

Full Length Research Paper

Administering social issues in Malaysia: An application of social management system

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This paper discusses the need for social scientists to not only react to events, but to follow a four-step model to ensure the effectiveness of their roles. The discussion centers around the case of the Rumah Panjang KTM, one of the most badly affected areas during the ethnic clash in Kampung Medan. Adopting the PINTAS model, it is imperative that concerned social scientists follow through a four-step model to achieve an integrated nation and to reduce conflict between its members. Furthermore, these two elements were intricately linked to the survival and displacement of elites within the ruling system. However, there has recently been a transformation of the government and its policies. The Malaysia's 2008 12th general election witnessed a major political transformation and the rise of political blogging and other manifestations of the non-mainstream media in Malaysia. The Malay, Chinese and Indian tended to stick within their beneath the tranquility surface of Malaysian society, tensions of the potential for violence still lurks. The data regarding the socio-political tension plays significant impact and tremendous changes in Malaysia reflect relative political hegemony of the Malaysian democracy.

Key words: Ethnic clash, social conflict, hegemony, new media.

INTRODUCTION

Social issues are not foreign to the field of Social Sciences as all its disciplines such as sociology, psychology, law, history, to name a few, study human related issues (Kendall, 2008). However, the tools and lens used to understand the given social issue as well as the means to manage and administer the issue differ from one discipline to the next. With these knowledge imbedded in trained Social scientists, how does these knowledge can then be used to benefit the social world? Should Social scientists only contribute at the hegemonic level via the development of the corpus of knowledge or contribute at the micro and macro levels via their direct and indirect involvement of the social intervention efforts?

Theoretical Social scientists support the former, while practical Social scientist supports the latter. Taking on functionalist perspective, we do not only believe that each of these roles is necessary and important, but we also believe that those roles should also be integrated as a complete whole in order to manage social issues effectively and systematically. Hence, this paper suggests that in order to manage any given social issue at hand, a complete five-stage system should be in place and played by Social scientists side-by-side. However, for the purpose of discussion, the application of the social management system is applied to the one of the most crucial issue in Malaysia, the ethnic unity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The understanding ethnic conflict

Malaysian context

Ethnicity used in this discussion refers to "the cultural heritage or identity of a group and is based on factors such as language or

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Abbreviations: NEP, New economic policy; BBC, British Broadcasting Corporation; UNISEL, University of Industrial Selangor; PRIM, parti reformasi Insan Malaysia.

country of origin" (Kendall, 2008). Ethnic identity may also include political dimension which serve as the basis of identity judgments by members of one group towards another. In an ethnically diverse society, ethnic groups are differentiated by various factors, each of which can independently constitute the basis for identity judgments between members of different groups. It can be argued that the definition of ethnic identity would be based on the selection of criteria which the group considered as most salient under certain circumstances. Therefore, ethnicity is regarded as a dependent variable since it depends on the various perceptions in a particular situation. In relation, Abraham suggested that ethnicity in Malaysia is initially regarded as a dependent variable being contingent upon the colonial situation. Under these conditions ethnicity may be seen as a manipulation of social reality transforming itself into perceptions of race (Abraham, 2004). Ethnic conflicts then, as defined loosely by several scholars, is political or social conflict involving one or more groups which are identified by some marker of ethnic identity (Crawford and Lipschutz, 1998).

The role of the economic policy has been argued by some as one of the contributing factors to ethnic conflicts. After the ethnic riot that happened on May 13th 1969, the government introduced the new economic policy (NEP). The main purpose of introducing the NEP is to eradicate poverty among Malaysians as it was seen to be the critical issue among the rioter. Since many of those who were found to be below the poverty line were Malays, the NEP is perceived as mainly benefiting the Malay population. There is little doubt that the two decades of growth and the NEP redistribution have given rise to a new Malay middle class (Hilley, 2001). Thus, the NEP class interests had fostered new communal tensions. Furthermore according to Hilley, the affirmative benefits of the NEP had also stimulated a greater tendency towards Islam as a source of communal status among the newly educated Malay middle classes, especially those in public sectors. With Islamic codes becoming fully institutionalized in key areas such as education, commerce and civil law, the fear of cultural marginalization among the Chinese and the Indians intensified during the 1980s.

