

# ONE MALAYSIA, UNDER GOD, BIPOLAR

Essays on Society,  
Schooling, and Salvation



**AZLY RAHMAN**

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**ONE  
MALAYSIA,  
UNDER  
GOD,  
BIPOLAR**

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Schooling, and Salvation

**AZLY RAHMAN**

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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SIRD

Strategic Information and Research Development Centre

Petaling Jaya, Malaysia



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# Foreword

Writing a foreword is not always a facile task. One is expected to read the manuscript and then say something meaningful as a commendation to anyone who may be interested in the book. There is always the possibility that a prospective reader may skip or skim through the foreword. But since it is most likely that an excerpt of the foreword will appear as one of the endorsements at the back cover of the book, what one says in a foreword is important. It is a responsibility that one cannot take lightly especially if it is a foreword to a book that, I believe, anyone with the slightest interest in Malaysia and its future cannot ignore or neglect. In this fine collection of opinion pieces, the respected and sagacious public intellectual Azly Rahman reflects on the political machinations and cultural politics in Malaysia. The book is a smorgasbord of commentaries on the poetics and politics of cultural life in a nation that is struggling to transcend its racialized structure to forge a cohesive and harmonious future. The word 'smorgasbord' may give the impression that what is presented in this book is simply a variety of 'dishes', hot and cold, familiar and exotic, all separate and distinct treats laid out on a buffet table. It is a smorgasbord with a difference: all the 'culinary delights' (read: commentaries) are laid out in an orderly manner with a story line that threads through the whole text. Organised around three main themes—society, schooling, and salvation—the commentaries offer rich food for thought and reflection and satisfy the intellectual and political appetite of anyone interested in Malaysian affairs and cultural politics in general. (The references and inferences to food is intentional as eating and talking about food is, as any observer of Malaysian culture will concur, is a Malaysian past-time or obsession. Azly Rahman does partake in this obsession as evident in two or three of his opinion pieces.)

Thinking analogically, the commentaries are like colourful beads on a string, where each bead is a gem on its own but strung together the beads transform into a sparkling piece of art. Metaphorically speaking,

the string represents the critical theory (the three Ps, namely political economy, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism) shaping and informing the political analysis and opinions presented in this collection. While the opinion pieces are enhanced with a healthy dose of theoretical and philosophical reflection, they are not simply for an academic audience or for pedagogical purposes, even though Azly Rahman states that as an educator he is interested in what he calls the 'teachable moment' of political debates in Malaysia and elsewhere. They are also not just to interest or fascinate the reader with Malaysian tales of extraordinary politics but what makes this book of immense value, in my opinion, is its explicit objective to arouse the awareness, sensitivities and sensibilities, especially amongst Malaysians, of the injustices, malpractices, and policy follies in the country. Azly Rahman invites his audience to shift their attention and concerns from the 'manufactured crises' and slogans circulated in the public space and the gutter politics to the 'real big issues' such as the 1Malaysia Development Board fiasco, massive financial losses, GST, the rising cost of living, Sedition Act arrests, and rent seeking.

One of the many admirable aspects of this book is Azly Rahman's approach to race and racism. He begins his book with a heart-warming poetic expression of gratitude and love for his late mother and through his poem dedicated to his mother he reveals his strong sense of ethnic pride as a Malay. Many with a similar pride tend to slide on the slippery slope to racial bigotry and ethnic chauvinism. Azly Rahman, however, embraces a refreshing and progressive multi-ethnicity where he highlights the malaise of racial, ethnic and religious chauvinism and celebrates the many delights of Malaysian interculturalism and cultural hybridity. He reminds us that one can be proud of one's own identity or ethnicity without denigrating or disavowing cultural diversity and multiculturalism. In other words, Azly Rahman in his musings underscores the fact that ethnic pride and interculturalism or cosmopolitanism are not, and need not be, logically incompatible or paradoxical. It is also implicit in his writings that he adheres to the belief that Malaysia is not just a multi-ethnic nation but a nation made up of multi-ethnic people.

