"Problematic Singapore Malays" – The making of a portrayal[1]

Suriani Suratman
Department of Malay Studies
National University of Singapore

Introduction

One frequent commentary which I heard in the background upon returning to Singapore in 1999 after a 10-year lapse is how Singapore Malays are progressing but then again how they are still lagging behind the other ethnic groups or that they have not quite integrated themselves in Singapore society. The commentaries became louder when I started teaching a module on "Malays of Singapore". Students from different ethnic backgrounds and disciplines take this university requirement module. As an introduction, I ask students to pen down their descriptions of Malays. They tell me that Malays are "friendly but they tend to keep to themselves" and that they are "easy going, easily satisfied and therefore not motivated to work hard".

In the course of preparing for the module on Malays of Singapore, I went through articles from both the English and Malay local newspapers from mid-1960s to the present bearing in mind two crucial concerns of the Singapore government i.e. economic development and nation building. More specifically I looked at issues concerning Malays in Singapore i.e. education and national integration. Two dominant portrayals of Singapore Malays can be discerned from these newspaper reports: that they are "lagging behind" and that their loyalty to the state is "doubtful".

In this paper I take a closer look at the continuous reproductions of these portrayals of Malays. While the main characteristics of these portrayals are reproduced over the decades I show that the nuances of these portrayals have changed. The changes in the nuances are important in revealing how the portrayal of Malays "lagging behind" is sustained over the decades despite Malay progress and how the portrayal of Malays' "doubtful loyalty" becomes more visible.

Relevant studies on portrayals of Malays in Singapore

The image of Malays lagging behind can be traced back historically. It is a reproduction of images of the "lazy native" during the colonial period, which has been analysed in-depth by Alatas (1977). This image is being continuously reproduced in the post-colonial period. Both Li and Lily point out that the image of Malay "backwardness" which is the reproduction of the "lazy native" appears in the media, in publications of Malay organisations, as well as academic works (Li 1989:168 – 173, Lily 1998:58-59). And this image of the "backward Malay" is still present today in the portrayal of Malays as "lagging behind".

---

[1] Paper for International Symposium on Thinking Malayness organised by Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS), 19 -21 June 2004.

In their works both Li (1989) and Lily (1998) gave explanations as to why the image of "backward Malays" continues to prevail. Both argue that this image of Malay inferiority is ideological and play a significant role in "… legitimizing the inequalities in educational opportunity and in economic reward …" (Li 1989:178) and "… deflect attention from the weaknesses of the education system and their [Malay] marginal socio-economic status" (Lily 1998:186). Both have provided salient examples for their argument. There is nevertheless need to look at how this ideology is sustained in changing contexts.

Unlike the portrayal of Malays "lagging behind", the portrayal of Malays' "doubtful loyalty" to the country has not been given equal attention. Li (1989) does make remarks about it when discussing discrimination (1989:108-111). Lai (1995) in her study on ethnic relations in Singapore presents views from the Malay public about government's assertions that there is a lack of Malay participation in community organizations and that they have a tendency to form "ethnic enclaves" in public housing (1995:100-105, 121-132 respectively). While these studies look at the issue of Malays and ethnic integration, they do not look at Malays are portrayed within the context of this issue.

Lily's (1998) discussion on relations between the PAP government and the Malay community provides substantially to locating the "mutual suspicion and distrust" historically (1998:101-104). Today, this "mutual suspicion and distrust" is manifested as Malays' "doubtful loyalty" in newspaper reports about ethnic integration in Singapore. This image about Malays is reinforced within the context of attempts of "terrorist attack" within and outside of Singapore. It is therefore important to give attention to its emergence and reproduction.

1960s – "Malays are slow in adapting to changes"

Two very important projects of the People's Action Party (PAP) government in Singapore since 1959 are industrialization and urban redevelopment. Both required changes; not only in the physical landscape of the country but also in sources of income and living conditions. In the 1960s the Singapore government had vigorously worked to bring better livelihood through social services, education, housing and building of an industrialization base. Politically, however, the government was uncertain if their objective towards a "Malaysian Malaysia" as oppose to "Malay Malaysia" would be accepted. At the same time it was faced with Indonesia's confrontation and concerned with trying to deal with political propaganda that Malays in Singapore are not treated well by the Chinese majority.

The social imbalances between the Malays and the other ethnic groups therefore could not be ignored. Aware that opposing political parties would use communal issues pertaining to Malays in Singapore, the Singapore government was constantly reiterating it's recognition of the "special position" of Malays and its commitment to overcome this imbalance. In his address to more than 1,000 Malay leaders in July 1964 Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew pledged "sincere effort to adjust and remove the imbalance in

development …" because of "the special position of the Malays which is recognised in the Singapore constitution …".[2]

The government made it clear that it took particular effort to assist Malays. When 41 Malay families had to vacate their homes to make way for an industrial complex and were allocated free land and terrace houses Othman Wok, Minister for Social affairs said, "It is clear that in carrying out this resettlement scheme, the government has adopted a fair attitude and has given you all the amenities you need".[3] In his announcement to Malay residents of a *kampong* about to be resettled, the Prime Minister clarified that they will be re-housed and entitled to settlement benefits.[4] Similarly, Othman Wok assured Malay families affected by the government's Crawford urban development scheme that they will be given a rent subsidy of 20% and that the government "wants to help everybody, irrespective of race".[5]

