

Malaysia **Quest for a** **Politics of** **Consensus**

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PREFACE

The uniqueness and basic problem of Malaysia is that since its inception as an independent nation in 1957, it has struggled to arrive at a political and cultural consensus as a viable independent nation (consensus is used in the sense of an agreement on fundamentals). Its historical and political experience was not one of a unified political structure and hence there was no common political base to build upon. British influence and control had spread unevenly over the Malay states. With the opening up of tin mines and rubber estates in the nineteenth century there was large-scale migration of Chinese and Indian labour. Initially, they came to work, but as time passed many of them stayed leading to a situation where the immigrant non-Malays became as numerous as the Malays. It created a "plural society" par excellence, defined as one in which different ethnic groups lived side by side but separate within the same political unit. By the mid-twentieth century a society developed in Malaya in which the migrant communities lived with their own people, spoke their own language, worshipped their own Gods, kept their links with their mother country, preserved their own culture and expressed themselves in newspapers written in the vernacular. They were engaged in different occupations — the Malays were predominantly rural, the Indians worked on the estates while the Chinese worked in mining and construction industries, and retail and wholesale business enterprises. Traditionally, there were few levels of contact bringing the three ethnic groups together. The indigenous community, the Malays, felt that their interests were protected by the colonial power, while the Chinese and Indians were politically apathetic towards a country in which they felt they did not have a political stake.

Till the mid-twentieth century then, no overall sense of a national identity emerged. Distinct genetic and physical traits among the Malays, Chinese and Indians were reinforced by deep cleavages of cultural pluralism and distinct cultural values. These emphasized and reinforced ethnic identification and stood as barriers for the achievement of a

Malaysian identity. With independence, the immediate need was for the formulation and articulation of an identity acceptable to all. It was necessary to arrive at a consensus as to what constituted the Malayan identity and its acceptable symbols. In a delicate situation where the migrant Chinese and Indians were almost equal in number to the "indigenous" Malays, consensus on basic issues, institutions, norms and religion was sought to be arrived at as a process of compromises and adjustment.

Many "new" states faced with the primordial ties of race, language and religion hoped that these would be broken by the magic formula of modernization, urbanization, increased literacy and education, a modern economy and a full and free participation in the political process. In recent years however, there has been a sharp increase in communally inspired conflicts — in India the vocal demand for linguistic states, Northern Ireland beset with Protestant-Catholic problems, a rebellious Muslim minority in the Philippines, tension in Canada between the English-speaking and the French-speaking Canadians, Pakistan split by a civil war between Bengalis and non-Bengalis, Lebanon becoming a battleground between Muslims and Christians and Iran beset by problems of religious resurgence. Amongst Malaysia's neighbours as well there has been an increasing awareness of the nature of social pluralism.

This study seeks to present the developments in Malaysia, from 1969 to 1981, within a historical, chronological and analytical framework. In Malaysia, the persistence of ethnic pulls and the deep cleavages between the Malays, Chinese and Indians led to the political mobilization of each ethnic group — the majority of the Malays supported the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Chinese supported the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Indians the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). The leaders of the UMNO, MCA and MIC came together to form the *Alliance* and to work out by consensus the sensitive and vital issues affecting the development of Malaya. The result was a process of bargaining and compromise which led to the establishment of the pre-eminent position of the Malays and the acceptance of citizenship rights for the non-Malays. Basic conflicts were resolved within the Alliance by compromise and consensus. In 1969 however, traumatic racial riots which followed the fourth general elections held in May 1969, in Malaysia, seemed to indicate that the consensus which had worked so successfully earlier was breaking down.

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