This collection of commentaries were previously published in Azly's column in the online daily, Malaysiakini which is Malay for 'Malaysia Today' and can also mean 'contemporary Malaysia'. Azly Rahman is certainly a columnist who has a good grip on the pulse of contemporary

Malaysia. Like a western-trained medical doctor, he reads the pulse for the highs and lows of the heart-beat of a nation. And like a Chinese *sinseh*, his 'finger' on the pulsating nation alerts him to the past and future health woes of Malaysia and with sincerity and courage, Azly tells it as it is without 'fear and favour' (which is the title of the late Tan Chee Koon's column in *The Star* years ago). Azly's courage is driven by his strong commitment to dialogue, empathy, and social justice.

In my endorsement of Azly Rahman's book *Controlled Chaos*, I stated that 'with its wealth and breadth of penetrating insights disrupting conventional discourses and offering a 'new politics', this is a book that no Malaysian or non-Malaysian interested in Malaysia, can or should ignore'. I would endorse this book with the same words and state that Azly Rahman has shifted the focus of his critical eye on another set of issues but with the identical political message that Malaysians must open their eyes to the economic malpractices, religious extremism and political malaise in their nation in order to create a just, harmonious and peaceful society. Azly Rahman avers that 'Political change needs social imagination and critical sensibility founded upon a very strong ethical system drawn and designed as a national philosophy; a transcultural system inspired by the strength and universality of all religious and non-religious philosophies - not just based on Islam that has its limitations and cultural biases, albeit insisted upon and imposed onto many as a complete and all-encompassing, all-hegemonising political, social and existential philosophy.' I could not agree more.

Guided by such a principled philosophy, Azly Rahman makes a sound plea to Malaysians (and others): 'Let us work together on a common ground—for the common good'. It is a clarion call to Malaysians to get out of their comfort zone and apathy and to join the movement for a better Malaysia where bigotry, racism and religious extremism are kept in check and where peace, harmony, intercultural understanding are reinstated and reinforced as part and parcel of everyday life. There is much offered in this book that can constitute what I would boldly label as the 'Malaysian Manifesto'.

**Dr Alberto Gomes,**

*Emeritus Professor, La Trobe University, Melbourne*

*Global Director, Dialogue, Empathic Engagement and Peacebuilding (DEEP) Network*

# Preface

I had first wanted to give this book the title, '31<sup>st</sup> August 1984: Diary of an Asian Animal Farm', to capture the spirit of George Orwell's classics, 1984 and Animal Farm, respectively. After discussing with my editors at Gerakbudaya, I have decided to rename it 'One Malaysia, under God, Bipolar: Essays on Society, Schooling, and Salvation'. I think this gives it a more culturally relevant link to the analysis of Malaysia, viewed from an Orwellian perspective. For those who are students of the study of totalitarian regimes, the work of Eric Blair, the English writer whose pen name is George Orwell, is familiar. Similar to Orwell's work this book is about the state of things being in a critical condition and that need to be diagnosed and attended to, rehabilitated and healed. It is about the state of Malaysia as a society and her schools as a reproductive organ of her future, and about the fate of her spirituality. It is a story of a body politic in sorry state.

At every August 31<sup>st</sup> we seem to be inching towards the world that Orwell famously described in '1984'; a world in which totalitarianism reigns supreme where 'doublespeak' and 'newspeak' became the linguistic tools of mental, physical, emotional, as well as spiritual domination. It is a world ruled by a modern cult leader that uses the media and the ideological state apparatuses to 'hegemonise' the citizens of the State (of 'Oceania').

It is a dystopia in which systems built upon the ideals of the Constitution gradually break down, the separation of powers begins to blur and power and wealth come into being as a singular principle of oppression and dehumanization – which is recognizable as the inner-working of this 'Animal Farm' (as Orwell would also say) called Malaysia. It is a world wherein the greedy and the strong prey upon the meek and the weak, in a world of 'broken promises of equality and freedom and social justice' agreed upon at the onset of 'Independence' or in the case of Malaysia, at the arrival of 'Merdeka' on a golden platter.

In writing these 'diary entries of a nation in tatters,' I cannot but think of some of the ancient and modern work in the genre of the study of deconstructionism and totalitarianism that I have studied as well as used as required readings in my classes in Philosophy, Humanities, Politics, Education, and Anthropology. There are too many to mention here but principal amongst them are those in the fields I have studied which includes some of the seminal work of William Shakespeare, probably the greatest writer of the English language and its culture, who lived in the English Renaissance period.

