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Malaysia in Transition: The Battle for the Malay Mind

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**DESTINIES DELAYED (BUT NOT DENIED):
REFLECTIONS ON THE TRANSITION OF
MALAYSIAN ADMINISTRATIONS**

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THE MALAY MIND**

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About the Speaker

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Etiolation vs Neoteny

It might be expected that 22 years of a single administration would lead to a certain etiolation. In the shade of a great tree, not much can grow that does not grow not thin and pale, stretching feebly up to grasp at what dim light filters down through the foliage above.

It might also be, however, that the unusually long tenure of the present Malaysian administration has meant not etiolation but neoteny — an extension of gestation, with survival advantages.

After all, such stability and continuity is highly conducive to effective policy development and implementation. Pioneering initiatives have time to gestate. New ideas can be nurtured to maturity and not blown hither, yon and away on the fickle winds of political fads, fates and fortunes.

The economic and infrastructural transformation of Malaysia over the past 20 years is described in metaphors of break-neck growth and head-spinning change. In order to control this pell-mell push for the future, however, some of the past has had to stay the same.

The intimate integration of government and the private sector enabling Malaysia's economic development was only possible with near-absolute political stability. The downside of political stability is political stasis.

Longevity Rules

Quadrupling the annual per capita income of Malaysians while doubling the population in 20 years required a conspicuous lack of upward mobility in politics. Of

the ten longest-serving party-political leaders in world history, six are Malaysian. (On the 27th anniversary of his party presidency in 2002, Datuk Amar James Wong of the Sarawak National Party outdid Mao Zedong.)

Any future evaluation of the Malaysian era now ending should consider that this was not just about one man's unusual political longevity. Today, more than 22 years after taking office, Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad presides over a Cabinet heavy with incomparable long-service records. Malaysians also now have the resources of some unprecedentedly experienced second- and third-echeloners.

What in the early 90s seemed the advent of a Billionaire Boys' Club of brash and youthful Malay entrepreneurs has turned out instead a diminished band of battle-hardened veterans. Once-lavish lifestyles based on magnificent dreams have been traded in for quiet sobriety and sensible business plans — if not retirement to good works and contemplations.

Destinies Delayed

A decade ago, however, fears had become real of career plans seriously delayed, if not sent entirely awry, by Dr Mahathir's headlong charge for the future. Back in 1993, part of what fuelled Anwar Ibrahim's successful challenge of Ghafar Baba for the Umno deputy presidency was the fear of destinies denied — or at least delayed too long to be much fun.

Ten years ago, the former deputy prime minister's will to mount an ill-fated strike for the summit was forged in the crucible of the national policy that had empowered Malay ambition in the first place.

The preserver, protector and defender of that policy, however, has been Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who did not believe the Malays were quite as educated, sophisticated and capable as many of us thought we were. We could talk the talk, but we needed others to walk the walk.

The way we were, Dr Mahathir might not have seen any significant change from a hundred years before. Malay notions of business remained mired in rentier capitalism, bartering patronage for service, monetising land and chattel, and collecting tolls from passing traffic.

Success remained measured in prestige and property more than profit and prosperity. Following Mahathir's "Leadership by Example", many hatched brave new ideas. Several even began having visions themselves. But few could do the work — or wanted to.

Worst of all, over the course of the past generation, Malay *privileges*, upheld so diligently as the most sacrosanct element of our national contract, had somehow become Malay *rights*.

That subtle shift of meaning has been the despair of Dr Mahathir, for privileges are to be thankful for, while rights are to be expected. This ought to be borne in mind when recalling the many times Dr Mahathir chastised his party and the populace at large for being "ungrateful". It is not the privilege of protection that bedevils the Malays of Malaysia and their leading political party, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), but a debased strain of great expectations.

Dr Mahathir's iron-willed administration forced a lot of ambition astray — some into power-broking, booty-gathering and conspicuous consumption (not to say naked, nest-feathering venality); others into long abeyance in the bleak and bitter wilderness beyond the pale of his government. Within, however, our country was being transformed.

Visioneering

Dr Mahathir's extensive term in office has been a unique exercise in the application of political will not to impose an individual over a nation, as his critics aver, but to imprint an idea upon it. We now call this idea "Vision 2020", and all Malaysians should read and memorise its succinct and luminous founding document, Dr Mahathir's "The Way Forward" speech of February 1991.

