

**Malaysia's lost decade**  
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After much dithering, I picked up the courage 10 years ago this month to return to Malaysia. Prior to that, I had spent a good 11 years in London, where the 'miserable comfort' was both real and surreal to me.

I knew I had to put up with some serious miseries in Kuala Lumpur: horrible traffic congestion, notoriously disorganised public transport, and an economic 'miracle' that had been brought to its knees by the financial crisis in the late 1990s.

But there were hopes too. The general elections in November 1999 had dealt a severe blow to Mahathir Mohamad's autocratic and megalomaniac style of government, while a new political course was struggling to make its voice heard, one that was no longer premised on race and the feudalistic loyalty that it demanded, but on one's civic duties as a dignified citizen that respect the rule of law, fair play and justice.

In other words, I wanted to see the end of the Mahathir (left) regime, which was plain racist, arbitrary and corrupt to the core, and see it replaced with an alternative that truly championed the people's causes. Ten years on, my initial hopes have largely evaporated.

Since Mahathir's 'retirement' in late 2003, we have had two more prime ministers, but neither of them has grasped the opportunity to reform the country root and branch.

If anything, political culture in the country has only gone from bad to worse. Malaysian politics is divisive; it always has been. But it was the power-crazy Mahathir whose 22 years of rule that had sharpened the religious, ethnic and class differences. Every time when his power was threatened, Mahathir showed no qualms of resorting to racist and communal politics for survival.

Throughout the last decade, there was one word that made the most frequent appearance in the Malay press: pengkhianat (either of bangsa or Negara).

Whenever Umno is pressed against the wall, the party leadership is quick to accuse its detractor of being an ingrate or a running dog to a foreign power. This is a tried and tested formula, engendered by Mahathir and perfected by his successors. Their latest tactic is to hide behind the Malay rulers, oblivious to the fact that national/religious/racial is no substitute for our dignity as individuals who cherish freedom.

Mahathir brought in Anwar Ibrahim in 1982 to shore up Umno's Islamic 'credentials', and did not hesitate to demonise PAS throughout the 1980s and the 1990s. Extremism begets extremism, and one would only expect the opponents to fight back with more vigour and determination, hence the increasingly conservative religious climate across the Peninsula. Soon, Sabah and Sarawak will succumb to it if Umno has its way.

**The aftermath of pandering PMs**

Both Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Najib Abdul Razak have failed to respond to this. Instead of putting the nation (or are we a nation in its classical sense?) back on the secular track as

envisioned by the Federal Constitution, Mahathir's successors have only managed to pander further to the religionists, albeit in a different way.

Religious authorities are now emboldened to threaten members of the public, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. People like Azwan Ismail risk becoming social outcasts unless they keep their true identity hidden. Meanwhile, removing non-Islamic symbols is an unwritten requirement if one desires the prime minister to grace one's religious occasion.

In the event of lack of public support and state protection, I would suggest Azwan to emigrate. Facing threat from naked religious power and confronted with an indifferent society, emigration is always the safest bet.

This is not a time to engage in scholarly or religious debate over the issue of sexuality when one's life is at risk. No fiddling when the weak minorities are being cursed, please.

As for non-Muslim bodies, there is one simple way to save yourselves the dilemma of having to avoid using religious signage: stop inviting politicians for religious functions.

After all, it is not the presence of the prime minister that saves one's soul. If one insists on such feudal practice, then be prepared to live with the humiliation and stop complaining.

At the societal level, ethnic divisions have only become more visible. Every single issue can conveniently become tinged with racial or religious colour, and the public's attention is easily shifted. Despite the March 2008 political tsunami, people on the street now only feel more alienated from each other.

### **Corruption maggots' endless feast**

Yes, Teoh Beng Hock died a tragic death, and it is only right that all conscientious Malaysians are aggrieved by it.

But there are many more innocent deaths too, such as that of Gunasegaran and Aminulrasyid Amzah, and it is time that we have a concerted and nationwide effort to bring justice to their bereaved families. Sadly, cross-ethnic solidarity remains slow in coming.

Finally, none of our leaders has demonstrated the actual will to root out corruption and overhaul our economic structure. The appointment of Mohd Isa Samad (left), the tainted former menteri besar of Negeri Sembilan, as Felda chairman is the latest case in point.

Furthermore, our economy remains anchored in the fraternity between tycoons (predominantly Chinese but increasingly multiracial) and the ruling elite. The 'loveable rich' pledge their allegiance to Umnoputras in return for economic favours, required by the 'political and economic architecture to bribe as well as to lobby', as described by Joe Studwell in *Asian Godfathers*.

The end result is the rapidly widening inter and intra ethnic income gap evidenced by the mushrooming of modern condos and service apartments in Malaysian cities that cater mostly to the super-rich. Liew Kee Sin of S P Setia Bhd., a top property developer, has indeed thrived under the New Economic Policy, but he does not speak for the majority of Malaysians who merely eke out a living.

Still, it is nearly an insurmountable task to make this raw reality plain to the general public

(the Malays especially) because of Umno's media manipulation and its camouflaging of class dominance with ethno-populism.

Tony Benn, a British Labour veteran and a staunch socialist, attributed Britain's social malaise in the 1980s to Margaret Thatcher's philosophy that measured 'the price of everything and the value of nothing'. Listen to his excellent speech in Parliament, and one will be astounded to know how much the issues elaborated by Benn are relevant to Malaysia's lost decade.

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