In addition, though the main objective of NEP is to eradicate poverty, the issue of poverty eradication, as argued by some people, had created imbalance in priorities and the unreliability of the governments' statistical calculations among the ethnic groups. The new Malay dilemma of NEP stigma of the selective sponsorship of Bumiputera interests and the rise of a Malay capitalist class then became the new expression. A lot of the Malays were depending on the subsidy from the government and the NEP has also formed ethnic chauvinisms. The introduction of NEP in Malaysian life discourages some Malays from putting more effort and struggle to strive. Contracts and rewards were very significant as a lot of Malays grabbed the opportunities and benefits introduced by the NEP. This perceived imbalance contributes to the dissatisfaction and negative labelling, stereotypes and attitudes towards the Malays by other ethnic groups. Looking at this problem, the Prime Minister at that time, Tun Mahathir Mohamad introduced the idea of privatization to cool down the ethnic tensions in the country as a result of the NEP intervention.

In Malaysia, the all-time favourite ethnic conflict issue among scholars is the Chinese versus Malay split. That split has been transformed since the early 1990s into a democracy versus authoritarianism split (Gilliey, 2004). Malaysian scholars, as Case bemoans, 'still dwell on the country's "plural", "divided", or "communal" makeup as its most salient feature have been caught off guard by the rise of the pro-democracy Reformation movement (Case, 1995). The discussion of ethnic conflict has increased the attention of few scholars preferring instead to raise the unproven spectre of ethnic conflict as endemic or 'everywhere on the rise'. What seems to be everywhere on the rise is the characterization of diverse conflicts as 'ethnics' and the moral or security concerns of scholars about conflicts that contain ethnic markers.

As suggested previously, colonialism also contributes to the

divisiveness among Malaysians based on their ethnic membership. Historically, under the practice of "divide-and-rule" policy by the British, the Malayan unity was challenged because the ethnic groups were segregated based on the aspects of topography, as well as within the occupational and educational system. This contributes to the underlying cause of ethnic conflict as segregation limits the opportunity to be in an environment that promotes tolerance, give-and-take, understanding and respect among members of different ethnic groups.

Furthermore, development and modernization of the country also contribute to the erosion of unity among the ethnic groups. The society became very materialistic and individualistic and those values at times surpass the need of social unity. Ethnic groups start to question their rights and interpret the constitution at their own convenience. As a result, it gives rise to the divided society, not only among the communal group but place a strain on the ethnic relation via their feelings of ethnocentricity.

Another factor that threatens the ethnic solidarity is the concerted effort between some political leaders, non-governmental organizations, and mass media. Through political games and underlying agendas, these individuals or bodies would instigate the masses by fanning the flames of ethnicity and religion, specifically to highlight sensitive ethnic issues. This is evident in the reports even carried by the mainstream media. Thus, ethnic divide does not only widen with such unhealthy joined effort, but any misrepresentations or biased reports would heighten the ethnic tension.

The failure of the modernization paradigm and various assimilationist theories to account for growing ethnic paradigm and various multiethnic societies led to disillusionment with the optimistic predictions of nation-building theories and renewed interest "in the theory of the plural society, which posited that multiethnic societies could not remain both stable and democratic (Rokkan, 1970). Furnivall elaborated on the central thesis of the plural society approach that is – in an ethnically plural societies, where different ethnic groups live in close proximity to, but are separately from each other – intercommunal relations are characterized by unchecked economic competition. It is because relations between the various groups remain confined to the marketplace; these societies fail to develop a sense of common loyalty that would overcome the cultural and ethnic differences between the various groups that is a sense of civic nationalism (Taras and Ganguly, 2002). The factor that leads to the fragmentation in the society was unrestrained competition and competing nationalisms between different cultural groups. Furnivall argued that the only way such societies could be held together is through the application of external force which he suggested that the force was provided by colonialism (Furnivall, 1944). Malaysia is the perfect example to reflect the situation pictured by Furnivall, whereby Malaysia has undergone colonialism phase for many years and the British succeeded in using the "divide and rule" to disintegrate the people in the Malayan. Figure 1 showed the distribution numbers of the Malaysia population according to territories and states.

DISCUSSION

Social relationship strengthened?

