

GETTING A GRIP ON THE MALAY DILEMMA

NST - 7 OCT 1981

IN ALL probability, it was the May 1969 riots which gave the intellectual impetus to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir to write *The Malay Dilemma*.

At the time, he was neither MP nor Prime Minister. Now that he is, his views may not have changed; however, he has declared "there are many roads to the same destination."

A good number of accounts have of course been written about the background of that sad day in Malaysian history, including one by the then Prime Minister and another by the Government of the day, not to mention the many sensational reports in the foreign press.

Unlike those accounts, Dr Mahathir's essay is more reflective, fusing cultural and historical factors into an analysis of the reality of Peninsular politics.

In this respect, I find it certainly more worthwhile reading than books produced by scholars, such as K.J. Ratnam's *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaysia* (1965) or R.K.

Vasil's *Ethnic Politics in Malaysia* (1980) — to mention only two political works published before and after the *Dilemma*.

Perhaps it is timely now for scholars, especially Malaysian academicians, to venture into deeper research on the points brought out by Dr Mahathir, to bring together disciplines such as psychology, sociology, history, economics and politics — even genetics.

According to the author of the *Dilemma*, genetical factors — heredity and variation (especially in-breeding) — play an important part, along with environmental factors, in placing the Malays in a lower economic position than the immigrant communities.

Debate

For a long time more, I suppose, people will debate the influences of in-breeding on the poor economic achievement of the Malays. Dr Mahathir is at least brave enough, as a Malay, to highlight the genetical factors, and I would suggest further

scientific study to enumerate their effects on the Malays.

For the present, we do not even have data on the extent of in-breeding among Malays and a sample study could throw some evidence on the points made by Dr Mahathir regarding the effects of heredity.

The heredity factors cause the most despondency in attempts at solving the problem of Malay backwardness.

The author places the environment next to heredity in producing such backwardness. In most of the book, he tackles, principally, the environmental factors and offers an analysis on the Malay dilemma, which he explains in the book's introduction thus:

"The Malays seem to be teetering between the desire to assert their rights and arrogate to themselves what they consider to be theirs, and the overwhelming desire to be polite, courteous and thoughtful of the rights and demands of others.

"Deep within them there is a conviction that

no matter what they decide to do, things will continue to slip from their control; that slowly but surely they are becoming dispossessed in their own land. This is the Malay Dilemma."

And so, we get a feel, before reading further, of what the bulk of the book is going to be about: ethnic politics, with special reference to the economic plight of the Malays.

Dr Mahathir opens up with a chapter entitled *What Went Wrong?* to outline the causes of the racial disruptions, stating "What finally led to the outbreak of violence on May 13, 1969, started the moment the Union Jack was lowered and the Malaysian flag went up."

Even prior to that, he contends, there never was true racial harmony and he reserves his scathing attack on successive (Alliance) "Governments of mediocre people... The Malays were disenchanted because in their eyes the Government continually favoured the Chinese and had failed to correct the real imbalance in the wealth and progress of

the races...The Chinese demands increased as Government concessions whetted their appetite...And over and above these racial reactions was the increasingly diminishing faith in the ability or the desire of the Alliance Government to rule and rule well."

Thus (the less than favourable) results (to the Alliance) of the 1969 general election. And it took only the opposition victory procession to make the tension explode on May 13.

All this appears like an angry sweep indeed and must have touched the sensitivities of those who ruled before Dr Mahathir. Nevertheless, as a broad summation, it cannot be denied that the author's view reflects the truth, unpleasant as it may sound.

The chapter on the influence of heredity and environment on the Malay race is self-explanatory, and we have mentioned Dr Mahathir's view on heredity.

Factors

He analyses the en-

environmental factors with the geographical factors — the riverine settlements conditioning the Malays to leisure amidst natural surroundings. Feudal and customary polity increased the conservatism of the Malays, and their adoption of Islam as their religion consolidated the situation making the Malays imprevius to non-Islamic influences.

And then came the punch: "Next to Islam the single most important change in the Malay environment was the massive influx of Chinese immigrants. Until the coming of the Chinese, the Malays of pure or mixed blood were not only the peasants, but also the petty traders, craftsmen, skilled workers, and, through the system of *penghulus* and *rajas*, the administrators in Malaya..."

On the effect of Chinese immigration — encouraged by the British — he cites displacement of Malays in the urban areas, further division between the Malays and Chinese, even further division between the rural and the (much smaller in number) town Malays, destruction of Malay self-reliance, and he brings the history to Independence, which "brought power and wealth to the new Malay elite."

And then the author asks: "How will heredity and this new environment affect the Malays?" His answer is gloomy because the Malays "will become softer and less able to overcome dif-

cessful consensus under such an arrangement.

Also, there is already widespread acceptance that the Malay economic problem is to be treated as a national problem. Thus, the New Economic Policy is here to stay, and criticisms of the NEP is nowadays limited to modes of implementation only.

