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Research paper

The Concept of *Muhibah* in Nation-Building in Malaysia: the Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

This article deliberated on the concept of muhibah and its application as a means to foster harmony in the Malaysian pluralistic society comprising mainly the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Given the multiracial, multicultural and multireligous background, the study acknowledges the need to protect one's heritage and cultural traits which are necessarily connected to the question of right and freedom as the Malaysian citizen. The questions at hands, how is it possible to inculcate muhibah in the face of multiple claims to right and freedom. The article will therefore focus on the two issues pertain to right which are the right to freedom of religion and the right to language. The analysis is qualitative in nature and it relied upon library research for data collection. The article adopts textual analysis method for data analysis. The findings show that despite its historical relevance and practicality, implementing muhibah has been very challenging in Malaysia. This is due the pressing demand from particular ethnic and religion, to preserving their cultural trait. It is therefore concluded that the success of muhibah is a reciprocal process. It can be achievable if every ethnic group in Malaysia have trust and respect for the national policy such as muhibah and therefore willing to work together in realizing the policy.

Keywords: *Muhibah; Nation-building; Plural Society; Malaysia*

1. Introduction

For a plural society like Malaysia, fostering *muhibah* is not an easy feat to accomplish, as there are various disparities that are potentially to set the communities apart. Not only are the people physically different, but they are also miles apart in the aspects of religion, culture, social norms, language and education. The dissimilarities pose a huge challenge to integrate the people, as they are abstract in nature; hence meeting eye-to-eye among the communities when discussing sensitive issues has been a continuous struggle over the years. Indeed the search for the ideals practical solution that could bring everyone together is a truly challenging and time-bound process.

Nation-building is an attempt by a government at nurturing patriotism among its people. For a country, It is vital to ensure that a national identity could be inculcated upon the public, whether the community is made up of a single ethnic, or multi-ethnic(1). In the Malaysian context, infusing *muhibah* as a visionary and nation-building strategic policy is of paramount importance to ensure that national progress would not be hindered(2, 3). Each member of the plural society must be prepared to embrace *muhibah*; a post-Independence nation-building concept that epitomizes the Malaysian pluralistic society. The needs for a new social concept such as *muhibah* cannot be avoided considering that the Malaysian post-Independence society has undergone many structural changes in the areas of socio-politics, socio-economy and socio-culture. Hence the new social concept is aspired to help the Malaysians to develop as a civilized society hence contributing to its nation building agenda(4). Nation-building is not just the means to instill a sense of belonging among the ethnics, but it also provides a new identity to the citizens of Malaysia; a newly established nation formerly known as Malaya. It is hoped that *muhibah* will nurture for a shared values among the multi-ethnics society, resulting in a sense of patriotism, which will overcome each community's ethnocentric sentiments, so that they are able to work side-by side to build the nation.

A review of past literature found that no study has been conducted to measure the success or failure of the implementation of *muhibah* policy as the means to integrate ethnic communities. One of the researches carried out was on the concept of *muhibah*, as explained by Kamaruzaman(5) in her writing, *Religion and Pluralistic Co-existence the Muhibah Perspectives*. Other researchers, like(6, 7), have also debated the issues on nation-building from different aspects, but with little elaboration on the concept of *muhibah*. There is a recent article that gauges the understanding of *muhibah* among religious leaders in Malaysia titled *Muhibah is not Religious Pluralism: The Understanding of Religious Coexistence among Religious Leaders in Malaysia(8)*.

