6-2016

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CENSUS-TAKING IN MALAYSIA: BUMIPUTERA, NON-BUMIPUTERA AND THE NEP

Published:

30 Jun 2016

Ethnic categorisation in Malaysia was once more detailed than indigenous versus non-indigenous, and free from economic policy-making pressure

Flipping through Malaysia's population census, one would notice four categories under the "ethnic distribution" section: Bumiputera (native Malaysians), Chinese, Indian, and Others. Those familiar with Malaysia are unlikely to find such categorisation surprising, and might have some understanding behind the affirmative action policies that underpins the Bumiputera versus non-Bumiputera dynamic in the country.

What is less well-known is that there were more than just four categories for Malaysian citizens before 1991.

"In a report about the 1947 census, there was a question on how many ethnic groups there were in Sarawak," explains **Charles Hirschman**, the Boeing International Professor at the Department of Sociology at the University of Washington. "The census takers were going to collect data on 51, but there are really 129. That's a lot to put on a piece of paper.

"From 1957 to 1980, there were no changes in ethnic classifications in Malaysia. The census takers were just following precedent. The other thing is, they were confronting diversity in Sabah and Sarawak into the Peninsula Malaysia classification and that was really a stumbling block – there was just too much human diversity."

SIMPLIFYING AND POLITICISING ETHNIC CLASSIFICATION

When Britain conducted in 1957 its last colonial census in Malaysia, there were four categories: Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Others. Within the “Malay” category there were “Indonesian”, six Orang Asli (native people) groups, and “Other Malay”. The Chinese were categorised according to the major dialect groups, while Indians’ sub-categories expanded from four to 10.

Fast forward to 2010, where the census categories are: Bumiputera (14.2 million Malay, 3.3 million “Other Bumiputera”), Chinese (24.6 million, sans dialect group categorisation), Indian (7.3 milllion, sans sub-categories), and Others (0.7 million with no further categorisation).

“[The government] came up with a new principle to organise diversity, and that principle is Bumiputera versus non-Bumiputera,” Hirschman says. “It is not language or culture. They have eliminated all the foreign groups that are culturally similar from the classifications. The details are gone.

“Those from northern Sumatra are Acehnese, and if they are from a little more south they are Batak – all that classification is gone. And all those who are foreign born, which make up a substantial part of the population in Malaysia [in 1991 before the categories were streamlined], they don’t even get an ethnicity. Ethnicity is only a domestic characteristic.”

He adds, “The way census takers classify people is based on government policy. They are effectively saying, ‘We are aligning the way we do our data collection and policy in line with government policy. It’s Bumiputera versus non-Bumipuetra, meaning: you’re a citizen entitled to full benefits i.e. Bumiputera, or you’re a citizen who is not entitled to full benefits, and we’ll call these folks ‘non-Bumiputera’.”

THE NEP: FROM 'CATCH UP' TO ENTITLEMENT

The Malaysian government implemented the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970 following the race riots that broke out on May 13, 1969. The NEP was an affirmative action programme created to help the Malays catch up economically, thereby addressing the economic imbalances that led to the riots. But what was originally meant to run for 20 years became an indefinite distribution of privilege and largesse from the government.

“The Bumiputera principle of indigeneity was formulated on the principle of ‘catch up’,” Hirschman elaborates. “People were behind through no fault of their own. They could have been born in rural areas or places with poorer schools, or they were born to poorer parents; they didn’t choose any of these things. Economic policy was formulated for these people to catch up (1970). It was meant to be completed in 1990.

“Now, the economic policy has a different principle, and it’s entitlement. Entitlement means ‘we deserve something’. People often feel that they deserve something because of their parents, because of their language or something else. They don’t have to earn it.”

Malay privilege was a prime issue of contention that led to Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia in 1965. While Singapore has prospered with its mantra of meritocracy, Hirschman says meritocracy is not a magic bullet.

“We have a saying in the United States: You’re born on third base but you think you’ve hit a triple,” he says, making a baseball analogy. “In other words, you find yourself in an advantaged place and you think you deserved it, but it was your parents who did everything they could to get you there.”

So, how does one solve this problem? “Opportunity,” Hirschman states. “Opportunity is the magical lubricant to de-emphasise ethnicity in society. We cannot eliminate inequality but we can reduce the high levels that we see in the modern world. Minimise inequality, not the eradication of it, and provide equal opportunities, and these groups of people will take care of themselves.”