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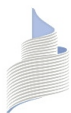
Empathy

The Quest for Malaysian Unity

Chandra Muzaffar



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A plea for
Empathy

The Quest for Malaysian Unity

by
Chandra Muzaffar

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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Kuala Lumpur



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While acknowledging the help received, I must emphasize that I am solely responsible for the book's shortcomings.

C.M.

18 March 2010.

PREFACE

This is the first time that I have put together in book form a number of my articles on national unity written over a period of 34 years.

Issues pertaining to national unity have been among my most passionate concerns from my secondary school days. My articles have appeared in newspapers, popular magazines, academic journals and books published at home and abroad. A whole section of my 1989 book *Challenges and Choices in Malaysian Politics and Society* is devoted to this subject.

However, the present volume which focuses exclusively upon national unity covers a much wider range of topics than my 1989 endeavor. I look at language, culture, religion, the economy, politics, human rights, education, ethnic accommodation, ethnic conflict, and trends in ethnic relations over the decades. While the book does not include all my writings on national unity in the English language --- there have also been many articles in Malay-- this collection embodies the essence of my thoughts on the causes of disunity and the solutions that are possible at this juncture of the Malaysian journey towards nationhood.

To put it differently, the analysis of the ethnic situation in the country, and some of the remedies that we should seek, are important dimensions of this work. This book also offers some insights on how ethnic challenges have emerged and evolved over a long period of time. The perennial and the transient in the interaction among the different communities become obvious as we move from chapter to chapter. At the same time, we catch a glimpse of the complexity of the Malaysian ethnic landscape.

There is perhaps something else that this book will reveal to the reader. It will show that my fundamental perspectives on national unity in Malaysia have not changed since the early seventies. I argue that at a basic psychological level, there is a very little empathy within community X for the hopes and fears of community Y. A lot of Malaysians of Chinese and Indian origin for instance do not appreciate why Malays and other indigenous communities feel the way they do about the history and the identity of the land and what it implies for the present and the future. Likewise, there are not many Malays who understand the aspirations of Chinese and Indian Malaysians for political equality in a nation which has also been their home for generations. Closing this psychological gap between the communities is one of the most formidable challenges facing Malaysia today.

It is to underscore the significance of this challenge that this book is entitled A Plea for Empathy-The Quest for Malaysian Unity.

Finally, a note about how this book has been put together. The 23 articles have been arranged in chronological order, beginning with a 1974 paper and ending with a 2008 piece. Given the evolution of ethnic concerns and trends, this arrangement makes sense. References to specific events and personalities--- whenever they occur--- have also been left as they are. In some instances they help to buttress the context in which a certain ethnic issue expressed itself. In other instances, these time-bound references serve to highlight the significance of larger ethnic trends in the country.

Chandra Muzaffar

Petaling Jaya,

Malaysia.

25 March 2010.

SOURCE REFERENCES

The chapters in this book were sourced from the following publications:

- Chapter 1**, Chandra Muzaffar* *Trends in Ethnic Relations* || Yong Mun Cheong (ed) (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1974)
(*The actual article carries the author's name before his conversion to Islam-Chandrasekaran Pillay)
- Chapter 2**, Chandra Muzaffar, *The NEP Development and Alternative Consciousness* (Penang: ALIRAN, 1989)
- Chapter 3**, Chandra Muzaffar, *Negara VOL. IV, No. 1* (Kuala Lumpur: Board of National Unity, Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia, 1980)
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- Chapters 16 to 23**, Chandra Muzaffar, (*published in various Malaysian newspapers between 2005 and 2008*)

Chapter 1

TRENDS IN ETHNIC RELATIONS

(This essay was first published in “Trends in Ethnic Relations” I I Yong Mun Cheong (ed) (Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1974))

Any discussion of ethnic relations in Malaysia will have to pay serious attention to the juxtaposition of communities in the country.

As far as ethnic perceptions and responses are concerned, there are two definable communities in Peninsular Malaysia: an indigenous-Malay community and a non-indigenous non-Malay community. In 1957, the year of independence, the language of the indigenous community, Malay, became the sole official and national language of the country. Its religion, Islam, became the official religion of the country while its traditional leaders, the Sultans, became constitutional monarchs in the new country. Also, politically, it was the stronger group; economically it was, however, considerably weaker. For this, and other reasons the indigenous community was accorded a ‘special position’ in the Constitution. ‘Special position’ refers to preferential quotas in recruitment into Division I of the Civil Service, the Judicial Service, the Customs Service and the Police Force. It also applies to all levels of the armed forces. Besides this, the quota applies to recruitment into institutions of higher learning and in the award of scholarships for education and training and licenses in the transport and haulage business. Malay reservation land also comes under ‘special position’. Constitutional guarantees apart, ‘special position’ is, additionally, a policy that seeks to emphasize a special commitment to the Malay economic situation. Hence we have today, Mara, Pernas, Bank Bumiputra and so on.

