

MAJORITY-MINORITY SITUATION IN SINGAPORE

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Introduction

The issue of majority-minority relations is a significant problem in all states of Southeast Asia. Such a division of a majority and a minority could have been the result of past migratory trends, which created the indigenous groups, or of recent colonial policies resulting in the emergence of plural societies. In the region, it would seem that there is no state which has an entirely homogenous population. Rather, the prevalent situation seems to be that in every state there exists divisions of the populations based on racial, religious, language and cultural lines. An example of a state with an indigenous racial majority and an immigrant minority is Burma, between the Burmese and the Indians; an example of a state where the majority and minority is divided along religious lines is the Philippines, between the Catholics and the Muslims; and an example of a state where there exists an immigrant majority and an indigenous minority is Singapore. However, such general divisions may not be meaningful for an understanding of the majority-minority situation in the state, as within each group there may exist different sub-cultures or ethnic units.

The majority-minority relations in any state in Southeast Asia have to be discussed against the assumption of the priorities of national economic development and political stability. Most Southeast Asian states are in the process of diversification and particularly they seek to industrialize. For these endeavours to be successful, they require skilled manpower, scientific and technical knowledge, foreign expertise and investments. In terms of political stability, the issue is related to

the nation-building process, that is, what national norms should be formulated which would be the symbols of allegiance of the whole population. In cases where the majority is firmly established, the majority values may form the basis of the national values. Where the government is in the process of constructing the national norms, the minority group would seek to integrate their values in the national whole. However, there may be a case where the political leadership creates the national norms which would reflect neither those of the majority nor the minority, but are the results of an integrative approach towards the various communities in the plural society. In all these situations, however, a sense of competition and conflict would prevail as each ethnic, religious and language group seeks to adjust its role in the state.

In this conflict situation, there have been a number of experiences in Southeast Asia which have been and are in the process of being tried, ranging from assimilation to integration. In the case of assimilation, the majority values are adopted as the national norms and the minority groups would be compelled to accept them. In such a situation, the dominant cultural values of the minorities could be disposed of, or they would be allowed to exist without any official encouragement. On the other hand, the policy of integration calls for the co-existence of the various racial, language, religious and cultural groups, irrespective of the dominance of an ethnic group in the population. In both these approaches of assimilation or integration, the minority group may seek the peaceful way to adjust; however, it could resist and adopt the militant path, including rebellion or succession.

The majority-minority relations also revolve around the question of threats which are perceived by the minority community. On this will depend the stability of the nation-state and in turn, this will depend on the treatment of the minority group. The minority should not feel that its language, religion or customs are being threatened by extinction and that the government discriminates against it on the basis of its ethnic origin, but that the government seeks to protect its interests against the power of the majority. In situations where the basic principles of the nation-state have been accepted, the minority would seek the equality of opportunities and integration into the mainstream of national development of the state.

The Singapore Situation

The approach to the study of the majority-minority situation in Singapore is to examine the Government's policies on language and education, and the concerns on these matters of the minority groups with emphasis on the Malay community. But before discussing the subject, it should be noted that Singapore possesses certain characteristics which may be unique in Southeast Asia. Firstly, its population comprises almost entirely of immigrants and their descendants. A Malay settlement existed before the advent of the British colonialists, but it was only after the foundation of the British trading post and when Singapore became a Crown Colony in 1824 that the influx of immigrants from the Malay Archipelago, China, India and the Middle East came about. Secondly, the majority population is Chinese while the minority groups are Malays, Indians, Pakistanis, Eurasians and others.¹ However, there are divisions within each community; for example, there are sub-ethnic groups in the Malay community, while the Chinese are divided along dialectal groups and also along language lines, viz., between those who have been to English-medium schools and institutions (the English-educated) and those who have been through Mandarin-medium schools (the Chinese-educated).² Thirdly, Singapore has only been independent since 8 August, 1965. It was under British colonial rule for about a hundred and fifty years, achieved internal self-government in 1959, was a constituent state of the Federation of Malaysia from September, 1963 until complete independence was attained in August 1965. Thus, in the few years since independence, Singapore under its political leadership has been strenuously involved in building a nation out of its plural society which has been conditioned by these factors. The Republic of Singapore is a newly independent state which has essentially an immigrant plural population with a Chinese majority and which has experienced British colonial rule as well as participated in a federation with Malaysia.

