

Seeds of fascism germinate
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Fascism in Malaysia is indeed a
MCPX
realistic scenario - albeit a
low-probability and long-term scenario - but one that we cannot
ignore.

The 2008 election earthquake has toppled some decayed trees, and today we bask in the sun in this small jungle clearing. But the jungle can fight back; federal powers can strangle any seedlings of change.

Federal budgetary grants to the states, federal development departments (to disburse oil income), the police, little napoleon bureaucrats, and federal control over local infrastructure, are instruments that the BN has used to obstruct and usurp the power of the Pakatan Rakyat state governments.

While we hope a new Pakatan federal government will plant the tree of liberty, it is not a certainty that it will have the will, ability, and duration to do so. Our corrupted culture may not support Pakatan. External economic accidents can overwhelm it. Pakatan is also vulnerable in its reliance on the force of personality of a single person to hold it together, as argued in Who will succeed Anwar Ibrahim?

adolf hitler giving the nazi salute

So despite our post-election euphoria, we must not dismiss these seven seeds of fascism that lie in wait:

First there is a litany of bad laws that may take decades to repeal and reform: ISA, OSA, Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), University and University College Act (UUCA), Sedition Act, Society Act, Police Act, Import Publication Act, election laws, and communication/broadcast related laws, etc. Pakatan may not last long enough to complete the task, or would need to gain BN-like hegemonic (and oppressive) power to ramp through changes quickly.

Second is NEP, a racist-socialist policy. NEP has become a 'zombie' policy that transcends laws and even its own expiry. Most intellectuals view NEP as a problem only because it is badly implemented. No. I have argued but twice that as a socialist policy, NEP will inevitably degenerate into fascism. NEP is intrinsically evil because it starts with unjust laws, requires a strongman to implement, requires centralised 'planning' power, and will eventually implode into authoritarianism - oppressing precisely the group that NEP is supposed to protect.

Respects power over law

Even in retirement, former PM Mahathir is painting the current PM

Abdullah as 'weak' and undeserving, attempting to resurrect the dangerous idea that only a strongman can implement NEP optimally. This is the Malaysian version of The Road to serfdom.

Who is really in charge at the Home Ministry?

Third is our political culture that respects power more than law, and ends more than means.

At the top of the government, we have a prime minister and his deputy who have hung on to both the powerful security portfolios – home ministry (the police guarding internal security) and defence ministry (the military guarding external security).

While the PM has officially given up the home ministry portfolio, his replacement has a weak political base and leans on the PM for political support.

Further, the ministry seems to have -judging from police brutality, police rejection of the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC) , the stubborn and inhumane detention of Hindraf leaders that seems to run counter to the PM's wishes, recent attempts to reassert control over the media (punishing Makkal Osai and Raja Petra), unequal investigation of Opposition MPs, chief ministers and NGO protestors, and the minister being clueless regarding Hindraf chairman's flip-flop passport status- grown a mind of its own, quite apart from the home minister himself.

We have a developing mystery, who is really in charge of the home affairs ministry these days? Who are the real masterminds? How will this 'free will' at the ministry develop?

At the mid-level of our political culture, aspiring-ministers and retired premier continue to expound racist and seditious rhetoric, to hope to win influence. At the ground level, the ruling party is infatuated with Mat Rempits, who are prepared to do the dirty deeds during election campaigns and toll road protests.

zaid ibrahim pc 110608 03Fourth is the deterioration of the rule of law. Within the government, the de-facto law minister Zaid Ibrahim who proposed judiciary reform is also the one most attacked by his cabinet and party colleagues, and is substantially cowed by now. All kinds of theatricals from our former premier are allowed to obscure the need for follow-up investigation into the royal commission's report on the Lingam tape affair.

Fifth, there is a subtle blurring of the border between the police and the military. The police are a civilian security force, but use military-like IC numbers to identify themselves and to vote. Recently, the police plans to recruit retired soldiers. Although retired soldiers are valuable assets, such a targeted recruiting plan must have assumed that military training is somehow valuable for injection into the police force, a dangerous contention.

Disparage detractors

As government budget is squandered such that we underpay the police, the government turns to a less disciplined Rela to do the job. But Rela has an incredibly wide range of roles. From policing, crime-fighting (rarely done), immigration raids (their chief's pet project),

crowd control, traffic control for political parties and corporations, to disaster relief.

Blurring the distinction between 'voluntary' police and military.. These roles can easily expand to raiding civilian homes on the excuses of 'national security' or 'patriotism', the latter already used by the Rela chief to disparage detractors

Rela should be disbanded. Yet the government plans to give Rela enforcement power that will only deeply threaten civil rights. In contrast, the government undermines the enforcement powers of important civilian institutions: Suhakam, the Election Commission, ACA, and Securities Commission.

refugee arrested by rela officers 200608If Rela is meant to be as professional as the police, why not just merge it into the police? Otherwise, why give it more power?

The only reason to elevate Rela would seem to be to create a paramilitary group, with its own budget, weaponry, and command structure, unbridled by professionalism and scrutiny that civil society and police/military conventions demand.

