

# University student's first-class flight raises questions on Malaysia's race-based policies

[Hazlin Hassan](#)

Malaysia Correspondent

KUALA LUMPUR - A Malaysian woman who was studying at a public university has come under fire for posting photographs of herself flying first class on an Emirates flight, sparking debate on who is entitled to benefit from pro-Malay policies and whether the rich are taking advantage of them.

Many netizens said Ms Tasnim Shah, 23, appeared to be from a rich family, with some questioning if she has deprived an underprivileged student of a spot at the Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM).

UiTM was formed by government agency Mara - the acronym for Majlis Amanah Rakyat - for bumiputeras, who are ethnic Malay majority and indigenous natives.

Ms Tasnim reportedly posted on Twitter earlier this month that she flew first class from London to Dubai. Screenshots showed that she said it was "a self reward" for her exam results last month, and that she was "officially done with law school".

Her Twitter account has since been made private.

Ms Tasnim is an influencer with more than 600,000 followers on Instagram and has her own clothing line.

She reportedly told Gempak online website: "After discussing with my family, I don't want to prolong this issue. My advice to netizens, let's focus on good things in this holy month (of Ramadan)."

Social activist Adam Adli told The Straits Times: "UiTM, by design, was meant to uplift the economic conditions of the poor bumiputeras through affordable tertiary education."

When a person who can afford a first-class flight to Europe gets to enjoy the benefits of race-based policies, "it sends the wrong message, and is a huge indicator of how flawed the implementation of government policies is", he said.

Mr Hafidzi Razali, senior analyst at BowerGroupAsia, said: "Through social media, bumiputeras who have long been cocooned by socio-political narratives are now able to see that the very system designed to uplift the poor can also be manipulated by the already well-off."

The public is concerned that the well-off do not only have a head start, but they can also rightfully qualify for affirmative action by the virtue of their ethnicity, Mr Hafidzi said.

"This creates an uneven playing field in various aspects, particularly so in economic opportunities," he added.

The New Economic Policy (NEP), introduced after the deadly 1969 race riots, was aimed at redistributing the nation's wealth - mainly through quotas, discounts and other preferential treatment for bumiputeras in areas such as education, property ownership and business.

But some Malays have begun to question its merits, believing that a small cluster of rich Malay individuals and their families are exploiting the privileges at the expense of the poor.

Mr Hafidzi said: "More people are acknowledging that a fairer higher education system is needed, and this includes making well-off bumiputeras contribute their due - be it financially or by voluntarily recusing themselves from this subsidised system."

Another criticism is that the NEP has further divided the bumiputera and the non-bumiputera, mainly comprising ethnic Chinese and Indians.

Mr Hafidzi said: "Affirmative action should be needs-based irrespective of ethnicity."

The reactions to Ms Tasnim's post also highlight general discontentment with income inequality and flawed government policies to tackle it.

While many critics slammed Ms Tasnim for studying at a public university despite being able to afford a luxurious lifestyle, some in the top- and middle-income groups said they cannot afford the cost of private higher education and should not be judged for applying to public universities.

Based on the 2019 Household Income Survey, the top 20 per cent of households, or T20, are those with an income of at least RM10,960 (S\$3,510) a month, and the poorest 40 per cent, dubbed B40, are those with incomes below RM4,850 a month.

Senior manager Zulaikha Jamil, 52, said: "I fall under T20 on paper, but it has no meaning. People like me are stuck. I can't afford to send my children to private universities. I may not be poor but I am not wealthy. I am still struggling."

Sociopolitical analyst Awang Azman Pawi of Universiti Malaya said: "UiTM was set up to help the bumiputera, with the underprivileged groups as a priority."

But "it needs to be looked at from many aspects", he noted, citing an example of a T20 family with many children, and is earning only the minimum wage in the T20 category.

Mr Hafidzi said the three income groups could be tiered more accurately as they are too broad.

"A more narrowed scoping would provide a better understanding of the population's socio-economic status. For example, a B40 fresh graduate, say, with an average salary of RM2,100, with millionaire parents should not benefit from a system designed to assist another B40 with similar salary (but) with a family to feed and older parents in the village to support."