The 1964 gathering of Malay leaders mentioned above was organised to discuss problems affecting the Malay community and what could be done. Lee spelled out three areas where "the community is lagging behind" i.e. education, employment and housing. The Prime Minister's call to the community was the need to increase "the level of education of Malay youth" so that they can be trained in the building trade as "there are openings as fitters, carpenters, masons and semi-skilled labourers in factories and industries …" and, 'to accept these flats as a mode of life in a modern city".[6] The problems as laid out had to do with the need for Malays to change.

Malays were projected as slow at making changes. By pointing out that " … redress of social imbalances between the various racial groups would take a long time to complete", it will require "… a long and continuous process …" Lee was hinting that Malays would take a long time to overcome the above problems.[7] Malays were constantly reminded by Malay political leaders to "adopt new ways of thinking to meet the changed situation" and to "work hard to achieve progress".[8]

What was visible in the 1960s was the spelling out of the areas in which Malays lag behind i.e. education, employment and housing. More specifically the portrayal of Malays was in terms of their low educational qualifications, their employment in low-skilled jobs and their wanting to live in kampong. No specific comparisons between other ethnic communities were made. The uncertainty for the government then had to do with opposition parties' use of communal issues as political propaganda. That these issues would be appealing to Malays was not unexpected. Malays were presented as indigenous to the country and their allegiance was not questioned.

---

[2] The Straits Times 20 July 1964, *Lee:* We have done nothing dishonourable or wrong to the Malays.
[3] The Straits Times 23 October 1964, Chinese welcome new Malay neighbours.
[4] The Straits Times 14 June 1965, A plan to re-house kampong settlers.
[5] The Straits Times 1 November 1965, Singapore to give rent subsidy to Malays.
[6] The Straits Times 20 July 1964, *Lee:* We have done nothing dishonourable or wrong to the Malays.
[7] The Straits Times 20 July 1964, *Lee:* We have done nothing dishonourable or wrong to the Malays.
[8] The Straits Times 7 June 1966, Malays told: Change with the times. The Straits Times 28 August 1967, 'Join in': Ya'acob's call to Muslims.

1970s – "Malays are 'old fashioned' and 'traditional'"

In the 1970s the rate of industrialization and urbanisation Singapore was increasing rapidly. The Singapore government emphasized on education "for the emergence of the new Singaporean, imbued with new values and thus worthy of inheriting the new society …" (Gopinathan 1976:67). What this implies is "a need to constantly re-orientate the existing education system by providing it with more relevant objectives and a need to foster in the school population the growth of new values, which are deemed necessary for nation building" (Gopinathan 1976:67).

There were important changes in the features of the Singapore education system. One of these changes included recognising the economic importance of the English language in technology and economic development. Consequently greater emphasis was given to this language (Gopinathan 2002). The Malay language, which was accepted as the National language in the 1960s, was no longer perceived by the government as necessary after Singapore's separation from Malaysia. There was also a strong promotion of technical education to provide the necessary work force for the government's industrialization programmes.

Concerns about how Malays are coping with the rapid socio-economic changes in Singapore *Majlis Pusat* (Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations) together with the Community Study Centre organised a national seminar on "Malay Participation in National Development" in Malay 1970. For the first time reference was made to "the Malay problem" which was defined by the organisers as a "national problem" (Sharom & Wong 1971:1). The Seminar highlighted three problem areas faced by Malays in Singapore i.e. "educational, economic and social".

Within this context, the repeated stress to Malays was the need for them to change their attitude in order to develop economically. To push the Malays to make this change, comparisons were made between the progress of Malays and "non-Malays". Malays were told to compete vigorously or be left behind. Haji Ya'acob Mohammed, Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office said for example, that as a "minority community" they have to work even harder to improve their status otherwise they will just be "observers" of the success of those from the other communities.[9] Critical of those who looked down on the Malay race (*bangsa Melayu*), he called to the Malay people to realise the importance of education of their children because only in so doing Malays can be of the same status as non-Malays in the future.[10] Haji Ya'acob once again made the appeal, "If we want to progress together with the other groups in this republic, we have to work very hard".[11] Such comparisons accentuated the image that Malays are trailing behind non-Malays.

---

[9] *Berita Harian* 24 April 1972, *Orang-orang Islam perlu banyak berusaha*.
[10] *Berita Harian* 9 October 1972, *Ya'acob: Beratkan pelajaran anak-anak bangsa*.
[11] *Berita Harian* 11 November 1973, *Masyarakat Islam Singapura digesa kerja keras untuk setanding dengan kaum-kaum lain*.

The government's answer to economic to progress was (and still is) education. Malays were seen as not grasping the importance of education. They had to be continuously reminded of the need for education in equipping their children for the challenges of rapid social change.[12] Othman Wok, Minister for Social Affairs called those Malay parents who did not encourage or assist their children's education as having *"sikap kolot"* i.e. an old-fashioned attitude.[13] Furthermore Malays were not pursuing a certain type of education. Malay parents were criticised for not giving emphasis on technical education and were once again told to adapt by changing attitudes and views.[14]

The 1960s portrayal that Malays are slow in changing continued in 1970s. Malays were described as "old-fashioned" or "traditional". Othman Wok appealed to the Malay community not to be held back by old and stale (*lapuk*) ideas and encouraged the community to make the necessary adaptation to the needs of a new era and situation.[15]

At the same time there were reports about increasing numbers of Malays living in flats to depict "standard of living of Malays in Singapore has improved".[16] Findings of a study from the Department of Statistics showing that half of Malays in Singapore live in flats were presented.[17] But the accompanying message was very often one that stressed the need for more effort or that more improvements can be made.[18]

Apart from economic development, "uniting" the different ethnic communities was also a major concern of the Singapore government. Education and housing policies continued from the 1960s to bring different ethnic groups together. Moving away from vernacular-based schools the Singapore government established integrated schools to break down cultural, social and language barriers. Public housing too was an integral part of the government's national integration programme (Hassan 1976:240). By the early 1970s there were concerns about "social habits" in public housing living and calls were made to residents of housing HDB (Housing Development Board) estates to "stop being aloof and impersonal" and the need for "nurturing the cooperative and community spirit" in order that "Singapore is to develop into a united nation instead of drifting as a state of individuals".[19]

Reports on living in flats depict Malays as keeping to themselves and separating themselves from the other communities.[20] Calls were made for the need "to unite the different communities" and the need "to have an attitude of tolerance and accept multiethnic living and prepare themselves to adapt to such a living condition" were

[12] *Berita Harian* 6 October 1975, *Semoga Hari Raya bawa kesederan*.

[13] *Berita Harian* 1 November 1976, *Makin ramai orang-orang Melayu miliki flet HDB sendiri*.

[14] *Berita Harian* 4 August 1973, *Sikap ibubapa tak peduli pendidikan teknikal ditegur*.

[15] *Berita Harian* 13 December 1971, *Othman Wok seru Melayu jangan berfikiran lapok*.

[16] *Berita Harian* 1 November 1976, *Makin ramai orang-orang Melayu miliki flet HDB sendiri*.

[17] *Berita Harian* 15 June 1978, *Lebih separuh dari masyarakat Melayu kini tinggal di flat*.

[18] *Berita Harian* 6 October 1975, *Semoga Hari Raya bawa kesederan. Berita Harian* 1 November 1976, *Makin ramai orang-orang Melayu miliki flet HDB sendiri*.

[19] New Nation 20 August 1973, Forging a united community and New Nation 10 June 1974, Getting flat dwellers to be friendly.

[20] *Berita Harian* 11 February 1972, Othman sangkal orang-orang Melayu hanya tumpu di Queenstown.

made.[21] In the same manner Malay welfare organisations were encouraged to assist those from other ethnic groups stressing again on Singapore being a multi-ethnic society and the need to "live and move together with the other groups to ensure peace and harmony in our country".[22] The importance of unity of flat dwellers was stressed as well as spirit of neighbourliness.[23] A study conducted by the Department of Sociology, NUS which showed that "among other races, the Malays took credit for being cooperative and sociable" provided assurances that Malay flat-dwellers mingle with others. These assurances however, were in the light of an image that Malays are only mingling among themselves and that they are not integrating with others.[24]

Reporting on political groups and elections Malays were portrayed as susceptible to communal propaganda.[25] To counter perceptions that Malays were supportive of groups that disseminated communal issues Haji Ya'acob in his address after the 1976 elections stressed, "the Malay community has not fallen for communal issues which is a sign of wanting to change".[26]

In this decade the way Malays were portrayed as lagging behind is directed at their attitudes. Malays were described as "traditional" and "old fashioned" which hindered their ability to adapt to socio-economic changes. This same attitude slowed down their process of adapting to public housing. Malays were presented as not integrating with the rest of the communities i.e. Malays are keeping to themselves (by choosing a particular housing estate) and are separating themselves (by supporting bodies that disseminate communal issues). Of significance is that comparisons in terms of the above attitude were now made between Malays and "non-Malays" in reference to the other ethnic groups.

1980s – "Malays are still lagging behind and not integrating"

The 1980's saw consistent economic growth in Singapore. There was a rapid expansion of education and economic opportunities. The socio-economic disparity as well as the different rate of development between Malays and the other ethnic group became very apparent in the 1980 national census.

