

# Dr M: Race and religion got in the way of Bangsa Malaysia under Vision 2020

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succeed. So the culture is different.

I used to see Chinese who came here as coolies, they worked very hard. I saw them, in those days, the tongkang come up to Alor Setar, and to empty the tongkang, there is no crane or anything like that. The men go down, carry the huge bags of rice, go on the plank and come down. All were Chinese. No Malays. No Indians.

And the Indians, they all work in the rubber estates because the Malays don't want to do the heavy work, they don't want to go to the rubber estates. They prefer to work with the government to get the pension or they become paddy farmers.

So the development is different because they don't strive well, they do not develop themselves. But the Chinese, these old Chinese who came here who were poor, they were coolies, but if you ask where their children are, their grandchildren are [today], they have done much better.

**After so many years, is this considered a structural issue that policymakers were unable to change?**

It is still. You can say 'no, it's no longer like that' but let's admit that feeling of racism is still very strong because there is no intermarriage. For one thing, the religions are different. And Malay Muslims can only marry another Muslim. And the Chinese do not easily convert. My daughter-in-law is Chinese, my son-in-law is French, so I'm open. But generally, Chinese and Malays, despite living together in the kampungs, don't marry each other. So we don't develop a single Bangsa. In America, there are people of all kinds of European origins, there are Chinese, there are also blacks ... and they (inter) marry.

But here, we still distinguish ourselves as being Malays, Chinese, Indians, so we don't have a Bangsa Malaysia.

**Bangsa Malaysia is one of the key elements in Vision 2020 and from what you say, it has not been achieved and there is still a long way to go. Yet, after the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan government, you set**

**up Pejuang and a lot of people see this as a race-based party. Wouldn't that go against the Bangsa Malaysia goal?**

You know, before we formed Bersatu, the opposition tried to contest against the government and they failed. They failed because the Malays didn't support them. Pakatan Rakyat, for example — Keadilan, Amanah and PAS, and also DAP — they couldn't win. DAP could score at most 18 seats. So we decided that we must have the Malay input. So our party Bersatu was a Malay party, and we stood up for what we believed in. And because of that, in the 14th election, the DAP won 42 seats, 39 of them in the peninsula, because Malays supported the DAP, and also, even Keadilan won more seats because we came in and brought in the Malays. Suppose we are a multiracial party, the Malays will still reject us and the opposition will never win.

So we have to accept the reality. The reality is that the Malays feel worried about themselves, they are afraid. They think that the Chinese are going to dominate everything and all that, whether it is true or not, but they feel that way.

So if I were to form a party that is multiracial, again, we will not get the support of the Malays. And as you can see, Malays have supported this so-called Malay Muslim party ... You may not like racial politics, but the people are not ready for multiracialism.

In Indonesia, the Chinese, for example, they cannot speak Chinese. They speak only Bahasa Indonesia. In the Philippines, Cory Aquino is Chinese, and many of them are Chinese but they became Filipinos, they speak Tagalog.

In Thailand, it's the same, (former prime ministers) Chuan Leekpai is Chinese, Thaksin Shinawatra is Chinese, they rose to become prime minister because they are identified as Thai. But in Malaysia, we still talk about Chinese Malaysians, Indian Malaysians, Malays and all that, so we don't have a Bangsa Malaysia.

**In a way, not having a Bangsa Malaysia with a single language is also a strength**

**in the sense that being able to speak Chinese is good because we can communicate well with our largest trading partners. Many Malays can speak Chinese now, even better than some of the English-educated Chinese.**

Learning a language is important, but using that language as your mother tongue is different. You regard Chinese as your mother tongue, not Malay. Because in Indonesia, the Chinese at home speak Malay, they are still Chinese but they speak Malay. Once I was walking in Osaka in Japan, I heard people speaking Indonesian. I thought they were Indonesians, I turned around, they were all Chinese. So they are willing to give up many things to become identified with the country.

