

## EMERGING MALAYS: MOVING FROM POVERTY TO STRONG IDENTITY AND HIGH ECONOMIC POWER

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of the study is to determine factors that influence the development of future Malays in relation to their economic status, personal identity and leadership position. The study was conducted amongst 505 Malaysian Malays to understand their views about the important elements of emerging Malay. Malay self-attributes, education system and contribution of other parties play different but unique roles in the formation of the emerging Malays. This paper is written with two main objectives: 1) to determine the factors that contribute to emerging Malays with strong identity, economic power and leadership attributes 2) to examine whether the factors of personal attributes, education system, and the role of the community, economic and government support (subsidy) have a significant effect towards the future development of Malays. The authors found that Malaysian Malays are optimistic about the emerging Malaysian culture and are adapting well to the cultural elements of other ethnic groups despite some differences in opinions about what constituted the Malaysian culture.*

**Keywords:** Emerging Malay, poverty, Budi, Malays Culture

### INTRODUCTION

Malay has a long history and rich civilization in Malaysia. Malays who built the foundation of civilization in this country has gone through several phases, beginning with primitive phase, followed by a phase of slavery and feudalism. Until today, the Malays have reached the stage of class society, having succeeded in their economic status, education level and organizational leadership. This was achieved only after the government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP1) in 1971. The essence of this affirmative action scheme favored the Malays, who were seen as economically disadvantaged (Abdullah, 1997).

During the British colonial period in 1726, British implemented “divide and rule” policy across different cultural groups in Malaysia. The plural society turned into a culture divided along labor lines, laying the foundation for communal divisions (Montiel and Noor, 2009). Malay and Non-Malay were separated into two distinct and parallel methods of production where the large-scale production and commercial activities were of the English and non-Malay and the traditional methods of peasant agriculture and fishing practiced by the rural Malays. While the Europeans and non-Malays belonged to the modern capitalist sector of the economy, the Malays were mostly engaged in unwaged traditional peasant sector and live in poverty in the rural areas. Upon Independent in 1957, a power-sharing system based on the division and balance of responsibilities the economic prominence were introduced. The heart of this balance was called the “Bargain of 1957”, a social contract or agreement between the Malay and the non-Malays, where the Malays retained the major symbols of their nation, that is, their sultans, their special position, their language (as the official language), and Islam as their religion and in return for recognizing Chinese and other immigrants in the form of economic rights, citizenship and freedom to preserve, practice and propagate their religion, culture, and language (Salleh, 2000).

However, after more than 10 years of independent, Malays were still live in poverty especially those in the rural areas and their daily state of affairs had not changed much. On the other hand, the Chinese so called the immigrants were economically much better than them the locals as they controlled the country's economy. Although they have power upon the country's economy, Chinese were still unhappy with Malay political dominance, where Malays were given special rights with the use of Malay as the national language, Islam as the state religion, and the maintenance of the functions and status of the Malay rulers (Salleh, 2000). These special rights, especially the use of Malay as the national language, were the primary bone of contention for the Chinese. Due to this racial economic imbalance, in May 13, 1969, a riot between Chinese and Malays occurred. The "Bargain of 1957" were provided a balance in previous years, were broken (Faaland et al., 2003). The riots of May 1969 were inevitable due to past structural income and sectarian imbalances between the Malays and the Chinese, which the immediate trigger was the outcome of the federal election.

With their newly given citizenship status, the Chinese were able to increase their political strength by giving more support to Chinese opposition parties, and these parties made significant gains compared to the Malay-dominated Alliance Party. It was said that members of the winning party marched through Kuala Lumpur through some largely Malay areas, carrying brooms that symbolized "sweeping" the Malays out of Kuala Lumpur as well as questioning the special rights given to Malays. Malays were not only offended, but deeply humiliated because they saw that the Chinese benefited from their part of the bargain that gave equal political rights to Chinese; while Malays remained poor and now seemed to be losing their political dominance (Montiel and Noor, 2009).

Following the riots, the government came up with a new formula for political rule. First, to address the lack of Malay economic progress, the government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP1) in 1971 to eradicate poverty and correct for racial economic imbalances. The Malay-dominated government asserted the need for some affirmative actions to build a more economically equitable society and to uplift Malays from economic backwardness.

