

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE MALAY
COMMUNITY IN SINGAPORE:
PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS**

ABDULLAH BIN TARMUGI

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**Department of Malay Studies
National University of Singapore**

FOREWORD

I am pleased to write this short foreword to introduce the Department's Seminar and Occasional Papers Series. The series provides the opportunity for staff members of the Department as well as scholars of Malay Studies in general to have their research findings on Malay subjects made known to a wider audience. It is also hoped that this initiative will provide the avenue for a beneficial exchange of ideas and viewpoints on Malay issues between town and gown.

The Department would like to thank Hotel Properties Pte Ltd for sponsoring the publication of the series.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the views expressed in the seminar and occasional papers series are those of the respective authors.

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Professor Tham Seong Chee
Head
Department of Malay Studies

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ABDULLAH TARMUGI

Let me begin by stating my thesis: that the Malay community in Singapore is now more than ever ready to becoming a full-fledged partner in the development and the progress of the country.

I am optimistic about the future of the community. The prospects are there; the foundations for further achievements are increasingly in place. There are, however, challenges within the community which, if not addressed and resolved, could affect the speed and extent of the community's progress.

I will elaborate this thesis by discussing:

- i. the increased structural and psychological strength of the community
- ii. the factors outside the community conducive to its further progress;
- iii. the prospects and challenges that present themselves;

i. **Increased Structural Strength**

According to the 1990 Census of Population, the Malay community had

notched considerable improvements over 1980 in almost every socio-economic indicator used. This somewhat confirms what many observers and those working in and with the Malay community have felt and noted towards the end of the last decade.

Significantly, the community has made improvements in:

- Education

It is better educated generally, with more attaining higher or professional qualifications;

- Employment

More are now in occupations where the community was traditionally weak - doctors, engineers, managers, technical jobs etc;

- Business

More entrepreneurs and businessmen, also in areas where very few Malays traditionally ventured. What is also significant is that they are increasingly "Malay". Previously those in business would more likely be of Arab or Indian Muslim stock; and

- Housing

More live in better housing with a high degree of home ownership in the community.

Thus, we see a thickening of the upper crust in the community which is more Malay and less Arab or Indian Muslim in origin. But more importantly, we are seeing the rapid widening of a band of middle class Malays, the group most likely to serve as catalysts and movers of the Malay community in the future.

There are also more and stronger institutions and organisations in the community and their efforts are better co-ordinated.

These serve to galvanise and focus community effort and aspirations as well as to provide the leadership and direction necessary for the community's march towards further achievements. The more significant ones which merit mention are MUIS, Mendaki, Majlis Pusat, LBKM, the JHDs, mosques and, lately, the AMP.

What has emerged, therefore, is a community that has a wider base of contributors, more capable members and resources to make the community more self-reliant and vibrant as a group, to create and take greater advantage of the opportunities that exist in the country.

Increased Psychological Strength

Perhaps what will affect and determine the community's progress more than anything else is the increased strength in the Malay psyche. It is now more confident, more self-assured. It has shaken off much of the lethargy and

psychological burdens of the past which had hitherto prevented the community from making real effort to progress. There has been a perceptible change in attitudes. When Singapore got out of Malaysia, the Malays were confused and somewhat disoriented. From a community that had remained on the sidelines, it was suddenly thrust into the limelight when Singapore sought entry into Malaysia. During the Malaysian years, the Malays felt that they belonged to a wider community where their ethnic affiliation to the dominant political power made them hopeful, more comfortable and secure. It was therefore not surprising that the community should feel stunned when Singapore was evicted from the larger entity - their hopes and aspirations dashed overnight. The community, then, felt most vulnerable and abandoned.

The period after the Malaysia years was a period of self-searching for the Malays. It was a turning point between what they had expected and what they felt they had to do to make the grade and to succeed. Soon there was a painful realization that they could not depend on the powers across the causeway to fight their cause. They had to come to terms with the reality of their local environment.

So they slowly picked up the fallen pieces re-assembled them and shored them up with further effort - with considerable help from the government - to make up what they lost on Singapore's exit from Malaysia.

The community has now escaped the trauma of an "abandoned" community. While there are still niggling issues which bother the community - like its loyalty being suspect - it has chosen not to allow them to overshadow or divert its attention and effort at upliftment. This pragmatic approach plus the awareness that it has only itself to rely upon has made the community more resolute than ever to enter the Singapore mainstream. Younger Malays especially are free from the psychological burden of the past. The need to compete and to strive has been accepted by all.