In any discussion of the majority-minority situation in Singapore, certain qualifications have to be made with regard to the term "majority." Although the Chinese formed 75% of the population and the party in power since independence comprises mainly Chinese mem-

bers, it should be noted that the national leadership has formulated policies which do not conform entirely or mainly with those values of the majority population alone. The approach adopted is that of integration of the diverse values of the population; hence, its emphasis on multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural policies, and the non-communal approach: this has been clearly reflected in its language and educational policies. The political leadership does not favour or discriminate against any community on matters concerning language, education and employment opportunities. In fact, on these matters, all communities have to re-orientate their attitudes and, in the process, they have expressed differences in their abilities of adjustments.

Language and Education

The rationale behind the language policy of Singapore is based on, firstly, the acceptance of the cultural heritage from the great civilizations of the East, and secondly, the requirements for efficiency in administration and the development of industrialization. Starting from the position that Singapore has inherited the great cultures of the East, viz., the Malay-Muslim, Chinese and Indian cultures, and that the cultural-behavioural norms of the various communities could be encouraged, the Government has stated that all these languages, viz., Malay, Chinese and Tamil, are official languages and they can be the media of instructions in schools in the country. Further, since Singapore became self-governing in 1959, all political parties have agreed that English should remain the language of the administration. Hence, in Singapore, there are four official languages and these languages are used, for example, in Parliament and in Committee hearings, where there are simultaneous translations. Also, Singapore's economy is now structured on a broader base of export-oriented industries, ship-building and financial services with far less dependence on entrepot trade than in the past. Thus, in view of the expansion of international trade, influx of foreign investment and multi-national companies, the language of commerce and industry and for the acquisition of scientific and technological skills is mainly English.

In Singapore, the Government provides education in the four

official languages, and all parents are free to choose the language to be used as the medium of instruction for the children's education. The Government aims at providing at least ten years of education to every child from the age of six. Primary education is free, while at the secondary level, there is government assistance in the forms of bursaries, remission of school fees and loan of text-books. Bursaries, study loans and scholarships are available for post-secondary education. Malay children have free tuition from primary to tertiary levels. Two aspects of the education policy should be stressed: firstly, the bilingual emphasis in all schools, and secondly, the emphasis on technical education and industrial training.

There is unified education system based on the principle of parity for the four official languages with the schools using syllabuses of common content and presenting candidates for common examinations. Every child in school is required to study a second language. In English-medium schools, either Malay, Chinese or Tamil is the second language, whereas, in the non-English medium schools, English is the second language (see Table I). To promote and foster greater cohesion among the children of the various communities, integrated schools have been established (see Table II). In these integrated schools, students and teachers of two or three language streams work in the same building under one administration. The education policy on technical education and industrial training is geared to meet the manpower requirements of industrialization and, in schools, there is stress on the teaching of mathematics, science and technical subjects. In 1969, a new curriculum was introduced by which after two years in the secondary schools, the students would be channelled into academic, technical and commercial streams. In 1972, one out of every five students in their third and fourth years were studying technical subjects compared to the ratio of one in fourteen in 1969. The non-English schools face problems of the lack of textbooks in the teaching of science and technical subjects and rather adopt poor or inaccurate translations of English textbooks which are freely available. Furthermore, the rapid advances in science and technology have been disseminated mostly in English language texts and journals and thereby make translations obsolete.

