

Ibrahim Ali and Muhyiddin, partners in history?
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COMMENT So, Ibrahim Ali is back after a medical sojourn ('Ketuanan Melayu in the words of Ibrahim Ali' Dec 2) . For his first public statement he sounded like an old record played and replayed over and over again: he has to harp at the special rights of the Malays. I suppose some things or some people don't change for the better, but to regress for the worse.

He mentioned this 'special rights' case in his speech with the title 'Man must have history, for without history man is nothing.' The connotation is that he wished for ketuanan Melayu to be embraced by all as a matter of course, and its credibility to be understood by its critics within the context of history.

ibrahim ali press conference at his home in taman melawatiLet me support my contention; let's examine the facts.

For one, Ibrahim Ali (left) said that ketuanan Melayu was a slogan coined to unite the Malays during the struggle for independence.

Secondly, he further said, "The justification of ketuanan Melayu becomes a 'right' when it (is) further stipulated and enshrined in our constitution. Ketuanan Melayu was not just plucked out from the heavenly sky but had (been) demonstrated in the historical evolution of our nation."

I quite disagree on both counts.

I happened to be a young student during the immediate pre- and post-independent period. From experience I know that the favourite slogan used by the emerging political leaders like Tunku Abdul Rahman was just 'Merdeka!' repeatedly.

Lesser leaders would exclaim "hidup Melayu" and "untuk bangsa, agama dan negara" and when independence was achieved, it was 'untuk pembangunan negara' (for national economic development). For the life of me I do not recall 'ketuanan Melayu' being bandied about.

So 'ketuanan Melayu' had not yet been coined during the independence era.

Special position not right

As for the principles behind the phrase 'special position' I remember our founding fathers (e.g. Tunku Abdul Rahman again) taking note of the economic situation of the Malays. Apparently the Malays were economically backward with their participation in the economic wealth creating activity at about a meagre one or two percent. They obviously needed a boost if they were to play any meaningful part in the country's subsequent economic developments.

tunku abdul rahman merdeka declaration 261004The founding fathers then established government-based development agencies like Mara, Felda, Fama, and many others principally to help Malays be more involved in mainly in agriculture, fishing, and education.

This was what the 'special position' of the Malays originally was intended to mean. It has been addressed by our founders and yes, enshrined in the constitution. To this extent I'd say Ibrahim's second point has validity.

But this is within the context of the phrase special 'position', not 'right'. To me 'position' relates to privilege, but 'right' relates to entitlement. They are totally different so to make one similar to the other would amount to misrepresentation and dishonesty.

What then is the difference between them? 'Privilege' in this context refers to the feeling of empathy and concern over the emotional plight of the Malays at that time. So a special emphatic treatment was thought out by the founding fathers again by providing assistance and support to the Malay community.

The important point to note though, is that the treatment is entirely voluntary, emphatic and humanitarian in nature.

Position, privilege vs rights, entitlement

Now I have to go back to history to see where or how the term 'special position' has developed into a 'right' and an 'entitlement'.

NONESince the creation of the institutions catering for the special Malay position (and thus privileges) Malay economic advancement was not spectacular in the ensuing years after independence. By 1969 there was this unfortunate May 13 incident that many had thought has been partly economic in nature, between the Malay have nots versus the non-Malay (mainly Chinese) haves.

Tun Abdul Razak saw this Malay plight as a collective loss of face, a big no-no to Malay pride.

So thinking that desperate time required desperate measures, he devised and introduced a radical public policy boosting the government's effort to assist Malays rise up the modern economic ladder. Thus giving birth to the New Economic Policy with a specific target and timeframe: thirty percent of Malay involvement in the economy within twenty years, i.e. by 1990.

But unlike the voluntary 'special position', this new ruling has the element of entitlement, of 'right'; it's a virtual decree saying that the Malays have the right to get thirty percent of the economic cake; that the country owes them this right; that the country must deliver this to them; all within twenty years. This has not been enshrined in the constitution at all.

In any case Tun Razak was having the perception that Malay economic backwardness was caused by lack of opportunity and could be solved by economic policies and within a period of time.

Mental prerequisite for progress missing

On looking back he was right, but had missed or overlooked another equally potent factor, namely the psychology of the Malays, used to the traditional rural agrarian life, and not privy or motivated to the challenges of an emerging new economy.

Could they rise to the challenge of mastering, controlling and managing the economy from

one (or two) to thirty percent within twenty years only with copious government help but without any psychological preparedness?

