up citizenship was only 1,157,000 (Ratnam, 1965), which left the Chinese associations dissatisfied. The major

reason why not many immigrants accepted the proposal was due to the fact that they wanted to retain their Chinese citizenship status. In fact, if they were accepted as citizens, many did not want to join the army and fight against the Communist Party of Malaya (Thock, 2005).

- To encourage all the Chinese in Malaya to apply for citizenship, extra efforts were made by the *Chinese Chambers of Commerce* (CCC) and Chinese Chamber Associations (DPC). As a result, 38 Chinese associations with more than 70 representatives assembled at the DPC Perak and CCC Perak meeting in 1955. The cooperation between the associations led to the organization of the ‘Congress of Citizenship Rights Demands by Registered Chinese associations of Malaya’ in 1956, by securing assistance from *Jiazhong*, and the Chinese Chambers of Commerce of Selangor and Perak. The shared sentiments had attracted 454 associations to join the congress. The result of the congress saw the formation of a committee named the ‘Council Representatives of Chinese Guilds and Associations’ (CRCGA) (Thock, 2005). The resolutions from the congress reiterated the ethnic Chinese calls to protect their rights without having to compromise with the native Malays. They also demanded for the *jus soli* status to be granted for everyone born in the Malay Federation. As for others who were not born in Malaya, but had long resided in Malaya, they should be granted citizenship without having to sit for the Malay language test. They also demanded for equality, and the abolishment of Malay special privileges, and the acknowledgement of the Chinese language as an official language (Heng, 1988).

- The clashes of ideas led to conflicts between the Chinese associations and MCA. They were disappointed with MCA as they felt that they compromised with UMNO too much, and that they failed to protect Chinese traditions, especially the failure to recognize the Chinese language as an official language (Heng, 1988). However, the memorandum sent by CRCGA to the British Reid Commission was rejected, while the memorandum submitted by ALLIANCE (UMNO-MCA-MIC) had been accepted. A delegation led by Lau Pak Khuan, Tan Kee Gak and Yap Mau Tatt was sent to London to submit the Chinese associations’ demands (Thock, 2005).

- However, the memorandum was again rejected (Thock, 2005), and MCA succeeded as they had formed close ties with UMNO, the party that wielded the political power. Even though there were differences in MCA and CRCGA’s means of achieving their demands, they still maintained close ties as their actual objectives remained similar, which was to protect the rights of the Chinese.

- When the British laid down the terms that cooperation and unity among the ethnic groups must be attained before independence could be granted, the leaders of the ethnic groups had no other option but to control their racial sentiments. The objective of gaining independence also saw Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj (more commonly known as just Tunku in Malaysia) relaxing some precepts of Malay domination as the foundation to nation-building, compared to Onn’s demands. Tunku directly lambasted a few UMNO members who were deemed as over-the-top when they tried to propagate the ‘Malaya for the Malays’ policy (Ramlah, 2004). This tirade against his own party members was due in part, to the change in the composition of the society that had become a plural society. To win over the Chinese and Indians, Tunku even offered to reduce the number of UMNO seats in the Federal Election of 1955, from 40 to 35 seats. MCA was allocated with 15 seats compared to 12, while MIC was allocated 2 seats to reinforce their standing

in the ALLIANCE or *PERIKATAN* (Means, 1976: 162). Other than that, the principle foundation of Bahasa Melayu as the official national language would only be implemented in 10 years' time, while the language and culture of other ethnic groups would be preserved. In fact, Tunku introduced the condition that any candidate chosen to stand for election must be proficient in English (Ramlah, 2004).

- When Tunku was judged to have cast aside the importance of the Malays for the sake of appeasing the multi-ethnic society, he was immensely criticized by the Malays, both by UMNO supporters and the opposition members. His decision to make English one of the conditions for the election candidates to master upset many UMNO members and led to many of them leaving the party (Ramlah, 2004). Meanwhile, for the opposition like the National Party formed by Onn, they criticized the move as a threat to the sovereignty of Bahasa Melayu, and claimed that the act would only compromise the status of Bahasa Melayu as the official language. Meanwhile, Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmi, a former member of Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API) and PKMM also rejected UMNO's policies in jeopardizing the status of Bahasa Melayu, and granting citizenship through the *jus soli* principle. He went on to claim that UMNO had failed to protect the rights of the Malays.

- As a result of all the protests, *Barisan Kebangsaan Melayu* (Malay National Party) was formed with the objective to protect the rights of the Malays. Even though *Parti Negara* (Party of the Land) and *Barisan Kebangsaan Melayu* failed to win the support of the Malays in general, the moves showed that there were many Malays who were unhappy with the so-called protectors of the Malays - UMNO (Means, 1976). The conflicts among the Malay leaders continued until the post-independence period.