As a result of the education policy in recent years there has been

an increase of children from all communities going to English-medium schools. In 1967, the English-medium schools enrolled 56 per cent of all Chinese students, 53 per cent of all Malay students and 95 per cent of all Indian students. In 1972, the percentages of children enrolled in the four language streams of education were as follows: Malay medium 4.08, Chinese 30.88, Tamil 0.25 and English 64.79 (see Table III). This reorientation of the various communities can be partly attributed to the bilingual policy of the government and the realization that in terms of employment, English-medium education assures them of better opportunities. However, the parallel decline in enrolment in the non-English medium schools has resulted in the articulation of certain concerns regarding the development of these institutions, especially from the Malay community and Chinese-educated group.

The Malays have been very concerned with the questions of the opportunities for their community to advance both in the Malay and English streams of education. For a time, for example, the Malays led by the *Majlis Pelajaran Melayu* (Malay Education Council) and the *Kesatuan Guru Pelajaran Melayu* (Malay Teacher's Union), demanded

Table I

Second Language Teaching, 1972

Second Language	No. of Teachers	No. of Students
Malay	680	87,729
Chinese	1,339	221,341
Tamil	117	16,525
English	1,222	177,195
Total	3,358	502,790

Source: *Education in Singapore*, 2nd ed., (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1972), p. 25.

Table II**Government Integrated Primary and Secondary Schools, 1972**

Type of Integration	No. of Schools	No. of Students
English/Malay	31	42,774
English/Chinese	67	114,778
English/Tamil	1	2,023
English/Malay/Chinese	8	13,002
Total	107	172,577

Source: Education in Singapore 2nd ed., p. 9.

a Malay stream of education from Primary to University levels, and called for the establishment of a Malay University. However, this was rejected by the Government. This rejection could be due to a number of factors. Firstly, there was little support from among the rest of the Malay community on this proposal. Secondly, there are the departments of Malay Studies in Nanyang University and the University of Singapore where Malay students can advance their education. Thirdly, there is the poor employment opportunities for graduates of the non-English streams.

Other educational concerns of the Malay community are the declining rate of enrolment and the insufficient number of trained teachers. In 1971, it was estimated that the intake into Malay schools was only 500, and this was a severe decline compared with the figures of between 4,750 and 5,249 for the years 1963 and 1966. The Malays also complained of lack of Malay science and technical text-books, few pre-university classes, and the need for better qualified teachers. The subject of declining enrolment was brought up by the Chinese educated group as well. The Chinese newspaper and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce have been concerned regarding these matters and the latter proposed in early 1971 to establish a committee to look into the question of the preservation of Chinese education and specifically to encourage children to go into Chinese schools.

The Government's greater stress on bilingualism and technical education may resolve these problems and declining enrolment, the teaching of science and technical subjects in the Malay and Chinese-medium

Table III

Government and Government-Aided Primary and Secondary School Enrolment, 1972

Language Stream	Government	Government-Aided	Total (%)
Malay	20,946	Nil	20,946 (4.08%)
Chinese	44,854	113,795	158,649 (30.88%)
Tamil	1,144	134	1,278 (0.25%)
English	279,828	53,050	332,878 (64.79%)
Total	346,772	166,979	513,751 (100%)

Source: Education in Singapore, 2nd ed., p. 7

schools and the employment of Malay and Chinese teachers. Under the present system of education, English is the medium of instruction in the mathematics and science subjects, while Malay, Chinese or Tamil is the medium for the study of civics, humanities, arts and crafts in all schools. Such a policy would in time create better employment opportunities for students from all language streams and foster a greater integration of the various communities. For example, this year, many Primary One and Two classes are devoting 57 per cent of teaching time to the main and medium of instruction of the school and 43 per cent to the second language. To effect this new policy, a mass transfer of teachers from the four language streams occurred early in the year. According to the Minister for Education, such a policy would blur, in time, the distinction between pupils educated in the different streams and thereby eliminate the unfounded prejudices, the difference in sense of values and outlook of life, which were characteristics of products of the past school systems.³

