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Mapping the domains of socio-political ideas

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THE modern Malaysian nation was founded on a written constitution and a legal tradition. The sources of laws, including customary laws, go back to earlier epochs. Each law has social and political ideas and precedents. Each has its own biography and can be traced back to native customs, to Malacca Canon Laws (Hukum Kanun Melaka), and to those laws from Chinese, Indian, Egyptian and Greek civilisations.

Hammurabi, Magna Carta and Pax Romana all have their scions and origins. Trace further and many have origins from sacred laws in the Abrahamic faiths - the Judaic-Christian-Islamic traditions. Trace even further, and there are other sources.

Even so-called secular laws have their sacred origins in the inalienable rights of each person, the affirmation of God's rights and Man's rights. Trace more, and there are commonalities of lessons learned from the trials and errors of historical, legal and judicial precedents in the British, French and other empires of the mind. The tracing of origins continues.

Malaysia inherits civilisational and history-specific ideas and ideals. Some are accepted as universal ideals; some are rejected; some undergo review, revision, modification, to ensure relevance to cultures and the times. Some are newly emerging ideas and ideals. These may have national or international origins and stimulus.

Within the polity, the intellectuals and the elites, as individuals, as pressure groups and as interest groups, grapple with ideas, attempt to formulate policies and pass laws to ensure adherence and even conformity to the ideals.

Some of the zealous individuals and elite groups even attempt to monitor and control every aspect of implementation. Some make distinctions between first principles and secondary and tertiary principles. Others, in their determined proselytising, adopt the fallacy of the possibility or necessity of complete control over human affairs.

These guardians of values, ideas, policies and culture are significantly the various elites. Some are more idealistic than others, some more cosmopolitan, universal and others, more parochial, ethnocentric. Almost all are well-intended. Good intentions, however, do not guarantee that the general good is protected.

This is because some power elites of different orientations demand that their construction of the world is the only right construction. In their righteousness, there must be no alternatives. There must be no celebration of diversity. There must be only conformity to the will of their construction of reality. Their will and interpretation can override God's commandments.

The history of development in Malaysia is the history of negotiated ideals, ideas and action. The negotiations occur within the context of the aspirations and the will of the people. The negotiations also occur based on the understanding or otherwise of the various elites. The extent of the ordered and rational minds of the elites, or their cluttered and irrational minds, influence the climate of thought in society.

The intellectual life of modern Malaysia is also the life created by the power elites. As these elites shape the canopy and structure of national thought patterns, they are themselves shaped by their own constructions. The strengths of their ideals and ideas are formed by their personal individual strengths and limitations. Their will and the will of their

groups are governed by the self-imposed structure of their group think, often formulated and reinforced in their designed think-ins.

The first generation intellectuals were focused on independence, statehood, universal suffrage, national sovereignty, communism and the Emergency. They were united in enshrining the ideals of the constitution. In the education sector, this ideal was articulated by Aminuddin Baki in his proposal for the establishment of a national system of education. The ideals incorporate the various dilemmas and principles raised in the Barnes and Fenn Wu reports.

The idea of national unity was the primary first principle of the nation. The elites began to be concerned with the cardinal symbols of statehood: the national flag, the monarchy, national anthem, national parliament, national radio and television. The historic moment was the transition from God Save Our Queen to Negara Ku.

Into the second generation were the policy ideas of Malayanisation and the taking over of the functions of government from the former colonial civil servants and expatriate entrepreneurs. There were debates on the idea of "progress" - westernisation or modernisation, which later subsumed into ideas of "national development".

The policy of Malay as the national language of unity and the provision of education in the medium of Malay while respecting the rights of mother tongue education were the principles protected. The formation of Malaysia and confrontation with Indonesia as well as the Philippines' claim to Sabah tested the constitutional foundations, international alignments and the balance of regional powers. It also tested national resilience, the strength of national defence of the armed forces and civil guards, and national loyalty.

The external threats united the people further and defined the meaning of Malaysia. Hartal, May 13, 1969, further tested the durability of an experiment in world civilisation - a democratic multiracial, multilingual, multireligious Malaysian nationhood.

One of the most exciting episodes in the intellectual life of Malaysia in the 1960s was the Great Economic Debates at Universiti Malaya. The ideas in the great debates became the ideas debated and discussed widely among the elites and the masses. The elites and masses were concerned about what it means to be a Malaysian. Each ethnic group and Malaysians generally, were discussing the Malay dilemma and explored models of a Malaysian Malaysia and Bangsa Malaysia under the threat of the "Time-Bomb In Malaysia".

Ethnic mindsets, individual and group world-views were challenged and had to be reconstructed. The country formulated Rukunegara and focused on the restructuring of society and the eradication of poverty. The various notions of national development and basic amenities and facilities were explored. Revolusi Mental was the invitation of the times. The central ideas then included the notions of the urban-rural divide, the haves and the have-nots, affirmative action and the quota system, guided democracy and democracy without consensus.

Memorable experiences of university life for many in that generation include the high-wire expectancy of the debates, particularly between Mahathir Mohamad and Musa Hitam, and Lee Kuan Yew and Tan Chee Khoo. Such debates occur with great frankness, humour and principles but always with respect for those with opposing views.

In Lecture Theatre A of the Arts Faculty, or later in the Great Hall, the audience cheered and booed or were thoughtfully silent. But always, there was propriety and decorum respecting the values and spirit of intellectual life.

The third generation grappled with indigenisation and Islamisation. The

idea of a dominantly monolingual society was contested by the idea of a dominantly multilingual society. The symbolic usage of the term Bahasa Melayu or Bahasa Malaysia was also debated. Language engineering, schooling and national culture "engineering" and related issues continued to be discussed.

In the wake of the Islamic revolution in Iran came the ideals of the rule of the ulama and the challenge to the idea of "King above the Constitution" and "King above the Law". The will of the people or the will of the hereditary and ruling elites were explored and discussed publicly, but more often behind closed doors. The Islamisation of knowledge, Islamic alternatives, Islamic laws and Syariah courts, Islamic banking, Islamic hospitals and medicine and Islamic insurance dominated the thinking of the intellectuals, particularly Malay-Muslim intellectuals. This generation also saw the symbolic epistemology of the change from Pertandingan Al Quran to Musabaqah to Tilawah. And the introduction and wide use of the political language of Islam in all domains. The various notions of the meaning of an Islamic state and the various models of Malaysia as an Islamic state, as variously defined, were discussed across all religious groups.

The fourth generation debated Vision 2020. The idea of achieving the status of a developed nation ruled the minds of politicians, civil servants, business people, academicians and the people. The notion of a culture of excellence is enculturated. Policy initiatives and programmes which unfolded from the National Vision are an evolving legend, inspirational and almost in the collective national consciousness.

Into the fifth generation, the Multimedia Super Corridor, Putrajaya and Cyberjaya, the Petronas Towers, Bakun, KL Sentral and other mega projects construct the possible imagination of the times. Malaysia Boleh initiatives and the continuing codification of Formula Malaysia, notable achievements in the Malaysian Book of Records, are all realities and esteem-building exemplars for a nation that is learning from its history.

Human Rights, Suhakam, smart partnerships, ICT leadership, globalisation, liberalisation, share value in stock, Malaysia as a Centre of Excellence, world-class talent pool and the creation of a knowledge society are the overarching ideas and imagination of the day.

This sweep of Malaysian intellectual history identifies the emergence of time-honoured ideas and new ideas. Some have become cardinal principles, some are yet to grow, become enhanced and mature. Many are recurring ideas which will not go away. A few are ideas whose time have come to be.

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