It is also reported in the literatures that the racial riots that took place on May 13, 1969 had forced the government to execute some drastic measures. To pacify the strained relations between the ethnics, the government resorted to instilling idealistic and realistic values of harmony, respect and compassion among the ethnics. The framework developed by the National *Muhibah* Council was adopted as the policies for the National Action Council (*Majlis Gerakan Negara* - MAGERAN) in the efforts to appease the society's demand for safeguarding their culture and traditions. This work therefore seeks to analyze *muhibah* based on

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the expectation of its capacity to maintain ethnic harmony in Malaysia. Using textual analysis method the author explores the general definition of *muhibah*, its chronology as nation-building policy, and the challenges involved in implementing the policy. The author hopes to finally unravel the challenges, the prospects and ultimately to make some recommendations for implementing *muhibah* in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

The term 'nation-building' and the word 'nation' have several definitions, depending on the findings by the different researchers. There are scholars that describe nation as an ethnic community that practice the same culture, and live together; or, a political community that live in the same political region(6). 'Nation' is also defined as a community that is formed historically through the sharing of similar territories, economy and cultural elements. The main aim of nation-building, whether involving a community from a single ethnic or a plural society, is to nurture a sense of belonging and a sense of unity between ethnic communities in a newly-founded nation(2).

The nation building effort may involve eradicating certain norms, values and cultural traits inherited by certain ethnics like religion, traditions, language, education and arts. It may also require assimilation, though this may be a bit controversial as it is not easy to give up one inherited values and culture. The nation building strategy may also involve imposing shared values to be embraced by the society though there could be always tendency or demand the right or to revert to one's original culture. Taking Malaysia for example, historically, in the span of 450 years, it was colonized by the Portuguese, Dutch and British. The latter administration however has left the most pervasive effect in Malaysia. Not only did the British pillaged the country of its rich natural resources, transformed the structure of the Malay political supremacy into a Resident System that led to the formation of Straits settlement, Federated states and non-federated states. As a matter of fact, it was the British who was responsible for flooding the country with an influx of immigrants, the Chinese and Indian labourers to work for them in Malaya. As a result, this has brought new structure in the composition of the society Malaya was originally made up of the Malay. However with the emergence of immigrants, it developed into a multi-racial society loaded of diverse ethnic, race and religions with diverse cultural practices and customs (9).

The emergence of the Chinese and Indians immigrants to Malaya has triggered a sense of disappointment to the Malays who suddenly realized that they were made to share the local resources. The British 'divide and rule policy' has segregated the Chinese, Indian and the Malay population via their occupations and settlements; The Chinese worked at the tin mines and run small businesses in the cities, the Indian works in plantation and estate sectors, while the Malays remain in the village and led a traditional way of living. It is essential to mention that initially the immigrants were brought to work in Malaya and they had no intention to stay permanently(10). Perhaps this could be the main reason why the Malays tolerate their coexistence. The Japanese occupation however, has sparked racial tension between the Malays and the Chinese. The Japanese was claimed to be anti- Chinese and displayed their preference to the Malays(11). However, by the time the Japanese ended its occupation; the Malays have started to develop a sense of nationalism and there sparked the urge for independence from the colonial power. The British finally had to give in to the urge. However the British imposed a condition for independence that the Malay had to take the immigrants as citizens. With such a condition the immigrants were granted their citizenship. Unfortunately, later there was a sense of particularity among the different ethnic groups including the Malays as they tried to safeguard their cultural traits and traditions(10).

Given the different cultural background, national unity seems an untenable dream to achieve as the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians were historically from a different culture and traditional(12). They were ethnically, linguistically, religiously, culturally and physically different that hardly there was any trace of commonality(13), such as ethnicity, language, religion, culture, skin colour and caste. These core elements are the attributes that determine the very existence of the ethnics, hence the thorny issue of achieving civic unity is an uphill battle when each community are devoted to conserve their own ethnic's interests, as observed by Hitler in the case of Austria(14). Therefore, when the British granted independence to Malaya, each ethnic community was zealous in their effort to safeguard the survival of their respective culture, interest and status(7). As a matter of fact, issues regarding citizenship, religion, language and education continue to be challenging issues, from the onset of independence when the government called for its people to pledge their allegiance to the new nation, until the present day

3. Results and Findings

3.1. *Muhibah* and Nation Building in Malaysia

Muhibah is a term used to denote the cultivation of harmony and unity among Malaysia's multi-racial people. The word *muhibah* is claimed to be originated from the Arabic noun *al- hubb* yet the correct derivation should be *mahabbah* instead of *muhibah.* Perhaps, like many other Arabic words, *mahabbah* has been contextualized into Malay language hence giving it a local flavour. The *Kamus Dewan* defines the *muhibah* as 'affection, feelings of friendship and care' which could also mean harmony, peace, and tranquillity. The term is also defined by Kamaruzaman(5) as 'comradeship and unison, sympathy and empathy, respect and courtesy'. To achieve *muhibah,* she proposes five principles that are respect, courtesy, sympathy and empathy, comradeship, and unity in plurality to be adopted by Malaysia's multi-racial community.

