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## SPORTS AND NATION-BUILDING IN MALAYSIA: A SOCIO-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### INTRODUCTION

In many deeply divided societies, managing ethnicity and promoting national integration continues to be at the centre of politics. The paradox of nation-building in these societies is one of reconciling ethnic allegiance with overarching loyalty to the state. As a multi-ethnic society, nation-building has always been the greatest challenge for Malaysia. Amid its relative stability and rapid economic development, especially over the past two decades, Malaysia's nation-building project has not been fully accomplished. Although since the 1969 racial riots, Malaysian society has been able to absorb various threats to its political stability, the ultimate aim to build a 'united Malaysian nation' is yet to be achieved, and constantly dominates political agenda. Since its independence in 1957, almost all key national policies devised by the state have a direct bearing on the question of nation-building. Sports policy too is no exception. This article attempts to examine how sports policy and its programs in Malaysia have been geared towards promoting the 'project' of nation building in the country. Besides, it will also attempt to explore the extent to which a sense of patriotism has been generated amongst the various ethnic communities in Malaysia through sports. Although sports alone is not sufficient to address the problems of national

integration, the author contend that the role of sports, in easing national tension that emerged from centrifugal tendencies such as that of ethnic division, has to be adequately recognised. A huge investment in terms of monies and effort in sports has far-reaching implications where the project of nation-building in divided societies is concerned. The article therefore, proposes that many more 'focus studies' should be carried out in this regard in order to further apprehend the importance of sports for nation-building in the 'new nations'.

## THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SETTING

As far as demographic composition is concerned, Malaysian society is very diversified. The Malays and other indigenous communities constitute for about 55 per cent of the population and are classified as Bumiputera (literally sons of the soil). On the other hand, the ethnic Chinese made up for about 35 per cent and Indian communities contributed to the remaining 10 per cent and are classified as *non-bumiputera*. The majority of the non-Bumiputera communities now consist of the third and fourth generations of Chinese and Indian immigrants who came to Malaya in the nineteenth century during the peak of British colonial rule. Neither of these groups are homogeneous, being made up of people with varying languages and religions. Whilst the Malays are all Muslims and speak Malay, other Bumiputera communities especially in the two Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak practises differing religions and have their respective ethnic languages. Ethnic Indians are mainly Hindus and speak Tamil, whilst the religious and language characteristics of the Chinese are much more complicated (ethnic Chinese in Malaysia speak various Chinese dialects and practise differing religions). The religion and language divisions in Malaysia, therefore, occur both within and across ethnic groups. These divisions by no means imply that there exists no common language in Malaysia, as Malay (the national language), is widely spoken and understood amongst the post-independence generation. In spite of the general increase in population, from about 10 million in 1970, to approximately 22 million in 2000 as indicated

in the latest census, the nature of ethnic composition in Malaysia remain unchanged.

As far as nation-building is concerned, it is the Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera ethnic divide that is perceived as most important by many Malaysians as it illustrates the delicate demographic balance between the two categories, each constituting about half of the population (Shamsul, 1996:323). And within this division, it is the Sino-Malay relation that is perceived as most crucial as reflected in the socio-political development of the country since the past four decades and therefore, tends to dominate the politics of nation-building (Mohamed Mustafa, 1999). In simplified terms, this occurs because, despite the prevailing power sharing mechanism amongst the major ethnic groups at the federal level since independence, the Malays, who are more dominant in politics, are always concerned about the erosion of their political supremacy vis-à-vis the economically superior ethnic Chinese. The question of political leverage always constitutes the crux of the issue in Sino-Malay relations.

