

The UMNO Drama

Power Struggles in Malaysia



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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Present & Future

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Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, UMNO President and Prime Minister of Malaysia; also the Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Justice.

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Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad, former Minister of Social Welfare; was with the Semangat 46 group until he rejoined UMNO on 1 March 1989.

Tan Hussein Onn, former Prime Minister and UMNO President; was with the Semangat 46 group until November 1988 when he became mediator.

Prologue

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players."

— Shakespeare, *As You Like It*,
Act II, Scene 7, Line 139.

"The Devil enters the prompter's box and the play is ready to start."

— Robert William Service, *The Harpy*,
Stanza 12.

"People can believe in many things that are not right. History is indeed the story of liberation from wrong beliefs, of struggle against stupidity, against ignorance."

— Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Child of All Nations*.

Two years after the fateful UMNO General Assembly in April 1987, the drama of power struggles in UMNO still dominates the political scene and coffeeshop talk in Malaysia. Preparation for this book was started in early October 1988 in the belief the crisis in UMNO, the dominant party in the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, had implications and consequences far beyond the confines of UMNO itself. That belief has been confirmed in the course of researching for and writing the book.

There has been a profusion of books, booklets, pamphlets and newspaper articles, almost entirely in Bahasa Malaysia, which carry the polemics of the opposing camps. The Bahasa Malaysia

weeklies like *Watan*, *Mingguan Express*, *Mingguan Kota*, *Harakah* and, lately, *Mingguan Politik* have been saturated with news and views of the UMNO controversy. To a slightly lesser extent, so have the monthlies like *Aliran Monthly*, *The Rocket* and *Mimbar Sosialis*.

Another dimension of the pervasiveness of the subject is reflected in the readiness of the ordinary citizens to offer opinions on it, though often in an anonymous manner. A Chinese taxi driver told me, while we were travelling from Petaling Jaya to Kuala Lumpur on 16 October 1988: "If the two camps unite again, it would be easier for them to eat others". A Chinese school teacher thought that the "objective of the two factions is the same" (30 October 1988). And then there was the Malay taxi driver who said to me on 19 January 1989: "They have all gone mad; they are all greedy". These are just a sample of bits of conversation on the subject which seems to have preoccupied, rightly or wrongly, the attention and concern of many Malaysians. Inevitably, there are others who do not condemn both sides; instead, they take sides.

And then there are the interviews, mostly informal, with Malaysians from all walks of life and racial and religious groupings. Apart from that, conversations were had with foreign Press correspondents, diplomats and visitors.

The end result, together with all the relevant newspaper and foreign and local magazine clippings, articles and books, is a mountain of material. The main problem became one of sifting out the transient and pedantic from what was thought to be the more enduring, and sorting out the enormous heap of verbiage on the personalities involved together with their occasional twists and turns, and on the issues – real or contrived – which were supposed to be at stake.

The next problem was to decide on the suitable cutting-off-point for an exercise of such a nature, when the drama is still far from over. I finally decided, after some agonising, on the interlude between the verdict of the Ampang Jaya by-election and the return of Musa Hitam's group to UMNO Baru on the one hand, and the emerging battle of the next general elections, on the other.

Apart from being a narrative of the history of UMNO since 1946 as well as of the country to some extent, this study has also been an exercise in demythologization of our politics. The myths

that some Malaysians hold of our history, our politics and some of our politicians are often amazing. They disregard facts, evade certain questions deemed to be uncomfortable, embrace false rumours, and accept the distortion of our history, often with a smiling face. They remind us of George Orwell's assertion that "the most intelligent people seem capable of holding schizophrenic beliefs". Or of the lament by Melvyn Bragg about the problem of writing the biography of Richard Burton, the late famous actor:

The obstacle I faced was that Burton's life was so well known and so wrapped in myth.

How one shifts the myth, I don't know. Look at the potency of the Kennedy myth, of the brilliant man struck down before he could change the face of the world. We know that's not true now, but you can't dislodge the myth.

At another level, I am absolutely convinced that any study of the history of UMNO provides students of organizational behaviour and theories, stretching from Niccolo Machiavelli in the 15th Century to Handy, Bailey, Graeme Salaman and Kenneth Thompson and Etzioni in our time, a tremendously rich field for fruitful exploration. And, by way of conclusion, some of us may agree with Hobbes who says: "I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death", or with Vernon Van Dyke's statement that "Political actors rarely, if ever, struggle for power alone. They pursue other purposes, too".

Some readers might question my justification for holding UMNO responsible for governmental policies and actions of the last thirty-four years when UMNO was only one among many parties in the Alliance and Barisan Nasional regimes. For this we must always remember that UMNO was, and is, the dominant partner, not just any component party. Someone has put this fact succinctly in the letters column of the October 1984 issue of *Aliran Monthly*:

A look at the Cabinet, Federal Parliament and State Assemblies and the hundreds of committees at Federal, State and District levels will suffice to convince anyone that UMNO is the government and the government is UMNO. The prejudices of UMNO leaders become policies and the wishes of UMNO members become laws.

Another point that must be made is that the intense power struggle in UMNO should not give the wrong impression that power struggles are peculiar to the Malays as a people. True, for