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## **Fractured Society at a Crossroads**

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MALAYSIAN politics is race-based, and its major parties survive on the claim of being the champion of a race. This provides for an uneasy society.

Not only is there a steady — though far from static — nominal standoff between the race-based parties constituting the ruling Barisan Nasional, the contention between these governing parties and their opponents is frozen in an endless pillow fight.

The side in power insists that race-based politics carried out within the magically-tolerant world of the coalition guarantees national unity and growth. The other insists that issues-consciousness will save the country from growing dissatisfaction, corruption, governmental incompetence and biases in the distribution of wealth and opportunity.

In many relevant ways, this situation is reminiscent of the experience of countries in which the national discourse was based on clearly-chiselled dualisms.

The Chinese Communist Party, for example, ruled the land the way it won the war — through a fixation with foreign threats and by nurturing a class fetish. At the end of the day, the decisive criterion was economic growth. When poverty had spread far enough and fear had become a daily experience, a new way had to be tried. Mr Deng Xiaoping replaced the late Mao Zedong's preference for internal struggle with economic pragmatism, and broke the country's addiction to Marxist terminology.

Since Maoism took things to the extreme and in the end even entertained the insanity of eradicating the country's historical legacy of any perceived trace of class exploitation, it bankrupted the class paradigm. Mr Deng's "capitalist road" became the only promising way out, and made economic wealth the only criterion of social success.

While modern China was born into a world of international class struggle in 1949, Malaysia was born eight years later into a race paradigm, overtly opposed to the class paradigm of Marxism being preached by its own communist guerrillas.

In Malaysia, a “social contract” between the opposing races, and not the opposing classes, was reached in the run-up to Merdeka in 1957. This was motivated to a large extent by the need, especially felt by the retreating British, to cut off support to the communists.

The criteria for the success of this “social contract” — still proclaimed over 50 years later by the ruling coalition as the basis for political stability — are economic growth and inter-ethnic peace. Non-Malays were granted citizenship rights on the condition that they recognised the special position of the Malays due them for being badly handicapped by the colonial economy.

The New Economic Policy (NEP), which was implemented from 1970, tried to combine leftist and rightist considerations, and is aimed at fighting poverty and breaking racial economic patterns as well as reaffirming in concrete terms the contingent special position of the Malays that was being transformed into essentialist Malay rights.

As a leftist policy, the NEP’s success depended on the eradication of poverty and dismantling of the economic basis for inter-ethnic strife. As the rightist policy that it seems to have become, its success is expressed through the acceptance of Malay ethnocentrism.

There are lessons to be learned through a comparison of Malaysia’s national solutions with those of others. As an extreme, ethnocentrism will — just like Maoism — lead to a bankruptcy of thought, where the mere belonging to the sanctioned category (*bumiputera* in Malaysia, and proletarian in Maoist China) decides all matters.

The weakness of the contractual peace model lies in the fact that it succeeds by moulding society into an unchanging pattern. However, this pattern is only apparently unchanging. In reality, positions between the classes, or the races, do keep changing.

What we have in Malaysia is a fractured society kept in a state of apparent peace through a “social contract” among the races which in practice and over time favours one party over the others. This can succeed for a time, until the inferior work ethic that is bound to be created will finally make the country uncompetitive.

Malaysia is at a crossroads. After four years of indecisive reforms under Datuk Seri Abdullah, after almost 40 years of race-based affirmative action, and after 50 years of a supposed and unclear “social contract” between the races, Malaysia’s political discourse is marked by conflict and superficiality.

The national discourse based on race is nearing bankruptcy, and the “harmony” of the “social contract” is proving to be illusory.

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