

**Going down a blind alley**  
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COMMENT Malaysia is quite unique as a nation state. Very few countries in the world allows its citizens to choose the language of instruction in schools and they do not have two judicial systems running parallel to each other serving citizens of different religious beliefs.

But because ethnically, no one ethnic group dominated totally in 1957, the Constitution that governs the country had to accommodate the needs of the different ethnic groups.

Contrary to popular belief, Malaysia has succeeded because of its multi-ethnicity and not in spite of it. One only has to cast a glance at the same nations that achieved independence at about the same time to realise why. If one ethnic group dominated over a multitude of others as in most African countries, the result is often negative with internal wars of attrition crippling the country.

1MalaysiaBecause no one ethnic group dominated in Malaysia, our political leaders have had to work together in a kind of middle-ground politics. From 1957 till 1969, the Alliance Party was the most effective vehicle.

It succeeded because it was able to hog the middle ground and with the use of state power prevent the Opposition from forming a credible alternative option.

However, its success was also dependent on the personalities leading the three big political parties of UMNO, MCA and MIC. At some point, the ground that these leaders led moved ahead of them.

The power-sharing broke down and was replaced by the UMNO-dominated Barisan Nasional which was a much-expanded coalition.

The influence, prestige and centrality of MCA and MIC became much diluted.

However, the BN ruled decisively and effectively. From 1970 to 1999, it was basically unchallenged except by PAS in Kelantan and the DAP in the urban centres. Whilst the Alliance and the early BN leaders took on the Opposition in the realm of ideas, it had a clear advantage because it could deliver physical development.

Unforeseen consequences

Under Dr Mahathir, material development combined with a global consumerist boom, resulted in a very long "feel-good" period culminating in the Twin Towers development, the Multimedia Super Corridor and Putrajaya.

Dealing with the opposition was simple. Its powerful two-thirds majority in Parliament meant that the BN could easily re-draw the electoral boundaries to its advantage. This was done at the cost of urban voters, who were mainly non-Malays.

Without the third vote, the urban population became more and more disengaged from politics.

However, there were unforeseen consequences from all this gerrymandering. By 1999, the ethnic composition of Malaysian towns and cities had become overwhelming mixed. Malaysia is one of the most highly urbanised countries in Asia. Amenities and services in our towns and cities are suffering and the resultant "dissatisfaction" is felt across all ethnic groups.

But it was the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim and his subsequent brutal treatment that outraged a whole generation of Malaysians particularly those who were then under 35. That was the trigger event that ignited a movement to oppose the BN.

NONEDr Mahathir (left) himself knew that he could not carry on as PM and leader of the BN. He was the focus point of the anti-BN movement and had become a political liability.

Abdullah Badawi, his successor, realising that Malaysia needed a new type of politics could not deliver on his electoral promises to review the ethnic-based governmental policies, establish a commission to oversee the police, overhaul the judiciary and temper the rise of the political opposition.

This is because the BN as a political vehicle was unable to move into the next stage of its evolution: the managed merger of its race-based component parties.

Two years ago, the groundswell against the dominance of the BN and its inability to bring about meaningful development resulted in a political stalemate. Recently, the MCA president warned Malaysians against a politics of religion.

Living on borrowed time

Dr Chua Soi Lek must have realised that he would be castigated by his UMNO colleagues but perhaps he also realises that his party is living on borrowed time.

NONE By fingering Islam, Dr Chua (right) has really stirred-up a hornet's nest. If this is all the best the MCA can do - whip up the dreaded fear of Islam based on a single book called 'The Club of Doom', it is really a poor show.

The MCA must face political reality. By asking the Chinese to vote for the BN, they are essentially asking them to go down a blind alley.

Demographic reality, which will be known very shortly after the national census is completed and information tabulated, will reveal that ethnic minorities can no longer command the same kind of political influence by supporting race-based parties.

Moreover, UMNO through the PM is reaching out directly to all Malaysians. For the urban voter, governmental policies are not bound by race. All drivers dislike pot-holes, all drains need to be cleared, dengue affects us all in the same way and inflation does not distinguish the colour of the skin. In short, what are the solid reasons that we should maintain race-based political parties to this 1Malaysia prime minister?

Of course, It is risky supporting a coalition with an Islamist party but it is an even bigger risk supporting a coalition that is structurally incompatible to its own mantra of 1Malaysia.

Surely, after 53 years of Merdeka and nearly 50 years of being Malaysia, the ruling party can do better than telling Malaysians to emulate a political arrangement made in 1957.

In fact, even its own founder leaders aspired to a more united future. 1Malaysia must not remain an aspiration for fifty more years.

The BN should walk the talk and lead by becoming 1Malaysia, one party as envisioned by the founder of UMNO Dato' Onn Jaafar. Then it can take on the opposition more effectively, demonstrating that it truly is the personification of middle-ground politics.

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