

## Tackling Multiculturalism via Human Communication: A Public Relations Campaign of *IMalaysia*

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to illustrate the practices of public relations using human communication tactics that have been designed to accomplish the goal of a single national identity for multicultural Malaysia. It is intended at asserting that its incorporation of the time-tested principles of human values such as compromise and tolerance while adding in Islamic values seem to show positive results in instilling patriotic nationalism amongst its diversified multicultural population of Muslims and non-Muslims. It traces the government's efforts in rallying its multi-ethnic and multi-religious citizens via the implementation of campaigns and corporate social responsibilities for the government including its Vision 2020 which is aimed at creating a developed Malaysia that will eventually be a model nation for Muslim countries. The current Prime Minister's *IMalaysia* campaign emphasis on People First, Performance Now is used as a platform to showcase the human communication tactics in applying public relations strategies to achieve its goal. Supplemented by the intensive media relations promotions, various prescribed public relations programmes such as social community events, campaign launches and interpersonal communication activities are being employed to ascertain that multiculturalism and patriotic nationalism is intertwined within its various publics. Though criticisms by the proponents of racial politics coupled with citizen journalism activities in the online media will continue to be a challenge, the mission of getting all ethnic groups to embrace a single national identity of *IMalaysia*, in tandem with Vision 2020 will be an on-going concerted public relations exercise.

**Keywords:** *Malaysia, IMalaysia, human communication, public relations, multiculturalism, nationalism*

### 1. Introduction

The time-tested tradition of tolerance and compromise that blends with a touch of Islamic values, as practiced by most Malaysians is the key to the widely acknowledged success of multicultural Malaysia in the management of its human communication agenda. As such, it is no longer a surprise when many visitors to the country often refer to Malaysia as a model nation for Islamic countries. Although there are undercurrents here and there, its three major multi-religious ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians and its mixture of diverse native people continue to exist as law-abiding citizens since its independence in 1957. In the context of human communication in Malaysia, one can safely assume that the ruling government has been able to tackle the issue of culturally-based differences among the ethnic groups in respect of their verbal and non-verbal or direct and indirect communication styles and patterns. By and large, each ethnic group seems willing to shed their differences such as language, religious faiths, attitudes and other cultural dissimilarities when in the public sphere in order to share the same meanings as citizens of one community who pursue a participative goal of making Malaysia a peaceful and developed nation. After all, miscommunication-based disagreements across cultures can be lessened when people attempt to be mindful of their own imbued ways of viewing the environment around them (Hidasi, 2005).

In its intention to wipe out the culturally-based interpersonal conflicts in human communication, the Malaysian government has embarked on various public relations blitz using media and non-media publicity, including interpersonal communication approaches to promote harmony among the ethnic groups. The most recent public relations campaign launched by the ruling government in Malaysia in 2009 is the *IMalaysia* concept aimed at eventually creating a multicultural Malaysia in which each ethnic group could accept one another without prejudices. As such, the patterns and context of human communication would have to be well-planned and executed in order to appease the Malays, Chinese, Indians and the indigenous groups in East Malaysia to think as one for the sake of the nation. As it is, public relations is a significant and major component of human communication as has been proven and experienced in the promotion of nation-building in developed countries. The highly successful human communication campaign of Barack Obama as the President of the United States of America which utilizes every strategic public relations promotional tool is a classic case in point. Public relations practice integrates both "hard skills" and "soft skills". It begins with an audience research to uncover their perceptions and attitudes on an issue after which communication goals are formulated and ideas are strategized so that effective tactics are drawn out for actions to be implemented to cater to the public's needs and wants.

This paper is divided into five parts, including this introductory section which gives a concise picture of the significant role of human communication in building Malaysia as a multicultural nation. In addition, it also provides a brief content outline of the full paper. Section B looks at the contextual background of Malaysia and discusses on the complexities of the unique multi-ethnic and multi-religious culture of the nation. Among others, it touches on how the government by way of its national policies manage to maintain a peaceful, political, economic and cultural state of affairs since independence. In Section C, the focus is on the noteworthy roles and functions of public relations as an important component of the human communication process in promoting the government's various campaigns for a united multicultural Malaysia. A familiar model and theory of the public relations process is also incorporated to give a better understanding of the topic. Following this, Section D attempts to demonstrate how public relations programmes, with the use of human communication tactics, are utilized in promoting the concept of *IMalaysia* for all citizens of the country. This section is divided into two in which the first sub-section provides an overall representation of the *IMalaysia* concept while the second sub-section tries to link the goal of *IMalaysia* with the concerted public relations campaign that is implemented to accomplish the vision of getting every ethnic group to think as a true Malaysian, in spirit and in deeds. Finally, the concluding section provides a summary and review of the entire paper, with emphasis on the culture of tolerance and compromise together with recognized Islamic principles, as practiced by a majority of the multi-ethnic groups, as the key to the past accomplishments of the present Malaysian government.

## 2. A Background Portrait of Malaysia

The foundation of Malaysia's political, economic and cultural structure today started in the 15<sup>th</sup> century during the sovereignty of the Malaccan Empire which not only attracted Indian, Chinese and Arab traders but also enticed the attention of the Europeans who had then colonised India and some African states. Subsequently, as documented in the annals of Malaysian history, it became the colony of three European powers, namely the Portuguese, Dutch and British. Except for the Second World War years of 1942 until 1945 during which time the Japanese controlled Malaya, the Malay states of Malaya were a British colony until the independence of Malaya in 1957 (Gullick, 1981). Compared with other plural societies, Malaysia's population of 28.8 million (Economic Planning Unit, 2010) is quite varied and colourful with Malays comprising 51 percent, the mainly *bumiputra* natives of Sabah and Sarawak (which boast 30 indigenous groups in each state) in East Malaysia taking up 11 percent, Chinese 23 percent, Indians 7 percent and others covering about 8 percent. Looking at its population make-up, Malaysia has an almost balanced ethnic structure made up of two dominant groups, specifically the indigenous groups or *bumiputras* and the non-*bumiputras*. The former are the Malays in Peninsular Malaysia and natives in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak who together comprise about 62 percent of the population, whilst the latter are the Chinese, Indians and other races. Given its multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature, cultural pluralism is inevitable in the Malaysian society. While Islam is the country's official religion, Malaysians also practice Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and other faiths.