This 'diary' is presented especially to Malaysian readers; those who might be able to understand the society they live in through a lens which is kaleidoscopic in nature. The issues plaguing Malaysia as I have analyzed in my previous writings – in *Multiethnic Malaysia*, *Thesis on Cyberjaya*, *The Allah Controversy and Other Essays on Malaysian Hypermodernity*, *Dark Spring*, *Kalimah Allah Milik Siapa*, and the latest, *Controlled Chaos* – are the typical symptoms of a society that is undergoing a tension between the demands of a command economy, laissez-faire capitalism and the historical, political, and semiotic excesses of feudalism.

The 'entries,' divided by the primary themes of 'Society,' 'Schooling,' and 'Salvation,' narrate the symptoms as well as the possible solutions to the problems of the nation's ills.

I trust that Malaysian readers of this volume will have a better notion of critical and cultural analysis and be able to read deeper into these writings, given the intellectual/cognitive feel and pulse of the nation which is moving towards its maturity in learning about 'reading society as text'.

In writing these entries I have also been preoccupied with the themes of my lectures on work such as Socrates' 'Apology', 'Crito', 'Meno', and 'Symposium', Plato's 'Republic', 'The Epic of Gilgamesh', Freud's 'Civilization and its Discontents', and a variety of texts on trans-cultural and trans-religious philosophies, readings on the idea of the self and the individual from the scientific, philosophical, and religious perspectives, readings from Rousseau, Voltaire, and the poets of the Romantic Period right up to modern novels on the study of totalitarianism, such as George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' and '1984', Eli Wiesel's 'Night', and Margaret Atwood's 'A Handmaid's Tale'. In between these lie the works of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Henry David Thoreau that have formed the basis of my writings.

As a lifelong student of the Humanities and Philosophy, I also reflected upon the great bard of the English Renaissance period, William Shakespeare, whose birthday was on April 23<sup>rd</sup> (1564), a day after what is now Earth Day. Remembering the many famous quotes by the most influential writer of the English Language, I cannot help but inwardly lament the world we live in today – one which is increasingly violent and dehumanising.

On power and in 'Julius Caesar', Shakespeare wrote about loving Rome more than Caesar, and the Ides of March, on wealth and honesty his entire message is immortalised in the play 'The Merchant of Venice', and in the plays such as 'King Lear', 'Macbeth', and in comedies such as 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', the sage-playwright-poet wrote about the complexities of human nature as an interplay between power and love.

My early twenties were about reading his major works as part my study of English Literature.

As one who is always thinking about our beloved country and whose writings have been geared towards making suggestions for improvement, each of the Shakespearean quotes I recall went into thinking about what Malaysia has become today. Below are my notes I posted on my Facebook page, while concluding this manuscript.

## **1. Malaysia turning into Uganda?**

At the rate of how many political fights we are seeing,  
how many Idi Amin's in songkoks we have produced,  
how fast the capital flights we are witnessing are,  
how seriously the crime rate has risen,  
how policed the state has become,  
how many of those speaking truth to power have been persecuted,  
how fast the judiciary has rotted,  
how deep the educational standards have plunged,  
and how much wealth those in power have amassed  
we are seeing Kuala Lumpur turning into Kampala  
we hope not  
at least we must first become Kenya.

## **2. Wealth can be an enemy of wisdom**

One cannot serve god and money at the same time, as Jesus said  
this is what is happening in Malaysia today  
fighting over power, wealth and money  
the loss of basic sensibility... the absence of wisdom  
leaders taking pride in arrogance and ignorance  
it takes three generations to destroy a nation, Kungfu Tze would say  
for Malaysia, it takes only two.

## **3. Malaysia today**

Obsessed with the past and the politics of the day  
we have not paid much attention to the future... to education  
to building a new world of endless possibilities through education  
we owe the children this new world  
of charting new ways of doing things, of living,  
of relating, and making peace  
with oneself and with others,  
of creating a new philosophy, paradigm, processes, new products of value,  
these -  
not to have them inherit our ills  
and to have them born into debt and despair  
criminals are made, not born  
i wished the politicians from both sides  
have paid more attention to new ideas in education  
what a waste of two generations.

