

# What is the 'measure' of unity?

I WORRY about our society. We tend to measure many things that are important in life with numbers. Like university and academic excellence. So many numbers are created that the true role of academia and knowledge in society is simply lost.

Now we're measuring the unity of communities by numbers too, it seems. It feels like we are measuring our resilience as a society in almost the same way that the credit rating agency rates someone's eligibility for a loan.

Some say this way is effective, clear and decisive. I just say that it is lamentable.

For me, when one reduces a relationship like love, marriage and trust to numbers, then our humanity might as well give up and exist within the algorithms of artificial intelligence (AI).

Who should you marry? Ask the AI. Should you divorce her? Consult AI numbers. Can we be a real community? Hey, let's ask the researchers to come up with a number.

I have always had difficulty with numbers gauging social issues. When the Unity Ministry proudly proclaimed the unity index, I sighed heavily. When an Islamic NGO also claimed another unity index in their research, I wanted to ask many questions but

There is no solace in numbers and indices that purport to measure intangibles like harmony, says the columnist.

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was denied the time to do so.

I wanted to ask what was the research method used? Was it a questionnaire survey or was it a focus group discussion?

For me, both methods are weak and would never produce a credible understanding of the social situation in multi-hued Malaysia.

My proof? Well, for example, the issue of temples built without approval that almost resulted in a riot when some people wanted to demonstrate their hatred for another people's religion. A counterattack that saw a car being torched was also almost a spark for terrible consequences.

It seemingly doesn't take much to push us to the brink.

Now we have the Attorney General seemingly influenced by populism in deciding to charge citizens involved in fatal road accidents with murder.

For me, any unity index is a fantasy and a simple way to brush things under the carpet and proclaim, "Hey, we are better than last year!" Are you kidding me? I can quote incident after incident over the past 20 years involving racial and religious tension.

We are getting worse – and I will explain why I think so without any numbers.

Firstly, I believe we will always have racial and religious tensions because of the insular and isolationist aspects of religious education, because of political opportunism, and because of some media sensationalising stories for viewer traffic in the cut-throat world of social media platforms.

None of this will change unless people wake up and think about changing how we teach and learn of religion in a multi-faith society (I wrote a book about this, by the way – read it lah).

Secondly, we need to have credible citizens voicing out against

any racial and religious misunderstandings or seditious statements. At the moment we fail miserably in this as professors of religion and social science stay completely silent, along with mufti and other religious clerics.

We cannot just keep putting people in prison for uttering racial or religious words of hate. Instead, the long-term plan should be to produce a counternarrative by citizens who love this country.

Invariably in these situations, the government of the day is forced to say something.

But we can't leave it to the politicians. If we let politicians mitigate issues, their efforts will be bullets for the alternative parties just waiting to pounce.

No, it is up to us – you and I and everyone – to stand up and be heard to silence the voices of hate, mistrust and insult.

This is why I still see no improvement in how we handle racial and religious issues.

To me, if we have many responsible, loud voices that can drown out the hate narrative, then only would I say "We're OK".

There is no in-between.

There's a Malay saying that I think describes the situation in this country well: "Lagikan lidah boleh tergigit, apa pula suami isteri." Meaning, if even some things as close as teeth and tongue can come into conflict sometimes, what more a husband and wife – in other words, even the closest relationship will have conflict.

This nation will always have lidah tergigit (tongue accidentally bitten by the teeth) but as long as we have wise people handling the situation then we are OK.

Instead we have academics wasting time on thousands of surveys asking questions that most people would never answer with the truth in their hearts.

And we have some clerics who choose to see only their side of the story and have absolutely no clue about other people's feelings.

Our nation needs to work at unity through its responsible and visionary people. Let us not find excuses and elation from numbers or indices that are more in the realm of fantasy than clarity.

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