

Malaysia—Where Politics Must be Ethnically Inclusive and Exclusive at the Same Time

The Edge Malaysia, 26 October 2015

By OOI KEE BENG

What any Malaysian knows at heart is that the Malay community will always dominate the politics of the country. This means in concrete terms that Malaysia's key leaders will always nominally and in reality be Malay Muslims.

However, the country's population is a very mixed one, and from the very beginning, leaders of the Malay community who wish to be remembered as statesmen and respected as nation builders have had to expound the idea that Malay interests do not necessarily contradict national interest, or even the interests of other communities.

UMNO's first president famously tried to change the party's name from United Malay National Organisation to United Malayan National Organisation. He realised what most of his followers had not yet realised. Malaysian politics has to be multi-ethnically sensitive.

His successor as UMNO president, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, would realise this. Under him, UMNO grew from strength to strength based on the slogan of "Merdeka" rather than "Hidup Melayu"; the latter having been the *raison d'être* of the Malay party since its founding. More importantly, teaming up with the Malayan Chinese Association in 1952 made his party's agenda more clearly an inclusive one. And with that move, broad support could be gained, and Merdeka was gained at an earlier time than expected.

As truly as Malay dominance is an inescapable reality for Malaysia, a central policy direction that is ethnically inclusive is unavoidable for sufficient harmony to be achieved so that its economy can gain the trust of both domestic and international investors, and grow to its full potential.

Ethnic tensions saw riots breaking out in 1969. The Tunku had to retire and his successors put into place powerful constitutional curbs on the freedom of speech, in the public sphere and in parliament. Other measures were taken for UMNO to secure a stronger hold on power in its proclaimed role as the champion of Malay collective interests. But before the next general elections could be called, the new prime minister, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, had made certain that the ruling coalition would now include as many parties representing as possible. To top it off, he arranged for a much publicised visit by him to China to begin Malaysia's normalisation of ties with the communist giant.

This saw him winning a convincing victory in the 1974 general elections—quite an achievement considering how divided the country was in 1969.

Now, let's move forward to the late 1980s when UMNO was in deep trouble, and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was seriously challenged from within the party by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. Mahathir survived as party president, and as prime minister, he used the Internal Security Act on critics at this time, and purportedly averted what might have been another racial conflict in the country. The New Economic Policy, a comprehensive

affirmative action policy started in 1970 in favour of the Malay community, was also coming to its official end, and a replacement for it that was acceptable to all communities was not constructed yet.

And so, Mahathir did badly in the 1990 general elections. But with a stroke of genius, he came up with the idea of Bangsa Malaysia and Vision 2020 the following year. Helped by steady global economic growth, he became a very popular prime minister for the next seven years, until the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 opened up a deep irreparable schism between him and his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim.

What was so effective about Bangsa Malaysia was of course that it was Mahathir's version and vision of inclusive development for the country's various communities. Vision 2020 spelled out the evolution of Malaysians who have discarded his fixation with race, and who have grown confident and modern because they have become educated and knowledgeable about the world at large.

The confrontation between the two top leaders of UMNO at this time also reflected – and exacerbated – differences within the Malay community which were ideological and which had socio-economic basis. The Malays were becoming an increasingly diverse community—largely due to the success of many of the Malay-centric policies of the previous decades.

Probably seeing that he had become a strongly polarising figure, especially among the Malays, Mahathir retired, handing the leadership over to someone whose character promised to have a more healing effect on the population. This was Abdullah Badawi. As an inclusive kind of leader whose public agenda was to reform the country's governance and limit the damage done by Mahathir's excesses, Abdullah managed to garner enough votes to give his coalition a record number of seats in parliament in 2004.

The lesson learned so far is this. Malaysia's top leader must always be a Malay who styles himself as the champion of Malay interests. But to succeed well as a nation builder, he must at the same time inject an inclusive agenda into his discourse and policies.

Under Abdullah, however, excessive displays of Malay-centrism followed his electoral triumph. Cases of Muslim authorities snatching bodies of purported Muslim converts away from their non-Muslim funeral, the dismantling of Indian temples, and the unsheathing and raising of the Malay keris at UMNO annual assemblies infected the social ambience most negatively. This divisiveness was made plain in the 2008 general elections when the Barisan Nasional lost five states and the two-third majority in parliament that it had become used to having.

And so, Abdullah had to be replaced. In April 2009, Najib Razak took over. His job was to win back the votes that had been lost. He began by adopting the slogan "One Malaysia". This was of course meant to express the inclusiveness that all UMNO leaders, however ethnocentric, have had to adopt in order to be an effective prime minister.

Despite programmes for transforming the government and the economy, Najib never succeeded in gaining broad support for his discourse. The contradictions were simply too many, and also, by the time he took the stage, the game had congealed into a two-party battle and the new media had severely undermined the mainstream media that had been a mainstay of BN power.

In pandering to UMNO's right wing for fear of losing that final bastion of support, Najib ended up losing not only the chance to regain non-Malay sympathy, but also the Malay middle ground.

The paradox of Malaysian politics is thus this: Malay exclusivity cannot be taken too far. This is because Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country whichever way one looks at it. Today, BN relies more than ever on support from East Malaysia, which makes multi-ethnicity an even more important inherent characteristic of Malaysia to recognize.

The author is the Deputy Director of ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. His latest books are *Young and Malay: Growing up in Multicultural Malaysia* and *Drifting into Politics: The Unfinished Memoirs of Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman*.