

Policies emerging from May 13

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MANY consider the May 13, 1969 racial riot as the darkest chapter in our country's 50 years of independence.

Because it was such a traumatic event that scarred the nation, the government endeavoured, through national policies, to address the root causes that were thought to have sparked off the clashes.

According to the national unity and national integration department's website, three major policies emerged after the riots namely, the National Education Policy, the National Cultural Policy (NCP) and the New Economic Policy (NEP).

These policies were further strengthened with the introduction of the *Rukunegara* and other policies on national development and vision.

'Mother of all policies'

Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, who joined the civil service in 1959 and was directly involved in the formulation of major public policies including the NEP, described the policy, introduced in 1970, as the "mother of all policies".

"The dominant, underlying preoccupation was with administering the NEP. And the

other policies have all emerged, in one way or another, from the NEP," he told *theSun*.

Among others, Ramon was Finance Ministry deputy secretary-general from 1979-86. He retired in 1989 as Transport Ministry secretary-general.

"I still subscribe to the goals of the NEP which was necessary and which has contributed greatly to our peace, stability and progress," he said.

However, Ramon remains dissatisfied with the NEP's implementation. "It was not fully implemented according to its spirit."

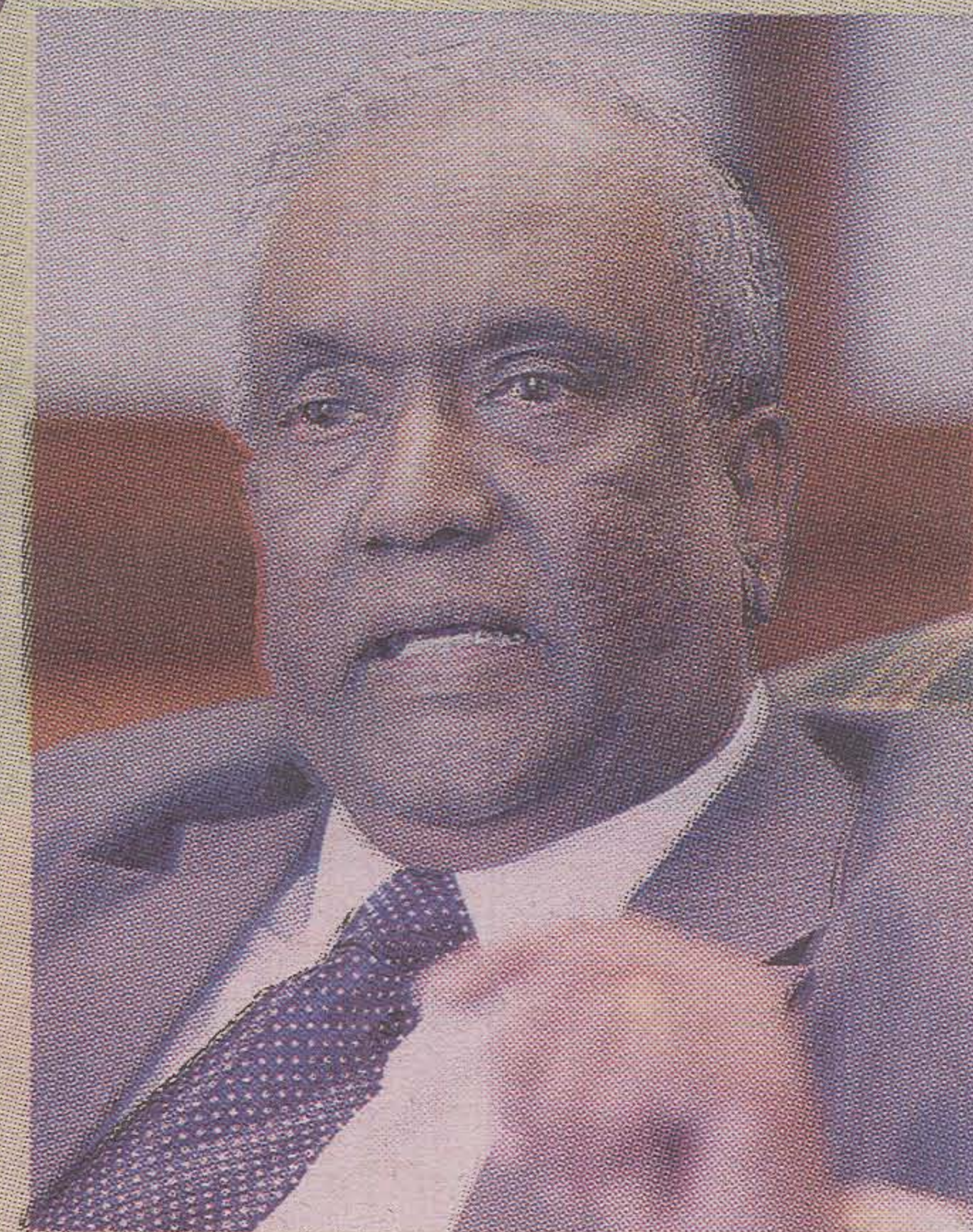
He said this has resulted in the prevalent polarisation and disunity among Malaysians which runs contrary to the NEP's goal as envisaged by the then Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and his cabinet.

