

## **Managing Ethnicity and Constructing the 'Bangsa Malaysia' (A United Malaysian Nation)\***

MOHAMED MUSTAFA ISHAK

*Student Affairs Department*

*Universiti Utara Malaysia*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The question of nation-building has always been a central issue in Malaysian politics. Whilst the country has been able to sustain stable politics since the 1969 racial tragedy, spawning two decades rapid socio-economic development until the 1997 Asian economic crisis, the project of nation-building remained a basic national agenda yet to be fully resolved. This short paper investigates the delicate process of nation-building in Malaysia in the post 1970s, especially in the context of the vision of constructing the Bangsa Malaysia or united Malaysian nation enshrined in Mahathir's Vision 2020 project which was introduced in 1991.*

*The aim of the paper is firstly, to highlight the underlying socio-political parameters that shaped and influenced the politics of nation-building in the country, and secondly, to explore the viability of the project of Bangsa Malaysia in the context of the daunting challenges involved in the process of nation-building. The paper contends that, based on the Malaysian experience, the potent interplay between the forces of ethnicity and nationalism constitute the crux of the problem in the politics of nation-building in Malaysia. This dialectic it is argued, stems from the prevalence of the varying 'nationalisms' within and across ethnic groups. These phenomena have not only shaped the pattern of ethnic political mobilization in the country, but above all, laid the most complex set of obstacles in the path of the project of nation-building.*

*The paper argues that the project of constructing the Bangsa Malaysia therefore, can be seen as significant attempt by the state to reconcile the competing 'nationalism'. It can also be considered as an attempt to consolidate Malay nationalism and cultural pluralism, thus promoting the development of 'civic nationalism' or creation of 'a supra-ethnic' national identity. The 'nation', therefore, is depicted as a 'mosaic of cultures', but with a strong fervour of Malay nationalism. However, the viability of the envisaged project is yet to be tested.*

*The concept itself is still vague to many people and the challenges ahead are enormous, involving political, economic, socio-cultural and religious issues. Indeed the project risks becoming the 'latest' in the series of competing notions of 'nation-of- intent' circulating in Malaysia. The paper contends that whilst, to some extent, the socio-political landscape of Malaysian society has been rapidly changing, especially in the past two decades of Mahathir's reign, ethnicity still pervades Malaysian political life. The paper probably differs from many previous studies on nation-building in Malaysia, which have*

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\* I have completed a study on the politics of nation-building in Malaysia for my Doctoral Degree at the University of Leeds, England in 1999. This paper is basically the gist of the thesis.

*mainly focused on either the historical dimensions or those which have examined the impact of key national policies. It is hoped that this brief paper would be able to contribute towards broadening the perspective in the analysis of ethnic relations and nation-building in Malaysia, thus, deepening the understanding of Malaysia politics and society.*

### ABSTRAK

*Persoalan pembentukan negara sentiasa menjadi isu utama dalam politik Malaysia. Walaupun negara ini telah memastikan kestabilan politik berterusan semenjak tragedi perkauman 1969, sepanjang sepanjang dua dekad pembangunan sosio-ekonomi yang pesat hingga Krisis Ekonomi Asia 1997, projek pembentukan negara kekal menjadi agenda asas negara yang belum dapat disempurnakan sepenuhnya. Artikel pendek ini menyelidik proses pembentuk negara yang rumit ini di Malaysia pasca 1970an, terutamanya dalam konteks wawasan untuk membentuk Bangsa Malaysia atau satu negara Malaysia yang bersatu seperti yang tertera dalam projek Wawasan 2020 oleh Dr Mahathir yang diperkenalkan pada tahun 1991.*

*Tujuan pertama artikel ini untuk menerangkan parameter sosio-ekonomi yang wujud dalam membentuk dan mempengaruhi politik pembentukan bangsa di negara ini, dan kedua, meninjau keupayaan dayamaju projek Bangsa Malaysia dalam konteks cabaran berat yang dihadapi dalam proses pembentukan negara ini. Artikel ini berpendapat, berdasar pengalaman Malaysia, hubungan timbal-balik utama di antara pengaruh etnisiti dan nasionalisme merupakan teras masalah politik pembentukan negara di Malaysia. Dailetik ini dikatakan lahir dari kewujudan kepelbagaian 'nasionalisme' di dalam dan di antara kumpulan etnik. Fenomena ini bukan sahaja membentuk pola pengembelangan politik etnik di dalam negara ini, tetapi lebih penting lagi, telah meletakkan satu set cabaran yang paling kompleks dalam landasan projek pembentukan negara.*

*Artikel ini berpendapat projek pembentukan Bangsa Malaysia patut dilihat sebagai satu percubaan penting oleh pemerintah untuk mengenemukan 'nasionalisme' yang bersaing ini. Ia juga boleh dianggap sebagai satu percubaan untuk mengukuh nasionalisme Melayu dan pluralisme budaya, hingga mempromosikan pembangunan 'nasionalisme sivil' atau pembentukan identiti nasional 'supra-etnik'. Justeru itu, 'negara' dipamerkan sebagai satu 'mosaik pelbagai budaya', tetapi dengan nasionalisme Melayu yang kuat. Namun demikian, keupayaan dayamaju projek yang dibayangkan ini masih belum diuji.*

*Konsep ini pun masih lagi kabur dipandangan kebanyakan orang ramai dan cabaran mendatang adalah besar yang melibatkan isu politik, ekonomi, sosio-budaya dan agama. Sememangnya projek ini berisiko menjadi 'hal terbaru' dalam siri persaingan tanggapan tentang 'negara idaman' berlegar di Malaysia. Artikel ini berpendapat, walaupun pada satu segi, landskap sosio-politik masyarakat Malaysia telah mengalami perubahan yang cepat, terutama dua dekad pemerintahan Dr. Mahathir, etnisiti masih mencorak kehidupan berpolitik rakyat Malaysia. Artikel ini mungkin berbeza dengan kajian yang lepas tentang pembentukan negara di Malaysia, kerana mereka telah memberi penumpuan sama ada pada dimensi sejarah atau ke atas tinjauan kesan dasar utama negara yang tertentu. Diharapkan artikel yang ringkas ini dapat menyumbang ke arah memperluaskan lagi perspektif analisis perhubungan etnik dan pembentukan negara di Malaysia, sekaligus memperdalamkan lagi kefahaman kita tentang politik dan masyarakat Malaysia.*

<sup>1</sup> The question of ethnicity and nationalism have drawn enormous interest from scholars of varied disciplines in the social sciences since years that may not possible to be fully listed here. To name a few were Brown (1999), Mcrone (1998), Nairn (1997), Hutchinson and A.D. Smith (1997) and so forth.

