



Why my son will leave Malaysia: Rise of racism, prejudice, religiosity, fundamentalism, and unscientific thinking

“No country can take care of Malaysians better than Malaysia.” I am not sure who said this first; perhaps it was already a common dictum long before when I first heard it at a young age. Even after spending several years overseas, Malaysia remains my home. I have never had any intention to stay overseas for long. Even if I were to work overseas, it would only be to polish my CV for a better job offer when I return home to Malaysia. And I would always return home. Always.

Malaysia has done exemplary well in just a short period after her independence in 1957. Where some countries fell into anarchy soon after gaining their independence, Malaysia (then Malaya) had a strong government to steer the country in the correct direction, helped a great deal by the collective support of the people.

But Malaysia today faces a much harder challenge. Our former Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir, recently wrote in his blog, [“There’s something rotten in the state of Malaysia”](#) in which he laments about the country’s poor governance. But Malaysia’s rot is much more fundamental and widespread than that lamented by Tun M.

Yes, we do have a weak and clueless government, eager to please everyone but pleasing no one at the end because Malaysians have now become so polarized in their beliefs and values. But at the other end of the ring, we also have an equally

clueless opposition and who are just as desperate for power as the government are desperate to stay in power. Together, these two belligerent factions have successfully nurtured mutually exclusive groups of people.

We the *rakyat* have become so cynical that we do not even desire to distinguish between the good and the bad, the truth and the lies. The good achievements of the country are mocked and the bad sarcastically hailed. Nothing good the country achieves is seen as good enough or done without the involvement of political conspiracies and hidden motives. Trust is gone.

We have become too inward looking to our own race, championing more for our race and less for the common good. Each race is told to unite, be strong, be progressive—and not to be outdone by the other races. Malays and Chinese see themselves as Malays and Chinese first, respectively, and Malaysians second. No wonder then we remain as ever racist and prejudiced. Contrary to what most cynics believe, we do not need the government or anyone to divide us along racial lines; we will do it ourselves. It is in our nature. We have evolved to be in group memberships because group living maximizes our chances of survival. And the tendency to be bias towards our own group and be prejudice against outsiders is our adaptive response against threats coming from outside our group.



Many moderates and activists such as Marina Mahathir know there is a rot in Malaysia and are fighting against it, but not

many of them have identified correctly its exact cause (photo from thestar.com.my).

Experiments even since the 1970s have shown that when we randomly place people in different groups, bias towards one's group automatically emerges even when these groups are demarcated along arbitrary and meaningless markers such as red and blue, north and south, or apple and pear. Race and religion are two very powerful polarizing agents that will easily divide people into distinct and zealous groups. People will fight and die for their race and religions. No other agents, apart from nationalism, can induce people to behave in such a manner. Numerous research have revealed that race and religion, as expected, tend to cause people to favor their own group and to discriminate other groups.

A local study by Chuah and his associates in 2014, for instance, showed that, of the 96 Malaysian respondents, the Muslims were the most religious and fundamentalist, followed by the Christians, and the Hindus and Buddhists the least. Chuah observed that while race and religion increased cooperation between two people who shared the same race or religion, religion fundamentalism increased out-group prejudice. In other words, religious people who believe their religion is the only and absolute truth (*i.e.*, fundamentalism) will cooperate more with like-minded people but show more prejudice against dissimilar people.



Research have shown that people who share the same race or religion tend to cooperate more with one other but less with others from a different race or religion (photo from life.se).

Social science studies such as Chuah's serve as warnings to us particularly when religious fundamentalism is on the rise in Malaysia. We are also seeing increased incidences where the beliefs, values, and demands of one religion are being imposed onto others who do not share the same faith. Most religions are incompatible with one another. Each religion defends itself as the only truth, the only way we should lead our lives, and the final and only answer. So, we cannot impose any one religion on others and yet expect no repercussions or indifferent compliance.