Looking back on what happened at kampung Medan, there was a funeral, a wedding, and a misunderstanding over a broken van windscreen. These led to a full-blown racial clash in Petaling Jaya Selatan that left six people dead and scores others suffering from head injuries, slash wounds and broken bones. As reported by Prasana

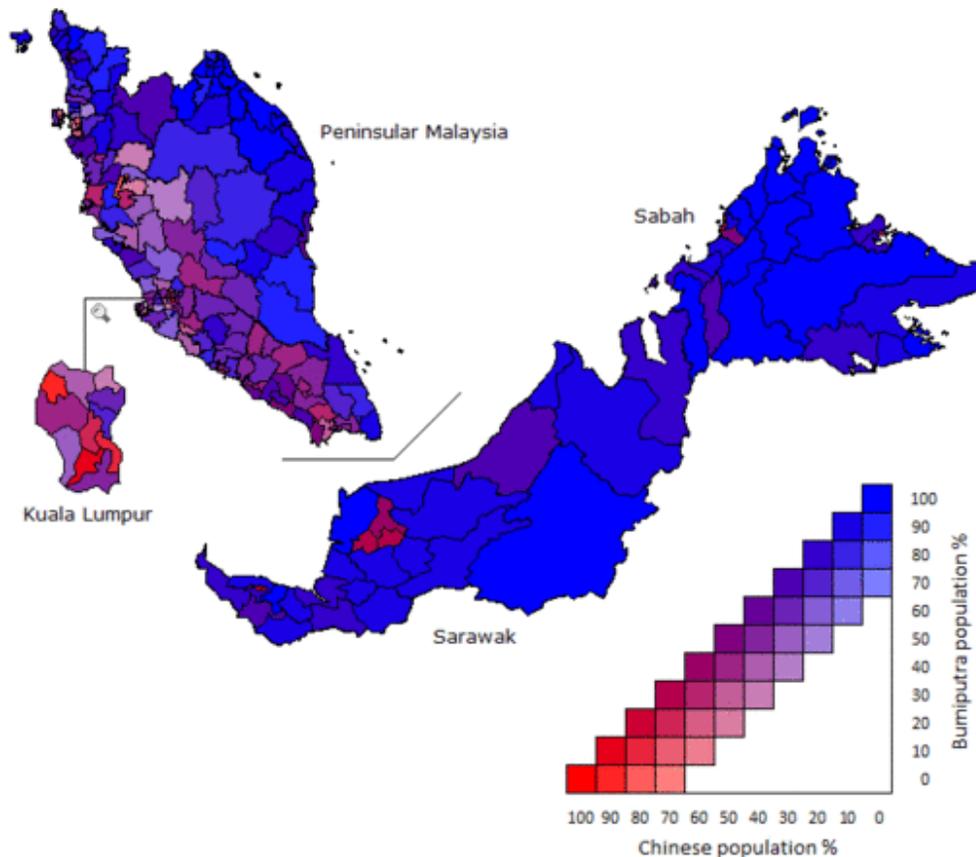


Figure 1. Distribution of 2010 Bumiputera and Chinese population in Malaysia. Source: Department Statistics, Malaysia.

Chandran of Malaysiakini, one of the victims, Vasu, 24, had both his hands hacked off by rampaging youths. Doctors managed to reattach his left hand but failed to save two of his fingers. There are several large stitch wounds on his forearm and on his wrist. There is also an unsightly wound on his palm. The infamous incident, better known as the Kampung Medan clashes, took place in March 2001. It is often compared to the racial riots of May 13, 1969 which sparked after an opposition party's election victory parade. The May 13 incident has been frequently used as a bogeyman during election time by the ruling coalition to urge the masses to reject the opposition, claiming that a bloody riot could reoccur. The incident created a climate of fear, anxiety, suspicion and trauma as attackers armed with parangs, samurai swords, iron rods and sticks roamed the vicinity baying for blood. The government has been accused of denying the ethnic dimension of the clashes, perhaps concerned over Malaysia's international image as it might rattle investors' confidence. Until to this point, despite numerous memorandums sent to the Prime Minister's department and human rights commission (Suhakam), there has not been a show of a response. This has undoubtedly created dismay among the minority Indians in the country (<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/10633>).

