TUN DR. MAHATHIR AND THE NOTION OF 'BANGSA MALAYSIA'[1]

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ABSTRACT

The question of nation-building has always been a central issue in Malaysian politics. Despite its relatively stable politics and constant economic development, the project of nation-building remained a basic national agenda yet to be fully resolved. The notion of 'Bangsa Malaysia' that was officially introduced by Dr Mahathir in 1991, as part of the package in his Vision 2020 project, was aimed to resolve the 'unfinished business' in the project of nation-building. Vision 2020 is a grand national project span for a period of one generation designed to turn Malaysia into a fully developed state in its 'own mould' by the year 2020. This paper attempts to examine the notion of 'Bangsa Malaysia' as it is envisages by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. The paper argues that since there exist a potent interplay between the forces of ethnicity and nationalism that has resulted in the creation of a competing notion of nation-of-intent among the various ethnic groups in Malaysia, the idea of 'Bangsa Malaysia, therefore,' could be seen as an attempt to mediate this contestation. The question is, does the meaning of the concept clear to all Malaysians? To what extent would the notion of 'Bangsa Malaysia' be able to reconcile the competing ethnic ideologies of a nation? Can it be a successful venture, or perhaps add to further complicates the politics of nation-building in Malaysia? It is hoped that this humble contribution would be able to highlight some of the important ideas of Tun Dr. Mahathir's thoughts in regard to the question of ethnic relations and nation-building in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Nation-building, Tun. Dr. Mahathir, Bangsa Malaysia and ethnic relations.*

INTRODUCTION

The main task in this paper is to examine the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* as it has been envisaged by Tun Dr. Mahathir over a period of two decades. The notion is to be viewed

and analyzed in the context of the daunting challenges faced by Malaysia in the politics of nation-building in the post independence era. It is not the concern of the paper to provide answers as to how *Bangsa Malaysia* is to be constructed, but rather to identify and examine the problematic notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* as a socio-political concept. The focus here is to explore the meaning of the concept at two different levels, namely the authority's definition of the term, and the popular perceptions as to what the notion should mean. Equally important is to explore how these perceptions relate to the existing contradictions within the discourse of nation formation in Malaysia. While the objectives of Vision 2020 and the idea of constructing the *Bangsa Malaysia* may well be understood by many Malaysians, the relevant question to ask are: To what extent would the idea of *Bangsa Malaysia* be able to reconcile the competing 'nationalisms' that are circulating in Malaysia? Can it be a successful venture, or may it instead further complicate the politics of nation-building in the country? These are among the important questions that the paper attempts to investigate.

'REINVENTING' THE NATION: *BANGSA MALAYSIA* AS A POLITICAL IMAGINED COMMUNITY

It has been argued by several writers that before Vision 2020 was unveiled, Malaysia was more successful in the state-building endeavour, but had not accomplished the same in as far as the nation-building agenda was concerned. This is not to say that the nation-building project was not vigorously pursued by the authority. However, along its path, the project had to cope with various profound obstacles, thus hindered its significant progress. In addition, the focus of the nation-building project then, arguably, has not been pursued surpassing the framework of conflict management, wealth redistribution, and racial harmony. A clear vision or concept of 'a nation' was not formulated, thus resulting in the agenda for nation-building lacking a coherent direction. Within and across the major ethnic communities, there exist conflicting notions of 'nation-of-intent'.[2] This was the general view expressed by several observers such as Shamsul A.B. (1992); Rustam A. Sani (1993); M. Mustafa Ishak (1994; 1999); and Abdul Rahman Embong (1995). There were two major factors that can be identified as restraining the efforts of nation-building from transcending the framework of conflict management and creating ethnic harmony. Firstly, is the pluralistic nature of Malaysian society, characterized by a potent interplay between the forces of ethnicity and nationalism, which at times tend to be socio-politically very divisive and disruptive. Ethnicity has been sharply institutionalized, and formed the very basis of Malaysia political system. This has been the case even before independence, and continued to be so in the post-independence years. Second, whilst Malay hegemony formed a crucial part of the polity, the structure of the ruling government was based on power sharing mechanism or academically referred to as the consociationalism political formula. As a result, the fundamental principles of multiculturalism had to be observed and respected. In addition, assimilation approach should they were ever thought off or attempted to, can neither be implemented nor endorsed by the ruling government, which consist of

the multi-ethnic representatives, and whose main responsibility was to protect and safeguard the interest of their respective communities.

Many observers reckoned that apart from the sustainable consociational political framework that continued to prevail, the improved ethnic relations in Malaysia since 1969 can be largely attributed to the economic factor, namely constant growth that the country has experienced, which allowed every ethnic group to benefit and enjoyed their respective portion of the expanding economic cake. According to Professor Khoo Kay Kim,

> as long as this principle is sustained, ethnicity will be moderated. But we cannot jump into conclusion to suggest that communalism is diminishing because in term of inter-ethnic relations, polarizations still persist.[3]

It is argued that one of the good indicator of this successful formula was demonstrated in the 1995 general election. The 1995 general election was held at the time Malaysia had sustained an average of 7-8 per cent growth for seven consecutive years. Unemployment was at its lowest point, while inflation was kept to below 4 per cent (*Utusan Malaysia*, 1 May 1995). The 'feel good' factor was very apparent and generally felt prior to the election. In that election the BN under Dr. Mahathir's leadership not only won a landslide victory, but of more significance was the apparent 'changing' voting behaviour of urban Chinese electorates. Many urban constituencies comprising more than 60 per cent of Chinese voters which were traditionally known as DAP strongholds, have been captured by the BN, a phenomenal success which had never occurred in previous electoral politics. Consequently, many local printed media concluded that this election marked 'the end of communalism', a presumption which many social scientists regard as rather too optimistic and perhaps a premature political analysis.[4] On the contrary, some observers query that to what extent the so-called 'the end of communalism' constitutes a permanent changes to the characteristics of the polity? Could it not be a temporary phenomenon resulted from the constant growth and expanding economics cake that allowed a redistribution exercise to be implemented rather effectively?[5] What would happen if the economics cake shrunk in a time of recession, thus forcing people to struggle over the scarce resources?

This was the background of the following general election held in November 1999, a situation which was a sharp contrast to the 1995 election. The 1999 election was held at the time Malaysia was still painfully struggled to overcome the worst effects of the 1997/98 economic crisis and the political upheaval of the 'Reformasi' movement, following the abrupt dismissal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from office.[6] Although communalism had not taken a central stage in the 1999 election, it has, nevertheless, re-emerged in the post election period in the form of communal demands championed by several Chinese educationists and NGOs.[7] Clearly, the predicted 'demise' of communalism and ethnic politics by certain parties in Malaysia following the success of the BN in the 1995 election, proven to be grossly flawed. What is the explanation for

this? It is argued that, this phenomenon can be attributed to the poor performance of the BN, especially UMNO in the election. UMNO which was 'temporarily' rejected by the Malays in the 1999 election not only in the Malay heartland states, but also in the urban constituencies, as a result of the Anwar Ibrahim saga and the 'Reformasi' movement. As a result, the party had to rely on the support of the non-Malay voters in order to survive. However, the support that UMNO received from the non-Malays came with a cost and a political concession. And this was exactly what they put forward after the 1999 election. Apparently, this is the paradox of ethnic politics in Malaysia that UMNO or perhaps any other Malay political parties had always has to remember!

The notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* embodied in Vision 2020 can be seen as an attempt to bring together the diverse ethnic group and varying perceptions of nation-of-intent into one united Malaysian nation. The introduction of the idea of *Bangsa Malaysia* also signified Dr. Mahathir's view that the country need to make a significant departure from the framework of conflict management and maintaining ethnic harmony of the past into a more 'robust' and futuristic venture of constructing a 'united Malaysian nation' under the banner of Vision 2020. It also reflects the government's 'admission' that efforts at nation-building over the previous four decades had not been all that successful. *Bangsa Malaysia* may not have been necessary if all had been well with the government's previous nation-building programmes. Apart from that, it also indicates the government's confidence that as socio-economic imbalances between ethnic groups continued to improve, a far-reaching framework for building a united Malaysian nation could be put forward for the people. However, the big question remained, what constitute the meanings of *Bangsa Malaysia*? Does it has a clear connotation, and do the people share the same perception of what the notion should mean?

BANGSA MALAYSIA: DR. MAHATHIR'S PERSPECTIVE

The notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* introduced by Dr. Mahathir has to be viewed in the context of Vision 2020. Vision 2020, which was unveiled in 1991 also by Dr. Mahathir, outlined the government's aspiration to turn Malaysia into an industrialised country within a period of one generation, that is by the year 2020. Dr. Mahathir believes that this aspiration can be achieved provided the country can sustain economic growth of at least 7 per cent per year from the time Vision 2020 was unveiled until the year 2020. Nevertheless, he envisages that Malaysia should not be a duplicate of any other developed country, but instead be 'a developed country in our own mould' (Mahathir Mohamad, 1991a:2) In Dr. Mahathir's words:

> Malaysia should not be developed only in the economic sense. It must be a nation that is fully developed along all the dimension: economically, politically, socially, spiritually, psychologically, and culturally. We must

> fully developed in terms of national unity and social cohesion, in terms of our economy, in terms of social justice, political stability, system of government, quality of life, social and spiritual values, national pride and confidence.
>
> (Mahathir Mohamad, 1991a:2)

Nevertheless, Dr. Mahathir argued that Malaysia cannot be fully developed in its own mould until and unless:

> We have finally overcome the nine central strategic challenges that have confronted us from the moment of our birth as an independent nation. The first of these is the challenge of establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny. We must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one '*Bangsa Malaysia*' with political loyalty and dedication to the nation.
>
> (Mahathir Mohamad, 1991a:2-3)

The other eight strategic challenges involve: (1) creating a psychologically liberated society, (2) fostering a mature democratic society, (3) establishing moral and ethical society, (4) establishing a liberal and tolerant society, (5) creating a scientific and progressive society, (6) creating a caring society, (7) the challenges of ensuring an economically just society, (8) and finally the challenges of establishing a prosperous society, with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic robust and resilient (Mahathir Mohamad, 1991a). Dr. Mahathir, however, asserts that the list of the challenges need not be in order of priority, as the priorities of any moment in time must meet the specific circumstances of that moment in time. But he argued that it would be surprising if the first strategic challenge, namely, 'the establishment of a united Malaysian nation-is not likely to be the most fundamental, the most basic' (Mahathir Mohamad, 1991a:4).

As far as the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* is concerned, neither Dr. Mahathir nor the government has yet suggested a comprehensive account of the operational definition of the concept and how it is to be achieved. Thus far, the government has only outlined the philosophy of the notion but the detailed characteristics of the 'nation-in-the-making' is yet to be decided. Thus, the concept is still quite vague for many ordinary Malaysians. As it stands, the notion is still very much a problematic and contested concept. In a speech made in 1992 Dr, Mahathir attempted to elaborate how the process of nation-building should be pursued in order to materialise the idea of constructing a *Bangsa Malaysia*. He argued that managing nation-building towards achieving the vision of *Bangsa Malaysia* will entail:

> 'honouring our respective obligation and responsibilities under the Constitution, whether it relates to politics, citizenship, socio-economic opportunities, language, religion or the respective power of the centre and the state. This was the solemn pledge that we all made when we worked

> out our consensus. This pledge we must continue to fulfil, sincerely and fully. ...managing our nation-building well will also entail we redress the socio-economic imbalances among the various ethnic groups and then various region in our country. [Thus] Grow, we no doubt must. If we do not grow we will not have the resources to redress anything. ...we will also need peace and stability to pursue and achieve our strategic goal of becoming a united nation without hindrance'.
>
> (Mahathir Mohamad, 1992:5)

There are two main points which Dr. Mahathir attempts to highlight in that speech. The first is peoples' obligation in regard to the 1957 consensus, or the Merdeka compromy which he argued must be fulfilled, sincerely and fully. The second is redressing the socio-economic imbalances amongst the various ethnic groups, the success of which heavily dependent on the extent to which economic growth and prosperity can be created and sustained in the country. Obviously, these are not new issues, but rather something which many Malaysians are familiar with, since they have formed the basic framework of national integration since 1970.

In relation to that statement, in 1995 the former Premier stated that, '*Bangsa Malaysia* means people who are able to identify themselves with the country, speak *Bahasa Malaysia* and accept the Constitution' (*The Star*, 11 September 1995). Although these statements once again only outlined a general interpretation of what the notion should be referred to, it did highlight three initial characteristics for *Bangsa Malaysia*. First, 'identification with the country' may reflect the call for undivided loyalty and a sense of patriotism towards Malaysia as the homeland. Second, 'speak *Bahasa Malaysia*' may be referring to one common language as means of communication among Malaysians which could also serve as a symbol of unity for the people.

Although the last characteristics, namely 'accept the Constitution' may not sound very significant (as every citizen of Malaysia is expected to respect and accept the country's constitution), it has nevertheless, a far-reaching implication that is every single provision embodied in the Constitution must be upheld and protected. This would inherently include the democratic system of electing the government, the federal structure of the political system, the democratic and citizenship rights of the people, the rule of law, constitutional monarchy, Malay as the national language, Islam as the official religion, and also Malay special rights. Although these aspects were not spelled out in detail by Dr. Mahathir, the implications of the words 'accepting the Constitution' is very broad and certainly connotes reference to those aspect which over times have constituted contentious subjects in as far as ethnic relation and the politics of nation-building were concerned.

In other words, this would also means that symbols of Malay identity and hegemony that were enshrined in the Constitution would remain unchanged despite the establishment of the *Bangsa Malaysia*. The symbol of Malay identities and hegemony enshrined in the Constitution are reflected in the provisions of Malay as the national

language (article 152), Malay special rights (article 153), The Monarch as the Head of State (article 32), and Islam as the official religion (article 3). In fact these are the three pillars of Malayness (*bahasa, agama/Islam, dan raja*) which formed the basis of Malay nationalism. It is almost inconceivable that those crucial provisions are to be reviewed let alone removed from the Malaysian Constitution in the foreseeable future. Even to question them publicly is forbidden by the Sedition Act 1948 which was further tightened after May 1969 tragedy. For most Malays, the provision of Malay special rights, Islam, Malay language and the position of the Malay Rulers inherent in the Federal Constitution are non-negotiable. The provisions marked the 'sacred' unwritten social contract in exchange of the citizenship rights for the non-Malays which were agreed upon before independence was achieved (Abdullah Ahmad, cited in K. Das, 1987; Crouch, 1996).

