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Multi-racialism by default

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Malaysia does have a veritable history of multi-racialism. It seems strange to have to state this, given how the whole region has always formed part of an important trade route, and how its most important urban centres have always been entrepot ports.

Indeed, why else would an endless flow of traders, warriors, pirates, missionaries and workers have gravitated to the area over the centuries? These included a colourful traffic of Indians, Arabs,

Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, English and Japanese; and we are not even mentioning the endlessly migrating peoples found within the archipelago.

Ethno-nationalists may call this flux a common curse, others may call it a boundless blessing. Whatever the case, this human complexity is what makes the place unique.

Geography does decide human relations. Let us look at the modern history of Malaysia to see how this is so.

In late 1945, the British returned to the region after the Second World War. They felt battered and embarrassed, and therefore had a great need to re-exert authority and to show some initiative.

They decided to implement the Malayan Union programme in 1946. This caused an uproar and led to the founding of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Shocked by the strength of the resistance to their initiative, the British sat down to talk to Malay leaders, and came up with the Federation of Malaya plan in 1948.

However, by 1950, Umno's founder, the highly respected Menteri Besar of Johor state, Onn Ja'afar, had come to realise that a Malay-only Umno was an over-reaction to the haphazard move made by the British.

No stable polity could be built around an agenda as narrow as mere racial defence, especially in an area marked by ethnic and religious heterogeneity.

Seeing how Umno limited its own possibilities by being basically a defence mechanism for normative Malays, he decided to put his position at risk, and demanded of his followers that the party abandon racial exclusivism as its *raison d'etre*. This failed, and he had to leave the party.

The logic of Umno as the defender of normative Malays lived on under its new president Tunku Abdul Rahman. The phenomenon of Umno led to at least two reactions where political organisations are concerned.

Firstly and more immediately, other parties came into being to defend each their normative ethnicity. The best examples of these are, of course, the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) and the Malayan Chinese Organisation (MCA), and also the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party.

Through the innovative grouping of the Alliance of 1952, where three races were represented by three parties working together as one independence-seeking party, the racialist logic of Umno, MCA and MIC managed to secure a peaceful transition from colonialism to nationalism.

This success endowed the three racialist parties with an authority and a legitimacy that nourish them until this day. Perhaps for the MIC, and to a slightly lesser extent the MCA, this reservoir of goodwill ran out on March 8 this year. Umno seems more able to hold its ground, at least for some time yet.

The second and more continual reaction to the phenomenon of Umno is parties propounding multi-racialism formed over the next six decades.

The first of these was Onn Ja'afar's Independence of Malaya Party, founded already in 1950. Since then, a string of others has appeared, such as the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) that was a spinoff of Singapore's People's Action Party, the Labour Party of Malaya, the People's Progressive Party, and the United Democratic Party, just to name a few. The latest of these is Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR).

These two political solutions to the multi-racialism of the region - one congealed into an unchanging form five decades ago, and the other a flexible phenomenon - remain at loggerheads till this day.

Put this way, the Alliance discourse appears to be a short-term solution that has become a long-term problem. Significantly, they were all formed before independence in 1957.

As Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, the late deputy prime minister and stalwart of Umno who died in 1973, used to think when contemplating policy, Malaysia has to recognise multi-racialism because it has no other choice. Multi-racialism in the region is not an ideology, it is a given state of affairs.

Put more precisely, Malaysia - and its nation-state neighbours for that matter - has to live with ethnic and religious pluralism by default. It cannot escape the historical cosmopolitanism of its urban centres, and it cannot achieve lasting stability unless its policies accept this one simple fact.

The nationalism of the anti-colonial period has understandably created a mentality that is both defensive and racial in character. What is now needed is for peoples and

politicians in the region to transcend that stage and adopt a trade-route cosmopolitanism that is more in keeping with the given human and economic conditions of the region.

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