

M'sia can do better without Umno
Malaysiakini.com
September 16,2011

On Sept 16, 1963, Malaysia was formed ostensibly to rid itself of colonial rule for good. Mind you, it was also Lee Kuan Yew's 40th birthday. Nearly five decades on, the man who is credited with having 'single-handedly' developed Singapore into an ultra-modern republic must now feel vindicated at the political divorce, but even luckier was Brunei that was almost lured into becoming merely a state of Malaysia.

Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III had been negotiating with the British and the Malaysians on joining the new federation. Rumour had it that the sultan had entered into the talks with a view to being installed as the first Yang Di-Pertuan Agong of Malaysia, which obviously did not go down well with the Bruneian populace.

A revolt led by the Partai Rakyat Brunei ensued. Thanks (again) to the ample supply of British weapons, the rebellion was eventually suppressed. Having felt the sentiments on the ground, the sultan knew he had to forgo his own vainglory for the sake of safeguarding the sovereignty of his kingdom, tiny it might be.

With the benefit of hindsight, it was indeed wise of the sultan to opt out of the Malaysian Project. Another farsighted move on the part of the sultanate was the currency interchangeability agreement with Singapore, which remains intact today. The Bruneians apparently will not allow their ethnic, religious and cultural affinities with Malaysia to take precedence over pragmatism.

Given the sigh of relief on the part of the Singaporeans and Bruneians at not being in the union, has Malaysia turned out to be an outright failure? Not quite. The federation is not a basket case that verges on a failed state - at least not yet.

On the contrary, Malaysia has done well since the 1960s, having fought off one challenge after another and established itself as a relatively prosperous middle-income country. Although it seems to pale into insignificance as compared to the regional star pupils, it remains the envy of many of the developing nations.

But let's not lose sight of the reality that the country's path to progress was brought to an abrupt halt with Mahathir Mohamad's blatant abuse of power beginning in the 1980s, and our people are now divided as never before.

september 16 sarawak and sabah independence Every time I speak to a Sarawakian or a Sabahan who cares to be candid with me, I can easily feel a keen sense of detachment. Some of them would make it abundantly clear that East Malaysians have been taken for a ride, while others would politely remind me of the exploitation of the natural resources by the Semenanjung. Still others quietly bemoan the fact that the two states are now an 'inalienable' part of a Malaysia that is inundated with religio-racial animosity.

Out of my duty as a 'fervently loyal' citizen, I would seek to reason with them that whatever profit that may have been made through the Malaysian deal, much of it has gone into the pockets of business elites and politicians from both East and West Malaysia.

While the Orang Asal communities have valid reasons to lament the lack of proper roads and educational facilities in the hinterlands of Sabah and Sarawak, not all West Malaysians have benefited from Barisan Nasional's policies either.

Just ask the downtrodden Indians or the marginalised Orang Asli what does 1Malaysia mean to them, or visit Kelantan to see why the federal roads there are in such an appalling condition, not to mention a long-awaited highway that may take a century to reach the PAS-administered state.

Challenges beyond territorial dimensions

Without dismissing the grievances of my compatriots from across the South China Sea, I would argue the challenges confronting Malaysia nowadays go far beyond territorial dimensions. In fact, the politico-economic malaises experienced by the nation as a whole should provide us with a precious opportunity to forge a common resistance against the BN hegemony.

United we stand, divided we fall, so no blame game please.

The burning question is: how much longer can Malaysia continue to indulge in a false sense of contentment by looking at our poorer peers? Even Indonesia is fast catching up and may soon overshadow us economically.

Malaysia was founded as a secular and multi-ethnic entity. It was also supposed to be a country where everyone had a part to play. But while other post-colonial states have moved beyond race and religion, Malaysia appears to be heading in the opposite direction. The Umno-led government - with the connivance of its coalition partners - is so addicted to the scare tactic that it has lost the ability to think otherwise.

This is the area where the Malaysian promise has failed to come true. Instead of taking the advantage of Malaysia's diversities to create a progressive nation, the powers-that-be have successfully instilled fear into the various communities. In this country, everyone faces all sorts of onslaught and is a threat to everyone else: the Chinese to the Malays, the Malays to the Indians and, needless to say, the Semenanjung to Sabah and Sarawak.

There is also an inexplicable fear of being assimilated as much as of being rejected. Between a Malaysian vowing to defend his/her ethnicity/religion to the death and another Malaysian dying to be recognised simply as a Malaysian, the chances of finding them both are amazingly equal.

As Iqbal Khan, a British theatre director of Pakistani origin, has painfully observed: the options are either to assimilate and remove the sense that one is a 'threat' to one's hosts, or entrench oneself among one's own people, for fear influences every action - be it the fear of rejection, persecution, exclusion or even of betraying one's ancestral origins.

How curious, that Malaysians have put up with all these lies for so long, as if we were not imbued with the ability to feel at ease with multiple identity but could easily run amok. Or is it because we have become anaesthetised to the constant propaganda bombardment by the BN government?

'What more do you want?'

One may ask: now that Najib Abdul Razak has announced the abolition of the Internal Security Act, what more do you want?

A lot more: independence of the judiciary, re-structuring of the economy to reflect distributive justice, and an end to racist and gutter politics, among many others.

The BN government must also restore the spirit of justice by apologising to all the victims who suffered under the ISA and other draconian laws, complete with corresponding reparations.

Malaysia does not necessarily have to aspire to be an economic wunderkind like Singapore or South Korea, but we must not allow fatalism and defeatism to lull us into thinking we can never become a peaceful, respectful and rational nation. A thorough and proper debate on our history is long overdue, and a reexamination of the heavily lopsided federal structure is badly needed.

Quite simply, the current race-based government can no longer represent the values and aspirations of the new generation.

After all, many multi-ethnic societies have managed to not only survive but also to evolve into a stable democracy, Mauritius being only one such example. Malaysia should be able to do the same, but the first step towards this goal may involve removing Umno from power, and that in itself is perhaps the single most daunting challenge.

JOSH HONG studied politics at London Metropolitan University and the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. A keen watcher of domestic and international politics, he longs for a day when Malaysians will learn and master the art of self-mockery, and enjoy life to the full in spite of politicians.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/176030>