There was, however, another speech made far back in 1988 by Dr. Mahathir which contained several important remarks on *Bangsa Malaysia*. This speech indicated that the idea of *Bangsa Malaysia* has been in Dr. Mahathir's mind long before it was officially introduced as a government policy in 1991. In that speech Dr. Mahathir said:

> ...when we attained independence we made an agreement to accept Malaysia as the official name of the country, a Malaysian nation as our nation, and Bahasa Malaysia as our national language. All this terms originated from the name of the largest indigenous community in the country namely the Malays. To accept Malaysia, to be called Malaysians and to use Bahasa Malaysia, does not make us Malay. We ethnically remains as Chinese or Indians or Ibans or Kadazans or Muruts and so fourth. We are only Malaysians nation in the sense of a political identity (emphasised added) based on a specific country. There is therefore no reason why we should be apprehensive about losing our ethnic identity. We do not even lose our ethnic language or culture.
>
> (Mahathir Mohamad, 1988)

In this speech Dr. Mahathir strongly emphasised that Malayness shaped the political backdrop of the country when the Federation of Malaya was formed in 1957, and later becoming Malaysia in 1963. However, the speech also indicated that nobody is going to lose their ethnic identity, their language, or culture by the creation of a *Bangsa Malaysia*. In other words, *Bangsa Malaysia* is not going to make a non-Malay become a Malay, as the concept was referring to a limited context, namely 'political identity'. The term 'political identity' used by Dr. Mahathir clearly indicates that the government refers to *Bangsa Malaysia* not in an anthropological sense or as 'Malaysian race'. Whilst the speech may indicate that Dr. Mahathir was still committed to Malayness and Malay nationalism, it was also stressing that multi-culturalism should prevail. It was apparent that Dr. Mahathir's line of thinking in the 1998 speech did not differ very much from the one he made in 1992 and 1995. Dr. Mahathir clearly relates the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* to the country's historical milieu which basically was Malay political history. Yet he never suggested anything which would imply a tendency towards assimilation. Rustam A. Sani argued that, 'It may take many more generations before the entire

society is moulded together through an evolutionary process to become one united Malaysian nation in its true sense'.[8] In other words, assimilation (if it occurs) will take a very long time and emerge through natural processes of history instead of by coercion. At this juncture, if the notion is seen beyond the parameter of a political concept, it might in turn caused a set back.[9] In fact, Dr. Mahathir reassured his audience that ethnic languages and cultures would remain part of Malaysian traditions, and thus no ethnic group should be too concerned about losing its own tradition and heritage. In the 1995 speech, this reassurances was very clearly given. He reportedly said that 'the people should start accepting each other as they are, regardless of ethnicity' (*The Star*, 11 September 1995). He further said that

> Previously, we tried to have a single entity but it caused a lot of tension and suspicions among the people because they thought the government was trying to create a hybrid. There was fear among the people that they may have to give up their own cultures, values, and religions. This could not work, and we believe that *Bangsa Malaysia* is the answer.
>
> (cited by *The Star*, 11 September 1995)

Clearly, Dr. Mahathir was advocating that the principle of multi-culturalism was to be protected.

Nevertheless, the gist of the two speeches indicates that elements of Malayness embodied within the polity were to be retained, despite the need to incorporate multi-culturalism as part and parcel of Malaysian national identity. Obviously Dr. Mahathir was offering Malay nationalism and multi-culturalism at the same time as the basis of the construction of the *Bangsa Malaysia*. The big question is how these two opposite ideologies could merge, thus leading towards the creation of the *Bangsa Malaysia?* If this is not clear enough, it would suggest that the operational definition of the concept is still rather vague, despite Dr. Mahathir's insistence that both Malayness and multi-culturalism should co-exist. In this regards, Shamsul AB (1996b) perceives that the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* as the nation-in-the-making could be interpreted in two ways. First, to mean a cultural community, which integrates the rural and the urban; intra and inter ethnic; and inter class solidarity. Secondly, is the construction of national identity, and hence of national integration. Therefore, Shamsul (1996b) sees *Bangsa Malaysia* as an attempt by Dr. Mahathir to shift Malaysian citizens' loyalty and identification from the other social collectives to the state and its institutions. But Shamsul did not quite explain what would be the basis for the national identity, nor did he elaborate further how the people would strongly identify themselves with the state and its institution when they are shifting their allegiance to the state from other social collectivities. Furthermore, suggesting that people should shift their ethnic loyalty and identification to the state is one thing, but actually to make it happen is something entirely different.

In an interview with Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, then, the Minister of Youth and Sport, he saw that the concept of 'unity in diversity' could probably best reflect the idea of

Bangsa Malaysia.[10] 'Unity in diversity' illustrates a nation made up of a plurality of ethnic groups. According to Tan Sri Muhyiddin, the governments and the majority of the people accept the fact that Malaysia is a multi-cultural and multi-religious society and this could never be modified, and thus will continue to prevail as unique characteristic of Malaysian society. To him, of more importance is that the pattern of thinking and the spirit of nationalism that the people have must be Malaysian in character. Therefore, he sees that a common national language is crucial in the development of the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia*. As he puts it:

> a common language would allow people to understand national issues more accurately as the national media are using *Bahasa Malaysia* to convey messages to the people. This is very important in the sense that the people do not have to interpret issues in their own language as they can understand the national language.[11]

Since then, there was no further explanation has been given by the authority either on the question of what should constitute the remaining characteristics of *Bangsa Malaysia* or of how the idea is going to be pursued. This as a result, left open the concept to numerous contending interpretations.[12] According to Wan Yaacob Hassan, then, the Director General of National Unity Department:

> As far as our Department is concerned, we still do not know what exactly is the definition of the concept, except a very brief definition given by the Dr. Mahathir. We still do not have a specific agenda to address the concept of '*Bangsa Malaysia*'. We continue to be doing our usual task of promoting national integration according to programmes that have been approved by the Ministry.[13]

Whereas the idea of constructing the *Bangsa Malaysia* was regarded as the 'ultimate Malaysian dream' and the overall reaction of the people to it has been rather 'positive' as one newspaper's survey indicates (*The Star*, 31 August 1995), the basic problem remained, that the concept stay ambiguous, and it could mean different things to different people. For Dr. Mahathir, whilst Malay nationalism to remain unaffected, multi-culturalism could be simultaneously promoted. Apparently, Dr. Mahathir tends to offer two different things at the same time. Whether this is intentional or otherwise is something interesting to explore. Another equally interesting to ask is, to what extent this ambiguity has served to diffuse the competing nationalism that prevails in Malaysia?

