

How PR Can Move Country Towards Non-Racial Politics

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Barisan Nasional may wish to keep on denying this but we can't escape the fact that it is the BN's divisive politics that has made our society into one so racially charged.

In the Umno-led coalition government of 13 race-based parties, 'Malay nationalism' and dominance is touted as the only alternative to national unity.

But is it really so? Can't we have another alternative?

Under the purview of Umno's Malay nationalism, other races in the country are forced to form political parties along racial lines. If the dominant majority race insists on its brand of nationalism, wouldn't it be a natural development for other minority races to claim their each and separate nationalisms as well?

Can our national unity be actually based upon racial politics along 'separate nationalisms' or 'political tribalism' which is how the late Yale University professor Leonard Thompson termed it in describing South Africa's apartheid?

Do we want a single nation? Or do we want many divisive nations within our country? There can be no genuine national unity if the powers-that-be keep proclaiming nationalism based on the dominant race ideology to the exclusion of all else.

British colonialists have long left the country but how far have we moved forward in terms of genuine national unity? Some senior Umno politicians and their ideologues have blamed poor national unity on the various streams of education while they are themselves unable to dissolve their own race-based political parties to be replaced by a pan-Malaysian party.

Chinese schools shouldn't be blamed

Are the various streams of primary education truly the root cause when they are actually open to all Malaysians? The fact is Chinese vernacular schools have been attracting more and more non-Chinese pupils. If these schools were anti-national why should Indian or Malay or East Malaysian pribumi parents send their kids to these schools?

To date there are no empirical studies to show that the young in Chinese or Tamil schools are less patriotic or less tolerant of other races and religions as compared with those in the national schools.

We need a more effective way to converge our education streams while allowing more equitability in the development of the various school streams.

Unequal allocations and discrimination against vernacular schools are among the causes for failure to move towards genuine national unity. In the apartheid era, South Africa operated schools along ethnicity. But more importantly, unequal allocation to the various schools was a factor in the divisiveness of that country.

In Malaysia, unequal allocations of development funds to the various education streams reflect Umno's determination on Malay-dominance policies despite the fact that ours is a diverse society.

Not nationalism but tribalism

Our pseudo-democratic election process has allowed a populist but immoral regime to remain in power by appealing to majority race-dominance. This has caused us to fail to view ourselves as one nation.

Nationalism is only a term to glorify a well-worn rallying cry despite the lack of an external threat. Who are our foreign enemies?

A race-based nationalism in a multiethnic country like Malaysia is more appropriate to be considered as tribalism. It is a torn national identity where one race sees other ethnic groups as the imaginary threats to their survival. Is this the reality in Malaysia? Or has it been merely a rhetoric by which the powers-that-be (read: Umno) cling on to power?

Similar to the Rand Strike in 1922 used as the justification for the later apartheid rule in South Africa, the only excuse for separate nationalism is a fear of a repeat of the May 13 race riots.

Malaysia has however transcended 1969. This can be seen at the Bersih rallies where Malays and non-Malays helped each other with first aid, and shared water bottles and salt amidst the water cannon spray and teargas.

The PAS-DAP relationship

But how can Pakatan Rakyat component parties forge truly non-racial politics in Malaysia?

Most would blame PAS for being an Islamic party which admits Muslims only but PAS claims that it is non-racial despite its religion-based ideology. Nonetheless, in Malaysia, race is religion and religion is race for Malays according to the constitutional definition of Article 160.

Since the formation of its PAS supporters' wing, the party has had some degree of success in achieving a more open image as compared to its archrival Umno. PAS's tremendous effort and determination to display a more pragmatic and multicultural outlook has helped make Pakatan Rakyat, and especially the DAP, appear a viable coalition.

But would PAS be able to galvanize as much non-Malay support without its alliance with the DAP? Would PAS be able to win mixed seats without DAP campaigning for its candidates?

During the Tenang by-election in January 2011, the PAS candidate was able to canvass 70 percent Chinese support in the heart of Labis town itself with the heavy-duty DAP election machinery to help her out.

I believe, if standing alone, PAS may be able to claim some non-Malay support but only to a certain extent. The Islamist party still requires the DAP to campaign for it among the traditional DAP supporters.

This situation reflects the interdependence between the two parties and the predicament of being restrained each in their communal/religious bases. These constraints are direct products of Umno's Ketuanan Melayu and the BN's political tribalism.

