

MALAY LANGUAGE ISSUE

Troubles in recent years in Ceylon, India, Belgium and Canada have shown that the right to speak your mother-tongue is one for which people are ready to fight. Tamils in Ceylon, non-Hindu speakers in India, Flemings in Belgium, and French Canadians have this urge to protect their language in common. But Ceylon, Belgium and Canada have had to deal with two languages only; in Malaysia, there are four major languages in Western Malaysia, to say nothing of various Chinese dialects. Clearly, the question of Malay as a single National Language is even more delicate than in the cases mentioned above, three of which produced bloodshed.

The constitutional date for the introduction of Malay as the single national language in Western Malaysia came on Aug. 31. The National

Language Bill, which was passed on March 4, represent a significant concession by Malay leaders to the Chinese and Indian communities, and to those educated in English of whatever community. The Paramount Ruler may allow English for official purposes for as long as is thought fit; the central or any state government may permit the use of any of the communal languages; the courts will use English; acts and ordinances will be in English and Malay; and members of parliament may be permitted to speak English.

Behind this sensible-sounding compromise lies Tengku Abdul Rahman's understanding that to "force things down people's throats whether they like it or not" would have produced communal strife and administrative breakdown. Instead, he has chosen "the peaceful way", despite demonstrations from students at the Muslim

College in Kuala Lumpur (which had to be closed), demonstrations outside the Tengku's house, and charges from the state premier of a Malay state that the compromise was a betrayal of Malay aspirations and government promises. On top of this, the influential director of the national language and literature agency, Syed Nasir, resigned over the bill.

The opposition of the Malays to what they see as concessions to English-speakers and the Chinese and Indian communities springs from their uncertain position in what they regard as their own country. Malays are in a bare majority over Chinese and Indians combined in Western Malaysia (in Malaysia as a whole, Malays are in a minority compared with all non-Malays). While they are well entrenched in politics, civil service, police and the army, the vast bulk of Malays, speak only their own language, are rural and agricultural, and have a small stake in Malaysia's commerce, industry and banking. Perhaps 80 per cent of Malaysia's economy is in Chinese hands. In addition, barely

a quarter of the students at the University of Malaysia are Malays.

This economic backwardness not only produces insecurity among the Malays; it is seen by them as being a direct result of the old colonial-based education system. English-speaking schools were entirely in the towns; an English education was the key to further education, and as there were few Malays in the towns and no Malay secondary education, the system favored Chinese and Indians. While Malay secondary and university education has expanded since independence, the proportion of Chinese and Indians with good education is still much higher. Malays feel that the use of the National Language would not only indicate that the country, though multi-racial, was basically Malay, but would iron out some of the glaring economic inequalities which actually harm Malay-Chinese relations.

Naturally the Chinese community, who for over a hundred years were regarded by the British as temporary inhabitants and were allowed

their own customs, schools and teachers, are just as fiercely attached to their language. Chinese-language produced, and still produces, people orientated towards China, not to Malaysia. Politically, the all-Chinese schools tend to be centres for the spread of communism. Where teaching in English and Chinese has been introduced, the whole tone of the pupils has changed as a result. While, therefore, the integration of Chinese schools into a dual-language system with English has not been opposed, the obligatory use of Malay would have been seen as an attack on the Chinese community and way of life. Politically, the consequences would have been disastrous.

As it is, Tengku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's prime minister since independence, may have his greatest contribution to racial harmony in Malaysia by personally devising and backing this compromise. As recently as two years ago, there were no signs of deflection in the policy. The national language and literature agency was not only modernizing Malay — in-

venting Malay words for all the thousands of technical and modern terms for which there were no Malay equivalents — but was also running national language weeks, which were expanded into national language months. During these periods, everyone in government was supposed to communicate only in Malay. As a result, little work was done. Singapore's premiere, Le Kuan Yew, who was committed to Malay as the national language in his overwhelmingly Chinese Singapore, but kept Chinese, English and Tamil as official languages, was warning that to impose Malay would be seen by the other communities as an act of Malay political chauvinism. Even government ministers spoke of fears of "language riots."

By the end of 1966, the tone was noticeably cooler. Tengku Abdul Rahman publicly stated that English could not be abandoned because it was an international language and the administration would run down without it. — *Forum World Features Ltd.* 1967, *Manila Bulletin*.