- The explanation shows that the principle of tolerance was adopted by the Malay leaders in the process of achieving independence. Even though there were conflicts among the Malay leaders, it never escalated into open fights against the leaders. By being tolerant, any dissatisfaction towards the UMNO stalwarts was diffused as each leader practiced patience to ensure that peace and harmony in the nation would prevail (Ramlah, 2004).

‘...in the efforts to maintain unity, Tunku always reminded the UMNO members to compromise with MCA and MIC... The UMNO press were also supportive of Tunku and pleaded with its members to be patient... Tunku urged the Malays and UMNO to eradicate their strong racial sentiments...’

- To achieve independence, MCA leaders also took the stance of reducing their strong Chinese sentiments. Even though Tan Cheng Lock initially proposed for the implementation of the Chinese language as part of ‘*multilingualism*’, for the sake of independence, he was ready to forgo the proposal (Ramlah, 2004). However, the MCA members' tolerant stand had led to dissatisfaction among the Chinese associations, as they were accused of failing to protect the rights of the Chinese education system and the status of the Chinese language as an official language. The conflict escalated when the associations called for a new party, *Chinese General Association* (CGA) to be formed to replace the MCA (Heng, 1988). However, the move backfired.

- Apart from that, Tunku's decision to allocate more seats to MCA was not well received by the Chinese associations, as they felt that it was too insignificant compared to their economic and political importance. Hence, there were also MCA members who made the move to leave the party. However, Tunku's move to reduce the rights of the Malays had led to ALLIANCE's success in winning votes from the non-Malays. It was reflected in ALLIANCE's huge mandate at the election by winning 52 of the 53 seats contested (Harper, 1999). The win was acknowledged by the British as the success of a *multi-ethnic* party that could guarantee harmony in a plural society (Milne & Mauzy, 1986). The massive win showed that the struggle to protect ethnic rights does not rely on political figures alone, but depends on support from each community (Von Vorys, 1975).
- ALLIANCE's success in negotiating for independence with the British (chaired by Lord Lennox Boyd in 1956), was due largely to Tunku's tolerant and affable manner. Tunku managed to coax MCA and MIC to form an alliance, and tolerated the demands of the non-Malay communities. Meanwhile, his background as a prince had led to massive support from the Malays, as they saw it as a means of continuing the tradition of Malay feudal politics. His standing in society also worked in his favour, as he was well respected by the British, MCA and MIC to accept UMNO as the leaders for the ALLIANCE.
- As a result of the negotiation, the British consented to grant independence to the Malay Federation on 31 August 1957, and the draft for 'Constituency of Independence' was led by Lord Reid in 1956. The *Social Contract 1957* was a consensus reached by the British, Malays, and non-Malays to achieve collaboration in the sharing of power (Faaland, 1991).
- By nurturing the spirit of tolerance and coupled with the Malays' generosity, the non-Malay ethnic groups were granted citizenship through birthright (*jus soli*) to live in the land of the Malays, and it provided ample opportunity for the Chinese to run their businesses. In return for their generosity, the Reid Commission agreed to grant the Malays some special privileges. Thus, all provisions enacted in the Federal Constitution could not be disputed. The first statute states that the entire Chapter III on citizenship was in Act 150 (6A). According to Tun Abdul Razak, even though the Emergency was in place after the independence, the Act would not be affected. Secondly, Act 71 assures that the Federal government must protect the Constitution of each state, and the privileges and supremacy of the monarchs. Thirdly, Act 152 establishes Bahasa Melayu as the official language. Fourth, Act 153 institutes the duties of His Majesty the King in safeguarding the special rights of the Malays, and the basic necessities of the other races. Fifth, Act 159 establishes that any change on the Malay Kings, or Act 38 that dictates on the Council of the kings and the functions. Acts 70, 71 and 153 can never be changed without the consent of the Kings' Council, as enacted in Act 159 (5) (*Majlis Gerakan Negara* Report, 1969).

## 5. Findings and Conclusion

Based on the discussion, the findings distinctly show that the principle of tolerance played a major role in nurturing the spirit of understanding and unity among the multi-ethnic communities of Malaya. In their quest to achieve independence, each community was willing to relinquish their rights for the

opportunity to build a new nation. However, it begs the question, did the spirit of tolerance continue to be observed after independence was granted on 31 August 1957? This is due to other research that shows that after independence, each ethnic community competed with each other to safeguard their culture and traditions. In fact, up to this day, the native Malays are still facing issues in establishing the Malay language as the official language, and are still struggling to overcome abject poverty among its people (Alis, 2006; Andaya, 2004). One of the reasons was that proposal to uphold Malay values as the basis of national unity was strongly resisted by the non-Malay communities. The findings of this study also shows that, the weak adherence to the principle of tolerance during the early days of independence was the major reason that caused the May 13th 1969 tragedy to erupt.

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