

Academic says multi-ethnic coalition in Malaysia died in 1969

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Arguing how the country has never been the same since racial riots, Prof James Chin claims BN has since merely been a means to project an image for Umno.

PETALING JAYA: An academic has called into question the long-held belief that Barisan Nasional (BN) had always practised the tradition of “narrowing ethnic and religious divides”.

In a commentary published by The Diplomat, Professor James Chin of the University of Tasmania said this viewpoint is erroneous.

“I would argue that the entire setup of BN was never meant to narrow the ethnic and religious divide, but rather cement the ideology of Ketuanan Melayu (Malay supremacy), and in recent times Ketuanan Islam (Islamic supremacy).

“In practice this meant Umno staying in power at the federal level in perpetuity.

“This is because for Umno, the contradiction of playing the Islamic card while leading a multi-ethnic coalition and country is irrelevant, since the coalition is merely meant to project an image for Umno,” Chin said, adding that the party was “never serious about accepting non-Malays as full citizens”.

Chin, who is director of Asian Studies at the Australian university, argued that Malaysia’s multi-ethnic coalition (Alliance) “died in 1969” with the May 13 racial riots.

“After the 1969 racial riots, the Umno Malay elites (and a sizable number of the Malay intelligentsia) decided that treating non-Malays as political equals (as in the Alliance model) was a mistake.

“They saw the rapid development of the Malay community (‘to catch up with the Chinese’) as contingent on massive government intervention in all political and economic spheres,” he said.

Chin also questioned the forming of the Barisan Nasional coalition in 1973 as being one of unequal partners, from the onset.

“They created a governing coalition that, while multi-racial and multi-religious on paper, was in effect simply a political vehicle for Umno to dominate the federal government while paying lip service to leading a multi-ethnic coalition.

“That is the reason why in the BN, you can have countless non-Malay parties but only one Malay party,” he said, adding that people should not romanticise the BN coalition as a genuine multi-ethnic coalition but to see it for what is really has been since its formation: a political vehicle for keeping Umno in power.

Though saying that the racial rift had begun in 1969, Chin said it accelerated under the government of former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

“He (Mahathir) not only politically further marginalised the main non-Malay parties, MCA and MIC, but he also supported the infusion of ‘Islamic values’ into the bureaucracy, thus directly aiding the rise of political Islam.

“No doubt Mahathir was trying to outdo PAS but his legacy is the creation of a powerful Islamic department (Jakim), which is trying to turn Malaysia into a Malay-Islamic country.

“Jakim is the natural ally of PAS and they have a strong influence in the Najib administration with a billion-ringgit budget,” Chin said.

In referring to current Prime Minister Najib Razak, Chin also alluded that his move to get close to PAS may have been prompted by the whole affair surrounding state-owned investment fund, 1MDB.

“However, in reality, the signs are clear: in the long run, with or without Najib, Umno will move toward the Islamic ground, thanks to the rise of the ‘Ketuanan Islam’ era under Najib (since 2009).

“The party knows their path to staying in power is in the ‘Islamic vote’, Chin said alleging that countless surveys have shown that the Malay community in Malaysia is becoming more conservative and places Islam above all other issues.

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