As Malaysia's political, legal, economic and education systems show a strong British influence, the citizens tend to be quite susceptible to Western thoughts. Furthermore, ideas continue to flow into Malaysia from Britain and other English speaking Western nations because many Malaysians today are the by-products of these countries. With English acknowledged as a primary global language, a section of the young Western-oriented urban Malaysians have adopted it as their primary language. Nevertheless, although many of them are comfortable watching Western movies and television programmes, the majority of Malaysians probably do not want to give up their culture. On this subject, it must be noted that while Malaysian cultural values are very much alive partly because of its intimate link with Islam, the well-established Malay medium education assures the preservation of the Malay language and culture. Also, the uninterrupted existence of the Chinese and Tamil schools signifies that the Chinese and Indian cultures continue to flourish.

On the political front, the topography of Malaysia is uniquely intertwined with an intriguing blend of divisions and compromises, and of restrictions and freedom. Nevertheless, despite its bitter experience of the 1969 racial riots, its political system has interlaced well into the social life of its masses as it has been successful in maintaining continued unity amongst its multi-ethnic and multi-religious people from varying classes and regions for four decades. Generally, its politics revolves around the cooperation amongst the ruling political parties in the government, its practice of democracy as defined by the government and the population's acknowledgement, not to forget its reverence that Islam is the official religion of the country. Following Malaya's independence in 1957, the three ethnic political parties namely United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) which represents the Malays, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) which acts for the Chinese, and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) which embodies the ethnic Indians joined hands to govern Malaya as *Parti Perikatan* (Alliance Party).

Ever since the first election in 1955, the Alliance Party continues to enjoy success. In 1974, other smaller parties came under its umbrella to form a bigger coalition called *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) which has been ruling the country ever since. It must be noted that before gaining independence, the three major ethnic groups agreed on a compromise that the Malays would hold on to their position as political custodians whilst the Chinese and Indian citizens would be free to practice their cultural traditions. Unfortunately, although the political agenda of the Malays was a success, its economic agenda was not. The younger generation of Malays were not happy with the economy of the country being in the hands of the Chinese while the young Chinese were also not satisfied that the Malays were dominating the country's political system. It is, therefore, not surprising that social unease reared its ugly head during the 1960s, which led to the racial riots of 1969, resulting in 196 deaths (Holden, 2001) and threatened to split the nation.

While order was eventually restored, this bloody incident changed the course of Malaysian political history. In the interest of national unity, the ruling Alliance government decided to put together and implement a remedial action plan in the form of a "social contract" based on the pre-independence bargain among the ethnic groups. This 20 year action plan which started in 1970 is famously known as the New Economic Policy (NEP) and its primary objective was to create a more balanced economic growth and wealth redistribution between the Malays and the non-Malays aimed at removing ethnic-based domination of specific economic activities and eradicating poverty regardless of racial backgrounds (Talib, 2000). As mentioned before, after the 1969 racial riots, Malaysia has not experienced any major racial problems although it cannot be denied that teething problems such as ordinary ethnic misunderstandings involving cultural and religious issues still exist. Taking into consideration the relatively peaceful and stable situation in Malaysia since the past 40 years it can therefore be claimed that in terms of its human communication development, there is sufficient intercultural communication competence (see Fontaine & Richardson, 2003), among the ethnic groups. Clearly, the continued culture of compromise and tolerance among the ethnic groups has worked quite well in that they have generally been able to avoid conflicts on issues that may arise among them.

When the NEP expired at the end of 1990, the 10 year National Development Policy (NDP) was launched in 1991 to replace it since the 30 percent target of *bumiputra* participation in the economic development of the country had not been fully achieved. In continuance of the NDP, the Vision 2020 was instituted in 2000 aimed at a full economic, political, social and spiritual development of Malaysia by the year 2020. It is pertinent to note that this vision is also determined at guiding Malaysians towards national unity where Malaysians would no longer be identified by their ethnic groups but their nationality. It must also be noted that Vision 2020 also places emphasis on the new global conditions and prospect of cultural refinement and identity in an effort to draw inward investments into Malaysia. Although it uses a modernist Western approach, Vision 2020 endeavours to distinguish Malaysian values from those of the West (Mohamad M. , 2002). In essence, the three development policies of NEP, NDP and Vision 2020 are all institutionalized within the "Malaysia Plan" which runs consecutively every five years. Along the way, incessant and varied approaches which parallel the conception of compromise and tolerance with a tinge of Islamic elements have been used at unifying the ethnic groups. Sometime in the mid-1990s, the former premier Dr. Mahathir Mohamed started a campaign known as *Malaysia Boleh* which became widespread in the country. Literally translated as "Malaysia Can", it is aimed at instilling patriotism by telling Malaysians of all ethnic groups that they are capable to achieve what they want. It encourages them to attempt feats that could reach world standards.

As politics has been entwined well into the Malaysian life, this *Malaysia Boleh* campaign became an important platform to inculcate the pride of national identity and messages of ethnic unity and cultural harmony to the public. In actual fact, this campaign is part of a future dream of Vision 2020 for the establishment of a united *Bangsa Malaysia* (the Malaysian Race) which is a depiction of a collective identity among the various multiethnic population (Silk, 2002). The mainstream traditional newspapers and the television channels being important tools for social development and under the control of the political parties within the National Front coalition (Phua & Soo, 2004) are consistently utilised for this purpose. Aligned with this, the government encourages the notion that some Asian values like selflessness and collectivism are more favoured than Western values such as personal satisfaction and egoism (Holden, 2001). When Abdullah Badawi took over the reign as Prime Minister in 2004, he introduced the concept of *Islam Hadhari* or Civilisational Islam which promotes consensus building (*musyawarah*) and recognizes the importance of the consultative process (*shura*) as an effective method in handling various issues and problems affecting the society (Badawi, 2006). At the same time, it is focused on developing a thinking multiethnic society comprising Muslims and non-Muslims that encourages social harmony and economic progress consistent with the tenets of Islam. Not to forget, it is also aimed at appeasing and guaranteeing the non-Malay Muslims of their equal rights as Malaysian citizens (Bashi, 2006).

