

27/06/2000

Non-Malay PM: More rhetorical than real

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UMNO was created in 1946 under the leadership of Datuk Onn Jaafar as a manifestation of Malay nationalism to oppose the much hated British-imposed Malayan Union Constitution which would deprive them of their land and country.

The British had warned that there would have to be some sort of unity among the various communities before independence could be granted. Onn tried to get Umno, of which he was still the popular president, to open its ranks to all races. He failed and sulked.

He left to organise the multi-racial Parti Negara which was a great flop. Onn was consigned to the dustbin of Malaysian history. The idea of a non-communal politics was well ahead of its time in 1951, and I say it still is. History is on my side.

The Economist (June 30) proclaims that the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has a dream: that the nation's next leader might well come from the Chinese, Indian or other ethnic minorities.

What Dr Mahathir said at the MCA's 47th Annual General Assembly (June 17) has produced mixed reactions, depending on whom you speak to. The non-Malays who welcomed it, though the statement is constitutionally correct, considered it more rhetorical than real.

Pas' quick reaction was to invite Bumiputera to join the party en masse to stop what Dr Mahathir said could happen. Umno members, on the whole, regarded it as an open warning to them from their president. Pas, notwithstanding its wooing of the Chinese, surprisingly over-reacted.

Do you really think this is going to happen?

Dr Mahathir was as persuasive as he was courageous to state the fact that the Federal Constitution does not specify that the Prime Minister must be from a particular race or religion. I say he was courageous because sometimes even saying the obvious can put the speaker in an awkward position and even in peril.

Dr Mahathir is firmly in command and he can afford to say what he wants. No danger of him having to backtrack. Japanese Ministers routinely backtrack on their statements about the Second World War, and recently the Minister of Interior of Pakistan made the mistake of describing "Islamic Pakistan" as "secular", then quickly backtracked.

The Prime Minister actually has said nothing startling or new. He was merely stating a fact that many Malaysians apparently did not and do not know, that any Malaysian above 21 who is sane can lead the nation if he commands the support of the majority of Members of Parliament in the Dewan Rakyat.

Perhaps Dr Mahathir was dramatising it to create a certain impact within Umno and warning the Bumiputera that unless they stop warring among themselves the possibility of a non-Muslim becoming Prime Minister - no matter how remote - exists.

However, I think the chances of it happening are as good as the chances of an Indian or Malay becoming the Prime Minister of Singapore.

I am a Malay, a Kelantanese to boot. In my State, my wife who is a Malay from Derga, Alor Setar, Kedah, cannot buy land in her own name. Anyone who wants to be the Menteri Besar of Kelantan must be a Kelantanese Malay.

I wonder whether my three Kuala Lumpur-born children are Kelantanese - subjects of the Sultan of Kelantan. In any event they can, I know, buy land in the State so I assume they are also Kelantanese by operation of

law. It is not easy living in Kelantan if you are not Kelantanese.

In Kelantan, the native Islamists are certainly growing stronger and more intolerant, and even belligerent, of anything which is perceived as not having been approved by Pas which, unfortunately and wrongly, has become synonymous with Islam.

It seems quite absurd that Kelantan society and that of Terengganu should be tyrannised by Pas' political Islam - harbinger of what is to come nationwide should Pas form a Federal Government.

Political Islam will take on a new rigour and anything seen as not being in line with Pas' notion of political correctness will be systematically diminished and eventually banished. Then an Asean Iran or Saudi Arabia will have been born.

Under the circumstances there is no chance whatsoever for even an enlightened Malay or liberal Muslim, let alone for a non-Malay, to become Prime Minister.

In 43 years of independence, the pragmatism of Umno, always tempered by the interest of its political and social structural support, has made us what we are today, and it continues to be the nation's guiding force for the future.

Dr Mahathir has stirred much debate, he has always done so. It is a tempting notion for any non-Malay to champion, that is, if he or she really thinks it is an achievable proposition that one of them can become Prime Minister.

When voters cut Umno and MCA majorities in the 1969 General Election, a vicious race riot ensued. Nobody wants a repeat of that. In the last General Election, only Umno suffered.

I believe, for a long time to come, the Chinese and other ethnic minorities will vote for status quo - for the devil they know rather than the angel they don't. Dr Mahathir has tossed the non-Malays a bone. Let us wait and see who picks it up.

Pas has now cleverly laced its message with tolerance because it still has a long journey before its ultimate destination: the establishment of a scrupulously theocratic Islamic nation in the fashion of Saudi Arabia or Iran.