The book is about politics but practical politics will get nowhere in a democratic system if the economic questions are not faced with seriousness by those who are in political power.

There are signs that this is being done. What can be done remains, indeed, short of what every ethnic group aspires to.

Displacement

If politics is truly the art of the possible, few other countries can match Malaysia's achievements since its independence. There have been numerous compromises and there will have to be many more, unless of course the country embarks on dangerous experiments in extremism.

Those who have the future of the country at heart will obviously avoid such experiments. It is best that proponents for change to the political system justify that change is needed.

The author, however, proposes no change in the political system to help settle the Malay economic dilemma.

He traces that dilemma, in historical terms,

nesc. "Competition, which should be between individuals and business groups, has developed into competition between racial groups in which one group has an absolute advantage over the other".

Known business practices of the Chinese — secret deals, family and clan ties, exclusivity of guilds and chambers of commerce, to name a few — worsened the Malay economic dilemma.

The real problem is that the Chinese are "established". The author's conclusion is given even before the analysis as follows:

"Unless the Chinese, in particular, are willing to hold themselves back and appreciate the need to bring the Malays up in the economic field, not even the determination of the Malays and the schemes of the Government can help to solve the Malay economic dilemma."

It is a credit to Dr Mahathir that he was bold enough to say what he said. Solutions to overcoming the Malay economic dilemma cannot be achieved with speed but the passage can be made smoother by understanding, especially by Chinese Malaysians.

Among the Malays themselves there should be full realisation, that ultimate success can never be theirs simply by shouting. Economic advancement, which certain individuals may achieve by mere luck, for a whole community is a process of diligent and

quality — a point made long ago by such writers as R.H. Tawney and a good number of others. Tawney, for example, wrote fifty years ago that the important thing is not that equality should be completely attained but that it should be sincerely sought.

Balanced

Dr Mahathir argues that certain specific measures such as laws on Malay land reservation, distribution of scholarships and civil service jobs to Malays are necessary to compensate for the low economic status of the Malays: those apparently discriminatory laws and policies are not meant to give advantage to one community over another, but are in fact designed to prevent this from happening.

Since he wrote the book, we know of course of the various measures already embarked upon by Government to further assist the Malays in the current Malaysian context, all bumiputras — including the recent launching of the Amanah Saham Nasional, to give the bumiputras larger participation in the modern sector, to overcome, as the author wrote in 1970 "an inequality of wealth, an inequality of opportunities, and an inequality of development."

Dr Mahathir's plea is clear: for the Malays to achieve racial equality there must be no discrimination against

Malaysia, that is, people who set up the first governments and these governments were the ones with which other countries did official business and had diplomatic relations.

Claims

If citizenship is conferred on races other than Malays, it is because Malays consent to this. The consent is conditional.

It is conditional upon recognition of the Malays as the definitive people, and especially recognition of their multifaceted problems, the slow solution of which entails understanding and positive support by the non-Malays.

Dr Mahathir points out that the (especially colonial) policies of pushing into the background the claims of the Malays as the definitive people of the Malay Peninsula have put all of us into the present communal divisions which produce a permanent source of conflict.

All non-Malay citizens have to bear a strong sense of history in order to appreciate the urgent need for solving the Malay dilemma.

All of us, especially the younger citizens, should appreciate why the NEP was needed and there is no reason for pessimism. We have many things in our favour, not the least of which is God's given variety of riches to make possible a Malaysia equitably shared by all citizens.

faculties on their own. Because of this, political power might ultimately prove their complete downfall."

Dr Mahathir brings forth no solution to this problem, but simply mentions that the answer seems to lie in a sort of "constructive protection" worked out after a careful study of the effects of heredity and environment."

Truths

One might speculate that the views of the author such as summarised above were the causes of the ban on his book, following the racial troubles of 1969. However, there should be no doubt, especially after his pronouncements since becoming Deputy and then Prime Minister, that Dr Mahathir is not an advocate of extremism in politics.

It is a fact of course that the book was an essay of the day by a candidate who had lost in the election and was unable to do something practical politically. Nevertheless, the author's points contain many truths, even to this day.

However, the climate has been changing since 1970. On the political side, there is the broader National Front government. While it is still ethnical-based, there can be wider optimism for suc-

beginning with the period during which there was real Malay economic independence, even though it was at a low level of economic sophistication, when the Malays were "exclusively involved in marketing, petty trading, importing and exporting and even manufacturing in the early Malay Sultanates.

The Malay economic dilemma is argued to have started with the influx of Chinese into the peninsula when Malays underwent the process of "displacement" from urban economic occupations.

British colonial policy assisted and accelerated this transformation, and even after World War II the Malays had to "face the same old pattern in which the Chinese controlled all business that was not big enough for the big British business-houses".

Then followed governmental attempts to assist Malays in commerce and industry, which were accelerated after Independence. "Independence," says the author, "has definitely boosted Malay involvement in the commercial life of the nation."

Faults

But, asserts Dr Mahathir, the Malays have never been able to, and can never hope, to catch up with the Chi-

purposeful hard work.