## INTRODUCTION

Studies on ethnicity and nationalism have been growing significantly in recent years despite the new interest in social sciences concerning ideas of postmodernism, globalization, and market liberalization, as well as regional political and economic cooperations.<sup>1</sup> Ethnicity continues to be crucial, and to constitute one of the most prominent features of modern society. As Horowitz (1985:13) puts it:

*The increasing prominence of ethnic loyalties is development for which neither statesmen nor social scientists were adequately prepared.*

In many divided societies, managing ethnic conflict and promoting national integration continues to be at the centre of politics. This is bound to be true as far as Malaysia is concerned. As a plural society, nation-building has always been the greatest challenge for Malaysia. Nation-building basically refers to a process of constructing national identity that could accommodate ethnic pluralism while simultaneously inculcating an overarching sense of nationhood. It is usually a process associated with plural societies. Although since the 1969 racial riots Malaysian plural society has been able to absorb various threats to its political stability, the ultimate aim to build a 'united Malaysian nation' is yet to be achieved.

The politics of nation-building in Malaysia is basically the politics of mediating identities. Indeed, this probably was the heart of the issue for many countries struggling with problems and challenges stemming from the politics of ethnicity and nationalism. As Clive J. Christie (1998) asserts, 'At the heart of any discussion of the nation and nationalism lies the issue of identity' (p. 3). For Shamsul A.B. (1993, 1996a) the politics of identity in Malaysia illustrates the prevailing contradictions of various notions of nation-of-intent<sup>2</sup> both inter and intra ethnic groups. The central question to ask is how Malaysian political

system has been coping with it and to which direction will the ideology of the Bangsa Malaysia introduced by Dr. Mahathir in 1991 seek to take Malaysians into the new millennium? And of more crucial is to what extent could this be a successful endeavour?

While the importance of historical factors has to be acknowledged, this paper embarked on the premise that the dialectic between ethnicity and nationalism is crucial to apprehend the politics of nation-building in Malaysia. Ethnicity characterised the very basis of Malaysian politics. This is reflected by the fact that political struggles are fought on ethnic basis, and tendency of every political issue to be perceived in ethnic term (see: Zakaria Ahmad, 1989; Crouch, 1996). This is the prevailing phenomenon in Malaysian polity since its independence in 1957. Amid its relative stability and rapid economic development, especially over the past two decades, Malaysia's nation-building project has not been fully accomplished, thus, constantly dominating the political agenda.

Although there have been a proliferation in the study of ethnicity and nationalism in the West in recent years, a full-length study that specifically focus on the politics of nation-building in the post New Economic policy (NEP) 1970-1990 on Malaysia is hardly found.<sup>3</sup> There were several studies on a similar subject in the past such as that Ratnam (1965); Ibrahim Saad (1976); Ongkili (1982); Wan Hashim (1983); and Abraham (1997). However, these studies were mainly restricted to events that took place in Malaysia over the first two and a half decades of independence, or between 1957 and the early 1980s. On the other hands, several contemporary writings on the questions of Bangsa Malaysia and identity politics in Malaysia made by several local observers such as Rustam A. Sani (1993); Shamsul A.B. (1993; 1996a) Ghazali Shafie (1995); and Abdul Rahman Embong (1997), apparently did not deeply discuss on aspect of the politics of nation-building. Therefore these observations need to be further scrutinised and deserved a more in-depth analysis as there have been tre-

<sup>2</sup> 'Nation-of-intent' was a concept first employed by Rothberg (1966) in his study of 'African Nationalism' and applied to the Malaysian context by Rustam A. Sani (1975) in his study of the 'Malay Left'. The concept was further expanded by Shamsul A.B. in debating about 'identity in Malaysia'.

mendous socio-economic and political changes affecting the country, particularly in the last decades, of Mahathir's political reign. One observer perceived that Mahathir's '...ideology, politics and personalities have contributed to reshaping the Malaysian polity...' (Khoo Boo Teik, 1995:x). The question is, to what extent there exist a kind of 'Mahathirism' which has significantly affect the politics of nation-building in gestures, since he came to power. Obviously, these new and important developments deserved fresh investigations.

A review of the literature suggests that the NEP and socio engineering programmes have made a significant impact socio-economically, on the landscape of Malaysia. To what extent this is affecting the short and long-term political parameters of ethnicity and nationalism would certainly constitute an interesting matter to look into. In the early 1990's Malaysia was experiencing tremendous economic growth. However, together with its other Southeast Asian neighbours, they were shaken by Asian economic crisis in 1997, which severely affected the region. The economic crisis of 1997 has then turned into a political turmoil in 1998 in several countries, and Malaysia is no exception. The sacking of Anwar Ibrahim- the popular Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia and, political crisis that erupted following his shocking removal from office was the case in point. This occurred at the time Malaysia was steadily moving towards promoting its Vision 2020 agenda, which embodied the idea of constructing the Bangsa Malaysia. Although aspects of the twin crises do not constitute the core focus of the paper, it is hoped that it would provide insights and new perspectives in assessing the effect and dimensions of the crises on problems of nation formation as well as prospects for future trend in Malaysian politics.

The main objective of this paper is to examine the delicate process of nation-building in the post 1970's especially in the context of the

vision constructing the Bangsa Malaysia or 'united Malaysian nation' which was formally introduced in 1991. The key interest of the paper is to outline the underlying socio-political parameters that shaped and influenced the politics of nation-building in the country. It is also sought to trace the extent to which shift was occurring from ethnicism to a Malaysian nationalism facilitated by the notion of Bangsa Malaysia. It is argued that the crux of the problem lies in the potent interplay of the forces of ethnicity and nationalism, which ultimately characterised Malaysian political life. This is the central argument of the paper.

## THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SETTING

As far as demographic composition is concerned, Malaysian society is very diversified. The Malays and other indigenous communities who constituted about 60 percent of the population are classified as Bumiputera (lit. sons of the soil, and enjoy certain privileges as stipulated under the Malaysian constitution).<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, ethnic Chinese who made up about 37 percent and Indian communities who contributed the remaining 11 percent. These two groups were classified as non-Bumiputera. None of these groups are homogenous, being made up of peoples with varying languages and religions. Whilst the Malays are all Muslims and speak Malay language, other Bumiputera communities especially in the two Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak practise differing religions and have their respective ethnic languages. On the other hand, the Indians are mainly Hindus and speak Tamil, whilst the religious and language backgrounds of the Chinese are much more complicated. The religion and language divisions in Malaysia, therefore, occur both within and across ethnic groups. In spite of the general increase in population, from about 10 million in 1970 to approximately 22 million in

<sup>4</sup> The terms Malay and Bumiputera, which are used in Malaysia often in the context of affirmative action programmes may at times cause confusion. Legally speaking, the term Bumiputera is referred to the indigeneous communities in Sabah and Sarawak, majority of which are non-Muslim. The term Malay used refers to ethnic Malay in the Peninsular who are Muslims. The small minority of the indigenous communities in the Peninsular is classified as the Orang Asli. However, during the NEP period (1971-1990), the term Bumiputera has been widely used by the government in policy documents as well as in idiom of everyday interaction to connote all the indigenous communities in Malaysia including the Malays.

2000 as indicated in the censuses of 1970, 1980, 1990, ethnic composition in Malaysia has not changed significantly. As far as nation-building is concerned, it is the Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera ethnic divide that is perceived as most important by many Malaysians as it illustrates the delicate demographic balance between the two categories, each constituting about half of the population (Shamsul A.B., 1996a:323). And within this division, it is the Sino-Malay relations that is perceived as most crucial as reflected in the socio-political development and tend to dominate the politics of nation-building in Malaysia.

For Malaysia, nation-building has been the single most crucial national agenda since its inception as a sovereign state in 1957. Almost all key national policies devised since then have a direct bearing on the questions of nation-building. Nevertheless in as much as these policies were hoped to redress the related problems of national integration, new challenges cropped up and even more problematic. In 1991 Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad unveiled the so-called Vision 2020, which simply means that in the year 2020 the government wants Malaysia to be an industrialised country in its own mould (Mahathir Mohamad, 1991). Of great interests in the project Vision 2020 is the list of nine challenges and obstacles that Malaysia has to overcome to translate it into reality. On top of the list is the creation of so-called *Bangsa Malaysia*, or 'united Malaysian nation'. Apparently this was the first time the government officially put forward a clear vision for constructing 'a nation' or *Bangsa Malaysia*. With that, it clearly infers previous attempt over the past forty years of constructing national integration lacks a coherent focus and thus has not been fully achieved.

### **ETHNICITY NATIONALISM AND NATION-BUILDING: THE THEORETICAL LINKAGES**

The rhetoric of nation-building has emerged as an essential agenda in most plural societies as the state sought to neutralise competing ethnic ideologies of nationhood. A plural society is one in

which politics is ethnicised, in which political competition is overtly drawn along ethnic lines. Whereas sustainable economic development and democracy may to some extent diffuse the political salience of ethnicity, it is wrong to suggest they will lead to the elimination of ethnicity. Eriksen, 1993:158) argued that ethnic revitalization has been an inherent feature of modernity, thus 'the eventual disappearance of ethnicity is no less certain than its appearance' (Eriksen, 1993:160). To him, 'ethnicity does not necessarily arise from modernity, and it is not necessarily an end-product' (p. 158). Therefore, although people tend to share many modern and cosmopolitan cultural values as a result of modernization, industrialization, and democratization, they simultaneously become socially more diversified. Ethnicity, without doubt, is one prevalent expressions of that diversification. Clearly, as Geller put it, modern society is both more homogeneous and more diversified...' (Gellner, 1978:141)

What make ethnicity and nationalism politically salient as far as nation-building in divided societies is concerned? The significance of ethnicity lies in its salience for group consciousness and collective political actions. People are willing to die for their collective 'nation', simply because of the powerful appeal and persistence of ethnic identity and sentiment (Anderson, 1996a). Ethnic identity provides a tangible set of common identifications-language, food, music, names-when other social collectivities become more abstract and impersonal (Bell, 1975). Therefore, psychologically, it has one advantage over the other modes of personal identity and social linkages, through its capacity to arouse and to engage the most intense, deep and private emotional sentiments of the people (see: Fortz, 1974:105). In this regards, the moment ethnic identity is perceived as being driven into a situation of threat, it explains why there is strong tendency for ethnic revitalization movements to emerge.

Identity as crucial mark of distinctiveness is the force behind ethnic consciousness and, in many cases ethnic groups enter into politics purportedly to protect themselves from or rather to resist the perceived threat of domination from

other ethnic groups, which might result in the dilution of their ethnic identity (the very mark of distinctiveness). As ethnic groups transform themselves into political conflict groups for the purpose of articulating its interest, the emotional intensity of their internal ethnic cohesion arises and ethnic solidarity and consciousness will be enhanced. From this premise, it appears that ethnicity does not exist in isolation but rather is a consequence of contact and conflict. According to 'the ethnicist paradigm' (Smith, 1996) ethnicity is something 'mythic' and 'symbolic' in character and derived its powerful appeal from aspect of a 'common past'. However, the relevant aspect of 'common past' here refers to 'order collective ties' (Smith, 1986) and not necessary or exclusively to a product of history (Nash, 1989: Shamsul A.B., 1996a) or modernization and industrialization (Gellner, 1983). It is argued that, whereas ethnic groups are characterized by a multiplicity of attributes, namely common descent, shared history, language, religion, race, colour culture, sect, caste and so on, ethnicity is basically an aspect of social relationships between one or more ethnic groups in a given socio-political setting.

