Managing Nation Building: Malaysian Scholars Perspective

Aizathul Hani Abd Hamid*, Khairol Anuar Kamri

Department of Social Science, Centre for General Studies and Cocurricular, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, 86400 Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, Johor, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author**

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91100288

Received: 20 November 2025; Accepted: 26 November 2025; Published: 08 December 2025

ABSTRACT

This article explores the discourse of nation-building in Malaysia by examining the contributions of three leading scholars which are Prof. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, Prof. Abdul Rahman Embong, and Prof. Mansor Mohd Noor. Shamsul emphasizes the dialectics between two social realities and the concept of nations-of-intent; Abdul Rahman highlights the role of the nation-state and the middle class in shaping national identity; while Mansor focuses on the thinning of ethnic boundaries and the emergence of a national ethos through micro-level interactions. By conducting a comparative analysis, this study argues that nation-building in Malaysia is a continuous, unfinished project requiring the integration of official discourse, socio-economic structures, and everyday lived experiences. The article further situates Malaysian scholarship within broader theoretical debates and discusses its contemporary implications for policy, education, and social cohesion.

Keywords: Nation-building, Malaysia, Shamsul A.B., Abdul Rahman Embong, Mansor Mohd Noor, national ethos, middle class, ethnic boundaries, identity politics, plural society.

INTRODUCTION

The process of nation-building has long been a central theme in the academic discourse of political sociology, anthropology, and ethnic relations. In Malaysia, the question of how to forge unity within diversity has been a pressing challenge since independence in 1957. Unlike state-building, which primarily concerns the construction of administrative and institutional frameworks, nation-building revolves around the more elusive task of cultivating a sense of collective belonging, shared identity, and solidarity across ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines. Malaysia's plural society, shaped by colonial legacies and post-independence policies, requires constant negotiation between state-led initiatives and the everyday realities of its citizens. In this context, the intellectual contributions of Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, Abdul Rahman Embong, and Mansor Mohd Noor are indispensable to understanding the complexities of Malaysian nation-building. This article expands on their key ideas while situating them in global theoretical debates and contemporary challenges.

Nation-Building: Global Theoretical Debates

Globally, the discourse on nation-building has been shaped by competing theoretical frameworks. Ernest Renan famously defined the nation as a 'daily plebiscite,' underscoring the importance of collective will and consent [7]. Benedict Anderson advanced the notion of nations as 'imagined communities,' constructed through shared narratives, symbols, and institutions [1]. Postcolonial perspectives, particularly J.S. Furnivall's critique of plural societies, highlighted the challenges of colonial legacies that left fragmented and segmented populations [4]. In Southeast Asia, scholars often describe nation-building as a top-down, state-led project designed to integrate diverse groups through policies of education, language, and economic redistribution. Yet, bottom-up processes such as everyday practices of negotiation and cultural exchange are equally crucial.

Malaysia reflects this duality. Official policies such as the New Economic Policy (NEP), the Rukun Negara, and national education curricula have aimed to institutionalize a sense of common identity. Simultaneously, the lived experiences of Malaysians in schools, workplaces, and communities reveal the ongoing, contested nature of this

project. The interplay between state narratives and everyday practices illustrates the complexity of building a nation in a plural society.

Shamsul Amri Baharuddin: Two Social Realities And Nations-Of-Intent

Shamsul Amri Baharuddin's framework offers one of the most influential interpretations of identity formation in Malaysia. He introduced the concept of two social realities which consist the 'authority-defined reality' and the 'everyday-defined reality' [[8] The former encompasses state-driven narratives, laws, policies, and institutional structures that articulate what it means to be Malaysian. The latter reflects the lived experiences of ordinary citizens in negotiating ethnic, cultural, and economic relations. National identity, according to Shamsul, emerges not from one reality alone but from the dialectics between these two spheres [8].

