Social Decohesion and Democracy: Renunciation of National Integration in a Pluralist Society

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Abstract

This paper analyzes social decohesion in a democratic country with a pluralist societal composition. More often than not, the ubiquitous presence of this element proves to be a hindrance to social integration. In other words, for a society with such significant and distinct ethnical backgrounds, social exclusiveness is understandably essential in integration process. However, over the years, not only has globalization blurred the definition of democracy, it has also made social exclusiveness to be even more distinctive and in some cases well-defined. In many ways, features of ethnocentrism do heighten and further social decohesion which in turn is more than likely to be detrimental to social integration. Thus, seeing at the deteriorating ethnic relations, in the name of inclusiveness, modernization has inadvertently made differences among members of the society to be more profound and clear. Besides, one must as well take into account the important role of instrumentalism and primordial elements in any intellectual discourse on ethnic conflict. Apparently, pursuant to the failing ethnic relations, social cohesion, that is supposedly integral in facilitating social integration, is still far from being successful primarily due to the ongoing process of social decohesion.

Keywords: *Social Decohesion, Democracy, Primordial, Instrumentalism, Integration, Ethnocentrism*

1. Introduction

The society of today is in the middle of a transitional democratic consolidation phase before it begins to enter its modern transformational era. But, not only are changes bound to alter current social class but also of the values and norms of life. Globalization, together with everything that it stands for, has swept through the society with such a revolutionary speed made possible by cutting edge technology that enables real-time and worldwide information sharing (Jreisat 2012; Ritzer 2011). As such, Malaysia as a multi-ethnic society composed of different social backgrounds made up of three main ethnics i.e. Malays, Chinese and Indian, as well as other ethnics, also find itself at the receiving end of the inevitable transformation into modernity. This, nevertheless, has reinforced the society's resistance to change, and in due process has justified its conservative approach in preserving own ethnic identity.

This is due to the impacts of globalization deemed as mainly responsible in affecting social relations and nation building efforts (Abdul Rahman 2000). Looking from a wider context, this phenomenon also plays a role in influencing the political stability notably in terms of democratic processes and demands for equal rights. As a result, social integration initiative becomes the element the state has to focus more in order to prevent inter-ethnic conflict engendered by globalization. By and large, as a pluralist society, adopting and adapting social transformation is indeed a long and arduous process. Although social unity will enable the appropriate implementation of social justice principles, different ethnic backgrounds notwithstanding, ethnic conflict within a pluralist society remains a real and constant threat that is more than culpable to cause any political systems to fail (Horowitz 2001). The instinctive and innate predisposition to protect and preserve social relations identity among members of each ethnic only makes integration more difficult to achieve (Verma 2002). This state of being, also known as social cohesion, subsequently is

strengthened by zealous ethnocentrism of each ethnic.

Besides, limited contacts only encourage members of the same ethnic to communicate with only those around and within their circles i.e. those with identical racial features, neighborhoods and schools. This is not surprising. Since such a tendency is only innate, naturally, it makes up part of instrumentalism and primordial elements of a community. In the context of national integration, social decohesion can be defined as a rejection of values and social integration drive in a pluralist society. However, this should not be confused with social exclusion because the process and perpetrators are fundamentally different. For Silver (1994), social exclusion is a process of discriminating the minority or individuals of their basic rights, as a member of a society, in education, security, proprietary and others. In general, social exclusion refers to a circumstance where the majority ethnic oppresses and denies the minority ethnic from enjoying basic human rights. It can also be understood from the theory of ethnic conflict, seen from instrumentalist and primordialist perspective.

A number of social science experts majoring in ethnic conflicts have a better preference to apply instrumental social class approach that sees socio-economy problem as the source of ethnic conflicts Horowitz (2001), Chua (2003), Jomo (2013) and Syed Husin (2015). Other than that, key institutional failures have also become common topics for researches that look into the implementation of discriminatory and skewed developmental policy responsible for causing protracted ethnic conflicts. However, in the context of Malaysian studies, both approaches play a key role in understanding ethnic conflicts in the country. It can be better understood via two angles: integration and assimilation. Despite Malaysia's relentless efforts as a democratic country that attempts to preserve and keep the image of well-integrated society, it has on the contrary turned integration itself into a silent threat. Like a timed-bomb, this threat continues to exist in the pluralist society of Malaysia. The fact that matters is that primordial elements are so strong that they are more than capable of compromising the integration itself. Moreover, since these elements have interwoven closely with the Malaysian society, they are difficult to disappear primarily due to their close association with the historical links that have founded this country (Syed Husin 2015; Abdul Rahman, 2015).

