



Rethinking Realities, Reimagining Pluralism

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I recently attended a conference on “Rethinking Realities, Reimagining Pluralism” that was organised by the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), CSR and Philanthropy and Transdisciplinary Action Group (CPTAG), at Universiti Sains Malaysia and Linkoping University, Sweden. The conference aimed to examine the linkages between pluralism and a variety of issues such as democratisation, legal transformation, ethnicity, religious diversity, identity reconstruction, gender and inequality and cultural diversity.

For those uninformed, Bangi is a satellite town about 50 kilometres from downtown Kuala Lumpur (KL) and UKM has been designated as one of the four research universities in Malaysia. Although, the traffic was predictably heavy despite it being the school holidays, and having engaged the services of a Kuala Lumpur taxi driver who was unfamiliar with Bangi, I managed to arrive more or less on time to register and attend the opening session.

Although the papers presented were mostly focused on Malaysia, the conference saw papers which covered other countries such as Indonesia, Sweden, Thailand, Nigeria and Singapore among others. Malaysian politics has been through some tumultuous times in recent years and I wanted to get a feel how their policy makers are managing their ethnicity and plurality issues. In terms of diversity, the Malaysian model has evolved into a Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) Plus. The Plus being the indigenous groups like the Bidayuh and Kadazan.



Some of the more interesting papers from the ethnicity perspective include one by Anis Yusal Yusoff from UKM. Anis presented a paper on *Managing Social Cohesion in Malaysia: A Case*

Study in Developing an Early Warning System of Ethnic Relations. The project hosted by the KITA at UKM attempts to develop an early warning system on the “health” of ethnic relations in Malaysia. It focuses on the issue of inclusiveness of all citizens regardless of race, religion and socio-economic status to ensure justice and equality.



In between sessions, the coffee breaks and lunches were opportunities to catch up with major academic figures such as the Founding Director of KITA Datuk, Distinguish Professor A B Shamsul and Professor Hans Dieter Evers (Pictures Enclosed). It was insightful to glean different perspectives from various academics over Teh

Tarik and Malaysian delicacies. To gather more minority perspectives, I managed to squeeze in a trip to the Arab quarter in KL (for some Middle Eastern food) and a quick trip to the headquartes of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) where I bumped into none other than Datuk Samy Vellu, who recently stepped down as the President of MIC. After that, it was a trip to KLCC and the bus back to Singapore.

Reflecting on the issues discussed at the conference on the bus ride back to Singapore, I started thinking about the need for Singapore to revisit its own CMIO model? With increasing diversity, the debate over evolving identities in cosmopolitan Singapore has also come to the fore. Will it be possible to officially assume multiple or split identities? Is the CMIO model adequately addressing the issue of inclusivity in Singapore? Does Singapore need its own CMIO Plus Model? Looks like there are enough unanswered questions for Singapore to consider organising its own conference on such issues.



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