In October 1981 *MENDAKI* (Council on Education of Muslim Children) was formed. Led by Malay political leaders *MENDAKI*'s main objective was to improve the educational performance of Muslim children. The establishment of *MENDAKI* saw the reproduction of Malays' "slow progress".[27] For example, in his opening address at the

---

[21] *Berita Harian* 13 August 1972, *Rakyat diseru agar membaharui azam laksankan tugas satukan masyarakat. Berita Harian* 14 September 1974, *Bina 'jembatan sefahaman' Othman Wok.*
[22] *Berita Harian* 3 November 1974, *Khidmat untuk masyarakat semua kaum.*
[23] *Berita Harian* 27 September 1975, '*Hidup lebih selesa dif let-flet jika penghuni-penghuni bersatupadu. Berita Harian* 29 October 1975, Othman gesa penghuni-penghuni galakkan persefahaman.
[24] The Straits Times 4 January 1979, Malay flat-dwellers still mingle: Sociologists.
[25] *Berita Harian* 18 September 1972, '*Ada yang mahu asingkan kita dari kaum-kaum berbilang bangsa'.*
[26] *Berita Harian* 25 December 1976, *Hj Ya'acob: Penduduk-penduduk Singapura tidak minat isu-isu perkauman*
[27] The Straits Times 28 May 1982, A programme has been set to mobilize the Malay community towards this goal. "Accelerating the climb to success".

MENDAKI Congress on education in May of 1982 Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew said, "… the importance of performance in examinations has become part of the culture of Chinese. The Indians too are keenly aware of the importance of studies and examinations as the road to success …" implying that the Malays have yet to acquire such values.[28]

For the first time, statistical data was used by MENDAKI to substantiate the educational gap between Malay and Chinese students in the Primary School Leaving Examination, in their performance in English, Mathematics and Science.[29] These figures strengthened existing notions that Malays are lagging behind. *MENDAKI*'s scope of plan covering "the child's education and upbringing, both moral and physical, from infancy until his working life" and dealing with "diet and study periods" and "financing and manpower recruitment" perpetuated further that Malays were behind others in encouraging their children to pursue education.[30]

Throughout the decade *MENDAKI* monitored closely yearly performances of Malay students. Although there were improvements over the years, comparisons with "national averages" and "national figures" were made to show that Malays were still lagging. For example, Mr. Ow Chin Hock a Member of Parliament indicated the increase in the literacy rate of Malays but "more effort should be made to improve the educational levels of Malay students as statistics show that the number of Malays with secondary and tertiary education was lower than national averages".[31] Similarly, Dr. Ahmad Mattar, Minister for the Environment and President of MENDAKI presented figures of Malays' educational achievements and corresponding "national figures" at MENDAKI's Trienniel General Meeting and reminded Malays that "we are still a long, long way from our target …We must intensify our efforts to achieve greater results".[32]

The concern was directed towards the gap between the educational achievements of Malays as compared to Chinese and Indian students.[33] At the second congress of MENDAKI in May 1989 the Dr. Ahmad Mattar, Minister for Environment as well as Minister-in-charge for Muslim Affairs reinstated the need to reduce gap between Malay students and students from other ethnic groups.[34]

Public housing also continued to be significant in the government's agenda towards building a "Singaporean community".[35] In the past two decades it was indicated that Malays were slow in accepting and adapting to public housing. By the 1980s close to

---

[28] The Straits Times 29 May 1982, MENDAKI can make the difference, but … "No quick fix-it says PM".

[29] The Straits Times 28 May 1982, Home and school determine how Malay students do.

[30] The Straits Times 28 May 1982, A programme has been set to mobilize the Malay community towards this goal. "Accelerating the climb to success".

[31] The Straits Times 9 August 1982, Malays have made great strides for the better, says Ow.

[32] Ministry of Culture, Singapore Government Press Release 20 May 1985. Release No. 51/Apr/07-1/85/04/28.

[33] *Berita Harian* 15 September 1988, *Rapatkan jurang pencapaian pelajar Melayu. Salah satu tugas utama Sidek di Kementerian Pelajaran*.

[34] *Berita Harian* 15 May 1989, *Tirai baru ke aran peningkatan menyeluruh*.

[35] The Straits Times 2 January 1982, What public housing has done for Singapore. Teh on highrise living and the Malay myth.

70% of Singapore's population was living in public housing estates. The numbers of Malays in high-rise flats were increasing. The National Development Minister for example articulated that "Malays made up 12.9 per cent of total households in the 1980 census, they occupy 13.6 per cent of all HDB flats".[36]

But the beginning of a new concern regarding Malays in public housing emerged in 1987. Mr. Yatiman Yusof, Parliamentary Secretary (Foreign Affairs) expressed his worry that "Singaporean Malays are showing a tendency to segregate themselves despite Government's efforts to integrate the various races in housing estates".[37] He pointed out that such a trend could result in "some kind of ethnic grouping" and "can obstruct ethnic integration".[38] Following this concern, Dr. Ahmad Mattar urged Muslim Singaporeans to "help speed up the growth of neighbourliness and a strong community spirit in the housing estates" by "volunteering your services in organisations and institutions which will reach out and involve the residents in community activities".[39] In 1989, Mr. Dhanabalan Minister for National Development announced that ethnic groupings in housing estates exist.[40] He stressed that such a trend cannot be encouraged in order to ensure unity among the ethnic groups.[41] Although the Minister did not only pointed out Malay ethnic enclaves in certain housing estates the earlier statements by Yatiman Yusof and Othman Wok in 1972 (see above) served as a confirmation that Malays tend to keep to themselves and that there's cause to doubt Malays wanting to integrate with the other ethnic groups.