The politics of nation-building in Malaysia is basically the politics of mediating identities (Mohamed Mustafa, 2000). Whilst national identity is still in the making, and yet to be strongly developed, the people at large are still strongly attached to their respective collective ethnic identities. Indeed, this probably was the heart of the issue for many countries struggling with problems and challenges stemming from the politics of ethnicity and nationalism. As Cristie (1998:3) asserts, "at the heart of any discussion of the nation and nationalism lies the issue of identity." Indeed, these constitute among the basic issues that constantly troubled many developing countries, including that of Southeast Asian countries in which Malaysia is no exception. In Malaysia, the Malays felt that Malay nationalism that matured in 1957 should be the basis of the country's nationalism and national identity, as other nationalisms were externally oriented (the pre-independence Chinese and Indian nationalisms). However, the non-Malays were skeptical of this view, as they saw that by accepting Malay nationalism and its hegemonic tendencies would mean allowing

the gradual and subtle encapsulation of their communities into the larger Malay society. This is something that they believe, would ultimately undermine the culturally pluralist basis of the polity that is in practise now.

The post-Independence era saw the non-Malays, mainly through political means, fiercely challenging Malay political hegemony. Nevertheless, it has to be stated that ethnic struggle in Malaysia is not so much about political independence, but rather about getting some limited objectives pertaining to economics, culture, religion and so on within the framework of the existing political boundary. The basic issue that was and still at work is the intense dialectic between Malays and non-Malays about the Malaysian national identity. In 1991, the Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad unveiled a national agenda, namely, the Vision 2020 project that set forth a plan to transform Malaysia into an industrialised country within a span of one generation. Nevertheless, Mahathir envisaged that Malaysia should not be a duplicate of any other developed country, but instead be “a developed country in our own mould” (Mahathir, 1991). However, before this aim can be realised, Malaysia has to overcome nine central strategic challenges that have confronted it since its birth as an independent nation. On top of the list, and of more crucial than the rest was a challenge to create the *Bangsa Malaysia* or a united Malaysian nation “with a sense of common and shared destiny, at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full partnership, with political loyalty and dedication to the nation” (Mahathir, 1991:2-3)

In addressing the challenges of nation-building, the government has always had to cope with two basic tasks. Firstly, it has to generate constant economic growth in order to have enough resources for the purpose of wealth redistribution in order to rectify the socio-economic imbalances amongst the major ethnic groups, in particular that of the *Bumiputera-non-Bumiputera* socio-economic divide. While this is being done, a conducive socio-psychological climate has also had to be created in order to instill a sense of belonging and patriotism

amongst the people so that the importance of preserving national integration is not forgotten by them and of more importance, the basic interest of others are not unduly affected in their quest to fulfill their respective ethnic demands. It is within this context that sports came into play in the politics of nation-building in Malaysia.

## **THE LINKAGES OF SPORTS AND NATION-BUILDING**

In most plural societies the development of nation-state had to contend with the strong presence of diverse ethnic communities. What actually happened was that the post-Independence ruling elite in these states inherited a state without a 'nation'. In other words, these states can be regarded as a "state with several nations" (Shamsul, 1992). Historically, the creation of many plural societies in Asia and Africa was a legacy of colonial rule. In Malaysia, although the Chinese and Indian communities had long been part of the social and cultural milieu of Peninsular Malaya, it was not until the British colonial administration policy of encouraging the influx of a huge number of immigrants from China and India in the early nineteenth century to perform a specific colonial economic functions that generated a dramatic change in the character of the Malayan society. With the departure of the colonial master, the new ruling elite had a crucial task of creating an undivided loyalty to the new state and its institutions amongst its' people, whilst simultaneously developing a strong sense of national identity out of the deep ethnic cultural divisions. In the process of building up the characteristics of national identity, the most basic challenge that the state had to cope with was, to neutralise the competing ethnic ideologies of nationhood. This challenging task was to be resolved through the project of nation-building. According to Atal (1981), nation-building is a distinctive concept related to the development of a polity that is characterised by stability and the people's firm commitment to it. To attain this, nation-building involves the utilisation of skills of social and political engineering. The index of nation-building is the degree of political cohesion and integration.

Atal (1981:6-7) insisted that the growth of a strong national sentiment in the pre-independence phase, imparting to the people a feeling of oneness, and an *esprit de corps* as an important foundation on which the nation has to be built. For nation-building to succeed, state nationalism must get institutionalised in the political and social system and internalised into the personality systems of the people. To achieve this, a conscious programme of political socialisation is required to provide sustenance to the new civic culture. At the very initial stage, the creation of symbols of national identity seems to proceed all other initiatives. In this regard, flags, anthems and uniform all serve this purpose. Sports teams may also help, particularly if they succeeded the international competition.

