

PERDANA DISCOURSE SERIES **2**

“SOCIAL RE-ENGINEERING”

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Thank you for giving me this opportunity to talk on a subject that concerns everyone of us, social re-engineering. When you say social re-engineering, it implies something that is done by us out of our consciousness of the need to re-engineer and the need to change.

Society normally goes through changes over a period of time. Society is never static but the changes take place naturally, probably in response to the environment and to the intellectual capacity of members of the society and also other influences, for example, foreign invasion or vast immigration of people into any society. There would be changes in the social structure of the society as a response to changes in the environment. But we're going to talk today about re-engineering, a conscious effort to re-engineer society, the social structure of society.

That implies that we know there is something wrong, something inadequate about our society which has to be corrected so that we can enjoy the best from living within this society. Now we all know that Malaysia is something of a unique country. It is a multiracial country.

It is not only multi-racial; it is multi-religious, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and also the distribution of wealth among the different races and ethnic groups are not balanced. The distribution is not balanced and these things tend to break up society, to cause society to be broken into groups which may result in confrontations and violence if not properly managed. In almost every multi-racial country we see this happening.

Even slight differences in religion can bring about confrontations and disruptions and the society becomes unstable. You see this happening in Northern Ireland where the people are the same; they are all white people, all ethnic Europeans. They are Christians but they have certain different interpretations of Christianity. One group is Protestant the other group is Catholic and because of these differences they have been fighting each other, destabilising Northern Ireland for so very long.

And there doesn't seem to be an end to that despite efforts being made from within and from without. The same thing happens of course in some of the Arab countries, principally Lebanon, where the Arabs of Lebanon are divided into Muslims and Christians and because of the differences in religion they had a civil war which lasted for many years resulting in the destruction of the country.

Now, of course, the country's war has stopped, the civil war has stopped. The country has recovered somewhat and then again recently they assassinated the man who rebuilt the whole of Lebanon. Rafic Hariri was killed in a bomb explosion and now they're back to square one. There are bombs exploding in Lebanon today. And the same thing is seen in Kashmir. We see the same thing even in Pakistan because of the differences between the Shi'a and the Sunni and all these things of course tend to destabilise a country.

Now, Malaysia has got all these numerous differences. Three different races, each adhering to three different religions. Malays being Muslim, Chinese being largely Buddhist and the Indians being Hindus, although we do find some Christians among the Indians and Chinese. Of course the Malays cannot change their religion because if they change they will not be Malays. Constitutionally we are defined as Malays only if we are Muslim.

And Muslims don't allow for apostasy. So Malays remain Muslim, the Chinese sometimes convert to Islam; the Indians sometimes convert to Islam. Inter-racial marriage, as a solution to our problem is not available to us as much as we would like because of the difficulty in inter-racial marriages and the religious insistence of Muslims that whoever marries a Muslim whether man or woman must become Muslims.

So the forces in Malaysia would not really lead to a unification of the nation but to a separation of the different races with their religions. So, we are very

conscious of this kind of situation, we find it difficult to create a single nation, to create an identity that is Malaysian. Who is a Malaysian? It's very difficult to really define because of these differences.

But the remarkable thing about Malaysia is that despite all these differences we have very few inter-racial conflicts. In 1969, on May the 13th, there was this race riot in Kuala Lumpur. More than a hundred people were killed and the world, Time magazine and Newsweek predicted that that was the end of Malaysia and strangely, many Malaysians including Tun Dr. Ismail said that democracy was finished in Malaysia. But you see today we are relatively stable. I mean it may not be the kind of harmony that you would like to see but there is obviously harmony. We work together and we play together.

We may return to our own homes and be separated again but frequently, we go out at night and have dinners together. Now, we don't care whether we go for a Chinese dinner or a Malay dinner or a western dinner in any of the ethnic restaurants that you'll find in this country. We can sit together and eat together. Actually Malaysians cannot sit at the same table simply because the Malays object if you serve pork, for example. Any products from the pig, if you put on the table, it is quite likely that a Muslim might get up and walk out. He will not eat at the same table. On the other hand, the Malays love beef and you know the Indians don't take beef. So the three of us cannot really sit at the same table but for some unknown reason we have found a way to sit at the same table, eat together, talk and joke among ourselves and not feel so much the differences between us.

So, this is quite some achievement. I don't know whether we can say it was re-engineered consciously or whether it just happened. More likely we all realise the need to be tolerant, to make adjustments and to accommodate other people, the people who have different religions from ourselves, who have different customs from us. Of course sometimes we breach the customs of the other group but the other group is tolerant enough to put up with it.

