

Beware the demands of 916
Malaysiakini.com
Sept 6, 2008
Sim Kwang Yang

De facto Pakatan Rakyat leader and newly-minted parliamentary Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim had proposed that Sept 16 be proclaimed a public holiday in Malaysia.

Penang chief minister Lim Guan Eng announced that he would consider this possibility. Soon after that, Kelantan menteri besar Nik Mat Nik Aziz also echoed the same sentiment, adding that it would be better if all the five state governments under Pakatan Rakyat would declare Sept 16 as their state public holiday.

Across the political aisles, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Bernard Dompok from Sabah also opined loudly in his ministerial hat that Sept 16 should be made national holiday. He said, "The day was an important part of the nation's history as it marked the formation of Malaysia in 1963 and should be remembered by all citizens."

Unfortunately, all these suggestions were swept aside by Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, proclaiming that August 31 Merdeka holiday was sufficient.

"Every country has an Independence Day. It is unnecessary to create another day as it invites polemics and interpretations. That is not healthy for unity." Here, the voice of central power has rung out again, to smash to smithereens the feeble dreams of the outlying provinces and colonies.

51 or 45 years old

Expressing her confusion in the op-ed section of the Chinese language Oriental Daily, a young lady writer wondered whether Malaysia is 51 or 45 years of age this year. In all her primary and secondary school years, she was told in history textbooks that Independence for Malaysia was achieved on 31 August, 1957. 16 September, 1963 was an inconsequential date.

When she asked her secondary history teacher why this was so, the teacher could not answer her question, merely reiterating what was printed in the history book, and that all students should love Malaysia.

You could not expect the poor teacher to do otherwise. Teachers are themselves the product of our half century social engineering project conducted through the education system. They too have been conditioned to accept uncritically what is recorded in official history.

On the other hand, my job is to peel back the façade of official history, which is merely the grand narrative of a primal kind of nationalist discourse in any country. In Foucault's words, we have to understand why and how truth has become truth, as history is a process engaged in the production of truth.

After the war, the British found themselves exhausted spiritually and nearly bankrupt economically. It was no longer tenable for them to hold on to their former colonies all over the world; an honourable exit from those territories was the only option.

tunku abdul rahman merdeka declaration 261004At a time when the Iron Curtain had descended upon the world, the British Colonial Office had to ensure that, in Malaya at least, they could engineer a hand-over of power to a party that would ensure the access of the "free world" to the critical Strait of Malacca. Apparently, their geo-political strategy drove them towards the moderate leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman and the Malay nationalist Umno under his charge.

August 31, 1957 then must have been a monumental symbolic day for the Malay nationalists of the time. It marked the liberation of the Malay people from centuries of internal division, and a history of bondage to various imperialist colonial powers from the West.

In other words, August 31 1957 was the day on which the destiny of the Malay nation had been fulfilled. Finally, the indigenous majority Malay people had sovereign dominion over their homeland, which they named logically: "Tahah Melayu". Naturally, all other symbols of Malay nationalism, such as the rulers, their religion, and their language were firmly entrenched in the Federal Constitution of 1957.

Issue of ethnic relation

Exactly how the Tunku came up with the idea of Malaysia in 1961 before his famous speech at the foreign Press Club of Singapore is beyond me. Someone should delve into the British government archive and examine those relevant declassified records that lie gathering dust within the bowels of the British bureaucracy.

tunku abdul rahman and patrick keith 020805For all parties, the union with Singapore seemed logical geo-politically. Given the situation at the time when Southeast Asia was the premier cockpit of the world, and communism was on the march everywhere.

Despite the natural and great advantage of adding Singapore to the territory of the Malay federation, the Tunku, thinking and acting as the leader of Malay nationalist aspiration, must have pondered upon the racial contradiction of adding more than one million Chinese voters to the electoral equation.

Was the inclusion of Sarawak, Sabah, and Brunei into the proposed new entity of Malaysia a counter proposal from the Tunku? In those three North Borneo territories ruled by the British Colonial Office, the Muslims/Malays did have a significant presence, and the Chinese were a small minority. They also had huge tracts of potentially valuable real estate and very rich deposits of natural resources.

One could not fault the Tunku for thinking as he did, if he did. At the time before and after 1957, Malaya and the North Borneo territories had already become incurably multi-racial. The exciting but frightening prospect of Independence must have traumatised the souls of members of all ethnic communities. The national dialogue naturally gravitated towards the core issue of ethnic relation.

Whatever the motive of the prime actors at that time, the end result is history. Brunei opted out from the Malaysia project, and today, the Sultan of Brunei is the richest man on earth. Singapore proved too much of an anomaly within the Malaysian body politics of communal equation, and became an independent nation in 1967. Today, Singapore is considered a developed state.

Over the last 45 years, great strides have been made in the eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak. Unfortunately, these two resource rich and expansive territories remain as the poorest states in the Federation. The people there are gazing at Brunei and Singapore with undisguised envy. Why this is so will take many volumes to analyse. Apparently, the socio-economic backwardness of these two huge states is only of interest to Sarawakians and Sabahans.

In retrospect, one must admire the Tunku's vision for his nationalist project in 1963. In the March 8 political tsunami this year, when the Umno hegemony and the idea of the BN social contract had been laid in tatters by a maturing electorate, and when the original nationalist project of the Tunku seemed on the verge of collapse, Sarawak and Sabah came to the BN rescue.

The role of king-makers

Without the support of the people of Sarawak and Sabah, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would have been denigrated to the position of Malaysian opposition leader in Parliament! For the first time, the MPs from these economically backward, long neglected, and consistently marginalised North Borneon states can play the role of king-makers in national politics, either in less than two weeks' time, or in the next general election.

Democracy is a long continuing process of demands and compromise. When you are king-makers, you would want to make the maximum use of this small window of opportunity, for personal gains perhaps, but also certainly for why you participate in electoral politics in the first place.

Besides the many peculiar features of local politics in Sabah and Sarawak, the political leaders worth their salt in these two states - especially those from of the non-Malay non-Muslim persuasions - must be tempted by this rare historical opportunity to review the Malaysian social contract of 1963.

They will ask themselves many sobering questions. The Tunku might have been prophetic in an oblique way about East Malaysia, but has it been worth the effort for the people of Sabah and Sarawak? With historical hindsight, have Sabah and Sarawak broken away from British dominion, only to become new colonies of Kuala Lumpur?

Is this adamant refusal to recognise September 16 as a day of national importance and the insistence to celebrate August 31 as the Independence Day not a libidinal subconscious mentality of Umno ideology to regard Sarawak and Sabah as mere appendages of Malaya? Were Sarawak and Sabah added to the Malaysian project in 1963 as an accidental after-thought, a historical aside? What people on earth would like to be consistently treated as a historical after-thought?

Indeed the demand to celebrate September 16 by the people of Sarawak and Sabah is an expression of their political will to reinterpret the Malaysian nationhood. Wallowing in the ideological quicksand of the past, the DPM has brushed it aside arrogantly, while Anwar Ibrahim and his now powerful Pakatan Rakyat allies offer their olive branch to East Malaysians and a historic opportunity to fulfil their aspirations.

The contrast between the two elephants cannot be more sharply juxtaposed. How will Sarawakians and Sabahans react? The small political mouse-deer may just not be crushed if

he is truly wise. He can determine which elephant rules the jungle.

I share solidarity with my friends in Sarawak and Sabah. In the past, nobody cared about all this business about 916. Now the date is paraded daily in the national and alternative media. Malaysians elsewhere begin to realise that Sarawakians and Sabahans do exist in a big way.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.

Source : <http://www.malysiakini.com/news/89203>