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All that's solid melts into air

IS the New Malay Dilemma a whisper of the old one? Or is it a contortion of those remedies despite their progressiveness?

These are the disturbing questions that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's discourse on the new dilemma poses. In seeking the answers, we must not, in the words of Marcel Proust, "be afraid to go too far, for truth lies beyond".

Dr Mahathir's exposition is a successful attempt to capture within the confines of a single term the socio-economic, cultural, spiritual and political facets of the Malays' pathetic state of affairs, which have already divided them and threaten to tear asunder the nation's polity.

The first new dilemma is whether the Malays should throw away the slew of affirmative action programmes or crutches of privilege, which have long been regarded as their birthright and, perversely, as symbols of their superior status in the country.

The very crutches meant to help the Malays stand on their own feet have enslaved them to a dependency mindset and infantilised them like suckling babes. The consequence: the Malays' political and economic impoverishment - not because of the lack of opportunities but a cultural attitude rooted in apathy, dogmatism and in the romanticised portrayal of the Malays as the perpetual inheritors of this homeland.

The truth is that the Malays' political dominance is rapidly fading. Even so, political dominance will not protect them from their downward spiral into humiliating irrelevance. Political time is short whereas temporalities such as cultural and sociological time have a longer duree. The Malays live in political time, making politics - myopic politics we might add - the substance of life. This explains why culturally, the Malays have not changed much. And progress is not possible when the Malays remain culturally untransformed.

The second dilemma is whether the Malays should "in the name of democracy allow the country to be destroyed or ensure that people are not subjected to manipulation to the point where they will use democracy to destroy democracy".

It is a dilemma underscored by the Malays' retreat from collective Malay-Islam solidarity, caused by the subversion of Islam and the endangering of Malaysia's pluralism by Pas' peculiar religio-political ideology. But as Antonio Gramsci observed, "To the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is psychological". It must be asked: In what sense has Pas' ideology claimed greater psychological validity on the Malays? Can Umno reclaim this psychological validity and thus arrest the ascendancy of religio-political mediaevalism? Dr Mahathir's diagnoses provide a compelling theory on the state of today's Malays. Since a theory is always a detour - a necessary one - to something more interesting, it raises the question: In what direction is the challenge of the New Malay Dilemma pointing?

Doubtless, policies must adapt to the changed terrain and agenda imposed by the new dilemmas. True, some will read the dilemmas as a smokescreen for a seismic shift of gravity towards a greater entrenchment of Malay privileges. But this is a negative dialectic that ignores the crux of the first dilemma - the brave admission that affirmative action is a double-edged sword that aids but debilitates as well. We must assess what has been gained, what deserves to be dropped, retained and perhaps rethought

in the light of the new dilemmas.

The second dilemma calls for a consideration of national security. We have said it before and we dare say it again, no political party should call itself Islam's vigilante in name or substance. But legal sanction aside, the greater challenge still lies in changing a mindset obsessed with spiritual form rather than substance.

Yes, these questions will engender a response of derision too (and possibly, an erosion of political support), with shrill cries of "sell-out" and "betrayal". The choice lies in the hands of the Malays. Can the New Malay Dilemma constitute a new historical epoch that begins with the enlightened rejection of the exploitation of Islam and liberation from any form of crutches? Let the discourse begin.