Currently, after 47 years since the implementation of the NEP, many Malays are still unhappy with the economic power of the Chinese and their dominance in the corporate sector. Malays fear that the Chinese will use this economic power to wield a political edge at their expense. While overall income inequality and interethnic and rural-urban inequality between the groups has declined, Malays still earn less than Chinese (Heng, 1997). Deraman et al. (2005) in their study found that, the success or failure of the Malays was depending on the individual themselves to choose failure or succeed in their life. In addition, according to Yussof et al. (2011), it was found that the background of the Malays which rests on the nature of identity, honesty, not easily deterred, confident and work hard is a fundamental factor in their success. With this strong background, the future Malays should be able to control the country's economic power, leadership and possess strong identity and self-esteem. Thus the measurements for emerging Malay are their strong identity, economic power and leadership in government and corporate sectors. These characteristic according to many researchers were enhanced by their self attributes conceptualized by their culture, spiritual beliefs, and support of other parties namely their community and Malaysian education, economic and political systems.

Malay personality traits refer to behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that embody the characteristics of positive and negative that they have. Although the Malay race has positive features, but it's plays an important role in building the strength of Malay. Conversely, the negative characteristics of the Malays have been manipulated by others to undermine the Malay race. *Budi Complex* of Malay humble attitude, for example, (Sobian, 2010) was used to subdue and weaken them. According to Sobian (2010), among positive characteristics of the Malays were: ability to carry themselves socially, humility, and respect for others and having virtuous life, but not submissive and yielded; They hold to the principle of consultation or consensus; and Islam is their way of life although many do not understand the demands and the teachings of Islam in all aspects.

Studies by Sa'ari (2001) however found that Malay were lacking in the power of identity. Other negative characteristics of the Malays, are: (1) do not know their origin and lack of understanding on the important features of Malays; (2) Does not regulate Malay customs, as many thinks that the custom is outdated and does not conform to the modern Malays lifestyle; (3) sensitive to the needs of others, but be accommodating often manipulated by others (even among Malays themselves); (4) failed to maintain their identities, and thus underestimate the ability of the nation; (5) failed to understand their strengths and weaknesses which cause the Malays to feel inferior, not confident, and failed to developed; and (6) isolated and lag behind in all aspects compared to other races (Chinese, Indian) in Malaysia. It was

supported by Embong (2007) who found that Malays were often associated with negative characteristics. Among other things, they were regarded as a nation of lazy, fatalistic, fear, and less religious faith. They also do not like to build and often resist any form of change.

According to Storz (1999), in general, the behavior patterns of Malays in Malaysia and their self-attribute were deriving from their culture of *budi* concept. It is important to understand the *budi* concept which encompasses the Malay way of life. Tham (1971) views *budi* complex as the essence of Malay's social relationships. It formulates norms of individuals and social behavior. The way an individual should feel and think about him or she and others is guided by the *budi* complex. Dahlan (1991) on the other hand cited that *budi* embodies all the virtues ranked in the system of values in Malay society and it comprised the qualities of generosity, respect, sincerity, righteousness, discretion, feelings of shame at the collective level and feeling of shame at the individual level. Malay culture greatly values the capacity of a person to be "sensitive", "considerate" and understanding of others and therefore always speak with care for the other person not to feel hurt (Goddard, 2002). These qualities, norms and expectations would produce a certain type of person. According to Dahlan (1991), it is a mental set that guides one's behavior. However, the culture of the Malays in the peninsula is the result of a weaving together of many strands and it is constantly changing and being subjected to new influences (Ryan, 1983). Alongside the *budi* complex is also the Islam religion. The spiritual and ethical aspect of the *budi* complex and the Muslim belief that one's destiny lies ultimately with Allah.

The Malays, the majority in Malaysia, are Muslims by practice and definition (Kling, 1993) and Islam has a fundamental influence in their society. In the definition of Malays by the Federal Constitution: "*Malay is a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to the Malay customs...*" (Malaysia, Federal Constitution, 160(2)). Both values of *budi* and Islam were tightly fused with the social norms of the Malay community's (Husin, 2010). It led to the birth of more definite social values such as compromise, respect, cooperation, tolerance, modesty, forgiveness, and patience. The focus on these aspects is important as it provides an insight into the influence of *budi*-Islam on the formation of Malay community's identity. Thus, the Malay society has retained the influence of religion (Islam) and it has an important role to control not only their spiritual beliefs but also their way of life (Ryan, 1983). The study by Husin (2010) found that, Malay behavior and attributes consistently shows patterns and directions of ideas, manners and actions that are influenced by a combination of these two values *Budi* and Islam. It was supported by Hashim et al. (2009) who also describes the spiritual element occurs among Malays due to religious faith and values.