It might be observed here that this policy of preference was, in fact, initiated by the British during their administration. It was the British who established an Anglo-Malay Civil Service which admitted non-Malays on a quota basis for the first time in 1952. It was the British who created Malay reservations. Kampong Baru in Kuala Lumpur was the first. It was the British who initiated special scholarships for Malays. It was the British who inaugurated the policy of granting transport licenses to Malays in 1952. British administrators and colonial historians have argued that all this was done since British treaties with the Sultans pledged to protect the native Malays - a pledge that assumed great significance as a result of alien immigration encouraged, one may add, by the British themselves! This contradiction exposed the superficial hypocrisy of this policy of protecting the Malays. For the Malays were not protected. They were, in fact, neglected. As an example, it was to console the Malays who were rapidly losing ownership and control of their land in the face of colonial-capitalist development that the British created Malay reservations. In any case, these reservations were not significant enough to safeguard their interests. Similarly, scholarships were puerile efforts in a situation where the substance of the benefits of modern education went to non-indigenous urban inhabitants. Also, permits in transport could not disguise the fact that trade and industry were in the hands of foreign and non-indigenous groups. And civil service appointments for Malays in the upper stratum of a feudal society were of little value when there was a dearth of the community in the technical and professional spheres.

The continuance of the 'special position' in the post independence period has been a crucial source of inter-ethnic dissension. Articulate and active elements among the non-indigenous community have argued that it reduces them to 'second class citizens' in the competition for economic opportunities. It has also been contended that in spite of political equality in the Constitution, political realities do not allow them to espouse their interests with the same strength and vehemence as the indigenous community. Also, certain non-indigenous parties have argued that the status of Malay as the sole official language and an education system based upon this language

policy does injustice to other languages and cultures. Now these three issues - 'special position', political equality, and the language and education policy - have been the fundamental controversies in inter-ethnic relations.

The non-indigenous challenge has been founded upon certain premises. A more equitable arrangement is advocated because:

- (i) Numerically, they constitute almost half of the total population.
- (ii) They have performed and continue to perform, significant roles in the socio-economic life of the country.
- (iii) Universal values of justice, equality and the philosophy of democratic socialism - the belief system of almost every non-indigenous political party - necessitate a new approach.

I would like to argue here that the non-indigenous view is historically untenable. As long as this is not realized, ethnic relations will continue to generate misconceptions and misperceptions which sometimes lead to national mishaps. It is untenable if one sees Malaysian history from an internal standpoint, and internal history, is, to my mind, *sine qua non* for an understanding of Malaysian politics. When I say internal history, I mean Malaysian history as seen through the microscope of an internal analyst - not the binoculars of an external spectator! Such an analyst will recognize immediately certain outstanding characteristics about Malaysian history:

- (i) That the long period of growth and settlement of the Malays in the Peninsula makes them the indigenous group.
- (ii) That they had developed a certain level of culture and technology which was strengthened by their Islamization after the fourteenth century.
- (iii) That riverine settlements developed into states and Sultanates which acquired many of the qualities of a full-fledged political system during the period of the Malacca Empire. Even after its collapse, successor Sultanates continued to manifest some of the attributes of state and government.

- (iv) Every external power that came into contact with the Peninsula recognized existing governments through trade ties or political treaties or cultural exchanges. Early Chinese empires, the Portuguese, Dutch and English and even imperial Japan would fall within this category. Indeed, early immigrant tin pioneers also recognized the Malays as the indigenous group and established ties with them on that basis.

Immigration and colonialism, the emergence of a new culture and the numerical strength of recently domiciled peoples do not invalidate these historical considerations. Arithmetic does not change history. Anyone who understands this will appreciate the need for the non-indigenous community to adjust, indeed, to assimilate into the new landscape.

The three crucial controversies mentioned a while ago must now be evaluated within the perspective of internal history. First, the question of language. Before anything else, it must be remembered that the use and study of the other languages - Chinese, Tamil and English - is guaranteed by the Constitution. And, in practice these languages can be studied up to university level and even now are used as media of instruction in state schools. The fact that Chinese, Tamil and English are used in the government-run mass-media, in the information services and in certain public institutions like hospitals means that they enjoy a sort of 'informal' official status. To accord a formal official role for these languages simply because of current realities would be unjust to the Malay language. For unlike all the other languages, Malay is historically and culturally indigenous to the region. Placing other 'alien' languages on the same status-scale with Malay would amount to relegating the position of the language.

