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THE *BUMIPUTERA* POLICY AND NATION-BUILDING

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INTRODUCTION

Although not used explicitly in the Malaysian Constitution, the term *bumiputera* is in common usage, and in some cases, the words *bumiputera* and/or "native" are used interchangeably.[1]

Politically, the usage of the term is complex and sometimes creates confusion, as clearly pointed out in a recent political science study: "The definition of *bumiputera* is 'sons of the soil', and hence it refers to the indigenous peoples of the country, which include Malays as well as aborigines and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak. However, in Malaysian politics, the terms *bumiputera* and 'Malay' (a Malay is defined as a Muslim who habitually speaks Malay and follows Malay customs and norms) are often used interchangeably, which implies that they mean the same thing. Obviously, they do not. Many of the non-Malay *bumiputera* from Sabah and Sarawak are not Muslims, and hence do not fit the definition of 'Malay'. Neither do the *orang asli* (literally, the original people), the aborigines of the Malay peninsula, who are mostly animists. Conversely, some Malays are actually immigrants from Indonesia, and are hence, not real *bumiputera.* The reason for all the confusion, deliberately fostered in part by the government has to do with political expediency."[2]

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[1] Ramy Bulan, "Native Status Under The Law," in *Public Law in Contemporary Malaysia*, (ed.) Wu Min Aun, Longman, Petaling Jaya, 1999, p. 256–257.

[2] Elizabeth Ng, "Preferential Policies and Political Stability in Developing Plural Polities: A Comparative Study of Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Fiji," M.A. Thesis, University of Windsor, Ontario, 1991, p. 102.

Bumiputera means an indigene. The claim of indigenous communities to "firstness" and to being *primus inter pares* (first among equals) is not only to be found in Malaysia, but also in other developing multiethnic societies like Fiji, Sri Lanka and Indonesia (in the last-mentioned the indigene is called *peribumi).* These multiethnic societies were at one time called "plural" societies, the construction or invention of colonialism in which different ethnic communities merely remained separate and did not bond, mingling only in the marketplace. After achieving national independence, however, began to bond culturally or politically in some way or other, but experience problems in developing their nationhood. In some cases, instead of national integration and national unity, violent conflicts have arisen between the indigenous (read *bumiputera*) and the non-indigenous (non-*bumiputera*) communities.

The claim to indigenous or *bumiputera* status is to enable the indigene to acquire legitimacy and sovereignty. It gives the indigenous community a special status over others. How does the Malaysian government's '*bumiputera* policy', or as it is sometimes referred to as *bumiputeraism,* contribute to nation-building? Does it impede or enhance the tasks of nation-building? This paper will discuss these questions.

BUMIPUTERAISM AND NATION-BUILDING

Malaysia's efforts in nation-building have generally attracted world-wide attention, even praised by many scholars, largely because, despite its preferential policies towards the *bumiputera*, it has experienced the greatest degree of political stability. Many factors have been attributed to its continuing successes not only in achieving multiracial cooperation and unity, but also in its policies of economic development. One formula that is frequently commented upon is the ability of its various ethnic communities to negotiate and bargain among themselves to arrive at a consensus. This ability to "give and take" has included the acceptance of the *bumiputera* status.

Only by making comparative studies of ethnic policies between Malaysia and other multiethnic societies in the region could we determine the extent of Malaysia's success or failure in nation-building. Compared to Sri Lanka and Fiji, Malaysia's ethnic policies emerge in

very favourable light. Malaysia has been described as a fairly successful example of "hegemonic control" by political scientist R.S. Milne.[3] This is a system or model in which one ethnic group in a politically dominant position (in this case represented by the United Malays National Organization, or UMNO) engages in bargaining and exchanges with other ethnic groups to ensure some consensus with them, albeit from a position of strength. The dominant group tries to ensure that its 'domination' is relatively benign and is accepted to a degree by the other ethnic groups. Stability is enhanced because the position of the dominant ethnic group is assured, while the interests of the other ethnic groups are accommodated to some extent.

In Malaysia, preferential policies like the pro-*bumiputera* New Economic Policy (NEP) cover a wide variety of areas, some of which are formalised with clear guidelines. Although their implementation is sometimes not transparent, the policies are openly debated and evaluated by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and opposition parties. The critics are allowed to check and minimise abuses of the pro-*bumiputera* policies by the government and by the beneficiaries of the policies. In response to criticisms, the government sometimes attempts to minimise the adverse effects of the preferential policies on the other ethnic groups. In a few cases, the government has been known to criticise or punish those *bumiputera* beneficiaries who opt to the opposition side or those who do not show it their gratitude or political support.

