

# Make Malaysian sovereignty the goal

The Sun - 15/5/2008

“KETUANAN Melayu” and “kedaulatan Melayu” are two terms which have gained some media prominence in recent weeks. They reflect the fears and concerns of a segment of the Malay community generated by the severe setback suffered by the Umno-led ruling coalition in the 12th general election on March 8. Both terms revolve around the Malay position and what is perceived as the erosion of Malay political power.

As a term, “Ketuanan Melayu” has been used for decades and has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Malays as “masters” (of the land), “Malay dominance”, “Malay supremacy”, “Malays as the hosts” are among interpretations that have been bandied about. Since the root word *tuan* suggests someone who is in charge – a person in control, a master – its usage does not conduce to inter-ethnic harmony in a multi-ethnic society. It appears to be an attempt to privilege one community in relation to the others. It explains why “Ketuanan Melayu” has invariably created resentment among non-Malays including the indigenous Kadazans and Dayaks of Sabah and Sarawak respectively.

“Kedaulatan Melayu” or Malay sovereignty, on the other hand, does not connote supremacy or dominance. Sovereignty as a political concept is often associated with the quest of subjugated peoples for the freedom and autonomy to determine their own future. Indeed, it was in the context of British colonialism that the idea of Malay sovereignty was first articulated.

In their criticism of colonial rule, all the main nationalist streams – the Islamic reformers, the advocates of socialism and the administrative elite – of the 1930s

emphasised Malay sovereignty. Restoring Malay sovereignty was also the battle cry of the unified Malay opposition to the Malayan Union of 1946. As Malay nationalists marched towards Merdeka between 1946 and 1957, protecting Malay sovereignty remained one of their primary concerns. However, as elements of Malay sovereignty were incorporated into the Malayan and later Malaysian Constitution through various provisions pertaining to the Malay language, Islam, the Sultanates and the “special position” of the Malays, Malay sovereignty ceased to be the political slogan of the Umno-led government after Independence. It was the opposition Islamic party, PAS, which tried to project itself as the champion of Malay sovereignty in the late fifties and sixties.

It is apparent that Malay sovereignty has evolved with the expansion of the Malay polity of the past into a Malayan and now a Malaysian nation. Protecting the sovereignty and independence of the Malaysian nation-state – which in a manner of speaking is both an extension and a transformation of Malay sovereignty – should be the goal of every Malaysian. What this means is that it makes more sense to talk of Malaysian, rather than Malay sovereignty today.

It is not just Malay sovereignty that has undergone a transformation. Institutions associated with Malay sovereignty are also part of this change. The subjects of the Malay monarchs are no longer from their own community; non-Malays are also their subjects. Similarly, the Malay language

today is more than just the mother tongue of a particular community or the *lingua franca* of a particular region. It is the language of a multi-ethnic nation, a substantial segment of which comprises citizens whose mother tongues are linguistically different from Malay. Through citizenship, Malay has also become their language – the language that identifies them with the land. By the same token, the Constitution which makes Malay the language of Malaysian identity not only protects the “special position” of the Malays and other indigenous communities, but also acknowledges the legitimate interests of the other Malaysian communities.

A similar transformation must also take place in the way in which Malays and Muslims relate

“The universalisation of our approach to Islam will strengthen our ability to meet the challenge of globalisation in an increasingly borderless world where outmoded religious exclusivities are no longer tenable.”

to Islam. Instead of viewing the religion through an ethnic prism especially in matters pertaining to politics, economics and power, they should put into practice an approach to Islam which reflects its universal, inclusive message of justice, equality and freedom. This is especially important at this stage of our evolution as a nation since issues linked to religion are bound to dominate public discourse in the years to come.

Malays and Muslims in Malaysia have nothing to fear from this transformation. The universalisation of our

understanding and approach to Islam will strengthen our ability to meet the challenge of globalisation in an increasingly borderless world where outmoded religious exclusivities are no longer tenable. Likewise, as Malay deepens its cultural bond with non-Malay communities and becomes a truly Malaysian language, it is quite conceivable that it will reach new heights never attained before.

Non-Malays should help accelerate this transformation by showing greater understanding of how we have evolved – and continue to evolve – from a Malay polity to a Malaysian nation. If they persist in denying the relevance of the past to the present, they will only encourage advocates of a static notion of Malay sovereignty to become louder and bolder in their campaign. It is a pity that after five decades of Merdeka, there are still groups among Chinese and Indian Malaysians who subscribe to attitudes and adopt positions that give the impression that Malaya suddenly emerged from the ocean after WW2 and the Malays, Chinese and Indians negotiated

among themselves and with the British to establish an independent nation-state in 1957. This is how some of them view the so-called “social contract” between the three communities. In reality, the “social contract” was a constitutional and political process through which the Malay elite, prodded by the British, acceded to the unprecedented, wholesale accommodation of recently domiciled non-Malays as citizens of Malaya on the eve of Merdeka. It was accommodation within a federation of mainly Malay states with their historical roots in the Sultanates of the past. Our proclamation of Independence itself makes this crystal clear.

I have often wondered why so many non-Malays, including Tan Sris and Datuks, have such great difficulty in understanding this. They have only to look at their titles to appreciate the impact of the Malay polity of the past on the Malaysian nation of the present.

**Dr Chandra Muzaffar**  
President, International  
Movement for a Just World