

May 13 and beyond (Pt 1)
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The May 13th race riots cannot be understood as an isolated event but as the cumulative convergence of historically determined disruptive political and social forces that were perpetuated and developed over a period of time.

These involved contributory and precipitating causes that have to do with the acquisition, discrimination and abuse of political power, and which came to a head in the post-independence period.

Indeed, in place of nation-building efforts, there was already the breakdown of law and order in Kuala Lumpur, such that May 13th itself has even been described at least by one observer as a "blessing in disguise" because it finally resulted in the lawless situation in Kuala Lumpur being brought under control. (Raja Petra: Malaysia Today, April 9, 2007).

The contributory causes need to be recognised. First, the root cause can be traced to the Federation of Malaya Agreement itself, the first piece of post-war legislation promulgated by the British colonial government which failed to provide any semblance of political stability because the constitutional status of the different racial groups was not negotiated in consultation with the legitimate representatives of the respective communities.

The innate characteristic of powerlessness was thereby initiated and allowed to be perpetuated right into the post-colonial period. The two groups most representative of the Malays, the Nationalist Party and the Islamic factions walked out of Umno and the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) which was the only party with predominant Chinese membership (that collaborated with the British in Force 136) was not invited to participate in the negotiations. Therefore it was the elitist Umno members' interests that were promoted in the Agreement which was unrealistically (and of course conveniently) considered by the British as representing the Malay community as a whole.

But this was an erroneous perspective. The Malay rakyat that had hitherto been politically dormant under the feudal system in the pre-colonial period had become strongly nationalistic, first because of the defeat of the British by the Japanese and then by the promise the latter to give the Malays political independence. It can be asserted that it was this nationalistic fervour, and not Umno membership as such, that enabled the mass protest against the Malayan Union proposals. Indeed it can also be argued that it was this same national consciousness that forced the resignation of Onn Jaafar when he proposed opening Umno membership to non-Malays.

The possibility of losing political power to the Chinese was the other main concern of the rakyat which was also the fear of the Malay elite, but there was the other additional reason that the latter feared the Chinese were likely to encroach on their economic interests (with British backing). But at the same time the elite groups also needed the Malay grassroots for political support to politically keep the Chinese at bay.

Therefore it would not be difficult in the situation of the victory parade after the 1969 general election where Chinese opposition parties were claiming to have defeated the Alliance and would "take over the government" for both groups to react fiercely particularly because the threat of the Chinese taking political power seemed to be becoming a reality.

Malay case

It must be emphasised that this nationalist consciousness could be expected to have become reinforced and heightened by the fact the Malay working class, the peasantry, other low income groups as well as the lower middle class had yet to see any appreciable improvement in their social life since Merdeka, and yet the Chinese immigrants were now threatening to take over the government.

The call for the Malay youth therefore to attend the post-election rally, also from other parts of the country as well, was also intended as a demonstration against Umno leadership itself for allowing this static economic situation to continue. Therefore it would be expected that the gathering at the home of the Selangor Mentri Besar would also have included representatives of lower-middle class Malays as well as others acting as youth leaders.

A defining question in the collaboration and first coming together of Umno and MCA in the Alliance party to contest the KL municipal elections is nothing more than a case of false consciousness. It needs to be strongly emphasised that this so-called political accommodation was essentially a 'fluke' shot in the political arena. It was totally devoid of any notions of political theory or ideology. But it was conveniently accepted as a sufficient condition to work for political independence because it was intended to maintain the status quo and therefore serve the common interests of the British, the Malay ruling class, and the Chinese business class.

The Alliance party therefore ensured that the unequal and discriminatory colonial social structure was maintained at the expense of egalitarian policies for Malay rakyat and the Chinese working classes. Put simply it was a case of 'each man for himself and God for all' and it follows that the election process that offered the only known hope of effecting a change to bring about a more caring society for all had become a farce.