When we contrast Malaysia's case of nation-building with the national bi-communal systems of Sri Lanka and Fiji, the ethnic communities in the latter two states failed to work out a system of power-sharing. In Sri Lanka, there was hardly any bargaining or consensus between the dominant Sinhalese and the minority Tamils, leading eventually to a prolonged Tamil armed rebellion and to the latter's demands for a separate state. In Fiji initially there was a degree of power-sharing between the dominant native Fijians and the Indian community, but ethnic relations broke down, and coups and political instability followed.[4]

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[3] R.S. Milne, "Bicommunal systems: Guyana, Malaysia, Fiji," *Publius,* 18 (Spring 1988), p. 101–113, cited in Elizabeth Ng, *op.cit.*, p. 23–24.

[4] *Ibid.*

AIMS OF *BUMIPUTERAISM*

In Malaysia, the distinction between *bumiputera* and non-*bumiputera* was designed to support and bolster the position of the dominant Malay *ethnie* (ethnic community). The departure of predominantly-Chinese Singapore from the Malaysian federation in 1965 ensured that the Malays and the *natives of Borneo* numerically combined (some 65%) would outnumber the Chinese and Indian communities who constitute the remaining 35% of Malaysia's population. Such a majority in numbers has been used to justify having special privileges and rights. Although this seems to create a wedge in the rationale for national unity and in the creation of a wider territorial 'political culture', economically, the *bumiputera* is said to be more backward than the Chinese and Indian communities, and the government considers that it is it's moral duty to raise their economic status. For this purpose, it sought and obtained endorsement by the leaders and political parties of the non-*bumiputera* communities for its policy of *bumiputeraism*.

The acquisition of, first, Malay special rights, then *bumiputera* status and then of an Islamic state (the last was a declaration made by Malaysia's Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamed in September 2001 i.e. two years before his retirement from office) marks the different stages of Malay ethnic dominance in Malaysia. It is a development, which has been made palatable only by the argument that the stages are being achieved largely through acquiescence, persuasion or consensus with the other ethnic communities.

The 13 May 1969 riots clearly marked a turning-point in the process of nation-building. National unity was not only impeded, but led the UMNO-dominated government to introduce in 1971 the pro-*bumiputera* NEP. This policy was followed soon after by attempts by Malay cultural bodies to impose a National Culture, a National Literature and a National History based on Malay culture, Malay language and Malay history respectively on Malaysia's multiethnic society. These groups used the *bumiputera*'s claim to "firstness" to demand that these policies be adopted and practised by the ethnic minorities. Done without consultations with the other ethnic groups, the move was more designed to proclaim superiority, rather than promote assimilation. Their demands were initially supported by UMNO Cabinet Ministers, who thereby gave

them a seal of authority. But gradually these pro-Malay policies were allowed to slide. These policies never gained public endorsement from non-Malay political parties and social organisations, many of which voiced their disagreements. Now, a more multicultural approach is evident, indicating greater tolerance of other cultures.

In Sarawak and Sabah ongoing intra-*bumiputera* differences and controversies over state rights and each indigenous group's rights, belie the assumed *bumiputera* unity. Several times differences have led to threats of secession, caused by opposition to the Malay-led federal government policies by the Sarawak and Sabah *bumiputera* parties. The Malay-led federal government had promoted Islamisation and Malayisation in these two states, but often these policies have met with resistance, followed by the rise of local ethnic and state-sponsored nationalisms.

It was probably to cut across the *bumiputera* and non-*bumiputera* divisions, and even to resolve the intra-*bumiputera* differences, that Dr. Mahathir Mohamed came up with his Vision 2020 project in 1991 to create a *Bangsa Malaysia*, or a Malaysian nation – an across the board solution for the whole multiracial society. More non-Malays than Malays supported his *Bangsa Malaysia* idea, vaguely defined as it was. There is still controversy over what is a 'Malaysian' identity and how to form a Malaysian nation.

Bumiputera's Image and the Psychology of a 'Minority'

Bumiputera rights or *bumiputeraism* is not only a political issue, but also an economic one. Although numerically the *bumiputera* group is larger than the non-*bumiputera* communities, the former regards itself as an economically disadvantaged group and psychologically behaves like a 'minority'. Its economic backwardness confers on it the privilege to receive affirmative action in the areas of administration, education, and business. The achievement of national integration and national unity will depend on when this economic and psychological 'minority' status of the *bumiputera* is overcome. For that purpose the NEP was devised and implemented to provide affirmative action in support of the *bumiputera.* The NEP's successor, the National Development Policy (NDP), introduced in 1991, was still designed as a pro-*bumiputera* policy to help resolve its 'minority' status.

The position of the 'majority' *bumiputera* in Malaysia is different from that of the black majority in South Africa. A comparison between these two groups will show that the position of the *bumiputera* has always been much better than that of their counterparts in South Africa. In South Africa under the system of *apartheid*, the black majority was disenfranchised, discriminated against, and ill-treated. Although the black Africans were in the majority, they enjoyed no preferential policies. They were excluded from key areas of the administration and the economy. Most lived in abject poverty and were confined to special areas of residence, or townships, which were more like ghettoes. In contrast, during the colonial period, in Malaya, in Sarawak and in Sabah the *bumiputera*'s rights were respected. Many of their traditional cultures were preserved. Their rulers and chiefs were duly recognised and accommodated in advisory bodies in the administration. In colonial Malaya, for instance, the Malay *bumiputera* enjoyed some preferential policies, such as land reservations, a Malay Administrative Service, special teaching colleges, and educational scholarships. Many of the Malay States (such as the states of Johor, Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis) were granted autonomous powers in administration. Malay staff dominated the government secretariat. On Malaya's independence in 1957, preferential policies became more extensive for Malays. In post-independence Malaya, Malay rulers were empowered to protect and safeguard the special rights of the Malays and, after the formation of Malaysia, "the natives of Borneo" as well.