Adding to this, the government made inferences that Malay votes for the PAP in the 1988 general election results had decreased.[42] The First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong expressed his uncertainty about giving support for *MENDAKI II* "in view of the lack of Malay backing for the PAP". In his letter responding to the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union (*Kesatuan Guru-Guru Melayu Singapura*) Goh questioned Malay's support for the PAP: "… does the Malay community want to merge with the mainstream of national life, and influence the direction of this mainstream by being part of it? Or does it prefer to be a branch on its own, setting its own direction independently of the rest of society?"[43] After close-door discussions with Malay political leaders, the decision was that the government would partly fund *MENDAKI II* but additional funds would be derived from tertiary education fees paid Malay students. This meant that the policy of free tertiary education for Malays is ceased. [44] The government's decision was not

---

[36] Ibid.
[37] The Straits Times 10 June 1987, Worried over Malay habits.
[38] *Berita Harian* 9 June 1987, *Tren Pengelompokan boleh jejas perpaduan.*
[39] The Straits Times 4 June 1987, Call to help promote neighbourly ties. Dr. Mattar urges Muslims to volunteer for community work.
[40] *Berita Harian* 7 January 1989, *Kelompok kaum wujud di estet perumahan.*
[41] *Berita Harian* 7 January 1989. *Mengekal perpaduan*.
[42] The Straits Times, 23 January 1988, The vote drop that shook Sidek.
[43] The Straits times, 19 October 1988, How Malays can realise their hopes: Chok Tong.
[44] See Lily (1998:94-95) for her elaboration of this proposal.

surprisingly unpopular and was seen by factions of the Malay community as disregarding Malay's special position in Singapore.[45]

Goh's question to the Malays raises doubts about Malays integrating with the other communities. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew' National Day Rally speech added on to this doubt. He stated that Malays would only be in the national mainstream in a generation and pointed out "But being a part of the mainstream really boiled down to the question of one's feelings and emotions as a Singaporean, not the amount of money or status which one has. In your heart, you must feel you are a Singaporean".[46] By implication Singapore Malays are not yet in the "national mainstream" and that emotionally they may not feel themselves as Singapore citizens.

Indicators were used to back up doubts about Singapore Malays wanting to be "in the national mainstream". On such indicator was that Malays appear to differentiate themselves from others and choosing to "behave more like Muslims in other countries".[47] Prime Minister Lee pointed out that "…they [Malays] have to think hard about whether they want to be even more different than non-Muslims here".[48] Another indicator is their lack of participation in the activities of Resident Committees and Community Clubs, set up in housing estates in part to promote ethnic integration.[49] This was seen as Malays preference for "isolation and a certain detached relationship".[50]

Most significant in the 1980s is the detailing of educational achievements of Malay students by using statistical figures. Furthermore the other ethnic groups are now also clearly defined as Chinese, Indians and Others. Malays' "lagging behind" in this period was expressed in terms of their educational gap with the different ethnic groups. The disparity between the ethnic groups now becomes more pronounced with the use of statistical figures. Furthermore the statistical figures as a fact confirms whatever ambiguities might have prevailed. A noteworthy element in the 1980s is that the gap between Malays and the other ethnic groups is now not just economic but a social and political gap as well. Malays were depicted as not wanting to mix with other ethnic groups e.g. they form "ethnic enclaves" in public housing estates, they do not participate in activities organised by community centres and they distinguish themselves as Muslims from others who are not. In addition, they are not aligning with the leadership.

1990s – "Malays are progressing but cannot be satisfied yet"

Singapore continued to experience economic growth throughout most of the 1990s. The country was entering into a "developed economy" and focus was channelled towards upgrading of labour skills. As signs of economic recession appeared in 1997 the government forewarned that the economic pie will be shrinking and reminded

---

[45] *Berita Harian* 29 May 1989, *Hak Melayu tidak tergugat* and *Berita Harian* 10 June 1989, *'Timbangkan sebab, semangat FAsal 152'*.
[46] The Straits Times 18 August 1987, Malays will be in the national mainstream in one generation.
[47] The Straits Times 23 January 1988, Gap between Malays and others a fact of life.
[48] Ibid.
[49] The Straits times, 19 October 1988, How Malays can realise their hopes: Chok Tong.
[50] Ibid.

Singaporeans of the importance of "harmonious relationship" in holding the Singapore population together.

But the allegations by the government directed towards Malays with regards to their decreasing number of votes for the PAP as well as the withdrawing of free tertiary education for Malays had created some tension between the government and Malays in general. Unhappiness with performance of Malay Members of Parliament in this context saw the emergence of the Association of Malay/Muslim Professionals (AMP) in 1990. AMP saw itself as providing alternative assistance in addressing the "Malay/Muslim problem" (AMP 1990:16).