Besides, leakage and abuse of power that precipitate a single ethnic's domination of a society have as well contributed towards understanding this theory (Gomez & Jomo, 1997; Syed Husin, 2015). In the context of national integration in Malaysia, political elites' decisions and political socialization that have grown to be more unpredictable over the years have often frustrated integration-oriented efforts in a pluralist society. In addition to those, for Horowitz

(2001), economic and power rivalry can serve as a form of a class approach method that can be used to understand ethnic conflicts further. From economic standpoint, Chua (2003) believes that capitalism also contributes to ethnic conflict. Dominance or economic domination by the capitalists, in more ways than one, can have the ability to set off large-scale ethnic conflicts as evidenced by similar conflicts in a host of countries across Asia and Europe. Chua emphasizes that ethnic-based economic identification often turns out to be the issue or source of conflict the government fails to resolve. As a result, social and economic issues among economically-inferior ethnics always lead to them forming prejudice against the economically-advanced ones (Mansor, 2012).

Furthermore, strong primordial element is also one of essences of ethnic conflicts studies across the globe. The bind that founds nation-building history with the withdrawal of colonial powers has brought about significant impacts to centrism. Yet, the element has nonetheless paved the way for assimilation and integration to take place in Malaysia. As aforementioned, due to its historical background, this country naturally cannot rid itself of the element. Besides, by chronological and early civilizational accounts, "Tanah Melayu" or Malaya has been inhabited by its own original habitants for hundreds of years. Still, colonial occupation that changed the ethnic composition of this country has definitely put the latter into a complex and delicate ethnic pluralism (Shamsul Amri, 2014). In the context of this country, national integration can be deemed as a bold process initiated by the local inhabitants of Tanah Melayu during the conclusion of social contract in early 1950s. Pursuant to that, the political development of Tanah Melayu began to be shaped by ethnic politics and national integration running concurrently.

2. Social Exclusiveness in a Pluralist Society

In discussing national social integration, social exclusiveness is indeed one of the key aspects that must be understood beforehand in order to acquire better and clear comprehension of the values and historical background of a country. Thus, it is common for a pluralist society, as highlighted by Furnivall (1948), to own significant characters that separate one ethnic from the other. Despite the fact that they live alongside each other, yet they do not mix around with the other ethnic, and in due process, each ethnic continues to retain its own uniqueness. Consequently, Rabushka & Shepsle (1972) argues that a plural society devoid of common values can only lead to complexity in terms of values more so since they form part of the strong primordial elements. Moreover, as far as politics is concerned,

such a delicate condition has the potential to risk power-sharing concept between ethnics because its tendency to tilt towards hegemony. According to Shamsul Amri (2010), social exclusiveness in a plural society is a common view in post-colonial countries. Nevertheless, these countries need to keep themselves open to political negotiations and power bargaining processes in order to achieve political stability.

2.1 Overcoming Disparities

Obviously, the major challenge to social integration drive is to overcome differences or social exclusiveness in all forms and types so as to encourage all ethnics to sustain harmony and realize common national goals. Unfortunately, for such a long time, vast differences in culture, language and faith have done more than enough to stifle social integration process of the society (Abdul Rahman, 2015). In addition to that, integration fails to move forward since every ethnic refuses to understand each other. In fact, for some time, done in stages, each has even begun to segregate each other in terms of education and culture. Mansor (2010) notes that ethnic exclusiveness does not depend only on the differences or specific ethnic features, it also depends on uneven or unbalanced development. Only by studying ethnic identities can one acquire an understanding of the way certain ethnic thinks and acts. Only then, social exclusiveness can be better understood as it can as well be used to measure the integrity and strength of the level of ethnic relations. However, in the context of Malaysia, the government has dealt with this social exclusiveness by introducing socio-cultural transformation especially through the implementation of National Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 (Abdul Rahman, 2015). As it turns out, NEP proves to be the correct policy to deal with the after-effects of racial riots of 1969. Up to a qualified extent, the 1969 ethnic riot can be seen as the end-result of failed and erroneous national social and economic policies.