As race relations is an important determinant for political and economic stability, the government has been accommodative to the demands of the Chinese and Indian communities in retaining their constitutional rights including preserving and developing their own vernacular schools. This denotes that although *Malay* is the national and official language, the Chinese dialects of Cantonese and Hokkien, and the Tamil language of the south Indians are widely spoken. Also, not to forget the English language is very much at home in Malaysia and remains the dominant language in the private commercial and industrial sector although the *Malay* language remains the medium of instruction in public schools and most public universities. Although Malaysians of all races have not discarded their racial identities, many seem to agree that a compromised and tolerant race relation is a crucial solution for the sake of modernization and industrialization of Malaysia. In fact, with ethnic hostility after the May 13<sup>th</sup> 1969 riots being successfully pacified, there are positive signs of a continued multiculturalism free from racial politics in the country, provided its economy continues to be stable and the government of the day keeps on monitoring and tackling mitigating racial rifts.

When Najib Razak took the helm as Prime Minister of Malaysia in 2008, he summoned Malaysians to stick together with him to accomplish the goal of making multicultural Malaysia a developed nation. Consequently, he launched the concept of *IMalaysia* with the slogan *People First, Performance Now*. As the thrust and strength of *IMalaysia* hinges on the value of compromise and tolerance without sacrificing the already embedded Islamic values, mutual trust and respect among the varied and multiethnic population of Malaysia becomes his manual in the implementation of all economic, social and political programmes of the country. In reality, *IMalaysia* is an extension of earlier slogans and campaigns to promote a united Malaysia in order to achieve Vision 2020. In fact, in his speech at a recent UMNO gathering in Kuala Lumpur, Najib confirmed that the *IMalaysia* concept is an expansion of the labours of the first Prime Minister who set up the Alliance party and helped achieve the country's independence in 1957, followed through by the second Prime Minister who formed a bigger coalition of political parties, the National Front (The Star, 2010). Other prime ministers followed through with campaigns that carry a similar message of multicultural integration for a developed Malaysia.

### **3. Public Relations Practice - An Effective Approach in Human Communication**

As indicated earlier, the Malaysian government's agenda of using human communication to establish cultural acceptance amongst its various ethnic groups has been achieving considerable success via its various public relations programmes. To further understand the effectiveness of these public relations programmes and how it relates to human communication tactics, it is imperative to first scrutinize the widely accepted definition of public relations. The Canadian Public Relations Society defined public relations as "the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve public interest" (Canadian Public Relations Society, 2009). The key phrase of "strategic management of relationships" clearly brings into line the fundamental approach in human communication.

The writers will now attempt to extract some key points that have emerged in this definition to fit into the theme of this paper. "Strategic management" refers to the *IMalaysia* concept which supports the Federal Constitution and *Rukunegara* (see **Appendix 1** for *Rukunegara*); "diverse publics" are the 28.8 million Malaysian citizens consisting of various ethnic groups, religious faiths and cultures; "communication" is the dissemination of information using all available public relations and communication channels; "mutual understanding" relates to the culture of tolerance and compromise as key elements in driving the nation ahead; "realize organizational goals" is associated with the idea of one single race - Malaysians living harmoniously and "serve public interest" concerns the achievement of a fully developed nation by year 2020.

In taking their responsibility of promoting the *IMalaysia* concept, public relations practitioners, well-equipped with their human communication skills, act as catalysts of development and agents of change. As in all human communication approaches to public relations, their ultimate goal is to deliver intended messages to the intended publics in the hope of reaching their intended goals. This paper will specifically focus on public relations practitioners working in or for the government with the multicultural Malaysian citizens as the main stakeholders. Government public relations practice carries a few general objectives mainly to gain support on the implementation of new laws and initiatives, greater use of government services and support for their agencies and programmes. They too seek to anticipate and address problems before these issues become critical, maintain a strong service orientation by responding to all publics and concentrate on building two-way communication and openness in government dealings. As it is, there has always been a need for government communications to inform citizens of the services available in the manner in which they may be used (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009).

Being an essential aspect of human communication, public information in Malaysia is crucial if its multicultural citizens are to make intelligent judgments about policies and activities of their elected representatives given that Malaysia is a democratic nation. A well informed society is guaranteed an adequate background knowledge for them to fully participate in the formation and execution of government policies. As Adnan (2010) states, “the use of public relations strategies and tactics are pervasive in many areas of governmental and political communication”.

In light of its human communication function to inform and persuade a mass audience of diverse ethnicity and religious beliefs, we have selected two relevant social science theories that can explain the roles and responsibilities of public relations practitioners in the promotion of *IMalaysia*. They are the “Elaborated Likelihood Model” and the “Agenda Setting Theory”. The Elaborated Likelihood Model proposes a “peripheral route” in which humans are influenced by such things as repetition, a highly credible spokesperson, or even tangible rewards (Dan Lattimore, 2009). Public relations practitioners often use this route when designing their messages. For instance in promoting the *IMalaysia* concept, practitioners working on campaigns blanket the entire nation with signs, posters, buntings, billboards and many other media vehicles with repetitive use of *IMalaysia* logo. In this case, the Prime Minister is rightly portrayed as a credible spokesperson as he is the opinion leader to champion this concept. This human communication strategy ensures dissemination of messages via print and electronic media. More on promotion and publicity efforts on *IMalaysia* will be discussed in the following sections.

The “Agenda Setting Theory” works on the premise that although media cannot tell people what to think, they are stunningly successful in telling them what to think about (Cohen, 2009). During the American presidential campaigns in the 1960s, political campaigners came to realize that there were significant relationships between what voters said was important and what media were reporting as important. Here, the role of the public relations practitioner is to influence the media agenda by providing news items for public consumption (Dan Lattimore, 2009). This way public relations practitioners are feeding the public with ideas they intend the public to accept and adopt. In Malaysia, the increase in urbanization, complexity of society and government has led to the need of establishing a sophisticated communication system and effective public relations practice (Adnan, 2010). There has also been an increase in citizens’ demands, public scrutiny, exposure caused by emerging trends in new media and technologies, increase in globalisation, competition, transparency and specialisation. The government is answerable to a larger audience as compared to corporations. The government is expected to tell their story to the people at large. This factor alone is strong enough to illustrate the importance of a forceful human communication tactic via an effective public relations effort to communicate messages and information of the *IMalaysia* concept.

