**Malaysia’s Malay-first policy: A legacy of colonial trauma**

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Affirmative action policies that favoured the Malay-majority of the country has been a fixed feature in Malaysia’s domestic policy. Ever since its independence from British rule in 1957 and its formation as a federation in 1963, Malaysia has maintained an affirmative action regime that gave its Malay citizens special rights and privileges over the non-Malays in the country.Despite the country’s population mainly consisting of Malays, Chinese, and Indians, Malaysia maintains its Malay-first affirmative action policy that grants its Malay citizens special rights and privileges in social, economic, and political aspects of life. The affirmative action served as a reminder of Malaysia’s colonial past and was part of the colonial legacy left behind by British colonial rule. In 2019, Malaysia was reminded of its attachment to this particular piece of colonial legacy, as it refused to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (ICERD) in favour of its affirmative action policy. This reaction baffled many, especially when Malaysia’s affirmative action policy seems to function not as a tool to redress inequality within its society, but rather as form of maintaining the status quo of the Malays in the country. This article seeks to dissect the logic behind Malaysia maintaining its affirmative action policy through the lens of colonial trauma that the country suffered under century-long British colonial rule. I argue that the affirmative action policy practiced by Malaysia is a form of reaction to the trauma it experienced during British colonial rule.

Colonial trauma in this context should be approached not through a medical approach, but rather through the lens of social and political history, as advocated by scholars such as Prussing [4] and Goozee [1]. In recent years there has been an uptick in the discourse of trauma and how it played a role in identity formation and national construction in postcolonial spaces. Scholars such as Visser [5], and Luxon [3] have each noted the role colonial trauma played in the construction of national identity and traditions during the decolonisation process. Colonialism inflicted violence in the forms of loss of ownership, not only of property but also of self-identity [6]. Therefore, the reaction to colonial trauma often includes a level of reconstruction of identities or communities that aim to provide security or protection from the same trauma being inflicted in the future [2].

This research utilises existing literature on trauma theories, colonial trauma, and *postmemory* in an attempt to make sense of Malaysia’s affirmative action policy. An important part to this approach is to view trauma through the postcolonial lens, whereby the trauma does not constitute of a single event but rather a cumulation of acts of colonial violence inflicted upon the colonised populace. Additionally, the research also uses official correspondences and records of events from 1946-1948 and from 1969-1970. These years represented significant events where trauma was inflicted upon the Malay populace, which resulted in massive shift in the national consciousness. Although trauma could not be pinpointed to a singular event, these dates signify the turning point in Malaysia’s history and the formation of its affirmative action policy.

From the analysis on existing literatures and review on the available sources, the preliminary finding of this research indicates a strong possibility of Malaysia’s affirmative action policy being driven by its reaction or rather the need to react to the colonial trauma the nation experienced during British colonial rule. The imposed *jus soli* citizenship during Malayan Union was a form of colonial violence that resulted in the loss of the Malay status quo in Malaya. This sparked a movement that gave birth to Malay nationalism, essentially paving the way for more protection towards Malay rights within the country. Few decades later, the Malay people was reminded on the risk of losing their status quo in 1969, when a non-Malay party won a local election, sparking an interracial riot that led to the formalization of Malay special rights in the following year. These incidents indicated that there is a correlation between the trauma on the loss of Malay dominance in Malaysia with the creation of a policy that’s meant to protect their status quo in the country, which is in line with the assumption made in the introduction of this article.

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