Within this background, the government showed that Malays have been making achievements for the last 30 years. They highlighted that Malays have succeeded to reduce the educational gap between them and the other ethnic groups and, that they have increased their standard of living in terms of possession of houses.[51] These achievements however were not seen to be sufficient. Figures now specify that at the higher levels of education i.e. secondary and tertiary levels the achievement gap was actually increasing.[52] Additional statistical figures were given to show the performance of Malay students in specific subjects namely English, Mathematics and Science.[53] As such the picture is that Malays may have progressed but they are still not at par with the other ethnic groups.[54]

While the government's message reiterated the need for Malays to work even harder to improve themselves further, there was a tinge of optimism that Malays would be able to decrease the gap.[55] Prime Minister Goh highlighted the "spirit and realisation of Malay parents and efforts of Malay-Muslim organisations" as reasons for this optimism.[56] In the following years of 1990s articles in the newspapers featured Malay pupils as among the best in mathematics in an international study,[57] "how Malays sprint"[58] and how they 'fare well"[59].

In an attempt to remedy earlier references in the 1980s that Malays were not merging in "the national mainstream", the government drew attention to Malays' "wise choice" when they "… accepted a multi-racial society, with equal opportunities for all, in the

[51] *Berita Harian* 28 July 1990, *Dr. Tan: Melayu berjaya rapatkan jurang, Berita Harian* 14 May 1991, *Kemajuan pelajar Melayu semakin baik. Dr. Tay bentang keputusan peperiksaan tiga kaum sepanjang 12 tahun*, *Berita Harian* 19 May 1991, *Masyarakat Melayu nikmati taraf hidup lebih baik..*
[52] *Berita Harian* 16 November 1990. *Jurang kian luas di peringkat tinggi.*
[53] *Berita Harian* 2 Feb 1991, *PSLE: Boleh capai kelulusan 90% juka lulus EL1, Matematik, Sains*, *Berita Harian* 14 May 1991, *Kemajuan pelajar Melayu semakin baik. Dr. Tay bentang keputusan peperiksaan tiga kaum sepanjang 12 tahun*.
[54] Berita Harian 8 October 1990. Rapatkan jurang dalam pelajaran. Satu-satunya cara masyarakat Melayu dapat setanding dengan kaum lain.
[55] *Berita Harian* 29 May 1991, *Melayu mampu perkecil jurang pelajaran. Kejayaan sepanjang 12 tahun boleh dijadikan dorongan.*
[56] Ibid.
[57] The Straits Times 25 August 1997, Malay pupils here among world's best in maths, 1994 study shows.
[58] The Straits Times 5 January 1998, See how the Malays sprint.
[59] The Straits Times 27 February 1998, Malay pupils fare well, says President Ong.

General Elections in September 1963 … They voted for PAP candidates in the then Malay constituencies … They confirmed their decision after separation in 1965. Malaysia offered them opportunities, but the vast majority chose to remain in Singapore …".[60] These positive pronouncements however did not reverse existing images of Malays as keeping to themselves.

In the late 1990s notions about Malays' "communalism" took an additional dimension. Following the statement made by the then Indonesian President, Prof. B. J. Habibie's in a Taiwanese press interview that Malays in Singapore are discriminated from becoming a military officer, Malays' allegiance to the country was questioned.[61] At a Singapore 21 Forum in September 1999, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew in response to a question on "instinctive emotional ethnic bonds" said "If, for instance, you put in a Malay officer who's very religious and who has family ties in Malaysia in charge of a machine gun unit, that's a very tricky business".[62] This statement reproduces the portrayal of Singapore Malays' as keeping to themselves not only within the country but in the region as well. Singapore Malays' commitment to defend the country is presented as doubtful as they would align with Malays in the region.

One clear feature in the way Malays were portrayed as lagging behind in the 1990s is, that they still needed to catch up with the Chinese and Indian counterparts in specific subjects i.e. English, Mathematics and Science and, in the higher levels of education. In this way, Malays maybe progressing but there are still areas in which they have yet to improve on. Uncertainty of Malays' loyalty takes an additional form. Apart from earlier portrayals that they were not integrating with the rest in the Singapore society, the issue with regards to Malays in the SAF introduced the trustworthiness of Malays in defending the country i.e. "Malays' loyalty".

2000s – "Malays are progressing but are distancing themselves"

The concern for the Singapore government in the new century pertains to how it is going to deal with economic recession, which the country is experiencing. The new century also saw a variety of issues pertaining to Malays in Singapore that have significant influence on the portrayals of Malays.

To mark its 10th Anniversary in September 2000 AMP presented its assessment of Malay community's progress in the 1990s and raised issues on effectiveness of meritocracy in Singapore.[63] This sparked off a series of dialogues in the newspapers regarding Singapore Malays' progress and marginalisation. Addressing allegations of discrimination raised by AMP Prime Minister Goh cited figures to show that Malays have made tremendous progress.[64] He added, "You [AMP] do the Malay community a great disservice if you get

---

[60] The Straits Times 25 August 1997, Malay pupils here among world's best in maths, 1994 study shows.
[61] The Straits Times 10 February 1999, Habibie on ethnic Chinese.
[62] The Straits Times 19 Sept 1999, Reality is race bonds exist – SM.
[63] The Straits Times 30 July 2000, Malays meet to assess progress.
[64] The Straits Times 6 November 2000, Community catching up in academic results.