As the most workably optimistic exegesis of the New Economic Policy, instituted to remake Malaysia after the communal breakdowns of the 1960s, Vision 2020 is as good as it gets from here. Just as it was with the NEP, however, the easiest stage of any national development strategy is the first stage: building things.

History may look back on what Dr Mahathir achieved as fairly basic: He built modern Malaysia. Our roads and highways (and seven of every ten vehicles upon

them); our railways, ports and airports; our new industrial plants and spreading conurbations — all were borne on his ambition.

There is massive new industry in Malaysia. Manufacturing overtook agriculture 15 years ago and hasn't looked back. But even agriculture is playing catch-up, with new ambitions to tech itself up to an RM11 billion industry within the next few years. Consequently, the incidence of poverty in Malaysia has been reduced from 37% to 7.5% in the past 20 years.

Education has burgeoned. Tertiary enrolment increased nearly ten-fold, from fewer than 30,000 in 1981, in six universities, to nearly a quarter-million in 2000, in twice as many universities.

We now have privatised utilities, high technology and top-flight telecommunications. Internet penetration tops 22% this year, while just about every other Malaysian now carries a mobile phone.

Annual GDP growth averaged a shade under 10% over the duration of Dr Mahathir's tenure in the nation's top office. Although there are nearly twice as many Malaysians now as in 1980, we're about four times richer per capita.

Dr Mahathir managed all this while navigating Malaysia through one political challenge after another, including the constitutional amendments of the monarchy and the judiciary, and the deregistration and resurrection of his own party, before finishing off by getting us through the concurrent calamities of the regional financial crisis and the Anwar rebellion.

How he did it we all know and history will document and anatomise in minute detail. How *we* made it is more intriguing.

Malaysia Boleh

How did we do it? How was it possible for a Malaysian like me, for example, to have had the surreal honour of greeting Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh at the newly opened National Art Gallery on Jalan Tun Razak in late September 1998, while three kilometres away as the crow flew, it was flying blind through tear gas dispersing the crowds massing in support of the sacked deputy prime minister?

There is something profound in our catchy little exhortation, "*Malaysia Boleh!*". The past two or three decades seem to have honed us into a sort of stylish

resilience. Among the things “Malaysia Can Do” is sidestep insouciantly past pitfalls that routinely swallow other nations whole.

We are held together in our chronic cultural disarray by — among other things — a certain gallows humour and clear-eyed realism. In Malaysia, after all, even the most horrific highway pile-up raises the possibility of lucky numbers.

Among the first things Dr Mahathir told the foreign media upon becoming Prime Minister 22 years ago was that in Malaysia, everyone had to be a bit unhappy. Should anyone be too happy, someone else would be too unhappy. Social stability as a function of equitable unhappiness was as brutally frank a diagnosis as he ever made.

Someday, Dr Mahathir’s outspokenness may be recalled with fond nostalgia. What is astounding now is how he stayed “on message” for 30 years. The career he began in earnest in 1969 with his challenge of Tunku Abdul Rahman and the book he wrote the following year, *The Malay Dilemma*, ends this October still on song and in tune.

Dr Mahathir declared his intentions long ago, and fulfilled as much of his promise as he could. He declared himself a failure in his effort to change the “mindset” of the Malays, but what he could do, he did with a single-minded vengeance the like of which we are unlikely ever to see again.

Build-Operate-Transfer

The Malaysia we know today has been assembled on a Build-Operate-and-Transfer basis. Dr Mahathir built it, and now he is handing it over to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to operate, and eventually transfer to his own successor.

The grand sweep of Dr Mahathir’s generation-long stewardship of Malaysia comes down to the Four Challenges he leaves Abdullah (he actually cited them as the things he had failed to complete):

The Four Challenges

- *Return to meritocracy:* With 30 years of preferential educational policies having led to the mediocrity of the privileged and the ill-will of everyone else, racial quotas on college entry have been repealed. Initial results have not indicated any drastic drop in the number of Bumiputras qualifying for tertiary education.

