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## **Time for Umno to rise above ethnic politics**

**By Ooi Kee Beng**

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THINGS that succeed become one of two things. They either face irrelevance or they continue their existence as an unquestioned configuring backdrop. Normally, they do a bit of both, because success is often only partial.

Political relations between ethnic groups in Malaysia had already taken the form of ethnic bargains in the early 1950s. It proved to be a successful way of winning independence, given the conditions of the day. Ethnic relations were fragile, British decolonisation was caught up in damage control and the local communists had taken to armed resistance.

The Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) was founded with much encouragement from the British, both to provide the local Chinese with a political alternative that was not obviously tied to mainland Chinese politics and to create a Chinese-supported partner for the Malay-supported United Malays National Organisation (Umno). Independence was aided by such a clearly defined inter-ethnic structure.

Following the elections and riots of 1969, the power balance between the ethnic groups and their political representatives veered strongly to accommodate what came to be called the Malay Agenda. Government policies after 1971 were all configured strongly by the programme of the Malay nationalists to advance the socio-political and socio-economic role and status of the Malay community.

The expansion of the ruling Alliance coalition to become Barisan Nasional (BN) also meant a strengthening of Umno's hegemonic status. This also meant that the MCA's status and influence were weakened.

In many ways, this New Economic Policy succeeded. This is commonly described through the welcome emergence of the Malay middle class and the Melayu Baru. Although the NEP ended in 1990, it lived on in practice and in policy in various forms.

However, privatisation and the radical changes in the foreign policy discourse of the Mahathir years, together with the overall economic success of the decade preceding the 1997 to 1998 financial crisis, altered the conditions for inter-ethnic relations.

A broadly held wish to move beyond ethnocentrism as the decisive political and social discourse became more and more obvious throughout the later Mahathir period. The rise of non-governmental organisations intimated that ethnocentric politics were diminishing in importance.

This trend gained dramatic expression when former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim's refusal to disappear quietly from the political scene in September 1998 served the population with suddenly increased public space. Despite his subsequent removal from the scene, the 1999 general election saw Barisan Alternatif give Umno and the BN a sobering wake-up call.

Apparently, it was Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), and not its partners Keadilan or the Democratic Action Party, that gained decisive ground. This also signalled that Malaysian politics had now become largely an intra-Malay matter.

Since then, Umno, pragmatic and flexible as always, and somewhat aided by the political aftermath of 9/11, has regained both the political and moral high ground from PAS in all the states except Kelantan.

The March 2004 general election gave the BN, Umno and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi the largest mandate it had ever had, with PAS the main loser.

The shift from inter-ethnic balance to Umno hegemony over the years thus led to Malaysian politics becoming centred on intra-Malay leadership, and by extension, to the issue of Islamisation. What this has led to, where non-Malay politics are concerned, is the marginalisation - or the ironic de-politicisation - of ethnicity-based Chinese and Indian political parties and their politicians.

The success of Umno has not led to its own irrelevance, but to the irrelevance of its partners in the erstwhile politics of symmetric ethnic balance.

This can be observed in the discussion now underway in Malaysia about the MCA's present and future role. Picking up on the debate that had been running in Malaysian Chinese newspapers since October, last's month's Aliran magazine joined the fray with articles by Mr Francis Loh and Mr Tan Lee Ooi calling for the MCA to return to politics.

No doubt, being an ethnicity-based party in a political scenario where all references to ethnicity and religion are sensitive could not have been easy, and must have left the MCA paranoid and limp.

The strategy that it seemed to have developed over the years was to leave high-power politics well enough alone and to concentrate on economics in its wider contexts, which of course included education. The founding of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman in 2002 and MCA's present Lifelong Learning campaign attest to this.

Perhaps it would be wiser to let the MCA submerge itself into civil society where it can do some tangible good. In a BN where Umno reigns supreme, the MCA lacks the ambition to be anything other than what it had become - 'an extension and instrument of the state so as to assist in maintaining the status quo and in supplementing the delivery of public works and services', as Mr Loh put it.

The political trend, as has been argued, is in favour of issues transcending ethnicity. This in itself is a result of the success of the Malay Agenda, which was aided to some extent by global dynamics. The apparatus of ethnocentric politics - or at least the ethnocentric tenor of the establishment - is showing signs of irrelevance and should perhaps be allowed to remain a backdrop.

Tellingly, even the Islam Hadhari initiative started by Umno under Datuk Seri Abdullah in January last year avoided any mention of ethnicity.

Given the power it presently enjoys, a responsible tactic for Umno to adopt as part of a long-term policy would be to transcend ethnocentric politics on its own, and perhaps even transform itself in the process into a party for Malaysians, and not only Malays.

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