

**Malays as a 'dominant majority'**  
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It has been more than 100 days since the political tsunami of March 8. Other than the pervasive doubt as to whether Pakatan Rakyat could deliver results in states under its administration, the single most important issue uppermost in the minds of many voters is perhaps whether or not the Malay electorate has truly changed.  
MCPX

Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, no stranger to racist politics, has been quick to rub salt into the wound of his anointed successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi by accusing the latter of causing the deep divisions within the Malay community. But Mahathir's sarcasm is also reflective of the radically transformed political equation, while the bogey of May 13 is now exorcised.

Still, the outcome of the last general election, however welcome, was not a result of a new political discourse. In other words, the electorate knew what was detestable, but had a very vague idea about what was desirable.

Precisely because of this, we continue to witness some unpleasant scenarios that had characterized Malaysia's national politics in the past, such as the flimsily orchestrated demonstration by Umno against the proposed centralization of pig farming in Selangor, and the tit-for-tit between Mahathir and his two most ardent detractors - Param Cumaraswamy and Karpal Singh - that reeks of racism at times.

There was even sms going around calling for the public to boycott Indian Muslim restaurants in Penang following the protest by a pathetically small crowd of Umno supporters over Lim Guan Eng's plan to abolish the New Economy Policy in the state.

(How very ludicrous, for those who are into gambling would surely not miss out on the opportunity to watch Euro 2008 live at the affordable Mamak stall!)

### **New political discourse**

I still see the silver lining. Umno, for one, has failed to heighten the Malays' sense of crisis to its own end, at least less successful as it used to be. While many are ambivalent, and quite legitimately so, about Anwar Ibrahim's transformation, the charismatic leader has nevertheless been brave enough to reiterate his vow to do away with the NEP and replace it with a fair and just alternative, and this he did in none other than Kampung Baru, a birthplace of Malay nationalism.

More staggeringly, tens of thousands turned out to listen to Anwar in this Malay enclave in the heart of KL, and he received rounds of applause in return. I wonder if the MCA, the MIC and Gerakan would have the guts to repeat what Anwar has said at BN meetings.

Lim Kit Siang, still opposition-minded, indeed sought to play the role of a Chinese hero by instructing DAP state assemblypersons to boycott the swearing-in ceremony of Perak Menteri Besar, putting himself on a collision course with the sultan and alienating the Malays. Fortunately, there were non-Malays who severely criticized Lim for his reckless

behaviour, while Umno failed to manipulate the issue for political mileage. After all, Abdullah had been caught in tug-of-war with the state rulers in Terengganu and Perlis and ended up humiliated.

The incipient civil disorder points to one thing: the need to come up with a new political discourse through which national politics could transit from "ethnic" to "civic". This process is vitally important as it would come to signify the maturing of the nation, as well as the will to look to the future, not the past.

In the Malaysian context, it would mean a clean break with Umno's largely racist and sometimes fascist rhetoric that regards the "non-Bumiputra" communities as *pendatang* (visitors). It would also inform the Malay masses in a bold and clear manner that we should be able to embrace multiculturalism without feeling any threat to our very own identity. Instead of indulging ourselves in the romantic but unrealistic "ethnic homogeneity" of the preceding centuries, we should celebrate a tangible and firm nationhood that may be in the making, as Canada and the Netherlands have shown.

Granted, a majority of the Malaysian people remain skeptical towards the developed West. However, the democratic achievements and the safeguards for weak minorities of these countries have set the world some very fine examples to model on. Whom do we emulate if not the relatively prosperous, stable, peaceful and democratic West? China? Burma? Or Zimbabwe?

Suffice it to say that, for all the talk of a stronger and unified Chinese nation, China hardly comes to the mind as a migration destination for many Chinese Malaysians, for their choices are, more likely than not, the United States, Canada, Australia or New Zealand, in no particular order of course.

I am not under any delusion here to promote blind worship of the western world. Globalization has indeed forced many countries to open its door to trade and closer economic links, while North America and European Union countries are now receptive to multiculturalist ideals through immigration and acceptance of refugee populations.

Still, with this trend comes an inevitable dilemma: would the emphasis on minority rights and the emergence of multicultural societies cause the decline of the dominant majorities in the developed world?

### **Monopolised by Umno**

Samuel P Huntingdon raises in his book *Who Are We* the genuine concern as to whether increasing multiculturalism would weaken and dilute Anglo-Saxon and Judeo-Protestant culture, on which American society is based.

Even in the United Kingdom, one of the most tolerant and liberal countries in the world, a debate on what constitutes "Britishness" or "British values" has been going on. Both Gordon Brown and Prospect, an intellectual magazine, have simultaneously encouraged further discussion on the thematic issue.