The role of sports in nation-building is multi-faceted. Sports has the power of creating the sense of belonging, which is crucial for the development of national integration. Sports provides people with social context where they can encounter other people in a non-threatening way, and can get rid of harmful emotions that can cause ethnic divisions. In this connection, sports as a popular culture that cuts across class, caste and ethnicity has a lot to offer in as far as nation-building is concerned, though some people may argue that its role is minimal. The political focus of sports in this connection is on gaining national pride, improving the image of the nation, and national reconciliation and integration. In Canada and several African countries, intensive government investments in sport were intended to exploit the resulting national pride in order to engender a sense of nationhood. In the Sydney 2000 Olympics, not many people had anticipated the dramatic effect left by Catherine Freeman (the first Australian aborigine to win a gold medal in the Olympic Games) in highlighting the aboriginal issues both within and outside Australia. Through extensive media coverage, Australia seemed to re-emerge as a nation making peace with itself, despite the history of the hundred years of aboriginal oppression. In the 1998 World Cup Soccer hosted by France, Zinedine Zidane, was and still a national hero who had made Algerian French and the rest of France proud with his contribution in making the nation a world champion in football. In the final match of African Nations Cup in 1996 Nelson Mandela sat

in the stand next to then Vice President De Klerk and Inkatha leader, Buthelezi, putting aside differences on politics and ideological issues to show their solid unity in supporting the south African team that emerged the winner. These are just bits and pieces of events that highlights and proving the extent of the positive influence of sports on peace building and reconciliation initiatives. That sports can provide a useful channel for improving relations between nations with long-standing antipathies has been long acknowledged in the 'ping-pong diplomacy' that preceded the diplomatic relations between the United States and China in 1970. Another example was during the France 1998 Soccer World Cup that not only saw the American and the Iranian players playing in one of the fairest game in the entire tournament, but also exchanging bouquets, posing for group photos and even embracing before and after the match, despite the long adversarial between the two country. Although the Iranians won 2-1, and the victory was celebrated joyously in Iran, the Americans were sportive in defeat. Quite a number of people were nervous before the match as the two countries were political adversaries, but sport proved to us that it was able to do something amazingly unexpected that politics cannot possibly offer.

In brief, politics and sports can go hand-in-hand, and its obvyous effect in nation-building and reconciliation processes has to be adequately acknowledged. The true value of sports in promoting co-existence needs to be further explored and exploited by nation-builders. Sports, therefore, should no longer be regarded as a supplementary initiative in nation-building, but instead its potential in the healing of political wounds caused by ethnic divisions has to be thoroughly examined. Nevertheless, this is neither meant to say that sports will always enable people to transcend racial and ethnic divide nor does the national pride enthusiasm generated by the national team's successes always translate into a reduction of internal nationalism. Whilst research (Coakley, 1993a, 1993b) indicated that contact between people from differing ethnic groups can lead to favourable changes on a personal level, Coakley (1998:282) reminded that, "People don't give up racial and ethnic beliefs easily, especially when they come in the form of well-established ideologies rooted deeply in their cultures".

To him there were “at least three reasons to be cautions before concluding that interaction in sports reduces prejudices:

1. When people are in the habit of using racial and ethnic ideologies to explain what happens in their world, they resist changing those ideologies.
2. Contact between members of different racial and ethnic groups is often so superficial that it fails to break down prejudices, or challenge ideologies, or change people’s behaviours, especially off-the-field behaviours.
3. The competition that occurs within and between teams to perpetuate hostile and destructive ideologies” (Coakley, 1998:281).

Therefore in order to improve intergroup relations through sports, there must be a concerted effort taken at various levels in confronting racism and ethnic prejudices in sports such as that of “Let’s Kick Racism Out of Football” campaign launched by The Commissions for Racial Equality in Britain in 1993-1994 (Donegan, 1994; Greenfield & Osborn, 1996). Beyond that, it would perhaps be a much more fruitful initiatives if the national sports policy that governs the entire sports affairs in a given country incorporate the agenda and an implementable programme of nation-building in its blueprint. In this connection, the role of the government seems crucial in making sports and the nation-building project to go hand-in-hand. We shall look at this by taking Malaysia as a case in point.