And in the past, the Chinese who lived in Malaysia became Baba Nyonya ... they were Malaysians, very Malay in their ways. They are still Chinese, but they speak Bahasa. This insistence on the original language of where you come from, let's admit that it does not contribute to us coming together. Of course, religion is another problem, because [in Malaysia] you need to change [your religion if you marry a Muslim]. In America, that's not a problem. But in Malaysia, the Malays insist on my daughter-in-law being a Muslim.

**Do you mean to say there should be a trade-off, where non-Malays give up their identity to create a Bangsa Malaysia?**

Bangsa Malaysia is not actually Malay. It's an adoption of some of the original culture and language of the country, that's all. You will still be a Chinese but your home language is Malay, you don't have to change your religion. I think if there are a lot of similarities, more than differences, then you'll have a Bangsa Malaysia. That's what I had in mind when I put down one of the nine objectives [of Vision 2020].

**That dream notwithstanding, should pushing for a Bangsa Malaysia still be a prior-**

**ity, given that the world has developed so fast technologically? There are many pressing matters, including having the right education and policies to attract enough investments in the right areas. You were so early in bringing the Multimedia Super Corridor to Malaysia, yet today, we are not a leader. Can the country afford to continue talking about things like whether a subject should be taught in English or the Chinese should forget their language?**

I think there is no bar in terms of education. The only thing is that we have to push the Malays because normally, they are not able to go for higher education. You know what I did for the Chinese, which I don't like to talk about because the Malays will get angry? I [once] met some Chinese students in London. I talked to them, and they told me that they didn't get any scholarship [but] their parents were able to pay for their education there. So when I came back, I decided that many Chinese cannot send their children abroad because they are not rich enough like those people. So to help them, we started a twinning arrangement between local universities and foreign universities so that the cost of education is lower. So they do two years in the country, one year abroad, and they get a foreign degree. But now those [colleges] have become very advanced, now they are full universities. They are recognised by the world as universities, and you don't have to go anywhere.

So a lot of Chinese who otherwise would not be able to send their children abroad, now get [to educate] their children in the country. And if you go and see the population of the private universities, mostly they are Chinese and some Indians, but very few Malays.

So the disparity is very great, we had to correct that because between the rich and the poor, there is always conflict. Even if you are a single race, the rich and the poor will always have conflicts. So much so that there is the Russian Revolution, the French Rev-

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lution and all these ideas about equality and all that — it's because of the disparity. That is why I want to help the Malays catch up with the Chinese. But in the meantime, we don't stop the Chinese.

There is disparity between rich and poor that will cause tension. But when the disparity is equated with race, the tension would be greater.

**In your opinion, what are the structural problems that have actually hindered the country from achieving Vision 2020, apart from the points that you have brought up, such as corruption going up?**

I think we are on the way. A lot of young Chinese and also Malays have acquired skills in using artificial intelligence and digitalisation and all that. Some of them are quite good but the government itself doesn't apply enough support for them. We need to support them. That is what I've said — that [if] you have a government that is not interested, then of course we lag behind. But if you have a government that is pushing [things would be different]. The Koreans may have assassinated Park Chung-hee but I admire him very much because he called up 12 Koreans, very low-middle class type, like Hyundai — Hyundai was a motorcar repairer — and asked them to go big. 'I will support you, I will lend you money, I will give you soft loans', and see what Korea is right now. It is the government support. But, of course, the government sometimes can be very severe against these people also. But otherwise, [their companies like] Samsung, have 10,000 PhDs doing research. Where do we have that kind of thing?

**Tun, when you say government support, in our country, some people actually see that, especially in the 1980s or 1990s, there was actually a growth in cronies and cronyism. Would you believe my explanation, because nobody does? Actually, I helped a lot of people, whether they were cronies or not, they were known [to me] or not; whether they were from the opposition [or not], I gave help to all of them. Yes, many cronies, because I helped everybody. I helped the Malays, I helped the Chinese; most of these Chinese who are now billionaires were helped by me. Not because they were my cronies, but because they had the capacity to deliver.**

You don't give a big job to develop [something like] Tanjung Pelepas Port to someone popular [but who can't deliver]. Nothing would happen. I chose people who had shown capability. So, Syed Mokhtar had that capability, and many other Malays who had the capability, I helped. But at the same time, I also helped a lot of other people and they failed, they didn't do the right thing. I gave a lot of APs (approved permits) to Malay companies, [and] they sold their APs. I stopped because it's not about cronies. My job is to help Malays catch up with the Chinese. If I help only two or three people, then it's not going to achieve the purpose. I helped so many people, I gave licences, I gave APs, I gave contracts, to many Malays but they failed; so because they failed, nobody calls them my cronies. But those who succeed, that [people call them] my cronies. So the only way I can avoid being accused of cronyism is to make sure that everybody fails, then nobody will say I helped cronies.

