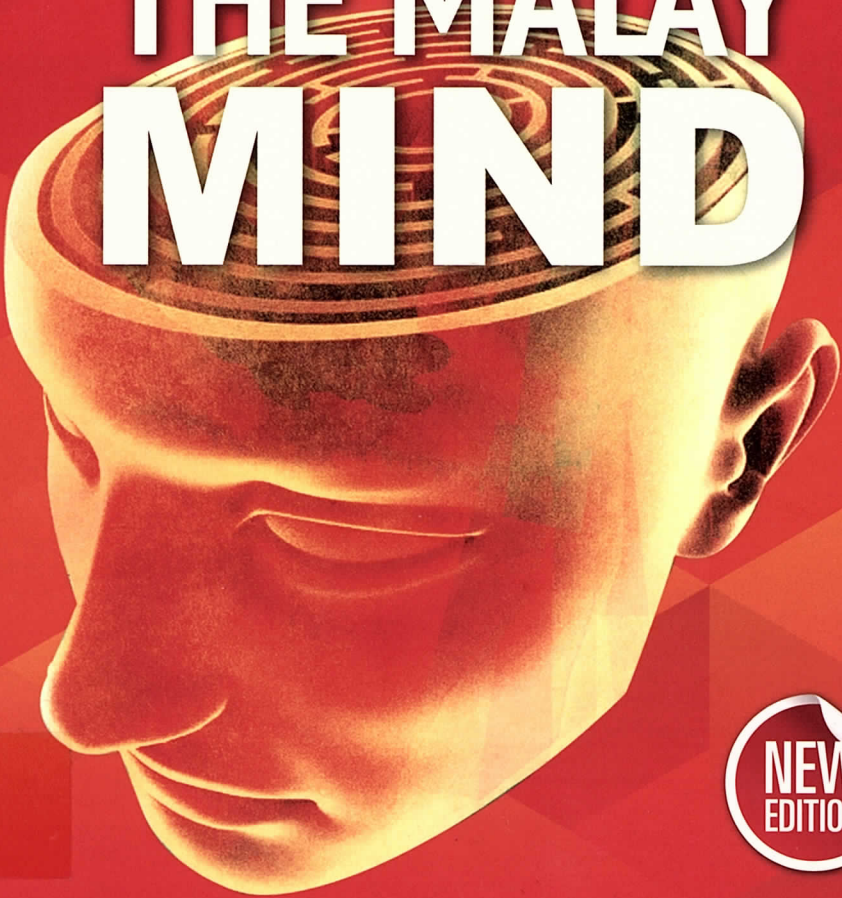


FROM THE AUTHOR OF  
THE MALAY DILEMMA REVISITED

**M. BAKRI MUSA**

**LIBERATING  
THE MALAY  
MIND**

A golden head sculpture, shown in profile facing left, with its top removed. Inside the hollowed-out top of the head is a complex, circular maze pattern. The entire scene is set against a vibrant red background.

**NEW  
EDITION**



TUN DR. MAHATHIR MOHAJ

# Liberating The Malay Mind

M. Bakri Musa



PUSTAKA PERDANA



1011307



PERDANA  
LEADERSHIP  
FOUNDATION  
YAYASAN  
KEPIMPINAN  
PERDANA

## **Liberating The Malay Mind**

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*For our Hang Jebats and Hang Nadims  
May the state not take you from us!*



### **About The Author**

BAKRI MUSA, a surgeon in private practice in Silicon Valley, California, writes frequently on Malaysian issues. His commentaries have appeared in Malaysian and international publications. He is the author of, among others, *The Malay Dilemma Revisited*, *Malaysia In The Era Of Globalization*, and *Towards A Competitive Malaysia*.



ALSO BY M. BAKRI MUSA

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*Moving Malaysia Forward* (2008)

*Towards A Competitive Malaysia:  
Development Challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2006)

*With Love, From Malaysia:  
Letters From A Young Canadian Mother* (2004)  
(With Karen E. Musa)

*Seeing Malaysia My Way:  
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*An Education System Worthy of Malaysia* (2003)

*Malaysia In The Era Of Globalization* (2002)

*The Malay Dilemma Revisited:  
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## *Minda Dalam Sangkar*

*Wahai kau minda dalam sangkar  
sungguh nasibmu malang benar  
tak seorang pun ambil tahu  
duka dan lara diminda mu*

*Wahai kau minda dalam sangkar  
dapatkah kau menahan seksa  
dari kekejaman dunia  
yang tak tahu menimbang rasa*

*Batinmu nangis jiwa patah  
riwayat tertulis penuh dengan  
tetesan air mata*

*Sungguh ini satu ujian  
tetapi hendaklah kau bersabar  
jujurlah kepada Tuhan*

My translation:

### **The Caged Mind**

Pity the caged mind  
How truly sad its kind!  
The world beyond swirls around  
His is furrowed with frowns.

Pity the caged mind  
Tortured *sans* timelines  
While the callous cruel world  
Continues with its twirl.

Self-worth battered, spirit shattered  
With only tears to write your plight

It's only a test, they say,  
Faith, patience the only way  
Have faith in Allah, you pray!

Apologies to (*ampun ma'af*) Ahmad Wan Yet's "*Burung Dalam Sangkar*"  
(Bird in A Cage) in Maria Menado Production, "*Korban Fitnah*"  
(Sacrifice of Slander), 1959.





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# Preface

*Orang boleh pandai setinggi langit, tapi selama ia tak menulis,  
ia akan hilang di dalam masyarakat dan dari sejarah.*

(Your intellect may tower to the skies but if you do not write,  
then you would be lost in society and from history.)

Pramoedya Ananta Toer in *Rumah Kaca* (The Glasshouse)

THIS BOOK EXPANDS on the presentations I gave at the three Alif Ba Ta conferences organized by the UMNO Club of New York and New Jersey, an organization of Malay students in the two states.

The first was in November 2008, at the University of Buffalo, New York; the second at the Rochester Institute of Technology in December 2009, also in New York; and the third at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey, in February 2011.

I began writing after the second conference and had a near-completed draft with the slightly pretentious title, *A New Direction for Malays*, in part because I liked the Malay translation *Arahan Baru Bangsa Melayu*. It implies an assertive action and has a rhythmic ring. As I had also planned a Malay version, having an impressive title in that language would give the book a marketing push.

On reviewing however, the draft turned out to be simply the merging of my two earlier presentations. The theme of the first was “Towards The New Malay;” the second, “Towards A Developed Malaysia.” Merely combining the two was an easy but intellectually lazy course to take, and the result showed. It was an unsatisfying collation of my views without any central thesis or unifying core. The manuscript read more like the ranting of a pompous *warung kopi* (coffee shop) patron indulging himself without mercy upon the hapless waiter.

I set aside the project to let my ideas gel; waiting for *ilham* (inspiration) as some would put it. The demands and time constraints of my clinical practice provided a necessary and convenient excuse. I soon discovered that intellectual inertia was far more formidable than the physical variety, for the manuscript remained unvisited for months.

Amidst the doldrums I received an invitation in November 2010 from Zaid Nabil Johari to another – the third – Alif Ba Ta conference. The theme chosen by the students this time was, “Longing For A Free Mind.” That ignited a spark in me; it was my moment of epiphany. A free mind! That was exactly the central theme I had been groping for but failed to capture in my earlier manuscript.

Malays need a free mind, *minda merdeka*. We do not need another *Melayu Baru* (New Malay), *Glokal* (contraction for global and local) Malay, *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay hegemony), or even *revolusi mental* (mental revolution). These would all be for naught if our collective mind remained trapped with its distorted views of the past and present. Facing the future with a closed mind is not the way either, at least not with any hope for success.

The famed Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer published his highly-acclaimed *Buru Quartet* novels soon after his release from Pulau Buru prison. When asked during a book tour in America how he was able to have crafted such wonderful works while being imprisoned under the most inhumane conditions, Pramoedya replied, “I create freedom for myself!”

This is what a free mind can do for its bearer. While the body may be imprisoned and confined to total darkness for 24 hours a day, save for a ray of light peeking through the keyhole, no one can imprison a free mind. Under such cruel circumstances a mind that is not free could easily disintegrate, go wild and berserk, further justifying the isolation.

*Merdeka Minda Melayu!* (Liberated Malay Mind!) This should be our new battle cry, its rhythmic resonance and arresting alliteration trumping even Hang Tuah’s immortal *Takkan Melayu Hilang Di Dunia!* (Malays shall never disappear from this Earth!)

Implicit in my choice of the title for this book is the recognition that the Malay mind has long been entrapped. The challenges we have been struggling with all along can directly or indirectly be attributed to the fact that our collective consciousness has been caged and consequently closed off to seeking new and innovative solutions.

Contrary to the assertions of many, our problems are not rooted in the presumed deficiencies of our biology or culture. Nor are they caused by colonialism (traditional or the neo-variety), *pendatang*s (immigrants), capitalism, globalization, or even our supposed lack of unity. We have been led to believe that these are problems, not opportunities. They will remain so as long as our minds are trapped. If we liberate our minds we will then be able to view these challenges as possibilities, and begin to explore them.

With the spark ignited, and a deadline looming, I was able to reorganize my earlier thoughts and add some new perspective to a coherent whole for presentation at the February 2011 conference, its theme becoming the foundation of this book.

### **UMNO Club of New York-New Jersey**

SINCE THE STUDENTS at UMNO Club of NY-NJ were so instrumental in my writing this book, I would be remiss in not acknowledging them. My way of doing so is to recount how I became involved with them. At first glance I would be the last person to be invited by such an organization.

There are many other larger and more established UMNO Clubs. At one time the UMNO Club of California, now defunct, boasted a membership in the hundreds. However, the best they could do was to organize *Hari Raya* gatherings and receptions for visiting dignitaries. Those were occasions less for the exchange of ideas, more for young wannabe leaders to ingratiate themselves to party officials on “official” visits to California.

Those UMNO Club members of the northeast were far from the usual mold. I remember well the very first time their president Nabil Nih

Ramli approached me, in July 2008. There was something unusual about the invitation even though it arrived in the simple format of an attachment to an e-mail.

When I receive speaking invitations from Malaysians here in America as well as Malaysia, I am often left wondering whether they are genuinely interested in hearing me out or merely engaging in what we Malays call *sogok sogok ayam* (chicken's invitation; meaning, perfunctory invite). Their praises for me may be profuse and their pleasures unbounded were I to accept, but the important technical details were often left very sketchy if at all mentioned. For example, it is sometimes unclear if I would be the only speaker or even when exactly the event beyond "sometime this term" or even this year. A few might indirectly inquire about my fees, as though that were the defining component.

In truth, even if my host were to pick up my tab and pay me their usual honoraria, it would still not be the deciding factor. I am more likely to accept if the event were to be at the beginning or end of the week as that would entail the least disruption to my schedule. The biggest expense for me would simply be my being away from my practice. Besides, monetary details are never the primary consideration for me on whether to accept or decline an invitation.

Once I had an invitation from a senior Malaysian academic. As usual, the details were vague. Aware of the atmosphere on Malaysian campuses, I inquired as to whether he had cleared the invite with his Vice-Chancellor; an individual with whom I have had some previous difference in opinions. I soon received a sheepish and profuse apology to accompany my "disinvitation."

On another occasion, a Malaysian host in America invited me to meet an "important" visitor from Malaysia. I was further assured that this guest had specifically requested my presence. Since I had enough time to rearrange my schedule, and sufficiently flattered, I readily accepted the invitation.

A few days before the event however, I had a frantic phone call from the host. This visitor had at the very last minute specifically told his host to

un-invite me. Understandably incensed, the host threatened to cancel the whole reception. However, I persuaded him otherwise, assuring him that I was half expecting the request. There was a general election on the horizon and this visitor must have found out enough about me to conclude that associating with me would not be politically advantageous. Who knows, pictures of him and me could have ended up on the Internet!

I did not think much about the incident except that a few months later I received a profuse apology with the typical self-deprecating humility that our people are famed for. It came from the visitor's superior, an even more "important" official. On closer inspection I realized that it was not from him but his official civil servant secretary writing on his behalf. Perhaps it was a canned apology rather than a heartfelt one.

Thus when I received the e-mail from Nabil Ramli that July of 2008 inviting me to my first Alif Ba Ta conference, my frame of reference had been fashioned by my earlier experiences. Yet there was something unusual about that particular invitation that piqued my interest. It was direct, with all the pertinent details included: the conference's theme, a tentative list of speakers, and the expected audience. Then there were the added practical details; his organization would be covering my expenses and there was even a modest speaking fee! In short, I had all the details needed to make a decision; I readily accepted, and with great pleasure.

Soon however, I received another e-mail, this time from the fund-raising committee soliciting donations. The committee had also thoughtfully attached a copy of its proposed budget, and the expenses for the speakers were substantial.

That put me in a quandary. After all theirs was a students' organization, not a well-endowed university or a rich corporation. However, I do not wish to contribute to an entity under the umbrella of a political party whose policies and philosophy I do not share. Instead I suggested that I would pay for all my expenses, thus relieving the committee of a major budgetary item.

With those past experiences in mind, I added an important proviso. I would reimburse the committee only at the end of the conference. That

way, I explained to the committee chair, if for any reason my talk were to be cancelled as with a directive from headquarters, the organization would be responsible for the financial loss. When I did not receive an immediate confirmation, I wrote it off as one of *those* Malaysian invitations.

To my surprise, a few weeks later I did receive a reply. After the usual profuse apology for the delay, Nabil Ramli said that the entire leadership had met in response to my stipulation. The delay in replying was due to the difficulty in getting them all together. Then the crux of their decision: They were in unanimous agreement and fully committed to having me as a speaker regardless what anyone in the hierarchy of their organization or elsewhere would dictate. They had specifically met to reaffirm their commitment and make sure that this sentiment was also shared by the general membership. He further assured me that the members were interested to hear from me, especially after learning of my viewpoints and preferences expressed in my earlier commentaries.

I was impressed! Buoyed by their strong resolve, I wrote back immediately telling them not to worry and that I would be making my own travel and accommodation arrangements. Doing so would ensure that I have the most convenient travel schedule at the best price, as well as add to my frequent-miles points.

After that first presentation, paying my own way became the practice for the two subsequent engagements. I considered the expenses as investments for I learned so much from the students and my fellow panelists. I thoroughly enjoyed the interactions with the students, especially the formal question-and-answer sessions as well as the informal conversations in the evenings.

Most of all I enjoyed their company; they truly impressed me with their forthright and penetrating questions and comments. The social atmosphere was warm as well; even the cold northeastern winter could not dampen it.

As someone wise once observed, to be with the young adds life to your years, and possibly years to your life. This is especially so when the young are intellectually curious and not shy with their probing questions. Those students were both.

I did wonder whether a similar session in Malaysia would be as stimulating or if the students would become unduly submissive and less assertive in expressing themselves. After all, if my professional title was not a barrier, there was my age, as attested to by my generous crop of gray hair. Those students could well be my children or even grandchildren.

Perhaps meeting in a foreign land with its equally alien culture, where reminders of authority figures were absent, or if present were not routinely made a fuss of, liberated the conversation. Back in Malaysia these youngsters would have addressed me as *Pak*, or worse, *Tok*, and with it, an exaggerated accession to and respect for seniority. Any semblance of a vigorous exchange would then vanish into excessive politeness and effusive displays of deference.

The students were also superb organizers; they picked me up at the airport and hotel, and delivered me back on schedule. I experienced no glitches despite dealing with three different sets of leaders. That was remarkable. The bane of any organization, especially of students, is continuity of leadership. Often when one set of outstanding leaders move on, the next set does not necessarily have the same commitment. UMNO NY-NJ had done a superb job of nurturing its next set of leaders and maintaining its high caliber of leadership, something its parent organization could learn from. Their achievements were even more extraordinary considering that they were mostly science or engineering students and thus had a much heavier academic load.