To assist children to pursue post-secondary education, a number of scholarships are available. For example, there are the People's Scholarship Fund, Merit Scholarships, Merit Bursaries and Study Loans which are open to all from the various communities. In addition, there are the Special Malay Bursaries which only those of the race can apply. The criteria for the last award are as follows: good academic performance, sound extra-curricular activities, employment value of the course to be studied and the low income of the student's family. These scholarships are tenable at the University of Singapore, Singapore Polytechnic, Ngee Ann Technical College and Singapore Technical Institute. Students applying for such scholarships are encouraged to take up courses in Engineering, Business Administration, Economics and technical subjects. However, there is the request for a relaxation of the conditions of awards so that more Malay students may go for higher studies. One of the grounds which has been brought forward is that there is a small percentage of Malay students in the University, that is, about 3%. But this would not seem to be a valid justification for a lowering of standards; moreover, if the students have not attained the merit to be awarded scholarships, it would be difficult to see how they would manage in the University courses.

Education & Employment Opportunities

The problem of education and employment has been a concern of both the Malay community and the Chinese-educated of the majority community. It has been pointed out that in the Government sector, the Malays comprised 2.4% of the total officers at Division 1, 3.7% at Division II, 10.9% at Division III and 37.5% at Division IV in 1967.⁴ The Malays want greater opportunities to participate in commerce and industry and have suggested some form of "special treatment" for themselves. They have proposed, for example, that Malays should be represented in all statutory boards, that a Malay Secretariat should be established to assist their participation in commerce and industry.

It should be noted that the Chinese-educated have pointed to the fact that they occupy the lower and middle ranks of government service,

while the English-educated dominate the higher levels of all occupations. Thus, both the Malay community and the Chinese educated perceived the problem as serious enough to warrant discussions on the issue. For example, the *Majlis Pusat Pertubohan Budaya Melayu Singapura* (Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations of Singapore), in conjunction with the Council of Social Services, organized a seminar in December 1970 entitled, "Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore," while the Chinese newspaper *Nanyang Siang Pau* and radio station Rediffusion organized two discussions on the prospects of School Leavers from Chinese schools and Nanyang University graduates in mid-1970.

In response to the Malay demands, the Government seemed to have taken note that there could be a place for a Malay Secretariat to assist Malay participation in commerce and industry and, to that end, established the department in 1967. The task of the Malay Secretariat was to give advice and guidance to Malays. Unfortunately, the reaction seemed to be poor and the Secretariat was closed down after a few months.⁵ The question of appointing Malays to statutory boards did not in fact receive the support of many of the Malay leaders, as many felt that this could lead to the selection of Malay community. The proposal did not seem to have been taken up by the Government in any case.

The Chinese-educated have focused on the unsatisfactory employment situation of the graduates from the Chinese-medium Nanyang University. According to a survey undertaken by Nanyang University in 1968, out of the total of 3,672 graduates, 30% were employed in Education, 30% in Commerce and Industry, 6% in Government Services other than Education and the rest in such occupations as tutors and reporters. The problem with the Nanyang graduates could be partly due to low proficiency in English and partly due to the employment value of the courses at Nanyang University.⁶

Other Minority Concerns

The problems of language, education and employment opportunities for the minority communities especially the Malays, have been two major issues mentioned. However, as it has been discussed, these issues

are not the concerns of the minority community alone but those of the Chinese-educated of the majority community as well. However, for the Malays, there are certain particular problems that have been articulated from time to time. For example, there are the cultural and religious problems which have arisen as a result of urbanization and the massive housing programme for the people.

Until recently, the Malay community have been concentrated in certain areas of Singapore, viz., the southeast part around Geylang Serai and Jalan Eunos locality and in scattered villages along the western and eastern coasts of the Republic, for example, Changi, Bedok and Pasir Panjang. As a result of the urban renewal and housing programmes of the Government, a considerable section of the Malay community has been re-located into high-rise flats. A recent estimate indicated that about 40% of the Malay community are now living in such housing estates, for example, in Jurong Satellite Town, Toa Payoh and Queens-town. This means that they have to establish and adjust to new patterns of relationships with the other communities. However, in order to make the period of adjustment more comfortable, they would like a degree of their communal and religious life transferred to these new areas; for example, that in every new housing estate, a site for the construction of a mosque should be made available. Further, that in the purchase of the site, a certain subsidy should be given by the Government.