Race and religion are taboo to any form of questioning. We cannot question race or religion in Malaysia without serious repercussions. We may demand for freedom of speech, but I think many of us will balk at such freedom especially when it includes freedom to question our religion. We are told to be more scientific and more religious, not realizing that the two are mutually incompatible. No amount of reconciliation can make both science and religion share the same spot in our mental faculties; we will suffer from cognitive dissonance, a state of mental stress from having two opposing ideas.



Radio station BFM host Aisyah Tajuddin received death and rape threats because of this BFM video satire questioning the need of hudud law in the Kelantan state of Malaysia (photo from themalymail.com).

If religion and fundamentalism continues to grow in this country, they will impede scientific progress and rational thinking. They will impede our freedom to discover, to question, to seek for answers, and to defend our ideas and beliefs. Religion and fundamentalism breed intolerance because they prevent us from

changing our opinions and stance in spite of us being shown wrong. Freedom of speech is the foundation of enlightenment. As [Christopher Hitchens](#) said, it is not so much what we think is important; it is also matters *how* we think it. It is frightening to learn that [people in the U.A.E. countries read only one book every ten years](#), and that [Spain has translated more English books into Spanish in one year than all the Arab countries into Arabic in the last 1,000 years](#). In contrast, research have shown that people in non-religious or secular countries tend to have higher levels of education, IQ, and verbal ability; lower levels of prejudice, ethnocentrism, racism, and homophobia; and greater support for women's equality and independent thinking than in religious countries. Correlation is not causation, of course, but it is telling that social benefits seem to flourish in the absence of religion or when religion exerts little influence on the society.

I find it distressing to learn from [a recent survey by MASTIC](#) that showed half of Malaysian scientists still believe humans were created by a Supreme Being, and a third do not believe the Big Bang created the universe. These Malaysian scientists have apparently built mental walls to separate science from their everyday thinking and decision-making process. Science appears just a tool they use at work. I fear it is not just Malaysian scientists but also includes our schoolchildren, many of whom view science is just one of the subjects at school that they have plod through and where only 20 to 30% of them will choose science-based careers.

There is something wrong when our national school exams show continuous improvement in overall test scores every year, only for us to be brought down to earth when our school students take the international exams for science and mathematics. For the past decade, Malaysia has been ranked as the country having one of the lowest literacy in science and mathematics in the world.

Racism, religiosity, prejudice, and unscientific thinking are all related to one another.

It is too easy to blame all ills on the current government, as the opposition love to do and would like us to follow suite. But the opposition stand just as clueless as the accused for the solutions to Malaysia's rot. The opposition talk about "*Ubah*" or "Big Change". But it isn't just change that Malaysia needs. It is a complete (and very painful) upheaval involving the whole political and social structure. The reboot process involves the following:

1. We must separate religion from government and from all public affairs.
2. We must have complete freedom of speech, where no beliefs and no ideas are taboo.
3. We must make science the foundation upon which the country develops.
4. We must de-emphasize differences between races by not dividing the society along racial lines but along lines of people who need the least to most help, for instance.
5. We must create a society that is safe and governed by a just government, free of corruption at all levels.

I am under no illusions. These five steps will be extremely difficult to achieve, considering the current state of our country and the peoples. Any politician today advocating such a Malaysian reboot (especially advocating separation of religion from government) will be committing political suicide. Optimistically, it may take a hundred years for Malaysia to achieve a complete reboot.

Like any responsible parent, I would like my child to flourish. I want my son to learn, live, work, and love in a society that is intellectual, sophisticated, adaptable, and culturally-rich, one that provides him with opportunities to discover his talents and use them to lead a meaningful and productive life. That Malaysia is still far from being such a nation is not what upsets me. No, what upsets me the most is that Malaysia is regressing from being such a nation, that the country today is becoming increasingly oppressive, intolerant, narrow-minded, and unscientific, and that the rot in Malaysia is simply this: the Malaysian mind is closing.

References

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