Beyond Decolonisation: Malay Positionality in Malaysia

Aiman Jamilah Abdul Rahman
Doctoral Researcher, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling, United Kingdom
a.b.abdulrahman@stir.ac.uk | teach.aiman@gmail.com
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2177-0001
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/aimanjamilah/

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I first encountered the term ‘decolonisation’ at a talk about ‘decolonising the curriculum’. As a Malaysian, the colonisation that I was most familiar with involved the military. Growing up, our history textbooks referred to the Portuguese, Dutch, British and Japanese as penjajah (meaning ‘colonisers’ in Malay) who came to Malaya to profit from our land. Therefore, I didn’t quite understand what ‘decolonising the curriculum’ meant. Is education at war? Are there people trying to invade it?

As my PhD research revolves around social justice, I began to encounter the term ‘decolonisation’ more frequently. I sought to explore further what it meant. Based on my own basic understanding, ‘decolonisation’ asserts that the current and mainstream ideologies, methods, ways, systems, beliefs, values and assumptions have been decided and controlled, therefore ‘colonised’, by a particular group of people, usually implied to be Whites from the Global North, referred to as the ‘colonisers’. Their ideas are promoted unquestioningly as the ‘right’ ideas; therefore, ‘decolonisation’ is the effort to contest the imposed standardisation of those ideas and allow other ideas to gain attention. Scholars commonly attribute ‘decolonisation’ towards the aim of amplifying the voices of the marginalised, such as, as highlighted within most foundational literature, those of indigenous communities (e.g., Chilisa & Bowman, 2023; Smith, 2022).

As my research participants are Malays in Malaysia, I attempted to reflect on how ‘decolonisation’ might be relevant to my context. Yes, Malays are considered indigenous to the land; they are neither White nor from the Global North. For nearly 450 years, they were colonised under multiple colonial empires. But something felt off. To refer to Malays as being part of the ‘marginalised’, particularly within the current Malaysian context, failed to resonate with my experiences growing up as a Malay in modern Malaysia. The Malays are considered the dominant racial group in Malaysia. Historically, all of Malaysia’s Prime Ministers have been Malays. I, too, have never felt marginalised as a Malay. If anything, I feel like I grew up

privileged. For example, when I finished school, I received a government scholarship to pursue studies overseas. Based on these points, it is extremely difficult to argue that the Malays are a marginalised group.

However, if I were to rewind to the colonial era, history did see a time when the Malays were marginalised. For example, from around the 1850s to the early 1900s during the British occupation, Malaya saw arrivals of immigrants from China and India in massive numbers, brought in to work at tin mines and rubber plantations (Gabriel, 2015). This caused a significant shift in the diaspora. The British inflicted a divide-and-rule policy that kept the Malays in rural areas with little opportunity for wider economic development (Choong, 2022; Leow, 2016). From this view, as the Malays were forced to stay in the margins, it is fair to say that the Malays were marginalised.

However, upon achieving independence in 1957, the Malays and other indigenous groups were granted special privileges, enforced through the constitution. This was a tactic used to appease the Malays for allowing the granting of citizenship to Chinese and Indian immigrants, as these groups made up significant segments of the population. This was an important move in forming unity to be able to gain national independence. At the same time, the special privileges affirmed the Malays' position as the natives of the land, while also acting as a form of affirmative action to redistribute wealth and encourage participation of the Malays in the economy. These special privileges include preferential treatment in employment, finance, land ownership and education (Choong, 2022), like the aforementioned scholarship I received. Fast forward nearly 70 years, or around three generations later, the substantial economic disparity that existed is almost untraceable. The majority of Malays nowadays have achieved upward mobility, thus confirming the impact of affirmative action.

Nonetheless, growing up as a Muslim, I have always struggled with the idea of such race-based privileges. Based on the teachings of Islam, which is the dominant religion in Malaysia, we are taught to treat everyone equally, regardless of their race or religion. I question why these race-based privileges are considered acceptable, and where the line is that would make these fall into racial discrimination.

Returning to our topic of decolonisation, in my view, the Malays do not seem representative of what we might refer to as being 'marginalised'; it does not seem to me that the Malays need their voices amplified. Therefore, the Malays would not be a group requiring 'decolonising' despite being formerly colonised. However, in recent years, several debates have sparked over the fairness and equity of the provision of the special privileges and how other Malaysian races are affected (e.g. Hassan, 2025). By having special privileges, could it be possible that the Malays have taken up a coloniser-like role instead? Asserting their

power and ideas to be accepted by everyone else as the status quo. If this was the case, it could mean that other racial groups are the ones falling under marginalisation.

Following a similar thought trajectory, not too long ago, I read Paulo Freire's (1970/2005) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, in which he introduced the dichotomy of roles between the oppressed and the oppressor. Reading this work forced a reality check: am I part of the oppressed or the oppressor? Freire spoke of the oppressors' perceived inherent right to have more, and their view of others as undeserving. During a class discussion with Malaysian adult students, I prompted them to contemplate the relevance of the Malays' special privileges within the modern Malaysian context. However, I was quickly met with defensiveness; several argued that the privileges should never be questioned as they were birthrights, granted to the Malays as the natives of the land. In my view, this reaction identified more with the oppressor rather than the oppressed.

Simultaneously, Freire (1970/2005) also cautioned that the oppressed, in their pursuit of liberation, could take on the image of the oppressor. They would adopt the way the oppressors think and act. In explicating their sense of liberation, they may even inflict harm on other oppressed members. I wonder if this is the actual case. The Malays, having previously faced colonisation, in attempting to break out of it, could have thought that to make progress, they must follow the ways of the coloniser. Therefore, upon gaining some level of power, the liberated Malays utilised it against others who seemed less superior. In this case, it becomes unclear whether they might be part of the oppressor or the oppressed.

Therefore, I believe there is a need to recognise a third, middle group: the mediators. This group is one that may or may not have experienced oppression themselves, but have no intention to exercise oppression onto others. It is possible that the mediators or their ancestors have been part of either of the former two groups, but they have adequate power to choose not to be. This group is essential since they are the ones who actually have the most power, as they can bridge the gap between the oppressor and the oppressed. The oppressed admire the mediators, as the mediators possess power and help advocate for the oppressed, while the oppressors realise the power the mediators have and therefore know not to mess with them.

Nonetheless, there is still the question of how the mediators, or even the oppressed, ensure that they do not fall to become oppressors themselves. This is where I feel the discourse around decolonisation may be missing; it talks about giving voice to the marginalised and empowering through action. What it lacks is something that Freire (1970/2005) had already addressed; in achieving liberation, it is not adequate to only focus on action, but action must go hand in hand with reflection. The mediators, those who are and those who wish to be, must practise constant reflection to keep their actions in check. The

Malays may have special privileges, but they must keep check to ensure that these privileges do not instead cause oppression towards others.

In positioning the Malays in modern Malaysia, I believe many have managed to accumulate enough power to fall safely within the mediator group. They are no longer marginalised, nor do they necessarily require decolonising efforts to amplify their voices. Since the provision of Malay privileges is not only part of affirmative action but also a historical move towards achieving unity and independence, it seems unlikely that these privileges will be altered anytime soon. Therefore, the Malays, just as any other liberated groups, must remember that the power they now hold also comes with the responsibility to ensure that justice, dignity, and opportunity are extended to all.

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