

## VISIONS WITHOUT HEAT: THE SEARCH FOR A MALAYSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY, 1948-1990

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### Introduction

After Perak signed the Pangkor Treaty in 1874, the Malay peninsula, with growing British presence, began to show signs of modernization. For instance, a Western system of administration was introduced. With the establishment of plantation agriculture and a large-scale tin industry, an export economy was initiated. There were also notable infrastructural developments, such as the installment of a modern communication system, which changed the landscape of the peninsula.

Along with the process of modernization, one of the most pronounced social changes was the tremendous drastic influx of immigrant peoples into Malaya. This change was closely related to a major objective of British colonial rule in Malaya, which was to maximize economic profits for the home country. Motivated by this objective and biased by their stereotypes, the British attempted to keep the Malays locked in their traditional societal structures. To the British, "Malays... were lazy, unwilling to work for wages and therefore could not be considered a potential pool of labour in the colonial economy" (Andaya 1981: 176). Accordingly, for tin mining enterprises and especially for the booming rubber industry, the British imported Chinese and Indian migrant laborers, who were assumably more industrious. As a consequence, "British Malaya" became a multi-ethnic society in the 1920s.

In a plural society "with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately within the same political unit" (Furnivall 1948: 304), the British pro-Malay policy, based on the idea that "Malaya belongs to the Malays" (non-Malays are considered unpermanent inhabitants), deliberately kept the traditional Malay authority intact, which prevented the Malays from diversifying their targets for inspiring *semangat kemelayuan* (the spirit or will-power of national unity among Malays) or "Malay nationalism." Under this condition, although the rise of *semangat*

*kemelayuan* intrinsically rejected foreign threats in the development of Malay society, it progressed principally because of ethnic identity, rather than anti-colonial agitations until 1948 (Soh 1993). As a result, the development of *semangat kemelayuan* signified the ripening of a communal outlook within the Malay society. A strong communal feeling among the Malays continued to be a great obstacle in the nation-building process of postwar, multi-ethnic Malaya (Malaysia since 1963).

This study attempts to understand Malay political leaders' efforts to create a Malaysian national identity during the period between 1948 and 1990, focusing principally on their visions for the preservation of inter-communal unity. Through investigating the hidden dynamics behind social changes overlooked by theory-based studies of contemporary issues, this paper also tries to better understand some of the social, economic, and political aspects of post-independence Malaysia. There are three key questions this study investigates: What were the Malay leaders' visions for the creation of a Malaysian national identity? How did they implement these during the past 43 years? Were their dreams to create a truly united nation fulfilled?

## **Prelude to the Search: Two Visions, 1948-57**

### *British Attitudes toward Malaya's Independence*

For most Malays, the Federation Agreement of 1948 was a stepping stone for Malaya's eventual self-government, which was subsequently attained by the Malay victory in the struggle against the Malayan Union. Compared to the White Paper of 1946, there was no doubt that the new agreement entailed a clear call for Malay political independence. Malay intellectuals were looked upon to envision their people's political freedom in detail.

With regard to Malaya's independence, Sir Henry Gurney, the High Commissioner, said that "Any forecast of the political future of the Federation must start with some hypothesis as to the likelihood of the Chinese and Malays forgetting their differences to the extent of political integration of the two races... it [is] difficult to discern any common objective capable of actually achieving this miracle..."<sup>1</sup> As indicated, the

<sup>1</sup> "Letter from Sir Henry Gurney to Mr. Paskin," (August 25, 1949). Colonial Office (CO) 537/4741.

attainment of Malaya's independence depended upon the political integration of the Malays and the Chinese through inter-racial harmony. Obviously, as long as this condition was not met, realization of self-government would be gradual. Growth of Malay national awareness meant heightened racial tensions, making the task of creating inter-communal unity nearly impossible.

Meanwhile, the communist insurrection of June 1948 made this formidable task even more unlikely, since it intensified the racial enmity between the two major communal groups in Malaya. However, the communist revolt turned out to be a mixed blessing for the peaceful achievement of the Malaya's independence. First, the declaration of the Emergency was followed by repressive measures against anti-British political organizations and figures. This led to the elimination of two revolutionary ideals for the independence of Malaya. The communist armed revolt was put down, frustrating the ultimate goal of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP)—a "New Democratic" Malaya. In addition, with the Malay Nationalist Party (MNP)'s dissolution, the force behind Malaya's independence within Greater Malaya eventually died.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, in the wake of the communist armed revolt, the only way possible for Malaya to gain independence was a constitutional struggle.

Second, at the end of 1948, Sir Henry Gurney observed that the British battle against communism in Malaya was a political war in which the "hearts and minds" of the people should be won over. The British government introduced a new administrative approach to the Chinese by encouraging their leaders to form a political organization that would help bridge the gap between the British administration and the Chinese community. This organization consequently became the rallying point for the community against the threat of the communists.<sup>3</sup> This approach entailed setting up the Communities Liaison Committee (CLC), a group of influential representatives from different communities that came together in order to solve various political problems of Malaya in April 1949.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> With the Emergency Regulations declared on June 18, 1948, the British government proscribed the Malayan Communist Party and its two front organizations, the New Democratic Youth League and the MPAJA ex-Comrades Association. The *Ikatan Pembela Tanah Ayer*, which was supposed to succeed the *Angkatan Pemuda Insaf* was also banned. Despite the arrest of its president, Ishak Haji Muhammad, and many other key leaders, the MNP itself was not proscribed immediately. The party continued to function under an acting president, Mohamed Taha Kalu in Singapore. Nevertheless, under the Emergency Regulations, the MNP was unable to function and eventually faded into political oblivion after it was dissolved at the end of April, 1950 (For details on this subject, see Firdaus 1985).

<sup>3</sup> "The Chinese and the Emergency," (n.d.). CO 537/4741.

<sup>4</sup> "The Communities Liaison Committee," (n.d.). CO 537/4741.

Under these new political changes, the two great architects of statehood, Dato Onn bin Jaafar (hereafter Dato) and Tunku Abdul Rahman (hereafter Tunku) took charge of the seemingly impossible task and eventually succeeded in carving out independence for Malaya.

*Dato Onn bin Jaafar's Vision, 1948-51*

When the negotiations with the British on the Federation Constitution entered the final stages, Dato already envisioned the achievement of Malaya's independence. In his speech at the General Assembly of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) held on September 2, 1947, Dato implicitly expressed this ideal.

Though the task of fighting the Malayan Union is nearly complete, the Malays must be aware of the fact that it is only the beginning of our struggle. There are many other things that the Malays must do. The UMNO has been formed not only for the purpose of opposing the Malayan Union, but also to fight against the Malays themselves. We have to find ways and means of how we shall change the habits and way of life of the Malays in order to enable to realise their duties and responsibilities (*Minutes of the General Assembly of UMNO: September 2, 1947*).

Stated above, "The beginning of our struggle" meant that UMNO would continue its struggle for independence after its struggle against the Malayan Union was over. If this was the case, how would the organization achieve its ultimate goal? Dato believed that the Malays could not achieve independence without the cooperation of the non-Malays. Accordingly, "to fight against the Malays themselves" and "We have to find ways and means of how we shall change the habits and way of life of the Malays" implied that the integration of the two major communities of Malaya would have to occur. Under the UMNO, "their duties and responsibilities" were to foster a true Malayan vision in their community. In short, Dato intended to establish the ideal of inter-communal unity as the solid ground on which to strive for independence, restructuring Malay society in the process.

For the attainment of this, Dato made strenuous efforts in both the CLC and the UMNO. Nevertheless, he failed to obtain any concrete results for this ideal until he left UMNO and set up a new inter-communal party, the Independence of Malay Party (IMP) in September 1951. This was because his choice of tactics was unrealistic in creating an inter-communal unity. His strategy for Malayan unity was to nurture a Malayan outlook among the Malay population as an alternative, thus replacing their communalism.

The Malays were urged to give up their traditional rights and privileges and merge with the non-Malays. This move by Dato alarmed many leaders of UMNO as inappropriate. It was obvious that if they accepted Dato's ideal, the Malay race would be endangered. By and large, the leaders believed that the Malays were not prepared to adopt Dato's strategy in light of their economic and educational weaknesses. Furthermore, given the conviction among the Malays that their special privileges were a valuable return on their struggle against the Malayan Union, Dato's strategy offered no immediate benefits, making it difficult to accept. Thus, Dato's strategy for inter-communal unity could have been achieved only through a revolution in Malay thought.

Dato must have been aware of how strongly communalism had taken root within the Malay community. Nevertheless, perhaps combined with his individual political ambition as a national leader, his strong suspicion of the reluctant British attitude toward Malaya's independence prompted Dato to play for high stakes for this unattainable prize. Also, it is possible that he took his popularity among the Malays for granted. At any event, Dato's drive to create a true sense of a Malayan identity within the Malay community turned out to be futile. As long as he stuck to the ideal in the IMP, Dato could not gain strong support among the Malays.

Though Dato failed to appreciate the depth of Malay communalism, his dream of the achievement of independence did not fade away. Indeed, the ideal of inter-communal unity was first generated and implemented by him as an instrument to achieve Malaya's independence. Since Dato left the UMNO without any concrete results to show for his various efforts, his dream of independence continued to be pursued by the UMNO under the new leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman, albeit the ways and means were different.

#### *Tunku Abdul Rahman's Vision, 1951-57*

Shortly after Dato resigned from the presidency of the UMNO, Tunku Abdul Rahman, a loyal prince with little political experience took charge of the UMNO's presidency in 1951. In an effort to elevate the organization's weak political status, the new leader blasted his predecessor's non-communal outlook, offering to reinstate the historical claim of special privileges for the Malays. In his inaugural speech, Tunku defended this position.

This is a Malay country, and privileges should be given to the Malays... What will

become of the Malays if we concede every time to the insatiable demands of the other races?... Some people say independence should be handed to "Malayans." Who are these "Malayans"? The Malays will decide who the "Malayans" should be... The Malay Rulers should consider what will happen if this country is handed to "Malayans"; it is certain that their palaces will be torn down... The independence of this country must be handed over to us with all possible speed... We shall destroy the Federation Agreement in the same way we destroyed the Malayan Union five years ago, and establish instead freedom for our people (Miller 1982: 113-114).

Tunku however did not ignore the possibility that Dato's IMP might attract the support of a large portion of the people in Malaya. Thus he did not rule out the possibility of cooperation between the Malays and the non-Malays.

For two hundred years, the Malays had lived in harmony with their non-Malays neighbours. If there was any misunderstanding, it was the work of outsiders... [the greatest wish of the Malays was] to secure and to safeguard the peace of the country, and to guarantee the safety of all communities the bond of friendship and goodwill of the communities living here (Yusof 1967: 171).

In these remarks, one can trace Tunku's ideal for the achievement of Malaya's independence. He ensured that the UMNO would never give up its communal outlook as a Malay political organization, protecting the traditional interests and privileges of the Malays. He also declared that its main goal was to strive for Malaya's independence, and that sovereignty should be handed over to the Malays. At the same time, Tunku did not forget to include that the Malays needed the cooperation of non-Malays to achieve independence. However, given his strong communalistic attitude, the cooperation would have a precondition; namely the non-interference of non-Malays in the rights and privileges of the Malays. Therefore, although Tunku also intended to take advantage of the rhetoric of inter-communal unity for independence, his methods to secure the ideal differed from Dato's. Whereas Dato sought to achieve the ideal through integrating the Malays and non-Malays, Tunku attempted it through an alliance. Dato's fusion aimed at the creation of a true sense of Malayan consciousness and believed that a nation must be created first before independence could occur. In his view, it would be possible only when the Malays were willing to give up their traditional rights and privileges. In contrast, Tunku's alliance aimed at the establishment of the peaceful co-existence of all communities living in Malaya and implied that independence must come first before a nation could be established. Tunku

firmly believed that Malay historical claims must not be sacrificed in the course of the achievement of independence because Malaya originally was a Malay country. Thus, compared to Dato's approach, Tunku's appeared a more realistic strategy for the Malayan situation.

Like Dato, Tan Cheng Lock had a strong desire to integrate the several races of Malaya into a single political community. However, it was obvious from the beginning that Tan Cheng Lock desired a gradual development of a Malayan consciousness. When Dato hastily challenged the Malay rulers on the question of Malayan nationality, the Chinese leader thought the move was unwise. Few would have openly attacked the deep-rooted communalism within the Malay community.

I thought it would be wiser to proceed by stages. The Malays have yet to concede the all-important point that Federal citizens must possess all the rights of citizenship, including entry for non-Malays into the Administration. Some of them still think that they might find it possible to open the citizenship door and so to wean the Chinese away from China and Chinese Consulates, while still confining certain privileges of citizenship to Malays only.<sup>5</sup>

While Tan Cheng Lock worked together with Dato in the CLC for inter-communal unity, the Chinese leader worried that the split among the Malays due to Dato's brazen move might have a disastrous effect on their efforts in the CLC. Thus, Tan Cheng Lock attempted to bring about a reconciliation between the Sultan of Johor and Dato, by sending letter to the sultan.<sup>6</sup> Daunted by Dato's behavior, Tan Cheng Lock, nevertheless, had no other prominent Malay partner in the common cause at the time to work with. Thus, his uneasiness with Dato resulted in a weakening of their coalition within the CLC.

When Dato announced the formation of the inter-communal party and the UMNO was reorganized under Tunku, the position of Tan Cheng Lock as the political leader of the Chinese community became crucial. As long as the Malay community by itself was not able to achieve independence, the two prominent Malay leaders attempted to pursue inter-communal unity as an instrument for autonomy. Tan Cheng Lock knew that his cooperation was critical for both the IMP and the new UMNO, since now he had the power of the deciding vote in the inter-communal politics of Malaya.

However, Tunku's strong communalistic attitude which excluded the

<sup>5</sup> "From Henry Gurney to J.J. Paskin," (December 31, 1949). CO 537/4741.

<sup>6</sup> "Savingram No. 86 from the High Commissioner," (December 16, 1949). CO 537/4741.

Chinese community forced Tan Cheng Lock to abandon a "wait and see" approach. Thus when Dato launched the IMP, the Chinese leader, together with the former members of the CLC, decided to support the newly established inter-communal party. Nevertheless, Tan Cheng Lock's personal discord toward Dato developed during the disputes over the Malayan Union and the Federation of Malaya (Means 1970: 134) as well as his uncertainty over Dato's hastiness on Malayan nationality destabilized the relationship between the two politicians, which made cementing the alliance between the MCA and the new IMP nearly impossible. When Henry Gurney was murdered in October 1951, one political observer noted the bad chemistry between the two leaders.

With his own high standing among the people, Gurney could probably have afforded to lay before the people a new idea of unity and get them to accept it. As it happened, when Gurney died Onn and Tan Cheng Lock were not yet close enough to be able to come together permanently (Miller 1982: 118).

In the meantime, when the local leaders of the UMNO and the MCA attempted to form their alliance for the municipal elections of Kuala Lumpur in early 1952, Tan Cheng Lock had a chance to reconsider the future of the Chinese community and the role he would play. While the central regime of the new UMNO and the MCA did not yet control their branches throughout Malaya, the UMNO-MCA alliance was formed under the initiative of the local branch leaders of the two organizations. Indeed, it had nothing to do with Tunku and Tan Cheng Lock (Khong 1984: 171). From the beginning, Tan Cheng Lock was surprised with this development. However, he decided to wait and see what would happen to the alliance after the elections. In his view, the elections was an opportunity to measure the popularity of the UMNO-MCA alliance and of the IMP among the voters of Malaya. When the alliance won a landslide victory, Tan Cheng Lock decided to shift his support from the IMP to the UMNO. When he withdrew his support from the inter-communal party, Dato's political fame dwindled, as did the IMP.

In subsequent local elections, Tan Cheng Lock was convinced that Dato was overconfident of the IMP's appeal to the Malays. There was no doubt that Dato's ideal of inter-communal unity was much more favorable to the Chinese community than Tunku's. However, given that no significant political development could be readily implemented without the majority support of the Malays, Tan Cheng Lock thought that Dato's push to develop Malayan consciousness among the populace was a bit idealistic



and unattainable in the near future. In spite of the UMNO's vehemence for the Malay special privileges, Tan Cheng Lock thought that an UMNO-MCA alliance based on political co-existence derived from a realistic appraisal of the Malayan socio-political situation at that time. When Tunku proposed a pan-Malayan alliance with the MCA, Tan Cheng Lock saw no pressing reason to reject the proposal.

As the UMNO-MCA coalition became stronger, the constitutional struggle for independence in Malaya took a new turn in the beginning of 1953. The British government could not restrain this political process as long as the alliance did not interfere in the struggle against the communists. When the High Commissioner announced that the elections for the Federal Legislative Council would be held in 1955, all the political parties in Malaya readied themselves to compete for the 52 seats of the council. During the elections, several changes occurred in the political scene. The UMNO-MCA alliance gained a new partner, the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) in December 1954. The dispersed pro-Indonesian intellectuals under the Emergency were incorporated into a new party, the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP). More conspicuously, for unknown reasons, Dato withdrew from the IMP and established the Parti Negara (National Party) in February 1954. Indeed, this new party was an outgrowth of the IMP-Mentri Besars' national conference.<sup>7</sup> Many leaders of the IMP moved into the Parti Negara. However, Dato's party differed from the IMP in some aspects. Unlike the IMP, the Parti Negara was not inter-communal. It was a Malay communal party that adopted the prime principle among the Malays during the protest against the Malayan Union—"Malaya belongs to the Malays."

The major contest between the UMNO-MIC alliance and the Parti Negara in the Federal elections held on July 27, 1955 ended with the Alliance's landslide victory.<sup>8</sup> It was clear that Dato's communal issues were anachronistic in the political climate of 1955.

As soon as the Alliance achieved its electoral victory, self-government

<sup>7</sup> It was national conference held under the sponsorship of the Mentri Besars on April 27, 1953. In addition to the IMP, several other minor organizations such as the Malayan Indian Congress, the Malayan Indian Association, the Selangor Pakistani Association and the Straits Chinese British Association were present at the conference. The IMP leaders expected that if the Mentri Besars sponsored the conference, it might be effective in securing significant Malay support. *Utusan Melayu* (April 29, 1953).

<sup>8</sup> Whereas the Alliance's candidate succeeded in winning 51 seats out of 52 in the contest, Dato Onn's Parti Negara failed to win even a single seat. The PMIP too one seat in Krian, Perak. Dato Onn himself lost even in his stronghold, Johor Bahru. Sulaiman obtained 8,745 votes while Dato Onn got only 2,802. *Utusan Melayu* (July 29, 1955).

and independence became central issues in the politics of Malaya. After the Second World War, the demand for independence in Malaya had been proclaimed by a minority of the Malay populace, usually referred to as the "leftists." Now the demand came from a majority, those who were on the side of inter-communal unity. In the General Assembly of the UMNO held in Kuala Lumpur during the Christmas holidays of 1955, which was the first general meeting of the organization since the Alliance took power in the Federation, the assembly resolved that "the date of full independence for this country, if possible, should not be later than 31st August, 1957" (Utusan Melayu: December 29, 1955). Full of hope for "Merdeka" among the great majority in Malaya, four representatives of the Malay rulers and four representatives of the Alliance left for London on January 1, 1956. In the "Merdeka talks" in London, between January and ended in February, vigorous efforts of Tunku and other Alliance leaders succeeded in obtaining autonomy for Malaya. The Alliance now became the government.

During the final phase of gaining independence, the Reid Commission was formed for the purpose of creating a constitutional framework for an independent Malaya. When the Commission prepared to produce its final report, various controversial communal issues like the special position of the Malays, language and citizenship caused disputes. In order to not only settle these issues but also recommend their policies to the Reid Commission, the Alliances released a memorandum. In the Alliance memorandum, the UMNO managed to secure the special position of the Malays and the adoption of only the Malay and the English language as official languages. Meanwhile, according to the principle of *jus soli*, whereby all those born in Malaya after independence would automatically become citizens, and other unrestrictive citizenship requirements, the MCA and MIC enabled most of the Chinese and the Indian population to acquire citizenship after independence. The Reid Commission adopted nearly all of the Alliance's position regarding these issues. When the final constitutional framework was accepted by the Conference of Rulers in June and the Legislative Council in August 1957, the Alliance government established an independent and sovereign state of Malaya within the Commonwealth of Nations on August 31, 1957.

Malaya eventually succeeded in her quest for nationhood. Independent Malaya was an epic advance over twelve years since the White Paper of 1946 first announced "eventual self-government of Malaya." It was a great masterpiece skillfully molded by the preeminent Malay leaders Dato Onn and Tunku Abdul Rahman who had personified Malay aspirations for

political freedom since the 1920s. Indeed, the movement for self-government and independence in Malaya had been propelled under the initiative of the Malays. As a result, while the non-Malays accepted the demands of the Malay community for the special position of the Malays and the Malay language, their cooperation to fight for independence through the inter-communal unity in the wake of the communist revolt was traded for their Malayan citizenship. Indeed, this short-term solution of the controversial issues was a strong reflection of the enduring principle—"Malaya belongs to the Malays."

In accordance with Tunku's realistic ideal, independence came first before the nation could be formed, thus assuring special privileges of the Malays. Consequently, this new nation was launched with the underlying communal threat that would hamper its fragile inter-communal unity. Now, as Dato had once earnestly attempted, the specific problem that politicians would face in independent Malaya was how to dilute the deep-rooted communalism and integrate different ethnic communities into a truly united identity.

## The Quest for a "New Malaysian," 1957-90

### *Tunku Abdul Rahman's Vision, 1957-69*

Since independence, the principal preoccupation of government leaders in Malaysia has been the creation of a united nation. With *Merdeka*, this formidable task was first entrusted to Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of the new nation. In order to more accurately understand Tunku's attempt at the restructuring of Malaysian society, it is necessary to examine his thinking on the preservation of inter-communal unity.

Basically, Tunku intended to maintain the inter-communal unity through a dualistic approach, as this passage from his memoirs makes clear.

With *Merdeka* we had to plan afresh for the well-being and happiness of the people. We had promised to preserve Malay rights and at the same time protect the legitimate interests of the other races, so we had to work hard to give the Malays in the rural areas all the help they deserved to improve the living standards and conditions, while at the same time encouraging commerce, trade and industry in every way to boost our national economy (Abdul 1977: 72).

Predictably, Tunku's approach was based upon the racial stereotypes

held by the British colonial government.

The Chinese are materialistic as a race and a practical minded people. Generally, they were not interested in local politics, they liked to live in places where law and order reigned and with a minimum of interference, so that they could go about their business, merely to make money. The Malays, on the other hand, are a simple and contented people, used to their own way of life, their distinctive traditions, their deep Islamic belief in God and the Hereafter, and respect for their Sultans. Sons of the soil and the sea, they lived close to nature in a bountiful land. Why bother to work so hard? "Allah will provide," they would say. So economically they could not hope to compete with the industrious morn-noon-and-night Chinese for whom the Hereafter is an extension of the present so the better off you are on earth the more so it will be in the world to come (Abdul 1977: 78-79).

Thus, Tunku concluded that "Chinese have no intention of taking over the country... [their] ambition is to do business... [they] are happy to leave politics and the administration of this country to the Malays..." (Abdul 1983: 21). On the other hand, he completely downplayed economic aspirations among the Malays. Apparently, Tunku was convinced that as long as their different ethnic characteristics were reasonably respected without interference from one another, a peaceful inter-communal unity would be maintained. Accordingly, one of the functions of the government was to protect this balance, strictly preserving the Malays in the rural sector and the Chinese in the urban or business sector. In his view, the best way to maintain this was to constitutionally protect the rural Malays, because they were indolent and vulnerable to non-Malay encroachment: "It was obvious... that the Malays might, without the protection of the Constitution, find themselves at a total loss in the only homeland they had. This eventually might well mean trouble as the outcome. And who wanted that?" (Abdul 1977: 79)

Tunku's dualism was manifested in many of his policies for the creation of a "new Malaysian," which signified the molding of "a new Malaysian citizen whose loyalty would be to the nation instead of a particular state or ethnic group" (Andaya 1981: 277). According to Tunku's interpretation, the "new Malaysian" idea should be achieved on the basis of "Malaya's traditional culture and heritage, meaning Malay language and culture" (Andaya 1981: 277). In return for this assimilation of the non-Malays to Malay traditional culture, the Malays would guarantee that the non-Malays would be able to freely engage in economic activities without any biased treatment.

In an effort to realize this ideal, Tunku implemented national language

and educational policies as the chief instruments. On March 3, 1967, the Malaysian Government passed a National Language Bill based on a provision of the Merdeka Constitution of 1957 that "after ten years Malay will be the sole official language" (Andaya 1981: 277). The government's educational policy was to have a uniform and nationalized educational system ensuring the dominance of the Malay language. In 1960, the Rahman Talib Report reasserted this policy which had been upheld in two previous reports, such as the Barnes Report of 1951 and the Razak Report of 1956 (Andaya 1981: 278).

Quite obviously, the Tunku believed that his dualistic arrangement would satisfy both the Malays and the Chinese. He expected that while the former would feel ethnic pride by the non-Malay adoption of the Malay language, the latter would endure the disintegration of their cultural heritage for economic advantages. However, the non-Malay campaign for the 1969 Federal elections that was principally colored by the issues of language and education signalled the failure of Tunku's arrangement in the creation of a truly united nation. In the campaign, the non-Malays' slogan was "equality, justice and equal opportunity for all." They vociferously wanted "an end to the Malays' special privileges" (Andaya 1981: 280). Furthermore, the May 13 ethnic disturbances proved the strength of communal threats underlying the uneasy balance between Malay political power and non-Malay economic power.

It seemed that in the jubilation of independence, Tunku was too optimistic about the future of the new nation to see the reality of the communal threat. In his *May 13, Before and After*, he wrote: "I frequently and openly said that I was the happiest Prime Minister in the world. On May 13th, however, I suddenly found that I was the unhappiest Prime Minister" (Abdul 1969: 6). Under political pressure, Tunku was replaced by Tun Abdul Razak (hereafter Tun) as Prime Minister in 1970. Like the downfall of Dato in the early 1950s, Tunku was forced to prematurely end his political career when he failed to grasp the reality of communal problems within Malay society.

#### *Tun Abdul Razak's and Mahathir bin Mohamad's Visions, 1970-90*

The new regime under Tun Abdul Razak initiated a new cultural, political and economic approach for the growth of a Malaysian national identity which has continued to the present-day. It discarded the colonial dualism implemented by Tunku, rejecting the divisions between the Malays and non-Malays. In its place, the regime introduced a new system

of sharing political and economic power.

In the cultural sphere, the government formulated a national ideology, *Rukunegara* (Articles of Faith of the State). It was formally proclaimed on August 31, 1970.

Our nation, Malaysia, being dedicated to achieving a greater unity of all her peoples; to maintaining a democratic way of life; to creating a just society in which the wealth of the nation shall be equitably shared; to ensuring a liberal approach to her rich and diverse cultural traditions; to building a progressive society which shall be oriented to modern science and technology;

We, her people, pledge our united efforts to attain those ends guided by these principles:

Belief in God  
Loyalty to King and Country  
Upholding the Constitution  
Rule of Law  
Good Behaviour and Morality  
(Andaya 1981: 281)

Ensuring a liberal approach to Malaysia's diverse cultural traditions, the new cultural measure implied that the government would reject the idea of assimilation—the transforming of everyone in Malaysia into a Malay. Instead, it emphasized “integration of the society into a ‘Malaysian’ identity” (Andaya 1981: 295).

In the political sphere, Tun's regime replaced the Alliance of Tunku with the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front). Shaharuddin Maaruf defines the new political system.

The *Barisan* functions like a huge power syndicate which opens its membership to any political party with some backing and power. Ideologies and issues matter little among its constituent parties. In essence, the *Barisan* is like a conference of warlords which allocates the political cake and its benefits according to the political strength and worth of each party... It is a gathering of political leaders around one supreme figure who dominates and mediates among them. The arrangement is designed to withdraw politics from the public and make it an affair behind closed doors (Shaharuddin 1988: 137).

The new regime under Tun argued that this political transformation was aimed at the sharing of political power. It also justified that this political step was intended to reduce politicking and encourage political leaders to concentrate more on development. However, the *Barisan Nasional* rejected the ideal of democratic opposition and public accountability. Tunku

criticized this new development.

When Tun Razak formed the *Barisan Nasional* he had in mind a one-party system. There appears to be no limit to the numbers who can join up, but whoever does join must toe the party line... His idea was that the country should have a one-party leader, and that would be the Prime Minister. One thing seemed certain; whoever was Prime Minister would stay on as such unopposed and for as long as he liked... He set up a one-party government and ran the country without squabbles or bickering... but I don't subscribe to this view because parliamentary democracy requires that every party in Parliament must express its views. Whether they hurt the government or not is immaterial, but each man sitting in opposition must speak his mind (Abdul 1978: 99, 115).

In addition, the new regime took another political step through constitutional amendments. This meant that the raising of "sensitive issues" in the realm of public discussions, such as the power and status of the Malay rulers, Malay special privileges, citizenship, Malay as the national language and the status of Islam as the official religion, would be regarded as seditious (Andaya 1981: 291). Whatever the new regime's justification, these political measures were principally intended to augment UMNO's power in the government so that it could implement bold measures for the restructuring of Malaysian society without much difficulties. Through the lesson of the premature retirement of Dato and Tunku, possibly it was also considered by the new Prime Minister that political leaders in Malaysia could not survive without any firm control over communal problems.

In the economic sphere, there was a major change. As a reflection of growing economic aspirations among the Malays, the new regime introduced a long-term economic plan called, the New Economic Policy (NEP), to be implemented between 1971 to 1990. Two objectives were included in the NEP. The first was to reduce and eventually eradicate poverty "regardless of race." The second was to redress the imbalance in economic power among communal groups by transforming an employment pattern based on the population's ethnic composition,<sup>9</sup> and rearranging share of capital in the commercial and industrial sectors.<sup>10</sup> In order to allay fears among the Chinese, the government assured that "this restructuring would be achieved through sustained economic growth and

<sup>9</sup> In 1970, the ethnic composition in Peninsula Malaysia was 53.2 per cent Malay, 35.4 per cent Chinese, 10.7 per cent Indian and 0.8 per cent others (Andaya 1981: 285).

<sup>10</sup> Malays and indigenous peoples or their interests 30 per cent, other Malaysians 40 per cent and foreigners 30 per cent.

not through redistribution of existing resources" (Andaya 1981: 284).

As supplementary steps to ensure greater Malay participation in economic sectors, the government established several public enterprises like the Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA, Council of Trust for Indigenous Peoples), the Perbadanan Nasional Berhad (PERNAS, National Corporation Ltd), the State Economic Development Corporations (SEDC), the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and the Malaysian Industrial Development Finance Ltd (MIDF) (Andaya 1981: 285). The government also introduced various training programs for the purpose of producing skilled Malay personnel.<sup>11</sup> Under this training scheme, many Malays have been sent to developed countries like Japan and Korea. In addition, in an attempt to redress the ethnic imbalance in the professions, the constitutional amendments of 1971 reserved a quota of positions within institutions of higher learning for *bumiputras* (sons of the soil), including the peninsula Malays and the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak. As a result, by 1975 Malay graduates from Malaysia's five universities comprised 58.5 percent (Andaya 1981: 291-292).

Regarding its efforts to create a Malaysian national consciousness, how has the government justified its patronage or preferential treatment for *bumiputras* in economic sectors? One justification is found in *The Malay Dilemma* by Mahathir bin Mohamad (hereafter Mahathir), the present Prime Minister of the country.

Mahathir attempted to attribute the economic backwardness of the Malays to the indolent Malay characteristic, the lack of natural selection and Malay racial inferiority. Regarding the indolent Malay characteristic, he explained his theory.

No great exertion or ingenuity was required to obtain food. There was plenty for everyone throughout the year. Hunger and starvation, a common feature in countries like China, were unknown in Malaya. Under these conditions, everyone survived. Even the weakest and the least diligent were able to live in comparative comfort, to marry and procreate (Mahathir 1970: 21).

In this abundant tropical environment, the Malays remained indolent without undergoing natural selection: "The observation that only the fittest would survive did not apply, for the abundance of food supported the existence of even the weakest" (Mahathir 1970: 21).

In Mahathir's view, the Chinese became a hardy race partly because

<sup>11</sup> By 1975, nearly three thousand trained Malays were produced by the MARA Institute of Technology alone (Andaya 1981: 286).



they had been screened by natural selection. He maintained that this is a theme in Chinese history.

The history of China is littered with disasters, both natural and man-made. Four thousand years ago a great flood was recorded, and subsequently floods alternated with famine, while waves of invaders, predatory emperors and warlords ravaged the country. In the process, the weak in mind and body lost out to the strong and the resourceful. For generation after generation, through four thousand years or more, this weeding out of the unfit went on, aided and abetted by the consequent limitation of survival to the fit only (Mahathir 1970: 24).

In an attempt to explain the Malay racial inferiority, Mahathir speculated that

...instances of in-breeding are greater among them [the Malays] than among the other major race in Malaysia—the Chinese... And so it is correct to say that in-breeding together with forced marriages of the unfit produce a much greater percentage of human failures among the Malays as compared with other races. [On the other hand] Chinese custom decreed that marriage should not be within the same clan. This resulted in more cross-breeding than in-breeding, in direct contrast to Malay partiality towards in-breeding. The result of this Chinese custom was to reproduce the best strains and characteristics... (Mahathir 1970: 23-24).

He further argued that the coming of Islam limited intermarriages between the Malays and the Chinese and was partly responsible for the retention of this Malay genetic inferiority: "Islam forbade such marriage except when certain conditions were met... the Malays had already become impervious to non-Islamic influence... Intermarriage between Malays and Chinese was extremely rare" (Mahathir 1970: 23). In Mahathir's comparison, economic success mainly depended upon superior genes.

In Mahathir's evaluation, the economic backwardness of the Malays can be overcome by the enrichment of their racial quality. For this aim, Mahathir advocated Malay economic endeavors, rather than intermarriage between the Malays and the Chinese. With regard to Malay political power, he argued that "...politics created for the Malays a soft environment which removed all challenge to their survival and progress... Because of this, political power might ultimately prove their complete downfall" (Mahathir 1970: 31). In his view, Malays undertaking economic endeavors might be the best way to enrich their racial quality. He blamed Tunku's administration for the frustration of the Malays in economic

enterprise during the first phase of independence. "In the first place the Government started off on the wrong premise... It believed that the Chinese were only interested in business and acquisition of wealth, and that the Malays wished only to become Government servants" (Mahathir 1970: 15). Accordingly, whereas Tunku attempted to protect the "indolent" Malays through their separation from economic activity, Mahathir made efforts to stimulate them through the creation of their distinct reserve in economic sectors.

However, in his effort to ensure greater Malay participation in the economy, Mahathir rejected open competition with the Chinese. He argued that the Malays should be given preferential treatment by the government because of their racial inferiority. "Whatever the Malays could do, the Chinese could do better and cheaper... Removal of all protection would subject the Malays to the primitive laws that enable only the fittest to survive" (Mahathir 1970: 25, 31). Then he advocated a special kind of policy for the Malays in economic sectors.

Malaysia has far too many non-Malay citizens who can swamp the Malays the moment protection is removed. The frequent suggestion that the only way to help the Malays is to let them fight their own battles cannot therefore be seriously considered. The answer seems to lie somewhere in between; in a sort of "constructive protection" worked out after a careful study of the effects of heredity and environment on the Malays is likely to continue (Mahathir 1970: 31).

While the government hastened the process of Malay ownership of 30 percent of the corporate sector by 1990, the Chinese generally believed that the restructuring of society was at their expense. By 1990, the Chinese hoped that the government would allow them to participate in various government programs and remove quotas for *bumiputras* in universities. However, their hope was frustrated in 1991 when "Wawasan 2020"<sup>12</sup> superseded the "new Malaysian," apparently due to failure in the attainment of the NEP's goals. This new bottle with old wine clearly indicates that the government is not ready to make concessions to the Chinese. Instead of raising fundamental questions about sensitive communal problems in the society, government leaders still believe that a true sense of a united Malaysian nation can be achieved by reallocation of

<sup>12</sup> Following the NEP, the government embarked upon another long term economic policy, the Dasar Pembangunan Nasional or DPN (National Development Policy or NDP) which will be implemented over a period of thirty years, from 1991 to 2020. The Sixth Malaysia Plan of 1991-5 is conceived as the first in a series of development plans aimed at the creation of an industrial nation with US\$ 10,000 per capita income by 2020 (Mahayuddin 1991: 140).

economic power among racial groups.

## Conclusion

When Malay leaders attempted to envision Malaya's independence in greater detail from 1948, a major obstacle they faced was inter-racial conflicts. Given that the growth of Malay national awareness had progressed primarily at the cost of inter-racial harmony, the creation of an inter-communal unity appeared an impossible task. However, in the wake of the communist armed revolt, the moderate non-Malays began to cultivate their loyalty to Malaya, regarding the Malaysian communists as their common enemy. When Dato Onn bin Jaafar and Tunku Abdul Rahman attempted to forge an inter-communal unity to achieve Malaya's independence, a large number of non-Malays were willing to devote themselves to the formidable task. In the face of the communist threat, their aspirations for political freedom overshadowed deep-rooted inter-racial enmity. By 1957, when all obstacles to hinder independence had been eliminated, the British could find no other reason to further deny Malaya's independence. Eventually, Malaya became an independent state on August 31, 1957.

However, independence in Malaysia did not automatically bring a Malaysian national consciousness. The bloody inter-racial disturbances of 1969 showed that the achievement of independence was quite a different matter from building a truly united nation. 1990 was the target year for the emergence of a "new Malaysian." However, the task was far from complete and the target year was rescheduled with "Wawasan 2020" (Vision 2020) in 1991. On the whole, government leaders' efforts have focused on the implementation of *pro-bumiputra* policies, rather than on the solution of sensitive communal issues.

There is no doubt that the historically deep-seated inter-racial discord in Malaysia cannot be easily solved within the relative short period of 43 years. In one sense, Malaysia could be seen as a successful multi-ethnic state that has experienced rapid economic growth without any major racial conflict during the past 20 years. However, in the absence of a serious consideration of communal problems, and as long as government leaders blindly think that a truly united nation can be achieved by reallocation of economic power among ethnic groups, the latest plan will prove as unfruitful as those that preceded it.

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