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Stop passing the buck!

iewed by Cheah Boon Kheng

THE May 1969 inter-racial disorders in Peninsular Malaysia may be traced to the racist ideology and so-called "pro-Malay" policies of the British colonial order, which were introduced during the economic depression of the 1930s. These policies had distinct racial overtones, discriminated against the Chinese and Indians, and for the first time, "played off" one race against the other.

This highly original but contentious perspective comes from sociologist Dr Colin Abraham, author of *Divide and Rule*, who seems to suggest that in giving in to Malay nationalism, the British authorities not only put down the other races, but also set the pattern of race relations for post-independence Malaysia.

Abraham also implies that by giving in to Malay demands, the British were encouraging Malay nationalism. On page 252, he states: "Indeed, there is fairly plausible evidence to suggest that Malay nationalism itself was stimulated by the colonial government". Unfortunately, however, the "plausible evidence" is not presented.

*Divide and Rule*, based on a doctoral dissertation submitted to Oxford University in the 1970s is, therefore, a provocative, hard-hitting critique of British colonial ethnic ideology and race relations.

Probably because of these strong views, this incisive work on Malaysian social history has taken a long time to see publication. Another reason could be the radical Marxist theoretical framework underpinning much of the work, though as applied here, it appears to be a rather intelligent and imaginative one.

Since Abraham has raised several other contentious issues which serve as excellent yeast for academic debates, let me first comment on the merits of this book before making any points of disagreement. The author was, for many years until his retirement, a teaching colleague at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Firstly, the early chapters of *Divide and Rule* are quite lively and readable when they discuss the historical background of early colonial rule in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States, colonial ethnic ideology, labour and immigration, and Malay economic and political issues. The key chapters are, however, on colonial labour and immigration policies.

Because his analysis is so theory and race-oriented, Abraham has a sharp eye for apt quotations from British colonial officials to support his arguments about colonial ethnic ideology. In no other Malaysian historical work have I seen such a judicious selection of quotes which condemn their speakers as racists. Abraham's grasp of colonial history is good; so is his use of colonial documentary sources.

For instance, he has a beautiful "racial" line from Governor Jervois in 1876 - two years after British intervention in Perak - to show how the Chinese presence was used as a rationale to "protect" the Malays from Chinese economic dominance and prevent conflict between the two groups: "in the interests of the Malays themselves, it will compel us sooner or later to intervene ... I think we must look forward to the necessity that will arise of our eventually having to keep the peace in some way between the Malays, the Chinese and the Indian population". Numerous other quotations come from officials like Frank Swettenham and Hugh Clifford.

Abraham shows quite cogently how British officials devised a colonial

policy of dividing labour along ethnic lines; the same rules applied during the subsequent large-scale immigration of Chinese and Indians into Malaya from the late 1870s. To justify the policy, the British identified the Malays as being "intrinsically incapable of economic performance" in the development of the modern sector of the economy. Accordingly, alien immigration was encouraged.

The British buttressed this further by deliberately fostering the ideology of British racial superiority and Malay inferiority, to convince the Malay ruling elites that they were incapable of good government. This was not difficult to do, given the disorders and anarchy which had led to British intervention and the Pangkor Treaty of 1874. The Malays, says Abraham, came to accept this myth.

Running through the whole book is the Marxist perspective that the fundamental purpose of colonial rule in Malaya was to create the necessary conditions for the capitalist mode of production. From the 1870s onwards, Britain practised "new imperialism" or "economic imperialism". This meant colonies were to be fully exploited in the interests of British capital.

Example: The colonial government in Malaya helped British and European capital achieve a real breakthrough into tin mining by providing lands and loans for the introduction of the dredge in 1912. Within 25 years (1912-37) tin mining was transformed from a predominantly Chinese to a predominantly Western industry.

A similar pattern occurred in the rubber industry when British official support and encouragement was given to British capital. Colonial land policy was essentially geared towards fostering the development of large-scale plantations by Western capitalist enterprises. During the 1922-28 rubber slump, Malay peasant rubber smallholders were restricted from tapping and replanting rubber to accede to Western rubber growers' demands to control production.

Although the Malay Reservations Enactment 1933 prevented Chinese from owning new land, Western economic interests were not affected. They easily acquired Malay lands for rubber and oil palm plantations.

While British economic policies were favourably oriented to white Europeans, its colonial policy dealt with each race as a distinct and separate entity. In fact, the place of origin and occupational speciality of a racial group were the factors that shaped colonial policies towards it. Indian labourers, for instance, were recruited only from South India and not the North, where British economic interests were heavily invested and Indian labour was needed.

Labour recruitment policies were determined by the selection of different races to weaken the bargaining power of any one group; this means one racial group could be "played off" against the other.

As an example of this "divide and rule" policy, the estate managerial staff were predominantly Malayalam and Ceylonese, while the labourers were largely Tamils and Telegus. Although the Malayalam, Tamil and Telegu employees were all from South India, they spoke different languages. "Thus, the question might reasonably be posed as to the necessity of creating this ethnic mosaic," observes Abraham, "when it would have been perfectly possible to have recruited Tamil-speaking staff from South India".

His discussion of how European employers resorted to the use of opium, as part payment of their Chinese labourers' earnings, and for purposes of social control of the labourers is excellent. Opium made the workers docile and passive.

Despite the many merits of this book, one of its major disappointments is its failure to investigate beyond the 1930s, to show to what extent the colonial theory of race relations applies to the post-independence

situation. The author links his findings to the May 1969 incidents, but fails to provide empirical data showing their connection. Also, some 30 years separate them, and the latter occurred in post-colonial Malaysia.

