

**Umno, in urgent need of new ideology**  
**Malaysiakini.com**  
**Nov 20, 2008**  
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When Umno was first set up in 1946, its mission was very clear. Malays, never before a united people, came to see themselves as one. Malay unity was galvanised by a deep sense of being threatened with extinction. Three things went into the crucible that made the Malay in postwar Malaya. Defending the sultanates, breaking down state affiliations and resisting being overwhelmed in one's homeland.

In other words, Malay nationalism was a kind of ethnic nationalism. Large numbers of Chinese Malaysians also felt the same way. In their case, it has to do with language. Many recoil at the sight of the Baba Malay-speaking Peranakan Chinese. To the Chinese ethno-nationalists, the Peranakan Chinese were end products of a long process of derascination.

The ethno-nationalists in Umno, by standing up to the British, engineered a transfer of "ketuanan" from the sultans to the Malay people. Hence, their early battle cry was "Hidup Melayu". Following their partially successful brinkmanship, the Federation of Malaya replaced the Malayan Union but nevertheless brought all the Malay Sultanates under a single administration. Umno leaders were willing to accept this as this meant that the British will be dealing with them and not only with the sultans.

umno 2009Since then, Umno has had to work in such a way as to strengthen "Malay" identity. At first, Malay culture, derived from the Royal Court, was held up as a beacon. Then, the Johor-Riau Malay dialect was chosen as the official language of the Malays.

Islam was the last to be incorporated into this greater Malay identity. It opened up the membership to cultural hybrids like the Jawi Peranakans, Peranakan Arab and other Nusantara groups on the proviso that they assimilate into the newly defined "Malay identity". Already practising a Malay world lifestyle, these hybrid groups did not face much problem "assimilating". Till today, they make up some of the most vehement Malay "purists".

When Umno decided to fight for independence, myths of the land were popularised. The Malays, traditionally a trading people or "orang dagang", became rooted in "Tanah Melayu". This conveniently, distinguished them from immigrant groups including the Eurasians, Peranakan Chinese and Chitty Peranakans, some of whom have family roots in Malaya going back centuries.

### **Economic backwardness**

By linking the Malays to a stable homeland, Umno then began to claim economic backwardness as an unacceptable condition of the Malays. This was largely because the Malays did not play an active role in the colonial economy. Conveniently forgotten was the role of the Malay rulers in granting concessions and permission for pig farms, opium monopolies etc.

When Umno finally came to power, it had to deal with the business of running the country. This, its leaders, did very well. There were attempts to bridge cultural and linguistic divides by promoting Malay as the national language. But for most Malaysians, the experience of

being part of a unitary state was a novel one. Tribalism, so strong then, is only slowly attenuating today.

After 1969, Malay economic backwardness came to be the single most defining characteristic of the Malay people. The sultans, still important, did not really galvanise the people as state loyalties became diluted. The traditional practices and court rituals seem rather backward compared with the all pervasive "western culture". Finally, the Malay language itself became a national language which the Malays could no longer call their own. New words and even new idioms unrelated to traditional Malay society were deliberately incorporated into the language, now known as Bahasa Malaysia. So, Umno had only one thing left in its arsenal - economic backwardness.

Bumiputera forward movement became the personification of the "Malay" agenda. This is contradictory as not all bumiputeras are Malays. The indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak increasingly dislike being tarred with the same brush. The tar blackens an entire race with intrinsic disabilities. The tongkat (walking stick) now rivals the keris (Malay dagger) as the symbol of the Malay race.

Over time, even this economic agenda was not enough. Islam, of a revolutionary-type, reinforced a distinct way of dressing, eating, and finally ended the attenuating traditions of Malay court culture.

### **New ideology needed**

But at the same time, "budaya kuning" or western culture crept into every household via radio, television, VCRs, cable tv and finally, the Internet. Outside the home, Malaysians became consumerists par excellence. If in doubt check our per-capita credit card debt!

In short, although Malays began dressing differently, they have increasingly common pursuits with their non-Malay counterparts. Witness the awe and shock of first time visitors of all races to KLCC or the dumbstruck Malaysian when witnessing the obviously un-Malaysian architectural landscape of Putrajaya!

Over time, Umno's "Malay agenda" created a duality in the Malay self-perception. On the one hand, it was based upon a material forward movement whilst on the other, it was consumed by religious affectations. If PAS are Islamists, Umno came to represent the "worldly" Malay persona. Of course, PKR now hopes to bridge both worlds. There are also elements in PAS and Umno that oscillate between the two personas. All are essentially one.

In short, since its inception, Umno never had a monopoly over all Malay peoples in Malaysia. In fact, most of the time, the party was struggling to keep up with the cultural progress of the community it purports to represent. But it has had the chance to define what a Malay ought to be and what the "Malay agenda" should be. But in both these identity reinforcing agendas, it has had to face contests. Some times, PAS has the upper hand but only now has the Malay Left, through the emergence of PKR, appear on the scene to scupper Umno's formidable dominance of the middle-ground.

For Umno to remain relevant today, it needs to regain some internal balance. What it lacks is a unifying ideology. Malay economic backwardness as the sole ideological driving force is no longer working. Umno needs to embrace its potential of being a truly national organisation. It needs to recognise that its destiny is in Malaysia and not some imaginary Malay homeland which never really existed (the Malacca Sultanate was multicultural as

well).

Umno needs to realise that the keris is now a national symbol just as the Malay language is now the national language. If it is not careful, the party will find itself in a rather tight spot. Proclaiming to fight for narrow sectarian interests is no longer enough. Umno needs to fashion a new ideology, one that is firmly rooted in our new Malaysian reality.

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