

Malaysia: Permanent Ethnic Malay Polity

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The February putsch of the ineffective and sabotaged Pakatan Harapan government by the makeshift flag-of-convenience Perikatan Nasional, which is comprised of an alignment of Malay-centric political parties, is the natural order for Malaysia, made possible by Machiavellian betrayal, a common trait in Malay politics since independence in 1957.

What is very Malay about the grab for power currently underway in parliament is that the change of government was not as a result of a defeat at the polls or on the floor of the parliament, but rather a decision made by the traditional Malay patriarch, the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong – the current king, Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad.

The structure and fabric of Malaysian power are made up of a patriarchal elite Malay hierarchy. At the top are the royal families, which yield a symbolic cultural authority. Next are the long-established political families who have been involved at the forefront of politics and government since independence. Next is a network of political warlords spreading down to the village level. These warlords operate under the patronage and in-turn provide support to the leaders of the political families.

Alongside these groups are lines of Islamic clerics, who create religious legitimacy. Then comes a large sway of civil servants whose loyalty is to the

Malay agenda rather than the government of the day and who caused chaos for the multiracial Pakatan Harapan government. Connected professionals and businesspeople complete the make-up of the Malay gentry.

Malaysia, once seen as a multicultural nation, has been incrementally traveling down the path of monoculturalism. In 1957, Chinese comprised about 40 percent of the population. That has shrunk to about 23 percent today. Any ideas promoting a true multi-cultural Malaysia were politically resisted.

One of the founders of the United Malays National Organization, Onn Ja'afar, called for UMNO membership to be open for all races and renaming the party the United Malayan National Organization. That wasn't accepted by UMNO regional warlords, forcing Onn Ja'afar to leave UMNO and form a non-communal Independence Party of Malaya Party in 1951. Lee Kwan Yew called for the discriminatory section of the Malaysian constitution providing for special provisions for the Malays to be scrapped, with a vision of a Malaysian Malaysia. Lee fell into conflict with then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, with the result that Singapore was expelled from Malaysia in 1965.

The masterpiece of social engineering was the formulation and enactment of the New Economic Policy (NEP), in 1971, in response to the bloody race riots on May 13, 1969, that took hundreds of lives, the nation was socially engineered towards a monocultural state. The formal intention was to bring Malays on par with other races, specifically in economic matters. However, then Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak and following administrations extended NEP principles across all aspects of society, including, quotas in the civil service, education, the military forces, the formation of special purpose government agencies, and even discounts on buying properties. Positive discrimination for Malays has become deeply institutionalized and has deep influence upon the nature of Malaysian society today.

Three generations of Malays have now been educated through the local system, which has rewritten history to espouse the justification of their special privileges.

Islam has been reframed to become a tool of exclusion, rather than a doctrine of social inclusion. The psyche of Malays today is much more insular than it was 30 years ago. Language and greetings have been Arabized, which has separated Malays even more from other ethnic groups. The Malay monoculture is now the norm.

The Malaysian civil service is deeply embedded with Malay cultural practices and ethics. The so-called “Malay agenda” is seen over by an elite apparatus. The military forces have been purged of ethnic diversity, and a politicalized reserve of senior officers is in place. Academics and administrative staff of Malaysia’s public universities are primarily Malay. Government-linked companies and sovereign corporations like Petronas, Sime Darby and Khazanah are filled with Malay professionals.

The economy is skewed towards favoring Malay interests through monopoly, regulation and the dominance of GLCs in particular sectors. The legal system also appears rigged to favor the elite as was seen in the recent incident in which Riza Aziz, the stepson of the disgraced former Prime Minister Najib Razak, escaped prosecution for his part in the 1MDB scandal. Now the narrative is changing over the Najib case, with the defense saying public opinion is heavily against conviction despite the loss of US\$4.8 billion in the scandal.

There are two streams of Islam that are reinforcing polarization. One is overt, full of rhetoric, the political Islam of the rural fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia or PAS, inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood. This rhetoric appeals to the souls of Malays, who are all Muslims. Islam is a powerful part of the persona in which any mockery towards Islam is usually framed as an attack on Malays.