On the contrary, many young Malays have welcomed the chance to regain the respect of their non-Malay compatriots, who had collectively developed an ill-concealed contempt for the apparent ease with which Malays could acquire the trappings of education without necessarily proving their merit — even as non-Malay examination results soared through sheer pressure of necessity.

- *Promote the English language:* A generation ago, the most useful legacy of Malaysia's colonial history was set aside to encourage the maturation of the national language, Malay. The usage of both languages swiftly deteriorated in tandem. This has given a back-handed push to restoring the use of English, not as a capitulation to “Western dominance” and “globalisation”, but as a necessary device for arresting the closing of the Malaysian mind.
- *Curb corruption:* “Money politics” has scourged the ruling parties in the past decade. The blatant cynicism with which Umno, in particular, was reduced to a one-stop shop for handouts and party favours famously drove Dr Mahathir to tears, and was a cancer in the Malay body politic.

If progress has been made against money politics, at least some of it is measured in the precocious wisdom of the party's younger new members, who now say it's better to make your money *before* entering politics.

It has to be said, however cynically, that Malaysians are prepared to pay a price in principle for peace. Most seem more concerned by incompetence than the infamous troika of “corruption, collusion and nepotism” that toppled neighbouring Indonesia's President Suharto in early 1998, and which Anwar Ibrahim then sought to rope into service in his own “Reformasi” movement against the Mahathir Administration.

After the past generation's experience in seeking expedient results at all costs, Malaysians seem to have grown inured to the costs of getting the job done — as long as the job gets done quickly and well. It's not the kickbacks and palm-greasing that Malaysians most despise, but the incompetence that sees such venality leading to massive losses and government bailouts anyway.

- *Eliminate Extremism:* Dr Mahathir's position seems to be that he would like to see Parti Islam SeMalaysia obliterated as a political force in our country. That is unlikely to happen, but acting decisively against any tendency among Malaysian Islamists to nurture murderous fanaticism accords entirely with the “zero tolerance” for political violence Malaysia has practised all its life.

Socio-politically, Islamism has been a dominant bugbear of the Mahathir Administration, which has invoked Malaysia's cultural diversity against the efforts of Pas to change our government into a theocracy.

The Main Manager

These are the tasks Dr Mahathir bequeaths Pak Lah, who will determine how to manage them. Critically, the style of governance in Malaysia is going from magisterial to managerial.

In his very first public speech as Acting Prime Minister last March, Abdullah said that many people had asked him what his vision was. “I have always given the same answer,” he said. “My vision for Malaysia is Vision 2020.”

Since then, he has taken pains to honour the memory of all his predecessors. As Malaysia’s fifth Prime Minister and his party’s sixth President, Abdullah is an icon of the continuity that has been Umno’s most cherished achievement, and Malaysia’s distinguishing political feature.

By cleaving so emphatically, and from the very outset, to the Mahathir Administration’s crowning achievement in development strategy, Abdullah has clearly distinguished between what Dr Mahathir did, and what Pak Lah will do.

He will do his best, of course. He always has done; even when it cost him dearly. Having spent three years in the political wilderness himself, and returned to Mahathir’s New Umno for the sake of the party more than the man, Abdullah will as dutifully set himself to operating the Malaysia Dr Mahathir built.

Pent-Up Supply

To achieve his objectives, Abdullah will be able to tap the services of not just one but two generations of Malaysian talent (albeit expensively cultivated and still thin on the ground). Pak Lah has the affection of younger Malaysians. He has the goodwill of Umno’s Youth and Puteri wings.

He also has more mature resources available, among Malaysians under 50 trained by national policy away from politics and into the technocracy, management and the professions, in which many have spent the past ten or 20 years hunkered down in low-profile but high-intensity careers. As a consequence, out of the transformative turbulence of the Mahathir years, a quieter, more expert brand of senior Malaysian may emerge.

Across the board of the nation — in corporate governance, the civil service and the institutions of state as much as in commerce, industry and the media — there

will be greater reliance on top management to ensure their corporations profit, prosper and progress on the political capital so dearly invested in the new Malaysian economy.

Might this mean a more collegiate administration under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi? Perhaps. Many are chary of the reappearance of a clubby corporatocracy such as emerged under Tun Daim Zainuddin's husbandry of the national economy.

