



Dr M's legacy of moneyed Melayu Baru
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If Dr Mahathir Mohamad lives to greet 2020, he may see not only his son Mokhzani listed among the country's richest individuals but also many more brothers, daughters, and kith and kin of his Umno colleagues and cronies.

Mahathir (*below right*) would die a happy man if in the annual rich list, Malay billionaires outnumbered the nons. The chip on his shoulder is that Malays are too young to be aware of and to "experience the bitterness and pain of life as a colonized people" [from his 1986 essay *Quo vadis Malaysia?*].

His exaggerated fear – "will the Malays who were colonised 400 years be again conquered and enslaved" – is a recurrent theme. His way of assuaging this deep-seated anxiety is through the assurance of the power of money. He wants Malays to be self-assured and successful but the Mahathir measure is calibrated in ringgit and sen.

In his 1970s book *The Malay Dilemma*, Mahathir wrote: "With the existence of the few rich Malays at least the poor Malays can say that their fate is not entirely to serve the rich non-Malays." The post-May 13 tutorial frames his *bete noire* Chinese as living "in huge houses" who regarded Malays as Ahmads "only fit to drive their cars".

"From the point of view of racial ego, and this ego is still strong, the unseemly existence of Malay tycoons is essential," Mahathir had avowed.

From the point of view of our ex-premier, creating a mere handful of super-duper elites is okay, as long as they are Malay. These captains of industry will show the world that *Melayu pun boleh*. On a pile of newly minted money, Malays can stand tall.

Excesses of the nouveau riche

The profligacy of 'Melayu Baru' role models is not usually made known to the unwashed masses. We only get an inkling of their fabulous wealth when a politician's home is burgled. Details of the police report tell of 'small change' taken from the safe, or Rolexes, designer clothing and loose jewelry stolen.

Divorce proceedings are yet another enlightening primary source of information. We learned a few years ago how one ageing Datin was given a RM50 million settlement by ex-hubby the former minister Effendi Norwawi (*right*), whose much younger second wife is the glamorous actress Tiara Jacquelina.

Lower-ranked politicians don't do too badly for themselves either.

When former Negri Sembilan state assemblyman for Seri Menanti, Hishamuddin Abdul Kadir, 60, was served divorce papers by his 34-year-old wife Norish Karman last July, she asked for five houses, five cars and his company shares.

In her filing at the Syariah High Court, the starlet sought their RM2 million home in Bangi, three condos in KL and another house in Seremban; their cars a BMW 6-series, a Nissan Murano, a Nissan Elgrand, a Rexton Stavic and a Toyota Caldina; RM1,500 monthly

maintenance for each child (they have three children); RM900 for the maid plus her own personal expenses of RM6,000 monthly. Oh yes, and the shares too.

This slice of life from the Melayu Baru landscape shows Umno leadership by example.

Too nice by nature

In his opus on eugenics, Mahathir proffered a “therapeutic diagnosis” on what hindered the progress and competitive abilities of the dilemma-ed Malay.

His treatise said Malays were economically backward because they were by nature too nice, and thus unflinchingly preyed upon by the “aggressive” and “predatory” Chinese.

His prescriptive treatment of the malaise was for the community to radically alter their 'adat' which in his opinion was an impediment.

The *Malay Dilemma* advances the most amazing insights, such as this gem: “If race differentiates citizens, then there must also be racial loyalty. Racial loyalty must involve privileges for one's race and denial of rights to others.”

Mahathir views that “Under these conditions, each member of a race must be instinctively guided by considerations of profit and loss for himself. It follows that the more privileges of a given race the greater the gain for the individual member.

'Each member must therefore seek to enhance the position of his race so that he himself may gain in the long run. If this fact of race, race loyalty and privilege are understood, then attitudes on race relations in Malaysia can be better appreciated.”

During his 22-year tenure, Mahathir had ample means to impose and implement his will.

Reengineering the Melayu marque

Mahathir's pursuit of modernity is Western-oriented, with a nod to Japan during his 'Look East' phase. Under him, Malaysia became car-makers like the Americans, Europeans and Japanese. Mahathir currently wants Malays to master science through English.

True enough, Japanese are in the thick of technology but Mahathir forgets that they did in on their own terms. Japanese until today don't speak English capably. They did not copy the whites and abandon the core of their self-identity.

With the Meiji Restoration, they embraced the technological age with a vengeance but kept their social mores intact.

On the other hand, the *Malay Dilemma* is a “blaze of amateur sociology” (to borrow from Nobel-winning economist Robert Solow) to explain Malay lack of productivity and the community's meagre share of national income. That before the NEP Malays were floundering for which Mahathir ascribed to their traditional value system and this held them back from entrepreneurship.

He decried the conservative rural community's propensity to prepare for the hereafter as “a form of escapism from the realities of life, an insulation against the envy Malays must feel for the prosperity of other races”.

To compete with the drive of those other races, he insisted Malays must change their code of ethics, and with thoroughness and speed. He believed attitude to work and money is key to economic advancement. He also believed the Malay approach in this respect was to their disadvantage.

He encouraged Malays to go into business in a big way. But for them to thrive in an environment already dominated by the Chinese, Mahathir felt that the Malay "innocent" must radically transform.

Enter Melayu Baru 2.0

Playing behavioral scientist in 1970, Mahathir saw Malays as polite, generous, having good breeding and possessing "the quality of moderation".

He felt that to successfully compete, they had to put aside their temperance, fatalism, caution and indecisiveness, as well as leave behind their courtesy, accommodation, tolerance and spirit of compromise.

In short, to get themselves out of their perceived predicament, Malays needed to be remodeled. But into what? As quoted earlier, into a people who are race loyal and willing to deny the rights of others in the course of the rat race.

This religio-ethnocentricity that Mahathir moulded can be glimpsed in the country's present indifference to the plight of those outside the charmed circle – in the inertia of official response to the earthquake in Haiti, to the despair of the Tamil underclass in our own backyard.

Nothing much for Haiti

Malaysia gave tens of millions in cash and Mercy Malaysia immediately sent seven missions to Gaza in 2009 following Israel's attack which left between 1,200 and 1,400 Palestinians dead. As far as I know, Malaysia did not send any significant humanitarian relief or medical teams (donation drives privately headed by Unicef Malaysia and Red Crescent apart) to Haiti where 230,000 were killed.

Three days before last Christmas, there was a small news report on a 68-year-old mentally unsound Indian vagabond found dead in a pool of blood. CCTV camera showed the assailant covering the victim's head with a plastic bag and punching him on a corridor of a shop in Georgetown. This heartbreaking story should have sparked national outrage, but it hardly blipped on the radar of public consciousness.

What has the Mahathir solution to the Malay dilemma ultimately wrought?



He once handpicked Khir Toyo (*left*) to be Selangor Menteri Besar. He is now promoting foul-mouthed ally Ibrahim Ali as Perkasa chairman. His mediocre son Mukhriz is a deputy minister. These are among Dr M's tangible Melayu Baru legacies.

More than anyone else, the man has singlehandedly done untold damage to the Melayu Lama *adab* of graciousness and saddled us with the truly graceless.

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to be a practising cartoonist. But for the present, she is in the NGO circles and settling down to more serious writing and reading of social issues.

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