In Malaysia, "The liberal minded" Tunku Abdul Rahman's education policies of social engineering and nation building allowed both an integrated and parallel two tiered system of education to emerge (Kheng, 2009). This dualism meant to satisfy the various ethnic communities in the country up to the present. The integrated system comprises a national education system in Malay (the national language) while the parallel system allows government aided Chinese vernacular primary and secondary Chinese schools and Tamil vernacular primary schools to exist, as well as privately funded Chinese secondary schools. Both systems, however, follow a national curriculum. These policies were the compromised between the communal parties within the ruling Alliance and to overcome dissatisfaction among Chinese educational groups (Kheng, 2009).

During colonial time, Malay, Chinese, and Indian vernacular schools were usually only attended by students whose mother tongue was the same as the language of instruction. English-medium schools were mostly in the urban areas and generally had a racially mixed student population. The composition of English-medium school students during colonial time were: Malay, 9%; Chinese, 14%; and Indian, 28% (Hirschman 1972) and secondary education were available only in English and Chinese-medium schools. Village Malay population was mostly going to Islamic ("*sekolah pondok*")<sup>1</sup> or Malay-medium school in the rural areas as the goal of village Malay schooling at that time was just to make the son of the fisherman or peasant a better fisherman or peasant than his father. The goal of the urban English-medium schools during the colonial era on the other hand was to provide clerks for the bureaucracy (Hirschman 1972).

Poverty is closely related to the education achievement of an individual. Therefore, the lower the academic achievements, the higher the likelihood of an individual being trapped in poverty line. Additionally, financial resources are one of the main constraints of poor families in their quest to reach the level higher education. Due to lack of financial resources for education, Malays stay poor in the rural areas and other ethnic group getting richer and richer.

To address this problem and particularly the economic imbalance among various races in Malaysia that affecting racial unity and national security, New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced in 1971. Malay, Chinese, Indian and other “*Bumiputera*”<sup>2</sup> community were restructuring so that the type of race is not synonymous with the economic activities. Two-pronged strategy that focus on efforts to increase the income of the poor and rural people especially Malay were introduced through modernization of the agriculture sector, improve education level, create Malay-Business-Man and enhance corporate equity holders among Malays.

According to Hambali (2011), in addition to the personal factors, characteristics and the Malaysian education system, other factors such as community, economic and political system also influence the level of competitiveness and success of the Malays. On the other hand, according to Alam et al. (2011), other aspects that impact positive success of the Malays were the support of family, social relationships, and adherence to religious (Islam). Therefore, Sobian (2010) suggested that more research should be done to understand the Malays and see the good side of it and not only concentrate on the aspects of their weakness, especially in the economic and social development. Factors that may influence the success of future Malays should be scrutinized and intervention strategy should be undertaken. Thus, the present article aim to empirically discuss on the factors that contribute to emerging Malays with strong identity, economic power and leadership attributes and to examine whether the factors of personal attribute, education system, and the role of the community, economic and government support (*subsidy*) have a significant effect towards the future development of Malays. The following section will discusses on research method used, the findings, discussion and conclusion of this study.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The present study research design was explanatory in nature. It used quantitative analysis through cross-sectional survey of 505 respondents. The data collected was carried out via street survey in various locations in Peninsular Malaysia. The findings presented in this paper were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis aided by the computer software SPSS and the results displayed in descriptive, frequency and percentile forms. For the test of relationship, multiple regressions was used to measure the relationship between independent variables (Malay self attributes, education system, community, economic and government support) and dependent variables (Emerging Malays with the three dimensions; Personal identity, economic power, leadership) involved in this study.

The main units of analysis of the study was individual aged 18 years old and above. The respondents were only Malays regardless of gender and ethnicity and involved in various kinds of business sectors ranging from retail to services. There was no statistical sampling frame to select the respondents in this study due to unidentified population. Thus, for practical reason, non-probability via convenient sampling methods was used for the study. This was the most suitable method to select a sample whose nature was confined to particular restricted research requirements, i.e. people whose age ranged more than 18 years old. Moreover, these sampling methods were suitable for selecting respondents who were at times difficult to locate and uncooperative.

