

PLAYING ISOTHYMIA ETHNIC CARD ON HARMONY: MALAYSIA'S CURRENT STATE

Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah¹

Afi Roshezry Abu Bakar²

¹ Centre for Core Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Bandar Baru Nilai, 71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan.
(Email: azmirnizah@usim.edu.my)

² Journalism Department, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, 31900 Kampar, Perak. (Email: afi@utar.edu.my)

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Abstract: *Malaysia's rich cultural mosaic comprises various ethnic groups, with Malays, Chinese, Indigenous Sabah and Sarawak, and Indians being the predominant communities. This diversity has been central to Malaysia's national identity, yet it has also presented challenges in fostering genuine social cohesion. Central to this discourse is "isothymia," referring to the universal human desire for equal recognition and respect. This paper will analyze the trend of the interplay between ethnic identity and the pursuit of isothymia, which has profound implications for national harmony. This paper uses a qualitative design with a content analysis method to argue that the current isothymiotic syndrome is rising despite government social reformation efforts. It is pertinent to recognize and address the isothymiotic aspirations of all ethnic groups, which is crucial for Malaysia to foster genuine unity and social cohesion*

Keywords: *Ethnic Identity; Megalothymia; Social Cohesion; Madani*

Introduction

Malaysia's national identity is intricately composed of its different ethnic groups, with Malays accounting for around 60% of the population, Chinese 22%, Indians 7%, and various indigenous communities, collectively known as Bumiputera, providing the cultural and demographic base. This diversity, while a source of pride, has also caused challenges in achieving long-term community cohesion. Since gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia has faced the difficulty of integrating its heterogeneous community under a shared national vision, regularly navigating the delicate balance between preserving ethnic diversity and ensuring equitable development. The concept of isothymia, coined by political philosopher Francis Fukuyama, is fundamental to this discussion about identity and recognition. Isothymia, derived from the Greek words *iso* (equal) and *thymos* (spirit or desire), refers to the innate human yearning for recognition as equal in dignity and value. In Malaysia, ethnic groups want equitable treatment and recognition of their cultural identity within a multiethnic framework. However, historical practices, socioeconomic inequities, and political discourse have frequently hampered these efforts, resulting in a complicated interplay of cohesion and fragmentation.

This essay investigates the impact of isothymia on Malaysia's current interethnic relations. It examines the legacy of policies like the New Economic Policy (NEP) and their impact on ethnic perspectives, as well as current debates about inclusivity and meritocracy. This study seeks to clarify the paths to genuine national peace by situating Malaysia's experience within the larger theoretical framework of isothymia

Literature Review

Francis Fukuyama's concept of isothymia provides an effective framework for understanding Malaysia's ethnic dynamics. In *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (2018), Fukuyama argues that the human quest for recognition drives social and political action, often exacerbating group identities. In Malaysia, this struggle is evident in ethnic communities' competing desires for recognition of their achievements, rights, and cultural legacy within a state that has historically been organized along ethnic lines.

The New Economic Policy (NEP), implemented in 1970 following the 1969 racial riots, is a watershed moment in Malaysia's ethnic policy framework. The NEP was designed to fight poverty and economic inequities by promoting the Bumiputera demographic—which includes Malays and indigenous communities—through affirmative action in education, employment, and entrepreneurship. Over several decades, the policy significantly increased the Malay middle class while decreasing overall poverty rates, from 49.3% in 1970 to 5.6% in 2019 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Nonetheless, its ethnic-centric methodology has been criticized for increasing societal tensions. According to Gomez and Jomo (1999), the NEP established a patronage and dependency structure, developing perceptions of Malay dominance while marginalizing non-Malay communities, particularly Chinese and Indians, who felt overlooked despite their economic achievements. However, the dispute over this issue lingered.