However, the incident does not end there. Following the bloody clashes, a group of concerned citizens comprising non-governmental organisations and individuals came together to draw-up a memorandum that was sent to the Prime Minister's Department, after failing to hand it personally to premier Mahathir Mohamad at the Parliament House last year. In the memorandum, the group asked that financial support be provided for the affected families as the victims were from the lower-income group such as petty traders, lorry drivers and factory workers. And some families had lost their breadwinner. The group asked for immediate socio-economic development programmes aimed at providing adequate housing, sanitation, community centres, recreational facilities, public amenities and places of worship in Kampung Medan and the affected areas. The poorest of them, regardless of their ethnic background, should be given further aid to own houses.

There was a request for the setting up of a special multi-ethnic police task force as the police were perceived to have acted sluggishly during the first three days of the clashes. Only a multi-ethnic police force would be able to handle Kampung Medan-type of conflicts that involve ethnic dimensions, according to the memorandum. The communities living in the affected

areas have long been suffering from drug and gang related problems. These problems, however, are not merely confined to the Kampung Medan area. Therefore, the setting up of a national task force was in order to take a holistic approach to resolve the problems. The memorandum said Malaysians from all walks of life face ethnic discrimination and religious intolerance. Taking the Kampung Medan incident as a cue, it called for a race relations commission be set up in order to eradicate unfair discrimination. However, there has been no response to the memorandum, and no royal commission of inquiry into the matter. A political party, Parti Reformasi Insan Malaysia (PRIM), has also been pressuring the government for adequate compensation and to investigate the cause of the clashes.

In the aftermath of the clashes, a British broadcasting corporation (BBC) news article dated March 18, 2001 reported: Today, it is clear that beneath the normally tranquil surface of Malaysian society, dangerous tensions of the potential for violence still lurks. The statement above can be found in any local newspapers, blogs and received wide coverage locally and internationally.

In other aspect, according to the research done by Azman (2005), Kampung Medan, Petaling Jaya Selatan was regarded as an underdeveloped area without proper road system, streets lights and no appropriate dumping ground although the whole area is practically in the middle of Klang Valley. Most of the residents here are categorised in the lower socio-economic status. There also exists the culture of gangsterism and crime especially drug trafficking. The discussion above shown that there is lack of response from the government and authorities regarding this matter. However, Rukun Tetangga Scheme and Voluntary Patrolling has been established by Jabatan Perpaduan Negara Dan Integrasi Nasional to initiate the intervention action on 9th March 2001. The main purpose of this body is to avert fighting and rumours from marauding in several areas such as Rumah Panjang KTM, KTM Tambahan, Kampung Penaga, Penaga Indah, Penaga Jaya, Penaga Jaya Baru and Taman Desa Ria Fasa 5A.

Many government agencies and departments such as the district office, local council, town council, police, media and also non-governmental agencies were involved in trying to defuse the tense situation in Kampung Medan. However, in reality, most of them failed because they mirrored biasness, and thus increased the community's suspicions of their intentions. The security forces that were sent to Kampung Medan were generally Malay personnel, which caused the non-Malays to feel insecure, and perceive that the security forces would support the Malays. There were also a number of high-ranking officials from the government who gave 'clever' speeches during those tense periods that disgusted the residents. In these situations, they should have played their part in helping to solve the people's problems (Azman, 2005).

In another study that focused on the Rumah Panjang KTM, one of the most badly affected area during the Kampung Medan clash, a slightly better feedback were obtained (Wan, 2006). The respondents did perceive that some efforts had been done by the politicians, media and local authorities due to this event. For instance, the clash had, for the first time, brought the media and politicians into the area to "listen" to their plights and concerns. In addition, infrastructures were put in place after the clash that is additional road and public telephone while the services were improved that is better electricity supply and rubbish are now collected from their housing area. However, the respondents also report that those attention were only given immediately after the clash, and no maintenance or follow-up effort was done at the point of study. Thus, the sincerity of the concerns and assistance given then is questionable for most of them. Similar findings on the reported biased treatment from the authorities during the clash as well as the perceived causes reported in abovementioned were also found in this study (Wan, 2005).