## RESULTS

In general, this section is intended to obtain background information on the respondents’ gender, age, status and others the show the representativeness of the data.

### *Respondent profile*

Table 1 below shows the gender distribution of respondents around the Malaysian peninsula. There were number of respondents which are men were more than women with the percentage of 53.2 percent and 47.8 percent respectively.

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1 Traditional Islamic School

2 Malaysian of indigenous Malay origin

Table 1. Gender distribution of respondents

| N = 505 | Number | Percent |
|---------|--------|---------|
| Male    | 264    | 53.2    |
| Female  | 241    | 47.8    |

Table 2 indicates the age distribution of the respondents. Of the total respondents which were 505 people, about 54.7 percent were aged 18 to 30 years. It was followed by respondents who were age between 30 years to 39 years with a total of 26.7 percent. From that table, 1.2 percent of the respondent who were aged over 58 years giving their opinion on the influential factors of emerging Malays.

Table 2. Age distribution of respondents

| N = 505                | Number | Percent |
|------------------------|--------|---------|
| 18 to 30 years old     | 276    | 54.7    |
| 30 to 39 years old     | 135    | 26.7    |
| 40 to 49 years old     | 66     | 13.1    |
| 50 to 58 years old     | 22     | 4.4     |
| More than 58 years old | 6      | 1.2     |

In the Table 3 below, the distribution of the marital status of respondents shows that 58.4 percent were still single and 41.5 were married and the rest of 5 respondents were others (widows, single mothers, widowers).

Table 3. Distribution of the marital status of respondents

| N = 505 | Number | Percent |
|---------|--------|---------|
| Single  | 290    | 58.4    |
| Married | 210    | 41.5    |
| Others  | 5      | 0.1     |

In terms of education level, the distribution was quite even between those highly educated and less educated. However, the majority of 192 respondents which was 38.1 percent hold bachelor's degrees followed by 26.3 percent were educated below than diploma level (certificate and high school level). While a total of 24.1 percent has a diploma/matriculation and the rest (11.5%) had master or PhD (Table 4).

Table 4. Distribution of the education level of respondents

| N = 505                     | Number | Percent |
|-----------------------------|--------|---------|
| Below than diploma          | 133    | 26.3    |
| Diploma/matriculation level | 122    | 24.1    |
| Degree level                | 192    | 38.1    |
| Masters/PhD                 | 58     | 11.5    |

### ***Frequency analysis on factors affecting self-attributes of Emerging Malays***

Emerging Malays were measured in terms of their economic status, leadership position and strong-identity. Table 5 shows a list of seven factors that affecting the self attributes of emerging Malays perceived by the respondents. Frequency analysis indicates that majority of the respondent perceive that the self-attributes of the emerging Malays were affected by their own culture which encompasses of *budi-islam* characteristics

Table 5. Factors that affecting the Self-attributes of Emerging Malays

|   | N = 505 | Percent |
|---|---------|---------|
| Malay Culture ( <i>budi-islam</i> )   |         | 65.1    |
| External or environmental factors (influence of friends, media, and others) |         | 62.0    |
| Education factor  |         | 57.6    |
| Islam religion  |         | 55.8    |
| Internal factors (ethnicity, parents)                                       |         | 54.3    |
| Economic factors  |         | 52.1    |
| Other factor (government support/subsidy)                                   |         | 3.6     |

and beliefs. The second critical factor was external or environmental factors ranging from the influence of friends, media, and others (62 percent). Followed by education (57.6 percent), Islam religion (55.6 percent), internal factors (54.3 percent), economic factors (52.1 percent), and the last factor was others (3.6 percent).

### Multiple regression analysis

Multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the independent variables constituted a significant effect on the dependent variable. Table 6 shows the results of a regression analysis where dependent variable in this study was the Emerging Malay and the independent variables were the Malay culture, education system, and other supported factors. The results of the analysis showed that three of the Malay's attributes (spirituality, education level and financial capabilities) has a significant relationship with the future development of Malays ( $p < 0.000$ ). Referring to the national education system, the analysis showed that no significant relationship between independent variables (education system) with the dependent variable (the development of emerging Malays) where significant value was in excess of 0.05. Meanwhile, referring to the other supported factors involved, only government support is significant in contributing to the future development of Malays (sig. = 0.007, 0.025, 0.000). This indicates that for Malays to be position as those who have economic power, having strong identity and hold high leadership position, they have to possess strong self attributes with education, financially stable and strong belief in the almighty.

