

Manifesto Rakyat Pillar 1: Unity in Diversity/Bangsa Malaysia

1: Cultural Identity & Religious Harmony

Preamble

This policy area covers the aspirations of the Rakyat to promote national unity and social cohesion. Some of the proposals below took inspiration from selected recommendations in the 2015 National Unity Consultative Council report. All have in common a vision of unity in diversity, affirming, in particular, cultural and linguistic diversity as an asset of the nation.

I: Inclusive National Identity & Constitutional Supremacy

Malaysians generally take pride in maintaining cordial interethnic and interreligious relations and appreciate the nation's multicultural and multireligious makeup. Nonetheless, intergroup tension has surfaced in the public sphere from time to time, often exacerbated by right-wing groups who propagate religious or racial supremacist discourses against minorities. The situation is compounded by the low level of constitutional literacy in society and the Malay-centric perspective in the history curriculum which neglects the historical contribution of non-Malays. It is imperative that this situation is rectified to encourage a shared sense of mutual acceptance and belonging among citizens based on an inclusive articulation of a national identity and respect for rule of law.

1. Integrate constitutional literacy and respect for the rights of others into the school curriculum.

Teach in secondary school the key features of the Federal Constitution, including the historical context and spirit in which important provisions were introduced. Impart appreciation of the guaranteed fundamental liberties in tandem with the concept of rule of law. This is a crucial part of civic education, which should be introduced in school in view of the lowering of the voting age.

(GBM; Harmony Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform)

2. Revamp the history curriculum and textbooks to promote a shared sense of national belonging.

Current textbook narratives propagate an overly Malay-centred interpretation of history and contain minimal information on the presence and role of non-Malays in the development of the nation. This imbalance impedes a greater appreciation of the origins of the social and religious pluralism in Malaysia, and the contribution of all ethnic and social groups to the transformation of the country. It also does not foster mutual acceptance of all ethnic groups and a balanced historical understanding among them. The history of immigration itself should be presented in a positive light, as Malaysia came to be what it is today through continual settlement of peoples and selective incorporation of external cultures.

(GBM, Harmony Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform)

3. Hold educational campaigns through official government channels to increase constitutional literacy and popularise a more inclusive historical narrative.

The government should also use its official channels—such as programmes for training civil servants, Rukun Tetangga or the new youth leadership—to educate the public on the correct interpretation of the Federal Constitution and a more inclusive history of the nation.

(GBM, Harmony Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform)

4. Review Syariah legislation to accord it with the Federal Constitution and relevant human rights tenets.

Several recent court judgments have found specific state legislation to be *ultra vires* and unconstitutional. There is hence an urgent need to conduct the review in order to identify clauses that are in conflict with the Federal Constitution, and make the necessary amendments of state Syariah legislation in respect of not just the principle of constitutional supremacy but also human rights. It is particularly urgent to review the state Syariah Criminal Offences enactments. The government should assert leadership and appoint respectable leaders who will engage stakeholders and champion open and coherent discourse on the administration of Islamic laws based on justice, tolerance and moderation.

(G25, Proposal 1B-1)

5. Review the effectiveness of the National Unity Action Plan and the National Unity Blueprint, and refine them periodically to focus on promoting national unity instead of symbolism.

Review the National Unity Action Plan (NUAP) (2021–2030) and the National Unity Blueprint (NUB) (2021–2030) periodically and concretise the contents of these documents to address the issues that contribute to the erosion of national unity and social cohesion (e.g. racial and religious discrimination).

(Dato' Stanley Isaacs, Proposal 1A-1; Harmony Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 1A-2)

6. Re-orient/Rectify the functions of the Ministry of Unity back to its original focus.

The Ministry of Unity is publicly perceived as being chiefly concerned with managing non-Muslim matters. The roles and responsibilities of the ministry must be revamped to focus on promoting national unity and social cohesion among all citizens.

(Harmony Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 1A-3)

II: Respect for Human Dignity & Fairness

A specific policy or legislation that addresses the issues of racial discrimination and racism in Malaysia is essential to preserve a harmonious society, where peoples of different ethnicities are treated and respected equally and are able to practise their own culture and religion freely. At present, there is no such policy or law. Instead, the propagation of racial and religiously-based policies over time has led to our once multicultural society becoming increasingly insular and narrow-minded, a society in which minority groups are largely side-lined from the mainstream cultural, political and social directions of the country.

7. Set up a National Harmony and Reconciliation Commission.

To address complaints regarding racial and religious discrimination or vilification, establish an independent statutory body, a National Harmony and Reconciliation Commission, via a specific legislation (e.g., an Enabling Act or a Comprehensive

Anti-Discrimination Act). The commission shall have the power to investigate and conduct national inquiries into such issues. Among its tasks is to set minimum standards against racial and religious discrimination, and educate the public about their right to fairness, dignity and respect. It shall be an essential point of contact for policymakers, public bodies and business.