Ideally, *muhibah*, is nation building strategic policy that aim to foster unity among the Malaysians. However, the implementation of *muhibah* is a set of different narratives as there are various challenges, constrains and problems, especially when each community find it hard to accommodate each other interest and differences. The causes vary, and the most pressing ones was when there was obsession to preserving an exclusive culture and deny the need to accommodate with a universal identity that can be shared by all ethnic groups. For example, at present, espousing Bahasa Melayu as a national language that is widely spoken, taught and adopted by all agencies and institutions in Malaysia, is hindered by a consistent demand for maintaining vernacular school that treats Bahasa Melayu as secondary. Prejudices tend to develop when incidents occurred out of insensitivity to other ethnics for example many of the job advertisements make a preference for a certain language instead of Bahasa Melayu.

Historically, *muhibah* concept tries to unite the different ethnic groups in Malaysia through the enactment of the National Principles (*Rukun Negara*). However, the racial riot in May 13, 1969 has triggered questions such as to how would the principles of *Rukun Negara* like the 'Belief in God' strengthens harmony among the races?. Such a question arose due to the major differences in the religions.' For example with regard to the first principle which is 'the belief in God'; the Muslims do not recognize Gods other than Allah the Almighty, and Muslims conversion into other religions are severely condemned as blasphemous act. On the other hand, the Chinese who follow the ancestors' religion are of the opinion that there are many Gods, and that every religion is parallel as long as it promotes goodness(15). In addition, religion is not a fundamental aspect for them, as the Chinese philosophical ethics is more relied upon for shaping their moral concept. The Chinese do not view apostasy in serious manner in comparison to the Muslims and the Christians (16). The Indians, who are largely Hindus, regard their deities as mediators and not the ultimate God.

Given such diversity what are the prospects of *muhibah* in the context of the first principle, for bridging the different religious followers in Malaysia?

In nation building, one of the main challenges faced by the government is to construct the policies that are capable of uniting the communities with diverse background. Taking France as an example, the migration of Northern African ethnics into France has stirred some conflicts with the nationalists especially when the former rejected some of the national policies. On the other hand, the migration of Christian Catholics to Western Europe was welcomed by the local community as the former did not have much cultural differences with the latter. Meanwhile, in America, there were also disagreements between the various ethnics and the National Cultural Policy. Interestingly, the Anglo Saxons cultures were incorporated in the national cultural policy as the core foundations to unite the American pluralistic society(17). Considering such tendencies, it can be presumed that communities with diverse background such as Malaysia had greater challenges in attaining national unity via a concept that is adaptable and adoptable by all the different ethnics and races living in coexistence in Malaysia. These ethnics and races who had diverse origins and traditions were made to acknowledge diverse cultural symbols, effigies, dances, and clothes that signify the conventions embraced by a particular community. Misunderstanding can be arising in the absence of respect, tolerance and appreciation for each other cultural traits. In the Malaysian case, *muhibah* is expected to be the bond that is able to disregard the visible differences that marked the Malaysian pluralistic society

3.2. Nation-building in Malaysia – Applying the Concept of Muhibah

When ethnics originate from different civilizations and traditions, conflicts would definitely arise as they face a variety of intricacies in acknowledging the diverse cultural elements such as symbols, effigies, dances, and clothes that signify the conventions embraced by the communities. Misunderstandings could easily arise if a community could not appreciate, respect or tolerate the identities or elements of another ethnic community. Hence, the strongly-bound ties that each community has towards its culture would cause them to unite and revolt if their customs and traditions are threatened