## **NATIONAL SPORTS POLICY, AND NATION-BUILDING IN MALAYSIA**

As stated earlier, since the question of nation-building continues to constitute a primary national agenda for the country, all key national policies devised by the Government of Malaysia since Independence have a direct bearing on this issue. The Malaysian Government



through the Ministry of Youth and Sports has outlined that there were two rationales in the formulation of the National Sports Policy (NSP) in 1998. Firstly, as the NSP is a sports policy for all, it encompasses both high performance sports and mass sports aimed to achieve national development, unity and continued stability. Secondly, sports which serves to promote healthy competition, goodwill, tolerance, understanding and the development of physical and moral qualities, provides a conducive platform for integrating the various ethnic groups into a united nation, as well as for enhancing national prestige. With these two rationales, the ultimate aim of the NSP is to develop an active, healthy and fit society through sports and physical recreational activities in line with the overall effort of the Government in nation-building. To strengthen the NSP, the 1997 Sport Development Act was formulated and endorsed by the Parliament, granting all the necessary power to the Ministry of Youth and Sports to implement the NSP. It is obvious that the NSP in Malaysia clearly spelled out on the outset that although the policy was about sports and recreational activities, the highest ideal that it sought to attain was highly political, namely, nation-building. Therefore, NSP, together with several others national policies such as that of the language and educational policies, cultural policy and the economics and industrial policies are all geared towards promoting and achieving national unity.

With regard to the strategy and implementation of the NSP, the Government insisted that both mass sports and high performance sports are to be run simultaneously, though with different emphases. These two types of sports will complement each other as a continuum. In implementing the relevant programmes for these sports, the Ministry of Youth and Sports concentrates on promoting mass and recreational activities based on the *Malaysia Cergas* concept. Conversely the National Sports Council which is an agency under the Ministry, focuses on coordinating and assisting the development of sports in order to enhance the performance of sports persons at national and international competitions in collaboration with the Malaysian Olympic Council and all the existing sports bodies in the country. Since independence, ethnic divide in the political and socio-economic fields has not significantly influenced the conduct of sports

programmes in Malaysia. Popular sports such as soccer, hockey and badminton are played by various ethnic and the ethnic representation in the national teams for these sports also reflect a similar scenario. This can be clearly seen in Table 3.1 below which illustrates the figure of athlete composition based on ethnic groups in the Commonwealth Games of 1998. Therefore, popular sports in Malaysia are not only popular among the *Bumiputera* community, but likewise they are also enjoyed and supported by the *non-Bumiputera*. Indeed, the *non-Bumiputera* communities identify with the national team to a more or less the same extent as the *Bumiputera* population as reflected in the composition of players as well the spectators watching the games. Nevertheless, there are two exceptional games that are still identifiable with a particular ethnic group. *Sepaktakraw*, a traditional Malay games, is still fully dominated by the Malays. Conversely, basketball which is more popular with the Chinese community continues to be dominated by them, despite the fact that there are quite a number of Malays in the urban areas and boarding schools that had begun playing and enjoying the game especially when the American NBA games are brought live via satellite to the Malaysian audience.

Although from the beginning, Malaysia's achievement at international level competition has been rather limited to a few sports, the government continue to pump in money into sports development in the country. This effort was doubled when in 1992 Malaysia won the bid to host the Commonwealth Game of 1998. Before July 1997, that was when Asian financial meltdown hit the country, Malaysia had been recording tremendous economic growth of between 7 to 8 per cent annually for nearly 10 consecutive years. This has given the government a flexible hand in spending money to develop sports facilities in preparation for the Commonwealth Games. A new National Sports Complex was developed as an official venue for the game, and for this alone an amount of RM 990 million was provided by the government. The new National Stadium located within the premises of the complex is capable of accommodating a maximum of 100,000 spectators. About RM 35-40 million was spent to improve the existing sport facilities around the country. RM 40 million was allocated to develop the National Doping Centre, to become one of

the biggest doping centre in Asia and accredited by the International Olympic Council (IOC). On top of all these, another RM 65 million was pent to develop a non-sporting family park within the area of the National Sports Complex. In sum, the Malaysian government spent more than RM 1.029 billion for the Commonwealth Games alone, and the total bill-included the provision of new roads, railways, land acquisition, and other facilities, plus the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), all of which came to nearly US\$ 5 Billion (Asiaweek, September 1998).