The only snag was at the last conference. I was so engrossed in a small group discussion that I totally lost track of the time despite frequent gentle reminders from my student hosts who were to drive me back to the airport. Consequently I missed my flight, much to their embarrassment. Fortunately there was a later flight and I was able to get on that one without incurring any financial penalty, thanks to the bargaining power of my “frequent miles” points. The crisis was averted, much to the relief of my hosts, and we converted it into an opportunity to spend a few extra hours at the airport coffee shop!

So it is with great pleasure that I pay tribute to the leaders of UMNO Club NY-NJ. Nabil Ramli, who first contacted me in July 2008, was unable to take part in the conference that November as his visa had by then expired. The transition went without a hitch with Amer Shukri and later, Shahrir Tamrin at RIT and Muhammad Khairun Redzuan at Stevens.

I also wish to express my sincere appreciation to Arif Aiman and Zaid Nabil, Presidents of the Malaysian Students Associations at RIT and Stevens respectively, and to Ili Amirah, Ummi Abdullah, Nur Aqlili Riana Alias, Nur Fauzana and others in the various organizing committees. Their hard work made my participation in their conferences thoroughly enjoyable, deeply meaningful, and delightfully memorable. They had also done a professional job in video-recording the proceedings and posting them on Youtube to reach a wider audience.

The conferences also afforded me the privilege to meet some outstanding Malaysians, my co-panelists. In Buffalo there was Muhammad Salleh Din, then holder of the Razak Chair at Ohio University, and Alima Joned, the Yale-educated former Dean of Law at the University of Malaya and now an attorney in Washington, DC.

At RIT there was Ambassador Jamaludin Jarjis and Ali Iqbal from Bank Negara's New York office. At Stevens, Dr. Abdul Rahman Abdullah, Education Attaché at the Malaysian embassy in DC, and Shamsul Qamar, Special Aide to the Deputy Minister of Higher Education. Shamsul was then on a State Department-sponsored study tour of America. Also at Stevens was Dr. Waleed Abdelwalid, an Egyptian physician formerly with a major pharmaceutical company in New Jersey.

Dr. Azly Rahman participated with me at all three conferences. An educator with a Columbia doctorate, he is well known to Malaysians in the cyber world for his often sharp but always erudite commentaries. At Stevens, I was lucky enough to meet his wife Mutiara Mohamad, also an educator with a Columbia doctorate. That these students openly welcomed both Dr. Azly and me knowing full well our views and inclinations is testament to their free mindedness.

# A Note of Appreciation

MY PRESENTATIONS at all three conferences were posted on my website (bakrimusa.com) as well as other online portals. I take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks and great appreciation to Raja Petra Kamarudin and Lim Kit Siang for carrying those and other postings of mine. Raja Petra, better known as Pete or RPK, is more than just a blogger. He is a phenomenon; he single-handedly transformed the Malaysian socio-political landscape. “Transformation” is an over-used word especially with the Najib Administration, but with Pete, it is an accurate description. I have more to say on him later, citing him as a shining example of a Malaysian with a free mind. Lim Kit Siang, or Kit as he likes to be called, is leader of the Democratic Action Party. His website is one of the most widely read and I am grateful to him for carrying my commentaries.

Likewise with Din Merican, frequent collaborator in many of my earlier essays whose blog now has a loyal and passionate following. After about 12 years of communicating only through cyberspace, I finally had the opportunity to meet Din and his lovely wife Dr. Kamsiah recently when they were visiting California.

I also thank my readers for taking their valuable time in sharing their views with and otherwise engaging me.

A special note of appreciation for Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh, *Sasterawan Negara* (National Literary Laureate), for permission to reproduce his heartfelt poem, “Selamat Pulang, Juita” (Welcome Home, Juita). That verse, together with Hamka’s stanza from his “Nikmat Hidup” (Life’s Bounty) and the last but one verse of Usman Awang’s “Melayu” (Malay) which I quote elsewhere in this book, captures well the concept of a free mind.

I also thank the young Indonesian poet Argus R. Sarjono for permission to quote his *Sajak Palsu* (False Poetry), for the epigraph of my chapter, “Freedom Through Education.”