But that turnkey approach to entrepreneurial development didn't breed only turkeys. The Malaysia-Inc companies that survived the upheavals of the late 90s now do better, and the lessons learned in the catastrophes that befell the worst-run of them will not soon be forgotten. Chief among them: the objective of business is to make a profit, and don't let any presumptive nation-builder tell you otherwise.

The importance of sound management has come home to roost. In the throes of the Asian financial crisis of 1997/8, top Malaysian managers were shaking their heads in the awful realisation, as one of them put it, that "everyone minds their own business, so no one knows the whole picture".

There isn't much to be said for being even the biggest, tallest and healthiest tree, when the forest is on fire.

This was another problem of life within the secure embrace of a strong and protective administration. There was short-sightedness and complacency. There was the blithe conceit that someone was watching over what we could not see. When the sky indeed fell, Chickens Little and Pollyannas alike were equally done in.

For this reason, we can expect transparency in the next administration as a simple function of the more consultative manner in which it is likely to operate.

This will have advantages and disadvantages. Pitting the former against the latter will be Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's unique challenge. His personal credentials are secure. His political support is affirmed. He will be our next Prime Minister.

Observing that he will not be "another Dr Mahathir", as so many are wont so glibly to do, is fatuous. Dr Mahathir himself could not do what Pak Lah has to do, which is to lead Malaysia out of Dr Mahathir's era and usher it along towards 2020.

Next Change

Pak Lah's own term as Prime Minister will not see the completion of the journey Dr Mahathir began. In what will be Umno's true test of its viability for the century to come, that will come with the fate of Pak Lah's successor.

At this writing, that seems likely to be Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak. He is almost certain to be named Abdullah's deputy when Pak Lah takes over as PM in late October. What follows then, according to precedent, will be a brief "honeymoon" for the new administration, during which Pak Lah will be free to stamp his imprimatur on the job before going to the people for a mandate.

Dr Mahathir enjoyed just such a "honeymoon" after inheriting the premiership with the retirement of his predecessor, Tun Hussein Onn, in July 1981. By the time Dr Mahathir went to the national polls in August the following year, he had instituted some of his most populist initiatives.

He had introduced name-tags and punch-cards to straighten up government servants. His "Look East" and "Buy British Last" policies began changing traditional Malaysian mindsets. He unified Peninsular Malaysia with Sabah and Sarawak by the simple expedient of adopting the same time-zone. And he vociferously pledged the people a "Clean, Efficient and Trustworthy" government.

Malaysian voters rewarded him with 62% of the popular vote, the biggest electoral victory in a quarter-century, affirming Dr Mahathir as the nation's leader and clearing the way for his more radical goals of re-engineering the institutions of state and setting new directions for the national economy.

The outcome of the 2004 general elections, which statutorily must be held before November next year but may well take place several months earlier, will strongly influence Umno's subsequent decisions on its own leadership.

How the fledgling Badawi Administration fares thereafter will hinge on whether the Malaysian electorate returns the desired verdict. The ruling Barisan Nasional coalition should comfortably retain its two-thirds majority of the newly expanded 219-seat Parliament, but the target is closer to three-fourths of those seats. (The BN's control of Parliament reached the peak of a *four-fifths* majority in the 1995 general election.)

The fate and fortunes of Pas are especially critical. Umno wants to win back Terengganu, lost to the Islamist Opposition in the 1999 general election, as much because of the Anwar affair as disgruntlement with an unpopular state administration.

Kelantan, Pas' heartland, may be secure for Pas but still allow Umno some inroads. The electoral verdicts in the "borderline" states of Kedah, Perlis and Pahang, however, will be barometers of Pas' prospects under the Badawi Administration.

Pas supporters have resisted Dr Mahathir's depiction of them as deluded and dangerous deal-breakers of the multi-racial national contract. They think Abdullah will be less combative and more accommodating of religious politics. They may be right about the rhetoric but wrong about the resolve.

As Malaysia sets to work on its fourth generation as an independent nation, after all the pioneering, visioning and re-engineering, it is time now for manageering. Mahathir Mohamad messianically launched Malaysia and the Malays out of the past. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will have to shepherd them along to the promised future.

What lies beyond will be another story, but if Pak Lah has his way, the next five years in Malaysian governance should be clean, efficient, and trustworthy.

