

Pakatan Harapan and the Malay position

A LOT of Malaysians are worried about the frequency with which ethnic controversies are erupting in the country. Ethnic controversies by themselves which we have had to confront right through our history do not portend doom. It is the context in which they occur and how they are linked to power which matters.

Umno's ouster from power at the federal level last year has given rise to a perception within a segment of Malay society that the ethnic equation of authority has changed. It is felt that Malays no longer constitute the anchor of state power.

This is a gross misperception. It is being deliberately fuelled by a segment of the political opposition reinforced by a wide range of civil society groups. The purpose is obvious: it is to undermine the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government.

If the principal source of power and authority in a political system like ours is the federal Cabinet, the majority of its members are Malays. The majority of members of Parliament are also Malay just as the majority of the judiciary are from the same community. The civil and public services are largely Malay just as the police and armed forces are also mainly Malay. Of course, the nation's constitutional monarchs are Malay.

What this shows is that regardless of whether Umno is in power or not, the Malay presence and position in society is secure and stable. It is fallacious therefore to view Umno as the guarantor of the Malay position. But for many Malays, Umno is still the protector of the Malay position which is why in spite of all its wrongdoings it still managed to win 54 parliamentary seats in the 14th general election making it the largest single party in Parliament at that point.

There are many reasons that explain Umno's continuing though waning grip upon the Malay mind. Apart from Umno propaganda, there is no doubt that as the party at the helm of government for 61 years, it had succeeded to a great extent to eliminate poverty among the Malay masses, expand educational opportunities, enhance social mobility, create a sizeable middle class, and in general endow the community with a sense of accomplishment while ensuring that Islam

and the Malay language remain at the core of the nation's identity. It is all this that has helped to forge a bond between the party and the Malays.

PH has to address this bond if it wants to overcome the challenge posed by Umno and its allies in the days ahead. How this bond expresses itself in various spheres and what its ramifications are should be at the crux of the PH's concern. This demands a clear understanding of the Malay position which Umno claims to protect.

The Malay position is not only part and parcel of the Federal Constitution but is also a product of the evolution of Malaysian politics and society. Its most salient features are:

- i) the status of the Malay rulers as constitutional monarchs;
- ii) the Malay core of Malaysian politics;
- iii) the special position of the Malays in the constitution and the aspirations of the Malay economy as a whole;
- iv) the role of Malay as the official and national language; and
- v) the position of Islam as the religion of the federation.

It is incumbent upon the PH and the Malaysian society as a whole to understand and appreciate the emotional and psychological power behind the idea of the Malay position. If Malays are deeply attached to the Malay position it is mainly because it is the protective shield of sorts that emerged in the wake of the tremendous changes that occurred as a result of British colonial rule and colonial migration which impacted adversely upon the community.

The Malay sultanates from the early 12th century (Kedah 1136) logically should have coalesced into a Malay federation, a Malay nation-state but it did not happen partly because of the massive accommodation of the huge recently domiciled Chinese and Indian communities. In a sense the Malays as a people who historically gave the land its name were relegated to a community among communities.

The challenge now before PH is to articulate a vision of the Malay position which is more just and equitable than what Umno has hitherto offered. On the rulers, for instance, it should commit itself totally

to principles and practices that require them to adhere strictly to the rule of law and remain above politics and business. Similarly, Malay political leaders should be beacons of integrity and honesty fulfilling their trusts to the people. Working with their non-Malay and non-Muslim counterparts in pursuit of the larger good should be their central mission. It follows that emphasising justice that forefronts the needs of the weak and vulnerable while recognising and rewarding ability and excellence irrespective of ethnicity and religion should be PH's agenda. The PH coalition should also strengthen and popularise Malay as a truly Malaysian language. Its present endeavour to develop an inclusive, progressive understanding of Islam focused upon the substance of faith should be further enhanced and refined.

By articulating such a vision of the Malay position, the contrast between PH and Umno would be highlighted vis-a-vis a goal that both seek to protect. In more specific terms, Malays would realise that Umno's notion of a Malay leadership core is mere attachment to ethnicity devoid of any genuine commitment to ethical practices. They would realise that its protection of the economic well-being of the community has led to a widening gap between the "have-a-lot" and the "have-a-little" accompanied by abuse of opportunities by the well-connected. Malays and Muslims would hopefully become aware that glorification of form and symbol in the name of religion does not do justice to the essence of Islam.

When the Malay position is understood and implemented in an enlightened manner, it would synchronise with PH's reform agenda, elements of which have already become reality such as the food bank programme for the needy and the declaration of assets and liabilities by legislators. Indeed, an alternative approach to the Malay position will strengthen just, ethical governance as a whole. In the process, the Malay position itself will be transformed for the well-being of the community and the nation.

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