it to believe that it is weak, discriminated against, and marginalised".[65] By now the issue of Malays' marginalization became of interest to the Malaysian media. Goh reiterated his message that Malays in Singapore has made significant progress and showed statistical figures of Malays' achievements in education, occupation, income and quality of life for the last 10 years.[66] To further counter allegations of Singapore Malays' marginalization, Goh pointed out, "Singapore Malays have done well educationally as compared to Malaysian Malays", giving the figures for Malay workers in Singapore with upper secondary or higher qualifications at 25% compared with 14% for Malaysian Malays.[67] Malay organisations followed suit to show that Malays in Singapore can "compete and succeed".[68] Within this backdrop, the government made longitudinal comparisons and contrasted Singapore Malays' achievements with that of Malaysian Malays to show that Malays have been developing well and not lagging behind.

Following this issue of Singapore Malays' marginalisation, AMP made a proposal for a Malay collective leadership at its Second National Convention in November 2000. The leadership which would comprise of only Malays elected by the Malay community is to make up for what AMP sees as the weakness of the existing Malay political leaders (AMP 2000). The government gave a stern warning of how such a proposal would lead to communalism and would obstruct national integration between the different ethnic groups.[69]

To clear the air of misconception AMP together with Majlis Pusat organised a meeting between the Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew with Malay Members of Parliaments, community leaders and professionals in March 2001.[70] The Senior Minister covered issues concerning "Malay loyalty" and the role of Malays in SAF where he gave historical and contemporary examples to justify "why we cannot ignore race and religion" in the security services.[71] Stressing the importance of integration of communities he concluded his speech by asking the Malay community to choose between two options: "the first, to support the present policy of gradual integration; or the second, to differentiate and distance itself form the larger society".[72] This question had similar tones as the earlier question by Goh in the 1980s, which implied that Malays are not integrating.

In the dialogue session following the speech Mr. Lee delineated what he saw as Malays distancing themselves from the larger society: participation in mosque activities and wanting *madrasah* education.[73] The outcome of the dialogue was a unanimous statement

[65] Ibid.
[66] The Straits Times 22 January 2001, Singapore Malays have made significant progress – PM Goh and The Straits Times 22 January 2001, Malays have moved up, says PM.
[67] The Straits Times 22 January 2001, Malays here compare well with Malaysian Malays.
[68] The Straits Times 23 January 2001, Malays here can 'compete and succeed'.
[69] The Straits Times 6 November 2000, Racial politics will undermine S'pore: PM.
[70] The Straits times 4 March 2001, Session frank and fruitful, say Malay groups.
[71] The Straits Times 4 March 2001, "Integration has brought benefits to all".
[72] The Straits Times 4 March 2001, "Integration has brought benefits to all" and The Straits Times 4 March 2001, Integrate or separate – Malays pick.
[73] The Straits Times 11 March 2001, We are not unchanging immovables – SM.

by Malay community leaders of their commitment to "multiracial integration".[74] The dialogue reconfirmed notions that there is a real cause to distrust Malays. The public statement by Malay community leaders further reinstates doubts that Malays were not integrating in Singapore society.

Doubts about Malays' commitment to the country recurred when Internal Security Department (ISD) announced the arrests of 15 persons in December 2001 who were members of an organisation called *Jemaah Islamiah* (JI) suspected for "involvement in terrorism-related activities".[75] In addition, postings in the website of Fateha.com, asserted that the Singapore government "has prompted terrorist intentions".[76]

Subsequently, the government raised concerns regarding "inter-racial and inter-religious ties". While stating, "our Malay/Muslim community is made up of good, loyal Singaporeans" the Prime Minister raised the question, "How do we prevent distrust between the different racial and religious communities from arising, should a terrorist act by some Malay/Muslim Singaporeans take place in the future?"[77] The question recreates the portrayal of Malays' doubtful Malay loyalty. An article on the profile of some of the arrested depicted them as "ordinary Singaporeans" who were "good workers, who were polite, friendly and never got into trouble".[78] This only increases whatever suspicion Singaporeans may have of Malays or Muslims.

Against this scenario, PM Goh announced the setting up of Inter-racial Confidence Circles (IRCC) "to bring together religious and community leaders to help build trust, understanding among races".[79] While asking non-Muslim Singaporeans to "proactively reach out to our Malay/Muslim community", he asked Malay/Muslims to "make an effort to participate more actively in non-Malay/Muslim activities" namely "non-mosque grassroots activities".[80] What Malays were expected to do were further outlined. They should speak up against "extremist voices", "weed out deviant and extremist teachings", "remove barriers that reduce the common space", setting up of IRCC in schools and work places and "join constituency activities and volunteer for events organised by non-Muslim organisations".[81] Articles in the newspapers show Malays speaking out and making efforts "to mix with other races".[82] The measurement of progress for Malays now includes the extent to which Malays are able to "bond" with the other communities. As pointed out by the Senior Minister, "But success should not be measured only in terms of the number of professionals and businessmen in the community but also in how well

---

[74] The Straits Times 11 March 2001, Malay leaders 'want more integration'.
[75] The Straits Times 6 January 2002, 15 nabbed here for terror plans.
[76] The Straits Times 20 January 2002, Leaders warn against fringe groups.
[77] The Straits Times 30 January 2002, Forge closer ties, tackle irrational fears.
[78] The Straits Times 19 January 2002, Did anyone really know them?
[79] The Straits Times 30 January 2002, New push to strengthen racial ties.
[80] The Straits Times 30 January 2002, Forge closer ties, tackle irrational fears.
[81] The Straits Times 3 February 2002, S'pore at risk if races assert separate identities.
[82] The Straits Times 10 October 2002, Muslims go all out to mix with others and The Straits Times 13 October 2002, Doing this is not ditching culture – Malay leader.