About the Speaker

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MALAYSIA IN TRANSITION: THE BATTLE FOR THE MALAY MIND

Introduction

Much has been reported, commented and discussed in recent years about “the political transition” in Malaysia since September 1998 as if it is just about whether Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would take over the positions of prime minister and Umno president from Dr Mahathir Mohamad smoothly in October this year.

This is certainly an important concern of the political transition in Malaysia because there have been widespread — and not unintelligent — speculations that some of the loyalists of Dr Mahathir Mohamad may find it difficult to accept a successful and smooth transition which may jeopardise their interests. A political clash between Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, as well as their respective supporters, at this point would almost certainly bring about political instability of a great magnitude.

However, in the opinion of this writer, there is now little doubt that, formally and officially, Dr Mahathir Mohamad will step down in October, and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi immediately take over as both the prime minister and Umno president. The only genuine concerns seems to be:

- (1) What informal or behind-the-scene influences Dr Mahathir Mohamad will have in the decision-making processes of the government, Umno and the ruling National Front coalition;
- (2) Whether the influences are compatible or otherwise with the values and interests of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his supporters;
- (3) Who, among the three Umno vice presidents would Abdullah Ahmad Badawi pick as his deputy in the government and Umno, and what are the costs and benefits of choosing one but not the other two.

These concerns are only related and confined to Umno and the Umno-dominated government. It is essentially the politics of intra-party personalities and factions of the ethno-nationalist Umno.

Another equally critical dimension of “the political dimension” in Malaysia is the direction of the socio-political and ideological forces that have been unleashed outside Umno politics in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and 1998-1999 Anwar Saga. These forces, like them or not, will affect in one way or another, the broader and deeper political transition — or transformation — in Malaysia.

As Malaysia is a multiethnic society that is made up of peoples of different cultural, religious and linguistic affiliations, these forces express their hopes and fears in different cultural, religious and linguistic paradigms, icons and symbolism. For the purpose of this presentation, this writer proposes to confine the discourse only to the Malay aspect of these socio-economic and ideological forces, both the positive and negative, that constitute the dynamics of the broader and deeper political transition — or transformation — in Malaysia.

Besides the limitation of time in the presentation, an equally important reason for focussing on the Malay aspect is that officially and self-evidently, the Malays in Malaysia constitute the majority of the population as well as the voters.

Many Malay Minds in Politics

Umno

Although it is observed by Harold Crouch that the Malays who are almost all Muslims are not only “the largest” community in Malaysia, “but also the most homogenous” vis-à-vis other ethnic communities such as the Chinese and Indians (Crouch: p.14-15), they are politically and ideologically divided into Umno, PAS, Keadilan and PRM. There are also many Malays who are non-partisan or swinging voters, especially in urban areas or constituencies.

By far, Umno is still the largest Malay party in terms of the numbers of party members, members of parliament and senate, state assembly representatives and local government representatives. However, in the 1999 general elections, its traditional legitimacy and claim as the sole representative of the Malay community was seriously

eroded by the PAS-led opposition front which comprised of Keadilan and PRM. It is conservatively estimated that it received less than 50% of the total Malay votes cast.

Two major reasons are attributed to the erosion of Malay support for Umno. First, the massive resentment of Malays against the sacking and detention of former deputy Umno president and deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998, and second, the rise or surge of Islamic consciousness in politics or political Islam. These two factors are not unrelated.

From a longer historical perspective, it can be seen that the co-option of Anwar Ibrahim — into Umno in 1982 and his subsequent rise to the top leadership had served to provide the ethno-nationalist party which was also once seen to be overtly pro-West, with “an Islamic face”. It had also served to check the expansion of PAS that underwent an ideological transformation in the mid-1980s after its top leadership was taken over by a more Islamic core. The sacking of Anwar in 1998 and the popularly perceived persecution and cruelty (*kezaliman*) to which he has been subject seem to have reversed Umno to the pre-1982 years when it was perceived by the non-elite Malays to be a ethno-nationalist, materialistic and corrupt (both financial and moral) party.