By the same token, cultural peculiarities may have a direct bearing on the emergence of ethnic consciousness, but it is only when cultural differences make a social difference do they lead to the creation of ethnicity. The question of protecting one's cultural traits may not arise unless there exist elements of cultural domination and threat from another culture. Nevertheless, living with dual or multiple identities does not always constitute a problem. It does create some difficulties when one is expected to have a clearly delineated identity. This is part of the problem that prevails in plural societies, which consequently makes the project of nation-formation a difficult task. The problem lies in the conflict between protecting ethnic distinctiveness or identity vis-à-vis subscribing to national identity. Ethnic identities, and the belief in shared cultures and history, however are not perpetual. Instead, they are creations, which may result from specific historical circumstances, strategic actors or as unintended consequences of political projects (Eriksen, 1993:92). Identity, in this regard is not static but rather is dynamic, and is prone to constant change in ac-

cordance with changes in social and political environments. Identity is fluid and situational. The problem that prevails in many divided societies is that, while ethnic identities may constantly change, the people are still strongly attached to their collective ethnic identities, in contrast to national identity, which has yet to be developed.

The crucial linkages between ethnicity and nationalism lie in the state. That is, nationalism emerges when there is an ... institutionalization of one particular ethnic identity attaching it to the state (Worsely, 1984:247). Whereas a state in contemporary politics is defined as having (1) a geographical area endowed with political sovereignty, (2) a monopoly on the use of force; and (3) consisting of citizens with terminal loyalties (Oommen, 1994:26), a nation derives from the people's relationship to and identification with the state. Where there exists a relatively strong, cohesive and common identification between the people and the state, then a nation-state is arguable created. In this regard, national identity or collective culture links together the people and the state to create a nation-state. The most common feature of a modern nation state can be in seen Europe, where a nation (a cultural entity) co-exists with the state (a political entity) thus creating many distinctive Europe nation-states (Oommen, 1994). These states are basically a composition of both cultural and political nations, which emerges through a long process of the ethnogenesis of the nation.

However, many developing countries have been formed as a consequence of decolonisation. They are largely independent states created out of the territories, which were under European colonial administration. Their boundaries were drawn, as Hobsbawm (1990:171) explains, without any reference to, and sometimes without the knowledge of their peoples, except perhaps for some Westernized aristocrats. For Malaysia, its geographical boundaries were delineated by common consent through a process negotiation. In the Peninsula, the common factor is provided by recognition of the federation of Malay states as the basic for the 'new state'. After departure of the colonial masters, the ruling elites inherited the state, but without having 'a united union'. Instead, they had to grapple with the problems of govern-

ing a state in which the society was multi-ethnic and multi-cultural.

By the time of independence, the Malay states had already been changed through linkages instituted by the British. Above all, the composition of the population had also changed, so that common descent could not be the basis of national identity and unity. The presence of citizens of differing ethnic and cultural origins requires the formulation of a new basis for the national identity. The basic problem with which Malaysia (and many other states with similar characteristics) have to cope has been the prevalence of strong and conspicuous identification of its people with other social collectivities (especially ethnic and tribal groups) in contrast to common identification with the state. In other words, their national identity is still weak in comparison to their ethnic identities. This also implies that whereas the citizens can identify with the state politically because of their citizenship status, they may not identify strongly with it culturally. This is a crucial problem in the development of national culture and identity in Malaysia.

Hence, if Malaysians envisage the 'nation', it will tend to be a political nation rather than a 'cultural nation'. This is a possible alternative to avoid the controversy of being an ethnic nation, while awaiting the long process of ethnogenesis of the nation to bring about the creation of the 'ethno-cultural nation'. This is the significant contrast between these 'nations' and other nation-states such as those of many European nation-states. Therefore, countries such as Malaysia can be regarded as states with 'several nations' (Shamsul A.B., 1992) or 'plural society nations' because of their multinational or multi-ethnic composition. Thus, there was a suggestion that these states be called 'state-nations' rather than nation-states (Leo Suryadinata, 1997). What tends to constitute a persistent problem in these states has been the assertion of ethnic identities in national terms, thus signifying a 'danger' to the state and often 'perceived' as posing a similar threat to other ethnic communities.

Quite often, the state itself is not a neutral entity, as it may have been 'seized' to serve the specific motives and agendas of a particular political elite or ethnic group. Political life in the

state thus sometimes reflect the struggle of various social groupings 'against' the state, which was perceived as attempting to hinder their legitimate interests, a persistent phenomenon likened to the 'Hobbesian state'. With such a backdrop, the state-nations itself tends to be a very fragile institution. Although political violence or anarchy may not necessarily be a persistent phenomenon, these societies probably can be best described as 'states in stable tension' (Shamsul A.B., 1996a). Hence, in a conscious attempt to preserve the sovereignty and the integrity of the state, political regimes in divided societies tend to succumb into political authoritarianism or make use of 'quasi-democratic' systems as an alternative to western style liberal democracy (see: Crouch, 1996; Zakaria Ahmad, 1989).

Starting with an authoritarian system, those who control or dominate the state tend to manipulate its apparatus to propagate nation-building as an ethnic project or present the nation-state in ethnic terms. In other words, the country's nation formation is to be based on a particular ethnic identity. Which consequently implies that other ethnic communities will inevitably have to accept a predetermined national identity at the expense of their own ethnic identities. This type of nation formation encourages ethnic and cultural revitalization on the part of the affected groups to resist the cultural and political hegemony of the dominant ethnic group. For some other states whose internal political structures have been established on the framework of consociational democracy, the persistent dilemma has been to maintain pluralism while simultaneously moving towards the construction of national identity, and hence nation formation. Malaysia has been facing most of these problems since its inception as a modern independent state in 1957.

Moving to the question of nationalism, it is argued that nationalism emerges as a form of ethnicity or rather as Smith (1986) perceives, 'ethnicity is a precursor of nationalism'. Although Smith (1983) argues that nationalism may emerge with or without a nation, Gellner (1983) believes that nationalism 'invents nations where they do not exist.' This score implies that without nationalism, the nation is perhaps much more difficult to conceive. Therefore, in the context of countries

in which their 'nations' are in-the-making, it is crucial that nationalism is constantly developed to promote a sense of nationhood amongst its citizens. But since nationalism is deeply embedded in ethno-symbolic base, the question is which ethnic identity should constitute the basis for nationalism in divided societies?

In Malaysia, the Malays felt that Malay nationalism that matured in 1957 should be the basis for the country's nationalism, as other nationalism were externally oriented (pre-independence Chinese and Indian nationalism in Malaya). However, the non-Malays were sceptical about this view, as they saw that accepting Malay nationalism and its hegemonic tendencies might result in the encapsulation of other ethnic communities into Malay society. This is something that would ultimately undermine the culturally pluralist basis of the polity that was established in 1957. For the Malays, their intention to subordinate other ethnic communities into the framework of 'Malay nation-state' was obstructed by the consociational framework that anchored the political system. This system is based on power sharing mechanism in which every ethnic groups attempt to seek maximum power to protect their interest and influence national policies. Therefore, ethnic struggle in this connection may not be so much about political independence, but rather about getting some limited objectives pertaining to economics, cultural, religious, linguistics, and so on within the framework of the existing state. These illustrate the notions of ethnic ideology of nationhood held by each individual ethnic group. Perhaps, this might be the same factor that 'saved' Malaysia from plummeting into endless ethnic confrontations, as the system provides adequate space for conflict regulation, despite being severely challenged in the 1969 racial riots.

While consociational democracy may provide certain tangible mechanisms for conflict management, it has, however, certain outstanding flaws. The dangers for this system may lie in (1) the failure of multi-ethnic national elite to reach

political accommodation or compromise (2) the failure of ethnic elite at the national level to gain adequate or continuous support from ethnic groups that they represent; and (3) the threat of moderate national ethnic elite being severely challenged by the extremist and radical forces within and outside their own ethnic groups (see Lijphart, 1977; Horowitz, 1985). These challenges have posed serious threats to Malaysian consociationalism, which brought the system to near collapse in the 1969 racial riots. However, the system was revived in 1974 with the establishment of the Barisan Nasional grand coalition which is a bigger, more representative and thus a more stable consociational structure. Nevertheless, to provide a more lasting stability, the country still needs to find a permanent solution through the nation-building agenda. The biggest challenge is to formulate the most acceptable framework for mediating identities, so that it can accommodate all the essential interests of major ethnic groups in the society.

In short, there is no simple solution to alleviate the effect of ethnic, religious or linguistic cleavages in plural societies. Without consensus, a radical and coercive approach in nation-building often may result in a setback. Neither ethnic cleavages nor ethnic nationalism can be easily managed single handedly. State intervention may only resolve part of the problem. But over intervention by the state in the nation-building project may result in the state being regarded as a tool to advance the interests of a particular ethnic group. However, it is much more reasonable for the government to embark upon programme towards minimising ethnic grievances in politics and socio-economics spheres, while simultaneously promoting 'state nationalism' or 'civic nationalism'<sup>5</sup>, a vision of common destiny, and universal cultural values among all the ethnic groups. The most important is to pursue the project of nation formation on the basis of national consensus but the big question is how could these be attained without prejudice or implying that nation-building

<sup>5</sup> The distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism tend to be a problematic one in the sense that one cannot simply equate civic nationalism as good and all ethnic nationalisms as bad. David Brown (1999) argued that civic nationalism might also develop in either liberal or illiberal directions depending upon how effectively its visions of civic community are employed by the mobilizing elites to resolve societal aspirations or fears.



agenda is not heading towards an ethnic project? Obviously the debates so far indicate that nation building as argued by Atal (1981:23) is

*a complex phenomenon, simplistic answers do not explain its intricate patterns, nor can one trust the many proffered panaceas for instant nation-building. It is a journey towards the desirable but the unknown, with several built-in handicaps all along the road.*

### **THE POLITICS OF NATION-BUILDING IN MALAYSIA: MANAGING ETHNICITY AND CONSOLIDATING NATIONALISM**

History has shown that Malaysia is never short of nationalist ideals to form the basis of a nation. Indeed, the country's independence was largely attributed to the struggle of Malay nationalism. However, within Malay nationalist movements of the pre-independence era there were clear ideological divisions between the radical and conservative groups (W.R. Roff, 1994; Ariffin Omar, 1993; Ikmal Said, 1992; Firdaus Abdullah, 1985). Even after the conservative-nationalist group represented by UMNO managed to dominate the post independence Malaysian politics, the aspiration of creating a Malay nation-state has not been materialized. Instead, the nationalists had to compromise to the creation of 'a plural society nation' when independence was granted in 1957 and shared power with the non-Malays, who were mainly immigrant communities then had settled in the colonial Malaya in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, despite the creation of a power sharing mechanism at the Federal level which illustrates the formation of Malaysia's model of consociational democracy, Malay political supremacy was reconstituted, enshrined in UMNO as the backbone of the Alliance (1957-1974) and later the BN coalition government. Malay centric or rather UMNO centric government has been the hallmark of Malaysian politics. Thus, in contrast to the 'ideal consociationalism' arrangement (Lipjhart, 1977), the system in Malaysia can be considered

as a system of 'hegemonic consociationalism' (Milne and Mauzy, 1999:18). Whilst the Malays are politically dominant, the non-Malays, especially the Chinese are economically superior. This delicate balance or perhaps an outstanding discrepancy has further complicated the project of nation formation in the country.