Although the 16<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Games of 1998 was managed by a special agency called SUKOM 98 in collaboration with the Malaysian Olympic Council, the government took serious attention on its preparation and management. The government considered the Commonwealth Games as a national project and wanted it to be a successful event that was supported by the entire nation. As a matter of fact, the Games was the first biggest sporting event to be hosted by Malaysia and also the first to be held in Asia. Indeed, the Commonwealth Games is the second largest sporting event in the world after the Olympics. Before the commencement of the Games, the government coined a nationalistic slogan of *Malaysia Boleh!* (Malaysia Can!) to woo the spirit of Malaysian athletes as well as the public about the ability of the nation not only in organising international sport events, but also to excel in sports and activities that other nations have achieved. A number of projects were envisaged to propagate such a slogan. The *Malaysia Boleh* campaign can be seen as an endeavour to instill a sense of patriotism and national pride in achieving excellence not only in sports but also in other fields. With that, came the 'Everest Project' in which the government and private sectors co-sponsored a group of multi-ethnic Malaysian mountain climbers to reach and set the Malaysian national flag on the summit of Mount Everest. It was the 23rd of April 1997 when two Malaysians of ethnic Indian origin, Mohandas Nagappan and M. Magendran put their name into the Everest Records Book. From the time the climbers left the country to the minute they set foot on the Everest Summit, Malaysians of all walk of life followed their movement live through national television stations and these were

also extensively covered by the printed media. The success of the Everest Project was later followed by a group of 16 multi-ethnic Malaysian skydivers, who then became the first Asians to make a freefall at the North Pole on the 21<sup>st</sup> April 1998. In this expedition, the team managed to land on the North Pole, the Proton Wira the national car as symbol of national achievement and pride.

**Table 3.1**  
**The Distribution of Ethnics in the Malaysian XVI**  
**Commonwealth Games (1998) Delegation**

Game	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Others	Total
Synchronised Swimming	3	1	0	1	5
Swimming / Diving	5	19	0	2	26
Atheletics	10	7	17	1	35
Badminton (M)	1	6	0	0	7
Badminton(W)	1	6	0	0	7
Boxing	5	0	1	4	10
Cricket	1	1	13	2	17
Cycling	13	2	1	0	16
Gym.Artistic (M)	2	4	0	0	6
Gym.Artistic (W)	1	3	1	0	5
Gym. Rhythmic	2	2	1	0	5
Hockey (M)	8	2	7	1	18
Hockey(W)	12	4	2	0	18
Lawn Bowl (M)	7	0	0	1	8
Lawn Bowl (W)	6	1	0	1	8
Netball	8	7	0	1	16
Rugby	11	0	0	3	14
Shooting	18	5	0	1	24
Squash	1	9	1	2	13
Bowling	1	3	0	1	5
Weight Lifting	6	1	0	1	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>271</b>

Note: The figures are based on the team photos from the "Malaysia XVI Commonwealth Games(1998) Souvenir Book"

Source: Olympic Council of Malaysia(1998). Malaysia XVI Commonwealth Games, Kuala Lumpur.