Almost a decade after the 1995 speech, in May 2005, Dr. Mahathir made another important speech concerning the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia*. This was his 'first' reported speech on the subject after his retirement in October 2003. At this point he explains about how the vision of *Bangsa Malaysia* could be achieved as well as the responsibility and the role of the Malay community to make it materialised. Dr. Mahathir was reportedly asserts that, "the success of the Malays in all field would be a determining factor in the

process to create the *Bangsa Malaysia.*" (Berita Harian, 25 May 2005). He further explains'

> If the Malays become a successful ethnic group in all field, I think there will not be a problem for the Chinese and Indian communities to accept the concept of Malaysia Nationalism (*Kebangsan Malaysia*). Therefore, it is the Malays who should shoulder the responsibility to build a *Bangsa Malaysia*, unless they do not care that other communities are different and far away from them, and do not regard Malaysia as their own country. I says this in a blunt manner as I know that among those attending this gathering there are Chinese and Indian community...they will respect and would like to be known as *Bangsa Malaysia* should the Malays in this country emerged as a successful ethnic group in all areas."
>
> (Berita Harian, 25 May 2005)

This important speech entitled 'Nation and state building in Malaysia' (*Pembinaan Bangsa dan Negara*) was made at the Petronas University in Tronoh, Perak, where he is the Chancellor of the university. He makes such remark and relates it to the success of the United States in creating the American nation, despite the fact that the country is a multi-ethnic society, which includes minorities who are mainly immigrant groups. According to him, this has been achieved because those who migrated to the US accept the concept, culture and the language of the state. In his words:

> "As the WASP community (White Anglo-Saxon People) are so successful, it is easier for others to accept the English culture as their own culture. However, in Malaysia the situation is different because we could see that the Malays are less successful in comparison to the Chinese and Indian communities."
>
> (Utusan Malaysia, 25 May 2005)

Dr. Mahathir mentions that by this, he does not mean to question the loyalty of other ethnic communities towards Malaysia as they had accepted the Malay language as the national language that unite and connect the various ethnic group to one another. Nevertheless, for him, " it is impossible for the Chinese and Indian to respect and willing to be known as a *Bangsa Malaysia* in a situation in which the Malays themselves are a not a successful ethnic group"(Utusan Malaysia, 25 May 2005).

It is crucial that these remarks be given further analysis as through the speech Dr. Mahathir was giving his account on how the creation of the *Bangsa Malaysia* can be attained. This is the first time he made such a clear departure from the previous speeches which focused more on aspect of the 'what' to aspect of the 'how' the vision of *Bangsa Malaysia* can be achieved. Apart from that, he also makes a comparable case study between the scenario that prevail in the US and the extent to which a similar situation could be emulated in Malaysia. Based on the speech, there are several important points

that could be raised about how *Bangsa Malaysia* could be materialised according to Dr. Mahathir's view. First, he clearly believes that until and unless the Malays can be achieved the status of a successful community, a *Bangsa Malaysia* will not materialise. The success of the Malays in all fields would encouraged and enabled the other community to identify more with the 'nation' and the country. This has been the case in the US and likewise, he envisages that a similar situation could occur in Malaysia. In other words, Malay socio-economic success is a precondition for the creation of the *Bangsa Malaysia*. Second, as the creation of the *Bangsa Malaysia* inherently lies with and contingent to the success of the Malays, it is vital that the Malays strive harder to improve their well-being in all areas. It also implies that helping the Malays to succeed is a step toward achieving the *Bangsa Malaysia*. In other words, Dr. Mahathir is saying that if the Malays become a successful community, everyone else would like to identify with them or even willing to be known like one. When this occurs, he envisages that *Bangsa Malaysia* is just a step away to emerge.

To what extent Dr. Mahathir's view could be a reality or perhaps there are some other factors that he may not have thoroughly considered? Are theories of ethnicity and nationalism support his views? How about the religious factor, namely Islam that is strongly embedded within the Malay community and constituted one the three pillars of Malayness. It is worth to mention that a study by Heng Pek Khoon (1996) has demonstrated that the non-Malays, especially the Chinese community feel quite convenient to identify with at least two of the Malay ethnic identifier, namely the *Raja* and the *Bahasa Melayu*. However, they found it rather uncomfortable and quite difficult to identify with Islam as the religion is such an all-embracing religion. At least this is the perception that they held, despite the fact that there are approximately sixty million Chinese Muslim in China, a much bigger number than all the Muslims put together in Malaysia. However, in spite of the religion, they remain ethnically Chinese, and not Arabs what more Malays. Since Islam still and will continue to be a crucial element in the Malay psyche as well as within their socio-political life, and their attachment to Islam is somewhat much stronger than the other two Malay ethnic identifiers, to what extent could the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* is to be tied to the Malays or their religion? Would not this, therefore, make the project of creating the *Bangsa Malaysia* remain contentious and a problematic venture?

BANGSA MALAYSIA: THE PEOPLES' PERCEPTION

How do Malaysians perceive the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia*? Is there any common ground in their perception as to what *Bangsa Malaysia* should mean? Dr. Ranjit Singh agreed with Dr. Mahathir's view, that the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* can be attained if it is seen in purely political terms. As he puts it:

> *Bangsa Malaysia* can only be achieved at a political level or at supra-level. Therefore, ethnic identities, differing cultures and religions would remain

> as the basic multi-ethnic characteristics of the society. In my view, there are three important integration processes that need to be resolved. Malaysia has resolved the first one, namely the language aspects, or a common language for all citizens. Malaysians have accepted the position and the role of Malay as the national language. The second stage is economics. We have remarkably addressed problem of economic imbalances in the past and this continued to be rectified in the future. The last process which have not yet attempted is an integration in the political sense. That is equal rights to all citizens and political institution that is no longer ethnic in nature. Since '*Bangsa Malaysia*' is a political concept, it is imperative that the political dimension is also addressed adequately.[14]

Dr. Ranjit's view implies that equal rights to all citizens should mean that Malaysians should no longer be differentiated on the basis of ethnicity. 'The *Bumiputera*-non-*Bumiputera* dichotomy has to go if *Bangsa Malaysia* is to be created'.[15] As far as political institutions are concerned, he argued that the country should also gradually move away from ethnic-based political parties and start working towards establishing a non-communal party system. He argued that, 'if the country can resolve the national language issue, address the economic imbalances between ethnic groups, I do not see why we should not go one step further to change our party system and make them in line with the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia*'.[16] He sees that UMNO as the backbone of the government should take the first initiative to become true a multi-ethnic party, before other political parties could follow suit. This view is shared by Dr. Goh Cheng Teik, then, the Gerakan vice-president and Deputy Minister of Land and Regional Development. In his words:

> ...at present the reward system is wrong. It pays to be a racist not otherwise. If you are too Malaysian in UMNO or MCA or the MIC you are doomed to disaster. Politicians are very practical people. They can be adored by the whole world, but if they lost a position in their own party, that is it. It is very important therefore, we Malaysianize our political parties.[17]

He also proposed that, 'UMNO should transform into United Malaysian National Organisation instead of being a Malay organisation', a call similar to the one made by Dato Onn in 1951, but was rejected by the party then. The question is, why UMNO? Dr. Goh perceives that as the biggest political party in Malaysia, UMNO should take the lead. Hence, all parties in the BN can dissolve and join one single Malaysian party. He argues that although the country had made much progress in matters pertaining to ethnic relations, still, he does not see Malaysians have made any major breakthrough as far political parties are concerned.[18]

However, those views of Dr. Ranjit and Dr. Goh Cheng Teik were not entirely supported by Tan Sri Koh Tsu Khoon, the Chief Minister of Penang who is also another Vice-

president of the Gerakan party, and also by Professor Khoo Kay Kim. Professor Khoo argued that:

