

Malay problem root of nation's problem
Malaysiakini.com
January 6, 2011

COMMENT About a year and a bit ago, the Old Boys' Association of the Royal Military College otherwise known as 'Old Putras' organised an evening of discourse.

The forum noted that the Malaysian people were fragmented, the economy at a virtual standstill, and democracy eroded by dictatorship, returning feudalism, and theocracy. Those present wanted to analyse the degeneration and like good citizens we were to come up with some solutions.

It was then that one speaker, Mohd Dahan if I remember correctly, who stood up to say, "Solve the Malay problem, and you solve the country's problem." Now we are in the first month of the second decade of the 21st century, the ring of truth in his statement still prevails.

But at this time, 53 years after independence and 10 years to becoming a high-income country, it appears we are still embedded deep in a long list of unsolved national problems, with many getting worse than before.

Here are but some of them: A restive and fragmented population, high migration rate, poor rate of growth, broken public institutions like education and the judiciary, high crime rate, degenerating personal and public morality, price increases, inflation, and a generally authoritative, intimidating and arrogant government. Our comparative indices with other countries like in areas of transparency, human rights, education, are all on the downward swing.

And corruption, the perennial social cancer, taking place at the highest possible level, involving amounts that would make Carlos Slim (currently the richest man in the world according to Forbes) and Bill Gates almost poor by comparison.

Hope lies eternal, so let's see whether we can try to solve at least some of the national problems, by first solving some Malay problems, for this coming year.

But first, what exactly is the 'Malay problem'?

Unable to break the inertia

My observation of this matter stemmed from the collective Malay lack of knowledge and of modern technical skills and thereby negatively reflected in the country's wealth distribution scenario.

In 1957 the record books indicated that Malay economic involvement was no more than at a paltry 2 percent. This is not good at all as viewed and agreed on by the founding fathers and every meaningful citizen of whatever ethnic background.

Since then the Malays have been given all opportunities to be more fruitfully involved in the country's economic activities. In 1970, a name was given to this ground-breaking exercise known as social engineering under the New Economic Policy.

Lavishly-funded government policies and programmes were introduced to even the playing field for Malay incursion into the national economy.

But try as they might, the Malays could not manage to break the inertia and achieve any planning targets. (Please spare me the need to repeat even some of the details for they have been pretty well and regularly documented by proponents, supporters and critics alike.)

This was to me the first time the Malay problem surfaced. It's that the perception that Malay economic backwardness (and 'problem') is solely economic in its cause and could largely be solved under the NEP.

In fact its architect, Abdul Razak Hussein (right), asked for 20 years for the project implementation; surely thinking that this period was enough to see the Malay through.

Sadly, history has indicated there has been a fundamental flaw in this presumption. In reality, his economic ineptitude being one, but far more is his psychological or mental deficiency.

Psychological or mental? Yes. He has this innate inability to realise that upon independence the country was morphing progressively into a new era: From old to new, rural to urban, agrarian to manufacturing, ancient to modern. From a life aligned with nature and the natural featured by myth, magic, miracle and mystery, to one surrounded and led by technical principles and science. It was an era of change.

Change requires a few mental subtleties. First there must be awareness or consciousness of the advent of change, and second, it requires a willingness to adapt to it. Without these two, any change is but a natural progression. The mind must therefore be equipped to be conscious and be aware of change. This is what the Malay did not have.

Ketuanan Melayu

History tells us that the Malay has not been able to produce the thinking faculty to recognise the coming of change to begin with. Hardly surprising therefore for him to show an inability to adapt at the appropriate time. He has no ability to accept and adapt to change.

So this is to me the root of the 'Malay problem'.

This inability to change again to me reflects the inner features and characteristics of Malay thinking:

- i) It is ethnocentric: it believes in the superiority of its own type over all other types.
- ii) It is non-scientific: it believes in not yet ascertained truth and in non-provable ones.
- iii) It is quick in denial.
- iv) It is not aware of its mistakes.

They would produce the following end-product or behaviour patterns:

- v) The Malay is a superior race.

vi) Islam is the one and only religion that gets approval from God Almighty.

vii) These are irrefutable truths.

viii) Anyone denying the above is a traitor to the race and an apostate to religion.