The emergence of this state of affairs in the Malay community has, in my view, been helped by the somewhat conducive environment outside the community.

ii. **Conducive External Environment**

Economic progress, political stability and strong government that have existed in Singapore all this while have helped to mould the kind of Malay community now present here.

Without economic progress, it is arguable whether the Malay community would have been able to chalk up improvements all these years. The growing economy has created more opportunities for all and there is no need for any group or community to feel threatened or edged out. Similarly, the stability that we have enjoyed all these years has meant that plans and effort could be made and maintained without fear of political chaos. But it was a firm, strong

and impartial government that could perhaps be singled out as the most important external factor that has helped the community to succeed as it has. Given a Chinese majority, a weaker government would have found it easier to cater only to the needs of this majority group. Indeed, without government concern and involvement in the state and affairs of the Malay community it is also doubtful whether the main institutions in the community could have developed as they have now.

But the methods and policies which it employed to assist the community was one of creating opportunities for the community to help itself, not to shield it from the harsh realities of economic, social and political life that exist in this country. In other words, not mere handouts. While some may disagree with the method, it is, I think, fair to assert that the community has emerged, in such a short time, stronger and more battle-hardened because of it.

The conditions that exist in and outside the community lead me to conclude that the Malays' ability to survive, prosper and to contribute has never been better.

iii. **Prospects for the Future**

I am optimistic about the future of the Malays in Singapore. The inertia and lethargy that characterised the Malay community in the past have largely been overcome. Instead, there is now greater awareness of and resolve to tackle the obstacles that had prevented the community from taking off. There is now

a larger base of capable Malays; a more solid foundation on which to build the community. The momentum to move forward has begun. The potential to sustain this momentum and to quicken it to achieve greater advancement is there.

To be sure, there are problems and concerns which could impede the community's continued progress. Drug addiction, high divorce rates and single parent families are chief among these problems. The need for more and better educated Malays is still a principal challenge. These the community will have to work on.

For the community to effectively tackle and face the problems and challenges that exist, it will require a concerted effort by its members and working in the same direction.

In this respect three issues are of direct relevance and would need attention.

1. **Maintenance of Community Unity**

Given the limited resources that are within the community, it can ill-afford disunity. There are, however, worrying tendencies which, if allowed to exacerbate, will be inimical to the community's ability to solve its problems.

Bickering and competition among organisations prompted by the desire for one-upmanship or individual and sectional interest is one such worrying trend.

These result in divided loyalties and multiple groupings leading to a wastage of resources and effort. Competition per se is healthy when it is premised on the battle of ideas and methods in an atmosphere that is friendly, sincere and collaborative. Not so otherwise.

2. **Leadership Growth in the Community**

The community needs effective leaders and movers at all levels to galvanise, rally and urge its members to act. The Malay community will need more of such individuals for leadership renewal as well as to add more to the existing pool of talent. Younger and more capable Malays must be found or made to come forward to lead the organisations and institutions in the community. A quick glance around existing organisations and institutions reveals the presence of many similar and familiar faces in leadership positions or in committees. The likelihood of these individuals being overstretched cannot be discounted.

3. **Reconciliation of Reality and Change with Islam**

Given the place and role of Islam in the Malay community, I envisage increasing instances whereby Malays will have to reconcile their need to progress, to adapt to their largely secular national environment, with their religion as circumstances and conditions change. From the Muslim viewpoint, this ability at reconciliation is crucial, yet, the subject is still highly sensitive.

Two specific instances serve to illustrate how painful the exercise can be:

- (i) Many Malays still balk at pledging their kidneys; some because they are unsure of its religious admissibility, for others, because they feel that it is against their religion to do so.

- (ii) The criticisms faced by religious teacher Ustaz Nasir Sali for the methods he employed to reach out to youths at risk.

In both instances, there appears to be a conflict between the solution proposed and religious belief: between means and ends. The success of the Malay community to resolve such conflicts therefore will determine, to a considerable extent, the ability of the Malays to cope and adjust to their environment.

To conclude, while I see greater a capacity for the Malay community to make further progress, there are underlying issues which will need to be faced and resolved if its potential to advance even further and faster is to be fully realised.

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