> I do not see that the time is now ripe for the ethnic-based political parties to transform themselves into a non-communal basis. Even to openly talk about these possibilities is still quite sensitive or rather too early. The Gerakan and DAP who claim to be a non-communal party, still rely on the support from among ethnic Chinese.[19]

Clearly, Professor Khoo was indicating that as long as ethnic groups feel their interests are best served through ethnic-based parties, a shift to a non-ethnic party system may not occur as it is hoped to be. For Tan Sri Dr. Koh Tsu Khoon, the question of which political party should be dissolved first, or the idea that every ethnic-based party must be dissolved to remould BN into a true multi-ethnic party should not be raised. 'This must be left to the people to decide. This is not easy as it was thought to be', he added. Tan Sri Koh, would rather perceive *Bangsa Malaysia* in terms of,

> ...every Malaysian having a sense of loyalty to the nation, in which they could identify themselves as *orang Malaysia* (lit. people of Malaysia). They must be loyal to the country, adhere to the Constitution and the *Rukunegara*, has sense of belonging and sense of togetherness. It does not has to be based on ethnicity, but rather based on sense of sharing future destiny.[20]

In his view a shared culture that is consistently developed within the society, illustrated by having open-houses during the 'Hari Raya' celebration, Chinese New Year, Deepavali and Christmas, where friends from other ethnic groups visit each other, is peculiar to Malaysian society. Apart from that, aspects of religious and cultural tolerance, such as Malaysians enjoying multi-ethnic cuisine, as well as the improved communication skill in the national language among the non-Malays also constitute among important ingredients in promoting the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia*.

In a view not very dissimilar from Dr. Koh's assertion, Professor Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, insists that:

> A multi-ethnic national identity rather than a mono-ethnic identity will be the norm. In the Malaysian context, a common language, common values and common sense of destiny will be the ingredients needed for a true Malaysian identity.
>
> (*The Star*, 31 August 1995)

Chandra's insistence on multiculturalism and common values are shared by Professor Dr. P. Ramasamy, a political scientist from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, who said that the question of assimilation and melting-pot should not be raised anymore. He argues that:

> It is clear that people are not willing to subordinate their culture, religion and be one race. But to be less Indian or less Chinese is quite acceptable to some extent as long as people are not being forced to dilute their ethnicity. A healthier way of looking at *Bangsa Malaysia* is the emergence of multiculturalism with the ethnic groups retaining their identities. If multiculturalism is practiced, then the rights of minority have to be respected and maintained. We must take heed from nations facing civil strife because they emphasize on one culture and race, such as Sri Lanka.[21]

His point clearly reflects the fact that *Bangsa Malaysia* has to be viewed in political terms to avoid the question of assimilation. Forcing one culture to dominate the rest would not go down well as far as the non-Malays are concerned. 'While they are prepared to be 'less Chinese' or 'less Indians', they wanted their ethnic culture and religion to be given the space it needed to flourish', he added. Nevertheless, by and large he saw that Malaysia was now a more integrated society, and a sense of Malaysianness is increasingly felt by the people. 'But when people express their concern about ethnic matters this does not mean that they are less nationalistic. Malaysians should be able to distinguish this aspect accordingly', he argued.

The DAP however, equate the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* to the concept of *Malaysian Malaysia*[22] which they have been advocating over the past several decades. According to Dr. Tan Seng Giaw, member of Parliament for Kepong, then the party Vice-Chairman,

> To me *Bangsa Malaysia* is similar to the concept of *Malaysian Malaysia* that the DAP have been fighting for the last thirty years. Over the last decade we did not see that people talked about assimilation of the non-Malays into the Malay culture especially after the 1990 general election.[23]

A similar view was echoed by the party leader, Mr. Lim Kit Siang (who is also the Opposition Leader) when he said that:

> ...it should be a Malaysian centric concept as we have been advocating since the 1960's. What the DAP have been trying to do all this while was to insist the government and the people to recognize the plural basis of the nation. In the last few years there were certain admissions to the principle by the government especially by the statement from the Prime Minister that assimilation will not be the case for nation-building in Malaysia. If the government was to accept this long time ago, we did not have to waste so much of our energy and resources on those issues, but instead could have moved on to address on how to strengthen and enrich the nation.[24]

Clearly the DAP believed that *Bangsa Malaysia* should be a Malaysian centric concept not dissimilar to the concept of *Malaysian Malaysia* which they have been championing since the 1960s. For the DAP, as long as the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* did not project

the image of domination of one ethnic group over another, Malaysian would accept and participate in the materialisation of the vision. Although the party tacitly agreed that the position of the national language was important for integration, they cautiously noted that the national language policy should not be pursued at the expense, diminution, and the lessening of the importance of other languages.[25] For them the multilingual reality that has existed in Malaysia had to be fully recognized.[26]

As far as the development of Malaysian culture is concerned, Lim Kit Siang saw that it should be left to an evolutionary process, and not created by coercion. 'Malaysian culture must be a manifestation of the totality of the different ethnic cultures', he insists. But of more importance, the DAP saw that 'the country need to strive towards meritocracy, in the sense that whosoever needs help, they must be assisted and whosoever is good he has to be rewarded regardless of ethnicity'. For the DAP the government should devise policies that benefit those who are in the economically backward sector, rather than look at things on an ethnic basis. Lim Kit Siang felt that if this is done, 'it will remove the sense of alienation and deprivation that the people might have against the government'.

Obviously, most of the views stated above, especially from the non-Malay respondents, seem to agree on several common grounds. First, while they recognised the importance of the national language as an instrument of unity and as pre-requisite for the creation of *Bangsa Malaysia*, they maintained that multi-culturalism and multi-lingualism must be respected as these reflected the reality of Malaysian society. At the same time, while they do not overtly denounce the *Bumiputeraism* policy and Malay special rights, they would like to see some steps taken towards the ending of the *Bumiputera-non-Bumiputera* dichotomy. Therefore, the relevant question to ask is, were all these views by the non-Malays not implicitly advocating to strengthen the notion of multiculturalism, at the expense of a Malay-based *Bangsa Malaysia*? If so, would the Malays not be infuriated by such ideas?

> For Professor Zainal Abidin Wahid:
> There are two important aspects that should be the basis of *Bangsa Malaysia*. First is the principle of national cultural policy stipulated by the national cultural congress in 1971, and secondly is the historical basis of the country. If the non-Malays wanted to be a true Malaysian they have to make several sacrifices. One of it is the Chinese must be less Chinese and the Indian have to be less Indian. We can accept differences, but that should be the premise.[27]

Clearly Prof. Zainal's view stresses Malayness and Malay nationalism as the basis of the 'nation'. In a similar tone, Datuk Salleh Majid, then, the Managing Director of Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange asserts that:

> *Bangsa Malaysia* can be achieved without necessarily giving up all the ethnic heritage and identities that one have. However, the position of Malay

> language as the official language of the country and the language to identify with the 'nation' should not be questioned. *Bangsa Malaysia* is not *Malaysian Malaysia*. It has to have a strong Malay characteristics as Malays are the dominant ethnic group in the country.[28]

For Rustam A. Sani, '*Bangsa Malaysia* should not be equated with the DAP's concept of *Malaysian Malaysia*'.[29] To him,

> *Malaysian Malaysia* is a notion of cultural *laissez faire* of maintaining ethnic separateness which is to allow every ethnic group to live their own way without any bearing towards common values which are needed to construct part of the characteristics for the national identity.[30]

He further argued that,

> There is no such thing as national identity as far as the concept of *Malaysian Malaysia* was concerned as it advocates a complete philosophy of cultural pluralism which people used to live during colonial times.[31]

Therefore to Rustam,

> If there is a clear recognition and the acceptance to the national language policy and common cultural values in Malaysia, the concept of *Malaysian Malaysia* is no longer relevant.