Politically, Chan and Ever (1973:303-4) argued that in many Southeast Asian countries there were two alternatives adopted in dealing with the problems of nation-building. One was to resort to the 'regressive' identity by reviving a long and proud cultural tradition through an appeal to the 'golden past'. The other was a 'progressive' identity, culminating an ameliorative programme of building a society by discarding its feudal or colonial shackles in which one such option lay in establishing a socialist state. For Malaysia both approaches were attempted, yet neither were successfully materialized. Attempt by the communist (the MCP) to create a 'progressive' identity through the realisation of a socialist state in Malaysia was rejected by the Malays, as its struggle was incompatible with their historical, cultural and religious identities. Discarding feudal and colonial bondages that have been strongly embedded in the system in order to allow the establishment of a socialist or a communist state would result in the elimination of Malay ethnic identifiers namely the bahasa, agama and the raja. Moreover, the MCP was an organisation dominated by the Chinese. Therefore, the communists agenda was seen by the Malays as Chinese struggle which was perceived as incompatible with their cultural identities and political interests. On the other hand, attempts by Malay nationalists to revive a long and proud Malay cultural traditions culminated in the creation of a Malay nation-state was denied by the British as it was opposed by the non-Malays especially the economically superior ethnic Chinese. While Malay historical and political supremacy was recognized, a new independent state of 1957 was based on the principle of multi-ethnic society that would allow the diverse ethnic and cultural elements to co-exist along each other.

The post-independence era, saw that Malay hegemony has been fiercely challenged by the non-Malays. They felt that Malay dominant thesis was an ideology that served to dominate

them, hence perceived that there were conscious attempts by the nationalists to turn nation-building as an ethnic project which will ultimately threaten their ethnic identities and the basis of the 'plural society nation'. This partly explained the reasons behind the non-Malays opposition to the national language and education policy in the 1950's-1960's, and the national cultural policy that was introduced in 1971. Apart from that, the post-independence Malay nationalism has also to cope with challenges from other factions within Malay and Bumiputera communities who espoused the notion of an Islamic state; and notions of Kadazanism and Dayakism as the definitive identities in the two Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak respectively. Nation-building in Malaysia thus could be seen as a struggle of every ethnic groups against the state (read a Malay centric state) on one hand, and on the other, against each others to materialise their respective versions of a 'nation'. But the most obvious contestation was between Malay vis-à-vis the non-Malay groups anchored by the Chinese. This is the most salient struggle which had left several damaging political scars to Malaysian society, the worst culminated in the 1969 racial riots. This is also a struggle, which formed the basic characteristic of Malaysian politics.

Since the 1969 tragedy, Malaysian political system however has been able to absorb various threats to its stability. To some extent, this indicates that the once perceived very fragile system of Malaysia's consociational democracy has been gaining momentum since the formation of the BN coalition government in 1974. Apart from that, the state generated 'stability' can also be attributed to various strategies of depoliticisation that marked the growing political authoritarianism in Malaysia (see Crouch, 1996; Khoo Boo Teik, 1997). Despite the various criticism to its democratic practices, the government since the implementation of the NEP in 1970 has been able to embark upon affirmative action programmes to tackle the problems of ethnic imbalances in the socio-economic fields, especially in rectifying the Bumiputeras' economic backwardness. While these measures have made some positive results, the project of nation formation is still far from being resolved. Ethnic politics is still a major

threat to the system continued stability, and government leaders have constantly reiterated that managing ethnic conflicts and moving towards national integration always constitute a primary national agenda.

That was a backdrop against which the notion of Bangsa Malaysia was introduced in 1991. Whereas the objective of the project may well be easily understood, Bangsa Malaysia, however, is a problematic concept. On one hand, its operational definition is still vague to many Malaysians, while on the other, its viability as a formula to resolve the national predicament in Malaysia's plural society may arouse as much ambiguity as its meaning. While the country was enjoying constant economic growth since the late 1980's, in July 1997 what was later known as an Asian economic meltdown, has severely disrupted Malaysia's relative stability and thus eclipsed its economic success story. Malaysia has not only had to grapple with the economic downturn, but worst still, a year later the country was plunged into a political crisis following the abrupt dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim, then the country's popular Deputy Prime Minister, who was widely seen as Mahathir's heir-apparent.

The twin crises have left damaging political consequences not only for Mahathir's leadership, but beyond that the ruling party or rather more specifically UMNO, suffered serious political setback as depicted in the November 1999 general election. Although the BN retained its two third majority at the Federal Parliament, UMNO power-base has been seriously eroded by the Opposition Front, the Barisan Alternatif led by PAS. Indeed, PAS was the greatest beneficiary of the 1997-98 economic and political crises. Apart from retaining Kelantan, Pas was able to capture Terengganu and also made significant in-road into several other states such as Kedah, Pahang, Selangor and Perak. The 1999 the general election clearly indicated that UMNO was largely rejected by the Malays; its traditional power-base, and now had to count on the non-Malays in order to remain in power. To what extent UMNO could regain its influence among the Malays, especially the younger generations and the middle class, before the next general election remain to be seen. Obviously, all these new developments would have significant effects on the project of nation-

building in Malaysia, thus constituting a new dimension to look into as far as the politics of ethnicity and nationalism in Malaysia is concerned.

Despite some tensions between the federal government and several state governments, ethnic struggle in Malaysia has largely taken place within existing political boundaries, whereby each ethnic group trying to seek maximum power to protect their interests. PAS, which ruled the state of Kelantan from 1959-1978, and from 1990 to the present, has confined itself to attempting to portray the Islamic 'holier than thou' approach in governing the state vis-à-vis the perceived UMNO 'secular-nationalist ideology'. Although PAS has been propagating the notion of 'Islamic-nation-state', it has not been able to achieve its goal, due to constitutional limitation. PAS needs to amend the Federal Constitution in order to allow Kelantan and Terengganu to become 'model' of Islamic states, a legislative battle which it has been unable to win given the BN domination of the Federal Parliament. Moreover, the non-Muslim communities who constituted around 40 percent of the population are yet to be convinced by PAS concept of universal justice through the establishment of an Islamic state. In Sabah the PBS regime from 1985-1991 only attempted to reconstruct the notion of Malay-based Bumiputeraism into Kadazan-based Bumiputeraism in that particular state. Kadazan nationalism is more of a political expression of socio-economic and cultural deprivation of the Kadazan communities than a political nationalism *per se*. Likewise, Ibanism or Dayakism in Sarawak have a similar characteristics. The success of the BN to topple the PBS-led government in 1994 after several of the former state representatives hopped into the BN and regained its power in the 1999 Sabah election apparently 'halted' the wave of Kadazan nationalism for the time being. In Sarawak, however, the strong BN leadership of Tan Sri Taib Mahmud has been able to curb Dayakism from gaining its strength similar to that of Kadazanism.<sup>6</sup>

