

GDN-2
Education, Arena of Communal Conflict

Kuala Lumpur
Malaya
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

In Malaya, as in the rest of Southeast Asia, the rise of nationalism contains a threat for the non-indigenous communities. Where discriminatory action is taken against non-indigenous communities, it is usually directed at some activity or institution in which those communities have been especially successful. The Chinese schools in Malaya are visible institutions in competition with native institutions, and they are also the carriers of distinctive Chinese culture. This has meant that the Chinese schools would become the objects of communal controversy almost from the beginning of Malaya's struggle for independence and economic growth.

In 1951 the British High Commissioner for Malaya called a committee, under the direction of L.J. Barnes (Oxford), to report on the education of Malays in Malaya. The committee was popularly hailed as a major step forward for the emerging nation. Up to that time education in the Malay language was available only through the primary school level. A Malay with educational aspirations beyond that received instruction in English. This was considered an impossible situation for a society wanting independence and economic growth. A new, fully national education system was needed, and the Barnes committee saw fit to recommend such a system, though the terms of the committee referred to Malays only. The system recommended by the committee would provide a common intellectual heritage, imparted only in English or Malay, for all who chose to make Malaya their home. Language and syllabus would be used to unify the diverse communities of Malaya. The non-Malay communities (Chinese and Indian) were asked to give up their vernacular schools to promote national unity. To compensate for this sacrifice, the plan would make the new national schools truly superior. Rather unadvisedly as it appears today, the committee argued that if any parents were unhappy with this arrangement, their unhappiness would properly be taken as evidence that they did not regard Malaya as their home and object of their undivided loyalty.

Such a view might be accepted by a community that did not itself value education highly, or by one that had not organized in support of that value; but this could never be said of the Chinese. In comparison with the Malays, the Chinese had a higher proportion of their children in school and met a far higher proportion of the cost of that education privately. In 1949 almost all Malay students were in government assisted schools, with an average yearly assistance of M\$ 55 per student. Only 79% of the Chinese students were in government assisted schools, with an average yearly assistance of only M\$ 9 per student. The Chinese community was digging deep into its own pocket to provide an education for its children. In addition, through taxation, the Chinese were contributing significantly to the education of the children of other communities. By the time the Barnes report was made

the Chinese community had built an extensive and visible institution that stood as a monument to the value that community accorded education. (Much the same could be said for the smaller, but more literate, Indian community.) This was not a community that could accept the charge of disloyalty for the pride it felt in its own efforts.

Partly because of the reaction to the Barnes committee, the High Commissioner called another committee, under the direction of Doctors W.P. Fenn (US) and T.Y. Wu (UN), to report on Chinese education in Malaya. The Fenn-Wu report was presented shortly after publication of the Barnes report. It gave due credit to the industry of the Chinese community in providing schools for its children, but it also called for considerable reform of Chinese education. The most immediate need was for new texts and syllabuses. These had previously come from China and were not suited to schools in Malaya. New materials and a new orientation were needed if the Chinese children were to be prepared for responsible citizenship in a new and independent Malaya.

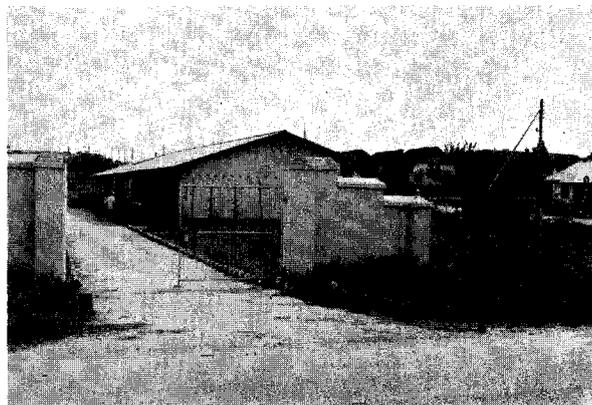
These two reports touched off a storm of public controversy. Newspapers contained daily letters and articles praising and vilifying both Chinese and Malay cultures. That this happened in the depths of the Emergency only served to amplify the controversy. The Malays wanted guarantees of Chinese loyalty. They did not want Malaya turned into a satellite of Communist China. The danger seemed (and was) real. The Chinese wanted guarantees of their right to exist peacefully and to obtain just rewards for their efforts.