## **4. Anti-terrorism laws are necessary**

Only if used wisely and justifiably  
for national safety and security  
only in a society that knows what clear separation means  
of the Executive, Legislature, and Judiciary,  
such as the government of the United States  
and not yet of Malaysia – where those with power and money  
are in deep desperation

## 5. On the passing of Malaysia's renewed Internal Security Act

Or the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA)... all is done as BN wanted it to be. Where were all the Pakatan Rakyat Members of Parliament – those missing on voting day on this issue of such a grave magnitude? Not interested any more in fighting for those who fought for you to be in office?

## 6. What actually matters in Malaysian politics

For the rich and powerful, the children and family members to rule the country  
 for the poor and powerless, how to feed the family and how the leaders and the rulers are ruining the country,  
 and therefore that too is what the media is interested in reporting  
 this is a new brand of class and consciousness in a hypermodern economy,  
 in a world of modern slavery.

## 7. A mirror

There is so much hatred in this world today  
 love seems to have flown away  
 until in each of our hearts we tear down the walls  
 of fear  
 of anger  
 of bigotry  
 of jealousy  
 of prejudice  
 of selfishness  
 of misconstructions  
 and let love and only love  
 engulf us  
 and overwhelm us to tears  
 embracing each other and open  
 our eyes  
 window to our soul  
 to the sufferings of many  
 because we are a mirror of one another

## 8. Malaysians, return to sanity. Here's how:

Political will, radical political change, an overhaul of the system, a fresh new and different mandate, a prison complex big enough to incarcerate the long-time corrupt ones, a plan to redistribute wealth, to dismantle educational apartheid, a rewriting of Malay and Malaysian history, a re-threading of the moral fiber of the armed personnel, a massive arrest of political tyrants for past doings, a restructuring of the casino capitalist economy, the establishment of a stronger local government, a clampdown on racist and other hate-groups, a return to the rule of law, a return to agricultural society, an experimentation with a radically new form of communal-styled living, a dismantling of systems that allow global corporate giants to continue to prey upon the natives, a return to the cooperative system, the strengthening of labor, a re-education of political officials on management, ethics, and political philosophy, the separation of religion and state, the dismantling of useless cultural and religious rituals, a restructuring of society based on the principles of radical multiculturalism and the celebration of transcultural philosophies, the reduction of TV time and TV channels, the introduction of the reading of the great works of arts, humanities, and literature from the cradle to the grave, the curbing of rhetoric on Islamic or any religious state, the compulsory teaching of philosophy from the cradle to the grave, .... all these and more to overturn the system onto its ugly head.

Those are the thoughts I penned as I was following closely the developments of the latest issues in Malaysia, especially the 1MDB fiasco and the current power struggle within UMNO in the form of an open war between the camp of former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and the current leader, Najib Abdul Razak.

I hope this collection of essays will both be an enjoyable read as well as help inform readers of the views I have taken thus far on the state of Malaysian affairs, as they are impacted by the historical forces of race and religion.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank those who regularly contribute to my Malaysiakini column with their thoughts and comments. Their contributions are always engaging, diverse and intellectually stimulating, signifying the level of maturity Malaysian readers have arrived at on critical issues facing the nation. I have learned a lot from

the generous responses of those who took the time to read and comment. My deepest appreciation goes especially to those who comment regularly, participating in the dialogues with the level of decorum expected of intellectual discussions.

As in my previous works, I have enjoyed writing these essays and sharing my concern for our beloved Malaysia as we usher into yet another unknown frontier in this complex and globalizing world characterized by bipolarism; a condition of clinical depression, of emotional ups and downs, that can be applied to characterise the Malaysia of today as a hypermodern nation.

Again thank you for your continuing interest in the dialogue on how to make Malaysia a better nation.

Sincerely,

**Azly Rahman**

*New Jersey, USA*

*June 2015*

# A Meaningful Merdeka Day for Me!

When my first book in the Malay language was published, I wrote the preface expressing the strong desire of the Malay-speaking population of the Straits Settlements to merge into the country of the Malay Peninsula, and to have the same Merdeka Day as the Malay Peninsula.

I am so happy that it is a real Merdeka Day for me. A day of freedom and another kind of independence. My first book in the beautiful Bahasa Malaysia and written in Malay was published. I had the honor to be called *Kalimah* (word) by the Malay-speaking population of the Straits Settlements. It is the day of the Malaysian people's Merdeka Day. I am excited.

A few months ago, I was in Singapore, which I now write about in my book. The last night of my stay in Singapore, I was thinking of the Merdeka Day.