"The NEP has succeeded and also failed. It succeeded by reducing poverty drastically and in creating access for bumiputras into all areas of economy.

"Today the bumiputras are well represented in all the major professions and dominate in the public sector at all levels.

"There is also a greater sense of economic and social stability, but these have been at the expense of national integration and unity," he said.

Ramon believes that if the NEP was implemented to remain faithful to its words and spirit, there would be no or much less



polarisation.

"But it was abused when the minority gained at the expense of the majority," he said. Referring to the bumiputras, he noted that the people who are penalised most are those whom the NEP was meant to help the most.

"That is why there is an income gap within the Malays, and between the Malays and non-Malays."

When the NEP expired in 1990, many of its affirmative action approaches were continued in the National Development Policy, which was in place until 2000, when it was replaced by the National Vision Policy, effective until 2010.

Ramon stressed that it was not the NEP or the other related policies emerging from 1969 that were wrong. "It's the bad implementation of these policies through bad governance, corruption and greed that has created a rentier class that has sought to benefit itself at the terrible expense of the poor and the underprivileged of all racial groups."

That, he said, was certainly not the intention of the nation's leaders such as Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak and Tun Hussein Onn who were mainly responsible for the formulation and earlier implementation of the original NEP.

Ramon also believes that the target for 30% bumiputra equity ownership – which has not been achieved according to the government – was not part of the original plan.

"The original target was social restructuring to remove the identification of race with economic functions. But slowly, the 30% target came in. Somebody introduced it during the implementation process but I can't remember in which year."

The long-standing debate on the NEP created a controversy earlier this year when it was revealed that bumiputra corporate equity ownership could have reached 45% – higher than the target of 30% and official figure of 18.9%.

Ramon said it was crucial for Malaysia to begin introducing real competition at all levels for all Malaysians with assistance for the genuinely handicapped and underprivileged, regardless of race and religion, as was the NEP's original vision.

Historian Prof Emeritus Datuk Dr Khoo Kay Kim agrees that the NEP was "badly implemented".

He said the NEP aimed to balance the economic well-being between the Malays and non-Malays, but not by taking from the non-Malays' portion.

"There was this theory of expanding the pie first to give more to the Malays. But, how do you get an expanding pie?"

"At that time, the leaders favoured industrialisation. They believed it was the answer to every country's problem, rather than tin and rubber which were already considered old-fashioned then," Khoo said.

On the NCP, Ramon said it started out with the good intention of fostering multi-culturalism but the nation has ended up with mono-culturalism instead.

"We are a bit more multi-cultural but there is no direction or focus. It (the policy) has also been abused for political gain," he said.

However, Khoo said the NCP did not emerge from May 13 because it was already in the pipeline since after independence in 1957.

"It was always stressed, from the very beginning, that Malay culture would be the core of national culture while other cultures could be incorporated."

Khoo was involved in providing input for the NCP. He considers two other post-May 13 outcomes as being more significant.

First was the 1970 change of the Sixth Form exam from the Higher School Certificate (HSC) to the *Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia* (STPM); and second, the 1974 establishment of Barisan Nasional (BN).

Pre-1970, Khoo said, the HSC exam was in English. As a result, Malay-medium students could not go to university; at that time only Universiti Malaya (UM) was around. Because of the change, in the early 1970s, UM was flooded with Malay school teachers who had sat for the STPM.

"This had to do with May 13. The government wanted to speed up Malay development so that more of them could enter university and contribute to economic development."

Continued politicking

The BN was ostensibly formed to reduce communal politicking.

Up to May 13, 1969 and a little later, three ethnic-based political parties formed the Alliance – Umno, the MCA and the MIC.

"The thinking was, after May 1969, if a unit or organisation could be created where the opposition parties could also come in, it would be possible to discuss critical sensitive issues within



the organisation, without bringing them out to the public."

"The BN was formed to reduce politicking. But, it never happened because they still brought these issues out to the public.

"It is bad enough when leaders of political parties don't get along but when they get the public involved, the whole nation becomes like that, and instead of reducing politicking, it continues," Khoo lamented.

He said there was a need to revive the spirit of "unity in diversity" for a better future.

He added that government efforts thus far to address disunity are insufficient.

"They have not succeeded yet. You have to find ways and means of getting the people together.

"It is possible. I can say that because I lived through a period in Malaysian history when that was possible," Khoo, who turned 70 this year, said.