RESULTS

Application of the social management system

The aftermath of the Kampung Medan is felt even years after the event. Whatever the "real" cause was, the consequences on individuals of Kampung Medan were evident. During the study conducted four years later at Rumah Panjang KTM, some of the respondents were still traumatized while others were still distrustful towards the "outsiders," the authorities, and the media (Wan, 2006). More disturbingly, more than 50% of the respondent surveyed state that "there is a tendency" for a similar incident would reoccur. Thus what are we, the social scientists, are doing to ensure that incident like that would not occur again? Whether their recollection and reports is accurate, those study raises a few questions commonly associated with managing social issues.

First, why do we tend to react to the issues – not planning and engaging in efforts to ensure that it does not happen in the first place? Mere reaction is problematic because should we wait for the damage to be done physically, emotionally and mentally before we do something? This is not only inhumane but for those who are concerned about dollars and cents, it is also more costly – rebuilding the infrastructure, sending experts in for counseling and rehabilitation, re-painting the tarnish reputation of the authorities involved, re-branding the area concerned to attract tourists and investors, and the list goes on. Thus, mere reaction does not seem to be the best way to handle a social issue.

Second, when we do react to the social issues, do we react professionally, ethically and effectively? What are the aspects of concern being focused? Is it sufficient to build more infrastructures, such as roads, public phones,

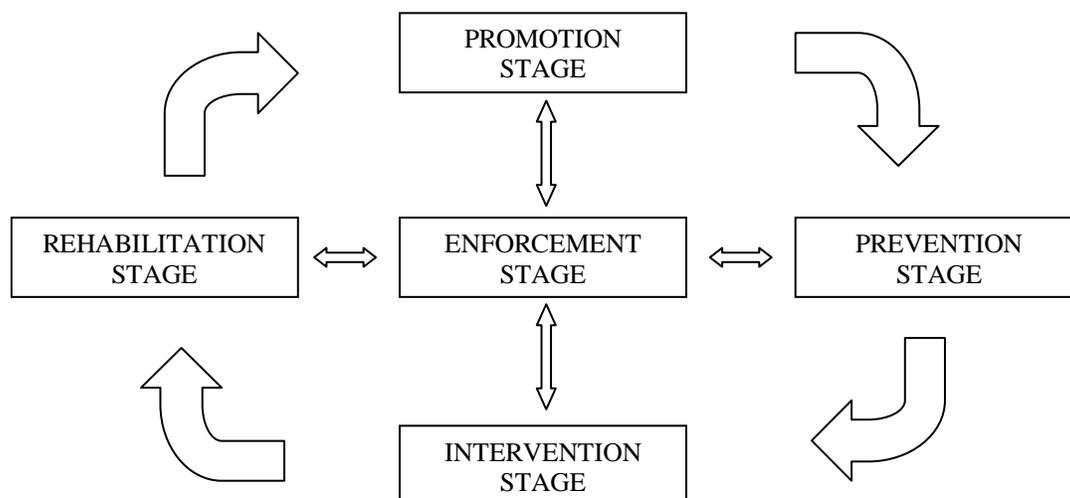


Figure 2. Social management system.

and houses, as well as improve on services such as telephone line, garbage collecting, water supply and so forth after the event? What about social support, social inclusion and social cohesiveness? Are not those also vital to ensure that racial incident does not re-occur? Of course those material developments are important and necessary, but it is indeed vital for all components of development and rebuilding to be taken into consideration including social aspects in order to manage social issues.

Third, what is the next step to be taken after the hype of the social issue subsides? Since we tend to react, we no longer do anything as soon as the issue seems “stable” or “resolved.” Interestingly, since social issue is at times described as a disease, to manage it also is similar to curing a disease – regular medicine intake and occasional visit to the doctor is important to ensure that the disease does not only heals, but it heals properly. Thus, actions needed to be carried out to ensure that social issues are managed systematically and efficiently for a lasting result.

Inspired by the ideas and practical training of some social scientists such as Prof. Dato. Dr. Wan Halim Othman, Prof. Dr. Mohd. Zaidi Hajazi, Prof. Abdullah Malim Baginda, Dr. Sabzali Khan and Hanifah Sayed Muhammad. A comprehensive, systematic and practical model that should be adapted in managing social issues is the proposed Social Management System. There are five main stages to this system, namely the promotion stage, prevention stage, intervention stage, rehabilitation stage and enforcement stage. For the purpose of this discussion, we will use racial clash incident as the social issue to be managed and racial unity as the main objective to be achieved. Figure 2 showed the social management system.