My greatest wish is to be translated into the Malay language that I will one day be able to read.

In my time, there is a sense of awe, mystery, magic and beauty in the beautiful language and I find it an enchanting effort to convey my ideas to Malay-speaking readers. I grew up in this language as my soul and inner reality was constructed out of the words and materials, artifice and consciousness offered by it.

This language will always be the beautiful bridge that connects me to the person I loved most in my life my mother, but passed on a few years ago. My only regret is she did not get the chance to understand what I have been writing all these years.

## On Society

# A Meaningful Merdeka Day for Me!

*When my first book in the Malay Language came out I wrote this article expressing the joy of seeing it in print, the appreciation of the beautiful language I was born into, and the memory of the most beautiful person in my life: my mother.*

I am so happy today. It is a real Merdeka Day for me. A day to celebrate another kind of independence. My first book in the beautiful Bahasa Malaysia and my fifth on Malaysian Cultural Studies will be out soon, entitled *Kalimah Allah Milik Siapa?: Renungan dan Nukilan Tentang Malaysia di Era Pancaroba*, due to be out in the Malaysian bookstores by Merdeka Day. I am elated.

A few months ago, when I was working on it, I wrote these thoughts, which I now want to share with my wonderful and supportive readers of the last eight years, when I first started writing for *Malaysiakini*. Here it goes:

My greatest moment of joy, in all my years of writing, will be for my ideas to be translated into the Malay Language. I have often told myself that I will one day find that moment to celebrate - I think this will be the moment.

To me, there is a sense of awe, mystery, magic and humility in this beautiful language and I find it an enchanting effort to convey my ideas to Malay-speaking readers. I grew up in this language and my social and inner reality was constructed out of the tools and materials, artifacts and consciousness offered by it.

This language will always be the beautiful bridge that connects me to the person I loved most in my life: my mother. She passed on a few years ago. My only regret is she did not get the chance to understand what I have been writing all these years.

Language constructs reality, alters it, shapes it, deconstructs it, or even destroys it only to have it evolve into a karmic cycle. Throughout my life, my worldviews have vacillated and oscillated between these two worlds. I think in both languages and direct my consciousness to act in the worldviews of both.

There is a challenge, however. I write better in the English Language having been schooled in it since the day I set foot in an English-medium school in Johor Baru: Sekolah Temenggong Abdul Rahman 1.

The challenge is then to express my thoughts to others in the Malay Language and to convey the meaning as accurately as I can by using metaphors, similes, examples, extrapolations, and clarifications in the Malay Language. Yet the biggest challenge is to convey anthropological, philosophical, philological, and technological ideas to a speaker of the Malay Language.

This problem of translation however works both ways. In the case of my writings on the 'Allah Controversy', how, for example would the English language be able to fully convey the ideas of the nature and attributes of God when words such as 'ujud, qidam, baqa', muha-lafatuhu lil hawadis, walqiamuhu binafsih wahdaniat, kudrat, iradat, ilm, hayat, sama 'basar, qalam...' of 'ruh, jasad, zat, sifat', of the concepts addressing complexity of the 'ilmu kalam', and so on and so forth are to be translated or transliterated into the English Language?

What about words such as 'nafs ammarah lawammah, suriyah, mutmainnah' to be understood as the evolutionary and vacillatory stages of anger? This is the complexity and the daunting-ness of the works in translations.

### **My thoughts are essentially Western-centric**

This is the dilemma. My thoughts are essentially 'Western-centric' and my hopes are to get these ideas into the world of those who are 'Eastern-centric', with the goal of coming to an agreement on the universality of ideas on politics, education, semiotics, cybernetics, and spirituality.

I have never given up on this hope, although I have found it daunting to think how Malaysian readers well-versed in the beautiful and aesthetically pleasing Malay Language can grasp the meaning of my ideas presented in the functional and technologically-inspired English Language. I know that it is not merely a 'translation', whether direct or

in 'spirit'; it concerns a complex cognitive process of 'shifting, vacillating and oscillating' world views.

Countless times I have been asked to have my writings translated, so that 'the Malays can benefit from my calls for change' as it is often said, and my commitment to share what I believe a beautiful country such as Malaysia ought to evolve into can be realised, given my ideas on ethics, creativity and futurism drawn essentially from a 'Western-centric' point of view.