Items (i) to (iv) indicate that the Malay is racially conscious and highly religion bound. Items (v) to (viii) reveal his racism and religious tendencies. They in turn at least partially explain the favourite Malay ideology 'untuk agama, bangsa dan negara'.

They have also been personified by the ketuanan Melayu entity, and giving rise to the Perkasa movement.

Doubters to this contention might wish to counter check: Are ketuanan Melayu and Perkasa not ethnocentric? They are for championing 'Malay rights' when the constitution says it's only Malay 'special privileges'.

They are also non-scientific for championing Islam, or at least the government-approved version of Islam: Sunni sect, Imam Shafie line, and until recently, Islam Hadhari variety.

Who then are ketuanan Melayu members? To me, the ketuanan Melayu entity comprises those who generally harbour the eight features just mentioned above. As individuals they are:

i) The ruling party members, especially Umno leaders;

ii) The civil servants running the government machinery;

iii) The officers and personnel running government agencies like the police, military, customs, immigration, etc.;

iv) The ulama whose job is to protect and propagate Islam;

v) Political chiefs aspiring to get to the top of the party ladder.

It's eerie to think the obvious - that this list would net almost the entire educated, urban, middle class, Malay population. And they are the embodiment of the Malay problem!

In other words, the root, core, essence of the Malay problem is the Malay collective culture!

Shameful performance

How has this collective culture been performing as the top leaders and managers of the country? Well, unless I am grossly wrong, you can't create something good out of something rotten. Ketuanan Melayu (i.e. racism and religious fundamentalism) to me is something definitely rotten. So Malay supremacy has been able to create in the last decade or so the following:

a) Bending the laws to suit Malay interests. In this case the constitution has been amended a record 40 times (with 650 individual amendments) since 1957. Compare this with the US that has amended its constitution about 27 times since its founding. Or, Singapore, four times. Racism is institutionalised in this country!

b) Breaking the thin line between Syariah and civil laws. The supremacy of the constitution has been eroded.

c. Breaking down of institutions like the check and balance features of democratic governance. Democracy is all but dead. Have the periodic general elections, and that's it, democracy is observed. Whatever happens in between is another matter altogether.

d) The flagrant use of lies, deceit, hooliganism on the part of the ruling elite against its own people. There is this massive breaking down of individual and public morality.

There are countless thousands of others.

We come back to Dahan's wisdom. Now that we have re-acquainted ourselves with the Malay problem, how do we go about solving it?

This is no easy task for the obstacles are enormous. On the one side we have a people under the ketuanan Melayu ambit digging deep into the fortress of race and religion and not at all ashamed to use the political power available at its disposal. To the Malay, the saying that the ends justify the means is enshrined in gold.

The government and ketuanan Melayu are not about to let go easily. They are deep in the quagmire of lies, deceit, corruption, even sin and criminality. Only by them staying in power will they be able to prevent the law from taking its course.

On the other side we have the 21st century world demanding a 21st century open and flexible mind. Some of them are: Technical ability, professionalism, openness, honesty, fairness, justice, morality, transparency, responsibility, accountability and integrity.

Solutions

Whatever programme we have to solve the Malay problem, two elements must be present: The secularisation of the Malay mind and the restoration of basic human rights to the peoples of Malaysia.

It has to be repeated that it won't be easy.

But hope against hope, the government must restore power to the people; the ulama must come to terms with universal realities. Civil servants too should reorient their thinking to serve the people rather than the politicians.

And the people, the average Malay down the road, must come to realise that the world is not an oyster, that individualism is the key to any personal or national development.

How can all these be achieved? Thinking influences behaviour - the ketuanan Melayu Malay mind must change from its ethnocentricity and non-scientific features to one of openness, fairness, rationality and respect for other men.

Develop the sense of the individual in him. Secularise Malay thinking. Open his closed mind. Go for secular education. Teach philosophy in schools. Do not teach children about religion until they are able to think for themselves.

Do anything to make the Malay more receptive for change. Then perhaps we can begin to

solve the Malay problem, in 2011 and onwards.

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Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/152600>