

PUBLIC RELATIONS TO STRENGTHENS PRO HUMAN RIGHTS CAUSE IN MALAYSIA

By Mohd Hamdan bin Adnan'

One of the main tasks of a Public Relations Professional is to remember events or days that are significant to his or her organisation and country. This is more so when it has a great impact on humanity. Therefore, it is sad that on the 21st of March, which is the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, very few Malaysians, including Public Relations Professionals, know that such a day or event exist.

On this day in 1960, police opened fire and killed 69 people peacefully demonstrating against apartheid "pass laws" in the township of Sharpeville, South Africa. The notorious passbooks were a repressive tool to control the movements of black South Africans.



The United Nations General Assembly has declared 21 March to be the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. It called on the international community not only to commemorate that tragedy, but also to work together to combat racism and discrimination wherever they exist.

It would be great that Public Relations Practitioners and its professional bodies are involved in promoting human rights activities like the United Nations' (UN) International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. After all Public Relations Professionals are supposed to be expert in promotions and events management to make our world a better place. Thus, it is in the best interest of the Public Relations Professionals to support human rights activities, however small the impact may be.



Hence, it is sad in Malaysia even government agencies that are supposed to eliminate racial discrimination and the media chose to ignore it or give it minimal coverage. This is sadder still in the light that the Government is daily shouting about 1Malaysia which is based on citizens equality.

In Malaysia a multi ethnic and multi religions country, the challenge for national unity will continue to haunt Malaysians as long as racial discriminations are perceived to exist. Hence, the concept of 1Malaysia as championed by the Prime Minister

to unite Malaysians must be seen as free from racial discriminations and seeking to redress it if any exist.

Slogan alone without much concrete evidences and actions to reflect the Government sincerity, credibility, and competency of the effort to unite all Malaysians as one people, it will be harder to realise. Therefore, it is imperative that Malaysia be a signatory to the International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) as well celebrate the 21st of March soonest.

However, being a party to the ICERD should not mean that Malaysia is unable to practice affirmative action or positive discrimination. It must be remembered that the May 13 racial conflict tragedy and the formulation of the former New Economic Policy is the consequence of racial imbalance.

The ICERD, a second-generation human rights instrument, commits its members to the elimination of racial discrimination and the promotion of understanding among all races. It also requires members to outlaw hate speech and criminalize membership in racist organizations. The ICERD also includes an individual complaints mechanism, effectively making it enforceable against its signatories. This has led to the development of a limited jurisprudence on the interpretation and implementation of the Convention.

The ICERD was adopted and opened for signature by the United Nations General Assembly on December 21, 1965, and entered into force on January 4, 1969. As of February 2011, it has 85 signatories and 174 parties. The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) monitors this Convention.

With the Prime Minister working hard to make 1Malaysia a reality, it is timely that Malaysia be a signatory to the ICERD to give credence to his call.

Birth of PROHAM

The newly formed Association for the Promotion of Human Rights or PROHAM had its launching and its first Annual General Meeting on 21st March 2011. In addition, it held a Roundtable Discussion jointly with the Bar Council on the topic of Eliminating Racial Discrimination as its first activity.



Launching PROHAM

PROHAM is established by former members of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia or more popularly known as SUHAKAM and the Royal Police Commission. It was registered on March 10, 2011 under the Registrar of Societies as

Persatuan Promosi Hak Asasi Manusia (PROHAM).

Proham will operate as an independent and impartial human rights organisation adhering to the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

During Proham first AGM, Tan Sri Simon Sipaun was elected Chairperson and Professor Dato' Mohd Hamdan Adnan as his Deputy. Dato' Dr Michael Yeoh was elected as Honorary Secretary and Datuk Dr Chiam Heng Keng as his Assistant. Dato' Siva Subramaniam was elected as Treasurer while Datuk KC Vohrah and Datuk Dr Denison Yayasooria as Committee Members. Tan Sri Dr Navaratnam and Tan Sri Dr Asiah were elected as internal auditors. Tun Mohamed Dzaidin bin Haji Abdullah was conferred the Honorary Membership.

According to Proham Constitution, it will work with all parties including the government, civil society and private sector. It will operate within the principles and values established in the UDHR and other UN International Human Rights statutes and Malaysia's Federal Constitution.

