

Has our Vision gone of the rails?

by **Farish A. Noor**

AS Malaysia is poised to celebrate its 49th year of independence, we should perhaps stand aside to reflect upon some developments of late. The recent survey carried out by Dr. Patricia Martinez indicates that despite the rhetoric of racial harmony and multiculturalism that predominates in the political discourse of the country, most Malaysians still see themselves as culturally, racially and religiously distinct from one another.

Furthermore, the very idea of debating these differences has become problematic by now: The heated debate on Islam and its place in the Malaysian constitution has spilled into the streets, with angry demonstrations in Penang and Johor where the formerly silent voice of the subaltern classes came out in anger, revealing the strong undercurrent of racial and religious communitarianism that we are often ashamed or afraid to admit to ourselves.

Today the campaign to defend Islam and the rights of Muslims cannot be divorced from the axiomatic concern to defend the Malay position.

Liberals and moderates may -
bemoan this visible
slide to exclusive

communitarian
politics bill perhaps
we should all do away
with the police fiction
that there is some
"silent majority" out
there that secretly
harbours the wish to
be liberal and
moderate. No, the fact
is that Malaysian
society has slipped
low arils a more
conservative register in
its understanding and
articulation of
communitarian politics.

We are therefore
confronted with the

obvious question: Should

are, where way
they are, where is the
country heading? For a
nation that is barely half a

century old, we remain
stuck in the quagmire of

the past, with leading
politicians hogging the
limelight time and again by
conjuring ghosts of the
past: May 15, Operation
Lallang. Discussions on
matters of national
importance are often
foreclosed on the basis of

"protecting" the sensitivities
of the public - despite the

fact that one too many a
politician has seen fit to play
the rare or religion card whenever it suits him. The
saddest fact of all is that over the past five decades,
there has not been a single Malaysian politician who
has come to power by articulating a common
national interest based on the notion of an abstract
Malaysian citizenship that was not underscored by
considerations of race or religion. In other words,
Malaysia has still not been governed by a Malaysian
leader - who is truly Malaysian in his or her mindset
- who governs Malaysia for Malaysians as a whole.

The country, therefore, is beading towards a crisis
in no uncertain terms: Interaction between the racial
and religious communities continues to diminish at
an alarming rate. From the campuses to the social
hang outs that dot the urban landscape of Wang
valley and beyond, we witness the fraying of the
consensus as Malaysians flock to those of
the same colour and creed. To complicate matters
further, the penetration of religious-communitarian
concerns into the space of public life and family law
now means that even inter-racial and inter-religious
marriages and relationships are on the wane.

national

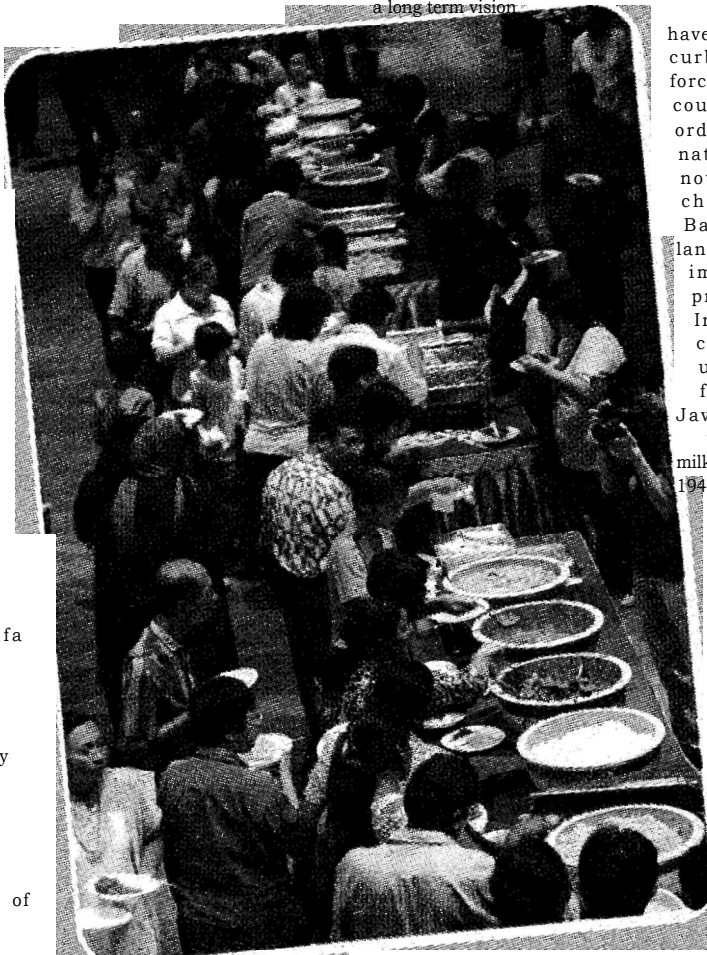
lly bridity, cross cultural contact and fertilisation are
becoming next to impossible.

Traces of this strengthening of cultural-religious
borders are everywhere to be seen: Even on the level
of pre-school education, we now have "religious"
kindergartens that were, not too long ago, unheard of
and unseen in the country. The absence of a national
vision that places the abstract Malaysian citizen at
the centre of national politics means that more and
more exclusive spaces are being carved out across
the land.

Where, one asks, is the state in the midst of all
this?

The political remedy to this problem lies in the
acceptance of the simple fact that nation states are
neither necessary nor natural. There is nothing
essentially Malaysian about any of us, save for a set
of historically contingent factors that placed us all on
this patch of the earth. Nation-building is and can
only be an artificial, perhaps even unnatural,
process; though it remains necessary nonetheless. In
many other post-colonial societies such as
neighbouring Indonesia we have seen how far-
sighted politicians with

a long term vision



have tried their best to
curb the centrifugal
forces that can rip a
country apart in
order to build a
nation out of
nothing. Indonesia's
choice of using
Bahasa Melayu - a
language that was
imposed on
practically all
Indonesian ethnic
communities
unhiding the
fiercely proud
Javanese - to unite
the nation-in
milking in the
1940s was a

tactical move that
saved the young
nation from
disintegration
and collapse.

Today in
Malaysia there is
the evident need
of such bridge
building
cultural capital,
and it has to be
admitted that
loken gestures
such as
the kongsi

concept
no longer
suffice. (Indeed

some may even argue that they have
become counter-productive.) Taking into account the
extent of polarisation in the country however, one
can only conclude that whatever measures taken by
the Malaysian elite will have to be bold and
ambitious, to bridge the chasms of mutual distrust
and antipathy that have grown of late. But can
Malaysia issue forth a leader of such vision, who is
prepared to be populist yet unpopular at the same
time? Can we in short finally admit to ourselves that
our nation building programme has failed and that
there is an urgent need to breathe hie again into the
soon to be defunct idea of a Malaysia for all
Malaysians? Or Will we once again vote for yet
another soapbox, orator who will velle the familiar
slogan of our racial/religious community in danger'
whenever a political crisis looms? Malaysia's political
opportunities seem to be fewer than ever, but then
again so are the brat e voices in this country.

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