Even before the independence, British power brokers realized that social exclusiveness was advantageous to them. Existing social divide for all ethnic could keep resistance at bay and this only made it easier for the British to administer and manage the various ethnics. By having separate education i.e. by letting each ethnic running own education separately and individually, it helped boost discrimination and failing ethnic integration (Muhammed, 2014). Nevertheless, some civil movements that have come to the realization of the on-going social exclusiveness have initiated attempts towards social integration. The endeavor to unite the various ethnics has begun since early 1950s when political parties whose membership comprising multi-ethnics came to the fore.

Though primordial elements were inevitable in the struggle of the political parties in Tanah Melayu (Malaya before independence), there were still attempts to encourage ethnic integration through political parties like Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) 1951 and 'Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (PUTERA)-All Malaya Council of Joint Action' (AMCJA) 1947. True to form, these pluralist and integrated organizations that put instrumental elements in their manifestos and as the foundation of their political parties were considered as a counter measure to the British's attempt to put Tanah Melayu, which was as its richest colony, into submission. Such a cunning power play was designed in the first place to give British total control over Tanah Melayu. It first began doing so by first limiting the power of the Malay kings (Sultan). In general, the British's administrative structure overhauled Malay's traditional system to rid it of executive power (Syed Husin, 2015). However, the prevailing situation in Tanah Melayu was not in the best state of condition especially with much-changed social landscape caused by the influx of foreign workers and immigrants attracted by the booming economy of Tanah Melayu sparked by industrial revolution in Europe. Moreover, the laissez faire economy brought in by the British was evident of the importance of Tanah Melayu's natural resources in financing Britain's' post-World War II rebuilding efforts (Jomo & Wee, 2014).

Existing social cohesion has filled the voids within an ethnically different society. This has resulted in bringing about political stability and at the same time preventing ethnic conflicts from breaking out consistently. Though there have been intermittent ethnic conflicts after 1969, they are still largely under control and far from reaching the scale of the 1969 racial riot. Yet, the government's resolve to draw up inclusive policy by making the identities of all ethnics to match and complement the image of Malaysia as a nation-state is still far from being complete. According to Shamsul Amri (2014), tense but stable condition more or less best describes the current state of ethnic relations in Malaysia. However, intermittent but small-scale racially-motivated clashes such those of Kampung Medan in 2001, Interlok, Sungai Petani brawl and Plaza Low Yatt rampage in 2015 have more than dampened national integration progress. Things only get worse with the rise of social media platforms that like to harp on such unfortunate events by sensationalizing them. More than ever, prejudice still forms the essence of social integration in Malaysia, shaped by the way of thinking or mindsets rooted in primordial and instrumental elements in each ethnic.

3. Social Decohesion and Integration

Failed assimilation and the fusion of globalized-led democratization put the society at limbo when it comes to understanding the true meaning of democratic principles. This situation has caused contradiction to occur against the legal institutions and public policy. Further, the failure of assimilation in nation-building has also given rise to social decohesion. In spite of the much-reduced economic gaps via the elimination of ethnic identification of economy, assimilation remains very difficult to be achieved due to pervasive character of centrism.

In Malaysia, centrism has molded two main circumstances, firstly Malays supremacy and primordial element itself and secondly, chauvinism (ethnic supremacy) that combines elements of class and meritocracy. Together, both make for two significant contradicting factors. Therefore, they overwhelm assimilation by continuing to trigger conflicts in various types and forms such as separation in educational system, ancestral culture, language and others. Collectively, they make integration that much harder to succeed. Moreover, the strong element of ethnocentrism also plays a key role in necessitating social decohesion. Most elements of ethnocentrism are born out of the ethnic struggle for survival. Liberation from colonialism creates the objectives of a single ethnic-based nation of intent (Abdul Rahman, 2015). This alone is sufficient to show that ethnocentrism itself is taking place. Nevertheless, this is not surprising given the fact that it is only natural for ethnic loyalty to be part and parcel of an ethnic formation (Mohamed Mustafa, 2014). Besides, the keenness to keep and preserve traditional characters can also be categorized as ethnocentrism in its own right. The tendency to view other ethnic and culture as inferior from one's own more than often incites negative elements in as much as it initiates the perception that molds the main principle of centrism (Martin, 2003).