Within this framework, Shamsul developed the concept of 'nations-of-intent' which competing visions of the nation advanced by different groups. For instance, projects such as 'Bangsa Melayu,' 'Bangsa Malaysia,' or the 'Islamic Ummah' represent divergent yet overlapping attempts to define national belonging [9]. These competing narratives illustrate the contested nature of Malaysian identity. Importantly, Shamsul highlights the idea of 'stable tension,' a state in which ethnic and cultural conflicts persist but are managed and contained through institutions, negotiation, and political compromise [9]. This notion resonates strongly with Malaysia's post-independence history, where moments of crisis, such as the 1969 ethnic riots, gave rise to state interventions like the National Economic Policy (NEP), which simultaneously addressed economic inequalities while entrenching certain ethnic-based policies.

Malaysia as a "State without Nation"

Drawing from Shamsul's seminal argument, Malaysia may be more accurately described as a "state without nation" [10]. The colonial state apparatus which comprising its legal framework, bureaucratic institutions, and territorial demarcations, remained largely intact after independence in 1957. While the "state" as an entity was firmly established, the "nation" as an imagined community imbued with a shared sense of belonging has remained an unfinished agenda. Unlike the European ideal of the nation-state, where state and nation converge, Malaysia exemplifies the postcolonial condition in which political sovereignty did not automatically translate into cultural or national cohesion.

This disjuncture is especially salient in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies such as Malaysia, where the anti-colonial struggle itself was fragmented along ethnic and ideological lines. As a result, independence did not resolve questions of national identity; instead, it institutionalized a state framework within which multiple visions of nationhood continued to compete. Consequently, recurring debates on education, language, religion, and cultural identity are not merely policy disputes but expressions of Malaysia's persistent condition as a "state without nation". This condition provides fertile ground for the articulation of diverse "nations-of-intent", each seeking to define the cultural principle of national identity.

Competing Nations-of-Intent in Malaysia

Building on this, Shamsul's concept of "nations-of-intent" refers to the coexistence of multiple, often competing, visions of what Malaysia as a nation-state should be [10]. A nation-of-intent encompasses a programmatic idea of territory, population, language, culture, symbols, and institutions that bind a community together. In Malaysia, the absence of a singular, uncontested national identity has enabled various political elites and social groups to project their own competing nations-of-intent, some of which have been institutionalized through party platforms, state policies, and cultural practices.

Three notable examples illustrate this contestation. First, "Bangsa Malaysia", promoted during Mahathir Mohamad's premiership (1981–2003), envisaged unity through national integration while retaining the constitutionally enshrined privileges of the bumiputera. Second, the "Malaysian Malaysia" vision, originally articulated by Lee Kuan Yew in 1963 and later championed by the Democratic Action Party (DAP), demanded absolute equality irrespective of ethnicity or religion, thus calling for radical constitutional reform, a proposal strongly resisted by Malay political elites. Third, local experiments in Kelantan and Sabah, where state-level

governments at times articulated alternative versions of nationhood, further exemplify how subnational actors have sought to redefine aspects of Malaysian identity within their own jurisdictions, albeit with limited success.

Taken together, these examples underscore that Malaysia is not characterized by "one state, one nation," but rather by one state, several nations. This plurality of nations-of-intent demonstrates that nation-building in Malaysia is not a linear progression toward a singular national identity, but an ongoing process of negotiation and contestation. The coexistence of these competing visions highlights both the challenges and the dynamism of Malaysian nation-building: unity is continuously sought, yet perpetually refracted through divergent ideological, cultural, and political projects.

Abdul Rahman Embong: Nation-State And The New Middle Class

Abdul Rahman Embong situates nation-building within the broader historical and political project of constructing the nation-state [2]. He argues that the Malaysian state has played a decisive role in shaping national identity through development policies, integration efforts, and institution-building. In "Negara-Bangsa: Proses dan Perbahasan" (2001), he explores the state's central role in mediating competing demands of ethnicity, religion, and modern citizenship.

His later work, "State-Led Modernization and the New Middle Class in Malaysia" (2002), analyzes the socio-economic transformations brought about by state-led modernization. The emergence of a new middle class, a product of educational expansion and economic development, is identified as a key driver of democratic values, meritocracy, and social mobility. For Abdul Rahman, the middle class is not only an economic category but also a political force that can foster inclusive citizenship and strengthen national cohesion. This perspective links nation-building directly to economic inclusivity and modernization, offering insights into the ways class formation shapes identity politics.

