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TO THE NANYANG UNIVERSITY POLITICAL SCIENCE

SOCIETY ON MARCH 29, 1960.

LANGUAGE & POLITICS

The newly independent territories in the World can be broadly divided into two groups, those where language is not, and those where language is a political issue. Fortunate are those who start off with linguistic unity a settled fact. In

Asia the Burmese, Indonesia, Thais, Vietnamese and Filipinos can be considered to be in this category. They have their minority problems, and the manner in which they deal with the rights of their minority races to study and develop their own languages varies. But in none of them is the dominant language disputed.

Whatever the problems of Indonesia or Burma, the dominant language,

be it called the national language or the official language, is not disputed and is not a political issue. No Karen rebel would challenge the Burmese language as the dominant language in Burma, although he may want more opportunities to develop and use his own language. Similarly no Sumatran or Ambonese rebel would dream of repudiating Bahasa Indonesia as his National language.

But some countries have not been so fortunate. India despite all her great history and civilisation has no one dominant language. Over 200 languages are spoken in India, although the contest for supremacy is only between Hindi in the North and Tamil in the south. The fact remains that more than ten years after independence there are no signs that language has ceased to be a political issue. Hindi has been decreed by the Constitution as the national language and as the only official language after 15 years of independence. The Southern Indians still oppose this decision. Even today political leaders in the Tamil speaking south go softly on the question of Hindi as the official language, whatever their private views may be. About 1 1/2 years ago, when I was visiting a University Law School in North India, I met the Dean. He was a Tamil from the South. I asked him what was going to happen to the laws of India which are presently in English. What was to happen on the appointed day when Hindi must be the only official language. Were translations being prepared? Could the lawyers and Judges and the Magistrates administer the law and try cases in Hindi? He gave a cynical

laugh and said that there was no reason whatever to convert into Hindi. In his view, there were just as good other languages in India which had been overlooked. Anyway, no one not in the Hindi heartland had studied Hindi, and it was impracticable to implement it. Anyway he was not studying Hindi and had no intention of studying it.

And I thought to myself how different the history of China would have been but for the unifying force of one single language. For one single language is what the Chinese written script gave the Chinese people, whatever dialect they spoke. True, each province had its own way of pronouncing the vowels and consonants, but it was one language that was written and spoken albeit in different accents. Whatever the problems of getting Mandarin spread and developed as the standard national spoken language, it is nothing compared to the problems of India where riots have taken place in Bombay just because the boundaries of the Gujarati state had left out some of the Gujarati speaking people and where in the South, the Dravidian movement with considerable mass support at one time wanted to set up a Tamil speaking nation to be called Tamiland.

In Ceylon also, language is a live political issue. Recent events and the language riots between Singhalese and Tamils are all too fresh in our minds. And no one can fail to note that the Tamil minority of two millions out of Ceylon's

eight millions voted solidly for a Tamil speaking party in the elections ten days ago.

Although not to the same acute extent as in Ceylon, language is unfortunately also a political issue in Malaya. In the last elections, both in Singapore and in the Federation the division for the voting was broadly along language lines. Most of the Malay speaking voted for the United Malays National organisation in the Federation, most of the Chinese speaking voted for the People's Action Party in Singapore. The only reason why the language question has not reached the intensity of conflict as in Ceylon was because the political leaders in Malaya were more sober both in the Malay and Chinese sectors. The Razak Education policy recognised the right of the non-Malays to learn and use their own languages. And P.A.P. gave the Chinese the lead in accepting Malay as the National Language, whilst allowing each group to learn and use their own language. If the leadership on the Malay side had been with the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, expressing openly its intentions to stop the teaching and learning of any language other than Malay, and on the Chinese side led by racial chauvinists who reject Malay as a language worthy of becoming the national language, then we would have headed for something worse than the Ceylon situation. For in Ceylon at least the Tamils are numerically a minority of

about a quarter, and they all clustered more or less around the Jaffna side of the island, not like Malaya.