Further to this, Morreale (2007) mentioned a very essential component of human communication that is synonymous with public relations practice, that is, the ability to build strong interpersonal relationship with the targeted publics. One must not forget that the aptitude to create strong groups and teams also depends on human communication skills and that the way we communicate influences our ability to build solid and wholesome communities. Many public relations practitioners would agree that a powerful combination of all available public relations tools and other forms of human communication tactics would be the best way to reach a larger group of audience. Given that Malaysia’s population currently sits at 28.8 million people, made of three main ethnic groups together with 60 indigenous groups of natives, public relations practitioners must take advantage of all available human communication resources together with the necessary public relations tools in getting their message across.

Realizing that the tactics in human communication can effectively reach the publics by means of public relations tools, at a special cabinet meeting on national integrity held on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2008, the Malaysian government decided to enhance the roles and functions undertaken by the Public Relations Department in all its ministries. As a result, the Corporate Communications Units or Departments were established in all the 24 ministries (Ministry of Information Communications and Culture Malaysia, 2010). This initiative taken up by the government see additional injection of budget into implementing a more rigorous approach to public relations activities. Among the roles and functions of a public relations practitioner working with the government and ministries are to act as the ministry’s focal point in the delivery and dissemination of information, to plan and execute activities to enhance the ministry’s corporate image; to plan, coordinate and execute promotions and publicity programmes on the ministry’s achievements. Public relations practitioners are also required to plan, manage, execute and monitor all matters pertaining to customers, to manage media relations efforts, to monitor the overall media coverage on the ministry, to manage, monitor and coordinate all complaints received about the ministry, to manage customer services officers working for the ministry and to produce materials and information for the ministry’s portal.



In other words, the public relations practitioner whose main task is to promote the government's policies and campaigns are expected to be adept at both "hard skills" and "soft skills". While the "hard skills" involve knowledge and practical expertise in promotion, publicity and events management; the "soft skills" places emphasis on effective interpersonal communication, the key in human communication competence.

The "soft skills" is in actual fact, more challenging to develop because it involves internalization of the public's feelings and attitudes. This is where experienced public relations practitioners are ahead of professionals in many other fields since they get to master the human communication skill of interpersonal communication that is very useful when dealing with individuals from varied backgrounds. Professionals in the public relations field are generally composed, coordinated, attentive and expressive when they engage themselves in face to face communication with others. In fact, in recent years, interpersonal communication has emerged to become one of the most important aspects of human communication development. It is a natural instinct for individuals to often look forward to a touch of personal communication and real-time interaction as this gives room for an in-depth discussion or dialogue between two parties.

Another important public relations role that can be seen as contributing to human and nation development is the skills in media relations which has been part of the practice for many years and continue to be amplified in public relations practice as nations grow and develop. In Malaysia for instance, media exposure is deemed critical to the ruling government in its campaign to create a favourable image and reputation amongst its diverse multicultural publics. The commonly used tools to help disseminate the government's message to its citizens include brochures, pamphlets, creation of websites, posters, banners, public service announcements, events, exhibitions and press conferences. With allies such as social marketing campaigns, ideas and policies can easily be promoted to improve both personal and the society's welfare. This is the key to human and nation development. One must not forget Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) that in recent years have become a highly sought for practice. This has always been part of public relations practice integrated under the community relations function. Through CSR, corporate philanthropy acts are augmented and become a way for the government and corporations to give back to the society. Philanthropic acts which mostly are sustainable efforts allow the community to be developed, individual lives to be improved and if done on a larger scale, this act of generosity will help in nation development.

#### **4. The Promotion of *IMalaysia***

This section is divided into two sub-sections; the first provides a description of the *IMalaysia* concept whilst the second attempts to explain how various public relations strategies are applied to promote the *IMalaysia* concept. Here, the writer attempts to demonstrate the usefulness of human communication tactics at urging the diverse multicultural population to accept and embrace a shared aspiration of a truly Malaysian race.

##### **a. The *IMalaysia* Concept**

The *IMalaysia* concept is parallel to the long-standing efforts by the government to prolong and perk up the Islamically-inclined culture of tolerance and compromise amongst Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups. It aims to create a multicultural Malaysia that strives on excellence, perseverance, acceptance, education, integrity, meritocracy, humility and loyalty. As such, human development programmes that ascertain a continuous process of effective communication amongst its diverse ethnic groups are crucial. As it is, the ultimate goal is to maintain and reinforce racial harmony. This is where *IMalaysia* corresponds into Malaysia's local social background. The Prime Minister's personal website (*IMalaysia*, 2009) describes *IMalaysia* as intending to

*"..provide a free and open forum to discuss the things that matter deeply to us as a Nation. It provides a chance to express and explore the many perspectives of our fellow citizens. What makes Malaysia unique is the diversity of our peoples. IMalaysia's goal is to preserve and enhance this unity in diversity which has always been our strength and remains our best hope for the future. I hope this Website will initiate an open and vital dialogue exploring our Malaysian identity, purpose and direction. I encourage each of you to join me in defining our Malaysia and the role we must play in its future. Each of us – despite our differences – shares a desire for a better tomorrow. Each of us wants opportunity, respect, friendship and understanding."*

Realizing the significance of media and publicity for effective human communication activities, *IMalaysia* automatically became an on-going public relations campaign on September 16, 2008, the day it was first announced by the Prime Minister in which the cabinet, government agencies and civil servants were instructed to place sharp emphasis on ethnic harmony, national unity and competent governance. The *IMalaysia* concept caters to the needs of all sectors of the plural society to ensure equal distribution of wealth between racial groups and between all the states within the country. The concept acts as a manual to create a united and progressive nation while inculcating the spirit and values of togetherness and a sense of belonging, regardless of race, religion and creed.

*IMalaysia* does not abrogate affirmative action and *bumiputra* privileges as stipulated in the Federal Constitution of 1957, rather to improve its implementation in a fair manner and to keep intact the spirit of 1955-1957 which has been agreed upon by Malaysia's forefathers who fought for the country's independence during the late 1940s and 1950s. To strengthen national unity, it rests on three key principles, namely acceptance of others, be it from the same ethnic group or otherwise, as loyal friends; the national spirit of love for the country and social justice on the welfare of the diverse ethnic groups. To further elaborate, the *IMalaysia* concept is made up of eight values, comprising the culture of "excellence", "endurance", "acceptance", "education", "integrity", "meritocracy", "humility" and "loyalty" which strongly correlates with a popular tagline, "unity in diversity" that government departments were using earlier. The first value, the culture of "excellence" is meant to measure achievement and development by way of dedication, commitment and hard work among the civil servants. As such, the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) is used as a measurement tool amongst all government employees. The "endurance" value relates to the importance of Malaysians to be strong when facing trials and challenges for the sake of their individual successes, the multiracial community and that of the country.