Abdul Rahman Embong situates nation-building within the broader historical and political project of constructing the Malaysian nation-state. He emphasizes that this is not a finite achievement but rather a continuous process that requires the integration of economic development, social cohesion, and political inclusivity [2]. His works which ranging from Negara-Bangsa: Proses dan Perbahasan (2001) to State-Led Modernization and the New Middle Class in Malaysia (2002) and Rethinking Ethnicity and Nation-Building (2007), consistently stress the interplay between state-led modernization, class formation, and the management of ethnic diversity.

Nation-Building as a Continuous and Unfinished Process

For Abdul Rahman, nation-building in Malaysia must be understood as an ongoing, unfinished project. Unlike state-building, which focuses on the consolidation of administrative and institutional frameworks, nation-building involves cultivating solidarity, belonging, and inclusive citizenship across ethnic and religious divides. In the Malaysian context, this process is deeply shaped by colonial legacies, the negotiated independence of 1957, and the persistent salience of ethnic politics.

Importantly, Abdul Rahman argues that nation-building cannot be reduced to inter-ethnic accommodation alone. While ethnic compromise is necessary, the project of nation-building extends to institutional reforms, equitable economic policies, and the creation of shared political culture. Policies such as the New Economic Policy (NEP) demonstrate this dual character: while they successfully reduced poverty and expanded access to education, they also reinforced ethnic categorizations that continue to shape identity politics. As such, nation-building in Malaysia is marked by ambivalence that show progress in socio-economic terms coupled with persistent contestations over identity and belonging.

The Role of the Middle Class and the Depoliticisation of Ethnicity

One of Abdul Rahman's most significant contributions is his focus on the emergence of a new middle class as a critical agent in nation-building. This middle class, largely produced by state-led modernization, educational expansion, and economic growth under the NEP, embodies more than an economic category. It represents a political and social force with the potential to nurture democratic values, meritocracy, and inclusive citizenship.

The middle class, by virtue of its diversity and inter-ethnic composition, has the capacity to transcend parochial identities and advocate for broader notions of Malaysian nationhood.

However, Abdul Rahman also warns of the fragmentation within the middle class, arising from income inequality, urban-rural disparities, and the pressures of globalization. Such internal divisions weaken its ability to function as a cohesive agent of nation-building. To overcome this, he highlights the urgent need for the depoliticisation of ethnicity. Ethnicity, though a social construct, has become a "social fact" in Malaysia, entrenched through institutions, policies, and political mobilization. Nation-building, therefore, requires moving beyond ethnic categorization toward a citizenship-based identity. This shift does not imply erasing diversity but ensuring that ethnic difference is no longer the primary axis of political contestation.

In sum, Abdul Rahman presents nation-building as a dialectical process that must balance economic inclusivity with political reforms. By strengthening the middle class and depoliticising ethnicity, Malaysia can foster a more inclusive and resilient national identity.

Mansor Mohd Noor: Thinning Ethnic Boundaries and National Ethos

Mansor Mohd Noor approaches nation-building from the perspective of micro-level social interactions. His research underscores the importance of repeated, everyday encounters in blurring rigid ethnic boundaries [5]. In Kerencaman Sosial dan Penipisan Batas Etnik, he posits that sustained interactions in schools, universities, workplaces, and neighborhoods gradually erode rigid ethnic divisions, creating shared spaces of belonging [5].

Mansor introduces the concept of a 'national ethos,' a shared set of values emerging from the collective experience of living together [5]. He views educational institutions, particularly through the 'Ethnic Relations' module, as critical sites for shaping interethnic understanding among the younger generation. In later works on 2021, Mansor expands this idea by linking ethnic boundary change to broader questions of stability and cohesion in Malaysia [6]. By emphasizing bottom-up processes, Mansor highlights the role of micro-level interactions in complementing macro-level policies and structures [6].

Through this perspectives, Mansor Mohd Noor's scholarship highlights how nation-building in Malaysia cannot be reduced to state-led projects alone, but must also be understood through everyday encounters that gradually transform ethnic boundaries ([5], [6]). His analysis, however, does not remain confined to micro-level interactions. Instead, it engages with broader political discourses that shape how ethnicity, class, and religion are mobilized within Malaysian society ([5], [6]).