The education ordinance of 1952 reflected the rationality of the leadership in Malaya. It was a compromise that sought to build a better education system while protecting the integrity of the non-Malay communities. With the leadership Malaya possessed, the conflict had a stimulating and salutary effect upon all schools in the country.

The next significant step in the controversy came in 1956 with the Education Committee, under the direction of Dato Abdul Razak bin Abdul Hussein, now Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Rural Development. The terms of this committee were significantly different



U.S. Methodist (English)



Indian (Tamil)

from those of the Barnes committee: to examine the education system and recommend changes necessary to "...establish a national system of education acceptable to the people of the Federation as a whole which will satisfy their needs to promote their development as a nation, having regard to the intention to make Malay the national language... whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of the other communities in the country." The Barnes committee had included no Chinese or Indians, nor had these communities been represented in witnesses or memoranda called by the committee. The Razak committee included eight Malays, five Chinese, and two Indians; It was a national committee competent to recommend a national education system.

The recommendations of the Razak committee have become the main elements in the new education policy. Primary education is in four streams: Malay, English, Chinese (Mandarin), and Tamil. Secondary education will be only in English and Malay. Other languages can and will be taught as subjects. Examinations for entrance to secondary school will be in the language of instruction, but all higher examinations will be only in English and Malay. English and Malay speaking children will be bi-lingual; Chinese and Tamil speaking children will be tri-lingual. Beginning in 1962 all primary education will be free, and all schools will be either completely independent or completely government financed. The partially assisted schools, with more political freedom than fully assisted schools and more financial freedom than independent schools, will be things of the past. Independent schools must follow the standard minimum curriculum, but are free to choose the medium of instruction.

To the Malays, and to many non-Malays, this appears to be an equitable accommodation of the claims of the various communities. All the major political parties, including the major opposition party,* have accepted this program. At least on the surface these parties have convinced their followers that general acceptance of this program is in the best interest of all the communities.

Although the controversy has ebbed, it has not yet been fully resolved. There is still a haunting fear in parts of the Chinese and Indian communities that this is just the first encroachment, and that



Chinese

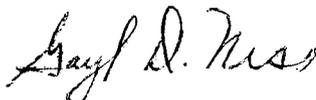


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ultimately the teaching of their languages, and thus their cultures, will be prohibited in Malaya. Events in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Ceylon give support to these fears. These fears also provide the base for what political force is still left in the controversy. The important question in this respect is how well the MCA represents the Chinese community. A group of rebels, now called Independents, broke off from the MCA over the education issue. The immediate demand of the Independents is for the use of Chinese as a medium of instruction in the secondary schools. A more basic demand, however, is that the MCA be closer to its constituents. If it were not for the power of the latter demand, the former would lose much of its significance, for there are only about 40 Chinese secondary schools out of a total of about 400 secondary schools. The potential for serious communal conflict at present depends upon whether the motives of the Independents are opportunistic or altruistic. The former means an upsurge of communalism with excessive Chinese demands and violent Malay reactions. The latter means continued sagacious compromise. My impression now, after talking with a few of the Independents, is that altruism outweighs opportunism.

It is significant that the Barnes committee, the first real attempt to suggest a new educational system for the new nation, should touch off communal conflict. Not only in Malaya, but perhaps in all of Southeast Asia, all real attempts to get at the roots of poverty and to transform the old societies into new, dynamic ones, will carry the potential of communal conflict. To keep such conflict from being destructive, to make it a stimulant for national growth rather than a haunting specter of violence and chaos, it is necessary that the leadership and the development programs of the new nations be rational and just, especially where the Chinese are concerned. It is necessary that national goals allow room for the aspirations of the Chinese communities, and it is necessary that leaders do not hasten to define these communities as alien and disloyal. In view of the recent history of China, and the long-standing disparity between the economic positions of the Chinese and indigenous communities, such rationality is perhaps too much to ask. This appears to be the case everywhere in Southeast Asia, with the notable exception of Malaya. In this controversy, the smooth transition to independence that gave support to moderate Malayan leadership was a key force in providing the rational and just leadership which alone can avert violent communal conflict.

Sincerely,



Gayl D. Ness

* The Alliance party, now in control of the government, is composed of the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). The major opposition party is the Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP).