



MALAYSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY: CONTINUING CONTESTATION

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Malaysian identity continues to be contested. The victory of Pakatan Harapan (the Alliance of Hope, PH in Malay, that won the 2018 general election and returned Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to power) has not resolved the issue. Instead it has made the contestation more open. This can only be resolved when all parties subscribe to the idea of a civic nation. As Malaysian political culture is ingrained in the racial politics practiced in the country over the last 70 years, it is likely to change only gradually. Much will hinge on the effort of the PH government and civil society to entrench the civic nation conception and the outcome of the next general election.

The stunning victory of the PH coalition in general election 14 and the commitment of its key constituent parties to the idea of a civic nation-state brought about an abrupt end to the UMNO project of an ethnic nation-state. However, the victory of the PH coalition has not fully resolved the issue but has made the contestation more open. UMNO, now the primary opposition party in Parliament, remains committed to the idea of a Malay nation-state in which non-Malay citizenship will be tolerated but with Malays occupying the dominant position in government.

Human Resource Minister Kulasegaran may have initiated the recent round of introspection by stating that the Hindus predate the Malay-Muslim in Malaysia and that as the original people of the country, Indians cannot be considered “Pendatang.” The youth

Wing of UMNO responded to this by calling for his removal from the Cabinet. In addition, UMNO Youth has opposed recognition of the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) on the ground that it will undermine the position of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language.

UMNO sees its primary role as protecting Malay-Muslim rights and securing their dominant position in the country. Thus, it has opposed appointment of non-Malays as attorney general and chief justice of the Supreme Court. And, former Prime Minister and former UMNO President Najib Razak has argued that Malays are being sidelined in their own country.

It is pertinent to note that the previous UMNO-led government appears to have funded a study to bolster the claim that Malays are the natives of the country and to support the history taught in schools that begins the conversion of Parameswara to Islam and his rule of the Malacca sultanate from 1402-1414. Marina Mahathir recently weighed in on this issue with a statement that the Chinese and Indians were the original peoples and that the Malays were the *pendatang* (foreign immigrants).

It is difficult to ascertain who were the original inhabitants of the territory that is now Malaysia but in recent history the British colonial administration entered into agreements with Malay rulers whom it believed had titles to their respective states. The sultans played a key role in the formation of Malaya. That the British considered the Malays the natives of the land is clear. Nevertheless, the British colonial authority advanced the Malayan Union proposal that would have granted equal political status to all citizens of the proposed country. UMNO was formed to oppose that proposal on the ground that, as the native people of the country, Malays would be disadvantaged.

In opposing continued British rule and seeking independence for Malaya, UMNO forged an alliance with the Malayan Chinese Association and the Malayan Indian Congress. In that process, the Malay leaders agreed to grant citizenship rights to Chinese and Indians resident in Malaya in return for certain rights and privileges for Malays and Islam. UMNO has since established itself as the supreme party within

the Alliance and later the Barisan Nasional coalition. In other words, the Malays were considered the natives of the land but the intention at the time of Malayan independence was clearly to provide political equality to all citizens of the country.

The key takeaway here is that no community has indefinite claim to territory and thus the question as to who the original inhabitants of the territory are/were is of little or no consequence. All citizens of the country have equal rights, obligations, and privileges especially in Malaysia where all racial groups have made important contributions to the establishment and development of the country.

Although China and India are independent countries, it cannot be inferred that Chinese and Indian Malaysians consider these to be their home countries or that they can return to them at will. Many have little or no connection to those countries. Malaysia is their home and they cannot forever accept second-class status in their home country, especially when several key Malay leaders are relatively recent arrivals. Furthermore, historically based affirmative action does not respect the human rights of the present people. Why should they suffer for the wrongdoings of their ancestors? Group-based affirmative action would also seem to benefit recent immigrants whose ancestors may not have suffered the wrongdoings that affirmative action is intended to address.

Based on the principle of one person, one vote, Malaya and later Malaysia were intended to be civic nation-states in which all citizens had equal political rights, opportunities, and responsibilities. UMNO's effort to forge a Malay ethnic nation-state in Malaya and later Malaysia ran contrary to understandings reached in 1957 and 1963.

Malaysian identity has become the object of contention between two major political forces: one forming the government and the other in opposition. Despite minor differences, PH seems committed to a civic nation conception in which all citizens would have equal share in opportunities and obligations while UMNO is committed to an ethnic Malay nation-state in which Malays hold the dominant position in government. An ethnic nation-state by definition, encourages zero-sum competition. It invariably

involves domination and destruction of minority nations. Ethnic nation-making invokes race, religion and language in negative fashion. Secularism, pluralism and liberalism become dirty words and concepts. Instead of building loyalty to the nation and state from minority ethnic groups, it encourages them to advocate political alternatives. Political development in the country comes to a grinding halt, and are replaced by "do or die battles" that have the potential to undermine stability and democracy in the country.

In contrast, the civic nation-state conception encourages positive win-win competition and cooperation. The energy of all citizens can be harnessed and channeled toward common national purposes. Greater unity and harmony can prevail. The idea of a civic nation-state will enable multiethnic and multireligious societies like Malaysia to exist without fear of violent fragmentation. Future Singapores can be avoided and the political map of Malaysia would be more stable. Those who want to secede will have peaceful options like greater authority and autonomy within the existing Federation.

A civic nation state does not open the door to secession and more new states. By allowing different groups to stay together, it prevents further secessions and stabilizes the political map. Despite the right to secede peacefully, the Scottish people and the Quebecois, for example, have opted to remain in the United Kingdom and Canada respectively demonstrating political development and maturity in these countries.

To facilitate such political development in Malaysia, UMNO must change its stance on the basis of the Malaysian nation, and indeed UMNO has missed an important opportunity to make sweeping changes. At the last UMNO presidential election held on June 30, 2018 it elected Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who is committed to regaining supremacy for UMNO within BN and for Malays in Malaysia. He defeated Khairy Jamaluddin who seemed intent on opening UMNO to non-Malays. But the issue is not just opening UMNO membership to non-Malays but a commitment to move toward a civic nation-state in which all citizens would be equal. Dato Onn, the founder and first president of UMNO, realized that a viable Malaya

must rest on a civic conception. Though he may have lost the battle 70 years ago, he and his idea of civic nation in which all citizens have equal stake remain very relevant. It is not too late for UMNO to move in that direction.

It will take time for UMNO to change its policy. Defeat in the next GE would highlight to that party that it is out of step with the population and that it has to change course on national identity. Until that happens, the basis for the Malaysian nation will continue to be contested. An UMNO victory in the next election would put the civic nation-state project in jeopardy. The PH government and civil society must do their utmost to realize that ideal when in power. That will not be easy; changing government, as difficult as it was, may seem relatively easy in comparison.

Moving toward a civic nation in which all citizens are equal would avoid future Singapores. Ethnicity would continue to be important but not determining. The present political map can be maintained. Though enjoying a high degree of autonomy Sabah and Sarawak would continue to be part of Malaysia. Malays would not be sidelined. Affirmative action for the poor and less educated of all ethnicities should remain a high priority in building a strong, united nation drawing on the talents of all of Malaysia's citizenry.

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