Proham established itself with nine objectives:

- 1. Promoting human rights among Malaysians**
- 2. Promoting indigenous people and ethnic minorities rights**
- 3. Engaging Government on the ratification of UN Human Rights Instruments & treaties**
- 4. Issuing press statements and position papers on current human rights concerns and issues**
- 5. Organising discussions on pressing human rights concern**
- 6. Conducting research on human rights concerns & issues**
- 7. Working closely with Suhakam, civil society and private sectors on matters pertaining to human rights**
- 8. Submitting recommendations to the Government and relevant organisations**

9. Networking with regional and international organisations in the promotion of human rights

According to Proham brochure, its major role will be to promote and create public awareness on the nine core human rights instruments. Malaysia had ratified only three. That is Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW, 1979), Convention on the rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006).

Proham provides five types of memberships:

1. Ordinary membership. It is open to former Suhakam members and other like-minded commissions.
2. Associate membership. It is open to individuals who have experience in the work of human rights.
3. Associate Corporate membership. It is open to private sector companies, which are committed to human rights.
4. Associate Voluntary Organisation. It is open to civil organisations committed to human rights.
5. Honorary membership. It is offered to distinguished person for contribution to human rights.



Tan Sri Simon as PROHAM chairperson giving his Introductory Remarks to the Roundtable Discussion on Racial Discrimination

Tan Sri Sipaun said that racial discrimination was a form of human rights violation which can stunt meritocracy. “What we hope to do is to use our pool of knowledge and experience to guide and assist human rights concerns in Malaysia.”

Sipaun said that although Proham is the new kid on the block, “collectively, we have over 100 years of experience on human rights issues... Human rights is an unending journey”. “Everyone has a role to play. It will not do to just leave it to Suhakam and other human rights bodies and organisations,” he added.



Participants listening intently to what Tan Sri Simon is saying about the impact of racial discrimination to a nation

Dato' Dr Michael Yeoh, Proham Secretary chaired The Roundtable discussion. The panel members were from United Nations Representative in Malaysia, Bar Council, Proham and the Institute Public Relations Malaysia.



Roundtable Panelists and chairperson Dato' Dr Michael Yeoh

The UN representative, Dr Lim Mui Kiang said: “There are nine core human rights treaties – six of them have not been signed by Malaysia and only three out of 12 human rights items have been ratified by the Malaysian government since 1960.”

“The government must look into eliminating all forms of discrimination, including torture and degrading treatment,” she added. All the panelists supported her suggestions.

Mohd Hamdan Adnan laments that the Malaysian mass media and the relevant government agencies gave minimal coverage to the International Day Against Racial Discrimination. He feels that the media and the relevant agencies in Malaysia should at least educate the people on the relevant covenants because it is essential in a country with a multi-racial/ethnic composition. Hamdan strongly believes that as long as racial discrimination is perceived to be rampant in Malaysia it will keep haunting the country. So efforts must be increased to eradicate such perceptions.

Added Hamdan: “The government shouts 1Malaysia a thousand times a day but isn't signing what it should to unite Malaysians for real. It is just talking, and not ratifying. I

strongly urge the Malaysian government to ratify the convention to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination.”

Nevertheless, Hamdan feels that the 1Malaysia effort to unite citizens and making them proud of being Malaysians must be supported by all. In fact the interested NGOs should form a monitoring committee to ensure its success.

Thus, Hamdan urges all relevant non-government organisations to be united in monitoring racial discriminations and taking the appropriate steps to minimise such incidents in Malaysia. Also, he urges all government agencies to make an effort to eradicate racial discriminations while ensuring government affirmative actions succeeded in meeting its objectives in creating a fair and just society. Hamdan reminds the relevants groups to ensure that actions to create a just and fair society be practiced within its context and that all parties benefited from it.

Another panelist representing Proham, Datuk Dr Denison stresses on the advantages of Malaysia signing the Convention Against Racial Discrimination. He strongly believes that it will benefits the country, especially the groups that are enjoying affirmative action.

Datuk Dr Chiam another panelist talks about preventing racial discrimination in schools. A study by SUHAKAM reveals that students do feel a certain amount of racial discriminations in the education system. Also, students tend to gather in schools in accordance to racial dan ethnic groupings.

The gathering propose that all efforts be made to ensure racial discriminations do not happen in schools and that students mix among all the various races. A clear program

should be drawn and implemented to improve racial mixings in schools so as to develop true Malaysians and a sense of belonging and love for Malaysia.



Tan Sri Simon Chairing Proham first Executive Committee meeting

Immediately after the roundtable, Proham had its first Council meeting. It is decided that Proham should be proactive and prioritise its activities in accordance to human rights need in Malaysia. It should try to be as visible as possible by being proactive and articulate in championing human rights without fear or favour. Human rights programs and financing were discussed to ensure Proham credibility and sustainability.