The 16<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Games was held in the background of the Asian economic and political crises. In Indonesia, the 32 year Suharto's dictatorship was ended by the *Reformasi* campaign. An awful campaign against ethnic Chinese who dominate Indonesian economy also occurred in the course of the *Reformasi*, which saw their shops and houses burned and looted by some angry and frustrated demonstrators. The Thailand and Korean governments had also been ousted as a result of the financial crisis. Things had also not went well in Malaysia, before the Games started on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1998. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1998, Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, fired his popular Deputy Premier, Anwar Ibrahim, who was also the Finance Minister as their differences on several economic and political issues reached breaking point. The shocking dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim and the ill-treatment he received thereafter, soon triggered the Indonesian-like *Reformasi* campaign in Malaysia. These were the backdrops against which the Commonwealth Games were held. Despite the economic crisis and the political turmoil, the Games continued with great success. For the moment, neither the Games nor the Government were seriously affected as a result of the crises. It seemed that for a while, Malaysians put aside their differences and showed their support and unity for the Games.

The achievement of the Malaysian contingent in the Games was beyond expectation (see: Table 3.2 and 3.3 below). To emerge at the fourth place, behind Australia, England and Canada in terms of medals won constituted a tremendous achievement for the country as Malaysia never did that well on previous occasions. Juan Antonio Samaranch, then the President of the International Olympic Council praised the event as the best organised Games ever hosted in the history of the Commonwealth Games (New Straits Times, 22 September 1998). To what extent did the Commonwealth Games significantly contributed to downplay the twin crises in Malaysia, and saved the Mahathir led government from succumbing into a similar fate of the Suharto regime in Indonesia, is somewhat interesting, perhaps to be further examined. What is rather obvious was that the Games had been able to generate a certain degree of 'feel good factor' into the Malaysian political arena at the time the

country was confronted with one of its biggest test since Independence. This incident perhaps demonstrated that sport and national pride have a profound effect in peace-making and reconciliation endeavors.

**Table 3.2**  
**Medals Won by Malaysia in the Commonwealth Games**

	G	S	B	G	S	B
1930 Hamilton	-	-	-	-	-	-
1934 London	-	-	-	-	-	-
1938 Sydney	-	-	-	-	-	-
1950 Auckland	-	-	-	2	1	1
1954 Vancouver	-	-	-	-	-	-
1958 Cardiff	-	-	-	-	2	-
1962 Perth	-	-	-	-	-	1
1966 Kingston	3	3	2	-	-	-
1970 Edinburgh	2	2	2	-	-	-
1974 Christchurch	1	-	4	-	-	-
1978 Edmonton	1	3	1	-	-	-
1982 Brisbane	2	-	1	-	-	-
1986 Edinburgh	-	-	-	-	-	-
1990 Auckland	3	3	-	-	-	-
1994 Victoria	3	2	3	-	1	-

Source: Majlis Olimpik Malaysia (1998). Malaysia XVI Commonwealth Games, Kuala Lumpur.

**Table 3.3**  
**Medal Tally for the 1998 Commonwealth Game**

Country	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
Australia	80	61	58	199
England	36	47	53	136
Canada	30	31	38	99
Malaysia	10	14	12	36

When the Commonwealth Games was over, the *Malaysia Boleh* campaign continued with the success of the two courageous Malaysian

brothers, Gerald, 26 and Justin Read, 19 who on the 12<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> April 1999 became the first Malaysians to walk the final degree to the North Pole. They trekked for 111 kilometers and braved the extremely cold temperature to set the Malaysian flag on the North Pole. On August 11, 1999 another Malaysian, Azhar Mansor, emerged as the first ever Malaysian to sail solo around the globe using a boat that was not aided with engine propulsion. He was sailing in an entirely new route, the fourth around-the-world route certified by the United Kingdom's Worlds Sailing Speed Record Council (WSSRC) that was considered as the toughest route. The achievement of the Read brothers and Azhar Mansor also had national impact. The Prime Minister himself set sailed the seaman and was one of the spectators to welcome him back to Malaysia after 190 days at sea. In September 1999, Malaysia for the first time hosted the annual event of F1 motor racing on its new multi-million dollar circuit built next to the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport. This event once again captured national and international attention, though Malaysia only served as the host and co-sponsored the Sauber-Petronas team. Malaysia is soon to produce its first F1 driver. Like the Commonwealth Games, the effect of F1 racing was overwhelming. The names of Michael Schumacher, Mika Hakkinen, David Coulthard and so on soon became familiar to the ordinary Malaysians who are in general still grappling to understand the system of the F1 motor racing.