Once it gets there, it will - come what may - integrate Islamic values and that of Pas' firmly into the Malaysian society and politics. It will then be too late for its Chinese ally, the DAP, to do anything. Even now, DAP cannot dictate anything to Pas.

G.K. Chesterton published a novel called *The Flying Inn*, at the beginning of the century. According to Anthony Burgess, the famous author who used to teach me and many other old collegians at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK), English, Chesterton depicted an England flying the star and the crescent, with drinks forbidden and two men and a dog rolling a barrel of rum round the roads, in constant danger from the Muslim police, trying to keep the memory of liquor alive.

Burgess says he sees a distinct possibility of the fulfillment of the vision, say about 2,100. Supernature, he insists in his novel, 1985, abhors a supervacuum. With the death of institutional Christianity will come the spread of Islam. That was what Burgess prophesied for Britain.

In Malaysia, I would say that an uncompromising political Islam of Pas is a greater likelihood in a much shorter time, unless something is done quickly and wisely.

To avoid Pas' tyranny is simple: hasten the fulfillment of Wawasan 2020.

A revolutionary change always comes about in underdeveloped and sometimes in developing countries, and it may be that in a Muslim nation the historical sequence is poverty, Islam or capitalism.

Take your choice of the tyrannies: I prefer the mild tyranny of the

consumer philosophy blended with a mild form genuine Islam which is forward looking and tolerant, not the rigidities of science and technology, where terms or words or symbols mean precisely what they say.

No doubt Dr Mahathir has incensed some Malays and Islamists - some cursing him in private conversations and in saloons, but he has also, I thought, given a timely warning to the warring Malays that if they want to keep what they have - the present political power - they must not just be united, but also high achievers in whatever they do.

Dr Mahathir's "warning" has various parameters of feasibility, all of which merit serious thought and even examination by the majority.

While I strongly feel the idea of Pas leading a Federal Government is wishful thinking because the population is too delicately balanced for that - only half of Malaysians are Muslim - there are more zealots out there who say Pas can and must seize power through the ballot box in 2004. It claims it is getting good co-operation from DAP to dispel the notion that Pas is anathema to the Chinese.

DAP, it seems, is willing to do what it takes to be a junior partner in any Pas government. Pas also claims young Malay professionals are joining the party.

Every political party has its agenda, and its own idea of what is good for its future.

Obviously, Pas and DAP have swallowed their differences to work together, imbued by their mutual hatred of the Barisan Nasional - Umno and MCA in particular.

Keadilan will soon absorb Parti Rakyat which has never been represented in Parliament in its own right. A long time ago in 1959, the founding president of Parti Rakyat, Datuk Ahmad Boestamam, was a one-term MP having won the Setapak Parliamentary Constituency in Kuala Lumpur via the courtesy of its senior partner, the Labour Party, in the defunct Barisan Socialis.

People complain of fiscal tyranny. It is not the worst tyranny you can get, but it is bad enough. And it can get worse, of course.

But the good thing is it only affects those with money and as the great majority of us have little money we should not be too concerned with it. You should worry more about the tyranny of Pas' political Islam.

Malaysia survived the Second World War, the Japanese Occupation, the 12-year-long war with the Communists, Indonesian Confrontation, subversion by Singapore and the separation, May 13, 1969, race riots, and two economic recessions.

We succeeded through a process of racial dilution: everybody being more Malaysia-conscious.

Malaysia, whether it is run by a Malay or non-Malay Prime Minister will survive. Malaysians will survive whatever challenges are in store for them. They are a remarkably ingenious people. The nation has done well under four Malay Prime Ministers.

The Bumiputera, I believe, are aware that survival, be it political or otherwise, will always remain with the fittest. Dr Mahathir during his 19 years of premiership has given his best efforts to prepare them for the future.

And what if they cannot sustain what they possess and face the future? Well, there remains Life which has no end. Singapore Malays live as do Cape Malays in South Africa.

I am a bit worried about the way in which we are developing politically. I feel the extremist "tactics and approach" of Pas and the holier-than-thou Islamists are causing some concern. The Government must act now before it escalates beyond control. Now it seems to be not so much communalism as religious extremism that has taken precedence.

Then as now the unity which the British thought would be impossible to achieve - was attained by an alliance of communal interests rather than by the multi-racial, non-communal approach which was and is favoured by saloon intellectuals and a certain know-all foreign power.

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