

thesun says

Daulat Tuanku

THE Sultan of Selangor is revered as the people's ruler. Even in his role as the regent and ruler-in-waiting, His Highness has been consistent in exercising his powers judiciously and in the interests of his subjects, irrespective of their standing, creed, colour or religion. He has never distinguished between urban or rural, poor or rich. He has always been a ruler of the people and for him, all his subjects must be treated fairly and equally. Hence, when residents of Petaling Jaya complained about the proliferation of billboards which were sanctioned by the state, he put his foot down.

Therefore, when the executive council member in charge of religious affairs announced that the state government wants to give mosque officials the power to arrest beer-drinking Muslims and made other unacceptable rulings, His Highness, expectedly, justly and cor-

rectly expressed his reservations. Such decisions have serious implications as the Sultan is the head of Islam in the state and hence, he should have been consulted. It has since been pointed out such a decision was not made collectively by the state, but by an individual.

Individuals cannot arbitrarily make or change laws; neither can rules and regulations be amended to suit the fancies of anyone. It is dangerous because one man cannot impose his will on the rest of the people. While it can be argued that such provisions exist in the Selangor Syariah Criminal Enactment 1995, protocol demands that the state executive council endorses them with the consent of His Royal Highness.

The people of Selangor, and to a certain extent the entire population, owe a debt of gratitude to His Royal Highness for the swift and skillful manner in which he has handled the issue.

The 'me' in Merdeka

IF, as has been recently suggested, the column for "race" on official forms is abolished, it would represent a moment that I have long awaited – for both personal and wider patriotic reasons.

Personal, not just because it is always a pain to fill in any tedious documents, but also because from a young age I didn't like the idea of being pigeonholed. I remember when, in 1994-5, my year group progressively got our identity cards. We would compare our new laminated documents, and we soon discovered that mine had an extra bit of information which some of my friends' did not. The name, address, citizenship and gender were all universally there, but mine had "Islam" on it, while the others didn't specify their religion. How

weird, I thought, and I attributed the omission to some obscure but harmless rules. I even contemplated I was somewhat special that mine was somehow more detailed than those of my friends, although I was later teased when our history teacher told us that the enforced labelling of one's religion was historically not usually for their benefit.

In the following years I encountered various other forms, and invariably there was a box for "race", even for purposes where this seemed pointless. By the time I went to the UK this practice had cropped up there too. Using the justification of "anti-discrimination" monitoring, cover slips to all sorts of application forms had appeared asking for my ethnic background. Of course, in the UK, "Malay" wasn't one of the default options. Instead there was "Asian" and a space to write in whatever I wanted. Surely, I was "Asian", but as I was used to a more refined system of categorisation, I mulled over how specific I ought to be.

By this time, my academic attitude towards my own "race" had evolved; the very definition "Malay" was, I had learnt, rather new, with varying criteria applied even in the early twentieth century according to which state you were living in. A growing knowledge of family history also played its part, and I discovered that I had ancestors from the Hadhramaut as well as Siam. Following my paternal side, however, my ancestors had been Minangkabau for six centuries, and henceforth I wrote "Minangkabau" in all these forms.

When I was back in Malaysia, I did the same, much to the bewilderment of civil servants who would then politely ask me to just tick "Malay". It became increasingly apparent that the purpose of this was precisely so that they could treat me differently on account of my race. And suddenly my friends began to comment on this: as we grew up, the more contact we had to have with the apparatus of state, and thus the more apparent the differential treatment became. And so another round of teasing: you're Malay, why don't you just do this or do that (because you can), as if this exalted status might override any sense of civic responsibility, a carte blanche for abuse.

Thus I have two concerns about these forms, even the British kind which ostensibly aims to

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 by **Tunku 'Abidin Muhriz**

monitor discrimination. The first is that it demands clarity upon your identity. So many people could easily belong in multiple categories, but by demanding a single tick it makes one self-

conscious of the extent to which one really is of a certain "race": it creates an artificial crisis of self-identity when for years one could plod along life, content with drawing upon one's personal, familial and wider cultural experiences and preferences without necessarily condensing them into a single label.

The second is the one that Malaysian civil society has argued over for some time, and it is a question that the politicians have long been petrified to approach because of the possible electoral ramifications: namely, the extent to which government should discriminate among its citizens on the basis of perceived biological and social characteristics according to criteria set by the state itself – after all, you are only bumiputra if the government says that you are. This, then, lies at the heart of debates on the NEP and its successors and Article 153. The problem is that many of these debates intrinsically accept these government-mandated categories as a given.

I say that the actual key question is far more fundamental, and that is: how much control over one's own identity does a Malaysian truly have? Do we need the state to tell us who we are? The ramifications are profound, however, since it will be argued that the provisions of the constitution become unenforceable if there is no government recognition.

Whatever the case may be, as far as I'm concerned, being Minangkabau is already to be in a special position: to be able to be a member of a community which pioneered democracy, women's rights and *rendang*, is a privilege in itself. I do not need the government to tell me that.

And so it is for wider patriotic reasons as well that I celebrate the "race" columns disappearing from forms, if this marks a shift from the constant reminding by the agents of government of what we are, just because they say we are.

Tunku 'Abidin Muhriz is founder president of the Malaysia Think Tank. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com.

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letter

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Why put up netting below MRR2?

LATELY, green safety nettings have been strung below many of the horizontal beams of the MRR2 from Selayang to Bukit Maluri, Kepong. As a roaduser I'm perplexed. Normally such nettings are used to trap falling objects.

Has there been any explanation from the relevant authorities on why the nettings have been put up? If someone has come across any such report in the press, please enlighten me.

As cracks on the MRR2 had been repaired earlier, the appearance of the nettings sends shivers down my spine and the first thing that comes to mind is public safety.

The other issue related to MRR2 is, has any action been taken against the culprits behind the defective construction of the highway which resulted in cracks on the beams or is this going to be another case of taxpayers' money going down the gutter?

Are the authorities and powers that be going to keep on shouting slogans about good governance, transparency and accountability and stop at that? Let's wait for the day to come when slogan shouting is replaced with action.

Spooked Motorist
Kuala Lumpur

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