

# editor's note **Malaysia Boleh**

IN 1987, A challenge was mounted for the presidency of Umno, the aftermath of which resulted in the party being declared illegal by the High Court, the formation of Umno Baru, and the removal of three of the country's most senior judges before the hearing of the High Court's appeal by a full bench of nine Supreme Court (as the Federal Court was then known) judges.

The relationship between the government's executive and judicial arms would change, and be changed, in fundamental ways that continue to affect public perception of the administration of justice in this country.

It seems fanciful that this democratic rupture – and its lasting effects – would have resulted from a formal process of one political party's (attempted) exercise of democracy. But it happened, because by convention, the president of Umno is also the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

As the largest Malay party in the country and the anchor member of the ruling Barisan Nasional, much of our lives hinge on Umno's rude health and its representation of the Malay. The party's mission since the Seventies has been guided by the much-talked-about (but not publicly discussed) New Economic Policy, a root-and-branch attempt at reorganising Malaysian society.

In this writer's estimation, the NEP has failed in its aim to uplift the Malay condition because its effect has been to segregate the country into Malay, and non-Malay; the NEP has failed to bring Malay society into the global mainstream because of parochial language and education policies ostensibly implemented in its name.

Malay role models are few or chequered, and the Wawasan (a rose by any other name) attempt to fast-track the creation of what the academic Khoo Boo Teik calls a 'Bumiputera Industrialist Capitalist Class' only led to popular resentment when one by one, its over-privileged members were bailed out. It's not unusual for political fortunes to ebb and flow with the economy, but Umno's might be intertwined with the largesse made traditional by

the exploitation of the idea of an NEP, hence the latest round of shouting about cancelled projects.

The recent kongsi raya debacle is the latest manifestation of a quest to lend dignity to the Malay identity, this time by using the aura of piety and race to elevate one's station in life. And if these muftis are succeeding, it will be in no small part due to the literal mindsets that the damaged education system has wrought, and which has also produced Malaysian graduates of all races whose critical faculties, employers know, have not been honed to a razor's edge.

Is a national affirmative action programme in favour of a political majority, qualified by race, still tenable? The answer is not so simple. 'Racism,' for all its politically correct heft, is not a self-evident term. But the 'sensitive issues' wielded by ridiculous politicians similarly militate against clear-headed and empathetic discussion.

Our interview with Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was prompted by his unveiling of the Parti Keadilan Rakyat's New Economic Agenda (NEA), which appears to acknowledge that the NEP was fundamentally flawed, and which proposes the reintroduction of meritocracy to address the serious issues of governance facing the country. Whether the NEA is a solution, or whether critics see it as a self-serving tilt at windmills, one thing is for sure: the need for a deep re-evaluation of the very values and beliefs which inform and animate Malaysian politics.

The writer of this letter in a national daily, below, highlights this:

'My daughter has just started her Form Six after national service and was in for a culture shock to find 98% of the students in her school were non-Malays. And I bet the Government matriculation colleges have the reverse – 98% Malays. So what happened to the national integration and national unity that was supposed to come out of national service? We will be celebrating 50 years of Merdeka next year, but we are far from national integration.'

□ Jason Tan