The attitude of the government seems to be that as such problems are specifically communal in nature, they should be left to the community itself to resolve, while the Government could assist in the achievements of those objectives. With regard to religious, social, economic and educational problems, the Malay community has numerous organizations which have attempted to resolve them with or without government assistance.⁷ The two main organizations are the *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* (Singapore Muslims Religious Council) and the *Majlis Pusat* mentioned earlier. In order to centralize and co-ordinate religious activities, the Government passed the Administration of Muslim Law Bill in 1966, setting up the *Majlis Ugama Islam*. It is to be an independent and autonomous body responsible for such matters as the administration of the mosques, religious sermons, collection of religious tithes, and the conversion of non-Muslims. The establishment of such a supreme

body to regulate Muslim religious affairs has led a Muslim scholar to state that henceforth, "religion will never become an issue between the Government and the Muslims."⁸ The other organization, the *Majlis Pusat* was registered in 1969 and its objective was to co-operate with the Government to bring about progress for the Malays in social, cultural, educational and economic fields. In the field of education, for example, it has assisted Malay students in the study of such subjects as English, Science and Mathematics. In 1971, the *Majlis Pusat* had 37 affiliates from educational, cultural, welfare Malay organizations and 47 associate members who were nearly all graduates. In the assessment of the scholar just mentioned, it is the most effective Malay organization in Singapore.

Finally, mention should be made of a political channel through which the minority interests of the Malays could be voiced particularly at the national level. Malay representation in the ruling party, viz., the People's Action Party, can be seen by the following statistics: in 1966, Malay membership comprised 14 per cent, while 10.4 per cent of officers of the branch committees were Malays.⁹ Although there is no constituency which has a Malay majority, nevertheless there are presently eight Malay parliamentarians out of the total of sixty-five, and among them are one Cabinet Minister, two Ministers of State and two Parliamentary Secretaries. Within the People's Action Party, there is the Malay Affairs Bureau, whose responsibilities are to liaise with Malay members and represent the interests of the Malays in Singapore. The attitude of the Malay community toward the Malay Affairs Bureau seemed to reflect an "increased desire by other Malay leaders to make the Malay Affairs Bureau act the role of intermediary between the Government and the Malay community."¹⁰

Conclusion

In the Singapore situation, it would thus seem to be that the majority-minority situation is unlike the other states in Southeast Asia. The national goals do not reflect those of the majority community, nor is there any attempt to subordinate or assimilate the value systems of the minority community. The national strategy seems to be that of integration of all communities in all facets of society — educational,

economic, social and cultural. In the present drive towards the national goals, a certain amount of stress and strain is bound to be felt by the aggrieved groups, be they the Malays, the Chinese-educated or any other minority group. But almost without any exception, all the communities have accepted the main issues, viz., the language policy, the principle of equal opportunities and the pluralistic nature of the Singapore society.

The main minority groups, viz., the Malay community should have no fear of the loss of their culture, language, religion and customs. Such a guarantee has been written into the Constitution under Article 89, Section 2 wherein it is stated, "The Government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognize the special position of the Malays who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language." ¹¹ Further, the Government has established the Presidential Council, which has the responsibility of safeguarding the minority rights. The assurances with regard to the preservation and development of their cultural heritage of all communities and the acceptance of the Government policies on various issues have led to progress towards the integration of all communities into a separate national identity. ¹² The education policy based on bilingualism and allowing more or less equal teaching time for Civics, Humanities, Arts and Crafts to be taught in either Malay, Chinese or Tamil, and for Science, Mathematics and Technical subjects to be taught in English, would serve a two-fold purpose, viz., the preservation and development of the languages and traditional cultures, and the enhancement of the employment opportunities of school leavers and graduates from all streams of education in the administrative, commercial and industrial sectors. It is on such policies based on the realities of the plural society and the need to develop the economy that the majority-minority situation can be stabilized and nationhood achieved in Singapore.