Abraham's study is confined to a limited historical period - the 1820s to the 1930s. In fact, most of the research materials in the book are dated before 1975 (when the thesis was probably written) and a lot of studies, particularly on the May 1969 incidents, are not cited. It is a pity that he did not see fit to revise his thesis before publication.

I would argue that the May 1969 incidents have nothing to do, directly or indirectly, with the 1930s' colonial policies. The former originated mainly from specific issues and historical circumstances surrounding the general elections of May 1969, under the independent Alliance Government of former Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. There is no need to pass the buck to the British colonisers.

What were the colonial policies of the 1930s? Was the economic depression really the turning point in race relations in Malayan history, as Abraham makes out? Was not Malay nationalism already a nascent force which British colonialism had to come to terms with?

The controversial policies referred to the Aliens Ordinance 1933, the Decentralisation policies of 1920-30, and the Malay Reservations Enactment 1933. The first and last legislation clearly came about as a result of the economic depression of 1929-32, but the decentralisation policies had been debated before 1920.

They were implemented in stages over the next decade, in an attempt to restore some administrative powers to the Malay Rulers of the Federated Malay States (Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang) and to mollify disgruntled Malay nationalists, who had complained that federation had diminished Malay political autonomy, and that States like Johor and Kedah, which did not join the federation in 1896, were better off.

The Aliens Ordinance 1933 was introduced to curb the immigration of aliens and regulate their repatriation or banishment. The Malay Reservations Enactment 1933 prohibited certain areas of Malay lands from being acquired by non-Malays for rubber planting during the period of economic recovery.

Abraham argues that the colonial policies encouraged Malays to dislike the other races; in turn, the Chinese felt that the policies were motivated by "anti-Chinese" intentions. Consequently, these policies aroused race consciousness in an unprecedented manner by "playing off" one ethnic group against the other.

Prior to this, he claims, race relations had been harmonious, marked by the absence of any "inter-racial conflict" largely due to the unintegrated character of the society, in which each race kept to itself and followed the colonial division of labour - whereby different ethnic groups performed mutually exclusive functions and received appropriate differential rewards. He seems to imply that this was an ideal situation for Malaya.

"The economic depression, therefore, greatly reinforced group perceptions taking a race form, and being manifested in conflict terms, because it shook the foundations on which the entire colonial social structure was based, and because it necessitated the direct intervention of the government in upholding the interests of certain social classes within racial groups while discriminating against others," the author says.

I disagree that the "pro-Malay" policies of the 1930s had such cataclysmic effects on Malaya's multi-racial society. Colonial "divide and rule" strategy had been in play prior to this and had generated acrimonious debates whenever concessions were made to either the Malays or

non-Malays.

Such debates caused inter-racial tensions, but they did not lead to any outbreak of violence and bloodshed. They no doubt stoked racial antagonism, but no inter-racial fighting and violence ever broke out then or during the entire colonial period.

The first outbreak of racial incidents occurred during the Japanese Occupation (1941-45). Its immediate causes had more to do with wartime Japanese race policies towards the Chinese and Malay than the 1930s issues.

Although the Japanese did not deliberately foster conflict between Malays and Chinese, their policies had this effect. Repressive measures, including massacres, against the Chinese, led to the formation of a Chinese-dominated resistance movement; Japanese "pro-Malay" policy created an under-current of resentment and distrust among the Chinese towards the Malays. Malay co-operation made them appear a chosen instrument of the Japanese.

It would be unfair, therefore, to argue that the wartime Japanese took the cue from the British "pro-Malay" policies on how to "divide and rule", just as it would be to say that the independent rulers of Malaysia had followed the British "divide and rule" policy and thereby caused the May 1969 incidents. Each of these events must be seen within the context of its own peculiar, historical circumstance.

To argue, therefore, as Abraham does, that the Malays, Chinese and Indians only began to think of themselves as races from the time of the promulgation of the "pro-Malay" policies of the 1930s, and not before, is to stretch a theory and the imagination too far.

What he seems to ignore is that when the British introduced "pro-Malay" policies to discriminate against the Chinese and Indians, those measures were, in fact, frequently offset by major Chinese gains in other areas - in business, labour and education, while the Indians were generally satisfied with gaining jobs in the public and private sectors and with the open atmosphere for business opportunities.

While one may blame the British for creating a multi-racial society, for allowing uncontrolled immigration of Chinese and Indians into the country and for the situation in 1931 when the Malays were outnumbered in their own country, they managed to keep the multi-racial society in Malaya a fairly harmonious one and reduced the room for social conflict.

"Divide and rule" as a strategy has been practised by ruling governments everywhere, not necessarily colonial governments; it has even occurred in politically independent and homogenous societies. Niccolo Machiavelli successful government.

This is evident even in the "racial politics" of the Barisan Nasional government. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed, in a 115-page Government pamphlet entitled 'The Malaysian System of Government' (published by the Prime Minister's Office in 1995), defended the Malaysian political system against Western criticism as follows:

"In a multi-racial country, there is no way to satisfy everyone. If, on the other hand, any race is completely satisfied then one can be sure that the others are not getting a fair deal. You cannot fully satisfy one race without denying something to the other races. And when one race is fully satisfied and the others feel deprived, the seeds of tension will be there. And eventually this tension will lead to racial clashes.

"It is when every race is equally dissatisfied that one can be sure that every one is having a fair deal. Then there will be relative harmony. As has been noted it is quite impossible to ensure that every race will be satisfied. If this can be made to happen then race becomes irrelevant. At this stage racial politics would become superfluous. Until then it is far

better to recognise the fact of race and to provide for as much fairness as possible for all. This is what Malaysia has done."

Given this statement, it would be inappropriate of Abraham to imply that the strategy of "divide and rule" was the exclusive invention or prerogative of the colonial authorities. If we keep blaming everything on the colonial past, there is a danger that we will lose sight of present-day realities.

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