

KOMUNIKASI/COMMUNICATION

Celebrating Ontology: A Comment on Loh's *Politik Baru di Malaysia?*
Professorial Inaugural Lecture, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, June
2002.

Vejai Balasubramaniam
Center for Policy Research
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Penang

Pilihan Raya Umum 1999 memang mempunyai signifikansi yang penting. Barisan Alternatif (BA) berjaya menafikan Barisan Nasional majoriti undi popular. Namun dalam sistem pilihan raya negara yang berlandaskan "first-past-the-post" serta penekanan yang diberi kepada konstituensi luar bandar dan "gerrymandering" serta politik berasaskan wang berjaya menghalang Barisan Alternatif daripada membentuk kerajaan. Barisan Nasional (BN) menang dua pertiga kerusi Dewan Rakyat meskipun bilangan yang diperolehi adalah kurang. Francis Loh dalam syarahan pelantikan profesornya menggunakan keputusan pilihan raya yang lepas dan pola pengundian serta kelakuan pengundi untuk mencerminkan sebuah politik yang ditandai oleh fragmentasi, pertentangan dan "politik baru". Ulasan ini mengkaji epistemologi dan politik "politik baru".

Hahakigi (broom tree) is a plant from which brooms were made and that had the poetic reputation of being visible from afar and of disappearing as one approached closer (Murasaki Shikibu, 2002). To review a subject written in a language (Bahasa Melayu) that is different from that used in this review can be particularly trying. A carefully written text is therefore important - one riven with spelling errors is a pain. But professorial inaugural lectures are important and need to be studied seriously. F. Loh's inaugural lecture on *New Politics in Malaysia?* falls within the category of the broom tree but not least because it is riddled with spelling errors, which begin as early as page two¹ (Loh, 2002).

¹ For the purpose of this review, I have used the full text of Francis Loh (2002).

To be sure, Malaysia has proved particularly attractive to social scientists. The country's rapid modernization, multiracial polity, geographical position and history serve the project of theory testing and theory constructing. Many an academic career have been advanced and secured by studying the Malaysian case. In this regard, it is those concerning themselves with studying and analyzing politics that tend to steal the thunder, as it is also the country that has the longest serving Prime Minister in the region. The Asian Financial Crisis, which had wrecked social, economic and political displacement in the region, did not threaten Malaysia as much as it did its neighbours. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad went on to consolidate his regime in the 1999 general elections, winning a handsome two-thirds majority in the *Dewan Rakyat*. The country also escaped the ethnic and religious pogroms such as experienced by Indonesia, for example. Many pundits who predicted that economic crisis would spell doom for ethnic and race relations in the country were humbled. So what makes Malaysia so unique? If it can be put down to one thing, it is politics.

Malaysia's constitutional monarchy, federal system, and the role of ethnicity in the electoral system, are particularly interesting, as they function as stabilizing features of the political system. Loh, in his inaugural lecture, focuses on the role of ethnicity in politics. He argues that the 1999 general elections indicate that a new phenomenon has emerged in politics. Dubbed "new politics", he suggests that while the election shows that the intra ethnic split (among the Malay and Chinese voters) has been heightened (contributing to fragmentation), the polity, on the other hand, is marked by contestation arising from the divergence between the discourse and practice of ethnic politics, participatory democracy and developmentalism. (*Politik baru merujuk pada peningkatan perpecahan dalam komuniti etnik di satu pihak, tentangan antara wacana dan amalan politik etnikisme, demokrasi berpartisipasi dan developmentalisma di satu pihak lagi.*)² The lecture was devoted to showing the phenomenon and stops short of predicting its re-emergence in future general elections.

² Loh (2002: 38)

“New Politics” – A Singular Interest

To show the two aspects related to “new politics”, that is, fragmentation and contestation, Loh undertakes a detailed study of the 1999 General Elections results--contrasting it in places with, among others, the 1995 and 1990 general elections.

Based on his analysis he argues that the results show that the Malay electorate is divided more or less down the middle between support for UMNO (United Malays National Organization, a leading member of the ruling BN), on the one hand, and PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) and KeADILAN on the other. The Chinese electorate, he argues, are divided between support for the non-Malay component parties that are members of the BN and the DAP (Democratic Action Party).³ Indian voters do not matter too much as he suggests them as pro BN. There is mention of the electorate in the East Malaysian States of Sabah and Sarawak but not specifics on their ethnicity; it seems they too do not matter very much. To show fragmentation and its implications on politics it is the political response/behaviour of the Malay and Chinese electorate that matters.

To show the opposition/contestation arising from the difference between the discourse and practice of “ethnic politics, participatory democracy, and developmentalism” Loh points to the important role of the middle classes and the proliferation and role of non-governmental or civil society organizations. He suggests that common concerns are contributing towards inter-ethnic unity, particularly among the middle class, and manifested in the urban middle class. This, he argues, may be discerned in urban middle class political support for the opposition *reformasi*/reformation struggle. Witness, for example, urban middle class Malay support for DAP (which has traditionally been seen as a Chinese dominated political party) sponsored candidates such as leaders of NGOs in the 1999 general elections.

³ It should be pointed out that intra ethnic splits among the Malays and Chinese in the Malaysia region are not new phenomena. They date back to the pre-colonial period. See, for example Kassim Ahmad (1991), Winstedt (1938) and Raja Ali Haji (1982) for a nuance of the politics of that period .

But while Loh does allude to the role of class, gender, and age, in his analysis of political behaviour, they do not appear as terribly significant-concerned as he was with showing what the election results meant ethnically. Thus, he writes that the dearth of research on matters related to class, gender, and age indicate otherwise. By which it is presumed he means these elements do not subsume ethnicity. [He writes: *Selain daripada latar belakang etnik, kategori lain yang penting bagi menganalisis kelakuan mengundi merupakan kelas, umur dan jantina. Malangnya terdapat hanya sedikit kajian yang mengambil kira kategori-kategori ini dijalankan dan data terhad yang didapati hanya memperlihatkan keadaan yang bertentangan.*⁴]

In a nutshell, the 1999 general elections indicate that the Malays and Chinese are more fragmented, marked by a heightening of intra-ethnic splits. On the other hand, contestation on issues related to “ethnic politics, developmentalism and participatory democracy” is working to coalesce support for civil society organizations and civil society activists. Both “fragmentation” and “contestation” dubbed “new politics”, can be expected, says Loh, to have ramifications for politics in general, working overtime to weaken the two thirds majority the BN has held in the *Dewan Rakyat* for some three decades now.

The discussion on “new politics” is too narrowly focused on domestic events, without making reference to important external shocks. The odd omission of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and its economic and political spillover effects, for example, causes “new politics” to be sanitised, and short in the political atmospherics of the period.⁵

⁴ Loh (2002: 25).

⁵ The reverberations of the Asian Financial Crisis had transformed a region, which was lauded as the Asian Miracle into an area of turmoil. Beginning in August of '97, currencies in the region plummeted, and as foreign capital inflows - the linchpin of economic growth - became net outflows amidst concerns of greater instability, the region's economic growth downslided. Kidnappings, ethnic butchery and bankruptcies were becoming commonplace. Compounding the social, economic and political turmoil was the haze - the result of slash and burn tactics. Forest fires in Borneo and Sumatra had shrouded the region in thick haze with ramifications on the economy and environment. Regional relations too were strained and

Loh's approach to the study of Malaysian politics smugly fits in with the Popperian approach to history - except that in his case it also amounts to celebrating the phenomenon in contrast to Karl Popper. In *The Poverty of Historicism* (Popper, 1961), Popper writes that he wishes to defend the view that history is characterized by its interest in actual, singular, or specific events, rather than in laws or generalization. Thus, it is not possible to anticipate today what will be known only in the future. Hence, despite his singular interest in "new politics", Loh refrains from conjecturing on the sustainability of his argument. In this respect, the hope that "new politics" can help in heralding "a two-party system" in politics and government which is more accountable and responsible to the needs of the citizens rather than the interests of the political elites is perhaps not relevant. Loh's thesis and epistemology amounts to nothing more than a celebration of the phenomenon and of ontology. But more important, Loh's caution on the sustainability of "new politics" stems from the salient role ethnicity plays in Malaysian politics – the 1999 general elections notwithstanding.