I knew that I would one day honour that request and whilst I know that what I have been sharing will reach the minds of the Malay-speaking readers, I believe that the moment has arrived - with my first book in the Malay Language. I could not have done this without the excellent work done by Pauline Fan, who I believe is one of the best translators to be able to read my vacillating-oscillating thoughts well, having also been the editor of two of my previous books. Given a good translator, my dream of not being lost in translation will become a reality.

I know that my mother will be proud of what I have been doing and from where she is now, looking at me in the eyes with the look of the profundity of love. She too will read the artifacts of my mind, with ease.

The moment has arrived - with my first book in the Malay Language. I could not have done this without the excellent work done by Pauline, a fellow columnist Bahasa Malaysia section and a cultural activist.

My work is collaborative with the support of my excellent and most efficient publisher Gerakbudaya, which has faith in my writings and has published my two previous works, 'The Allah Controversy' and 'Dark Spring'. It is needless to say of my gratitude to *Malaysiakini* for letting me share my views for social improvement, for the last eight years.

Finally, I hope I have honoured the request of many of my readers who have given me the encouragement to write, and whose words of praise have humbled me.

Till then, here is poem I wrote for my mother:

### **Mother's Day**

Mother

I am at a loss for words

I could just write 'Words cannot describe my love for you.

Thank you for everything ...'

Like everybody said  
 In those cards, those poems, those moments of well-wishing  
 I could just say that  
 And wait for another year.  
 Another celebration.

At each and every breath I take  
 As each and every thought of every veins in my body that makes me stay  
 awake  
 Each and every cell I bathe with mantras to  
 Each and every corner of your womb my eyes glanced through  
 I want to say 'thank you ...'

But that would be ordinary  
 As others too have wished.

Maybe I could send you a card  
 A prayer to your soul  
 And remind you of a memory of me when I was a child  
 And tell you where I have been as I walk on this world they called 'maya'  
 I could tell you now what you meant by the path of righteousness  
 The path I took  
 The road not taken  
 That may have made a difference  
 But mother, on this day of yours  
 Those would be ordinary.

I am at a loss for words  
 Unless my thoughts and my words are in the Jawi you know  
 I could write about the days when I was a child  
 Fighting demons  
 Strange creatures in my mind  
 Out to destroy our kampong  
 I fought them alone  
 None will ever know  
 On those trees  
 In the rivers  
 In the room I locked myself in  
 No one knew. Not even you.

I could write all those on Mother's Day  
 But those would be ordinary stories.

Mother, on this day I must confess  
That I was an existentialist as early as when I started to:  
Climb that tree  
Sneaked out of that wooden back door  
Jumped out of those old Javanese looking windows  
Roamed the city alone in my Japanese slippers  
Walked along the huge huge water pipes that lead to Singapore city.

I was an existentialist, mother.  
I cared about the Universe  
But did the Universe care about me?

I wanted to tell you all these  
On Mother's Day back in the day  
But my story would be ordinary.  
Plain ordinary.

You combed my hair daily  
Laced it with Brylcreem  
Masked me with Cuticura talcum powder  
Tucked my shirt well into my neatly pressed pants,

You held my hand everywhere I go  
Afraid that the world would take me away  
You held my hand tight as we crossed roads  
Afraid that I would come to multiple crossroads

I wanted to tell you all these Mother.  
On the following Mother's Day.  
Back in the day.  
Ordinary story to me.

Mother you are sweet  
You said I had beautiful eyes  
Those eyelashes too  
Eyes that came from the depth of the night

Somewhere you and I may know  
I saw you smile  
When many came to look at my eyes  
But what have those eyes seen now?

I don't know how to say 'Happy Mother's Day'  
That would be too ordinary to you and me.  
I can only feel everyday is your day.  
Though for many years I was sent away.  
Like an anarkin.

# An Interstellar View of 'Malay-ness'

Of late there have been intensifying debates on 'Malay-ness' and the fact that political parties will continue to engage in this, all conducted within the framework of Malaysia's 'commanding heights' (read Vladimir Lenin's essay) or the economic and ideological basis of this country as a hypermodern state. By 'commanding heights' I mean the pillars of the nation-state that govern its functioning. For the United States, for example, they are the economic system of free enterprise/laissez faire capitalism and liberal democracy and how it functions as a republic. For the former Soviet Union, they are the command economy and socialism.

