

Malaysia losing "faith capital values"



Gallup Chairman Jim Clifton asserts in [The Coming Jobs War](#), that what everyone in the world wants today is a good job. He added that the fate of a nation relies on good jobs, and that nations are in revolt and cities are crumbling for the lack of them. Can one simply accept his statement that jobs bring prosperity, peace and human development and that it is not the other way round? On the one hand, in the short term, it may be that the economy dictates the quality and character of human life. But in the long term, character values of justice, trustworthiness, mutual respect, benevolence and peace are foundational for the flourishing of any nation that strives towards a long term growth. The lack of these qualities creates tension, instability, and eventually loss of good jobs for the nation.

Ethical apathy and economic stagnation can create a cycle of decline. As Hans Kung, the President of the Foundation of Global Ethics, said to the Parliament of the World's Religion in Melbourne in December 2009,

“a painful truth is evident: this economic crisis is characterised by a notable absence of common ethical values and standards.”

In Malaysia, about 97 percent of the population claimed to adhere to faith traditions, enriched with ethical values and customs that ought to offer significant faith-based social capital. Diverse in its ethnicity and religious traditions, Malaysia theoretically should flourish much more compared to some of its neighboring countries, like Singapore which citizens are of almost the same ethnic and faith traditions but lack of land space and natural resources.

Malaysia undermines its "faith capital values" and thus retards potential economic growth, loses good jobs to other nations, and consequently, has lost almost 330,000 university graduates, especially the non-Malays; Six-hundred thousand of them have left to work in Singapore alone.

If Tun Mahathir is right that [90 percent of Malaysia's tax comes from the non-Malays](#), then this "[brain drain](#)" crisis, occasioned in part by dissatisfaction with Malaysia's social and ethical values, further undercuts the financial capital of the nation.

By recognising faith as the basis of social capital, such discourse can identify the responsibilities of the government leaders, the function of social institutions in shaping the patterns of behavior and character development of citizens, and the roles of Malaysian Muslims as the majority in the population. These three agents will have the greatest influence in bringing about change. This is not to say that public activism, marketplace dynamics, and the presence of other faiths or non-faith adherents are insignificant, but at present, they have less influence in Malaysia's pseudo-democratic context. Thus the first step in moving forward is to analyse where the three key agents fall short.

Surveys conducted in the last quarter of 2010 in Malaysia and Indonesia on "[Values, Dreams, Ideals – Muslims Youth in Southeast Asia](#)" release good news that Malaysia Muslim youths, who are at the center stage of this nation's population, prioritised believing in God and becoming better Muslims over becoming rich. Almost 70 percent wanted the Quran to replace the federal constitution. However, further analysis shows a contradiction, given that those interviewed are rather lax about praying, reading the Quran, and fasting, and prefer to watch television, listen to music, or surf the internet in their free time.

Data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) indicates that almost [65 percent of Malaysia population are internet users, a great increase from 15 percent in 2000](#). Youths are inclined towards technology, especially the internet and SMS text messages. Clearly, youths are increasingly consumed by the cyber world and distracted from other faith-related aspects of life, such as learning to exegete Quran passages or engaging themselves with the mosque communal gatherings and community services.

Many of those interviewed denounce violence, yet 62.4 percent perceive the late al-Qaeda terror group leader Osama bin Laden as a "freedom fighter." This ethical contradiction has parallels elsewhere in society.

Tunku Abidin Muhriz's analysis of this survey on the rise of social problems cites frequent incidences of underage sex and baby dumping. [Harian Metro](#), for example, reported that Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development recorded 152,182 babies were born of 64,000 single young Muslims and non-Muslims, from 2008 to 2010. This up-rise of social epidemic is also reflected in the fact that 79.07 percent from the 18,639 drug addicts are Malays according to the [National Anti-Drugs Agency](#) of the Ministry of Home Affairs. The report says that by 2010, drug addiction among the 19 to 24 year olds increases by 99.4 percent, and 43.72 percent among the 25 to 29 years old.

Dr. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin concludes that Malaysian Muslim youth, "at the level of personal development and lifestyle, are more inclined towards personal-based piety in their overall religious outlook and practice." In his generation-gap thesis, he also suggests that Muslim youth perceive themselves as religious, but may be superficial in their practice and knowledge of Islam; they concentrate mainly on the rituals without having deep theological knowledge.

The fact that most Malaysian Muslims are content to recite the Quran in Arabic, without understanding it or looking up the meaning in translation, let alone attempting to read the commentaries, shows little appreciation for Islamic reason and scholasticism theology. This phenomenon is what [Dr. Colin Turner](#), a professor in Manchester University who became Muslim in 1975, describes as being Muslims by imitation instead of genuine seeking.

This pattern is also prevalent among the older generation, some who infuse the youngsters' minds with bigotry, xenophobia, corruption, mismanagement, offensive content in political speeches, blogging, YouTube videos, and so on.

Tan Shang Neng a 23-year-old Malaysian through his writing, "[We, the Betrayed Generation](#)" in April 2011 speaks for all youth, who automatically lose a huge part of their inheritance of "faith capital value" until the situation changes.

It is undeniable that there exist some civic consciousness and constructive faith initiatives in Malaysia, but the government's investments in religious education programs for Muslims and non-Muslims have not been very successful in nurturing deeper engagement among citizens.

Many Malaysian Muslims are unaware of the principle of [Wasatiyyah](#) on being just, rooted in the Quranic passage 2:143 " *Thus We have made of you a community justly balanced that you might be witnesses over the people and the Messenger a witness over yourselves,*" as expounded by Professor Chandra Muzaffar, President of the International Movement of the Just World in his recent speech at PWTC this year.

Deep humanitarian reforms are necessary because economic perks alone will not convince Malaysians to stay and invest in their own country. At the institutional level, companies must change their corporate culture. For example, TalentCorp Malaysia has offered great 'balik

kampung' packages for talented Malaysians abroad, including invitations to participate in the twelve sectors identified to drive the Malaysian economy. But none of the ['Nurturing Malaysians'](#) opportunities cultivate healthy and competitive corporate or working cultures; If people left because of a cultural dearth, a job offer without improvement in that regard will not be effective. Naturally, unsatisfied human resources still opt for alternatives abroad.

Professor Lamin Sanneh, a scholar of religion of Yale University, explains the diminishment of intellectual engagement, after the nostalgic period of Muslim Spain, as a result of the 'ulama' resorting to modes of orthodox defiance. This led to competing assemblies, one under the mantle of the clerics, and the other under the remit of the politicians. The current Islamic religious landscape in Malaysia seems to fit into his proposition. Now again, there is a structure of competition between the clerics and politicians regarding social controls, which negatively impacts the faith practices and lives of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Unless the two contingents collaborate, the whole nation will be suppressed. Therefore, faith leaders need to reevaluate people's comprehension of the structures of power that mediate how people think about God and others.

When faith adherents harmoniously advocate and live out their common social values for the betterment of all citizens, Malaysiawill then flourish not only in creating jobs, but also in establishing a trajectory of stability and growth. Then, a new generation of 1Malaysia, who will feel a sense of belonging and loyalty to the country, will be born. This country can then be proud of its success in nurturing faithful citizens who will be more committed to their motherland in good times and bad times, supporting the national leadership and thus mitigating whatever potential hardships may come in the future.

[Norani Abu Bakar](#) is a Post Graduate Fellow and the Asia Project Director of [Pathways for Mutual Respect](#). She can be contacted at norani.abubakar@yale.edu and blogs at [Loving God and Neighbors](#).

This article is part of a series of articles under the theme, "[Faith in Malaysia](#)."