All this goes to show that even in countries that are popularly seen as progressive, the dominant majorities are not necessarily less antagonistic towards multiculturalism in spite of the the rapidly globalizing world economy. On the contrary, such process may very likely sharpen the differences between nations and force them to be resistant to multiculturalism

in their own backyard, a topic that Eric Kaufmann at Birkbeck College, University of London, is passionate about.

Thankfully, the weariness of the dominant majorities in western countries over their future is articulated on the open and democratic platform, which has thus far prevented the ascendance of racist politics (small pockets of racism is however unavoidable in the electoral process).

This is not the case with Malaysia. Here, the dominant ethnicity – the Malays – has seen its right to speak out monopolised by the hegemonic Umno since the 1950s. With the advent of the Ketuanan Melayu concept during the Mahathir era, the Malays have only experienced further erosion of their democratic rights.

Anthony Smith, an authority on nationalism, argues in his seminal book *National Identities* that nations must be able to resort to 'ethnic cores' or 'dominant ethnies' which furnish the nation with its legitimating myths, symbols and conception of territory, and these elements must even be created if they are absent in order to lay claim to the nation's "indigenesness".

At the nascent birth of Umno-engineered Malay nationalism in the 1940s, "kedudukan Bumiputra" as a discourse was promoted to buttress the "indigenesness" of the Malays, but also to set them apart from the Chinese and the Indians, which in turn gave rise to the conflictive nature of Malayan nationalisms in the anti-Japanese and anti-imperialist movements. It would therefore not be farfetched to say that, to a considerable extent, the Malay nationalists in Umno saw the non-Malays, who were seeking the right to call this blessed land home and to share it with the Malays, as the biggest enemy, rather than the Japanese invaders or the British colonialists.

This "ideology" was sustained after Malayan independence for it served Umno's agenda perfectly well, but it did not reach the zenith until Mahathir came to power. Given his shaky position and fledgling leadership in the Malay party, Mahathir was hard pressed to prove his worth as the defender of the Malays. As such, all his subsequent "modernizing" projects were aimed at "transforming" the Malays into a "modern" nation, and he did so at the expense of virtually every democratic institution available, be it the electoral process, Parliament, or the judiciary. He never had qualms trampling on the principles of political freedom and human rights.

What Mahathir has persistently been refusing to admit is that his instrumentalist leadership only strengthened the racist nature of Umno, relegating other BN components to second fiddle, some even to the margins of politics. The so-called consociational democracy as advanced by Dutch scholar Arend Lijphart in the 1970s can now ill describe Malaysia's political arrangement, for there has been little consensus to speak of since the late 1980s, and all the more so when national resources are increasingly monopolized by Umno elites. Paradoxically, this process has also robbed the Malays of their right and opportunity to articulate their fears, worries or inspirations.

### **Near feudal control**

Today, the Malay community is confronted with a host of social ills: youth unemployment, the mat rempit phenomenon, drug abuse, to name a few, much of this can be attributed to Mahathir's authoritarian and paternalistic rule that did not tolerate an inquisitive mind but constantly distorted social and religious values for political ends. The man is also largely

responsible for the deteriorating ethnic relations, economic competitiveness and the standards of tertiary education. How this egoistic and hypocritical politician can be regarded as "firing Malaysians' imagination" and "able leader" is still profoundly unfathomable to me.

In view of this, the launch of the updated version of *The Malays: Their Problems and Future*, written by the highly respected Dr Syed Husin Ali, who is also deputy president of the Parti Keadilan Rakyat, cannot be more timely. Malay politics has long been dominated by Umno, creating a situation in which the Malays are chained by the party through state institutions, their being the majority ethnic group in the country notwithstanding.

Umno as the dominant party has successfully subjected the Malays to near-feudal control until recently. As Syed rightly argues, the majority of the Malays have not benefited from the birdcage of democracy and the tightly controlled economic structure meticulously devised by Umno. Meanwhile, not a small number of non-Malay capitalists now thrive alongside their "bumiputra" counterparts thanks to Umno patronage.

Be so as it may, the discriminatory state policies have only heightened the decades-old resentment and even hostility of the non-Malays, making it all the harder for a Malay leader to discuss openly the sad state of truth facing the Malay community, for he/she will invariably be suspected as cashing on the issue for political gains. This, indeed, is yet another Malay dilemma!

It is high time a new discourse is forged, something that is more concrete and convincing to move the ethnic relations in this country forward. It must be able to address the marginalized position of the non-Malays and the indigenous groups, but also take into consideration the challenges of the Malays as the dominant ethnic group, who must in turn understand democratization and multiculturalism do not equal a zero-sum game, but a reliable channel for reconciliation.

A firm and sound discourse that can appeal to the Malays will reduce drastically the room for Umno to play up racial sentiments, forcing it to become more democratic in a fashion not too dissimilar from Golkar in Indonesia. The onus is as much on the politicians as on the civil society. Failing this, those who have voted for the Pakatan Rakyat could swing back to Umno in no time, and Malaysian politics would have come full circle by then.

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