(Harmony Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 1A-4; Badlishah Sham Baharin, GBM/IKRAM, Proposal 1B-2; Goh You Ping, Proposal, 1A-5; Dave, Proposal 1A-6)

8. Review and revamp existing race-based affirmative action measures.

Decades of race-based affirmative action since the implementation of the New Economic Policy have successfully transformed the socio-economic conditions of the Malay community and, to a lesser extent, those of the natives in Sabah and Sarawak as well as the Orang Asli. Nonetheless, there have been leakages and abuses in practice. Hence the government should:

- i. appraise existing policies in terms of their effectiveness and continued relevance;
- ii. shift progressively from a race-based approach to a needs-based approach so as to channel the limited resources to those who need them most;
- iii. premise new policies of affirmative action on an inclusive, non-discriminatory justification and appeal to a sense of justice and solidarity among citizens. Emphasis should be placed on programmes that aim at building resilience of target groups rather than creating dependency or reinforcing a sense of entitlement; and
- iv. promote a historically informed and accurate understanding of Article 153—the constitutional provision that provides the legal basis of the policy—in tandem with other provisions such as Article 8 on equal treatment of all citizens.

(Fanks, Proposal 1A-7; Harmony Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 1A-8; Sharmacheng, Proposal 1A-9; L., Proposal 1A-10)

9. Implement policies promoting diverse representation within decision-making bodies at all levels of government, paying particular attention to minority groups.

This should be done especially in local councils, in the transition from communal to non-communal politics.

(Anusha Arumugam, Tamil Foundation/The Educational, Welfare & Research Foundation Malaysia, Proposal 1A-11)

III: Minority Cultures & Languages

Indigenous peoples residing in rural areas have not enjoyed as much the fruits of socio-economic and human development from affirmative action policies for the uplift of the Bumiputera. Instead, they have experienced not only rapid erosion of their languages and cultures, but also conflicts over the preservation of their customary land, due to logging and other developmental activities. Their next generation, the youth, are also far behind their urban peers in educational achievement.

10. Provide indigenous minorities with institutional support to preserve their language and culture and improve their academic performance.

Language and culture are part of a child's holistic development, and indigenous languages and cultures should be regarded as educational resources in developing the initial literacy, self-esteem, identity and creativity in pre-school education. This will eventually help close the achievement gap among indigenous minorities, arrest the rapid erosion of their language and culture, and contribute to their mastering of Malay and English.

- i. Develop a national policy on mother-tongue-based multilingual education where the mother tongue is the preferred language of instruction in preschool education, and promote, where appropriate, a policy of mother-tongue-first literacy which uses the mother tongue as the language of instruction for initial literacy in both preschool and primary schools, while ensuring successful transition to Malay and English.

- ii. Fund, equip, monitor and evaluate mother-tongue-based pilot primary schools in rural and indigenous areas through collaboration with indigenous communities, language associations, NGOs and universities.
- iii. Strengthen, promote and research every language of Malaysia through collaborations with indigenous communities, language associations, NGOs and universities.

(PACOS Trust & Kadazandusun Language Foundation)

11. Allocate sufficient resources for the holistic development of indigenous peoples.

Implement policies to safeguard the right of the indigenous peoples to their customary land, as their ancestral land is an integral part of their culture and way of life. Prepare and implement community development programmes in genuine consultation with the community.

(Harmony Cluster, CSO Platform for Reform, Proposal 1A-8; Sabah Reform Initiative, Proposal 1A-12)

IV: Inclusive & Democratic Citizenship

Apart from an inclusive and non-discriminatory framework for nation-building, citizen cooperation and civility are important determinants of social cohesion in a culturally and religiously diverse society. Citizenship education is thus crucial to foster a responsible civic identity committed to promoting the common good and holding political authorities accountable through the democratic process.

12. Reinforce democratic citizenship education in schools.

The following measures are all the more important in view of the lowering of voting age and the drastic increase of younger voters:

- i. Enhance political literacy and maturity of the younger generation for democratic participation based on the rights and responsibilities of a citizen.
- ii. Impart holistic and balanced knowledge of the Federal Constitution and Malaysian history.
- iii. Train teachers to eliminate racial prejudices, and inculcate the same in students in every aspect of school life.

- iv. Inculcate a culture and practice of dialogue and negotiation, as well as a capacity for critical and inclusive engagement.

(GBM; Dato' Stanley Isaacs, Proposal 1A-1)

Concluding Remarks

These 12 key action plans, while not exhaustive, capture the need for a higher standard of regard for all ethnic groups in Malaysia, including far-sighted and substantive state actions in preserving and protecting the rights of minorities and bridging divisive social cleaves. They require long-term state commitment for the policies to render national unity more sustainable and social cohesion more resilient. The ruling government must be held to the agenda of unity and inclusive nationhood.