Differences between BN and PR

What are the differences between the DAP or PAS as opposed to Umno, MIC or MCA?

DAP was formed based on the aspiration for a non-racial and multicultural Malaysian society.

It is incidental that DAP has been restricted in its influence to mainly the non-Malay ground despite numerous outreach attempts to draw Malay participation. The difficulty for DAP is our realpolitik where Malays are more impressed by Umno's nationalistic approach.

However with the Malay masses being made aware of the series of abuses of power and corruption that have taken place, the young Malays of today are now able to see that Umno is no longer the only option.

Many, including those who jumped ship from the BN into PR, might perceive DAP as a Chinese

chauvinist party while forgetting that Umno, MCA and MIC to which they once belonged, are race-based parties. DAP influence has been historically restricted due to the ingrained Malay-government propaganda where anyone questioning the morality of Ketuanan Melayu is viewed as "chauvinist".

The separate nationalisms of the BN component parties are in fact only a softer term for the racialism and tribalism of their actual practice. It is they who have successfully divided the nation into many nations. With all the race-based political parties within its coalition, BN is not fit to talk about national unity.

How can BN attack DAP as "Chinese" party when the DAP rank and file consists of almost all the races from Indians, Malays to East Malaysian natives albeit the majority of its members are ethnic Chinese?

DAP leaders are seen more at ease with various cultural functions speaking in various languages to various crowds. On the other hand, it has been the practice that no MIC and MCA leaders would on their own address a Malay ceramah.

But would anyone challenge Umno, MIC, MCA and the other BN race-based parties to attempt the non-racial politics that DAP, PAS and PKR have tried to provide?

What are Umno and the BN's tribal chiefs waiting for? Dare they take up this challenge?

PKR pluses and minuses

Unlike DAP and PAS which are bogged down by historical baggage and demonized by the mainstream media, PKR has all the advantage to start anew by fostering a truly pan-Malaysian non-racial party.

Nonetheless by taking in too many former top guns from BN component parties, PKR has been hampered by the old tribal culture carried over from Umno, MIC and MCA respectively.

Nonetheless, I am often disgusted by the perception that DAP is threatened by "PKR Chinese" as this perception itself smacks of tribalism. Why should the DAP view itself as a 'Chinaman tribe' pitted against PKR's "Chinese tribal chiefs"?

On the other hand, neither should the Chinese leaders within PKR view themselves as competing for 'Chinese majority' seats while at the same time claiming that PKR is a true multi-racial party that can win in any seat.

While PKR has a lot of advantages as a new party to cross racial boundaries, it is held back by a weak party organization with origins in their old BN roots. Appointment of state chiefs by the top central leadership is a detrimental political culture that PKR has inherited from BN.

The end result is that the PKR top leadership loses touch with the grassroots who do not view these appointed leaders as in any way inspiring. For the other PR component parties, it is a nightmare to deal with an ever changing PKR state leadership and hence the difficulty in forming a stable relationship.

What PKR needs is to reexamine its structural problems, and to be willing to share DAP and PAS's experiences with regard to internal party reforms. It needs to let the party grassroots have greater say with regard to their middle and lower leadership tiers.

PR is a positive development

In general, all three PR component parties have achieved much in moving Malaysian politics towards a non-racial format not only in outlook but in spirit. Within PR, arguments on policy have preceded racial and ethnic interests.

The inter-partisan relationship is more interdependent, consultative and supportive in nature. The leaders of the PR parties have to consult each other on policymaking and announcements.

It is a positive development for our nation and people who have been too long addicted to Umno and BN's tribal politics.

The true worry now is: Would the Umno diehard nationalists accept defeat if the majority of the people vote PR into Putrajaya? Would there be a coup like what happened in Fiji when a Fijian native-Indian government is democratically elected?

Fiji's military junta is known to have close links with the Malay nationalists who provided them the ideology of race-based 'nationalism' in a multiethnic country, with Fiji and Malaysia having in common a one-race dominated military and police force.

However, there should not be any similar fear to Fiji that the indigenous inhabitants might be sidelined because PR is clearly able to show itself as a Malay majority coalition.

With the blessing of Malaysia's constitutional monarchy which treats all Malaysians as her subjects, and with the support of the civil service and armed forces for a peaceful transfer of power, a new era of true Malaysian nation-building can begin.

It is an inevitable process that everyone has to accept and PR has shown it is the way forward for the nation by adopting a multicultural outlook while maintaining an alternative and effective Malay-majority leadership. - CPI

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