Everyday Interactions and the Thinning of Ethnic Boundaries

Central to Mansor's work is the idea that repeated, everyday interactions in schools, universities, workplaces, and neighborhoods lead to the gradual thinning of rigid ethnic boundaries [6]. These encounters foster trust, cooperation, and a sense of shared belonging, eventually forming what he terms a "national ethos." This ethos reflects a lived multiculturalism where Malaysians of different backgrounds learn to accommodate one another through social practices rather than formal assimilation.

Empirical studies between 1990 and 2006 demonstrate that self-interest often overrides ethnic preference: Malays and Chinese, for instance, prioritized material gains, professional obligations, and neighborhood relations over ethnic loyalty. Such findings underscore that ethnic identity, while real, becomes secondary when confronted with economic opportunities, educational aspirations, or social ties that cut across group boundaries. In this sense, Mansor's argument reinforces the importance of micro-level integration as a complement to state policies and institutional frameworks ([5], [6]).

Political Discourses, Social Conflicts, and the National Ethos

Mansor also situates these micro-level dynamics within the larger political discourses of nation-building [5]. Historical trajectories of Malaysian politics reveal how ethnic boundaries are both reproduced and reconfigured by ideological contestations. Early nationalist movements ranged from UMNO's Malay nationalism and PAS's Islamic orientation to socialist and communist alternatives, while MCA and MIC institutionalized ethnic

representation within a consociational model. Later, the introduction of the Malaysian Malaysia slogan by PAP and DAP, and PAS's Islamic state discourse after the Iranian Revolution, injected new ideological dimensions into the debate.

These contestations became especially visible during the Reformasi era of the late 1990s, when the Asian financial crisis and political upheaval mobilized marginalized groups across ethnic lines. Conflicts in Kampung Rawa (1997) and Kampung Medan (2001) highlighted how urban poor Malays and Indians clashed not purely along ethnic lines but as a result of socio-economic vulnerabilities. At the same time, these episodes also gave rise to new forms of cross-ethnic solidarity under NGOs and reform movements.

For Mansor, such developments reveal two key insights: first, that political stability remains the paramount concern of Malaysians across ethnic groups, often outweighing governance or economic issues; and second, that the emergence of a national ethos is inseparable from how society collectively manages both conflict and cooperation [5]. This ethos does not erase ethnic boundaries but reframes them within a framework of pragmatism, moderation, and shared responsibility for stability.

Comparative Analysis

Although Shamsul, Abdul Rahman, and Mansor emphasize different dimensions of nation-building, their perspectives converge in rejecting assimilationist models that seek to erase diversity. Shamsul offers the most discursive interpretation, framing Malaysia as a "state without nation" where multiple nations-of-intent coexist under conditions of "stable tension" ([8], [9]. [10]). His framework underscores the interplay between authority-defined and everyday-defined realities, reminding us that national identity is not imposed unilaterally but negotiated across multiple spheres of social life.

Abdul Rahman, by contrast, provides a more structural account. He situates nation-building within the historical project of state-led modernization and insists that it must be understood as a continuous and unfinished process. For him, the emergence of a new middle class, shaped by education and economic growth, is a vital force for democratic values and inclusive citizenship. Yet, he also cautions that this class is fragmented by internal inequalities, which weakens its integrative potential. Nation-building, therefore, requires not only economic inclusivity but also the depoliticisation of ethnicity so that citizenship, rather than ethnic identity, becomes the foundation of the national project.

Mansor contributes an interactionist and discursive perspective that highlights how repeated everyday encounters gradually thin ethnic boundaries and generate a shared national ethos. His work demonstrates that interethnic trust and cooperation are not merely products of state policies but are cultivated in daily practices across schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods. At the same time, he situates these processes within broader ideological contestations, from Islamism to Malaysian Malaysia to the Reformasi movement, showing how grassroots interactions are inseparable from the political discourses that shape them ([5], [6]).

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that Malaysian nation-building is best understood as a multi-layered process in which discursive negotiations, structural transformations, and everyday practices reinforce and challenge one another. National identity in Malaysia is therefore not the outcome of a singular process, but the dynamic product of the constant interplay between state narratives, socio-economic changes, and lived multiculturalism.