Table 6. Relationship between self-attributes, education system and other supporting factors to development of Emerging Malays

| Variables                                | Dependent variable 'Emerging Malays' |          |
|--|--------------------------------------|----------|
|  | Std. Beta                            | Sig.     |
| <b>IV.1 (Malay self-attributes)</b>      |                                      |          |
| Malay Cultures                           | -0.018                               | 0.593    |
| Spirituality and Human Capital           | 0.15                                 | 0.000*** |
| Education level                          | 0.214                                | 0.000*** |
| Financial capabilities                   | 0.175                                | 0.000*** |
| <b>IV.2 (National education system)</b>  |                                      |          |
| The quality of Malaysian education       | -0.033                               | 0.206    |
| The effectiveness of Malaysian education | 0.051                                | 0.056    |
| <b>IV.3 (Support of others)</b>          |                                      |          |
| The role of Malay community              | -0.039                               | 0.266    |
| The role of economic system              | 0.049                                | 0.176    |
| Government support                       | 0.113                                | 0.000*** |
| F-value                                  | 52.846***                            |          |
| R  | 0.764                                |          |
| R <sup>2</sup>                           | 0.58                                 |          |
| R <sup>2</sup> Change                    | 0.572                                |          |
| Durbin Watson Index                      | 1.128                                |          |

Based on the regression results, it shows a good combination of spiritual value, education level and financial capabilities in addition to the role of government that was significant to the development of emerging Malays. The results showed that multiple regression coefficients for all the independent variables with the future development of Malays was  $R = 0.764$ ,  $R^2 = 0.572$  and the value of Dublin-Watson more than 1 point to prove that this study was valid.

## DISCUSSION

Islam permeates every facet of life of Malays, especially in the realm of values and behavior, in the realm of value; the Malays rely heavily on the religious success. The findings of the present study shows that Islamic teaching also has a deep influence on aspect of behavior which is consistent with previous research (e.g. Hashim et al.; 2009; Ryan, 1983; Husin, 2010). Although religion plays a role in molding the cultural and behavioral aspect of Malays people, there are other factors that have influenced the self attributes of the Malays that are their culture and subsequently their education background. Before 1970, Malay were mainly engaged in agriculture and fishing, where as non-malays were involved in business and entrepreneurship activities (grouch, 1996). Thus the Malays were far less mobilized socially and politically than non-malay. The large majority remain attracted to rural way of life. It remains segregated until the implementation of National Economic Policy (NEP) 1970. The NEP has changed the attitude of Malay and stimulated their needs to work hard for a better quality of life. Customary tradition of Malay is another factor that influence Malay personality and culture. Malay has strong sense of community spirit and they place their emphasis on manners and adab (Mastor et al., 2000)

## CONCLUSION

Malay race, at one time was one strong nation on its own land, from an economic sense, in terms of relationships within the community among themselves, respected, to be a strong player in the political system strong. Their lives were based on the customs and culture of the art so beautiful that exhibits good values, which in turn strengthened by life based on Islam's holistic and put them on the track direction of the Malay race clear as a nation firmly against the colonizers in order liberation of the nation, religion and nation. That's how the Malays, who despite his desire were so strong, like the others, also have disadvantages, which obviously led to the occupation of outsiders. However, the strength of weakness killed when Malaya achieved independence. Changes in the Malay race was said to occur after successfully achieved independence.

In summary, the future Malays was one of the high value of identity, self-reliant, adheres to religious and proud of their language and culture. They have economic power, and have the characteristics of entrepreneurs that will ensure the continuity of their success. Patriotic nature thickened in their breasts, and always donates and contributes to the development of the nation. Thus, although there were still many areas that need to be emphasized in order to produce the Malay-quality and competitive, however, to see the progress or otherwise of a country depends on its young generation at the time. In this context, education was seen as the best rides in the generation Malays dynamic, progressive, brilliant, morally good and morally upright. Education system, through the school system, was an important element of a country in an effort towards developing the community in terms of economic, social, political, religion, language and culture.

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