Dr Mahathir does not brush aside the faults of the Malays because he says, "The Malays must be aware of their own faults as much as the faults of others." It may even be useful for Malays and Malay leaders to substitute their many slogan songs with a small passage from Shakespeare:

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,

But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

Dr. Mahathir has stated that economic wrongs do exist. He is currently best-placed to put into practice what Government can do to correct those things wrong with the Malays, and he deserves the understanding and co-operation of both Malays and non-Malays.

I would think the real message Dr. Mahathir wanted to give is encompassed in the three chapters we have reviewed. The other seven chapters of uneven length can possibly be described as providing background and rationalisation for his views which some have tended in the past, wrongly labelled as "ultra" or extremist.

Dr Mahathir, without doubt, is well-read beyond his medical journals, in history and philosophy and other matters. He asserts that legal equality is meaningless in the face of social and economic ine-

them. The Malays and the non-Malays, especially the Chinese, are different in character and behaviour and there will have to be adjustments to each other which can only be achieved by understanding, goodwill and time.

These are balanced views and not extremist words of a disappointed author. The same can be said about the author's view in respect of promoting national unity in our multi-racial nation through Bahasa Malaysia as well as other accessory methods such as focusing loyalty to the King, teaching of national history and so forth.

Regarding the rehabilitation of the Malays and the Malay dilemma, Dr Mahathir sketches, and it is no more than a bare outline, the need to urbanise the Malays in a planned and thorough fashion.

But the Malays themselves need to acquire new skills and accept new values. When all this can be achieved is indeed difficult to gauge, but in 1970 Dr Mahathir already told us that something radical has to be done.

For the apparently inter-racial tranquility and harmony is fraught with danger. The author asks "How much can the Malay problem be blown up before it bursts?"

Dr Mahathir lamented in 1970 that there has been no study and analysis of the ethical codes and value systems of the Malays. A book published in 1977 (Tham Seong Chee, *Malays and Modernisation*) touches on some of these and their effects on modernising the Malays.

Dr Mahathir rightly outlines the difference between the Malay value systems and those of western civilisation. (The serious students may want to pursue Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and other such works).

Influence

He, almost pessimistically, notes that it is unlikely that mere changes in environment will bring about the necessary change in Malay values to an extent that they will be able to compete with the drive of the other communities or races.

Again, the Malay general attitude to property and money is quite unlike the Chinese, and the problem in solving the Malay economic dilemma is the juxtaposition of the spiritually-inclined Malays with materialistic, especially Chinese, non-Malays.

Of late, we have heard

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exhortations from Malay leaders that heed be paid to non-materialistic, particularly religious, matters. These are directed to the Malays, possibly to lessen the influence of an opposition religious party.

If these exhortations are clearly directed also to other citizens, and especially if they are echoed by non-Malay leaders, it will perhaps be best for all of us. It is hoped that the Prime Minister is looking into this matter.

Traits

The author does not view traditional traits in the Malays, such as adherence to feudalistic characteristics or deep religious inclinations as deleterious. He however regrets the lack of frankness, the adherence to traditional behaviour of self-restraint and a de-

sire not to displease because these cannot make the Malays prominent in an aggressive modern society.

Unless, of course, the Malays follow the thesis of getting away from unquestioning loyalty enunciated in a recent book (Aliran, 1979, *Protector?*) the solution is still far away. I for one, do not agree with the implied conclusion in *Protectors?* nor, I think, does Dr Mahathir.

Meanwhile, changing the attitudes of the Malays must be pursued with vigour. The need is for accelerated practical measures to ensure greater exposure of the Malays in modern sector activities, and given time, the required changes will follow suit.

Now, almost a dozen years since Dr Mahathir wrote his book, Malaysia is already in the second half of the NEP which incorporates Government long range attacks

to break away from the historically-set pattern of identification of race with economic functions of citizens.

The NEP is already widely accepted. At the background of the formulators of the Second Malaysia Plan, which launched the NEP were the cumulative arguments forthrightly brought out in *The Malay Dilemma*. In this context, Dr Mahathir can be named as contributor to the NEP, even though he entered the Cabinet well after the NEP's launching.

I have indicated above that *The Malay Dilemma* is a book on ethnic politics. On politics and parties the author openly states that it is the Malays who most favour a communal approach to politics. The truth, of course, is that all parties of some significance in this country approach politics communally, illustrating, to this day,

the continuing demand for such an approach. Let us look forward to the day when there shall be real integration among the communities in this country.

A pre-condition for this, and this in my view is vital, is abundant reasonableness among those who choose to be political leaders of the nation. The author of the *Dilemma*, whatever others have said before about him, is no advocate of Malay chauvinism (if there is any such thing).

He deserves our support to bring further material and moral progress to this young nation now that he is at the helm of government. We should wish him well in his attempts to remove all forms of incompetence.

This country deserves leaders who can rule well with the head; but equally important, our country requires leaders who rule with the heart as well.