So we do not have the kind of confrontation and the violence that you see in most other multi-racial countries. So we must praise Allah that we are a

tolerant group of people. It all started of course because some politicians decided to overlook the differences and to come together.

In 1952, there was to be a municipal election in Kuala Lumpur. At that time the Malays were members of UMNO, the Chinese were members of MCA and the two were not the best of friends because as you know the Malays fought hard against the Malayan Union and the Chinese felt that the Malayan Union would give them a better place in this country. So politically they were not together but the leaders of the MCA and UMNO did not look into the politics of it rather they looked into how to benefit each other by overlooking the fact that they were Chinese and Malays.

Members of the MCA, members of UMNO, Tun Ong Yoke Lin, Colonel H.S. Lee, Dato' Yahya, as leaders of the Kuala Lumpur branches of their parties, they decided that they should contest the elections together as a kind of unofficial coalition. It was meant only to be for that election without the knowledge of national leaders like Tunku Abdul Rahman. The principle was very simple; in a constituency where the main majority of the voters were Chinese there would be a Malay minority. The assumption was that the Chinese would be split into two almost equal numbers and the Malay votes would determine who is going to win. That is in the Chinese constituency. In the Malay constituency where the Malays are in the majority there would be a minority of Chinese. Now assuming that the Malays are split into two then the Chinese vote would determine who would win. It was a very simple theory and it worked. It worked so well that the multiracial parties as represented by Dato' Onn's IMP (Independence of Malaya Party) and the socialists lost to this racist party which had decided to work together. Now because it worked so well, then the politicians extended it on a national level and today what we have is the same principle working through the Barisan Nasional.

So it was almost accidental, the way we found a solution to our social problem, economic problem, political problem and having achieved that we have been able to keep the country as stable as possible and I think this is something we should be very grateful for to Tunku Abdul Rahman for accepting this approach to the problem. And that approach has worked very well for Malaysia so much so that people are amazed.

When they came to Malaysia, they didn't see a Malay running after a Chinese and stabbing him or fighting breaking out in Bintang Walk or whatever. You see them walking together, working together, playing together although they may speak in different languages and they have different beliefs. In Malaysia, this is something that has amazed foreigners to the extent that I have been invited to many places and one of the questions they invariably ask or ask me to speak about was how do you achieve racial harmony in Malaysia?

And how we achieved it, of course, began really with the political need to work together. And that political need has now spread into the economic area and into the social area. But we must admit that we have not achieved a true nation in the sense that we would say that we are Malaysians. We are not Malays, we are not Chinese, we are not Indians, we are Malaysians. We are not Buruj or Bajau or Iban or whatever. We are just Malaysians. We have not come to that stage although Malaysians of Chinese origin when abroad, when asked whether they are Chinese they say yes but we are Malaysian. You see they have to point out that they're not China Chinese, not Taiwan Chinese, not Hong Kong Chinese, not even Singapore Chinese; they are Malaysian Chinese. So they do have that identification with the country but not to the point of forgetting that they are Chinese.

The Malays also feel that they are Malays and it's the same with the Indians, they are Malaysian whenever they are abroad.

The strange thing is that when they come home, then they feel they are more Indian or more Chinese or more Malay. But when abroad, they are Malaysian. Now how do we engineer these things? It is not just a question of race; it's a question of the kind of society we want to live in. What kind of society do we want to live in? We want to live in a society where there is equality in all areas among the Malays, Chinese and Indians.

No special treatment for anyone. That's the kind of idea that we want to see. But that idea will not be achieved until the fear of being placed in an inferior position can be overcome. If we can overcome that fear, that's when there is equality of everything. The fear that equality of treatment may result in some race finding themselves at the bottom of the rung, in some race finding themselves at the top of the rung, this fear is still there.

The fear of the Malays that the Chinese would dominate the economy; this is a very real fear, Chinese economic power. On the other hand the Chinese fear the Malays because of their political power. There are more Malays; more indigenous people than there are Chinese. So the Chinese fear political dominance of the Malays. The Malays fear economic dominance of the Chinese and the Indians fear everybody. You see in Malaysia, really, Indians should not have even a single representative in parliament because there is no constituency where there is an Indian majority. If the Indians want to be elevated to become a Member of Parliament, he must seek the support of the non-Indians. In the Barisan Nasional, there is a mechanism for that and it has been successful, so we will still have Dato' Samy Vellu and his colleagues in Cabinet because of this arrangement. But on their own, if they come out as an Indian party, Indians for the Indians, they will never make it.

So they have to be friendly with the Chinese and with the Malays in order to get their support. So they fear both. Whereas the Chinese fear the Malays, the Malays fear the Chinese. They don't say in so many words but somewhere, there is this fear. Now, the solution to this of course is to remove this fear and this fear politically can be removed very easily. Just say everybody is equal politically. Everybody has the same right politically.

But in the economic field, it is not so easy to equalise the strength of the different races. To equalise you must bring up the Malays to the level of the Chinese where they can compete with the Chinese. It's already happening now, they can compete. In fact they have been successful. I'm glad to say that there are several Malay business people who have actually bought Chinese companies and turned around Chinese companies.

That is a remarkable achievement, something that was not thought of as possible before but it has now happened. I can name them but I don't have to name them here. But the fact is that it has happened. But if this thing keeps going on, the capacity of the Malays to compete with the Chinese is very obvious, very clear, then the fear of the Malays can be get rid of. They will not feel that fear and the Chinese for their part can easily feel comfortable because to give political power to the Chinese is by the stroke of a pen, literally.

And then there is the field of education. Unfortunately, despite the help given by the government there is still a disparity in terms of levels of education between the Chinese and the Malays and the Indians. For some reason or other the Malays are still behind. Not as far behind as before. In my days when I went to the university, out of 77 students who were in my class of 1947, doing medicine and dentistry, there were 7 Malays. At the end of the year there were only 4 Malays. So now we have hundreds and thousands of Malays in the university. Some of them do very well. Some of us do not do so well. We could do better. Today, in some universities, as many as 70% of the students are girls. What happened to the boys? Where are they? Are they stupid? I don't know. I feel like concluding that they are stupid, that's why they're not in university.

But maybe they are wiser than me. They avoid going to the university. It's a better life outside the university. But when you see the number of girls, you should see the same number of boys simply because in any human society the number of girls and boys are about equal. About the same, 50/50, God made us that way. You look at any society. A lot of people don't even notice this but actually there are in any society, 50% boys and 50% girls.

How this comes about I don't know because some people produce only boys, some people produce only girls. I have got more girl grandchildren than I have boy grandchildren. But when you add up on the average it's 50/50. So if there are a certain number of girl students in the university there should be the same number of boys in the university. But we don't have that and the people affected are unfortunately Malays. So in the field of education we have made considerable advances but by comparison to the other communities, the Chinese and Indians, the Malays are still behind and they need to catch up.

They need to work hard in order to achieve their true potential. I believe they have the same potential as everybody else but because they make no effort, the potential will not just come up by itself. You have to make an effort. That is with regard to education. Then there is this problem of value systems which affect the social structure. What really determines the kind of person we are is the value system that we believe in and we practise. We must believe in good value systems that can contribute towards our success and we find that the value systems of the Chinese and the Malays and Indians differ.

You know how Indian families drive their children. They must study. At least one of their children must become a doctor. Even if you have to go to Ukraine, you go to Ukraine. If they have a university in Siberia, they will go to Siberia because of this drive by the family. That is their belief; their value system forces them to ensure that their children achieve a level of education that they can be proud of. They are proud of the educational achievement of their children. They are also proud of other achievements of their children. They teach music, for example, to their children and they spend money on these things in order to raise themselves from the level that they are in; that is the Indian value system. The Chinese have a different value system but again the emphasis is on material success, worldly success because they feel that you have to show your ability, because the Chinese normally live in a competitive environment. They must do well otherwise they will, of course, be seen as failures, they would be poor, they would not enjoy life.

Now what is the Malay value system? Strictly speaking it should be an Islamic value system with a little bit of the old Malay values added to it. You know about how the Malays say “*biar mati anak jangan mati adat*”?* But if your child is dead, where is your *adat* (customs)? There will be nobody to carry on the *adat* so I think you have to have your children alive first and then we have the *adat*. Sometimes these wise saying are not really so wise so let’s rethink these things. We are in the business of re-engineering, let’s re-engineer this thing.

Now is there something wrong about Islamic values that hold back the Malays? Is there something wrong with it? Now you see throughout the world, almost all Islamic countries, Muslim countries, seem incapable of developing. In fact, many Muslims consider Malaysia to be the only Muslim country that has developed. Muslim countries seem incapable of having a good government. They are always fighting each other, assassinating each other and doing all the wrong things.

But in Malaysia, of course, we have succeeded to a certain extent. But the failure of the Malays is also something that is equated with some factor in Islam which holds back the material, earthly success of the Malays. But I

* “Let the children die rather than customs and tradition” is the literal English translation.

would like to differ. I would like to say that it is not Islam at all. Islam is not a negative force. Islam is a very positive force. What is negative is the interpretation of Islam.