Malaya is a land of many races, languages, cultures and religions. It is an accident of history that in Malaya, the Federation and Singapore should find themselves in the curious position where nearly half the population does not know what the other half says, writes or reads. It was the eagerness of the colonialists to exploit the national resources of Malaya that created this anomalous position by wholesale immigration of cheap labour.

Every student of history knows that it is easier to get a mixed social group to speak the same language than to be of the same race. To inter-marry and produce one homogeneous race may take centuries. But to make a people of different racial stock speak one language can be done in one generation. In an established national society one of the fundamental qualifications for joining that national society is an adequate knowledge of the unifying language of that society. It was this language qualification that ensured for the Americans that basic unifying force. Racially the immigrants started as Germans, Italians, Spaniards and even Japanese. But the fact that the American state insisted on an adequate command of the American version English before accepting the immigrant as a citizen of the State ensured the unifying force of one common

language in the people. And what is more, having come in, the immigrant finds that his children have only one type of language schools to go to.

Our position is completely different. By the time the Federation of Malaya became independent, about half the people already in the country did not speak Malay. And what is more the education system was in more than three language streams. True to naturalise as a Federation of Malaya citizen, an applicant must now know Malay but a large number of people had to be admitted as members of the new state without knowing the national language, because they have been here for generations. And it is still not legally a requirement to know Malay, the national language, to become a Singapore citizen, although this anomaly may not remain for long.

Let us frankly recognise that although we have been spared the horrors of race and linguistic conflict by the universal acceptance of Malay as the National Language, we have still some deep and difficult language problems to resolve in implementing this decision with all its implications. The ideal solution to a united Malayan nation would be to produce one race, one language, one culture, one religion. Since no one envisages the possibility of this happening, we have to do the next best thing, that is, all speaking one language and sharing common cultural values although of different races and religions.

No one can prophesy the distant future. The history of man is influenced by too many imponderables to allow accurate prediction. But for the immediate future we can safely hazard a guess. In the language field there are two possibilities:-

First where force is used.

Second, where development is peaceful.

Those who desire to see the teaching of any other language than Malay stopped, must be prepared to use force. Since the use of force must mean violence and bloodshed, it is the duty of all of us never to allow such a situation to arise. Such a situation need never arise if extreme racialist views either on the Malay or Chinese side are quietly but quickly debunked. The more talk there is of teaching only Malay and suppressing the teaching of all other languages, the more likely will the Chinese listen to those who talk of the preservation of Chinese language, education and culture. But the more questions there are as to the adequacy of Malay as the National Language and hesitations on the full implementation of the National Language, the more likely are the Malays to find attraction in the proposition that only Malay should be taught in Malaya.

Moderation is essential if both sides are not to provoke each other into extravagant and untenable positions.

If the development is peaceful, as we all must hope and work for, then I say Malay will become the dominant language as the national language of the country. But Malaysians of Chinese descent will continue to study and use the Chinese language. A resurgent China in an era when the speed and volume of communications through radio, and air transport of books and persons have so tremendously reduced space, makes it unnatural to expect the people of Chinese descent in Malaya to give up their language and the key to the cultural heritage of their ancestors. The point to remember always is that these primeval emotional pulls of language and culture have to be tempered in the environment we live in. Those who forget that we are in a predominantly Malay speaking South East Asia and not in China, have only themselves to blame when they are forcibly put on a repatriation ship back to Swatow. The Chinese language is itself coming under the influence of revolutionary forces in China.

Those who listen to and feel its happenings through the wireless, the press and magazines must always remember that different forces also of a revolutionary nature are at work in Malaya and South East Asia. To imitate slavishly the pattern of the Chinese homeland is to invite disaster.

What then does this mean in relation to Nanyang University? It means that in the immediate future, Chinese would be the chief medium of instruction. But with every passing year, more and more of the National Language must be taught and used to keep in line with the trend of Malaya's linguistic future, and also to fit Nantah students to play a useful role in Malayan society.