Now, the question of political equality. While the Constitution bestows equal political rights upon its citizens, it is true that there are now more Malays than others in Parliament, most of the state assemblies and the cabinet. Crucial political positions - the Prime Ministership, the Deputy Prime Ministership, the Menteri Besarship - have always been held by Malays. As a community there is no doubt that they are politically significant. This is due to two factors.

Firstly, there is a system of rural weightage in the electoral process that results in stronger Malay representation. Rural weightage — a practice that exists in other countries, too - is justified because rural areas are normally without other opportunities for representation. There are no trade unions, occupational associations, newspapers and so on through which to channel their grievances. For that reason, rural areas are more effectively represented in the legislature. In Third World countries, the importance of the agrarian sector makes this all the more imperative. Viewed from this perspective, Malay strength in decision-making institutions which is, in fact, rural strength has nothing to do with ethnic considerations.

From another angle, it is also true that there is a consciousness that the crux, the core of political power, must be in the hands of the Malays. The UMNO leadership and perhaps the Malay community as a whole believe in this. Again, seen from the standpoint of internal history, this is justified in the present stage of our evolution towards nationhood. For as far as the Malays are concerned, state and politics were exclusive Malay activities. Even colonialism recognized this. After all it was an Anglo-Malay elite that conferred citizenship, and therefore political rights, upon the non-indigenous population on such liberal terms from 1948-57. After having accommodated them, after having shared political power, the Malay elite deems it appropriate to retain the crux for its community. This is perceived as necessary in view of the economic aspirations of the Malays and the goal of establishing a national identity.

Finally, the question of 'special position'. If we examine the 'special position' carefully we will discover that its scope, function and impact is limited. For instance, 'special position' is of no value to the Malay farmer, fisherman and rubber smallholder when it comes to increasing their income and productivity, and providing them with a higher standard of living. And they — the farmer, fisherman, and rubber smallholder - constitute the majority of Malays. Improving their livelihood is, in fact, the crucial challenge before the Malay economy. Similarly, the 'special position' is of little assistance to the thousands of Malay pupils who have to struggle to remain in school. It is their capacity to survive the school system which, in the ultimate analysis,

will determine the degree of Malay participation in industry and the professions - and not preferential quotas as such.

What is needed then in Malaysia - as elsewhere in the Third World - is a direct onslaught upon the problems of poverty, exploitation and neglect of the rural masses. It is not the 'special position' that will accomplish this. Rather, it is that time-honoured solution - strong, effective, incorruptible political leadership concerned enough to be committed to the malaise of the majority.

Having said that I would still argue that the 'special position' is necessary. Again, it has to be seen from a historical perspective. For the Malays, the accommodation of the non-indigenous population, their acceptance as equal citizens since 1948, meant that a Malay nation which was the legitimate aspiration of Malay history and Malay nationalism was no longer possible. From a 'nation', the Malays became a 'community among communities.' This 'change in status' would not have meant very much if Malay society was strong and economically viable. It was not. It perceived itself and was perceived by the other communities as an economically weak group. For that reason, Malay society, it was felt, had to be 'compensated.' The Malay word for compensation *ganti rugi* describes the process more accurately. Thus, the 'special position' was continued with the clear understanding that it was an interim measure directed towards achieving specific economic goals. Once accomplished, it would cease to be relevant.

The capacity to comprehend internal history then holds the key to evaluating the status of the Malay language, the political pre-eminence of the Malays and the role of 'special position: The vast majority of politically active and articulate non-Malay elites have no notion at all of internal history. There was no clearer manifestation of this ignorance of historical realities than the crusade for a 'Malaysian Malaysia'. Wider opportunities for Chinese education advocated by the now defunct United Democratic Party (UDP), political equality advocated by the People's Action Party (PAP), official status for the other languages advocated by the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the elimination of 'special position' advocated by the People's Progressive Party (PPP) were policies and postures perceived as

detrimental to inter-ethnic harmony. Indeed, the very act of eulogizing Switzerland as a model for emulation showed that the champions of a 'Malaysian Malaysia' did not understand the forces of history.

I contend that this lag in the thinking of important non-Malay political elites was harmful to the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia. Similarly, the unwillingness of Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) and even elements within the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) to appreciate some of the social changes brought about through the political accommodation of the non-indigenous population has tended to threaten inter-ethnic relations. For instance, it is only recently that Malay leaders have realized that serious poverty does exist among non-Malays too. Even then, the causes of this poverty have not been examined or analyzed. In fact, among many Malay elites, there is very little knowledge about non-Malay affairs and about non-Malay aspirations. Besides, there is no clear conception among the influential stratum of Malay society of the extent and degree of integration required of the non-indigenous population. The absence of any firm ideas on this creates a sense of insecurity among the non-Malays. Finally, I suspect that very few politically active Malays are conscious that given the evolutionary character of Malaysian society, the existing distinction between the indigenous and non-indigenous communities, however legitimate just now, will have to disappear eventually. This is, in fact, a fundamental condition for future harmony and stability.