Now, over 1400 years, there have been many interpretations of Islam as there are in Christianity too. The Christians now have been broken up into Protestants, Catholics, Calvinists, and Methodists. Now we have a lot of new born again Christians and all that. Islam too has undergone that same division over 1400 years. The first division of course is the division between the Shi'a and the Sunni; the Shi'a would have about 12 different Imams, Sunnis would have 4. And then there are different sects, and of course we have Arqam* also. Here in Malaysia we have Arqam. Lots of people believe Arqam is the true Islam but these are the results of interpretation by ordinary human beings. These are not prophets. They are not in anyway of the same stature as the Prophet Muhammad. We can accept what Prophet Muhammad conveys to us as the message from Allah.

But would we say that Nik Aziz's** pronouncements are equivalent to that of the Prophet Muhammad? He says that if you vote for PAS you go to heaven. Who has been there to verify this? Nik Aziz is like me. I mean, he may be able to speak a little bit more Arabic than I do. I can read the Quran like everybody else but he is an ordinary person, an ordinary human being. He is not free from flaws. So his interpretation is not necessarily an Islamic interpretation. You know that Bukhari, Muslim and Tarmidzi, these are the people who studied the Hadith and even between them there are differences. What is accepted as verified by Bukhari may be rejected by Muslim, may be rejected by Tarmidzi or the others. So these are human beings who are learned but not free from faults and yet we tie ourselves to them, to their interpretation of Islam and we tie our belief to their interpretation. If they are wrong then we are wrong. Now I feel that in many instances they are wrong. So in that case what do you do? I'm not a preacher but I read the Quran, I read the Quran in English and Malay. I look at what I read and I find everything there is very positive. If they become negative it is because of this interpretation.

* Al-Arqam is a Malaysian-based Islamic religious sect banned by the Malaysian Government in 1994.

** Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat is the Chief Minister of Kelantan and the spiritual leader of the Pas Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)

Now let's look at the idea that if you study religion you'll get merit for your afterlife, *dapat pahala untuk akhirat kalau kita belajar agama*. If you study religion then your place in heaven is much more likely but if you study science, mathematics, astronomy or whatever, would your place in heaven be guaranteed? Now these people, not the Prophet Muhammad, not the Quran, not the Hadith but these people say that these other subjects will not merit consideration for your afterlife. In other words, they are of a lower grade. Maybe they are secular subjects which gain you nothing at all. This happens to be the teaching of some of these people, not all. Some of these people say that if we don't study religion then you are on your way to hell. So if you tell a Malay that you want to go to heaven, you study religion, you become a Hafiz, you can recite the Quran without looking at it and you go to heaven. But if you study science, you're going to hell. You ask a Malay which one do you want to study and the answer is I want to memorise the Quran because I want to go to heaven. But this is what these people tell you. What does the Quran tell you? In the Quran there are 2 types of verses. One is very specific, there are no two ways you can interpret it. The other one is made up of parables, stories which you have to interpret and you can interpret stories in many ways.

If you read some of the novels that are written you can either enjoy it or dislike it depending on your interpretation of it. So what happens? You look at the Quran and you read. I say it is positive because I find that the Quran asks you to study. Iqra', you know everybody knows Iqra'. The first message received by the Prophet was Iqra', "Read", and this man cannot read. He was asked to read, meaning to say he must study and learn to read.

But when you read something what do you get? You get better informed, you get better knowledge, you become clever and when it says Iqra' it doesn't say Iqra' only in religious matters. The Quran doesn't say; it just says Iqra', read. That is why the early Muslims straight away translated the works of the Greeks, the works of the Persians, the works of the Indians, the Chinese, into Arabic because they wanted to read and they became very knowledgeable. They were the prominent scientists at a time when the Europeans were very backward.

That is the meaning of read but these people make an interpretation saying that read means read the Quran, read the *kitab* written by Sheikh so and so. So

you'll find Malays are reluctant to study anything else other than religion and you see armies of them going to Al-Azhar University, staying there for 14 years and still not graduating because Al-Azhar doesn't mind, you can stay there forever. And some of them come back from Al-Azhar not able to speak a word of Arabic. I can speak better Arabic than they do. This is because they interpret reading as reading only religion but there is nothing to prevent you from studying other subjects. Read means acquire knowledge and you have to acquire knowledge in everything, in geography, in history, in mathematics and science.

You know, the word chemistry comes from the Arabic word alchemy. It's an Arabic subject developed by Muslim chemists. Physicians like Ibn Sina, they were the ones who identified diseases and treated diseases. Why? Because at that time you didn't have interpreters who told them this is not going to guarantee your place in heaven. Now would they go to heaven if they study? I think they would. I think that to study other subjects would be part of ibadah.

