

Federal Constitution 'silent' on tribal claim to country
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COMMENT Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad has now decided that the non-Malays must accept that Malaysia "belongs" to the Malays.

This is a continuation of the fiction in our history books that Malaysia is a continuation of the Malay-Muslim Malacca Sultanate. Malacca's founder Parameswara, a Hindu from Palembang, has no doubt been buried in the same manner as Mt Everest climber M Moorthy.

Why didn't Mahathir raise the issue, if any, during the 22 years when he was in public office?

This is a tribal mindset at work in a country which has since emerged as a nation-state with a colour-blind federal constitution and wedded to the rule of law.

We would not be where we are now if the British had not fought two wars with the Siamese to carve out Peninsular Malaysia from the Thai kingdom. The Thais saw themselves as the natural successors to the old Hindu kingdom of Langkasuka which was centred in Kedah and Srivijaya and Majapahit.

Malay nationalism doesn't figure at all anymore in the political equation than Kadazan or Dayak nationalism does in Malaysia.

If Mahathir is trying to entertain us, none of us are amused. It was Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew who once disclosed that Mahathir had written Indian Muslim in the box for race when applying to join the University of Malaya, then in Singapore, as a medical student.

For good measure, Lee handed over a copy of Mahathir's application form to the late sultan of Johore when he requested one.

Presumably, Mahathir wants all non-Malays, Dusuns, Dayaks and Orang Asli included, to enter into a Magna Carta of sorts on the subject.

Mahathir should accept that the entire human race is descended from homo sapiens who originated in East Africa. That would settle the debate once and for all.

There's no doubt that the former prime minister is making the political statement in the usual, Umno tradition, ie, twisting and turning every issue into a racial one. Old habits die hard.

There are no prizes for guessing what's driving Mahathir.

He hopes to scare the Malays into circling their wagons and uniting under one platform. It's a numbers game. It's only strength along these lines that will ensure that Mahathir and his kind continue to live the good life at the expense of the majority, Malays and non-Malays alike.

For starters, Mahathir's statement on 'Malay ownership of the country' confirms the suspicions of the native majority in Sabah and Sarawak that the ruling elite continues to

belabour under a misconception, ie, the British colonialists handed over their countries to the ruling Malay elite to rule as their colonies much like the colonialists did in the days of the "white man's burden".

Already, the natives have had to put up with Putrajaya imposing its proxy-rule on them.

If Mahathir thinks that the Dusuns and Dayaks are part of the rumpun Melayu (primary Malay grouping), they won't be thrilled to hear that they are being remembered in this manner.

Mahathir must be the reason Dayak schoolchildren are classified as Malays in their school records and issued MyKads indicating them as Malays.

Rumpun Melayu is a figment of the political imagination. If there's any such Rumpun Melayu, it's a reference to all those various ethnic groups in the archipelago that spoke Malay outside their homes. Hence, the Malay Archipelago.

Studies indicate that the population of Southeast Asia is descended from the Dravidians of southern India who made their way along the coast to southern China and Taiwan and intermarried with the Mongolian tribes living there.

Malay itself is a dialect that originated in Cambodia and went on to become the trading and missionary language of insular Southeast Asia during Hindu and Buddhist eras.

The infusion of Sanskrit and later Pali – a Sanskrit dialect used by the Buddhists – into Malay ensured that it emerged as the lingua franca of the archipelago. The Malay language's historical position has been recognized by Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Indonesia where it has been accepted as an official and national language.

But language is no proof of race. One does not become Malay by habitually speaking Malay.

Professor Roff in his "Origins of Malay Nationalism" and DGE Hall in the History of Southeast Asia both write that even in the late 1800s, 85 percent of the various tribes in Peninsular Malaysia were immigrants from various parts of the archipelago and speaking various dialects and languages.

They joined the melting pot in Peninsular Malaysia, which chose to habitually speak Malay outside their homes.

It's true that the Federal Constitution defines the Malays and natives. This is more for the purpose of owning Malay reservation land and native land. It wasn't about 'owning' the country.

In any case, the inclusion of the term Malay in the Federal Constitution is in recognition of the emergence of Malay nationalism as a reaction against ever-growing Chinese economic dominance in Malaya and Singapore. All nationalism is defined by what it opposes.

Malay nationalism, as Roff pointed out, was a creation of the Jawi Peranakan – descendants of Muslims from Kerala in southwestern India – in Singapore. They started the first Malay printing press and the first Malay newspapers, including Utusan Melayu. The various ethnic groups from the archipelago who crowded into Malaya and Singapore were so much cannon fodder for the Jawi Peranakan as they flogged Malay nationalism.

The Federal Constitution also defines the Malays and natives for the purpose of Article 153 which reserved, for 15 years, a special position for them in four specific areas - intake into the civil service; intake into government-owned institutions of higher learning and training privileges; scholarships from the government; and opportunities from the government to do business.

Article 153 is not a sapu bersih (clean sweep) clause. It takes into account the legitimate aspirations of the non-Malays by providing only a reasonable proportion for the Malays and natives in the four specific areas mentioned in Article 153.

Exceptions in the Federal Constitution aside, which in any case does not water down the various equality clauses, no one is any more special than another citizen in Malaysia.

The country belongs to all Malaysians. No one should make empty claims that any citizen has more of a claim to the country than another.

If there are any Malaysians who want out, it's those in Sabah and Sarawak who had enough of the racism and growing racial polarization in Peninsular Malaysia. They fear that these unwelcome trends are already spilling over into their countries and no longer want any part in it.

We should wish them well so that at least they can be spared from being the victims of the cesspool of human emotions in Peninsular Malaysia.

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