

Two nations in one country after May 13
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I refer to the malaysiakini report Exorcising the ghosts of May 13. It is interesting that a book has been published on that contentious issue that happened some 38 years ago. I must admit that I have not read the book and the following comments are made from reading newspaper articles in Britain as well as some dis-embargoed documents at the British National Archives.

It seems that British papers were particularly concerned that Malaysia was about to implode. Malaya had been described as early as July 1957 as an 'experiment', a multi-racial nation that needs to find common ground to survive. Language, the special privileges of the Malays, Islam as the state religion as well as citizenship for immigrant communities, including Indonesians, were a few of the most contentious issues.

By May 13, 1969, a Malayan Malaysia, a multiracial state led by consensus politics, came to a close. With the exit of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia embarked on a different route, one which was based on the supremacy of rule by ethnicity.

The London Times newspaper was particularly concerned that Tan Siew Sin, MCA's leader then, had pulled MCA ministers out of government after the party's poor performance in the elections. Non-Malay Malaysians, especially the generation born in Malaysia after World War II, had bought into the rhetoric of nation-building and saw themselves as full citizens, with every right to participate fully in the governing of the country.

But the racial riots and the ensuing rule by decree meant that such an egalitarian future was not possible. The NEP was the result of this new situation. Ever since then, Umno's main purpose, based on their actions whilst in government, has been to 'preserve' the status quo. Ever since then, non-bumis (a very new term that gained currency in the 1960s) have reacted with apathy, not caring even about the very streets they live in. We are two nations in one country.

Under Dr Mahathir Mohamad, great strides were made economically and a large Malay middle class emerged. Wawasan 2020 was a product of their new found confidence. But the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 dented that confidence. Without governmental protection, all that new found wealth could not be sustained. It seems that the entire social engineering process was failing. At the same time, an economic disparity began to emerge.

The gap now was less ethnic oriented and more visibly a class-based. Go to Taman Tun Dr Ismail, Bangsar, Seri Hartamas, and chances are there is a sizeable Malay middle-class, represented by their lavish mosques. This ruling elite, like those non-Malays who live behind gated communities, have taken root and flourished. Here we have a ruling elite living exclusive lives impervious to the rest of us.

May 13 should have faded into history but the spectre of that battle has now come back. Malaysians have to ask themselves, why? Why now, on the eve of our 50th anniversary has this issue been resurrected? It is like a bad dream, a nightmare that one letter writer in 1969 said 'keeps continuing'. In a sense, May 13 continues to haunt us. As long as we do not discuss it openly and rationally, we will never be able to put it to rest.

How is this possible?

The South African Truth Commissions, more about forgiveness than punishment, where those who tell the truth are given amnesty, may be a suitable model for us in Malaysia. But are the chief characters still around? Do we have enough wherewithal to embark on such a road? Can Malaysians set aside ethnicity and face up to its darkest moment in history?

The present prime minister, then a junior civil servant, was appointed to the powerful organisation that took over the running of the country. This was Mageran, led by Tun Abdul Razak. I may be wrong but the fact that Tun Razak very quickly relinquished such powers is a good indication of the professionalism that still sustains the country.

Conspiracy theories often assume that the government has a lot of power, often superhuman and that one man or a small group of men can organise such a thing as the May 13 riots and then take over from the ailing PM. More possibly, things got out of hand and a few officers in the Malay Regiment sent out were emotional having never faced such a situation before.

If the government wanted to quell a Malay uprising, surely Malay officers would be more persuasive. That things got out of hand, that the government then had to react according to the situation they were in is less romantic and hence a less acceptable view.

If Mahathir's comments about being unable to sack Samy Vellu are any indication, it is quite clear that May 13 would be infinitely harder to orchestrate, much less with the efficiency that it was allegedly executed. A lot of lives were lost and the incident is an indelible mark in all our minds, making ethnic division a permanent feature of our national identity.

We have paid dearly and continue to pay for May 13. The price has been ideological stagnation. That these same issues and this single incident still resonates with us, that we still need to ban books and threaten those who speak about it with detention without trial shows that we have not changed. We can only move forward if those involved come forward with a view to forgiveness and change.

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