"Acceptance" goes beyond the concept of tolerance. It is important that all ethnic groups accept one another to develop a national race. As such, the best traits of the Malays, Chinese, Indians and others have to be used to gain acceptance of each other. As for "education", the Ministry of Education and administrators of public universities are required take a more transparent approach, most specifically on its intake procedures such that ample placements are opened up for all ethnic groups. On "integrity", the government is expected to perform admirably and be truthful, be it with the people, the government sector or private enterprises. The next value, "meritocracy" relates to the global practice of liberalization wherein everyone who qualifies and fulfils the set criteria be given the opportunity to spur economic growth for the country. It emphasizes open competition based on pre-requisites that have been pre-determined and whosoever is able to fulfil the required criteria has the right to be chosen. The value of "humility" must be accorded suitably depending on time, situation and place. For instance when dealing with foreigners, Malaysians are expected to demonstrate their confidence and ability as Malaysians, not through abrasiveness, oppression or hostility. To be humble does not mean that one must surrender to others. Lastly, "loyalty" to King and country has to be embraced unconditionally. All ethnic groups have to place priority on loyalty and importance to the country over loyalty to their own ethnic group. Loyalty to leaders and head of an organization is the basis for authority, firmness, success and excellence. Solid relationships and ties are garnered through honesty and sincerity with friends, family or leaders.

#### **b. Championing *IMalaysia*: The Public Relations Approach**

As indicated in the earlier part of this paper, a well-planned and consistently orchestrated public relations campaign programme is essential for any promotion effort to gain an upper hand of persuasive and influential human communication. In the case of *IMalaysia*, on-going campaigns using public relations tools are considered as the backbone. The human communication approach in the *IMalaysia* campaign, involves the use of public relations strategies to reach all segments of the Malaysian population. Since this ambitious campaign was launched about two years ago to specifically promote ethnic harmony, national unity and competent governance, the public relations challenge is to set human communication goals that cater to all sectors of the population.

For a segment of the population who need to be informed and educated on the idea of ethnic harmony, national unity and competent governance, it is generally aimed at creating public awareness, public information and public education of the *IMalaysia* concept. At the same time, for those who are already beginning to practice or are already applying the *IMalaysia* concept in their daily life, the campaign aims to reinforce their attitudes and behaviours towards moving forward in getting everyone, regardless of their ethnic groups and religious beliefs, to embrace and exercise the concept together for the nation's well-being in the future. Based on the on-going efforts carried out to date, the public relations campaign for *IMalaysia* is orchestrated to achieve its set goals. These public relations goals are in line with the premise put in place by public relations scholars (Doug Newsom, 2010). Furthermore, they are constructed around an operative positioning statement of People First, Performance Now. In the following pages, the writers will trace the various practices in public relations as part of the campaign to promote *IMalaysia*.

##### **i. Meet the people sessions**

The "meet the people sessions" is put into practice by Najib Razak since he first became the Prime Minister where he meets folks at coffee shops, markets and other popular public places to listen to their views and grouses. This is undoubtedly an effective form and well-planned public relations exercise that practitioners in the Prime Minister's department had organized to deliver the *IMalaysia* message to the public.

At this point, there is a prospective golden opportunity for the Prime Minister and his think-tank to interpret and note the non-verbal messages sent by the people. As it is, unlike the American, German and Scandinavian cultures which Gudykunst, et.al (2002) group as “low-context” cultures, the Malaysian culture is classed as a “high-context” culture wherein high significance is placed on gestures and the unspoken message when there is spoken communication between two or more people.

When positioning an idea such as *IMalaysia* to the public, it is crucial that Najib Razak himself as the opinion leader, champion and reiterate the message. As Wilcox (2009) posits, opinion leaders are catalysts for the formation of public opinion as they are knowledgeable and articulate about specific issues. From the writers’ observations and monitoring on media reports and coverage of *IMalaysia*, Najib Razak has been recorded to touch on the *IMalaysia* concept in a majority of his speeches and in almost every interview he sits in. The list of speeches and news put in his personal website illustrates his application of the Elaborated Likelihood Model we have discussed earlier. Regardless of the occasion, he reinforces this idea to promote unity and racial acceptance. In one of his media interviews during the Hari Raya (Eid) Open House, he was quoted as saying, “If we hold open house and receive guests regardless of race and religion, it will be a meaningful avenue to foster national unity founded on the *IMalaysia* concept” (Bernama, 2010).

To ensure he set the right examples in his zeal to implement *IMalaysia*, Najib is positioned as accessible and approachable, mingling around the city of Kuala Lumpur from Petaling Street to Kampung Baru and SS2 Petaling Jaya to villages in the outskirts of Penampang Sabah to personally experience the lives of Malaysians. Even ardent critiques of the government commented positively on his walkabouts. M. Bakri Musa said in his comment posted in a blog owned by a leader of an opposition political party, “It is commendable that Prime Minister Najib Razak is periodically leaving his air-conditioned office to experience first-hand what ordinary citizens have to put up with in their daily lives, last week saw him riding the Light Rail Transit; the week before, a stroll down Petaling Street, all these so he could understand the pulse of the people” (Musa, 2009). Najib Razak himself was quoted as saying he has used his visits around the country and walkabouts in certain towns and cities to act on issues facing the people and facilitates immediate changes in their interest (Non-Aligned Movement News Network, 2010). He also believes that such walkabouts mark improvements in infrastructure and community development programmes. In the same article, the Prime Minister stated that historically and traditionally, this was a way for community leaders and village heads to gather information to benefit their community and for the people to voice and request the needs of a particular area (NAMNN, 2010). These “walkabout” acts as a very effective human communication tactic, clearly demonstrates that he is serious about the slogan, *People First, Performance Now*. Following Najib’s example are other ministers in his cabinet and government officials. Since the implementation of *IMalaysia* in 2008, on top of beginning an official function with the usual Islamic greeting and recital of prayers, government leaders are encouraged to include the phrase “*Salam IMalaysia*”, literally translated as “*IMalaysia Greetings*” before every public speech. It must be noted that official speech texts and scripts for the emcees are normally prepared by public relations practitioners working for the respective departments. With the use of the *IMalaysia* phrase repetitively, the government hopes to condition and reinforce the acceptance of the *IMalaysia* concept in the minds and hearts of its multicultural population.