The legacy of the NEP has both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, it addressed historical imbalances founded in colonial practices that benefited non-Malay urban elites, while also fueling a counter-narrative of marginalization among non-Bumiputera. This tension represents isothymia in action (Afi & Mohd Azmir, 2020). The Malays' desire for recognition of their socioeconomic advancement clashed with non-Malays' demands for equal chances in a

system seen to be biased against them. For example, the Chinese community, which dominates business, has frequently expressed dissatisfaction with quotas for public university admissions, while Indian communities highlight their underrepresentation in both the public and private sectors.

Recent scholarly debate has called for a rethinking of Malaysia's approach to ethnic justice. Shamsul (2008) suggests shifting from race-based policies to need-based frameworks that prioritize socioeconomic disadvantage over ethnicity. Proponents argue that this shift would better correspond with isothymiotic values by encouraging a sense of shared citizenship rather than ethnic antagonism. Political opposition to the removal of Bumiputera privileges remains strong, rooted in concerns about the probable loss of cultural and political hegemony, highlighting the deep link between isothymia and identity politics.

Emerging research emphasizes the significance of globalization and technology in changing ethnic identities. Social media has helped marginalized groups express their demands for intercultural education and equitable representation in governance (Nizah, 2024; Mohd Nizah, 2024). This changing picture suggests that there must be further research into how Malaysia might reconcile historical legacies with its modern ambitions for equality.

Persistent ethnic imbalances impede Malaysia's aim of national unity, despite decades of governmental initiatives. The NEP and its predecessors, such as the New Development Policy (1991-2000) and the National Vision Policy (2001-2010), sought to level the economic playing field, but their ethnic-specific focus has created allegations of favouritism. Non-Malay communities, particularly the Chinese and Indians, frequently point to limited access to government contracts, scholarships, and civil service employment as proof of systemic racism. In contrast, Malays defend these measures as required retribution for past inequities, thereby fostering a divisive discourse that undermines societal cohesion.

This tension invites important questions: How successful have Malaysia's ethnic-based policies been in fostering genuine equality? To what extent do isothymia desires for Malay advancement or non-Malay inclusion transcend or worsen racial divides? As Malaysia navigates its present multicultural identity, understanding these issues is critical for developing policies that promote peace rather than division.

This study aims to address two key questions. The goal is to analyze the idea of isothymia as a lens for understanding Malaysia's ethnic relations, with a focus on its impact on identity and recognition. It then delves into current concerns such as affirmative action, political representation, and cultural preservation, all of which are impacting Malaysian ethnic communities' pursuit of equal recognition.

This study takes a qualitative approach, utilizing content analysis methods. We examine policy documents, academic literature, and recent news items and events to determine the influence of isothymia on Malaysian ethnic relations.

Result and Discussion

In Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, where the Malay majority holds political and demographic dominance, the Chinese and Indian minority communities frequently navigate challenges to assert their equal standing. Isothymia, defined as the human desire for recognition as equal to others (Fukuyama, 1992), provides a lens for examining incidents between March 2022 and March 16, 2025, in which these groups sought parity in dignity, representation, and treatment. It reveals how these dynamics play out in contemporary Malaysia, reflecting the challenges and opportunities of balancing ethnic identities in a multiethnic state.

In May 2023, a political argument started when PAS president Tan Sri Abdul Hadi Awang claimed that the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which is mostly made up of Chinese people, was using Malay representatives to promote Chinese interests (The Star, 2023). This incited a pushback from both Chinese and Indian populations, with DAP defending its multiethnic credentials and Indian leaders from the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) emphasizing their political marginalization. This incident exemplifies isothymia, as both groups pursued equal legitimacy within Malaysia's political landscape, opposing Malay-centric narratives that undermined their contributions. Mohd Nizah et al. (2017) view this as an instance of ethnic minorities asserting their equality in political engagement, challenging prejudices that diminish their contributions.

