

I'm Malay' was once a more inclusive term
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Terence Netto

Widely criticised as a narrow formulation, though the deputy prime minister maintains otherwise, Muhyiddin Yassin's stance is credible if seen against a longer backdrop.

deputy prime minister muhyiddin yassin at sekolah menengah sains hulu selangor 020410
02Some little-known chapters in our post-independence history, occurring just over two decades ago, furnish instances where Muhyiddin's formulation can seem less exclusive than it now appears.

Delving further back, to the pre-independence phase of our history, the term 'Malay' or 'Melayu' was given more inclusive meanings.

Consider 1947 when the forces of the left, both Malay- and Chinese- led, and of the democratic right, including the MCA and MIC in combination with the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) - a forerunner of sorts to the present PKR - met and agreed to the People's Constitutional Proposals.

That occasion was a magical moment in Malaysian history, a truly rare confluence of interests temporarily uniting ideologically disparate groups.

Among the proposals this assembly, calling itself PUTERA-AMCJA, put forward was that 'Melayu' be the title of any proposed citizenship and nationality in Malaya.

That these proposals enjoyed broad support among the population then was proven by the successful hartal (closing of shops) called by PUTERA-AMCJA in October 1947.

The hartal was organised to demonstrate to the British that the latter ought to take PUTERA-AMCJA seriously as a political grouping and negotiate with them on the issue of independence.

Britain was unwilling to talk with anyone save those who they felt would assure the safety of their economic interests, mainly in plantation agriculture and tin mining, in the post-independence phase.

That meant Britain preferred the aristocrat-led Umno as their local interlocutor on independence. Class interests trumped all else in Britain's choice of whom to devolve independence.

What does Muhyiddin mean?

Umno had opposed several provisions of the People's Constitutional Proposals, most significantly the section proposing citizenship for all who avowed Malaya as their home.

From that episode more than six decades ago, it can be inferred that the term 'Malay' or 'Melayu' was put to inclusive use.

In Malaysian political discourse and history, the term has had an elasticity favouring inclusiveness going back longer than protagonists in the current debate may be willing to concede.

Of course, some may contend that Muhyiddin's use of the term does not encompass the meaning that PUTERA-AMCJA proposed in 1947.

In politics, we ought not to judge people by their motives, imputed or avowed. It's safer to go by their pronouncements and actions.

Suffice Muhyiddin Yassin's claim that his being Malay first does not detract from his being Malaysian has a provenance that cannot easily be pooh-poohed.

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