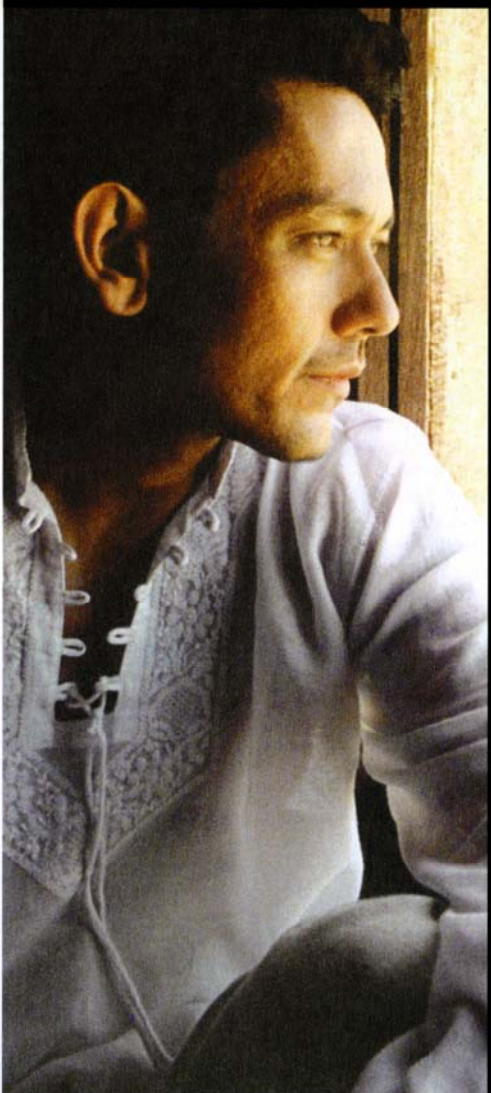




Farish A. Noor

Political Scientist



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Every Merdeka, it's the same thing. Bangsa Malaysia, government leaders cry out. Commercials on TV and ads in newspapers from big corporations strike the right pose to make us feel good about ourselves, with images of Chinese, Malay, Indian and lain-lain all getting along wonderfully. It's enough to make one all warm and fuzzy inside.

But here are the facts: The ruling government is still comprised of ethnic-based parties. Policies, whether social, educational or economic, still continue to be discussed and implemented along colour lines. Only 10% of Chinese Malaysian students attend national-language primary schools. There have been reports of race-based fights in the national service. So beneath the facade, resentment, mistrust and fear still exists between the different ethnic groups, perfect for politicians to exploit these shortcomings to their advantage.

"If the old colonialists like Raffles, Swettenham, Minto and Farquahar were miraculously brought back to life today, they would probably say 'Why, these natives are better at colonising themselves than we were!'" says political scientist Farish Noor.

Ripping apart the notion that Malaysian identity is static, Farish has been particularly vocal about his views on our nation. "We need to understand that any sense of national belonging has to be based on an understanding of identity that is composite, fluid, open and constantly being negotiated," he says. "Identities are dynamic and they evolve, and for that reason we—the ordinary citizens—ought to get involved in that very public and open process of negotiation."

When the infamous Zouk raid happened, Farish was one of few Muslims who publicly voiced uproar, not just at the way the raid was conducted, but the appropriateness of moral policing in our supposedly democratic society. And he didn't stop there, also admonishing non-Muslims in a *Malaysiakini* article for merely standing by while their friends were mistreated.

When proposals were made to segregate audiences along gender lines at entertainment events and restrict all forms of entertainment programmes while the Muslim call to prayer is heard, Farish wrote unflinchingly in *Kakiseni*: "The pursuit of one's personal beliefs cannot be at the cost of the marginalisation of others; though this simple fact has obviously eluded some of the religious functionaries of our state..."

Progressive opinions like those are bound to incite the wrath of conservatives. In 2004, he wrote an article deemed to be critical of the *ulama* in *Harakah*, causing those who disagreed with his views to protest vehemently. The then-editor of the PAS organ, Zulkifli Sulong, was subsequently replaced.

While many perceive him as being focused only on matters of religion, Farish is ultimately concerned about getting people to think about what it really means to be Malaysian. "My worry about the present state of Malaysia stems from the feeling that Malaysians are fundamentally an apathetic and passive lot; who for a host of reasons shy away from any public debate out of sheer selfishness or fear of reprisal," he says. "But as long as this be the case, we cannot ever expect a brave nation to emerge; one that is able to look itself in the face and admit to its collective mistakes and be courageous enough to entertain collective aspirations for a better future."

Agree with him or not, it's hard to deny Farish, who is based at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin, speaks and writes with clarity and purpose, arguing convincingly with facts and historical examples instead of the empty rhetoric we've become accustomed to. To many, his is the voice of sanity in an increasingly insular society. Unfortunately, few who agree with him are prepared to do so out loud.

"In my personal interaction with Malaysians in public and on the Internet, I come across many who share similar views. But none of them are prepared to say this in public," he says. "We all know the ship is riddled with holes and is sinking, but no-one has the guts to sound the alarm. That, for me as a political scientist, is the definition of an imminent crisis in the making." *Brian Yap*