The image problem of Umno has been further compounded by the bureaucratic or capitalist elitism, real or perceived, which has somehow distanced its top leaders and decision-makers emotively from the masses on the ground. One of the most commonplace accusations on the ground against Umno and its leaders is “arrogance” (*sombong*). The arrogance, real or perceived, is popularly personalised in the image of Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Seen in this perspective, the replacement of Dr Mahathir Mohamad by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is often said to have the effect of winning back the hearts and minds of the Malays for Umno because the latter is said to be less “arrogant” and more conversant in Islamic discourse. It may be true to a certain degree, as Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is known to be less combative in his posture of public appearance and style of public discourse and less tainted with controversial matters relating to public finance.

However, it remains to be seen if other factors such as the popular Malay perceptions of corruption, cronyism and nepotism, and injustices vis-à-vis Umno and

Umno leaders and decision-makers have decreased in their intensity. The perceived ongoing infighting within Umno is certainly a negative factor that may offset the relatively positive image of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

How Umno leaders handle Anwar Ibrahim still seems to matter critically, although many Malays have chosen not to speak up publicly as they did in 1998-2001 for fear of repression. The compulsory *Akujanji* pledge imposed on academics and tertiary students have the silencing effect, although silence does not necessarily mean or indicate a change of the hearts or minds.

Indeed, it could be argued that the *Akujanji* and other measures to suppress dissenting voices are not very wise because it may force grievances, real or otherwise, to “go underground” or into some little known corners in the cyberspace where no debates or arguments can be conducted to correct misperception and misinformation.

These measures, combined with the self-congratulatory reports and commentaries in the official media may also create a false sense of security, complacency and *groupthink* among Umno leaders, members and supporters.

PAS

Like it or not, after the 1999 general election, PAS has emerged to be the major counterweight to Umno in the Malay community. To put it simply, PAS has rather skilfully exploited the weaknesses, real or perceived, of Umno especially since September 1998.

Legally formed in 1951, PAS was originally a splinter group of discontented clergies and some left-wingers of Malay nationalism. It attempted to outdo Umno on the ethno-nationalist platform with some successes in Kelantan and Trengganu in the late 1950s and 1960s, but in 1974, it joined the ruling National Front to become a member of the coalition government.

However, in 1978, it left the National Front as well as the government. In the early 1980s, its top leadership was taken over by a more Islamic core led by the late Fadzil Noor, Abdul Haji Hadi Awang and Nik Aziz. Three of them are *ulama* or religious scholars or theologians. Since then, the party has also been undergoing ideological transformation, progressively turning itself from the platform of Malay ethno-nationalism to Islamism or political Islam.

Organisationally, it also began to build up grass-root organisations not only for electoral, but also for educational, missionary and community self-help purposes, especially in the rural areas or the Malay/Muslim heartland.

Coincident with the global rise of Islamic consciousness in politics sparked off by the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, PAS made headway under its new leadership.

However, from 1980 to mid-1990s, the very rural nature or orientation of its organisation and leadership imposed a limitation to its appeal to the more urban and educated Malays. The tide changed in the immediate aftermath of the sacking and detention of Anwar Ibrahim: many Umno members and supporters who resented left the party and joined PAS in protest. They included many urban, English-speaking and tertiary-educated professionals and intellectuals, such as Dr Hassan Ali and Kamaruddin Jaafar.

Between September 1998 and April 1999, there was no real alternative to Umno yet in the Malay community. The collective sense of shock, outrage and sudden disenchantment also called for faith-based politics. In any case, this injection of a new socio-economic element into PAS seems to have some intra-party transformative effects: it has become more self-confident in public debates and national discourses, and more accommodative to the hopes and aspirations of non-Malays, especially in the fields of vernacular education, ethnic cultures and non-racial approach to poverty eradication.

However, for a period of time after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in Washington D.C. and New York, PAS's image also seemed to have suffered from the massive fear on the part of non-Muslims and even some Muslims. The fear may have receded to a certain degree but the anxiety of non-Muslims and even some Muslims about its repeated declaration of the intention of setting up an "Islamic State", remains. What further compound the image problem of PAS among non-Muslims and some Muslims alike are some controversial remarks reportedly made by its theologians or religious scholars (*ulama*) on some social issues, such as public morality.

To be fair, it must also be pointed out that, despite its ups and downs in electoral performance as well as political rhetoric on both the ethno-nationalist (in the

past) and Islamic platforms, PAS has always been operating within the frameworks of parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy.