It has to be stated that before the Commonwealth Games took place, the world *Le Tour de Langkawi* bicycle racing was also held in the country. In 1999, the World Junior Hockey Championship and the World Ping Pong Championship were hosted in Kuala Lumpur. All these major sporting events which were strongly supported by the Government have demonstrated to the Malaysian public that the country, despite its under achievement in major sports at the international level, can still excel at least as one of the best organisers of world sporting events. Through all these events Malaysia was able to attract the influx of foreign tourists that contributed quite significantly in as far as, revenue collection and foreign exchange were concerned, at the time the country was facing with hardship as

a result of the economic crisis. In short, it was evident that the outcome of sports in Malaysia was tremendous. A sense of pride in being Malaysia was effectively consolidated as a result of those achievements. These achievements have pushed, cajoled and browbeaten Malaysian ethnic communities to think themselves as Malaysians first, at the time the country was confronted with its biggest crises as a result of the Asian financial meltdown from July 1997 to 1999 (Jayasakaran, 1998).

In November 1999, Malaysia once again captured international attention. This time around, the interest was about politics and stability as the country had a general election. The economic crisis and the Anwar Ibrahim issue were still at play as the country was yet to be fully recovered from the crises. The National Front coalition party (consist of 14 parties representing various ethnic communities) which ruled the country since 1957 was to face its toughest challenge, as the opposition parties were united in a solid front to oust the ruling government. Whilst the twin crises have in some ways tarnished the Mahathir led government's international reputation, at home his party was returned to power and managed to secure a two third majority, though, with reduced seats. Although sports may not always meddle with politics, one cannot simply ignore the 'feel good factor', national pride and nationalistic slogans such as that of the *Malaysia Boleh!* campaign generated through sports prior to the election. Whether all these development have a direct bearing towards promoting Malaysian nationalism and the sense of being a nation amongst its people is quite difficult to measure. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that all these success stories in sports have significantly transformed and crystallised into a sense of Malaysian nationalism within the Malaysian multi-ethnic society. Nevertheless, it is perhaps acceptable to argue that they have in many ways successfully instilled some sense of pride or even patriotism amongst the people.

The Government in Malaysia realises that the effect that sports has onto the people and the profound linkages of sports in the project of nation-building in the country. It is not surprising therefore, in the



Outline Perspective Plan for the next ten years (2001-2010), the Malaysian Government has once again stated that the policy and strategy for sports development in the country, considered that sport is important for:

- (i) promoting national integration,
- (ii) instilling the sense of patriotism and comradeship, and
- (iii) creating a discipline and competitive society (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2001).

These three objectives are to be implemented through four sports programmes, namely, mass sporting events, high performance sports, extreme sports and traditional sports. The values that the Government wanted to be observed in the implementation of all these programmes are mass participation from people of all ethnic backgrounds and of more crucial are, the elements of national integration, patriotism and discipline. It is the Government's hope that by 2010 the sense of pride and love for the nation would be generated through the successes achieved in the high performance sports at international levels of competition. It is clear that in the Malaysian sports policy together with all other national policies are devised and geared to promote nation-building and creating the realisation of the vision of *Bangsa Malaysia*.

## CONCLUSION

The discussion thus far has attempted to demonstrate that sports has a significant role in promoting nation-building in divided societies. The experience in Malaysia has illustrated some of the positive influence of sports in nation-building. Sports can be designed to boost a country's image and also win plaudits for the ruling elite and their political party. But it can also help to create a sense of national pride and patriotism as well as in making peace at home and abroad and enhance reconciliation endeavors. Gellner (1964:164) in his famous words said that, "nationalism invents nations where they do not exist."

Whilst sports may not invent nations as nationalism did, it has the power to strengthen the national and nationalist sentiment within society. Thus, sports and nation formation cannot be separated, and should work in tandem in societies where the nations are still in the making. Therefore, it is proposed that more studies should be conducted in this area in order to further investigate the extent to which sports can be of crucial importance in bringing people together as envoys in the spirit of the greatest sport on earth, namely the Olympic Games.

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