## ii. Creation of *IMalaysia* Identity

Positioning of the *IMalaysia* acceptance also takes place using common tools such as the use of slogans, ties with products and services extended by government agencies and corporate bodies to the society. A case in point is the Ministry of Youth and Sports’ initiative to tie in the slogan of “*1Belia, IMalaysia*”. Translated as “1Youth, *IMalaysia*”, this slogan connects youth from various races, ethnicity and religion in activities held by the Ministry to harvest togetherness and instil *IMalaysia* values amongst its future leaders. This demographic make-up is an important segment targeted by *IMalaysia* campaigners as they are the movers and shakers of the nation and will take up responsibility to sustain this effort even beyond the target of year 2020. As corporate identity is the actual manifestation of the organization’s reality created by the organization and communicated to a variety of constituencies (Argenti, 2009), the *IMalaysia* logo, name and slogan are imprinted on almost every tangible government items. They include the official government letterheads and stationeries, the ministers’ official *batik* shirt, button badges, and many other items ranging from the *IMalaysia* milk for school children to the *IMalaysia* F1 Racing Team that goes global. Big private corporations are showing their support to the government and acceptance of *IMalaysia* concept by spreading messages in a tangible manner. Based on messages sent in these tangible forms, perceptions are then formed by constituencies, in this case Malaysians of all ethnic and religious denominations. The uniqueness of the *IMalaysia* logo is that, it symbolizes Malaysia and its core values (see **Appendix 2** for *IMalaysia* logo rationale) and it mirrors the goal of this concept by just using the number “1”.



It is made from a fraction of the Malaysian flag, it is recognizable and easy to remember and carries perfectly the theme of *People First, Performance Now*.

### iii. Mass Media

The traditional media such as the newspaper and television have always been the core media of information dissemination. The Malaysian public relations practitioners in government departments treat their media relations with journalists as their central activity in promoting and creating awareness of government programmes. They do not have much difficulty compared to their counterparts in the private sector as all major mainstream media in Malaysia are by and large government controlled. As such, in their relentless effort to get free space and “getting publicity” for their promotional projects by the government, they used every workable ploy to take advantage of the newspapers and television stations.

*IMalaysia*'s advantage of being a government campaign has harnessed itself enormous support from ministries, government agencies, non-government organizations (NGOs), corporations and individuals. They are all jumping onto the bandwagon realizing the strength of this idea and intangible returns they may gain in future. A socially and economically stable nation promotes interest in investors and this may lead to a profitable return on investment as well as good reputation, of which is essential for any business. In light of this, *IMalaysia* values are injected effectively into massive advertising efforts done by businesses alike. Television and radio commercials created by businesses promotes the *IMalaysia* concept as a way of life and these commercials normally include the presence or voices of people from all races, regardless of the product or service promoted.

The promotion of *IMalaysia* was driven to a larger magnitude when corporations such as *Petronas*, famous for its elaborate corporate advertisements, joined in to promote national unity in their annual *Merdeka* commercials in 2009 and 2010. Corporate advertisements in this case, specifically issue advertising, attempts to do even more than influence opinions about the company; it tries to influence the attitudes of a company's constituencies about a specific issue that affect the company (Argenti, 2009). Other than *Petronas*, large national corporations such as *Maxis*, *Celcom*, *Media Prima*, *Telekom*, *Astro* and *Tenaga Nasional* have come up with “issue advertisements” tied to the *IMalaysia* ideas of unity and acceptance in all of its festive television commercials. With such overwhelming support in publicizing the *IMalaysia* concept, the writers are optimistic that *IMalaysia* will reach its desired goals even sooner than expected. Publicity is also amplified throughout the nation where major cities in Malaysia are blanketed with the *IMalaysia* logo used in mass advertising and publicity materials making it ubiquitous. Malaysians and tourists alike are bombarded with billboards of *IMalaysia* concepts along highways, advertisements on pedestrian bridges and flyovers, bunting on lamp posts along federal and city roads, presentations of digital media screens placed in strategic locations such as *Dataran Merdeka* and also on electronic crawlers placed along several highways with the collaboration of highway operators such as *Plus Berhad*. In addition, *IMalaysia* public service announcements are aired on both government and privately owned television channels and radio.

The *IMalaysia* Song Competition was also made part of the public relations tactic to promote *IMalaysia*. It kicked off in 2009 and within nine days, more than 350 submissions were received. In a press release posted on his blog Najib Razak mentioned, “I am extremely happy and excited with the response. In fact, the top ten finalists are made up of a wonderfully diverse group that ranges from well-known composers to complete unknowns, covering all races, genders, age groups and backgrounds (*IMalaysia*, 2009). The winning song was announced on *Merdeka* day 2009 and apart from winning cash prize; the song was turned into a music video and distributed to members of the media nationwide. It has since, been played both over television and radio on a daily basis. In a short visit to a popular downloading site at [www.4shared.com](http://www.4shared.com), the writers found that more than 100 files containing this theme song and other *IMalaysia*-related songs composed by both renowned and upcoming Malaysian composers. Singers of these songs are from all ethnic groups. These files were uploaded since the year 2009 and to date had received over thousands of hits and downloads per file and is still counting.

### iv. New Technologies

The high recognition of internet and innovation of new media technologies has given *IMalaysia* campaigners an added advantage in reaching a wider audience. Malaysians living abroad are also kept in sight and are encouraged to join and accept *IMalaysia* through the establishment of the *IMalaysia* official website. Press releases, pitch letters as well and video news releases have been employed by *IMalaysia* campaigners to reach a larger base of Malaysians. They have all been delivered to the media either traditionally or are posted on the *IMalaysia* website. This website also carries speech texts presented by the Prime Minister during events such as launches, meetings and conferences.