At the promotion stage, various activities to encourage healthy lifestyle, to foster positive relationship, as well as

to shape open and unbiased perception among the multiracial members of the community should be carried out. For instance, the concept of racial unity can be widely disseminated to members of all societal levels to create in-depth understanding of its importance. The history of the world can be highlighted to emphasize on the role of social unity and the success of the nation’s development. This can be done via mass media, schools, seminars and the like. Policies can also be periodically introduced and revised in the effort to promote racial unity-especially in the midst of social development.

In addition, other promotional effort, such as training of various units of the society that is the family, community and agency is also vital and necessary as any lasting effect. The training should include modules to encourage every family members, community and agency to provide a surrounding that is conducive for healthy interracial interaction, to change their negative preconceived notions and stereotypes about members of other ethnic groups, to instill common values and unity, to detect the early signs of ethnic tension, to practice respect for others’ feelings and rights despite of their ethnic background and to provide support to all who wants to achieve unity within the community. Thus, social scientists can engage in trainings and activities to ensure that all these are well covered to promote racial unity and to prevent future ethnic clash incidences.

At the prevention stage, efforts should be carried out oriented to high risk target groups to prevent from the occurrence of the social problem. For instance, areas where social tension is high like in Kampung Medan, various activities can be carried out such as encouraging periodical discussions among the community members regarding the current state, the development of the community as well as the means to overcome the issue. This is where social scientists should assist to ensure that the discussion is conducted systematically and

objectively via training the community leaders or facilitating it.

In addition, social skill training is another vital component for the high risk group to prevent ethnic clashes from occurring. Training courses on how to communicate and relate to members of the community who are of a different ethnic background are among the efforts that should be done. There should also be a place where the community members can come to seek assistance and reference. Many at times, those who are confronted with personal, familial and communal issues would not know where to go, who to speak to, and what to do because there is lack of reference point within the community. The community leaders should have networks and the ability to guide their community members to take proactive measures. The network may involve the police, lawyers, politicians, experts or any other individuals or agency that can provide assistance. This is necessary as issues that are properly addressed by the right people can minimize the likelihood of the problem to be blown out of proportion. Another prevention effort that can be carried out is the outreach programmes. Social Scientists can train and encourage the community leaders to reach out to the individuals and their significant others even before they come for assistance, despite their ethnic background. By showing that assistance will be given to all members and that the community leaders care, the negative stereotypes especially between members of different ethnicity can be reduced and hopefully minimize the tendency for ethnic clash to occur.

However, since social problems are complex and involve many parties, the promotional and prevention efforts may not be able to eliminate every single conflict. Thus, relevant, effective and necessary efforts needed to be done at the Intervention Stage to reduce the magnitude of the conflict as well as to reduce the negative consequences and implications of the event. In order to attend to the ethnic clash for instance, an intervention team should be set up which consists of key players of the community as suggested above. It is vital that the team comprises of members of all ethnic groups who are ready to take action when any issue sparks, professionally and effectively. In addition, experts of relevant field must be consulted and included in the process of handling the issue that arises such as sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrics, historians, religious leaders and so forth. Without the input and the aide from these experts, the issue may not be understood and handled holistically. In fact, in some cases, lack of experts' involvement may even result in detrimental and fatal outcomes to the community. Mediation services are also believed to be essential to reach a favorable outcome between individuals. Well-trained mediators would be successful in reducing the pent up dissatisfactions and eliminate grudges against each other as both parties will "win" in their negotiation. If all fails,

placing the individual(s) in institutions may be another option in the intervention process. This temporary effort is needed if the individual(s) show evidence that he or she may pose a threat to the individuals and community. However, careful attention to the transition back into the community must be given to avoid marginalization and social exclusion upon his/her return.

The rehabilitation stage involves effort to assist the victims of the ethnic conflict to return to the state of normalcy and to ensure that the perpetrators do not repeat their behaviors. The rehabilitation would include activities like supervision by the community members – not supervision from external authorities. The trained community leaders are the ones who know the community members better and recognize the "outsiders." They are also the ones who are sensitive to the signs of trouble as well as the ones who have the power to mediate, influence, and manage the community members. Authorities can temporarily control the situation, but the constant surveillance and other rehabilitation efforts are more effective if conducted by the community leaders such as the Rukun Tetangga (Resident Association), ethnic leaders or religious leaders of that community. Support system should also be organized and facilitated to gather those who were affected, either directly or indirectly, by the incident. Venting their frustrations, anger as well as sharing their sorrow and pain with other community members does not only serve as an outlet, but it also enables those who participate to empathize, help each other, provide moral support and reduce the racial gap.

