

The continuing Malay dilemma

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Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's speech at Malaysia's Harvard Club dinner on July 29 entitled "The new Malay dilemma" will go down as a defining moment in Malaysian history. His concluding statement that "It is entirely possible for all the prosperity, the stability and the racial harmony in Malaysia to be destroyed", in particular, raises the spectre that "democracy may itself destroy democracy".

In his seminal work *The Malay Dilemma* (published in 1970), Dr Mahathir had argued for a new political system that would move away from patronage and create new economic and social opportunities for all Malays. But it seems that the political system has not, in fact, changed.

In this respect, Azam Aris' quotations from *Malay Dilemma* in his article entitled "Looking Beyond Dr M" (Issue 402, July 1) is spot-on and needs to be repeated because of its significance to the analysis being advanced here. Among the quotations are: "The advent of patronage as a factor in intra-party politics was significant for it meant that the leaders were no longer answerable to the ordinary members and the faceless supporters but were only answerable to themselves." The article also raised the moot question, "Did Dr Mahathir fail to change the system that dictates Malaysian politics?"

in export-oriented manufacturing created vast opportunities for the political elites and the Malay ruling class through power positions and patronage to enrich themselves. In this way, this class through "oligarchic-type" arrangements not only consolidated their positions of economic dominance but also made it difficult for smaller Malay businesses to avail themselves of similar economic opportunities because of mobility closure.

Dr Mahathir has very clearly explained what was provided by way of special economic opportunities under the affirmative action programme. He went on to explain the rationale for these arrangements. Whereas the recipients could have maximised opportunities to ensure that the 30 per cent target for Malays was achieved, "the majority contributed nothing to the NEP [New Economic Policy] target". Instead, they "sold out" and "asked for more".

Perhaps the more important aspect of Dr Mahathir's speech is to focus on the implications of these developments for political stability. The frustration and disillusionment among the *rakyat* for not even being able to benefit even from "trickle-down effects" can be understood. Therefore, the emerging trends of political and religious "extremism" can be seen as reactions to situations where they find themselves unable to change this "crutch culture" by any other means. This could well manifest itself in support for religious-based opposition political parties that claim to be able to effect this change for the betterment

position of the Malay ruling class instead. Indeed, the British recognition of the Sultan as the paramount Ruler for religious and customary reasons, and the creation of the *Majlis Agama*, can be seen as measures intended to use Islam to further colonial domination as well as to enhance and re-enforce the interests of the Malay ruling class.

... the government may now find itself unable to ensure that its credible track record will be followed through, leading to the possibility that new 'dilemmas' will begin to give shape...

Then again there was the Malay "dilemma" of accommodating the Chinese and Indian immigrant communities in the context of constitutional provisions for independent Malaya.

needs to be briefly highlighted in the context of the "new Malay dilemma". What it means is that because of these acceptable constitutional arrangements by all parties, it had been possible to build an overtly civil society within a "modernistic ideology" of development. In this way, the government was successful in implementing modern economic and social development projects that in fact had the effect of disrupting social formations of radical extremist movements and also blocked incentives for cultural identities becoming transformed to political identities. To this extent, religion by itself and in itself was unable to provide an avenue for political mobilisation against the constitutionally secular society.

But it is important to recognise that this "success" is now being seriously threatened by the continued patronage system of the "crutch culture" of the "new Malay dilemma" mainly because of the political reaction among the *rakyat* directed against the government.

Also, it must be pointed out that the Chinese business community had acquiesced to the NEP mainly because they believed that improving the economic levels of the *rakyat* was good for political stability and especially for business success. Therefore, the patronage system of the "crutch culture" also creates resentment among them because they perceive themselves as being "short-changed" in the failure of the policy on both these counts.

As a consequence, the government may now find itself unable to ensure that its credi-

I am of the opinion it can be argued that the "new Malay dilemma" centres squarely on this question. Because the political system had failed to change, Malay ruling class consolidation provided new avenues for "political entrepreneurs to mould their political mobilisation efforts towards the politicisation and consolidation of cultural identity" to further increase their own interests.

In other words, competition among the political elite to strengthen their political base becomes more intense and takes new forms of class-based scenarios manifested in terms of cultural value systems. The "crutch culture" consequently can be seen as the further consolidation of the patronage system mentioned in *Malay Dilemma*.

This was heightened as a result of the economic growth model and the implementation of the affirmative action programme and can be briefly stated as follows.

The overt emphasis on economic growth

of the *rakyat*.

Finally the "new Malay dilemma" must also be viewed briefly against the background of certain other "non-Malay dilemmas" as well because they can be seen historically as being inextricably linked.

The British colonial power itself faced a dilemma towards the Malays after the assassination of its first resident to Perak, J W W Birch, in 1875. The original reprisal for the "Perak outrage" was to annex the state. Military expeditions were dispatched from India and Hong Kong for this purpose. Had this happened, the status of the Malays might have been similar to that of the native Americans of North America or indeed, the race itself might have ultimately become extinct (there is mention of both these possibilities in Colonial Office records though not in this exact context).

The dilemma was "overcome" with the policy reversal to indirect rule with the pacification, consolidation and legitimisation of the

On the one hand, because of the rising political aspirations of Malay nationalism, independence for Malaya in some circles was seen within the political framework of a wider "Malaysia" including Indonesia. Had this been the case, the status of the non-Malays might have been seriously politically "compromised". On the other, the British government itself refused to grant political independence unless the legitimate aspirations of these communities who had helped to develop the country economically were politically assured.

The solution was found by acknowledging the status of the Malays as the indigenous people of the country and this special position was to be entrenched and "protected" as well as Islam declared the official religion in the Constitution. At the same time, the legitimate political economic and religious interests of the non-Malays were also guaranteed in the Constitution.

The significance of these arrangements

ble track record will be followed through, leading to the possibility that new "dilemmas" will begin to give shape to further political competition. This, in turn, could question the legitimised initial political formulation of the race relations "social contract" of the Federation of Malaya Agreement and the Constitution of independent Malaysia.

It would seem, therefore, that unless and until there is a clear understanding of the social forces involved, and urgent political safeguards put in place to address and overcome the problems arising from the "crutch culture" of the "new Malay dilemma", Dr Mahathir's comment that democracy may itself destroy democracy may well happen. **E**

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