Keadilan/PRM

Immediately after the sacking and detention of Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998, there was an idea that his supporters should join the PRM (*Parti Rakyat Malaysia* or Malaysian People's Party) *en masse* to continue their political struggle. Some did join PRM but it seems that the majority finally opted to set up a new party named the National Justice Party (*Keadilan*).

In term of physical age, PRM is certainly the older of the two parties. Formed in 1955 as an anti-colonial and democratic leftist party, the Malay-predominated PRM has been rather consistent in its policy of opening up its leadership and membership to all ethnic communities. It also had its successful days in the early and mid-1960s when in alliance with the Chinese-based Labour Party, controlled some parliamentary, state and local government council seats. However, it began to decline electorally in the late 1960s as the combined results of state repression and popular rejection of its radicalism, real or perceived.

Although it has not won any parliamentary or state seats since 1969, it remains in existence and has even managed to attract some professionals and intellectuals of all ethnic communities, especially after 1986. To some Malaysian youths who are disenchanted with what they perceive as communal, racial, religious or realist politics, PRM represents or symbolises what they regards as idealism and multiculturalism.

Keadilan is the newest Malay-based party that also opens its leadership and membership to non-Malays. Inaugurated in April 1999 as “the container” (*wadah*) of the *reformasi* movement, it is more mass-based than PRM although it is still tiny as compared to Umno or PAS. Often criticised as a single-issue party that only campaigns for the release of Anwar Ibrahim, it has, however, been argued by supporters that it provides a “Third Way” for many Malays who are resentful of Umno but who also wish to keep an ideological distance from PAS.

Also, often criticised for not being active in the media scene on public debates, Keadilan seems, however, to have attracted a significant number of members,

supporters and well-wishers to some of its grass-root functions, especially in the northern states of Perak and Penang.

Despite its newness and seemingly lack of numerical strength *vis-à-vis* Umno and PAS, Keadilan is regarded as “bridges” between PAS and the non-Muslims, and between the opposition to the international community.

The impending merger between Keadilan and PRM is certainly a rather significant development in the Malay and Malaysian politics in the transition because it will consolidate the political strength of Malay-based multiethnic political forces *vis-à-vis* Umno and PAS.

Conclusion: A Non-Malay Assessment of the Transition

There are many and varied non-Malay responses, based on different interests, values and a combinations of both, to “the political transition” in Malaysia and the development of Malay or Malay-based politics.

First and foremost is their different attitude towards Umno, PAS and Keadilan/PRM.

While Umno is still generally perceived to be a relatively moderate and tolerable *status quo* power that ensures stability and economic development, many also feel that it needs to be counterbalanced by a stronger opposition. Among the supporters and well-wishers of the opposition, the majority seems to hope that the increased counterweight be provided by a unity of Keadilan/PRM and the Chinese-predominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), although there are also some, especially those in the Malay-predominated states of Kelantan, Trengganu, Kedah and Pahang, who do not mind to strengthen PAS as an opposition as well.

As for PAS, the non-Malay view is generally more ambivalent: on one hand, most of them realise that only PAS is strong enough to check and balance against Umno and also that PAS has moderated somehow, on the other, they are also wary of PAS intention of setting up an Islamic State which may jeopardise their religious rights and threaten their existing life styles or ways of life.

Most of the non-Malays, while not necessarily supportive of Keadilan/PRM with their votes, are, however, quite friendly to them; many may even vote for them or at least, wish them well. This is understandable because Keadilan/PRM is quite

popularly seen as “enlightened” and “progressive” Malay parties that respect and accept non-Malays as leaders and members.

As the process of political transition is clearly in a state of flux, it is difficult to characterise the situation in Malaysia in a bipolar paradigm between Malays one hand, and non-Malays on the other. There are many grey areas of attitude on the ground.

What is of paramount important is to keep the political discourses, discussions and exchanges open, free and socially responsible within the frameworks of parliamentary democracy, constitutional monarchy, universal human rights and the rule of law.

Last but not least is the often-overlooked fact that, despite their ideological differences and political competition and sometime controversial rhetoric, Umno, PAS and Keadilan/PRM have generally provided legal, constitutional, open and responsible leadership to the Malays who are almost all Muslims and who form the majority among the Malaysian population and voters.

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