



PRESS STATEMENT | 5 APRIL 2024  
*For Immediate Release*

---

## **Fostering Harmony: SERI's Call to Action Amidst Rising Religious and Racial Tensions**

**5 April 2024** - Amidst the backdrop of escalating religious and racial tensions in our nation, Social and Economic Research Initiative (SERI) believes that strengthening unity and harmony is not just necessary, but imperative. Recent events, involving the 'Allah' sock scandal sold at KK Mart, have sparked anger among the Malay Muslim community. The store's director and founder were charged under Section 298 of the Penal Code for intentionally wounding religious sentiments of others while directors of Xin Jian Chang Sdn Bhd faced impending charges under Section 109 of the Penal Code. Despite calls for calm, three KK Mart outlets were attacked with Molotov cocktails at Tapah, Kuantan and Kuching. The Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Sultan Ibrahim, has granted an audience to the founder and executive chairman of KK Mart, during which they extended their sincere apologies to His Majesty and the entire Muslim community for the recent controversy. In response, His Majesty issued a decree urging careful observation regarding products sold and cautioned all parties against exploiting or prolonging the situation. The King also emphasized the imperative role of leaders in fostering unity among Malaysians, rather than sowing division.

### **Reassess Existing Laws on Hate Speech**

Currently, Malaysia does not have a comprehensive law regulating hate speech as it is dealt by several laws which are The Sedition Act, The Communications and Multimedia Act, The Printing Presses and Publications Act and The Penal Code. The significance of this event lies not in the worsening of religious and racial tensions, but rather existing policies need to be strengthened to ensure national unity and harmony. SERI calls for a thorough review of existing hate speech legislation due its vagueness, which can lead to inconsistent enforcement.

## **Enact Harmony Charter and National Harmony and Reconciliation Commission Bill to Strengthen Unity**

In March of this year, the National Unity Minister announced the ongoing study of a Harmony Charter, intended to provide a comprehensive framework for fostering unity across the nation. While SERI wholeheartedly endorses the implementation of this charter, it is crucial that beyond mere symbolism, it is developed into a tangible set of actions with meaningful impact to the nation.

Hence, it is imperative that the Harmony Charter be complemented by the introduction of the National Harmony and Reconciliation Bill, originally introduced in 2019 as a Private Member's Bill by Mujahid Yusof Rawa. The Bill aims to establish the National Harmony and Reconciliation Commission, charged with the vital role of fostering national harmony, unity, reconciliation, integration, equality, and non-discrimination. Additionally, the Commission is mandated to raise awareness and provide education on these matters. The Commission should also comprise diverse representatives from various ethnic and religious backgrounds in Malaysia. This inclusive composition would enable them to effectively advise, assist, and make recommendations to the government on matters crucial to national unity.

### **Strengthening Unity Requires More Community Level Initiatives**

Nonetheless, SERI emphasizes that top-down policies alone do not suffice. Rather, a bottom-up process of strengthening national unity should be supported and advocated. In a prior commentary published by SERI, we championed the use of sports as a tool for nation building within schools because sports can naturally unite students from various backgrounds at a young age. For example, the SportsUnite programme organizes unity-focused sports initiatives in primary schools where each team must consist of more than two ethnicities. Therefore, SERI stresses the importance of adopting similar community-level approaches, underscoring the need for government support to allocate funding for these non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Moments of unity, such as those experienced during sports events, should be amplified. Take, for instance, the collective support Malaysians demonstrated when squash player S. Sivasangari won the PSA World Tour Gold-level title, becoming the first Malaysian woman to win a gold-level tournament. Another instance could be observed during Lee Chong Wei's medal-winning performances at the Olympics. Regardless of background, the entire nation rallied behind our national athletes, showcasing the potential for unity across diverse communities.

Beyond sports, cultural festivals and celebrations offer an excellent avenue for nurturing unity. The tradition of open houses is deeply ingrained in Malaysian culture, observed during festivities such as Hari Raya, Deepavali, or Chinese New Year. As the month of Ramadan draws to a close, SERI hopes that this period of spiritual reflection and celebration be extended beyond ourselves as individuals, to also celebrate the colour and diversity that makes us uniquely Malaysian.

*SERI is a non-partisan think-tank dedicated to the promotion of evidence-based policies that address issues of inequality, particularly at the intersection of technology and society. For more information, please visit [www.seri.my](http://www.seri.my) or email us at [hello@seri.my](mailto:hello@seri.my).*