3.2.1. Religious Diversity and Its Challenges in Malaysia

The concepts of *muhibah* and unity could be nurtured through the sharing of similar aspects found in religion, such as elements that promote harmony, stability and development within a society. One of the shared elements which is also a Malaysia's unique feature is the national celebration of major religious festivals. These major festivals which include 'Idul Fitr for the Muslims, the Chinese New Year by the Chinese including the followers of Mahayana Buddhists, the Deepavali by the Hindus and the Christmas by the Christians. These religious festivals are public holidays and its' joyous occasion are well-celebrated in the media and commercial sectors around the country. In addition, during the holy month of Ramadhan as the Muslims are fasting and many enterprising Malays sell delectable foods for *iftar* (fast breaking), other ethnics would also make a beeline at the many stalls that sprout all over the country to buy the proffered mouth-watering delicacies. It is so natural that festivals and its celebration are able to bring the Malaysians to be in the spirit of togetherness.

However, problems and conflicts would arise when practices, faith and the act of erecting shrines were misunderstood or not respected by other parties as the religions have different concepts, circumstances, rules and customs. The stark contrast in the practices of each religion are weighted more by the diversities in culture, resulting in difficulties to foster harmony among the religious communities as their regulations, judiciary system and religious elements like prayers, weddings and allocation of assets are as disparate as night and day. If another community attempted to question or instigate the importance of the elements, the affected ethnic would definitely be rattled, and would respond fittingly in order to safeguard their interests. It could result in a sensitive situation that would easily escalate into racial tensions among the various ethnics.

Unfortunately there are also records on racial and religious clashes due to misunderstanding, lack of information or perhaps misinformation. The stark contrast in the religious practices of each religion in addition to infusion of cultural elements in religion can be among the reasons that generate the gap between religions. The incident of Kampung Medan in 2001 for example recorded the conflict between the Indians and the Muslims over the conduct of religious rites that coincided. It was reported that the Indians in the neighbourhood were conducting the rites of passage and the Malays were celebrating a wedding ceremony(18). When an Indian man, claimed to be drunken, accidentally broke out his bike at the wedding ceremony, it has stirred up misunderstanding between the two parties. The small incident has spread into racial and religious clashes that caused riot and physical injuries. The parties involved were arrested and the affected areas were put under the police surveillance.

Of recent time, question of religious freedom has become one of the religious sensitive issues in Malaysia. The fact is, the Muslim religious affairs are subject to the Shariah law under the patron of the Sultan of the state. When it comes to marriage for example, the Muslims are bound under the enactment of the Islamic family law, of which one of the rulings is to forbid marriage with non-Muslim. On top of that, the Malay, according to the Federal Constitution is defined as a Muslim by religion. Hence, by the Constitution definition, a Malay is also a Muslim. This is not inexplicable since the Malays of this country has been largely influenced by Islam(19), and leaving Islam is regarded a taboo. If a person from another religion wishes to marry a Muslim, he or she must embrace Islam before he or she can get married with a Muslim. The bond between a Malay and Islam is plainly enacted in Article 3 of the Federal Constitution Ahmad (20). In general, to the Malay Muslims, issues related to faith is a sensitive matter especially on issues regarding conversion to other religions.

A controversy occurred in 1999 and dragged until 2007 involving the apostasy of Azlina Jailani (Lina Joy) has sparked an outrage among the Malays. A few non-Muslim NGOs (including the Advocate Councils of Hindu, Christian, Buddha and Sikh) and foreign observers like envoys from American and Australian embassies have extended their strong support to her case. The controversy almost *escalated* into a more serious affair when there were rumors that the *Inter Faith Commission* (IFC), an NGO, was planning to exploit the issue by calling for the eradication of the Malays' special privileges indicated in the Federal Constitution. The support for Lina Joy is advocated as a mark of respect to the freedom of religion and the rights of the many religions of the world (21). It was reported that about five hundred people demonstrated to call for Article 11 of the Federal Constitution (KA11) to be abolished. The IFC has organized a forum titled 'The Federal Constitution Protects Every Individual'. To avert an unwanted incident, the Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) had to act in cordoning off the area to prevent the demonstrators from creating any provocation. Malay leaders came out strongly in condemning the group and its propagation, The Malay leaders reiterated the stance that Article 11 would never be subject to changes. The then Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi also issued a stern warning to IFC to cease all planned dialogues related to religion. To date, the issue of religious freedom continues to be a delicate issue and more demands were made by the religious liberal group that generates uneasy feelings especially among the majority Muslims in the country.