At the time of independence, the component ethnic parties of the ruling multiethnic coalition, which had negotiated independence with the British colonial administration, agreed to the extension of the colonial preferential policies in deference to the wishes expressed by the dominant UMNO party. In other words, there was consultation and consensus. These policies were, in fact, ethnically based to overcome economic inequality and redress. It was then regarded as a lop-sided situation in which non-indigenous ethnic groups were dominant in administration, education, business and the economy. After independence, their position was reversed. The non-*bumiputera* component parties of the ruling coalition agreed that the government would be dominated by the Malays and the *bumiputera*. Since the non-Malays had been more concentrated in the cities, and the Malays in the rural areas, the electoral system was officially devised to give

"weightage" to rural voters to help the Malay dominated UMNO party to maintain its majority in the Parliament.

Malaysia's affirmative action policies have created a situation in which a great degree of 'social justice' and integration in administration and education has been achieved for the *bumiputera*. However, their integration within the economy, according to the indigenous parties, is still far from satisfactory. For this reason, Malay or *bumiputera* political dominance of the Malays or the *bumiputera* is likely to remain a permanent feature.

MULTICULTURALISM

As long as the UMNO is able to exercise "hegemonic control" in the coalition government of Malaysia, the preferential policies for the *bumiputera* will remain, unless and until the coalition itself feels that these policies are no longer necessary. It is seldom if ever that political and economic power is relinquished easily.

But the UMNO leaders are aware that for these preferential policies to remain acceptable to the other ethnic communities, there must equally be policies of "accommodation" of non-indigenous interests. Too much control can be just as dangerous to political stability as just too little control. One further step of "accommodation" would have to be in the direction of a more liberal policy of multiculturalism.

Malaysia practises a discreet form of multiculturalism, which does not seem to satisfy either the Chinese or Indian minorities. Officially, there is *partial* multilingualism in the educational system. Ethnic group culture cannot be fully sustained without its own ethnic language. Under the law relating to culture, there is freedom to express one's own language, and practice one's own religion and customs. This involves a reciprocal obligation to accept the right of others to do the same.

In terms of social equity, there is only *partial* equity and opportunities to enable different ethnic communities to develop and contribute to the social, political and economic life of Malaysia, free from discrimination on grounds of race, gender, culture, religion, language, location, or place of birth.

There is, therefore, a need for a greater celebration of ethnic diversity and tolerance of diverse cultures. There is a need for sustaining and enhancing ethnic pluralism. We have to accept ethnic stratification as a reality. Ethnic groups must be allowed to preserve their distinctiveness within what is otherwise seen as a gentle and insidious form of cultural domination.

Malaysia is a striking example of a fairly successful dominant-ethnic model of nation-making. The political culture of the new state's core ethnic community becomes the main pillar of the state's new national identity. Though other cultures continue to flourish, the identity of the emerging political community is shaped by the historic political culture of its dominant ethnic. This modern-state incorporates other ethnic communities in the manner of West European state-making and nation-forming. The pattern is found not only in Malaysia, but also in Indonesia, the Philippines, Burma, Sri Lanka, and to some extent in India, Pakistan, Algeria and Zimbabwe.[5]

There is, however, another model in the 'invention of nations' from colonies, in which no one ethnic is dominant. This model consists of equally small communities, none of which can dominate the state, such as in Tanzania, where there are no larger ethnic communities to compete for domination. The inculcation of a Tanzanian national identity has gone farthest in this direction. It also includes Nigeria where a number of rival ethnics exist (three major ethnics and some 250 other ethnic communities), but there, unfortunately, the nation-making has repeatedly broken down, resulting in two coups and frequent ethnic conflicts and ethnic massacres.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia has sometimes been described as a melting pot of cultures. This model is inappropriate. Melting implies fire and heat, force and violence. It is rather late in the day to start melting cultures. In contrast to the melting pot model, I prefer the *mosaic* model. It celebrates variety. Such a Malaysian nation can achieve unity in diversity, bonded by a

[5] See Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, Penguin Books, London, 1991, p. 114.

social contract between the different ethnic communities. It involves bargaining, accommodation of each other's interests, and, most importantly, consensus. Race and ethnic relations in Malaysia has generally been good and ethnic tolerance quite high. This relative ethnic harmony has survived. Hopefully it will continue to survive as long as mutual tolerance and accommodation of each other's cultures and interests exists.

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