In March 2023, a following controversy emerged when former Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad claimed that Malaysia's multi-ethnic society disproportionately favored the Chinese business community, hence marginalizing Malays (Malaysiakini, 2023). Indian speakers expressed their economic marginalization over Bumiputera privileges. This exemplifies isothymia via dual appeals for economic recognition: the Chinese sought validation of their meritocratic accomplishments, whereas the Indians demanded acknowledgment of their adversities, both contesting inequitable assessment. Mohd Nizah (2016) characterizes this as a political-social challenge, as minorities strive for equitable economic narratives amid systemic disparities.

The third case relates to a discussion in late 2022 on the financing of vernacular education, which escalated into early 2023. Demands from Malay nationalists to reduce support for Chinese and Tamil educational institutions prompted a unified statement from Chinese educators, including Dong Zong, and Indian leaders, who upheld their constitutional rights (Free Malaysia Today, 2023). This unified stance demonstrates isothymia, since both groups championed the equal preservation of their cultural heritage in opposition to assimilation pressures. Their request for parity with the Malay educational system underscores a shared challenge faced by minorities. In the framework of Mohd Nizah et al. (2017), this highlights a rare instance of inter-ethnic solidarity, illustrating the importance of cultural fairness within Malaysia's diverse culture.

In March 2024, a significant commercial controversy emerged when KK Mart, a retail chain favored by Chinese and Indian urban dwellers, faced grievances for selling socks bearing the inscription "Allah" and for positioning ham next to halal products (Mohd Nizah, 2024). Malay sides condemned the perceived insensitivity, while Chinese and Indian proponents championed the store's inclusivity, claiming equal commercial freedom. This story exemplifies isothymia, as both cultures sought equality in cultural acceptance, with the Chinese focusing on their

culinary customs and the Indians on their shopping rights, in consideration of Malay religious sensibilities. Mohd Nizah (2024) challenges this as an analysis of intercultural tolerance, advocating dialogue to reconcile ethnic and religious claims in communal regions.

Conversely, Jobstreet Malaysia's hiring figures, referenced in Fulcrum (2024), reveal a growing preference for Mandarin-literate applicants, with 20.8% of job advertisements on prominent platforms such as Jobstreet and LinkedIn requiring Mandarin proficiency as of late 2024. This trend, propelled by China's economic dominance, disadvantages Malays, who are less inclined to enroll in Chinese vernacular schools, with only 20% of SJKC pupils being non-Chinese, according to Fulcrum, 2024. Despite these trends, the situation enhances the role of Bahasa Malaysia as an official language.

In conclusion, these occurrences demonstrate that, from March 2022 to March 2025, the Chinese and Indian communities in Malaysia manifested *isothymia* through requests for equitable recognition across several spheres. Their appeals, whether opposing political stereotyping, economic scapegoating, educational reductions, business retaliation, or cultural marginalization, embody a collective minority quest for equality in a Malay-dominated society. The research of Mohd Nizah et al., (2017); Mohd Nizah, (2024) bolsters this viewpoint, emphasizing the imperative for tolerance and dialogue to address these challenges. Although certain examples remain conjectural due to data constraints, they correspond with Malaysia's persistent ethnic dynamics, illustrating the importance of *isothymia* in comprehending inter-minority relations.

Political developments within this timeframe further exemplify *isothymia* in action. The 2022 General Election (GE15) and its fallout into 2023 saw ethnic-based parties leveraging recognition narratives to mobilize support. The Malay-centric coalition Perikatan Nasional (PN) campaigned heavily on protecting Bumiputera privileges, framing it as a rightful acknowledgment of Malay contributions to nation-building. In contrast, the multiracial Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition emphasized a “Malaysian Malaysia” vision, appealing to non-Malay and progressive Malay voters seeking equal recognition across ethnic lines. The narrow victory of PH, followed by a unity government with Barisan Nasional (BN), reflected a public grappling with competing *isothymia* visions—one rooted in ethnic hierarchy, the other in shared citizenship. Post-election analyses noted heightened ethnic rhetoric on social media, with incidents of hate speech underscoring unresolved tensions (Merdeka Center, 2023).