While the New Economic Policy (NEP 1970-1990) has made a number of significant impacts in terms of rectifying socio-economic dis-

parities between the Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera communities, the framework of nation formation embodied in the policy did not transcend the premise of conflict management and racial harmony. On the contrary, the Bumiputera-non-Bumiputera dichotomy that was created during the NEP period has further deepened ethnic differentiation in the society. For non-Bumiputera, the question was why the new Malaysian generation who were supposed to have equal citizenship rights and status had to carry the burden of the historical baggage of previous generations that clearly affected their current position. In turn, the Malays argued that, the compromy was based on a 'sacred social contract' between the founding fathers of the country in 1957 which had set the basis of every citizen's constitutional rights. Obviously the institutionalization of ethnicity seems to be the core factor in such a debate, and will inevitably continue to be so, as long as the debate on national identity and nation formation is not resolved.

Whereas the Malays were concerned about sustaining Malayness and strengthening Malay-Islamic hegemony as well as improving their economic gains, the Chinese fear was the perceived threat to Chinese culture and Chinese language, the defining features of Chineseness, from the exertion of the Malay or Islamic dominant ideologies. Although Wang Gung Wu (1988:4) asserts that, 'the Chinese have never had a concept of identity, only a concept of Chineseness', the perceived threats to aspects of their 'Chineseness' such as Chinese language and culture, be it real or imaginary, that came from Malay nationalism and Islamism had resulted in the revitalization of Chinese cultural movements to project Chinese identity. For ethnic Chinese, the symbols of their identity lie in Chinese schools, the Chinese mass media (especially the press), and Chinese associations (see: Leo Suryadinata, 1997). The main functions of all these institutions are to promote Chinese language and culture, thus sustaining Chineseness. Therefore, as long as the basis of cultural pluralism is maintained in Malaysia, the Chinese and the other non-Malays' aspirations to

<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the Kadazans, the Dayak communities are disunited and their resources limited. Therefore, Dayakism as political movement has not been successfully mobilised (See: Jayum, 1994; and Mohamed Mustafa Ishak, 1999)

sustain their distinctive ethnic identities will be guaranteed.

In the wider context, Vision 2020 the ultimate goal of which was to create 'a united and an industrialized Malaysian nation in its own mould', can be seen as an attempt to reconstruct Malaysian nationalism on the basis of 'secular-materialist' components. However, the notion of Bangsa Malaysia embodied in the project has yet to be clearly spelled out. The definition of the concept is still open to various interpretation, and therefore could mean different things to different people. This clearly reflects the conflicting perception of what 'Malaysian nation' should represent. For the large majority of Malaysians, the concept is still vague and perhaps an ambiguous notion. Every ethnic community hoped that their social, cultural and political aspirations would be embedded in the concept of Bangsa Malaysia. On the other hand, several policy speeches made by government leaders concerning Bangsa Malaysia also had not been clearly elaborated the meaning of the concept. A number of speeches made by Dr. Mahathir since 1998 concerning the meaning of the concept of Bangsa Malaysia indicated that he only insisted that Bangsa Malaysia as 'the people who are able to identify themselves with the country, speak Bahasa Malaysia and accept the Constitution,' but will 'remain as Chinese or Indians or Ibans or Kadazans or Muruts and so forth'. In short, Mahathir states that a Malaysian will only be a 'Bangsa Malaysia' in the form 'political identity' and therefore will not lose their respective ethnic languages or cultures (see: Mohamed Mustafa Ishak, 1999).

With the introduction of the idea of Bangsa Malaysia, the government can be seen as attempting to formulate a middle ground through the consolidation of Malay nationalism and cultural pluralism, thus depicting the nation as 'a mosaic of different cultures' and creating a supra-ethnic national identity. By so doing, it tacitly sought to downplay the 'ethno-cultural dialectic' that strongly prevails in Malaysian society. Nevertheless, depicting the 'nation' as a 'mosaic of cultures' is easier than living in such a mosaic. Creating the united 'nation' out of distinct ethnic cultures is a difficult matter. The problem for this framework lies in its emphasis on differences

rather than similarities. The notion of Bangsa Malaysia has brought with it several fundamental questions yet to be addressed. The first and foremost is, to what extent the philosophy of 'unity in diversity' brought by the notion of Bangsa Malaysia is going to be viable basis for creating a 'united Malaysian nation'? The second is, before this venture can be endorsed, Malaysians may need to know what criteria are to be used to balance Malay nationalism with the notion of cultural pluralism in the formation of the characteristics of the Bangsa Malaysia? Answering these questions may trigger another cultural-political 'battle' between the major ethnic groups. The battle is likely to be a multi-dimensional one, that is a struggle between Malay nationalism, Islam, Bumiputeraism (Kadazanism and Dayakism), and cultural pluralism.

Since the notion of Bangsa Malaysia remains rather vague to the people at large, and the debates over what should constitute the core characteristics of the envisaged 'nation' are still very much alive, the project remains both conceptually and practically problematic. Bangsa Malaysia can therefore only be envisaged in political terms rather than cultural terms. Given the dominance of competing ethnic ideas of a nation within Malaysia's pluralistic socio-political settings, the notion of Bangsa Malaysia may simply prove the latest in a series of different nation-of-intent which have been articulated in post-independence Malaysia. Looking from this perspective, it is argued that the forces of ethnicity and nationalism will remain crucial in shaping and influencing the mechanics and the dynamics of the politics of nation-building in Malaysia for many years to come.