You know who started this word 'crony'? The *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Because I'd been nasty to the British and all that, the British papers don't like me. You know, I started off by saying buy British last and I never kowtowed to them, no way. I didn't attend the Commonwealth meetings until after three times. I didn't want to go. I told them the

wealth was not common. The wealth belonged to only five countries. All the rest were poor. What Commonwealth?

There was one time when the Queen reached 50, they showed that picture where I was saying that the Commonwealth is not a common wealth because the wealth belonged to only five countries. Even the Queen laughed. But that's the truth. You call it the Commonwealth but we are so poor, so many countries are very poor. But the British don't like me. Margaret Thatcher had to come and see me at our High Commission. I didn't want to see her. I didn't go to see the British government. For three years when I was prime minister, I never went there. I never went to America. The ambassador of America, the moment I became prime minister, came to tell me that 'it's so difficult to get an appointment with you', so I told Wisma Putra 'please tell this man I'm not going', and I didn't go.

So the Western press never liked me. Until now, they call me a dictator. They say that the judiciary was interfered with by me, all of which is not true. So now, even Malaysians say 'he practises cronyism'. No, I don't. But even if I tell you and you tell people, they will not believe this. Cronyism, I'm a dictator, I'm corrupt, all these things [people believe].

**Tun, you are still very passionate about the country. Are you changing your mind about not contesting in GE15?**

No, I will be 98 (laughs), too old. But if they ask me to help in any way I can, I will help. I don't live for anything else; I live for the country.

**Given the hindsight, if we could turn back the clock, would you have resigned?**

I didn't actually resign. By the time I resigned, I was no longer the prime minister. What happened was that, these people planned to bring down the Pakatan Harapan government by withdrawing support — Bersatu together with Azmin. When Bersatu and Azmin left, Pakatan had already lost the majority. So it was down. If it was no longer the government, I was also no longer the prime minister. But what I wanted to do was resign from my party, from the chairmanship of my party. Because they rejected my advice. I told them 'please don't do this', I said 'You wait first. If you say that DAP is bad, let's watch what they are going to do'. And I thought I could handle this matter, but they [already] planned to take over the government. And they offered me to be the prime minister, but I didn't want that because I didn't want to work with Najib. Again, I was elected by the people to form this government, how could I just renege on my promise? That,

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I could not do. So okay, I couldn't be the prime minister, it's alright.

To say that I planned this thing is ridiculous. I planned to get myself kicked out? How can that be?

**So what do you think were the missteps that actually caused the PH government to fall in less than two years after it took over Putrajaya?**

You see, when Najib lost, he was afraid of going to jail. So he tried to form a coalition with PAS. Not enough. Then he talked about a Malay-Muslim government because PH, of course, was dominated by non-Malays. So he started being very racist. And then, when Hamzah left Umno to join Bersatu, Hamzah persuaded the Bersatu people to leave PH and form another government with Najib, the so-called Malay-Muslim government. That is what I disagreed with. I don't want to do that. I don't want to work with Najib in any way.

**Apart from all these political strategy moves pulling out of the parties, in terms of policies, were there any missteps by the PH government? Because shortly before the [Sheraton move], popularity was actually falling, especially among the Malays.**

Among the Malays, the reason I already explained is that they were attracted by this idea of a Malay-Muslim government. But on the other hand, we were very much against Najib. We knew that Najib cheated a lot, so we wanted to punish him. He gave a lot of contracts to a lot of people, big contracts involving billions of dollars, overpriced, so that he could take some of the money. So we said we had to stop this. So when we became the government, we decided that all contracts should be nullified, stopped completely. And that was a very bad decision because when you stop the contracts, you are not punishing Najib. You are punishing the contractor and the workers and the subcontractors — all of them suffered.