Apart from socio-economy gap and ethnocentrism, the impact of globalization has massively affected the doctrine and the understanding of a society. Apparently, this is commonplace for democratization doctrines underpinning a nation's political system. As a result of that, democratization that is threatened by democracy itself has been permeated by elements of liberalism, socialism and others. That is why the emergence of cross-country new information proves to be quite a challenge to the society as well the ruling government (Mahathir, 2017). The people's awareness of their rights and the emergence of civil rights groups make up part of indicators of democracy for which principle and essence have been globalized. The fervent struggle for liberal human rights that go against the spirit of the constitution and nation-building is only encouraging dangerous ethnic conflicts.

In consequence to that, each element has led to social decohesion within the context of the society's social integration. A plural society detached from that element has indirectly jeopardized existing ethnic relations. There is no denying the fact that the level of integration within the country may vary from time to time. However, such an inconsistency has allowed social decohesion to outdo national integration from all angles, rendering all the government's related efforts to be virtually useless. This condition shows that integration has yet to be successful despite the continual efforts to harmonize relations between ethnics. Alas, elements of primordial and instrumentalism have reinforced social decohesion. The tragedy of Kampung Medan in 2001, Plaza Low Yatt riot and the Red Shirt March in 2015 can be taken as indicators of the on-going social decohesion. This situation is further complicated by the existence of vernacular schools and statements laced with sensitive racial slurs and hatred amongst the ethnics posted and shared on social media platforms. This is a clear sign that national integration is facing chronic and worsening social decohesion.
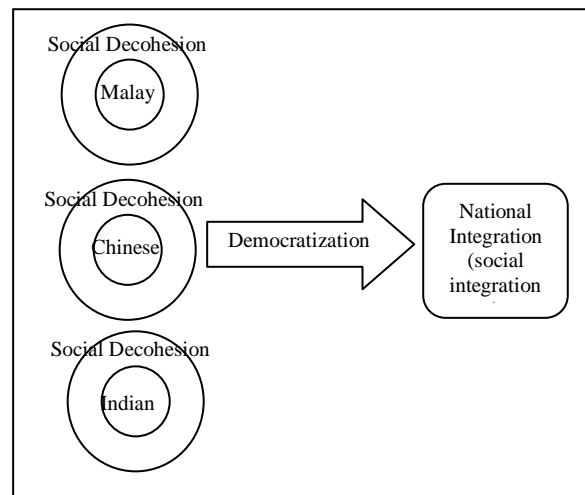

Figure 1: Social Decohesion / Withdrawal from National Integration

Figure 1 indicates that all ethnics have themselves confined within the element of social decohesion of their lives. This is the element that fails national integration. Additionally, national integration is further hampered by globalization-led democratization. Moreover, the resilience of social decohesion element also depends on national policy or the government's strategy in dealing with the need and the initiative to foster social cohesion between ethnics. Having said that, political socialization as a factor among politicians also does contribute to the resilience social decohesion of Malaysia's pluralist society (Mansor 2012; Shamsul Amri 2014).

4. Conclusions

Social decohesion can be taken to be an indication and the beginning of a deteriorating ethnic relation. For a country with a pluralist society, it is paramount that it overcomes this problem in advance so as to enable social integration so crucial for building a 'Nation of Intent' - an idea first espoused by Shamsul Amri (2015). Although the source of a conflict in a society is mostly caused by the orientation of the nation of intent, it is pertinent that the understanding of the political and social reality of the society must be made beforehand. Besides, social integration initiatives infused into national policies tend to be wrongly interpreted by the public. They mostly skew more towards ethnocentrism that eventually affects the society itself. Additionally, primordial elements must be moderated by more effective and rigorous implementation of integration.

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