The concept of *Malaysian Malaysia* which the DAP was championing in the 1960's did not recognised the principle of the national language (Means, 1976). Instead its proposed that every ethnic language including English was to be given equal status. Rustam argued that,

> while the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* is about nation-building, *Malaysian Malaysia* means everybody is free to remain as they were and there is no question of nation-building. *Bangsa Malaysia* is a concept of building national identity in a multi-ethnic Malaysia and it is therefore not about a 'melting-pot' either.[32]

However, he reckoned that:

> In the context of *Bangsa Malaysia*, cultural pluralism can exist to a certain level where one can remain as a Chinese or Malay, but there is also an overarching national identity that we want to create. It cannot be a scenario of multi-lingualism, one language has to dominate. As of in the United States or United Kingdom, their citizens are entitled to speak whatever language they want but at the national level, English is their national language.[33]

To start with, he believes that Malay as the national language would certainly form the basic characteristic for *Bangsa Malaysia*. As the Malay language is one of the important elements of Malay nationalism, Rustam suggests that Malay nationalism could also form the basis for Malaysian nationalism which is instrumental for the development of *Bangsa Malaysia*. However, he insists that,

> Malay nationalism in its original form that stresses on Malayness ought to undergo some changes to make it more accommodative to the multi-ethnic characteristics that prevail in Malaysian society.

The next challenging task for Malaysian to cope with is 'to negotiate and renegotiate as to what should constitute the remaining characteristics for *Bangsa Malaysia* and to promote the sense of shared culture among the peoples', Rustam added.

If Rustam's view could represent the views and aspiration of the majority of the Malays, would not *Bangsa Malaysia* reflect the domination of Malay nationalism and Malay culture over the rest, which many non-Malays are very reluctant to accept? On this point the late Professor Dahlan a sociologist from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia explains:

> If we attempt to build a nation, it has to have a model of unity of one nation. We cannot have a pluralistic nation but instead one nation in a multi-ethnic society. There can be a situation of 'unity in diversity', but the crucial question that one has to understand is that a 'nation' can be built out of a multi-ethnic society. It has to be a 'single notion' and not a plural nation.[34]

In Dahlan's opinion, from the very beginning Malaysians have to bear in mind that when they attempt to create a nation, or *Bangsa Malaysia*, they have to have nationalism. Although nationalism can emerge with or without a nation (as argued by Smith (1986)), in Dahlan's view, it is difficult to conceive a nation without nationalism. The question is do Malaysians already have nationalism', he insists. Therefore, he agreed with Rustam that Malay nationalism can and should be the basis for the development of Malaysian nationalism. He argues that in the theory of culture, every culture must have a core or centre before it can develop. Furthermore, Dahlan adds that:

> Before we have Malaysian nationalism we only have Malay nationalism. Even before we have Malaysian culture, we only have Malay culture in this country. If we go back to the past we could only find a Malay culture and Malay roots. And it was Malay cultural roots that form the 'corpus of prime symbols' of this country such as Malay as the national language, Malay *Raja* as the Head of State and Islam as the official religion. All these derived from Malay cultural roots which have long established in the country.[35]

In his view the non-Malay will find it difficult to accept that elements of Malay nationalism should be the basis of Malaysian nationalism and the construction of *Bangsa Malaysia* if they do not understand this background and the fact that the history of Malaysia did not begin in 1957, but went back centuries ago and it was essentially a Malay history. Therefore, Dahlan cynically asked that, 'if a Chinese who want to be a *Bangsa Malaysia* but rejects all those Malay symbols and the facts of history of the country, then he or she probably does not want to be a *Bangsa Malaysia* in its true sense'. In regard to this, Tan Sri A. Samad Ismail, a prominent Malaysian veteran journalist however saw that Malay factors should not be used to imply domination. 'While the Chinese have accepted the position of Malay as the national language, they do not want the national language issue to be used as a political tool to dominate them'. He argued that in the 1960's and 1970's certain Malay right wing politicians capitalized on the national language issue as a weapon to control the Chinese politically.[36] His view reflects the fact that domination of one ethnic group over another will not be helpful in promoting the vision of *Bangsa Malaysia*. Nevertheless, some Malays might argue that this is not a question of Malay domination over the others, but rather reaffirming their position and interests in accord with the fact of history of the country, as suggested by Professor Zainal, Rustam A. Sani and the late Professor Dahlan.

Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, the former Malaysian Foreign Minister who was also the 'architect' of the *Rukunegara* (the national ideology), argued that there are three criteria for *Bangsa Malaysia*, namely, a person who (1) Is Malaysian citizen, (2) Practices a lifestyle based on Malaysian culture, and (3) Uses *Bahasa Malaysia* as his everyday language.[37] To him all these criteria could be made legally binding via constitutional amendment. In other words, citizenship is equated with 'nation'. He argued that at the moment the term 'Malaysian' connotes citizenship rather than nationhood. The logic behind this suggestion is that the Malay race itself is politically defined in the first place. In the Constitution its parameters are set by three factors, namely, a person who (1) Is a Muslim, (2) Uses the Malay language, and (3) Lives with Malay customs. He argues that:

> Chinese, English or indeed anyone can become a Malay as long as he fulfils the three criteria...that is why term *'masuk Melayu'* (become a Malay) is used when a non-Malay conforms to the three criteria.[38]

Therefore, by the same token, a stroke of Parliament's pen could also write a new definition for *Bangsa Malaysia* into the Constitution. But he cautioned that there are many 'political obstacles' against this idea. Furthermore, 'Malaysian culture' itself has not yet been really amalgamated from the various ethnic cultures of the society. Nevertheless, he insists that what is more important for the vision of *Bangsa Malaysia* to be materialized does not depends so much on the legal or political definition of the concept, but the inner self of all Malaysians. He argues that, 'the inner self could only be developed further if there exists a strong sense of nationhood or nationalism'. But the question is: has Malaysian nationalism emerged? To him:

> What the country might be seeing thus far was more of an expression of patriotism than nationalism. Perhaps a sense of pride because of being a citizen of Malaysia. And this may not be Malaysian nationalism as many understood.[39]

While Malay ruling elite and most Malay intellectuals maintain that Malay nationalism has to be the basis for the construction of *Bangsa Malaysia*, PAS as the second largest Malay political party wanted Islam to be made the basis of 'the nation'.[40] Although the party under the *Ulamak's* leadership rejects Malay nationalism, as it was said to be 'in contradictory with the true teaching of Islam', the opposition to Malay nationalism was arguably made to distinguish the party's ideology and political struggle from that of its rival, UMNO. Ironically, the three pillars of Malayness, *'bahasa, agama dan raja'* that constitute the basis of Malay nationalism are still acceptable to PAS.[41] PAS, who staunchly apposed the 1996 Education Act, shared similar concerns with Malay intellectuals on the need to strengthen the role and position of Malay language for the benefits of nation-building.[42] The party had never questioned the system of constitutional monarchy that is practised in Malaysia. In fact, PAS recognised the significant role of Malay Rulers as a symbol of Malay political hegemony in the country.[43] Therefore the notion of an Islamic state or even Islamic nation if it is ever accomplished would surely retain a 'Malay dominant-state', but with a stronger Islamic fervour. However, PAS's 'Islamic nation' does not connote assimilation either, as the Islamic system recognized the rights of non-Malays to practice their religion, culture and language.[44] Perhaps the biggest question that PAS might need to answer is to what extent the non-Muslims in Malaysia would accept replacing the Malay nationalist agenda with the Islamic nation's project?