3.3. Language and Education Policies

Language is not merely a communication tool. A language is also the main symbol that showcases a community's identity (22, 23). There is a Malay famous saying *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* roughly translated as 'language is the nation soul' which reflects the proximity of language and mind. Indeed language mirrors an ethnic's norms and values. Hence the case of Malay language is also a pertinent issue to religious and racial harmony in Malaysia. In this regard, Malay language is given the privilege as the national language. It is aspired to be the language of *muhibah*, a language for every Malaysians to communicate and to relate better with each other.

The decision for granting the privilege to Malay language is not without historical significance. It was implemented with the affirmative action of the second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, who established Malay language as the foundation for educational policies. He made Malay language compulsory for government officer, the language of correspondence with the government and its agencies on funding application and grant related matters, the language in national examination as well as the language to be used at school for teaching and assessments (24).

It is not an easy task from the very beginning. With disparity in values, traditions, religion and culture, the government faced an uphill battle as there were some protests from a few fractions. The most opposition came from the Chinese community. Safeguarding Mandarin language is of utmost importance to them as Mandarin is their direct link to the linguistic traditions of their ancestors from mainland China. The Chinese regarded Mandarin as the language of the heavens. They also claim that the rich cultural heritage of the Chinese people could be traced back to 5000 years ago (25). The reinforcing of the Mandarin language was implemented through the Chinese vernacular education system which had been in existence in Malaya since the 19th Century. The Chinese education system is viewed as the bastion to preserve the Chinese language, culture and identity. It was through the efforts of *Dongjiaozong* that the Chinese community started pressing for preserving their rights as the citizen of Malaysia. Some of them had taken extreme responses against the government's initiative to establish a standardized education system that is using Malay language. To them, the standard is a potential threat to the Chinese's language and cultural traditions (26). In reality, such relentless effort by the *Dongjiaozong* in safeguarding the status of the Chinese language through the Chinese vernacular school system had begun since the pre-independence days and continues until today.

The continuous dissatisfaction from the non-native ethnics had spurred the Malays into action, which resulted in the formation of National Language Action Front, a body geared towards defining the status of *Bahasa Melayu* as the nation's official language in 1960. Calls were made to ensure that the government did not budge from its position and would not entertain the demands by the Chinese as it would only alienate the Malay language further. Meanwhile, the left-wing nationalists went a step further, by demanding that the importance of the English language to be curtailed. The act was not due to anti-British sentiments, but more on the concern to establish an extension of the Malay traditional values (24).

The dispute over the issue of language and education policy had to a certain extent became one of the hurdles to the inculcation of *muhibah* in this country. The government of Malaysia has taken a very careful measure in resolving the dispute. Despite the fact that the Malay language is the language of the soil and it is widely spoken by the majority ethnic in Malaysia, the government has tried to be accommodative to the non-Malay in preserving their rights to use their language in the national education system, hence the continuity of vernacular school in Malaysia has been receiving full support from the government, this as stated in the Razak Report.

We believe that it is of utmost importance for our schools to be spiritually infused with the elements bonded to the sacred land of the Malay Peninsula, and we feel that this can only be achieved by implementing the same syllabus so that all the children will be learning the same subjects even if they are taught in different languages.

