

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Plural Society - II
Malay Privileges and Non-Malay Frustrations

12 Road 5/35
Petaling Jaya, Selangor
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,

At a recent student party I was talking with a young Chinese girl working on a Master's degree in Linguistics. We talked first of her fascinating study of Malayan English, analyzed both linguistically and sociologically. Soon, however, she told me of her experiences with the bureaucracy. The government scholarship she had won through a competitive examination carried with it the stipulation that she must work for the Ministry of Education for five years after graduation. In all cases of this sort, the students are allowed to pay the value of the scholarship later if they do not want to fulfill the obligation.

"I went to ask for a deferment to go on for a Master's degree. They told me this year they were not allowing any deferments because they needed so many teachers. When I asked to pay off the scholarship in installments, they said that from this year the payment would have to be made all at once. But then when I came back to the University at the beginning of the term, I found some Malay students who had got a waiver of the obligation, not just a deferment. I realize they have to be helped, but I really didn't like the government lying to me like that."

From a Chinese faculty member I heard of two Malays who had asked for a deferment of obligations (which would have made teachers out of them) to do advanced work in the Malay Studies Department. The obligation was waived, they were accepted to graduate standing and given assistantships in the department. Then they promptly turned around and accepted higher paying positions in the more prestigious Malayan Civil Service. "How can you help them when they act like that? How can you create a Malay University staff? They scream because it is a foreigner who heads the Malay Studies Department and it is foreigners who do most of the teaching. But what can you do if they won't even take the trouble to learn their own language and culture?"

Chinese and Indian students have pointed out to me that a young Malay radical Marxist at the University, with a fat dossier in the police intelligence would have been under detention long ago if he were not a Malay. Instead he was assisted in the rewriting of an unacceptable (and some argue highly treasonable) Master's Essay, then given a position as an assistant lecturer in the University.

A fair number of last year's Chinese and Indian University graduates are still without the government jobs for which they applied a year ago. Many have distinguished themselves in their studies, but they know that grades do not always matter. They are well aware of the fact that a Malay who barely manages to scrape through will have the pick of the jobs while Chinese and Indians who have worked hard and performed well must wait for what they want or accept what others do not want.

Chinese and Indian students have told me of the first Malay to graduate in Civil Engineering. He took five years to do the four year course, and even then he was only prevented from failing by government intervention. Another Malay who passed only by virtue of his birthright was given a good position on the University's academic staff and was recently appointed to a lucrative position at the U.N. in New York. The only full professor in the Arts Faculty who has no training beyond the B.A. is a Malay. These are the typical observations cited by non-Malays in describing Malay privileges.

An American friend experienced a passionate display of Chinese frustration when he interviewed a coffee-shop owner. "I put eight children through the University and no one helped us! We did it alone! They've got to accept us here and give us a chance!" The tone resembled that portrayed by Michener in his Hawaiian Japanese who fought so gallantly in the last war in Europe. "How much longer? How much more do we have to do?"

The frustration is heightened by the Chinese and Indian's deep sense of cultural and intellectual superiority. These are not people like the American Negro, who became thoroughly Americanized because they were completely cut off from a culture which was at best inferior (an anthropologist would never use that term) to the culture they confronted. "We have languages and civilizations that go back thousands of years and we're being asked to be a part of a culture that scarcely exists. All right, we'll learn the Malay language. But watch out. If they really give us a chance we'll soon speak better Malay than the Malays themselves." And they are right. Already one of the big problems of the ministry of education is the inability of Malays to pass examinations in their own language. Chinese and Indians have already demonstrated their ability to pass any examination that will bring rewards in the modern world.

Fears of potential non-Malay frustration were expressed openly in the House of Representatives just after Malaya gained independence in 1957. A Chinese member rose and argued forcefully for getting on with the job of economic development. He gave expression to what I have found to be a fervent belief of many non-Malays; the Chinese in Malaya advanced through toil and skill, not through privileges. He asked the Malays not to demand too much in privileges, but to roll up their sleeves, give up their carefree ways and to work hard for the good of the nation. The country is here to be developed and only those who toil will reap the rewards. It was one of the very few public statements of this kind I have seen or heard.

The response this drew in the House was typical, and helps to explain why statements like this are not often made publicly. A gentle old Malay argued in an obviously restrained manner that people should not hasten to make unsolicited criticisms of the weaknesses of others. The other people who have been and continue to be the guests of the Malays in Malaya should only be thankful that the Malays have been peace-loving, hospitable and friendly to everyone. "I do not want to say further than that, because as a Malay I should not be impolite."