There is no doubt at all that the group in power—the Alliance—is partly responsible for this lack of awareness among both Malays and non-Malays. The Alliance has failed to educate non-Malays, particularly the post-independence generation, about the historical-cultural basis of the nation and the process of social evolution. Similarly, it has failed to 'socialize' Malays into contemporary realities. Schools, the family, religion, political parties, trade unions, clan associations, community organizations and individuals could have been mobilized for this crucial national task. Discussion and debate, argument and analysis could have been fostered. Instead, society was treated to a plethora of catchwords and clichés, songs and slogans - while ignorance, suspicion and resistance reigned supreme.

The economic position of the indigenous community in relation to the others and the feeling among the non-indigenous segment of society that it is not receiving sufficient attention has aggravated the situation. I contend that the standard of living among the majority of Malays has not improved since independence. A close examination of three areas of economic activity which are supposed to have benefitted the Malays will support my contention:

- (i) The provision of social services
- (ii) Agricultural development
- (iii) The implementation of 'special position'

Since independence, schools, clinics, community centers and roads have been, extended to the rural areas. However these facilities have not really generated fundamental changes in the rural environment. For example, the 'Dropout Report' published by the government has established that rural schools are badly equipped. This, in turn, is one of the main causes for the massive 'dropout' problem. Consequently, a substantial portion of young Malays are deprived of the benefits of education - in spite of beautiful school buildings and lavish opening ceremonies. Similarly, rural roads have been of greater material value to the wholesaler from town rather than the smalltime producer in the village.

Now, as with most countries in the Third World, Malaysia has sought to harness modern technology in its efforts to raise rural incomes. However, multi-million dollar irrigation projects and imported fertilizers need not always result in improved living standards for the farming community as a whole. This depends entirely upon the economic structure of the community concerned. If there has been radical land reform, if farmers own economic holdings, if farmers' cooperatives exercise effective control over the marketing system, if credit facilities are adequate, it is conceivable that technological changes will produce maximum benefits - for even the small farmer. Otherwise, only those who are already economically secure will reap the advantages. This is what is meant by the policy of betting on the strong - agricultural programs whose beneficiaries are invariably that thin, top layer of strong men in the rural economy.

Some of the studies of rural communities in the country reveal that Malaysia follows that pattern. Thus, the majority of the nation's rural population bears silent witness to increasing disparities within its own environment.

If anything, the manner of implementation of the 'special position' has only aggravated the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' within the Malay community. Scholarships and employment quotas which have reached the poorer segment of society aside, 'special position' has, in the main, worked to the advantage of a special class of Malays. It has been used to create a coterie of capitalists - an objective which the government has pursued with unrelenting vigor in the post-1969 period though this has been part of its policy since independence. Through the ownership of timber complexes, of land in Malay reservations, of licenses in transport, of shares in industries, hotels, restaurants and boutiques and through the occupancy of multiple directorships in crucial companies, this emerging elite, aided and abetted by the wielders of political power, has enriched itself beyond its own expectations. Under the guise of helping the Malay community, this privileged group has managed to accumulate wealth and glory. It is seldom realized that its well being has been accomplished at the expense of Malay society itself.

If state policies have created a class of Malay capitalists, they have also helped to expand the pre-independence class of non-Malay capitalists. These new capitalists are men who have benefitted substantially from a whole gamut of new activities in a rapidly expanding economy. In the ultimate analysis, the establishment of land schemes, the construction of roads and buildings, the provision of services and facilities, the creation of new industries, the birth of new townships, the expansion of trade and the discovery of new markets have been to the advantage of this group. There is no doubt at all that economically, it is this group of non-Malay capitalists who have gained most through independence.

At the same time, some of the problems of poverty among the non-Malays have also increased. For instance, the sub-division of estates - a post independence phenomenon - has affected the 'livelihood of a large number of Malaysian Tamils. Malaysian Chinese

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Dr. Chandra has published more than twenty books on civilizational dialogue, international politics, religion, human rights and Malaysian society. Among the publications are *Protector* (1979); *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (1987); *Human Rights and the New World Order* (1993), *Rights, Religion and Reform* (2002), *Global Ethic or Global Hegemony?* (2005), *Hegemony: Justice; Peace* (2008) and *Religion & Governance* (2009).

A Plea for Empathy, The Quest for Malaysian Unity, is a collection of twenty-three articles on Malaysian national unity that appeared in newspapers, magazines, academic journals and books published in Malaysia and abroad, between 1974 and 2008.



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