In one way or another, Bangsa Malaysia is tied to UMNO 'pragmatic-secularist politics'. UMNO is fully aware that based on the non-Muslims' difficulties in adapting to Islam in comparison to their willingness to adapt to the Malay language, the Raja and some elements of Malay culture, Islam will always constitute a sensitive subject as far as the Malay vis-à-vis non-Malay relationship is concerned. Therefore, although UMNO has claimed that the party is committed to Islam, the party has never proposed transforming the Malaysian semi-secular polity into an Islamic

theocratic state. This has been the crux of the conflict between UMNO and PAS which does envisage an Islamic state. Bangsa Malaysia has been part of Mahathir's grand vision of what a semi-secular Malaysian state should be in the year 2020.

Until July 1997 the government, in particular Mahathir's leadership, seemed to enjoy a strong popular mandate given the continued stability and rapid economic development the country has been experiencing. Every ethnic community generally felt that it had been getting its respective portion of the country's economic prosperity. The landslide electoral victory secured by the BN in the 1995 general election illustrated this widespread support backed by continuous economic growth, political stability, and strong popular support. Mahathir's leadership and his grandiose visions seemed unaffected despite various criticisms leveled against his policies, and the government's authoritarian tendencies. For more than a decade, Mahathir has been able to subdue his critics with Malaysia's economic success, internal cohesion and his high profile international reputation. Several attempts to challenge his power grip within UMNO itself ended in abject failure.

However, when the country was severely hit by the 1997 economic crisis which later turned into a political one, things began to change. The most serious criticism of his economic policies and grandiose projects were those of 'crony capitalism' and the widespread of corruption in his government. Even the new middle-class Malays who were basically the product of Mahathir's economic policies begin to challenge his leadership, especially with regard to the shocking dismissal of his popular deputy Anwar Ibrahim, and above all the ill-treatment that he received thereafter. Mahathir's eighteen years grip on power has been seriously questioned. Mahathir's leadership in the midst of the economic and political turmoil has divided Malaysians along ethnic lines. While the non-Malays, particularly the Chinese) believed that retaining Mahathir's leadership and UMNO led government was crucial to prevent Malaysia from succumbing to a grim scenario similar to that of the Indonesian crisis, many Malays (especially from amongst the middle class and the younger

generation) tended to see PAS as serious political alternative to UMNO. Indeed, support for PAS has been growing significantly since Anwar's dismissal, especially in the Malay heartland state of Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Perlis as demonstrated in 1999 general election. In fact, the opposition parties seem to have been brought much closer together by forming an electoral pact as depicted in the last election.

Although the government has been able to turn around the 1997-1998 economic recession with some moderate growth recorded by mid-1999 through several unorthodox approaches such as that of capital control and fixed exchange rate policies, politically, the government, especially UMNO is still struggling in its attempt to win back Malay voters who have supported PAS and its opposition pact during the last election. Such scenario if continued, will not only affect UMNO's position as the backbone of the government, but of more crucial is the position of Malaysian consociational political arrangement, as moderate national elite, namely UMNO, are faced with daunting task of regaining their influence. If UMNO is weakened, would there be another political party in the country capable of taking over-all control to maintain racial harmony in the country? To what extent the post Mahathir leadership in UMNO would be able to survive all these critical challenges has yet to be seen. The relevant question to ask is: to what extent is the idea of Bangsa Malaysia going to survive beyond Dr. Mahathir's political reign? In what manner Malaysian politics will evolve in the post Mahathir era is yet another crucial question which will have a significant bearing on the project of nation-building in the country. What is perhaps more or less certain is that ethnicity and nationalism will still be socially and politically salient in shaping and influencing the politics of nation-building in Malaysia for many years to come.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that as far as the project of nation-building in Malaysia is concerned, many of the shift

that were occurring in the system over the past four decades have been generated by the state. Although ethnicity still forms the very basis of Malaysian politics, its political salience in the post 1990 period has been rather different to the situation that prevailed in the 1960's and 1970's. The key factor was the prevalence of a relatively strong and stable consociational political regime with Malay leadership as its backbone. With that came the notion of Malay political hegemony, though the government since independence comprised representatives of multi-ethnic political coalition. A relatively strong government and stable political base has enabled efforts at generating economic development to yield many fruitful outcomes. Constant economic growth has enabled the government to embark on attempts at redressing ethnic imbalances in various fields. Ethnic harmony has been built through the sharing of economic wealth. In short, over the past four decades, sustainable economic development was seen as vital in promoting improved ethnic relations in the country. This will certainly remain the case in the future.

The notion of Bangsa Malaysia illustrated that the project of nation formation was advanced as part of a package of economic development inherent in Vision 2020, that is, a plan to turn Malaysia into a fully industrialized country. Although the symbiotic relationship between economic development and the political salience of ethnicity is acknowledged, the success of the project of nation formation in Malaysia needs more than economic measures. Nationalism and national identity is not only about the economy, but beyond that embedded in a strong sense culture and emotional ties. Establishing these ties is perhaps much more difficult than economic development. In Mahathir's word:

... building a nation out of diverse people with differing historical, ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural and geographical backgrounds is something more than just fostering consensus on the basic character of a state or nation. It involves the fostering of shared historical experiences; shared values; a feeling of common identity and shared destiny that transcends ethnic bounds without undermining ethnic identity; loyalty, commitment and an emotional attachments to the nation;

and flowering of distinctly national ethos...

(Mahathir Mohamad, 1992:2)

In sum, it is argued that the potent interplay between the forces of ethnicity and nationalism was the key factor behind the 'competing ethnic ideologies of a nation' to be created in Malaysia. The politics of nation-building in Malaysia reflects the pulls in different directions of the competing ethnic ideologies of nationhood, both within and across ethnic groups. This was the most prominent element that has complicated the project of nation-building in the country over the past four decades. Although the socio-economic landscape of Malaysian society has been rapidly changing, ethnicity still prevails Malaysian political life. The biggest threat for Malaysia may perhaps derive from extremism in the form of ethnic, cultural and religious revitalization. Extremism has had many awful repercussions in many parts of the country in the past, and will continue to re-emerge if the forces of ethnicity are not properly managed. Failure by the system to check emerging ethnic or religious extremism would constitute a setback for the project of nation-building in Malaysia.

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