This way they are able to disseminate more information and create a one-stop-centre for all information needed about *IMalaysia*. Media friends on the other hand, can rely on this website for additional information should they need to beef up their articles. Further, the government's full advocacy on development of broadband and wireless services, 3G networks and internet applications, social networking sites, Blackberry and iPhone technologies had facilitated dissemination of information, be it outbound or inbound. This progression not only signifies rapid human development in the nation but has helped elevate communication meanings to the next level where information is literally at one's finger tips. One click is all it takes to be in touch globally. Citizens' dependency on the innovation of communication technologies has solicited public relations practitioners in its publicity efforts. The Chief Executive Officer of CyberSecurity Malaysia was quoted in a media release as saying, "As information and communication technology continues to push the frontiers of innovation, the relevance and dependence on technology becomes our way of life (Jazri, 2010). In the same statement, Jazri (2010) added that at this point in time we all live in "digital cities" where the community combines broadband communications infrastructure and innovation services to meet the needs of government, business and the public. This was proven true when we see that even the Prime Minister himself depends on such technologies to ensure that he is kept abreast of the nation's happenings and at the same time employ the same technology to disseminate his agenda. The Prime Minister has his very own personal website, a Facebook account and Twitter account to post regular updates on his campaign of *IMalaysia*. The same platform is used to gather public opinion through tweets and comments posted by citizens to him personally.

#### v. Programmes tie-ins / Events

As mentioned earlier in Section C, professional public relations practitioners are ahead of others in the communication field when it comes to human communication or interpersonal communication as they are seen to be more composed, organized and verbally expressive. This is an avenue for *IMalaysia* campaigners as events and programmes further provide leverage to disseminate desired messages to the intended publics. The Malaysian government takes the initiative to drive home the *IMalaysia* promotion into all its activities done at federal level. Among others, they include tie-in promotion efforts into programmes such as the Independence or *Merdeka* Day celebration, *Hari Raya* (Eid) Festivals, *Chinese New Year* Celebrations, *Deepavali* Festivals and Christmas celebrations as well as to usher the New Year. In each occasion, the Prime Minister himself would deliver his speech and associate the *IMalaysia* idea to the respective celebrations. Public relations practitioners will create themes appropriate to the respective occasions such as *Menjana Transformasi* or Generating Transformation as the Independence Day theme this year. There are themes such as *Deeparaya* when a *Hari Raya* festival falls close to the *Deepavali* festival and *GongxiRaya* when the *Hari Raya* Festival falls close to the Chinese New Year Celebrations. The creations of such themes started even before the *IMalaysia* idea came into fruition. However, in recent years, it re-emerges again to promote national unity whenever possible.

On June 12<sup>th</sup> 2010, the *Barisan Nasional* Youth organised Rally *IMalaysia* or the *IMalaysia* Rally at *Stadium Putra Bukit Jalil*. Launched by the Prime Minister, it witnessed the attendance of approximately 15,000 youths from all races and religions, and participated by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other youth associations (News Straits Times, 2010). It was aimed to portray the spirit of *IMalaysia* among Malaysian youths who have begun to accept the idea of tolerance and compromise, putting aside their differences in order to achieve goals as the younger generation. At the same event, the Prime Minister also launched the *IMalaysia* Tour (*Jelajah IMalaysia*) which will be a year-long campaign to bring the *IMalaysia* concept to the grassroots. In addition to all the public appearances, the Prime Minister organised events that are more confined and aimed at reaching smaller groups of audiences. On March 15<sup>th</sup> 2010, he organised "Tea with Online Friends" at his official residence especially for his Facebook friends. According to the *IMalaysia* website, guests were treated to local delicacies and enjoyed the opportunity to interact with the Prime Minister and fellow friends of *IMalaysia*. Highlights of the day were the Q&A session with the Prime Minister and the group photo session at the end of the tea (*IMalaysia*, 2009). Another similar event, but this time a dinner event entitled *Makan Malam Perdana Menteri Bersama Rakan Online* or Prime Minister's Dinner with Online Friends will take place on November 5<sup>th</sup> 2010 at his residence. Such events encourage informal dialogues and foster networking among Malaysians.

#### vi. Challenges of *IMalaysia*

Albeit the encouraging support from the multicultural populace for *IMalaysia* promotions, there are many challenges to this ambitious endeavour. However, some factors that might hinder achievement may exist from within the planning team themselves. One of the biggest challenges by far is when the public relations professionals who themselves do not have a thorough knowledge and proper understanding of the *IMalaysia* concept.

Since public relations practitioners are usually put as front liners, they are responsible for the preparation of publications, developing and providing contents, and executing plans to achieve goals. To be ignorant of this important responsibility can be detrimental to the public at large, especially when change of attitude and behaviour is at stake. For instance, it is imperative for the public relations person to guide government officials acting as opinion leaders to have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the *IMalaysia* concept if they are to go out in public to persuade the populace to live this idea. Additionally, the tremendous development in new media technologies has made media users closer to the news they get from news portals online. The evolution of communication technology has modernised the media to be more than mere information providers, but the new media has enabled the media industry to also be a channel beyond education and entertainment but for many other reasons including gossips and other purposes. Of late, there has been a rise in the phenomenon of “citizen journalism”, defined as the ‘act of citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysis and disseminating news and information’ (Wikipedia, 2010).

The definition gives an insight that the community that we have today is no longer passive and live only to accept what others (the media) feeds them. Within this new form of knowledge, the people can continuously expand their wisdom and inadvertently gain experiences within a shorter period of time. The knowledge has empowered their minds and they have become active and sensible media users who do not blatantly accept and agree with others. Instead of just receiving, they are also contributing back to the media and the media user takes on the active role of a “citizen journalist”.

*IMalaysia* is no stranger from mentions by citizen journalists. Personal blogs provide an avenue to freely express ideas and thoughts, some of which the writers come across as not being supportive of the *IMalaysia* concept. Nevertheless, the government takes an open stand on criticisms for as long as they are within limits and for positive improvements. Postings that are considered as unethical or encourage disunity and create racial tensions are monitored by the government. If the posting is considered as offensive to racial harmony, the writer may be apprehended and charged under the Malaysian law. Another challenge that *IMalaysia* constantly receives is the criticisms from members of the opposition political parties. Some suggest that the new concept set by Najib Razak is too rhetorical and has no real policy agenda, except only for gaining support and portraying a new image of the government with the same old policy of oppressive politics. They often claim that the idea of *IMalaysia* is nothing more than a new packaging with the same old product with the intention of extending neo-feudalistic political culture of the *Barisan Nasional* and UMNO in power.