Despite these frictions, there are glimmers of progress toward reconciling *isothymia* aspirations. The Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (SPV), rolled out with pilot initiatives in 2023, introduced need-based aid programs, such as the *Bantuan Sara Hidup* expansion, which prioritized low-income households regardless of ethnicity, with a new version of *Sumbangan Asas Rahmah* (SARA) under MADANI initiatives. Early data from the Ministry of Economic Affairs (2024) showed a 20% increase in non-Bumiputera recipients compared to previous schemes, reducing perceptions of ethnic bias and fostering a sense of collective recognition. Additionally, grassroots efforts, such as the 2024 “Harmony Walk” in Penang—attended by Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous leaders—demonstrated a public appetite for unity, with participants explicitly calling for policies that honor the dignity of all communities (The Sun Daily, January 15, 2025).

These cases reveal *isothymia* as both a divisive and unifying force. The NEP's legacy, while uplifting Malays, has left non-Malay groups like the Chinese and Indians, as well as marginalized indigenous communities, yearning for equal standing, amplified by economic crises, political shifts, and social movements. The brain drain of non-Malay youth, noted by the World Bank (2021) because of perceived inequities, persists, with emigration rates spiking post-2022 election amid ethnic polarization. Nevertheless, initiatives suggest that Malaysia can harness *isothymia* for cohesion by reframing recognition as a national, rather than ethnic, endeavour. Bridging these divides requires acknowledging historical grievances while crafting policies that transcend ethnic lines, a challenge that remains urgent as Malaysia navigates its multicultural future.

Launched by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in January 2023, the Malaysia MADANI framework aims to cultivate a "civil Malaysia" through six fundamental values: sustainability, prosperity, innovation, respect, trust, and compassion (The Star, 2023). This study analyses how MADANI addresses *isothymia* within ethnic communities, specifically the Chinese and Indians, while assuring Malays—the foundation of its political support—of their well-being. The analysis, informed by policy measures, economic strategies, and academic perspectives, including those of Mohd Nizah et al. (2017), underscores the government's dual commitment to inclusion and Malay-centric goals from March 2022 to March 16, 2025.

The MADANI framework openly identifies itself as inclusive, seeking to tackle *isothymia* by acknowledging the rights of all ethnic groups to fair development. Prime Minister X has asserted that MADANI denounces "cruelty towards any individual or race," advocating for a humanitarian economy that emphasizes universal access to opportunity (Bernama, 2023a). The 12th Malaysia Plan Mid-Term Review (12MP MTR) in September 2023 presented 17 "Big Bold" initiatives, encompassing poverty alleviation for all ethnic groups and infrastructural enhancements in underprivileged regions (Malay Mail, 2023). These activities indicate to the Chinese and Indian populations that their economic and social contributions are equally esteemed, challenging historical notions of exclusion. To reassure Malays, PMX has asserted that Islam, the Malay language, and Malay rights are fundamental, ensuring that inclusion does not undermine their constitutional entitlements (Channel News Asia, 2023).

The MADANI Economy Framework, introduced in July 2023, aims to implement structural changes to enhance Malaysia's global competitiveness and ensure equitable distribution of gains (Ministry of Finance, 2023). Initiatives like the Sumbangan Tunai Rahmah (STR), augmented to RM13 billion in Budget 2025, deliver financial assistance primarily to low-income households, especially rural Malays (Bernama, 2024). The framework simultaneously promotes international investment and industrial expansion—areas in which Chinese enterprises excel—catering to their *isothymia* aspiration for economic equality. Malay welfare is protected through specific subsidies and Bumiputera-centric initiatives, such as the Orang Asli Economic Development Program, which reconciles minority ambitions with majority stability (Malay Mail, 2023). Mohd Nizah (2016) contends that this dual strategy signifies a pragmatic reaction to ethnic economic disparities, preserving Malay confidence in governance.