Another rehabilitation effort that can be done is to create ties between members of the community with voluntary associations. By encouraging the community members to engage in voluntary activities to help others despite their ethnic background, the exposure and positive interaction that occurs do not only benefit the target groups, but also provides the opportunity to dispel the in group-out group biases and crush the negative stereotypes of the "others." In addition, efforts to ensure that all members are socially included in the community are necessary to reduce the likelihood of future ethnic clashes. This effort includes promoting and providing social support to the community members to embrace each other – even those returning back from the institutions, ensuring that the physical structures and institutions of the community are properly planned and takes into consideration of social factors (that is no racial segregation), as well as providing public facilities and services that benefit and can be accessed by all members of the community (that is the availability of the religious institutions). All of these efforts should be conducted overtime and continued with the promotional efforts as previously discussed. It is believed that this systematic approach would enable any social issues to be managed effectively and harmful consequences reduced.

Any stage is not complete without the enforcement stage. Any ideas and plans tend to be more effective when they are institutionalized and have legal repercussions. The enforcement stage could be carried out by the police and religious officers, local authorities (that is Kuala Lumpur Municipal Council), and through the court system. Though social scientists can play their role on various activities as discussed above, their effort is limited to the field of academia, social and community work, popular writings and media as well as consultancy and private practices. Thus, the efforts done by the social scientists at the other four stages may be a futile attempt without the backings of the enforcers. For instance, if the enforcers do not play their part in enforcing the policies developed, being readily available as referent points to the community and committing themselves as the task force team member to handle any ethnic clashes, the efforts designed and consulted by social scientists would not be as impactful. The integrated effort is thus, deemed necessary not only to ensure the success of the social management system but also to gain trust and credibility of the social scientists from the masses.

Conclusion

We have no doubt that social scientists in Malaysia are playing some roles within the system outlined above that is engaging in voluntary association, working with target groups, consulting policy makers, creating awareness, training community leaders and so forth. However, most of us do not work hand-in-hand with other policy makers, enforcers and social scientists simultaneously, let alone approach the social issue in a systematic and holistic manner. Thus, by joining forces and expertise for every single issue at hand, this joined effort would definitely enable us to effectively assist in the social development of the society.

What happened in Kampung Medan back in March 2001 had stirred reactions not only from scholars but also authorities, media and members of the nation. There were various speculations as to what triggered the ethnic clash and various efforts had been done to handle the issue then. When Rumah Panjang KTM was revisited in 2005, it is found that the communities there were still affected emotionally and psychologically by what happened. To make matters worse, they perceive that the likelihood of the incident to happen again is very high. Thus, to what extent was the effort done by social scientists to ensure that this incident does not reoccur? Adopting the PINTAS model, it is imperative that concerned social scientists follow through a four-step model to achieve an integrated nation and to reduce conflict between its members. Furthermore, this paper will discuss on the ethnic paradigm that has dominated political science analysis of social conflict in Malaysia. This includes a socio-political tension that is found in the ethnic identity and ethnic-based conflict in Malaysia.

Other than that these two elements were intricately linked to the survival and displacement of elites within the ruling system. The competitiveness between the government and the people lack of the fact that ethnicity itself a situational variable and cannot be regarded as a constant in conflict analysis. However, there has recently been a transformation of the government and its policies. The Malaysia's 2008 12th general election witnessed a major political transformation and the rise of political blogging and other manifestations of the non-mainstream media in Malaysia. During the era of Mahathir, it was established as something of a consensus that ethnicity and religion were not discussed publicly. Malaysia was predominated by muslims and an Islamic country based on Sharia law. The Malay, Chinese and Indian tended to stick within their beneath the tranquility surface of Malaysian society, tensions of the potential for violence still lurks. The existing knowledge on the sociological politics and religion in Malaysia are still sparse. The data regarding the socio-political tension plays significant impact and tremendous changes in Malaysia reflect relative political hegemony of the Malaysian democracy.

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