*IMalaysia* concept was also asserted as superficial and a political move to win back support from the non-Malays who deserted from supporting the ruling government since the 12th general election in 2008. Another serious and harmful allegation was that Najib Razak’s comments and programmes about unity and togetherness are only for public consumption but behind the scenes, the *Biro Tatanegara* (BTN), an agency under the Prime Minister’s Department, is still continuing its indoctrination programmes for Malay civil servants and politicians, telling Malays to be wary of Chinese and Indians and continuously spreading neo-feudalism ideas.

## 5. Conclusion

Malaysia’s trademark multicultural concept of tolerance and compromise held by universal Islamic values has undeniably been the key to its political, economic and cultural stability. The achievement at preserving racial harmony and unity, is to a great extent due to a consistent and continuous human communication promotion as demonstrated in the public relations campaign of *Bangsa Malaysia* and *Islam Hadhari*. The *IMalaysia* public relations campaign goes beyond the unique concept of racial compromise and tolerance for it urges Malaysians of all denominations to accept one another by identifying themselves foremost as Malaysians with one identity, regardless of ethnic groups or religious beliefs. Glancing through this gradual transformation, one can considerably comprehend the encouraging effect in the government’s efforts to spearhead the nation to a developed status in 2020.

Social science scholars (Sardar, 2000) concur that despite diverse cultural differences that exist in Malaysia, each ethnic group could engage in informal interactions and settle differences amongst each other and this situation is seldom heard of in many other countries. This observation parallels to Goby’s (2007) contention that multicultural interaction increases one’s sensitivity to the needs of the non-ethnocentric approach to communication between people of different ethnic groups. Goby detects that people in a multicultural setting are more inclined to engage in groupthink. This situation occurs because of their heightened awareness of cultural differences and their wish to avoid conflict. Due to this development, the public relations campaign on *IMalaysia* that is passionately being heralded by Malaysia’s present Prime Minister to bind the multicultural and multi-religious citizens together to share optimistic values of cultural similarities is beginning to show positive outcomes.

Many are responding well to the eight *IMalaysia* values of “excellence”, “endurance”, “acceptance”, “education”, “integrity”, “meritocracy”, “humility” and “loyalty” that have been persistently campaigned using various public relations programmes. As such, one cannot doubt the power of effective human communication tactics that public relations tools are capable of taking on. These tools which include interpersonal communication, festive season launches, event tie-ins and corporate advertisements are effectively used to effect the realization of the goal of *IMalaysia* with the ultimate aim of fulfilling Vision 2020. As a consequence, *IMalaysia*'s slogan, *People First, Performance Now* appears to have captured the people's imagination; first because they give hope to them as multicultural citizens who appreciate the feelings of others and secondly, it moves them to overcome the ethnic barriers that may separate them to gain a better life and living standards.

Nevertheless, one cannot discount the fact that as any agenda of change, the *IMalaysia* concept comes with various challenges including the opening of democratic space via the new media technologies where everyone can write, criticize and comment anything on the internet at real time. This situation makes it more complicating when political parties opposing the government criticizes the *IMalaysia* concept as a manipulation of national unity, Islam and Malay values. To this end, it is pertinent for the government to counter these allegations by “walking the talk”. Other than practicing and demonstrating a moderate and inclusive leadership as can be seen by their attempts thus far, they must also be honest at admitting their weaknesses and overcoming them by truly demonstrating that *IMalaysia* is a collective compass and the values of camaraderie, justice and fairness can be seen in their attitude and behaviour. With Malaysians showing a keen interest in comprehending the *IMalaysia* concept and potentially tagging on to its widely acknowledged positive values, there is hope that race relations in Malaysia will keep advancing to a higher and more positive level. Although representative dissimilarity in ethnicity cannot be eliminated, it can be skilfully dealt with under the sign of multiculturalism to bring about a new form of national identity of the Malaysian race. To reiterate, the concept of *IMalaysia* will be a continuously collaborative human communication programme with the ultimate goal of accomplishing Malaysia's Vision 2020.

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Appendices

## Appendix 1 – the Rukunegara

The *Rukunegara*, translated as "National Principles" is the Malaysian declaration of national philosophy instituted by royal proclamation on Merdeka Day, 1970, in reaction to a serious race riot known as the May 13 incident which occurred in 1969. The incident proved at that time that Malaysian racial balance and stability was fragile at best. Immediately thereafter, the Malaysian government sought ways to foster unity among Malaysians. One of the methods used to encourage unity is the *Rukunegara*.

It is a declaration by Malaysians to achieve greater unity among themselves; maintain a democratic way of life; help create a just society in which the wealth of the nation shall be equitably shared; ensure a liberal approach to Malaysia's rich and diverse cultural tradition; and help build a progressive society which shall be oriented to modern science and technology. It is guided by the following five principles:

- BELIEF IN GOD
- LOYALTY TO KING AND COUNTRY
- UPHOLDING THE CONSTITUTION
- SOVEREIGNTY OF THE LAW, and



- GOOD BEHAVIOUR AND MORALITY

**Appendix 2 – 1Malaysia Logo Rationale**



What makes *1Malaysia* unique is the diversity of our peoples. The logo inspired by 'Number 1' is to preserve and enhance this unity in diversity which has always been a Malaysian strength and remains our best hope for the future. All of us must respect each other, go beyond tolerance and build trust among each other and build trust between various ethnic groups.

*Jalur Gemilang* reflection inside the logo symbolizes different races, religions and cultures joining hands to form one nation, producing one harmonious community. Care and love serves as basic human needs for one prosperous country.

The colour red signifies strength, bravery and courage in facing challenges. The colour white symbolizes honesty and integrity. The dark blue canton represents the unity and harmony of the peoples of Malaysia. The crescent represents Islam as the dominant religion. The 14-pointed star symbolises the unity of the 13 states with the Federal Government. The yellow colour of the crescent and star is the royal colour of the Rulers.