

**Umno: from racist to fascist**  
**MalaysiaKini.com**  
**February 17,2012**  
**Josh Hong**

Ready to get into a taxi just right outside KLIA, I was stopped by a loud male voice from behind: "Encik, boleh tukar tak? Kami nak pemandu Muslim."

I turned around and saw a middle-aged Malay man waving at me in a rather friendly manner, his wife busy sorting out the luggage. They already had an Indian driver awaiting by the car door, who was looking rather innocent.

"Boleh tukar?" The man asked again.

"Maaf lah." I got into the car and told the Malay driver to start the engine, leaving the bewildered couple behind.

This episode reminded me of an email that I had received recently, in which a lawyer specified that she would prefer a Christian legal assistant because "we are a God-fearing company and faithful followers of Christ".

These two experiences of mine again reveal the extent to which Malaysians show no qualms about their communalist mindset. In both cases, the words that the Malay man and the Christian lawyer uttered would be more than sufficient to bring them under the charge of discrimination in a mature democracy. But this is Malaysia and our values are "different".

That Malaysia is imbued with distrust and even antagonism is beyond doubt, but it is the ruling parties that institutionalised racism and communalism. In particular, Umno since the 1980s has been using race and religion to create a false sense of supremacy among the Malays, and the process was initiated - ironically - by a not-so-pure Malay by the name of Mahathir Mohamad.

For nearly 30 years, Umno has been propagating an ideology that is so exclusivistic that it not only marginalises - both politically and economically - the non-Malays, but blinds the significant segment of Malay society to the real and core issue of income disparity in this country.

Race, and increasingly religion, are now employed to justify Umno rule, even at the expense of the kampung folk and the urban poor. Meanwhile, social poverty and class divisions are making Malaysian society as combustible as never before, and a single spark can easily set a prairie fire.

**KFC fight club**The alleged assault incident at KFC in Shah Alam is a case in point. From the very beginning, it was just a management and customer relations issue, plain and simple. But in the context of Malaysia, the dispute has taken on a racial dimension because we are a society severely divided along racial lines.

Like it or not, years of indoctrination and brainwashing by Umno and other race-based parties have rendered Malaysians a suspicious lot: the Malay would see the Chinese as haughty, while the Chinese would regard the Malay as a laggard. The race-based policies so loved by the Umno elites are nothing but perfect recipe for trouble ahead.

The video clips showing the alleged assault enraged the Chinese, with some now arguing the fast-food chain's service has deteriorated since it was acquired by a bumiputra conglomerate.

Hello, the Berjaya Group of Vincent Tan has the franchise to run 7-Eleven convenience stores in Malaysia but the service clearly leaves much to be desired!

Race simply a false classification

Malaysians embrace race as a biological, genetically determined concept like the bee does honey, despite that this 'scientific' idea being challenged more than never before. If anything, race is simply a false classification of people that is not based on any scientific truth. It is nothing but a political construct.

A century ago, Irish and Polish Americans - being largely Catholic and poor - were not accepted as 'white' in the US. They only became 'mainstream' after the country began to see more 'people of colour'. The WASPs needed them to boost their political presence, just like Umno would need Indonesian migrants to guard against the non-Malays.

In the same vein, Japanese war orphans who were abandoned in Northeast China after World War II always lived like other Chinese until the day when they realised they could choose to "return" to Japan. Those who did are now often subjected to social exclusion in their newly-found 'motherland', being considered 'less Japanese' culturally.

Not to mention young Taiwanese who are now more than eager to differentiate themselves from the Chinese thanks to their socio-political experiences that are vastly different from those of mainland Chinese. Even in Hong Kong, the idea of a collective, all encompassing Chinese identity imposed by Beijing is vociferously contested.

Which is why 'ethnicity' has come to replace 'race' as an identity marker in academic research, and is found more useful in understanding a seemingly 'purely Chinese' societies such as Hong Kong and Taiwan.

But in Malaysia, the concept of race was a colonial product meant to justify and entrench the position of the imperial rulers. Umno, however, has been extremely successful in creating a classification of Malaysians with the intent to give more power to one particular group and to legitimise its own rule.

Having been commenced as a political project to establish 'Malay dominance' over others, Umno has now been using the racist ideology to lord over even the poor Malays.

Failure to address ethnic differences

Sadly, Malaysians are obsessed with 'race' and use it to articulate oppression or to safeguard political power. We can blame Umno and its cohorts for accentuating the idea, but we cannot absolve ourselves of the failure to learn to acknowledge and address adequately ethnic differences. In other words, we talk about race in order to protect "our own kind", instead of to respect and celebrate each other's uniqueness.

And this is the precise reason that I find the message from the Christian lawyer most discomforting. On one hand, the non-Malays/ non-Muslims are asking for the state to be neutral and fair in safeguarding our civic rights, yet we at the same time may deny others the equal opportunity that we claim to desire so much!

The country is divided deeply enough by Umno and the last thing we should avoid is to turn ourselves into an accomplice that would bring about its premature death with our ignorance.

No less damaging is the persistence of questionable characters like Mahathir, who continues to churn out racist remarks with relish. He and others employ distortions and omissions to support their 'conclusion' that the non-Malays are all rich, betraying only the startling failure of their leadership.

Their accounts of "social realities" may not be as crude and distasteful as the tabloids, but they do expose the fact that these people - and Mahathir in particular - are so absorbed by their own fictions that they are no more than prisoners of their own unpalatable past.

To redeem the country, Malaysians should perhaps do more to understand one another and seek to

bridge the gap, rather than engaging in incessant blame game or indulging in self-pity. We may not be able to stop Umno from behaving like a racist, but we certainly have the power to choose not to be dictated to by our emotions or racial sentiments.

I am therefore surprised to read a piece by one Zaidel Baharuddin who seeks to argue Umno is not a racist party. Granted, Umno appears to be a 'broad masjid' that counts various races among its members, this fact alone however does not negate the inconvenient truth that it is bent on dividing Malaysia along racial lines, buttressed by draconian powers.

Put simply, the presence of Malays of various ethnic backgrounds in Umno has not rid the party of its authoritarian nature.

A stench by any other name stinks the same. If the writer is irked that Umno is unjustly accused of being racist, perhaps fascist is a more fitting word to describe its current state.

Given the abject failure of Najib Abdul Razak to rebuke Ibrahim Ali over the white packets farce, and his pathetic silence on the thuggery that implicates Umno, one only fears that there is a whole lot of truth in it.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd  
<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/189496>