Whilst Vision 2020 only outlined a general idea of the type of developed nation that Malaysia should aspire, the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* remains an ambiguous concept. It is perhaps the most ambiguous concept of the nine strategic challenges laid in Vision 2020. The speeches of Dr. Mahathir examined in this paper do seem to conform to a 'tradition of political ambiguity'. This was also reflected in the people's interpretation to the meaning of the concept. The politics of ambiguity means that a particular issue which could potentially erupt into controversy between segments of the society is deliberately left ambiguous until there is a need for further clarification. In other words, a clear definition is yet to be made 'only during times of crisis, and until such a time, emotional issues are always kept on the periphery' (Ibrahim Saad, 1986:66). This arguably served well as a form of conflict regulation, in so far as the government is concerned. In this respect, it seems that until the conceptual definition of *Bangsa Malaysia* is adequately explained, detailed answers about how 'a united Malaysian nation' is to be constructed would also remain ambiguous.

The debates on Dr. Mahathir's so-called 'liberalisation' policies which began to take shape in the post 1990s following the introduction of Vision 2020 once again reflect the prevailing ambiguity concerning the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia*. However, we have

seen that the liberalisation policy of the mid 1990s and the implementation of meritocracy in the post 2000 era for the intake of students to enter public higher education institutions have recently caused deep concern within the Malay community, including UMNO. This is due to the fact that the 30 percent target for Malay equity ownership that was badly affected during the 1997/98 economic crisis has not improved from the 18 percent stagnant point. In addition, the number of Malay student enrolment in critical courses had also seen a sharp decline since meritocracy was implemented. This has prompted UMNO Youth and UMNO at large to make a wake-up call in the recent 2005 UMNO general assembly. The government was asked to re-instate and re-ensure that the New Economic Policy agenda and its spirit is being observed and implemented. This, however, has not went down well with the non-Malays as depicted in the statements made by the MCA and the Gerakan leaders who perceived this as a backward policy and might threatened the interests of the non-Malay communities (Berita Harian, 25 Julai 2005). The question is, where is *Bangsa Malaysia* in this controversy or could it be that the notion is temporarily forgotten or shadowed by a more pressing issues? Perhaps the last speech of Tun Dr. Mahathir quoted in this paper could remind everyone about the importance of the success of the Malays in respect to the creation of the *Bangsa Malaysia* .

CONCLUSION

The discussion in this paper has demonstrated that, despite its' 'noble' objective to create a united Malaysia nation in line with Vision 2020, the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* remains a problematic concept. While Dr. Mahathir in his attempts to define the concept, tends to balance Malay nationalism with ideas of multiculturalism, this does not significantly help to elucidate what the concept should actually mean. Instead, Dr. Mahathir arguably inclines towards promoting both the notions of Malay nationalism and multiculturalism at the same time. Whether this inclination could serve to consolidate Malay nationalism and multiculturalism, thus laying down the basis for the construction of Malaysian 'nation', has yet to be seen. However, what is also rather clear was that while such a tendency might be seen as promoting the project of nation-formation in the country, it may also simultaneously serve the purpose of diffusing the competing ethnic ideologies of nation-of-intent through appearances of an ambiguity, while presenting itself as representing the interests of the various ethnic communities.

The 'confusion' amongst the people on the actual definition of the concept may well reflect the 'success' of such attempts. If Dr. Mahathir's idea of simultaneously promoting these two opposite notions could gain some followers, what could probably emerge is a 'new' notion of nation-of-intent, which could add to and compete with the existing established notions of ethnic ideologies of a nationhood held by the Malays and the non-Malays. What is rather obvious is that the differing perceptions of what *Bangsa Malaysia* should mean are very much related to the varying notions of nation-of-intent, which were already circulating and well established in the society. While Malay nationalism articulates and tends to protect Malay interests, the notion of cultural

pluralism on the other hand envisages the protection of the non-Malays collective interests. The big question which remains yet to be answered is what *Bangsa Malaysia* really represents? At this juncture *Bangsa Malaysia* tends to protect elements of both Malay nationalism and multiculturalism. However, if this is the case, what sort of 'nation' will be created as its end product?

As far aspects of tangible characteristics of the *Bangsa Malaysia* are concerned, the language aspect appeared to be the most important common ground that could unite the views of the *Bumiputera* and the non-*Bumiputera* communities. The contribution of the national language policy in promoting a common language amongst Malaysians over the years and its role in enabling better interaction to take place within the society was widely acknowledge by many Malaysians. Nevertheless, it is also apparent that most of the non-*Bumiputeras*' views explored in this paper wanted multiculturalism to continue to form the basis of Malaysian society. In other words, if Malaysian culture is to be developed, it has to do so through natural evolutionary processes, and should not be induced by forced assimilation. Even for some Malays, while they envisaged that some semblance of Malay claims to 'pre-eminence' should be maintained, the fact that Malaysian society is really a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society is generally recognized. Although Dr. Mahathir proposed that *Bangsa Malaysia* should only be viewed in terms of political identity, his interpretation of the meaning of the concept remained vague. This vagueness or ambiguity has resulted in the concept being interpreted in various ways according to the peoples' own perception. Indeed, the notion has been left open to all sorts of interpretations from all parties, and thus means different things to different people.

Many Malays believe that the 'unfinished agenda of Malay nationalism' must continue, and Malayness should be made the 'definitive' element in the construction of the *Bangsa Malaysia*. As far as they are concerned the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* should embark from this vital premise. This means that the basic parameters have not and should not be altered. Some section of the Malays on the other hand, even envisaged that Islam should be made the most salient feature for the 'nation' when they propose the notion of an 'Islamic nation', instead of a Malay-based Malaysian nation. This has been particularly true of PAS, and would constitute their main political agenda, should they ever obtain political power. For the non-*Bumiputera* communities, the introduction of the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* at least, seems to bring new hope and promises that they will ultimately be regarded as equal citizens with the *Bumiputeras*. That is, *Bangsa Malaysia* could mark a step towards a resolution of the *Bumiputera*-non-*Bumiputera's* dichotomy, an aspiration which they perceived as long overdue. Thus, to them, the perceived government's 'liberalisation' tendencies in the post 1990 period reflect a transition towards a more liberal and multi-cultural Malaysian society which could ultimately pave the way towards achieving that end. However, the reality is that this may not be too easily attained, so long as the Malays still feel that any move in that direction may eventually put them in a very vulnerable situation. Furthermore, many Malays tend to believe that the issue of Malay special rights and their position as *Bumiputera* is non-negotiable, and therefore should not be raised.

