



Main Story

Thailand
BangkokPost.com, 17 September 2008

Prime Minister No. 26

Deputy leader of People Power party (PPP) Somchai Wongsawat was elected prime minister by parliament as expected on Wednesday morning with a solid 298 votes from PPP and the coalition.

Thailand's new premier Deputy leader of the People Power party, Somchai Wongsawat was voted in as Thailand's 26th prime minister Wednesday. — Chanat Katanyu

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In Focus

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Dealing with diversity in education



AP PHOTO/ANDY WONG

SINCE independence in 1957, Malaysia has managed to develop its education system into a largely successful one, compared to its neighbors.

One educationist puts the country's literacy rate at 84%, the figures for males and females being 89% and 79%, respectively. Primary school enrolment is above 90 percent for both males and females, while enrolment at secondary school level is 66% for females and 58% for males, presumably reflecting the higher labour force demands on males. At the tertiary level, enrolment is 11% overall." Education is free for Malaysians in government schools.

Following on this success, the government has embarked on an ambitious Education Development Master Plan that runs from 2006 till 2010. Amongst others, a massive RM25 billion will be allotted for upgrading schools and in training teachers.

The national language, Bahasa Malaysia was implemented as part of a nationalistic push in 1970 to unite people of different races. While it worked well, the government in 2002 felt that Malaysians were losing out internationally by not mastering Science and Maths in English.

With widespread support, it implemented the use of English as a medium of teaching these two subjects in primary schools. But of late, this policy has come under scrutiny as students not proficient in English complained of having to struggle to grasp Science and Maths.

Recent statistics from the Education Ministry reveal that an estimated 35% of teachers also lack a good command of English but are asked to teach the two subjects anyway. This inevitably resulted in the deterioration of the passing rate, leading to calls for the policy to be reversed.

Also hotly debated in the country currently is the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) 1971 which, amongst others, bars students from active politics. Not surprisingly, this contentious piece of legislation, which has been around for more than a decade, has been opposed by student unions and academics. The government, however, insists students should steer clear of politics.

University of Malaya's law associate professor, Dr Azmi Sharom points out that the restrictive nature of the UUCA has curbed academic freedom and independent thinking on Malaysian campuses.

His concerns are echoed by fellow educationist, Elizabeth Lee of Sunway University College, who feels that leaders and educators themselves must be liberated and the universities liberalised, before they can encourage and shape enquiring young minds, capable of independent thinking and freedom of expression.

Lee also argues that there is a need to de-politicise education. "In developing countries, one can understand the need for more direction in the form of control from a government as to how to ensure that education reaches the masses readily," she explains. "Malaysia has gone beyond that stage."

Even so, some policies have led to racial polarisation amongst young Malaysians. The Malaysian constitution guarantees the existence of vernacular schools, namely Chinese and Tamil schools.

Over the years, these schools have gained popularity with 90% of Chinese students and 50% of Tamil students opting to study in them. Interestingly, some 70,000 non-Chinese students are also currently enrolled in Chinese vernacular schools.

The racial divide at such a young age among Malaysians has raised alarm amongst politicians and educationists. One sociologist, Dr Syed Farid Alatas has blamed it on the country's education system which tends to polarize people of different races – the result of one's failure to appreciate each other's religion and culture. "When children grow up learning to respect each other's cultures, racial polarisation would no longer be an issue," he contends.

Fear of worsening racial polarisation has led to the Government encouraging Vision Schools - a noble proposal which emphasizes the sharing of common facilities between students from national and vernacular schools in one compound, ostensibly to encourage closer interaction. Unfortunately, this has received lukewarm response especially in rural areas, on fears that it may lead to the eventual abolition of vernacular schools.

Apart from political influences, religion has also created segregation and racial polarisation in national schools. Malaysia's former Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister, Rais Yatim (now Foreign Minister) was one of the first who made salient observations that there is "too much religion, too much Islam. They (the non-Malays) became frightened. That is the big impediment to the races studying together under one roof."

Many feel the proliferation of religious schools, private schools, vernacular schools and home schooling may be in direct response to specific community needs. Analysts argue that over protection of one's turfs may well have frustrated even positive initiatives in new education policies from being implemented.

Educationists say that in order to curb racial segregation in schools, any serious education reform would have to take into consideration the ultimate aim of education and to draw on the strengths of each of the existing education streams, whether private or public, vernacular, mission or national, schools.

There are other shortcomings too. Instead of producing all-round personalities, as former Education Director-General Murad Mohd Noor is quick to point out, students are in a rat race from as early as primary school to score the maximum number of distinctions.

In his call for curriculum change, former CEO of De La Salle, Professor Tarcicius has called for a revival of mission schools, which he claims are concerned not only with delivering academic success but, more importantly, in developing character and imbuing universal values. There are also positive values that can be reinforced in other streams of education, without having to dismantle years of efforts to develop the curriculum.

Any form of revamp to the system has to take into consideration not only the strengths in each education model, but also to institute positive changes to policies without political interference and to take into consideration the diverse community background in the country.

Educationists, representing every community should be given a free hand to debate and draw up long-term policies to develop the curriculum, with minimum political interference. Policy implementation should take its natural course, instead of being changed at the whims and fancies of

politicians, without taking into consideration the implications.

There have also been calls to emphasize the teaching of more languages to produce a multi-lingual Malaysian society, to take advantage of the global economy.

Moey Yoke Lai, a former principal of Methodist Boys School, says to see great strides in the revamp of the national education system, it is important for passion to be instilled into the teaching profession. "At the root of it all, it is still the teachers who make a difference in the quality of our education system," she envisages.

So any thorough education revamp in the country's education system should be holistic, with the aim of developing individuals, irrespective of background.

By Stephen Ng

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