

Ketuanan Melayu a double-edged keris
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'Ketuanan Melayu' is a concept that makes regular forays into the political scene, usually instigated by strategic politicians to further their own agendas. Practically every major Umno politician has used it at some point, usually in the early stages of his career.
MCPX

The latest agent provocateur to make use of it is none other than the original ultra himself, Dr Mahathir Mohamad. In a recent speech in Johor, he warned that Malays were losing out to the non-Malays and proceeded to make the phrase 'Malaysia for Malaysians' sound like some four-letter word, prompting Haris Ibrahim (of People's Parliament fame) to ask in response: "What, Malaysia is not for Malaysians? For who, then? Racists like you only?"

Previously, we had already talked about how Mahathir has come full circle. He began his career as an ultra and it looks like he's ending it as one. Whether he's doing this because he's a born-again ultra or whether it's purely to do with political opportunism is something we've already discussed. So, there's no need to revisit that angle. Instead, for today's piece we'd like to dwell specifically on the concept itself, from a constitutional standpoint.

shahrir samad interview 180405 making a point Different politicians have different takes on this term. Shahrir Abdul Samad, MP for Johor Baru and the minister of consumer affairs, links Ketuanan Melayu to the position of the sultans. He says that only by reforming the present government system to a presidential system can Ketuanan Rakyat be practiced.

Shahrir adds that while Ketuanan Rakyat is merely a political catchphrase being bandied about by PKR, Ketuanan Melayu is something that exists under the constitution. He's quite simply, wrong.

The term Ketuanan Melayu (Malay supremacy or dominance) does not appear anywhere in the Constitution, including Article 153 which is often used as the basis for the term. In actual fact, Ketuanan Melayu is nothing more than a political construct used by Umno politicians to gain political mileage.

tipping points 290508 Tricia Yeoh (right), director of the Centre for Public Policy Studies, wrote in 'Tipping Points', a new collection of essays about the recent general election, that this concept was introduced into the Malaysian political vocabulary by Umno in the 1980s.

Similarly, the New Economic Policy (NEP) cannot be found anywhere in the Constitution although, like Ketuanan Melayu, it is often linked to Article 153. Yet, as Tricia points out, the NEP has become so entrenched in the Malay psyche that it has almost become synonymous with the Malay identity.

cpps bar council roundtable 030407 tricia yeoh She notes how when Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng announced that he would introduce open tenders, over 1,000 Umno members defied the police and held an illegal rally carrying banners saying 'Don't Abolish Malay Rights' and 'Don't Abolish the NEP'.

PM plays role of a moderate

While the Constitution does mention the special position of the Malays (as well as those of the native people of Sabah and Sarawak), it is silent on how these rights might be spelled out in policy terms. For example, there is no provision that 30 percent of public equity must be owned by Malays. There is no mention of quotas in public universities. Nor is there mention of special discounts for houses.

The implementation of the NEP and the interpretation of Ketuanan Melayu is a political act which reflects the political realities of the day and the ability of those in power to carry out the policies they champion. These are not terms that are embedded within the Constitution of the country.

We think Shahrir knows that full well. What he's doing is playing an old political game of trying to argue that it is only Umno that can protect the interests of the Malays. He's throwing in the royalty angle because he knows this is a sensitive issue for Malays.

abdullah ahmad badawi pm mihas halal convention 080508 01Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, meanwhile, has characteristically tried to play the role of the moderate when responding to this issue. He defines Ketuanan Melayu as the aspiration for Malays to master necessary skill sets so that they are not coolies in their own country but rather the masters. This naturally begs the question though, that if they are the masters, who then are the coolies?

Would it be okay for MCA to talk of Ketuanan Cina on the ostensible grounds that it's all about mastery of skill sets and not wanting to be anyone's coolie? That's about as acceptable as the notion of MCA leaders waving kung fu swords at their general assembly.

Abdullah needs to ensure that this talk of Ketuanan Melayu does not escalate or he'll risk further alienating an already frustrated MCA, Gerakan and MIC – all of which blame their poor election showing on the fact that they were far too tolerant of Ketuanan Melayu posturing by the ultras within Umno.

The non-Malay parties in Barisan Nasional may have been well conditioned to 'kow tow' to Umno after years of diligent practice but that doesn't mean they won't ever learn to take a leaf out of the Sabah playbook. MCA, Gerakan and MIC collectively have 20 MPs. Think about it. Sabah has just a bit more - 25 MPs - and look at the clout that they have.

Speaking of Sabah, it's worth pointing out that many native groups of East Malaysia can equally lay claim to special rights as per Article 153. Yet, since they are not Malays, talk of Ketuanan Melayu naturally excludes them. After all, Ketuanan Melayu is not the same thing as Ketuanan Bumiputera.

In light of the fact that East Malaysian MPs are so crucial to BN maintaining its control over parliament, Umno leaders would do well to realise that pushing the Ketuanan Melayu rhetoric too far could risk pushing the East Malaysian MPs - and not to mention the non-Malay MPs in the Peninsular - over to the Pakatan Rakyat side, which incidentally champions the more inclusive Ketuanan Rakyat concept.