Reading some seminal work on evolutionary biology, eugenics, social Darwinism, and the 'mitochondrial Eve' as the first human, questions came to be demanding perspectives on what actually is 'Malay-ness' and whether the 'Malay' exists and what it has to do with culture, consciousness, and human progress in a multicultural society such as Malaysia.

I recently wrote these on my Facebook page:

## **THE TRUTH is ... THE MALAYS**

are not the first race/people on planet earth  
as will be soon claimed by pop-pseudo-evolutionary biologists  
the Mitochondrial Eve from Mother Africa  
was the first ... then here is migration and variations  
Malay-ness and 'other-raceness' is  
merely a construct  
mere illusion,  
mere construction,

merely an idea of social dominance  
 not to be taken seriously  
 and to write a history  
 or a theory of jealousy  
 race, ethnicity do not exist and has no scientific basis  
 so you politicians - stop whining  
 and complaining  
 and scheming  
 and fighting till we bleed  
 read more science and become more human  
 treat each other like human beings  
 like what Mother Africa Mitochondria preaches

- ar

### Is 'culture' the culprit?

We continue to debate about culture and religion in our public schools. We might be debating on faulty premises. We might have to look at the issue of culture, race, and ethnicity from a radically different perspective. Let us see what this may mean based on the propositions I will be making which fundamentally begin like this - culture is in the imagination and is not real.

There is not such a concept as 'original culture'. Cultures are systems for constructing realities that are influenced by the historical-materialistic march of technology and capital, that then develops conditions of existence and formulates human consciousness. Culture is fluid and amorphous and is a construct rather than a constant. Culture is not static. Cultural construction can be conveniently used and abused to lend legitimacy to power and its concentrated self.

It is more than just the tools we use and play with but also the house that we inhabit. Its definition is problematic; the numbers of definitions are many. The words Malay, Chinese, Indian, American, Indonesian - all these are cultural constructs that are useful in some ways but useless in others.

Unfortunately it is the uselessness of culture that is often most attractive and gets translated into sophisticated racist policies. As racist policies become further institutionalised and as economic interests that go with these need to be protected even more, racial tensions and consequently violence erupts. As this further mounts, we have war and ethnic cleansing - in the name of cultural superiority.

We are endowed by the Creator with these variations in skin colour and appearances to have use of to solve the problems of humanity; to understand what needs and wants are, and to discern what is Good and what is Evil.

Cultures can enable human thinking and they can also disable it. It can be shaped, structured, and symbolised based on the influence of class structure of the people/peoples.

This will translate into 'high', 'low', 'mass', 'popular', and 'sub-culture'. With all these sub definitions of culture comes the status symbols of objects of display, affection, work, leisure etc, that shape and that are shaped by economic conditions.

Hence, a goblet used in a Sultan's palace might be worth a thousand goblets used by the Sultan's hamba sahayas. Or a Rolls Royce used by a royal family signifies a symbol of 'high culture' as opposed to a '[Proton] Rusa', a symbol of 'popular culture' used by a family in a remote kampong.

There is a new dimension of culture emerging. There are classes of culture and a culture of classes. Classes of culture are post-industrial tribes that are victims of producers whereas the culture of classes is the internal logic of cultures that have been eroded by the forces of globalisation and late capitalism.

I am still thinking. I don't have the answers. I have only more questions on whether the 'Malay' actually exists and if one needs to defend the people through political designs. For too long we have been dwelling upon this problematique. Many have written about it.

Maybe we have been asking the wrong question all this while and fighting the wrong battles and setting up the wrong race-based institutions, based on the erroneous premises of winner-only-crafted history. This question by the way was inspired by a movie I watched recently - *Interstellar*.

What then, is the answer? Or rather- what should be the questions?

# Are We Brewing Another May 13, 1969?

This is serious, if you ask me about the latest events concerning UMNO and DAP: those revolving around name-calling, the storming of the Penang state legislature and the latest, the threat to burn down the headquarters of the DAP.

Is this a prelude to something bigger as we approach the 14th general election? Irrationality will rule and will be rationalised. Is the climax to a potentially explosive racial conflict going to be built up and the two parties involved in a showdown? Go back to the prelude to May 13, 1969, if we wish to process the brewing of mass violence.