I had a long argument with Guan Eng. He wanted to cut off all the contracts and give them to somebody else because these people were cronies of Najib. And also even TAR College, he didn't want to give the money to TAR College because this is an MCA project. And all these things caused a lot of other people to suffer, not MCA. It is the people who will suffer, the students who will suffer, and hate us. The Chinese also didn't like it; the Malays, of course, this was because of this idea of cutting out many Malay contracts. Small contractors lost their contracts.

So for all these reasons, in order to punish Najib, we punished all of them. They were the ones who suffered, and therefore they turned against us. And then, Najib used to give money freely to people; I could not give. All the fishermen were paid RM300 a month for living, for [doing] nothing. They were not even fishing. I said we can't do this kind of thing. He was trying to bribe them; I don't believe in bribery. I want them to work. We can create jobs for them so that they can make money for themselves. So we became unpopular.

But at the same time, what people don't notice is that we took over the government smoothly, we cleaned up the government, we dealt with the debts — all these things were done by the PH government. And if you look at other countries, when there is a change of government, invariably there is violence. People will take to the streets. You see what happened in Egypt, Syria, Algeria and Indonesia. Here, when we took over, the transition was smooth. No street demonstration, people accepted [us].

And to have a government of five different parties, not very close together but by different

parties, each with its own ideas, and yet we had a Cabinet that could function. When I formed the Cabinet, there was no protest. I did not give DAP more [appointments] than Bersatu. Bersatu had six [Cabinet ministers] including the prime minister, but DAP also had six, although they won 42 [seats]; we won only 13. But in the Cabinet, I'm levelled up. All these things, I can't go around and beat my chest and say I have done so well. But believe me, forming a government is not easy with five different parties, one of which — Warisan from Sabah — was not even a member of the coalition.

**Tun, you spoke about the country still having a lot of debt. When you were in office, one of the things you said was that the country doesn't need GST. Many say that was a mistake. Have you changed your mind on GST?**

No. When GST was introduced, a lot of people were very unhappy, because they tax at different levels. The importer, the wholesaler, the dealer, all had to pay all the way. But sales tax is only when there is a sale.

[In the case of GST], two years with claims, nothing happened, they didn't get the money. That is why we did away with GST, we reinstated the sales tax. Yes, the government gets less money, but it is fairer to the people.

But at the same time, of course, we had to pay our debts. A lot of the money went towards paying debts. So I had to work to make sure that the debts were paid so that we were not sued for bankruptcy. If you don't pay your debt, even the government can be bankrupted.

There were a lot of complaints against Guan Eng and all that, but he managed to pay the debts and, on top of that, seeing that Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah were very poor, he gave money to them. He gave RM400 million to Kelantan and they bought a Mercedes Benz. I'm not telling lies, you can confirm whether this is true or not. This is what we have done. This country having a transition from a 60-year-old government to a new government of the opposition smoothly is an achievement.

**But it didn't last, Tun.**

It didn't last because of the plotting — Najib's plotting. Najib wanted to come back, so he played on the issue of the Malay-Muslim government.

**Tell us three things that you think Malaysians need the government to do.**

Ensure there is no severe racial conflict so that the country becomes stable. That is No 1. Only a stable country can develop. Second, the government must think of serving the people — that is very important. And third, we must be respected by the world, we must be a country that practises the rule of law — democracy and all that — so that people have high respect for us. In fact, we achieved the status of being a model for most developing countries. Those were the things we wanted to do for this country and it can be done. We can make the country rich, no doubt about that.

**Are we in danger of falling behind our regional peers?**

Yes, we are going to be definitely behind Vietnam. Even Indonesia is now having big ideas. They want to invite rocket launching, and all kinds of things. And Jokowi himself rings up foreign investors.

**Any words for Malaysians in general who are worried about the state of the country? What must be done to salvage politics in this country, so to speak?**

Stop corruption. Reject corruption. That is one thing that can destroy us, corruption. ■