

06/08/2002

Waking up from slumber to face the NMD

Rozi Ali

A DYED-in-the-wool product of the New Economic Policy, I feel as though I have awoken from a bad dream. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's speech on the New Malay Dilemma (NMD) has left the Malays naked and vulnerable to the point where even Sharon Stone will not trust her Basic Instincts.

What are we, the post-NEP and post-New Development Policy Malays? A group unused to good work ethics or a competitive culture and untouched by any sort of Protestant ethic? How do we define ourselves in light of the NMD?

We're not entirely back to square one. Things have changed. Malays, too, have changed. And progressed. Once only socialists - and very few at that - refused to embrace the political ideology of Umno, which has liberated and advanced the Malays and the nation.

But come the economic and political crises of mid-1999, Umno's hegemony seemed threatened by what was mistaken for ultra-liberal Malays, ready to assert their political rights from a non-racial platform, and by ultra-religious Malays, fighting for their version of God's kingdom in our political domain. Post-1999, said some, are interesting times in the Malays' cultural politics.

Maybe so. Times in which we ponder semen stains on mattresses. Do you know how many wives and mistresses religiously use mattress protectors and layers of bedsheets now?

That's a new cultural practice for some. We tax our brains with the rules of relevance in a court proceeding - you know, that democratic forum known for orderly judicial inquiry and bars against inflammatory hyperbole and political speeches.

Nerdy Malay men are a dying breed judging from the number of Malay girls that shine academically while Malay macho men like to practise polygamy and politics.

And we've gained a culture that's now open to discussing penises and sodomy and to compressing everything, in the name of literary satire, into that single word (pity the Editor is not open to its usage) that describes excrement.

Lexicographers will be forced to admit this English word into the ever-evolving Bahasa Melayu. But when the stakes are driven into the heart of affirmative action, we cry betrayal and - with apologies to poet Umar Sutung RS - "Aljogho itu lagi" (That executioner again).

And here's the core of the narrative in the NMD: Affirmative action - good and necessary as it is in some circumstances such as those that led to the birth of the NEP - inspires backlash and complacency.

It often promotes those who are underprepared for their assigned tasks. It attaches a stigma to those who do succeed - there are many - on their own, often with a crushing burden. And sometimes, it is abused for nefarious purposes.

Unfortunately, some people (Malays and non-Malays) confuse affirmative action - in NEP, NDP and in all of its variations in the OPP - with the privileges or special provisions on the rights of the Bumiputera enshrined in the Federal Constitution.

They take the affirmative action programme as a birthright or constitutional entitlement. They ignore the fact that affirmative action, unlike the constitutionally scripted privileges, has a timeframe that

should be honoured.

They overlook the second objective of the NEP, which is retained in all its successors. This confusion should be cleared before we offer fresh approaches in those contentious areas that have fractured Malay progress. The crutches should be thrown away in areas where progress has been attained.

Areas that require continuation must be modified to render them effective. Otherwise, any institutionalised reaction to NMD will become the politics of evasion.

There should be an impassioned and productive way to approach the problems of underdevelopment. Affirmative action should be redefined to provide a leg-up to economically disadvantaged people of all races. In short, the second prong of the NEP - poverty eradication among all races - is still relevant and should reign now rather than an all-embracing action that uses race as a crude proxy.

Class-based affirmative action seeks to evaluate a beneficiary's record in light of obstacles overcome as a better measure of true merit and potential.

Those with minds and hearts stuck in the imagined Malay dynamism of the 70s should not be quick to disown those who are ready to throw the crutches as out-casts or traitors.

After all, the psyche of the bastard child is hardly independent of his family of origin. History is not a linear narrative of progress. Benefits may be won and taken away; gains are never absolute or perpetually uncontested; and policies, like all political movements, generate their own countervailing pressures after a certain lengthy period.

Revolutions may roll backwards, that's how Thomas Wentworth Higginson put it during the Civil War. The NMD is not a fractured political tableau that inverts the status quo of the Malays but a springboard for progressive national politics and Malays.

We speak the language of "race" so often that we forget we should have reached a stage where it does not matter.

Let's honestly ask ourselves: Dare we dream of a Malaysia where race disappears as a fundamental category for the distribution of power and resources? These are the questions bequeathed by Dr Mahathir's NMD that will shape the life of the nation in the 21st century. Or shall we continue with our slumber until, perchance, an errant asteroid smacks a sense of urgency and common purpose into us?