

Dr Mahathir's inflammatory pill

How not to build consensus

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the physician-turned politician and twice prime minister of Malaysia, is back at breaking taboos. This time it is race again. Again, because it is an old prescription of his. Doctors' prescriptions have side effects, so has this doctor's. Recently Dr Mahathir made public what many knew were his private thoughts: Malaysia is the land of the Malays and there are attempts by some politicians to shape it into a multiracial country, the implications being the marginalisation of the majority and the dilution of Islam as the official religion of the nation. There are two problems with this. One is the ethnic status of Malaysia. Two is the inflammatory nature of Dr Mahathir's medicine.

Start with the ethnic status of Malaysia. We grant the former prime minister his nostalgia for Tanah Melayu, literally Malay Land. But British colonialism in the 18th and 19th centuries has changed that. Today, Malaysia is a nation of many races. In other words, a multiracial nation. A look at the population census will show the nature of the Malaysian nation. Dr Mahathir knows this. He is a clever politician. He could not have been a prime minister twice otherwise. We must not forget, he formed and led a coalition that brought down a government that was led by another coalition for 60 years. He is also well aware that what he says would make people rise up in anger, though he may not be able to tell exactly how furious the reaction will be. As it turned out, it has been one hell of a fury, from the prime minister downwards, Malays and non-Malays alike. Dr Mahathir must have been puzzled somewhat.

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What is Dr Mahathir's game plan is now possibly the most frequently asked question. Politics appears to be the quick answer by politicians and academics alike. We think it is politics and more. And the more is that he feels that not enough is being done for the Malays despite being the majority. Here he has to blame himself more. After all, he was the longest-serving prime minister, notching up 22 years in his first term. That is almost a third of the lifetime of Malaysia. Yes, he did bring development to the country. Just in a few years, Dr Mahathir turned agricultural Malaysia into an industrial nation, leaving behind rural Malaysia, where most of the Malays lived. Sure, he made some Malay billionaires, but these were few and far between. Others, especially in rural Malaysia were left behind. Even the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, was deemphasised during his reign, much to the anger of the Malays. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the Academie Francaise equivalent of Malaysia, lost its oversight authority on Bahasa Malaysia. He can't deny he could have done more.

Not only the Malays mustn't be left behind, so mustn't other Malaysians. France offers a recent example of what happens when the French of a certain ethnicity are left behind. There it is a combo of factors: forced assimilation, secularisation and one-size-fits-all. This is a lesson for us, too, especially for our doctor in the house. Malaysians of different races have been placed together on this piece of Earth we call Malaysia for the grand purpose of getting to know each other. Only consensus can make us achieve this, not confrontation.