Malay Singaporeans identify themselves with their fellow countrymen[83]". What the other community had to do on their part was left open.

The picture presented of Malay socio-economic achievements is positive. Indeed Malays have progressed when longitudinal comparisons of over 10 years were presented. In addition comparing with Malays in Malaysia instead of contrasting with the other ethnic groups in Singapore depicted Malays as developing and not lagging behind. The portrayal of Malays' loyalty as doubtful was manifested in the list of the areas where Malays should try and change in order "to bond" with the other communities. Malays were depicted as having tendency to Islamic extremism. They have spaces where deviant and extremist teachings are propagated. Malays make barriers between them and others e.g. eating "*halal*" food, wearing the scarf. And, they only participate in mosque activities.

Concluding observations

The portrayal of Malays lagging behind other ethnic groups was still dominant by the end of the 1990s. The question is how this portrayal has been sustained when at the same time Malays were making economic progress in the past decades. The government has done this in two ways. Firstly it continuously identified new areas which require attention. From the three areas i.e. education, employment and housing defined in the 1960s and 1970s, focus was given to educational achievements in the 1980s. The focus was further narrowed down in the 1990s to performance in specific subjects i.e. English, Mathematics and Science. As such, when Malays have made progress in overall educational achievement for example, attention is directed at low performance level of Malay students in the specific subjects. Secondly, it makes comparisons of progress between ethnic groups at a given point in time instead of looking at longitudinal progress. Thereby it can be shown that there is always a gap between the performance of Malay students and Chinese and Indian students.

In the 2000s, following the debates on Malays being marginalized, the portrayal of Malays lagging behind was not noticeable in the newspapers. Instead, the focus shifted towards the issue of Malay loyalty. Although this issue began to emerge in the 1980s it became more visible in the newspaper discussions on marginalization. The issue was further reinforced in the aftermath of September 11 and the arrest of members of JI in Singapore. It would therefore be interesting to monitor if these events mark a turning point of Malays being portrayed as lagging behind.
It appears that the issue of Malays' marginalization has disrupted the government's portrayal of Malays "lagging behind". To counter arguments that Malays are marginalized, the government has had to show that Malays have been progressing. The issue necessarily calls for the government to reassess their presentation of Malays as "lagging behind".

Since the 1960s the government as well as Malay community leaders defined "the Malay problem" as an economic one whereby focus is given to education. The visibility of the portrayal of Malays' "doubtful loyalty" points to an additional aspect to "the Malay

---

[83] The Straits Times 19 October 2002, Bonding a vital part in Malays' success.

problem". Not only is the gap between Malays and the other ethnic groups an economic one; there is also a social and political gap. As such, the notion of Malays being "problematic" has increased rather than diminished. It remains to be seen how this portrayal will be further manifested.

Bibliography

Alatas, Syed Hussein 1977. The Myth of the Lazy Native. A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism. London: Frank & Cass.

AMP 1990. National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals. Malays/Muslims in 21st Century Singapore: Prospects, Challenges and Directions. Singapore: Association of Malay/Muslim Professionals.

AMP 2000. Vision 1010: Setting the Community Agenda in the 21st Century Singapore. Second National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals.

Benjamin, Geoffrey 1976. "The Cultural Logic of Singapore's Multiracialism". In Riaz Hassan (ed.) Singapore Society in Transition. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Clammer, John 1985. Malay Society in Singapore: Problems of a Minority Group. In John Clammer Singapore: Ideology, Society, Culture. Singapore: Chopmen Publishers.

Gopinathan, S. 1976. Towards a National Educational System. In Riaz Hassan (ed.) Singapore: Society in Transition. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Gopinathan, S 2002. Ethnicity Management and Language Education policy: Towards an alternative model of language education in our schools. Paper presented at IPS Research Forum, Ethnic Relations in Singapore.

Hassan, Riaz 1976. Public Housing. In Riaz Hassan (ed.) Singapore: Society in Transition. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Lai Ah Eng 1995. Meanings of Multi-ethnicity: a case study of ethnicity and ethnic relations in Singapore. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Li, Tania 1989. Malays in Singapore. Culture, Economy and Ideology. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

Lily Zubaidah Rahim 1998. The Singapore Dilemma. The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Sharom Ahmat & James Wong (ed.) 1971. Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore. Singapore: Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations Singapore.

Turnbull, C. M. 1989. A History of Singapore 1819 – 1988. Singapore: Oxford University Press.