The more sensibly we make the adjustments, the less ground we will give to those who think that only Malay can be taught in Malaya. And the more likely are we to succeed in taking the language issue out of the centre of the political arena. And happier are those countries where economic and not emotional issues agitate and divide its peoples. For language is an explosive emotional issue. The less such explosive issues become political issues the happier for all of us.

National Archives of Singapore

A recent statement issued in the name of the Nanyang University Students Union is to be regretted. It is the kind of talk which will provoke and give encouragement to the sort of views propounded by the PMIP in their recent memorandum to the Committee reviewing the Razak Education policy. That statement spoke of the reorganisation of Nanyang University on the principle of non-violation of the original aims in founding the University. The statement did not specifically define what these original aims are. It did go on to say: "but the

basic character of the Nanyang University - the use of Chinese language as the chief medium of instruction and its position as the highest link in Chinese education - must permanently be maintained, and not be damaged in any way." But to go on and say, as the statement did, that "Nanyang University is chiefly a Chinese University" is unwise. Nanyang University must be a Malayan University which for the immediate future will use Chinese as the chief medium of instruction. But if Malay is the National Language, and Nanyang a national University, then ultimately the National language must be a major language in the University. Under no circumstances should it be regarded as a Chinese or a Chinese language university. For this is the sort of provocation that will only strengthen the cause of racialism amongst the Malays. The original aim of Nanyang University is surely to found a Malayan University in Malaya to cater for the needs principally of the Chinese-speaking section of the population. But the ultimate aim must be a Malayan University to cater for all Malaysians, Chinese or otherwise. For the statement did go on to refer to Nanyang University as a national University. But if Nanyang University is to be a national University, then it must be a Malayan University and not a Chinese University.

With last year's elections in May in Singapore and August in the Federation, we have entered a new phase in the history of Malaya. We must recognise that old slogans coined in different situations to meet threats then

existing are inappropriate in the changed situation. A Singapore Government elected by the majority of the people, which includes the Chinese-speaking population, is basically and radically different in its approach to Chinese language and education from the old colonial government. There is no danger whatsoever in Singapore of Chinese education, language or culture being hindered or suppressed. No one intends to destroy the identity of Nanyang University by merging it into the University of Malaya, or by making English the chief medium of instruction. But if old slogans about the defence of Chinese culture, language and civilisation, coined to meet the threats of a colonial era, are shouted from Singapore, then racialist Malay forces may be let loose, which may well threaten the future study of the Chinese language. Let us adjust ourselves to the new situation. If there is any suppression, we can be sure that colonial forces are not in the forefront of the attack, and it will not be so easy to counter the attack.

National Archives of Singapore

The statement said that Nanyang University was a University established with the support of the mass of the Malayan people. The sentiment in the reference to the mass of the Malayan people is welcome and we should seek to make this a fact. For so long as Nanyang University has only the support of the mass of the Chinese people, then its future cannot be bright in Malaya. Any talk

that Nanyang University is a Chinese University cannot be calculated to attract support from the Malays and other non-Chinese people of Malaya.

I sympathise with the view that Nanyang University should be a pan-Malayan and not a Singapore University, and that the students who go to Nanyang should be from the whole of Malaya to maintain its pan-Malayan character. The Singapore Government has stated that it is prepared to subsidise and support up to 15% of non-Singapore students. If anyone can find ways and means to get subsidy and support for more than 15%, we would all be very happy. But these are matters for serious thinking and discussion and not for slogan shouting and emotional displays. Let us seriously ponder on the problems of the future of the Malayan people, its National Language, and the place of the Chinese language. Let us coin new slogans which will make the people effectively respond to the new situation we find ourselves in today. If we are able to adapt our approach and tactics to meet the changed situation, then the future should be bright for Nanyang University.

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