To Chinese and Indian expressions of frustration, some Malays are quick to answer that these "immigrants" can go back to their own poverty-stricken countries if they don't like it here. At this the non-Malays ask, "Who are the immigrants, anyway." It is true that many non-Malays have been here far longer than many Malays. Constitutional definitions of "Malay", however, mean that, for example, a person born in Malaya of Indonesian parents residing here on Independence Day can rightfully claim to be a "Malay" simply by virtue of his speaking Malay, being a Muslim and "following Malay custom". He is thus

entitled to legal advantages even over those Chinese (like the Minister of Finance, for example) whose families have been in the country contributing to its development for generations.

Objectively the frustration occurs not because the non-Malays are oppressed or held back, but because they have recently experienced a great opening of advantages. In last year's talks with the Borneo Chinese, the Malayan Chinese Association argued that they had acquired great advantages for their people by quiet negotiation. They pointed out that the four Malays to each non-Malay quota in the Civil Service is an infinite increase over British administration when the Civil Service was reserved for Europeans and Malays alone. I have often made this argument myself when Chinese friends give vent to their frustrations. They quickly agree that this is an advantage, but they also point out that this makes their experiences all the more frustrating. The advantages have only been half opened to them. They constantly see less competent Malays advanced over them in all government positions. Though they acknowledge that there are many excellent Malay administrators - the whole force of District Officers provides a good example - they also point out that the gross incompetence and lack of industry of many Malays is only kept from having disastrous effects on the administration by one or two Chinese or Indian assistants who really keep the service going.

The list could go on almost indefinitely.

A few weeks ago in Manila non-Malay frustrations were given a really crowning shock. Malaya, the Philippines and Indonesia together proposed a loose confederation to protect their interests. Almost immediately the suggestion was made that this would bring a crack-down on Chinese minorities in the region. Though this was vehemently denied by Malaya's Prime Minister, it did little to allay deep Chinese fears. Regardless of how improbable is the outcome of the proposed confederation, it is easily seen by many Chinese, almost too apprehensive to express their fears, as another indication of their continued failure to gain acceptance as loyal citizens. "Will there never be a place for us here?"

These reactions of non-Malays represent only a small illustration of what I have experienced hundreds of times during my 28 months in Malaya. The non-Malays are burdened with frustrations arising out of Malay privileges, and the frustrations are more intense because of the often displayed failure of Malays to react positively to these privileges.

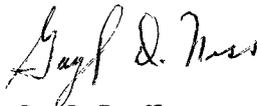
Actually, these observations reflect the views of some Malays as well as non-Malays. All over the country I have listened to District Officers express fears of Malay privileges. There is no frustration here, of course, only the fear that the system of privileges will make the Malays weaker rather than stronger. "I've told our people to look at the Chinese. You can see young Chinese school girls working in heavy construction after school hours, and they still come out with the highest marks. I tell our people that we Malays are lazy - I put it in terms of we, including myself, not just they, it makes it easier for them to accept - and that we have to get rid of our laziness if we want to serve our country and get ahead."

Objectively there are good reasons for thinking that the system of privileges is both necessary and workable. The Malays are behind in almost every modern activity. Compared with Chinese and Indians, they are less educated, less literate, less urban, less healthy, less occupied in modern economic activities and less involved in the total communications system of the new nation. Regardless of the reason for this, it is acknowledged even among non-Malays that something must be done about it. You cannot build a viable national state where half the population is both poor and of a different ethnic background, especially where that half is over-represented in the electorate. Further, it is generally acknowledged that Malay backwardness is not the result of anything like racial inferiority. One comparative, non-verbal, cross-cultural I.Q. test, for example, found that at the age of eight Chinese children are definitely ahead of Malay children, but by the age of twelve the differences disappear. Non-Malay school teachers are some of the first and most fervent believers in the proposition that any existing backwardness in the Malays can be remedied by increased educational opportunities. These optimists argue that the abuse of the privileges is largely a result of the great shortage of educated Malays. As this supply increases, there will be more competition between Malays for the high positions, bringing a general increase in standards of performance.

Whatever the objective situation may be, its effect depends almost entirely upon the way it is perceived and defined by the individuals involved. However rational may be the acceptance of the necessity and utility of Malay privileges, it cannot possibly assuage the hurt of the individual non-Malays who are frustrated by those privileges. It cannot help partly because the hurt itself is not rational, derived as it is from a commitment to the ultimate value of just rewards. It cannot help because the frustration itself comes not from a denial of opportunities, but from the partial withholding of opportunities that are at the same time being granted.

What is of real importance, of course, is the political implication of these frustrations. What will non-Malay frustrations on the one hand and Malay suspicions on the other mean for Malaya? Can a viable national state exist with a plural society, a society as torn as Malaya's by fundamental differences of large groups? This is the question I want to examine in my next newsletter.

Sincerely,



Gayl D. Ness

Received in New York July 8, 1963.