

25/07/2001

A Malaysian dilemma

Reviewed by Wazir Jahan Karim
THE MALAY DILEMMA REVISITED
Race Dynamics In Modern Malaysia
By M. Bakri Musa
Merantau Publishers: Gilroy
RM60, pp 369

THE author of this provocative book is not a social scientist but a surgeon residing in Morgan Hill, California.

Educated at the University of Alberta, Canada, M. Bakri provides personal insights into Malaysian development from the period of independence to the contemporary scene. He covers a range of controversial topics - the New Economic Policy, adat and Islam, ethnicity and genetics, urbanisation and Islamisation, the monarchy, bumiputera competitiveness, Malaysia's "pesky" neighbour, Singapore, corruption, cronyism and Vision 2020.

He attempts to draw information from secondary academic and popular sources and justifies his objectivity by claiming that "influential Malaysians" who discuss Malaysia overseas "are surprisingly open and candid in expressing their views."

He defends his competence to comment on contemporary news with his access to the Internet and Malaysian databases. Generally, the sentiment expressed in this book is not unlike that of many Malays who feel that they have made it on their own and need not feel gratitude or terhutang budi to the Malaysian Government for providing them with the right kind of incentives and perks.

Bakri made it on his own; he did it "his way".

Throughout the book, he criticises Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Malay Dilemma for misinterpreting the versatility and vibrancy of the Malays. He argues that they are not totally guided by emotion and sentiment but by a sense of identity and purpose; that they are more than capable of academic excellence and self-development without pandering to institutions like the New Economic Policy or Mara. Malay adat, he says, which warmly welcomes others to the Malay fold without much scrutiny of racial origin, is more than capable of holding up to Malaysian Chinese businesses.

Essentially, he argues for greater autonomy and trust in policies directed towards the Malays to enable them to redefine their lifestyles in ways more conducive to indigenous values of adat and Islam.

The average reader can agree with this line of thinking and generally empathise with the writer's concern for restoring Malay pride in its gene pool and culture.

A "Malay" is not a biological or racial type but a form of political identity.

Culturally, Malays are different from the Chinese and Indians, regardless of religion. Islam has not made Indian or Chinese Muslims more Malay. But Malay adat promotes a cultural core and sets up a set of social values which ensures a sense of social stability and confidence. Indian and Chinese Muslims have their own core values. The book does not explain these sociological differences clearly, and presents many ideas on ethnicity which are generally loose and confusing.

Yes, it is a tough and competitive world but the factor causing this is not only ethnic preference through "Bumiputeraism". It is a combination of

ethnicity, religion, class and gender. And being on the wrong side of a system of preferences - whether in corporate culture or national policy - is not only a Malaysian problem but also global one.

Singapore is praised by Bakri for its tough policies towards Bumiputeras. He states that meritocracy is preferable but fails to note that meritocracy alone may aggravate class differences and fan ethnic conflict.

Children of the middle and upper classes inevitably do better because they have access to better schools in towns and cities. In the case of the policy regarding admission to public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, the ethnic quota attempts to reduce the comparative advantage of class and privilege, but within each ethnic group, admission is based on merit points. The system is stratified meritocracy.

All in all, this book will probably win the sympathy and attention of non-Bumiputeras and Bumiputeras who can claim that they owe their success to pure grit and hard work. However, those who claim such success should also examine the politics of business and commerce in Malaysia and elsewhere. At some stage or other, much of one's success in business and commerce is based on connections and strategic networks and alliances. Chinese and Indian businesses have been well-documented in academic texts. They have been in existence for a long time in Asia and have, over centuries, conveyed the same story of ethnic monopolies.

Malay businesses, however, are dependent on non-Malay partnerships but are less well-researched or documented for any clear generalisations to be made. In the early stages of establishing strategic alliances, Malays have come to learn that their survival depends on successful alliances with non-Malays. This has unfortunately also led to inter-ethnic cronyism. Bumiputeraism, however, is not the cause of cronyism. These "strategic alliances" if monopolised by political elites of different ethnicities may become chronic and remove healthy competition in business and commerce even among Bumiputeras. With globalisation, ethnic differences become less significant and inter-ethnic alliances may become stronger. The author could have related some of these trends without focusing entirely on the demerits of Bumiputeraism.

Although ethnicity is an important variable to discuss in a book critical of dichotomies between dumb and intelligent genes, nevertheless, in the context of Malaysia, I would like to think that a more subtle argument on the interrelationships between ethnicity, class elitism and gender would have better revealed the Malaysian story.

Class differences are increasingly apparent and women have increased their participation in tertiary education up to 65 per cent. Does that mean that Malay women are equipped with better genes than Malay men? Or Chinese women better equipped than Chinese men? Social scientists have long done away with any kind of analysis which harbours genetics as the main variable of achievement.

The book is personal and judgmental in sentiment. Yet it criticises another for those very same weaknesses.

However, Bakri's "revisit" should not be ignored. It tells us that not everyone can master the social sciences by virtue of being a writer. We must see the emergence of proper social analysis of ethnic relations and offer solutions which can help build upon the concern of all Malaysians to end this constant bickering about who is gaining what from Malaysia's economic cake.

A "civil society" is based on a conscious effort on the part of all ethnic communities. Hostilities, prejudice and racism will fester if the Malays and the poor are treated as citizens who have not tried hard enough to succeed; or if women are treated as supplementary income-earners who

can be disposed of anytime the economy is in trouble, or if the youth are blamed for most of our social ills.

We must begin to discuss the social realities behind trends of social change and instability. A fundamental issue is increasing rootlessness among Malaysian youth regardless of ethnicity, class and gender. Another is the problem of redefining poverty, since an income level of RM500-RM900 clearly places an urban average-sized family of five in the category of absolute poverty - those who are unable to meet basic needs of food, transport, education, health and shelter. All ethnic communities share similar economic and social problems, yet, in Malaysia these problems are analysed separately and through different biological and psychological variables.

Better intercultural and intersocietal understanding may be the key solution to Malaysia's socioeconomic and political problems. Perhaps more social scientists should start writing about these social problems and give our enthusiastic doctors some much deserved rest!