Chinese case

The situation of the working class Chinese community was also one of a continuous struggle to survive. Emerging from what is perhaps the most exploitative system of indentured labour in Malaya recorded in documentary evidence as the 'pig trade' and subjected to 'vice' items to earn revenue by the colonial government through opium, alcohol, gambling and prostitution, a small proportion managed to set themselves up as independent workers in the tin industry and related occupations subsequently. But with increasing population and denied access to land they turned to wage employment and pressed for better working conditions through trades unions. However because the unions had the support of the CPM they were suppressed and declared illegal. Moreover because of this and the lack of jobs for the Chinese educated many joined the CPM because they had to fight to survive.

What the Chinese lacked most was political power. Persuaded by the colonial government, their businessmen organised themselves to protect their economic interests, so from its very inception the MCA was a political party representing the towkay class. It is important to recognise that while the fledging party could have worked to build up the party and provide political and economic support for the Chinese community as a whole, the leaders instead chose to forge links with the Malay ruling class and thereby develop mutually beneficial interests as a class.

The Chinese providing the economic support to the Alliance Party through the provision of huge funds for election purposes and economic representation in their larger business consortiums for the Umno elite, and in return seeking political legitimacy through representation of more parliamentary seats of the Alliance party. Their indifference to the Chinese community is evidenced by one of the most 'outrageous' scenarios of MCA indifference in the failure to present the Chinese Memorandum to the British Government at the Mederka Conference to demand a place in the independent Malaya. The Chinese interests therefore were not presented to the British government. Instead according to a statement attributed to Tunku Abdul Rahman the Memorandum was thrown into the wastepaper basket!

What this means is that literally the 'mass' of Chinese were automatically alienated from the political process from Day 1 and therefore sought political representation through opposition parties such as the Labour Front and the DAP. In fact it can be argued that in effect the reduction of political power of the Alliance in the 1969 election was because of the rejection of MCA candidates by the Chinese. Because the opposition parties were 'outside' the normal conservative value system of being subservient to the political status quo as in the MCA the Chinese members were therefore free to express political dissent with regard to their marginalised political status with a minimum of restraint in the opposition parties

To add to this was the confidence they had gained from the entry of the Peoples' Action Party (PAP) of Singapore into the Malaysian political arena. The demand by PAP leader Lee Kuan Yew for a Malaysian Malaysia provided emphasis to these Chinese to back the opposition parties with confidence and a sense of legitimacy. To them, Malaya belonged to all and as Malays are not necessarily the only indigenous community, they must necessarily accept the Chinese as equals in a power-sharing government.

1969 general election

On the eve of the 1969 polls and against this background there was the question of granting a police permit for a large funeral procession to go through the town centre for an opposition party (Labour Party) member who had been shot by the police. There are some conflicting accounts about the decision to grant this permit. Tunku Abdul Rahman told me that he was against a permit being issued because of the highly charged political climate.

But according to the Tunku the permit was finally issued by Abdul Razak Hussein (photo) when the latter was acting prime minister (after the Tunku had returned to his home town in Kedah for the weekend). Apparently pressure by Dr David Tan of the Labour Party convinced Razak that there was no legitimate reason why a permit should be withheld.

In one of the two long interviews I had with Tunku Abdul Rahman in Penang, (while I was teaching a race relations course at USM), the Tunku attached great importance to the funeral procession that was held on the eve of the general election. It was his strongly held view that this funeral procession sowed the seeds for the May 13th riots. The shooting of a Chinese opposition party member by a Malay policeman just days before the election, and the funeral procession being allowed to go through the KL town centre was, to the Tunku, a recipe for trouble.

According to the Tunku however, the decision to overrule him and grant the permit also had a personal dimension. He explained that while he was aware of a move by certain Umno leadership for him to step down as prime minister, no one had actually approached him to do so. He therefore felt that the permit approval against his earlier decision amounted to open criticism that he was no longer in touch with reality and should therefore resign.

There was also increasing concern among the Umno leadership at this time that certain MCA officials (and some Chinese businessmen as well) were moving in the inner circles among the Tunku's close associates. Although it was agreed that this was purely in his private capacity it might nonetheless compromise the Tunku's position as prime minister.

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