And if they accept that as part of their value system, then you will find most of them would apply themselves seriously to study all these other subjects. Now why should we study other subjects? Why is it that I say that the Quran wants you to study other subjects? Now among the things in the Quran which is very clear is that the Muslims must have the capacity to defend the ummah. They must be able to defend, not to attack other people but if the ummah is attacked then they must have the capacity to defend the ummah. And in Islam, if you have no capacity then you are sinning because you don't follow the injunctions of the Quran. Now in order to defend the ummah during the time of the Prophet they must have war horses, spears, bows and arrows and things like that and they were able to defend the ummah because the enemies also had the same weapons. And over time, the Muslims developed siege machines and many other weapons in order to defend the Muslims and this is because they learnt about the art and science of defending and making weapons. Why? Because the Quran enjoins upon them to be able to defend the ummah. Now today are you going to have war horses, bows and arrows and spears to defend the ummah? Obviously the word that is important is not the war horses or the weapons at the time of the Prophet but rather the ability to defend.

The ability to defend depends upon your ability to produce the correct weapons to defend yourself. Today Muslims cannot produce the correct weapons because they have not studied science, they neglected science, they neglected mathematics, they neglected everything and they are busy memorising the Quran in order to go to heaven. So we are in this state because we have not followed the injunctions of the Quran to study. That to study science, to study mathematics is as important as or perhaps even more important than your study of religion, your studies of the various writings of various Sheikhs and Imams and all that, who are mere men, they are not prophets. That is why today the value system which is supposed to be Islamic is not Islamic at all. It is the value system that is spread by the interpreters of Islam. Learned though they may be but they are still ordinary human beings and they can be wrong.

But if you go back to the Quran and the verified Hadith, you will find positive instruction there on every issue including justice. You know this *Hudud* law, the procedure of determining whether a person is guilty or not; the procedure includes having 4 witnesses who are people of good character. That's what is stated but the Quran also states that when you judge, judge with justice. That is more important, it must be justice. So if 2 men, 1 Chinese, 1 Malay go stealing things, you cannot chop the Malay hand and leave the Chinese hand free and he serves 2 months jail and the Malay goes around without one hand. Would that be justice? No, it will not be justice. If it is not justice would that be Islamic? It cannot be Islamic because it is unjust, obviously unjust.

I'll give you another example. A girl is raped. She of course recognises the rapist but she couldn't produce 4 witnesses. According to these people's interpretation of Islam, because she made an accusation without the 4 witnesses, she is guilty of perjury, guilty of making a false statement and therefore punishable by 80 strokes of the *rotan*. Is that justice? The person who is raped is punished and the rapist gets away. Is that justice? If it is not justice it's not Islamic. That is why we cannot go along that way. Of course, if there are 4 witnesses, well and good, but what are the 4 witnesses doing looking at the person being raped and not helping? You know the origin of this law was

because the wife of the Prophet was accused of having something to do with somebody else and the Prophet couldn't prove otherwise. But he said where are the witnesses? You make an accusation against my wife but where are the witnesses? So there are no witnesses and therefore you cannot accuse her or condemn her.

But here in this case the girl loses and yet she is going to be punished and if she gets pregnant it is evidence of *zina*. She should be stoned to death. Is that justice? Is that Islamic justice or is that justice at all? Obviously it's unjust so it cannot be Islamic if it is unjust. So if we go back to the Quran you will find the Quran is very correct and very positive about things and in terms of learning and having good values the Quran provides you with the best value system.

It urges you to be able to defend yourself, urges you to acquire knowledge, urges you to have all kinds of capacity, urges you to be always fair, there are inheritance laws etc. All of these things are very positive in Islam but what we are practising or the values that the Malay holds today are not really Islamic values. They are actually the results of wrong interpretation by these people who claim that they are very learned, they are the *Ulama*. People like me cannot ask, cannot say anything. We have to accept it without question because they are the *Ulama*. You go back to the origin of the word *Ulama* it comes from the word *Alim*. *Alim* means learned. I may not be learned in that particular subject, I'm learned in medicine, you know, and when they get sick they come to me. They won't come to me if I'm not learned in medicine so I am *Ulama Mahathir*.

So the Malays would be able to achieve the same material gains on this earth and in the next by acquiring knowledge and working hard in order to uplift the level of development of the Malays and when that is done, when the Malays are well developed, as progressive and capable as the Chinese and the Indians, the fear will disappear. The fear of the Chinese will disappear. At that stage when there is no fear on the part of the Chinese of the Malays, on the part of the Malays of the Chinese and the Indians fear nobody than we would have achieved our social re-engineering.

It's a tough task, it will take time but that is the thing that we must all try to do.