3.4. The Prospect in Fortifying Racial Ties through the Concept of Muhibah and Nation Building

The first few years of the post-Independence period, were the trying time for Malaysia. It was challenging as the different ethnics perceived every issue differently, especially in voicing conflicting matters regarding politics, economy, religion and language. There was silent dissatisfaction among the people until it could no longer be contained, culminating in a racial riot on May 13, 1969. The Malaysians however, seemed to learn from the crisis. Hence, for the next 40 years, they continue to tolerate each other in order to peacefully co-exist. Even though there were a number of isolated incidents involving clashes between ethnics like the incident in Kampung Medan, Selangor from 4 to 8 March 2001, but they were far and between. The government is consistent in trying to minimize the clashes. The Malaysians in general fortunately have been very careful and seemed mature in managing inter-ethnic and inter-racial issues.

3.4.1. The Roles of Individuals, Social Institutions and Relevant Government Agencies

The inculcation of *muhibah* should starts from home. Every parent should educate their children to acknowledge the pluralistic landscape of the Malaysian society. The appreciation for diversity should also be integrated at school and ways of integrating students who are currently enrolled in different types of school should be explored. At societal level, it is expected that coexistence and tolerance to be naturally and gradually embraced. There is a concept introduced in 1975 and continued to be practically held today which is *Rukun Tetangga* (neighbourhood watch). It was originally taken up to consolidate a jointly voluntary effort among people of certain neighbourhood to keep the neighbouring area under watch. Interestingly, it was through such cooperation that the people had the opportunity to interact, learn and benefit from each other in safeguarding the neighbouring community. The *Rukun Tetangga* is in fact, became one of the best mechanisms for the inculcation of *muhibah*. As a matter of fact, it falls under the purview of the Department of National Unity and Integration *Jabatan Perpaduan Negara and Integrasi Nasional* - JPNIN), which is the responsible department set up to foster unity and *muhibah* in the country.

JPNIN has in fact developed its Unity and National Integration Action Plan 2005-2010 to ensure that the *muhibah* concept can be cascaded down to every level of society. It has conducted programs with communities ranging from intellectual forums such as public lecture, dialogues, discourses (27), recreational program such as sports, telematch, cultural performance and others. Recently, there were also community mediation training programs that help to train community leaders to do intervention measures in case of small disputes in the community. In 2010, the government has taken a step ahead in tackling diverse religions in Malaysia. The establishment of Committee For The Promotion Of Inter Religious Understanding And Harmony Amoung Adherents (Jawatankuasa Mempromosikan Persefahaman Dan Keharmonian Antara Penganut Agama - JKMPKA) is meant to foster *muhibah* and inter-religious understanding among the people of different religions in Malaysia.

Finally, notwithstanding the national language dilemma, it is timely that the government of Malaysia to take firmer action to ensure that all Malaysians are capable of conversing in Malay language. Language as the main tool of communication is the best mecha-

nism for propagating interaction and fraternity between the different ethnics. The decision to enforce Malay language as the national language should be respected as it is not only the language of the native but also the language stipulated in Article 152 of the Federal Constitution. History records show that *Bahasa Melayu* has been the lingua franca of the Malay region during the height of the Melaka Sultanate era. It was also the language of choice when diplomatic deals between the Melaka kingdom and foreign envoys were held. Such, was the credibility of Bahasa Melayu in the past that it has been spoken not only by locals but also foreigners traveling to the region.

4. Conclusion

Muhibah deserves recognition as one of the effective government policies that has a long and subtle history in Malaysia. Its aims are noble for it seeks to bridge the gaps between the Malaysian pluralistic societies. Its concept of love, affection, respect and tolerance pertains to all religious teachings as well as cultural traditions. *Muhibah* then has the universal criteria and is unbiased to particular ethnic, race and religion. After more than forty years since its inception, *muhibah* is understood in abstraction and is in dire need for a more strategic approach to operationalize. Given the current challenges stemming from the global rising demands on human right and freedom, it is essential that *muhibah* as a national policy to be tightened and reinforced. *Muhibah* is indeed the secret recipe of the Malaysian success in managing its pluralistic society. It is a local concept tailored in such a way that is accommodative to the multiracial, multi-ethnic and multi-religious context and at the same time rooted in the history of Malaysia. It is a high time that Malaysians to be convinced to resolve their domestic affair using a home-grown formula as the proverb says it when in Rome do as the Romans do.

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