Sixth, we have a conformist culture and education system which is an ideal fascist breeding ground. UUCA and our school system prepare students for obedience, nationalism, and endeavour to cut down dissent. Our schools are churning out unemployable youths, a hotbed for extremist ideas if coupled with sustained economic downturns . It will require Pakatan to have the right mindset and time to reverse these trends.

We have an increasing number of youths being militarised by the National Service program. And why does a 'pro-unity' educational programme fall under the Ministry of Defense? Then the nation's heir-apparent to the PM position is a multi-term Minister of Defense.

The World in 1920s would not have been able to imagine that down-to-earth and sensible Germans could have turned into the fascist Nazi conformers of the 1930s.

Free trade gets no respect

Seventh, we may face a looming economic and employment downturn - both self-made and international in origins. Yet, BN's past corruption has mistakenly turned off Malaysians from the economic alternatives that will save us: privatisation, free trade, and liberalisation.

We have an increasingly inflexible government finance that relies on high oil and commodity prices, debts, and excise taxes. The year 2008 will be the 11th year of consecutive federal budget deficits - of about RM20 billion each year - through mostly good years. Federal debt has tripled from RM90 billion in 1997 to RM280+ billion estimated for 2008.

ringgit money exchange rate 230507 ringgit dollarWhile free trade has helped us beat communism by 1970s, given us growth since 1980s, and saved us from our self-inflicted crisis of 1998, free trade gets no respect from our Malaysian institutional intellectuals.

We allow our government to damage Afta with Proton and rice

protections. With vested interests, we stall the Malaysia-US FTA negotiation, inadvertently helping our government to protect its cronies via government procurement. WTO negotiation is stalling and these intellectuals are happy.

Further, 'privatisation' has become a dirty word. Our former PM Mahathir has made sure of that, with shameful examples like Renong, UEM, MAS, Proton, toll roads and bridges, rescued mass transit systems, bad buses, and dozens more. He completely discredited privatisation as a tool for economic growth through these pseudo-privatisation and de-facto feudalism that 'privatises profits and nationalises losses.' We will now have great difficulty revisiting privatisation.

Ironically, if we face any economic crisis, we will need properly-implemented privatisation to save us, to (1) strengthen government finance, (2) release the pent-up creativity trapped around our GLCs, (3) rapidly create employments by revitalizing our domestic service industries, and (4) hold down domestic prices.

Our neighbours are teetering too, no thanks to our Afta sins and their own mistake of emulating the Mahathiran model. The Thai pendulum keeps swinging between corrupted strongmen and the threat of military coups. Indonesia and the Philippines are not out of the woods with their own economic and social reforms.

Too few of our intellectuals give credit to free trade for delivering 60 years of world peace. Our intellectuals who have not absorbed the lessons from the abject poverty and oppression of communist China, USSR, central Europe of the 1970s are so much more tolerant and romantic about protectionism than today's officials from mainland China and Central Europe. The current South Korean political storm protesting US beef import only emphasises how misled and emotional the mob can become, biting the hand of free trade that feeds them.

In all likelihood, only two key factors will determine the world economic future for the next decade (we will feel that in the stock market, interest rates, inflation, our property prices, and employment outlook): We'll have no place to hide, no place to stash our savings, no place to find employment for our children, if (1) WTO negotiation collapses completely, and (2) the US turns inward and protectionist, manifested in their choice of the next US president.

Help Umno change

With the above seven elements, we can chart a path to a low-probability but severe scenario of fascism in Malaysia within a generation. We may even have under-estimated this probability because of the optimism surrounding the outcome of the 12th General Election.

abdullah ahmad badawi pm mahathir quits umno pc 190508 03Like a strangling fig, fascism can't take root overnight. It will take a generation's worth of economic problems, world trade protectionism, and increasing youth unemployment, for these seeds of fascism to germinate, grow, and strangle a country. But a generation's time passes in a flash.

While we hope GE 2008 will change everything, such an accidental political landslide is not stable ground. We need to do more foundation work.

We need to strengthen our systemic foundation and pillars: parliamentary and legislative reforms, judicial reform (including repealing Emergency Ordinance and ISA that interfere with the judiciary), law enforcement reform (putting ACA under the parliament, implementing IPCMC), financial reform (free up ringgit, liberalise ownership, reform EPF), electoral reforms (including direct local election), and information reform (repeal of PPPA at the same time enacting Freedom of Information Act and reform of OSA).

All these are ground-shifting rules, where a few rule changes can change the whole ecosystem. The benefits are more extensive and far reaching than even we the supporters can realise. As for the power of free trade, well, that is another set of arguments for another day.

Yet Umno, MCA, and Gerakan, are wallowing in the mud, too preoccupied with self-pity to carry out any of these reforms. Perhaps Ezam has made the right move. We should help BN and Umno out of the funk. After all, democracy is about helping the weak and the down-trodden -I mean also the down- trodden political party - to ensure enough competition among political parties, so that the minority people will have their rights protected.

Perhaps BN should even lose federal power for a while. The Taiwan story in which the corrupted and oppressive Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) lost presidential power for 8 years, split internally, and completely reformed itself into fresh-breathe, cheerful-faced, young party, and won over the electorate again, is a worthwhile inspiration.

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