The mental preparedness comes in many forms, like having technical knowledge, awareness of change, preparedness to accept change, and capital availability.

It also involves the willingness to dump old habits, work extra hard, have a lot of perseverance, and develop a presence of mind to make sacrifices today in the interest of a better tomorrow.

History has shown that they could not.

NONE Most unfortunately Tun Razak (right) passed away hardly a fifth into the NEP implementation period. His successors Tun Hussein Onn and later Dr Mahathir Mohamad virtually institutionalised the NEP not only by way of continuing to propagate it by ignoring the coercive thirty percent 'quota' and twenty-year limit.

When 1990 came by the Malays were still no way near the target (at least based on official figures). Again, Malay prestige (or 'mertabat') was at stake. Again, desperate time required desperate measures. Very subtly the Malay-led government ignored the twenty-year period and continued with the NEP, albeit in different nomenclature.

Most unfortunately the Malays ignored or refused to acknowledge the mental prerequisite mentioned above. On the contrary the Malay 'special position' had been hijacked to become a full blown 'right'. The lesson offered by history was lost.

Regretfully all successors to the NEP (e.g the National Development Plan, Malaysian Mission, Vision 2020) were still addressing Malay economic backwardness, but ignoring any possible psychological hang-ups on their part.

People like Ibrahim Ali should be aware of this subtle omission although he might choose to ignore or be blind to it. In the event he is being intellectually dishonest and deceitful.

And skip this "man has history and without history man is nothing" crap. To me this is one badly thought-of script masquerading as God-sent wisdom. Perhaps Ibrahim Ali should have cleared it first with his favourite ulama (like Harussani Zakaria for example). The ulama might find it distasteful for he would rather hear Ibrahim saying something like "man has religion (i.e. Islam) and without religion man is nothing".

Indoctrinating ketuanan in schools

Meanwhile Muhyiddin Yasin the Minister of Education announced at the last Umno general assembly the proposal to make History a 'must pass' subject in schools. Could there be a link between Ibrahim's Malay rights and Muhyiddin's compulsory history exams?

NONE Could it be that they are conniving to plug the possible loophole on ketuanan Melayu I have suggested above, and justify its credibility by projecting Ibrahim's perception into the history books for our younger generations to internalise?

Again to me this is intellectual dishonesty and deception, but nonetheless a real possibility.

But public opinion quickly reacted negatively to it. Public concern surrounding this proposal seem to centre on two points: one, what kind of history, and two, who writes it.

One, which history. Will it be the history of the ancients (e.g. the Srivijaya and Majapahit eras followed by the Malacca Sultanate)? Or will it be that of the modern world (e.g. from period of the British colonial rule to independence); or of current history (e.g. from 1957 to the present day)? The possibilities are endless.

My bet though is that the government is conniving to record for posterity ketuanan Melayu as perceived or understood by people like Ibrahim Ali.

Then comes the writers of the history. History is written by the victors, which should be different from that written by the vanquished. In this case it may well be history written by government-sponsored historians or writers.

From the nation's current experience history written by government writers would hyperbolically project Islamic and Malay experiences and accomplishments.

Current history text-books would give ample evidence to this observation. They are full of insular ethno-theological superlatives, namely that the world is beholden to Islamic and Arabic civilisation, that Malay is a lucky race for being Muslim.

Ingraining mediocrity

My regret is that there will be no mention of the strings of inglorious things that have happened since the Umno-led coalition governed the country since independence. I'd mention below some of them that would find little chance of mention in the Ibrahim-Muhyiddin history syllabus:

NONEFirst of course is the country's string of failed economic plans; of its regression when compared to others like Singapore, Korea, China, Hong Kong.

Second is the breaking down of infrastructure especially education and judiciary; the breaking down of democracy.

In the meantime the racial schism will widen, the broken public institutions will continue to decline, local investors will run away, foreign investors will not come.

Human resource planners will find it difficult to increase the productivity of (Malay) workers.

In a nutshell history as taught by the government does not enhance student maturity, nor does it boost any intellectual growth. It is a perfect vehicle for students to go round and round in the loop of mediocrity.

Ibrahim Ali's re-emergence bandying ketuanan Melayu and possible linkage with Muhyiddin Yassin (above) particularly on the question of Malaysian history is good news only to racists and theologians.

And to politicians depending on racism and theology to ensure their political survival. That's so very sad for the country.

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