A bogeyman has been created, a mythical evil, which is the enemy of Malays portrayed and defended by groups, in the image of the old Malay warriors. A recent Malay Dignity Congress was a rallying of the elite Malays to defend the interests of the weak. The calls to ban alcohol by PAS, and subsequent statements by ministers are overt proclamations of Malaysia’s monoculture. Likewise,

former deputy prime minister Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who raised controversy in 2018 over her objections to child marriage, indicated the strong influence of political Islam on Malay society.

Thus, open discussion about special privileges and the Malay agenda is deemed sensitive to Malays. The mythology of the social contract has become sacred. Its manifestation as Ketuanan Melayu or Malay supremacy will come down hard, through intimidation, on anyone brave enough to question it.

The second stream of Islam is covert. Individuals who have returned from studying in the Middle East, or UK, have formed an influential alumni always looking to further the cause of Islam within their spheres of influence at the workplace. The alumni have infiltrated the civil service, education system, military, GLCs, and Islamic organizations such as IKRAM. Muhyiddin Yassin has sought support from the organization's de facto leader, the Perlis Mufti, Dr. Asri Zainul Abidin, known as Dr. Maza.

Since independence, political control has been concentrated within a few elite Malay families. Malaysia's second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak's son Najib Razak was also a serving prime minister and remains extremely powerful within UMNO today despite the 1MDB scandal. Onn Ja'afar's son Hussein Onn became the third Malaysian prime minister. Hussein Onn's son Hishammuddin Hussein is still powerful within UMNO and served as minister for defense, transport, home affairs, and youth and culture respectively. Khairy Jamaluddin, the current defense minister, is the son in law of former prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Mahathir Mohamed's son Mukhriz Mahathir was the Kedah chief minister twice and former minister of international trade.

Anwar Ibrahim was deputy prime minister, his wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail was also a deputy prime minister, while their daughter Nurul Izzah Anwar is a member of parliament. In addition, members of these elite families are intermarried to each other, royalty, diplomats, judges, and other senior Malays. These dynasties also exist at regional political warlord level, as is the case with

former minister and parliamentary member for Arau, Shahidan Kassim, whose brother Ismail Kassim is involved in local state politics. There is also a mixture of mutual business interests, and opaque influence.

When Pakatan Harapan defeated the Barisan Nasional in the May 2018 national election, part of this elite grouping took power in a different configuration. The administration of the current beleaguered Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin is yet just a reconfiguration of the same people. Malay politics is more about the dynamics of these families than about policy and ideology. Malay politics has been primarily about feuds and alliances rather than vision.

These family dynamics pose questions. The Sarawak Report recently claimed that the present finance minister Tengku Zafrul, reportedly a relative of Muhyiddin, played a role with the palace when the king was making a decision on whom to support. The truth of this will remain a secret of the elite.

The grip of elite families on Malaysian politics has squeezed out potential new political talent and leadership. Muhyiddin's cabinet is not based upon meritocracy but rather support, patronage and payback. It's a configuration of political elite and warlords. There is no shared ideology or vision binding them together.

Structural and institutional factors combined will ensure Malaysia will remain a monocultural Malay state. As Malay birth rates have far exceeded those of other racial groups, the Malays are the dominant grouping in the country. The first-past-the-post electoral system ensures that only representatives with polarized views will win a majority in single-member constituencies. The electoral system is biased against bringing diversity into the parliament.

The two electoral wildcards Sabah and Sarawak have historically shown that political groupings there, also follow patronage politics. Malaysia is really Malaya plus two (Sabah and Sarawak) today. The Chinese-dominated Democratic Action

Party has been banished to Penang, which will remain the party's only sphere of influence.

The Malay elite are yet to complete their fight for power. The demise of the Barisan Nasional destroyed the country's political stability, which the multicultural Pakatan Harapan was unable to replace. It was only able to disturb the Malay political paradigm in the 2018 general election due to special circumstances – a vengeful former and future Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad on a crusade against a corrupt Najib.

Once again, there will be a fierce Malay political fight in a Malay state over the coming months, with the winner to take all.

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