MADANI fosters respect and compassion to alleviate conflicts stemming from *isothymia*. The government's reaction to events such as the March 2024 KK Mart controversy, where Malay objections against "Allah"-printed socks conflicted with Chinese and Indian advocates for

commercial liberty, demonstrates this equilibrium. PMX's administration facilitated discourse, boosting Malay religious sensitivities while promoting tolerance, thereby responding to minority demands for equitable cultural representation (Mohd Nizah, 2024). Moreover, expenditures in vernacular schools, despite resistance from Malay nationalists, indicate an acknowledgment of Chinese and Indian heritage, while Malay welfare is supported through increased funding for Islamic education (Free Malaysia Today, 2023). This dual-track program aims to reconcile ethnic identities while preserving the Malay foundation.

Politically, MADANI manages isothymia by cultivating trust among ethnic groups while strengthening Malay political supremacy. PMX's December 2023 discourse at the MADANI One-Year Anniversary underscored that the framework accommodates all ethnicities while preserving Islam's federal status and Malay rights (Prime Minister's Office, 2023). This reassurance helps ease Malay worries about losing their influence because of the minority groups wanting fair representation, especially seen in the reactions to the DAP's rise. The inclusion of the Chinese and Indians in the Unity Government and initiatives such as the Media Council address their aspirations for political representation (Global Voices, 2023).

Conclusion

Malaysia's national identity is shaped by its diverse ethnic composition, including Malays (60%), Chinese (22%), Indians (7%), and indigenous Bumiputera groups, creating a multifaceted, dynamic multicultural landscape. Since achieving independence in 1957, Malaysia has sought to unify its nation while addressing ethnic diversity and promoting equitable development. This essay analyzes the dynamics of isothymia, as articulated by Francis Fukuyama, which pertain to the human desire for equal respect and dignity and their impact on interethnic relations in Malaysia. The New Economic Policy (NEP), launched in 1970 after the 1969 racial riots, aimed to mitigate poverty and address economic disparities by favoring Bumiputera people through affirmative action initiatives. While it significantly reduced poverty (from 49.3% in 1970 to 5.6% in 2019) and broadened the Malay middle class, it intensified ethnic differences. Critics argue that it fostered Malay supremacy and marginalized non-Malay minorities, including the Chinese and Indians, who felt their contributions were underappreciated despite attaining economic success. This friction exemplifies isothymia, as ethnic groups seek equal recognition within a system perceived as unjust.

Recent events (2022–2025) highlight these dynamics. Political disputes, illustrated by PAS's 2023 accusation against DAP for promoting Chinese interests, coupled with economic discourse, such as Mahathir's claims of preferential treatment for the Chinese, highlight minority desires for political and economic parity. Conflicts over vernacular education funding and the 2024 KK Mart incident, in which socks inscribed with “Allah” incited outrage, underscore the difficulties of cultural recognition. Presently, employment trends that favor Mandarin speakers signify a shift in economic dominance, sometimes to the disadvantage of Malays.

The NEP's legacy is controversial, favoring Malays while intensifying non-Malay sentiments of inequality in education, employment, and governance. Scholars like Shamsul (2008) advocate for a shift from race-based to need-based policies to foster shared citizenship, yet resistance persists due to apprehensions regarding the possible erosion of Bumiputera

privileges. Globalization and social media amplify these isothymiotic needs, promoting inclusion. The 2022 election and the MADANI framework, instituted in 2023 under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, represent initiatives to address these concerns. MADANI promotes inclusivity by adhering to principles such as respect and equity, bolstered by initiatives like the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, which benefits all ethnic communities. Nonetheless, it harmonizes this with assurances of Malay rights, accommodating minority aspirations while maintaining majority stability.

To summarize, isothymia illuminates Malaysia's racial conflicts and ambitions for equity. While measures such as the NEP addressed existing disparities, they also exacerbated divisions. The path to unification necessitates recognizing the dignity of all groups and transcending ethnic boundaries—a struggle Malaysia continues to face as of 2025.

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