I hope we are all sane enough to diffuse this kind of situation and quickly make peace and learn for all to be patient, to exercise restraint, and to not provoke those who are irrational. We will make it as Malaysians. We have come a long way through our hard work in building bridges and to continue to call ourselves Malaysians.

But crises will be manufactured and we will never know the truth of any conflict that will bring chaos to the country.

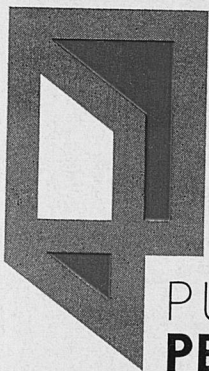
Let us use whatever medium of peace-making and peace-building that is at our disposal to make peace with ourselves and with others.

## Waging peace

After watching the video of the UMNO Youth protest in front of the DAP headquarters, I sensed that the worst is yet to come and we may never be able to stop violence or to stop those who are out to wage war - unless we wage peace, beginning at this very moment.



**DR AZLY RAHMAN** grew up in Johor Baru, Malaysia and holds a Columbia University (New York City) doctorate in International Education Development and Masters degrees in the fields of Education, International Affairs, Peace Studies and Communication. He will be pursuing his fifth Masters in Fine Arts, specializing in Fiction and Poetry Writing. He has taught more than 50 courses in six different departments and has written more than 350 analyses/essays on Malaysia. His twenty five years of teaching experience in Malaysia and the United States spans over a wide range of subjects, from elementary to graduate education. He has edited and authored six books; *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present, Future* (2009), *Thesis on Cyberjaya: Hegemony and Utopianism in a Southeast Asian State* (2012), *The Allah Controversy and Other Essays on Malaysian Hypermodernity* (2013), *Dark Spring: Essays on the Ideological Roots of Malaysia's General Elections-13* (2013), a first Malay publication *Kalimah Allah Milik Siapa?: Renungan dan Nukilan Tentang Malaysia di Era Pancaroba* (2014), and *Controlled Chaos: Essays on Mahathirism, Multimedia Super Corridor and Malaysia's 'New Politics'* (2014). He currently resides in the United States where he teaches courses in Education, Philosophy, Cultural Studies, Political Science, and American Studies. This book, *One Malaysia, Under God, Bipolar*, a joint project between Gerakbudaya and World Wise Books of New Jersey, USA, is his seventh compilation of essays on Malaysian Cultural, Creative, and Critical Studies. He is currently working on his eighth book, on Gifted and Talented Education in Malaysia, honoring a prominent educator.



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In this fine collection of opinion pieces, the respected and sagacious public intellectual Azly Rahman reflects on the political machinations and cultural politics in Malaysia.

The book is a smorgasbord of commentaries on the poetics and politics of cultural life in a nation that is struggling to transcend its racialized structure to forge a cohesive and harmonious future. The word 'smorgasbord' may give the impression that what is presented in this book is simply a variety of 'dishes', hot and cold, familiar and exotic, all separate and distinct treats laid out on a buffet table. It is a smorgasbord with a difference: all the 'culinary delights' (read: commentaries) are laid out in an orderly manner with a story line that threads through the whole text. Organised around three main themes—society, schooling, and salvation—the commentaries offer rich food for thought and reflection and satisfy the intellectual and political appetite of anyone interested in Malaysian affairs and cultural politics in general....

Azly Rahman avers that 'Political change needs social imagination and critical sensibility founded upon a very strong ethical system drawn and designed as a national philosophy; a transcultural system inspired by the strength and universality of all religious and non-religious philosophies - not just based on Islam that has its limitations and cultural biases, albeit insisted upon and imposed onto many as a complete and all-encompassing, all-hegemonising political, social and existential philosophy.' I could not agree more.

Guided by such a principled philosophy, Azly Rahman makes a sound plea to Malaysians (and others): 'Let us work together on a common ground—for the common good'. It is a clarion call to Malaysians to get out of their comfort zone and apathy and to join the movement for a better Malaysia where bigotry, racism and religious extremism are kept in check and where peace, harmony, intercultural understanding are reinstated and reinforced as part and parcel of everyday life.

There is much offered in this book that can constitute what I would boldly label as the 'Malaysian Manifesto'.

**Alberto Gomes, Ph.D**

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