FOOTNOTES

1. Distribution of Population by Race, 1901-1970

Year	Malays	Chinese	Indians & Pakistans	Others
1901	35,986 (15.8%)	164,041 (72.1%)	17,047 (7.8%)	9,768 (4.3%)
1911	41,806 (13.8%)	219,577 (72.4%)	27,755 (9.2%)	14,183 (4.6%)
1929	53,595 (12.8%)	315,151 (75.3%)	32,314 (7.7%)	17,298 (4.2%)
1931	65,014 (11.7%)	418,640 (75.1%)	50,811 (9.1%)	23,280 (4.2%)
1947	113,803 (12.1%)	729,473 (77.8%)	68,967 (7.4%)	25,901 (2.8%)
1957	197,060 (13.6%)	1,090,595 (75.4%)	124,084 (8.6%)	34,190 (2.4%)
1966	233,997 (12.1%)	1,519,225 (78.7%)	128,250 (6.6%)	48,261 (2.5%)
1970	311,379 (15.0%)	1,579,866 (75.5%)	145,169 (7.0%)	38,093 (2.5%)

Source: *Sample Household Survey 1966* (Singapore Government Printing Office, 1967,) and *Singapore Interim Release of Census of Population, 1970* (Singapore Government Printer, 1971).

2. (a) Distribution of Malays Within Each Sub-Ethnic Group, 1957

Group	Number	Percentage
Coastal Malays	135,662	68.8
Javanese	36,009	18.3
Boyanes	22,167	11.3
Buginese	1,069	0.5
Others	2,152	1.1
Total	1977,059	100.00

Source: Ismail bin Kassim, "Problems of Elite Cohesion: A Perspective from a Minority Community" (M. Soc. Sci. Thesis, University of Singapore, 1972, Unpublished), p. 42.

(b) According to an estimate in 1973, the distribution of the Chinese by dialects in percentage were as follows: Hokkien 41%, Teochew 22%, Cantonese 19%, Hakka 7%, Hainanese 7%, others 4%. John A Koffend, "Who Are The Singaporeans?" in *The Asia Magazine*, August. 26, 1973, p. 6.

3. Statements of the Minister, Dr. Lee Chiaw Meng, and quoted in *The Straits Times*, 2 March, 1974.

4. Athsani Karni and Ridzwan Dzafir, "Singapore Malays and Employment Opportunities," in **Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore**, Eds. Sharom Ahmat and Wong, (Singapore, May 1971), p. 17.
5. Ismail Kassim, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
6. **Nanyang Siang Pau** (Translation), 30 July, 1970.
7. **Breakdown of Malay/Muslim Organizations, 1968.**

Youth Organizations	8
Cultural	14
Literary and Educational	15
Welfare	30
Sports	27
Religious	15
Women	3
Total	112

Source: Ismail Kassim, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

8. Ismail Kassim *op. cit.*, p. 133.
9. Pang Cheng Lian, **Singapore's Action Party: Its History, Organization and Leadership** (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 47 and 60.
10. Ismail Kassim, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
11. **Constitution of Singapore, 1966.**
12. In a Singapore National Identity Survey conducted in late 1967 to early 1970 by John A MacDougall and Chiew Seen Kong, a substantial number of questions were asked to assess how successful the government has been in getting citizens of Singapore to think as Singaporeans. The authors concluded that nine in every ten citizens agreed with the statement that "Wherever I am, I am a Singaporean," and that eight in every ten chose to be first of all called Singaporeans rather than by the names of their communities. These patterns held for all three major communities, viz., Malays, Chinese and Indians. See John A MacDougall, **The Genuine Singapore Revolution**, Paper presented to the Seminar on Multi-racialism in Singapore at the University of Singapore, May, 1970, p. 15.