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4th MBRAS Lecture 2013

**“The Malaysian Generation: Making Sense of 50 Years of Heritage” by Dr
Neil Khor**

Badan Warisan Malaysia (BWM), Jalan Stonor, Kuala Lumpur

Saturday, 14 December 2013, 5 p.m.

Abstract

2013 is the 50th Anniversary of the formation of Malaysia. It has been greeted with little fanfare. Instead, we all belong to a national identity more contested than ever before. This lecture deals with the question of who and what is a Malaysian? Is our understanding and conception of identity forged in the age of the nation state still relevant in a globalized and urbanized world? How is the individual especially the young person able to participate in nation building? Using heritage as a lens to understand how Generation Malaysia (Malaysians born after 1963) makes sense of what they inherited and how they are making use of heritage as a tool for self-expression, this lecture is an attempt to understand why history is the ultimate resource for new identities in the age of social networking.

The Secretary's Report

Dr Neil Khor, the Honorary Secretary of the MBRAS, presented his lecture about the Malaysian Generation, a generation of Malaysians shaped by the nation-building process. He explained that for those born after 1963, the last fifty years have been marked by rapid urbanization and the internet revolution. Urbanization weakened and challenged traditional definitions of cultural identity, creating multi-ethnic and multi-religious geographies. By 2020, Malaysia will be amongst the world's most urbanized countries with some 75% of its population living in towns and cities. The rate of urbanization in Malaysia is also among the fastest and most dramatic, with the vast majority of the population “industrialized” within a single generation. The internet revolution, which has transformed the social and political landscape in the last twenty years, has empowered individuals just as urbanization has transformed communities

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economically. This means that individuals are free to form “tribes”, empower themselves and make themselves heard using digital technology and social networking. The result is many different “Malaysias” and new challenges to a state that insists on “defining” its citizens.

The Q&A session was very animated with questions ranging from how individuals are being empowered to the effectiveness of the state in dictating cultural identity. Dr Khor explained that whilst in the days of Dr Mahathir, communication was based on the idea of “one-to-many” as in the latter’s exploits as a writer for the Straits Times, social media has now made it possible for communication to be in the context of “many-to-many”. Citizen journalism, for example, had loosened the strangle hold of any single journalist to control news content. Similarly the government no longer has a monopoly on defining a public issue on its own terms. It can and will persist to do so but eventually it will not be able to control the public sphere. Dr Mahathir, realizing this, took to “blogging to unblog”, in his case to advance his own causes through the internet.

On how the different Malaysias will co-exist, Dr Khor said that the late Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu, a founding member of the Barisan Nasional and former Chief Minister of Penang, explained the government did want to define what a Malaysian should be, preferring national identity to evolve organically. It should be left to the market place of ideas to decide which Malaysia will prevail. The only caveat is that there will be some Malaysias that even the middle-class will not like but as valid as any other. It will be a test of our democratic spirit but so far Malaysia is progressing well. At least issues once deemed sensitive and sacred are being openly discussed with society reacting maturely and without violence. This is a testament to the level of material progress that we have achieved enabling most Malaysians to react rationally.

On the issue of “relics”, Dr Khor explained that in the age of the internet, nothing is really old. Ideas that were once considered no longer fashionable are like old junk. It can be reconstituted and given a new role to play. However, it is important to keep in touch with modern thinking and not to confine oneself to one’s community. The world is now global but not in a “flattening” way. Cultural identity matters more than ever but it is important to realize that the way we are wired now means that the level of interactivity is also very much higher. In this new world, ideas matter only if they are relevant to the physical world. Such ideas not only attract a tribe but can spark entire movements. It is vitally important for governments to constantly be a step ahead otherwise there will always be an expectations deficit.

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Dr Neil Khor is Honorary Secretary of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. He was Programme Director of Think City, an urban regeneration agency managing the George Town Grants Programme. He read English for his doctoral degree at Cambridge University. Neil is the author of books on Malaysian politics, history and Penang, his home state.



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