This book would not be possible without the enthusiastic support and encouragement from Ezra Zaid of ZI Publications. Ezra is an enterprising young man and I am pleased to have him associated with this project.

I also acknowledge with great pleasure the editorial assistance of Alice Williams and Lori Lee.

Lastly, I thank my wife Karen for patiently going over the manuscript umpteen times and correcting the errors without hesitation. If this book is at all comprehensible, then I owe her much of the credit.

MORGAN HILL, CA, USA  
JANUARY 2012

## Introduction:

# Widening Our Circle of Options

MALAYS HAVE BEEN addicted to the comfort of life underneath the coconut shell for far too long. Now with the shell breached by globalization and the digital waves, it is dawning upon us that our “comfort” is anything but. There is a far greater, more open, and definitely wondrous universe out there that we have been missing.

Life under the coconut shell is no longer sustainable; for many it is already intolerable. We can either topple this shell ourselves or risk having it done by external forces. With the former we would be in command of our destiny; we could purposely choose the timing, manner, and consequently the outcome. With the latter, we would be at the mercy of events and circumstances beyond our control; we would effectively become victims.

Saddam Hussein and his Republican Guards certainly thought they were very comfortable in the desert, secure under their well-camouflaged shells. That is, until those shells were literally blown apart by outside forces.

The metaphorical Malay coconut shell – our closed minds – cannot be destroyed physically. Besides, with the huge pores already created by globalization and the digital revolution, many have already successfully emerged from underneath. The biggest danger is not so much that our shell will be toppled by outside forces or through agitations from within, rather that the world would ignore and leave us to rot underneath it, with only the mushrooms to sustain us.

This would be the fate that awaits those with a closed mind. Perhaps we could rationalize that by adopting a “leave us alone” philosophy. Such an option however, is not for us to choose but for others to impose.

The colonials imposed upon the world and us their narrative of “the lazy native.” With our closed minds we readily accepted that and then lived up to it. Only centuries later did we manage to escape (though

In *Liberating The Malay Mind*, M.Bakri Musa maps with clarity a path towards a liberated Malaysia by carefully examining the country's past and evaluating the current Malay obsession with *Ketuanan Melayu*. This book explores the ways in how special rights and "sons of the soil" privileges bestowed have inhibited the Malay people from forging an educated, dynamic and globally competitive *Tanah Melayu*.

Dr. Bakri Musa examines Malay culture through the prisms of history, psyche and religion and details the steps necessary to liberate the collective Malay mindset through free access to information, an enlightened education system, and engagement in commerce.

With this careful navigation, and not by pinning hopes on the political amulet of Article 153, *Liberating The Malay Mind* forges a way towards a self-sufficient Malaysia, able to turn crises into opportunities, and challenges into inspirations.

"Unlike our political *merdeka* - which was granted to us by the British - our liberated mind can not be bestowed. We have to strive for it. Then we will be *Tuans* even elsewhere other than *Tanah Melayu*."

— M. Bakri Musa



Dr. Bakri Musa attended Tuanku Muhammad School, Kuala Pilah and later, Malay College, Kuala Kangsar for his Sixth Form. He received his undergraduate, medical, and graduate degrees from the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, and did his surgical training at the University of Alberta Hospital, Edmonton, and Montreal General Hospital. Awarded a Research Fellowship from the Medical Research Council of Canada, Bakri did full time research in transplant immunology in the 1970s.

He is a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Canada as well as a senior Fellow of the American College of Surgeons.

After a brief private practice in Edmonton he returned to Malaysia in 1976, and was posted at the General Hospitals in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Baru. He has been in private practice in Silicon Valley, California, for the past 35 years.

Apart from professional articles in scientific journals, Bakri's socio-political commentaries on Malaysia have appeared in such publications as the *International Herald Tribune*, *The New York Times*, and *The Far Eastern Economic Review*. He has also appeared on America's National Public Radio's "Marketplace" program.

He maintains a blog at [www.bakrimusa.com](http://www.bakrimusa.com).

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