

## **Mahathir's stance undermines his race theory**

**MalaysiaKini.com**

**Aug 10, 2012**

**By Terrence Netto**

Dr Mahathir Mohamad had come out with what appears to be a tacit admission of responsibility for the exponential growth in Sabah's population that occurred largely on his prime ministerial watch (1981-2003).

Sabah's population grew from 929,299 to 2.46 million in two decades from 1980. By 2010, it stood at 3.12 million, a truly Malthusian rate of increase.

In arguments that typify his amoral approach to politics especially when his hands are in the fire, Mahathir - after having earlier disclaimed responsibility for 'Project IC', the scheme that expedited citizenship for thousands of foreigners in Sabah during his premiership - now retrospectively justifies the decision on grounds that the newly minted citizens had been staying for a long time in Sabah and were conversant with the national language.

In the latter regard, they are the more deserving recipients of the privilege of citizenship, argues Mahathir, than others of our naturalised citizens who cannot speak Malay despite long residence in the country.

With this latest gyration in Mahathir's stance, it must be noted that it represents a change from the sweeping disclaimer he had issued earlier when he flatly denied responsibility for the problem.

This change can be read as a tacit acknowledgment that he cannot come before a second royal commission of inquiry and say, "I don't remember," like he did in January 2008 when he testified before the RCI on the Lingam videotape.

Total non-recall

It helps shed perspective on his penchant for pre-emptive positioning to recall what Mahathir said just before he appeared before the RCI on the Lingam videotape.

Then, he issued a statement through his lawyer that he was prepared to answer not only questions within the frame of the inquiry's terms of reference but also queries from outside of it.

Those familiar with his style would have recognised Mahathir's bravado for what it was: pre-emptive positioning - 'Ask all you want, I have nothing to fear.'

In the event, when he was questioned on lacunae in his testimony, he pleaded a lack of recall.

Now with another appearance before an RCI looming, Mahathir knows the excuse of pleading memory lapses about events that occurred on his prime ministerial watch would simply not fly a second time.

Rarely at a loss for subterfuge by which to subdue his critics, Mahathir has to try a new tack, especially now when Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is about to disclose the terms of reference for the RCI on illegal migrants in Sabah.

One cannot see how the terms would allow the 87-year-old former PM - who was home minister when the influx of migrants into Sabah and their quick naturalisation happened - to avoid being called before the inquiry though Najib is the sort who would bend over backwards not to give offence to Mahathir.

Najib had announced on June 1 that a RCI on the issue would be formed. Under pressure from component parties of Sabah BN whose frustration over the issue of 'illegals' in Sabah has been mounting steadily, a reluctant Najib was forced to acquiesce to the demand for an RCI.

After publicly conceding the need for a RCI, Najib must have hoped the pressure would recede, perhaps even go away, for, afterwards, the PM did not seem to be in a hurry to announce the terms of reference for the commission.

Anwar forces Najib's hand

He dragged his feet until about a fortnight ago when the agitational pitch of Sabahan discontent over the issue was ratcheted up by the defection of two BN members of parliament from the state - Lajim Ukin of Beaufort and Wilfred Bumburing of Tuaran.

If Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim is to be believed, another federal legislator will defect from the BN ranks this weekend.

If this happens, the pressure that crumbling support for the BN in Sabah would exert on the PM would become intolerable, given that a general election is imminent.

Mahathir can see how where all this is leading which is why he has shifted from denial of responsibility to retrospective justification of deed. This is a less intractable stance than flat disclaimers and pleas of amnesia.

At least, it can be counted on to generate public debate about rights to citizenship in Malaysia, a frequently combustible issue throughout Malaysian history, more so now when a leading controversialist is affecting to take a position on the matter that could mean that the 2.2 million documented foreign workers in Malaysia, particularly those who have long been in the country and can speak the national language, ought to qualify for the right to citizenship.

What this would imply in the long term for the dominant-race theory of this same controversialist - to wit, Malays are the dominant race of Malaysia by dint of a longer period of being domiciled in the country - is left to be seen.

Of Mahathir, it can be said that he is rarely without a combative argument but whether these stack up coherently or collapse in a heap is not as important as his staking out a position, particularly when he is in a pinch.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd  
Source: <http://www.malysiakini.com/news/205946>