Contemporary Implications

The theoretical contributions of these three scholars remain highly relevant in addressing contemporary challenges. Shamsul's notion of nations-of-intent has become increasingly salient in the digital era, where social media has emerged as a key arena for the articulation of competing visions of Malaysia. Online platforms amplify both inclusive narratives of multicultural citizenship and divisive ethno-religious discourses, demonstrating how authority-defined realities crafted by state institutions now operate alongside and are contested by everyday-defined realities shaped in digital spaces ([8], [9]. [10]).

Abdul Rahman's emphasis on the middle class also takes on renewed importance in the context of globalization and economic uncertainty. Once heralded as a stabilizing force, the middle class is now fragmented by widening inequalities, urban–rural divides, and the precarity of gig economies. Global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the vulnerabilities of this class, weakening its ability to serve as an agent of integration. Sustaining nation-building under these conditions requires policies that not only strengthen the economic resilience of the middle class but also ensure equitable access to education, housing, and social protection.

Mansor's concept of the national ethos retains particular significance in an era marked by urbanization and transnational migration [6]. Schools, universities, and workplaces remain crucial spaces for interethnic interaction, but these institutions now face new pressures from global cultural flows and shifting demographics. In this context, the cultivation of pragmatic coexistence, civic values, and intercultural competencies becomes essential to maintaining stability and fostering trust.

At the international level, Malaysia's experience continues to offer lessons for other plural societies. Its long-standing negotiation between unity and diversity illustrates both the difficulties and possibilities of sustaining national identity in a fragmented social landscape. As Malaysia strengthens its regional and global engagements, from ASEAN to the wider Islamic world, the challenge will be to project a resilient identity that reflects its plural character while navigating the competing demands of globalization and local diversity.

CONCLUSION

Nation-building in Malaysia remains a dynamic, contested, and unfinished project. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin demonstrates that Malaysia, as a state without nation, is characterized by the persistence of multiple nations-of-intent whose coexistence both sustains and destabilizes the national project. Abdul Rahman Embong emphasizes that economic modernization and the emergence of a new middle class are central to building national cohesion, yet he also highlights that the project cannot succeed unless ethnicity is depoliticised and citizenship becomes the primary organizing principle [3]. Mansor Mohd Noor shows that the thinning of ethnic boundaries and the development of a national ethos emerge from everyday interactions, but these processes must be situated within larger political discourses and conflicts that continue to shape Malaysian society [6].

When viewed together, these perspectives reveal that successful nation-building in Malaysia depends on balancing three interdependent dimensions: discursive inclusivity that manages multiple visions of nationhood, structural transformation that ensures equitable socio-economic development and strengthens the middle class, and everyday praxis that nurtures trust, cooperation, and shared responsibility. The integration of these dimensions is crucial if Malaysia is to cultivate a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable national identity capable of withstanding the challenges of the twenty-first century.

REFERENCES

1. Anderson, B. (2006). Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. Verso.
2. Embong, A. R. (2001). Negara-bangsa: Proses dan perbahasan. Bangi: Penerbit UKM.
3. Embong, A. R. (2002). State-led modernization and the new middle class in Malaysia. Palgrave Macmillan.
4. Furnivall, J. S. (1948). Colonial policy and practice: A comparative study of Burma and Netherlands India. Cambridge University Press.
5. Mansor, M. N. (2012). Kerencaman sosial dan penipisan batas etnik. Bangi: Institut Kajian Etnik (KITA).
6. Mansor, M. N. (2021). Changing ethnic boundary, social differentiation and the Malaysian nation: Roots of Malaysian stability. Bangi: KITA-UKM.
7. Renan, E. (1996). What is a nation? In H. K. Bhabha (Ed.), Nation and narration (pp. 8–22). Routledge.
8. Shamsul, A. B. (1996). Debating about identity in Malaysia: A discourse analysis. Southeast Asian Studies, 34(3), 476–499.
9. Shamsul, A. B. (2001). A history of an identity, an identity of a history: The idea and practice of 'Malayness' in Malaysia reconsidered. Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 32(3), 355–366.
10. Shamsul, A. B. (2015). Politics of language and nation-of-intent in Malaysia. Siri Kertas Kajian Etnik, KITA-UKM.