Therefore, the daunting task that lies ahead for the vision of *Bangsa Malaysia* to be successful is to mediate identities so as to construct characteristics for this vital political identity. This certainly will call for a fine balancing act, given the complexities of the ideological contestation on nation formation and national identity between the *Bumiputera* and non-*Bumiputera* that still prevails. The question is, how would the compromise is to be worked out? Does the basis of the middle ground already existed, or is it yet to be found?

ENDNOTES

[1] Paper presented at The International Conference of IPDM, 2005, ' Tun Dr. Mahathir: Managing Governance and Development in the 21st Century', the Renaissance Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, 1- 3 August 2005

[2] Nation-of-intent was a concept first employed by Rotberg (1966) in his study of 'African nationalism'. The notion was applied to the Malaysian context by Rustam A.Sani (1975) in his study of the 'Malay Left'. The concept has been expanded by Shamsul AB (1996a); and further developed by M.Mustafa Ishak (1999). Nation-of-intent depicts an idea of a nation that still needs to be constructed or reconstructed. It is employed as the basis for a platform expressing dissent or a challenged to the established notion of nation. It promises the citizens (or some of them) an opportunity to participate in a 'grand project' which they claim as theirs. Conceptually, nation-of-intent is not dissimilar to Benedict Anderson's (1996) concept of 'imagined political community'. However, it is a more open-ended one, thus may emerge not only from historical context of anti-colonialism, but also in the post-colonial era. However, it is the potent interplay of the forces of ethnicity and nationalism that form the basis of the conflicting notions of nation-of-intent that have characterised Malaysian politics and society since independence.

[3]Interview with Professor Khoo Kay Kim.

[4] Interview with Professor Shamsul A.B, Professor Zainal Abidin Wahid, Professor Khoo Kay Kim, Professor H.M. Dahlan, Professor P. Ramasamy, Rustam A. Sani and Chamil Wariya

[5] Ibid

[6] Anwar abrupt dismissal from the government on the September 2nd 1998 and the subsequent treatment that he faced thereafter had not only constituted one of the most shocking episode in Malaysian politics, but this had triggered a 'political tsunami' in Malaysia prior to the 1999 election which cost UMNO very dearly in the election.

[7] The demand put forward by Suqiu, a Chinese NGO, for the interest of the community that emerged shortly after the 1999 election; and the rejection of the Chinese community on the idea of 'Sekolah Wawasan' were two clear examples of the communal demands that will continue to surface in Malaysia politics each time UMNO loose its' grip over the Malay voters.

[8] Interview with Rustam A. sani

[9] Ibid

[10] Interview with Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

[11] Ibid

[12] This was clearly reflected in the interviews conducted in 1997 when I was doing my field research for my Doctoral thesis.

[13] Interview with Wan Yaacob Hassan, then, Director General of National Unity Department.

[14] opcit

[15] ibid

[16] Ibid

[17] Interview with Dr. Goh Cheng Teik.

[18] Ibid

[19] Interview with Professor Khoo Kay Kim.

[20] Interview with Tan Sri Koh Tsu Khoon.

[21] Interview with Dr. P Ramasamy

[22] The concept of *Malaysian Malaysia* was introduced by Lee Kuan Yew, the PAP leader when Singapore was part of Malaysia. *Malaysian Malaysia* reflected a total rejection of Malay political hegemony in which proponents of the notion called for the language and culture of non-Malays to be given equal status to that of the Malays as well as equal opportunities to scholarship and to government employment. It is a concept of cultural *laissez-faire* and envisages that the nation will become less Malay and more representative of other ethnics groups. See: G.P. Means (1976); Noordin Sopiee (1976).

[23] Interview with Dr. Tan Seng Giaw.

[24] Interview with Lim Kit Siang.

[25] ibid

[26] ibid

[27] Interview with Professor Zainal Abidin Wahid.

[28] Interview with Datuk Salleh Majid.

[29] Interview with Rustam A. Sani

[30] ibid

[31] ibid

[32] ibid

[33] ibid

[34] Interview with Professor Dahlan, who passed away a few months after this interview.

[35] ibid

[36] Interview with Tan Sri A. Samad Ismail

[37] Interview with Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie.

[38] ibid

[39] ibid

[40] Interview with Ustaz Fadhil Noor, then the President of PAS and Subky Latiff.

[41] Ibid

[42] Ibid

[43] Ibid

[44] Ibid

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Formal interview at his clinic in Petaling Jaya, 14 March 1997.
Mr. Wan Yaacob Hassan, Director General of the Department of National Unity.
Formal interview at his office, Kuala Lumpur, 8 april 1997.
Haji Subky Latiff, Member of PAS Central Committee.
Formal interview at PAS Headquarters, Kuala Lumpur, 13 March 1997.

Leading intellectuals

Professor Khoo Kay Khim, Professor of History, University of Malaya.
Formal interview at University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 30 April 1997.
Professor Lee Kam Hing, Professor of History, University of Malaya.
Formal interview at University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 10 April 1997.
Professor Shamsul A.B., the Dean Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanity.
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM – National University of Malaysia).
Informal discussion, at his office in UKM, Bangi, 11 April 1993.
Professor Datuk Zainal Abidin Wahid, Retired Professor of History.
Formal interview at his house in Petaling Jaya, 11 March 1997.
Professor H.M Dahlan, the Dean Faculty of Development Science, UKM.
Formal interview at his office in UKM, 31 March 1997, two month before his untimely demise.
Dr. Ranjit Singh, Associate Professor of History, University of Malaya.Formal interview at Universiy of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 30 April 1997.
Dr. P. Ramasamy, Associate Professor of Political Science, UKM. Formal interview at UKM, Bangi, 31 March 1997. Dr. Jayum A. Jawan, Dean, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).
Formal interview at UPM, Serdang, 7 April 1997.
Dr Kua Kia Soong, Director of the Dong Jiao Zhong (Chinese Education Association), at his office in Kajang, 2 April 1997.
Mr. Rustam A. Sani, Freelance Writer. Formal interview at his house in Kuala Lumpur, 7 April 1997.

III. Key Opinion Formers

Datuk Mohamad Salleh Majid, Managing Director Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange.
Formal interview at his office in Kuala Lumpur, 28 March 1997.

Datuk Johan Jaafar, Editor-in-Chief, the Utusan Melayu Group.
Formal interview at his office in Kuala Lumpur, 7 May 1997.
Datuk Ahmad Nazri Abdullah, Editor-in-Chief, Berita Harian Press.
Formal interview at his office in Kuala Lumpur, 12 May 1997.
Mr. Chamil Wariya, Editor, Magazine Division, Utusan Melayu Group.
Formal interview at his office in Kuala Lumpur, 10 April 1997.
Tan Sri A. Samad Ismail, Veteran Journalist.
Formal interview at his house in Petaling Jaya, 27 March 1997.
Mr. Wong Chun Wai, Senior Journalist, The Star Newspaper.
Informal Discussion, 2 May 1997.