If Loh is to ground his thesis on "new politics" it is the role of ethnicity in politics that needs to be explained. There are two ways this may be done. One, by accepting the dominant, state, defined categorisations of ethnicity (that is, in terms of Malays, Chinese, Indians, *lain-lain*). Two, by challenging the dominant ethnicisation of the polity. Loh has adopted the former, and embraced wholeheartedly the categorisations of the ruling political elite. From whence his analysis of the elections takes off. What is so new that he has added, apart from contributing another study in the gamut of literature on Malaysia in general and Malaysian politics

national leaders became jittery. In Malaysia, demonstrators spurred on by the spirit of *reformasi* were marching to *Seri Perdana* (Prime Minister's official residence in Kuala Lumpur), mosques were being transformed into venues of the opposition, families in the suburbs of the nation's capital were stocking up on essential food items, riot police and police road blocks were a common sight. Matters had come to a head with the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim over disagreements over the role the IMF should play in rescuing the Malaysian economy. Strongman Suharto had fallen off the stage; for Chuan Leekpai of Thailand it was just a matter of time and eyes were trained on Mahathir. Much of the events of this period can be found in the *Asian Wall Street Journal*. CNN had also brought gory images of ethnic butchery to many a breakfast table. See Balasubramaniam (1999).

in particular that are ethnicised? This will not do for a lecture of this standing. To show something new a more critical approach is needed; and in this context the premise of the ethnicised accounts needed to be challenged. A longitudinal approach would make it evident that ethnicity in Malaysia is State, *Negeri*, connected (Balasubramaniam, 2003). Hence, to posit that ethnicity is weakening implies that the role of the States in politics is thinning. In a federalism, this would indicate that the Federal Government's categorisation of ethnicity has undermined those of the States/*Negeris* without any resistance from the States. If Loh had adopted some such critical approach he would most certainly have said something "new", rather than just celebrate the phenomenon. 'New politics' the inference that "fragmentation" and "contestation" in the polity resulting from discontentment with "developmentalism", "participatory democracy", and "ethnic politics" is contributing to a weakening of ethnicity can only be accepted if the dominant state, defined categorisations of the polity is accepted wholeheartedly. Something "new" demands the adoption of a more critical approach – one that challenges the dominant, nationalist, discourse. There is nothing in Loh's lecture which goes even half-way in adopting such a critical approach. Quite frankly, there is nothing we can learn from it that is "new". To understand the meaning of "new politics" it is therefore necessary to see what the euphoria of new politics is centred on.

Politics of "New Politics"

Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* wrote "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (See Marx, 1869). In the Third World the dead weight, which had to be cast, was the contradictions engendered by colonial rule. Nationalism provided both the language and energy but also the bane in that it divided the world into jealously guarded nation-states. Be that as it may, there was no uniformity in perception regarding the nationalist struggle as may be witnessed in the different strands of the nationalist movement in the former colonies. This notwithstanding, they all saw independence and the nationalist agenda as a means to salvation and dignity.

The Cold War worked to the advantage of postcolonial states temporally and spatially as they went about the business of the nationalist project. Authoritarian regimes sank roots, clamping down on the opposition in the name of protecting the “free world”. Matters, however, changed in the post-Cold War period. If, in the period following independence, states find themselves dealing with the challenges of modernization in the present *fin de siecle* states find themselves having to deal with globalisation and the ideas and values inherent to it.

This is not the place to go into an elaboration on the economic and political aspects of globalisation; suffice to say that as the outcome of a conscious policy by the major industrial nations (United States), economic globalisation and its ideological baggage is not only about Britney Spears but also a discourse and language centred on accountability, transparency, human rights, justice, equality, and democracy.

Middle class activists in the Third World, working and volunteering in INGOs and NGOs, are taking these values and ideas on board. Thus, if only a generation ago they would have embraced the ideas and values of modernization and nationalism, in the present *fin de siecle* they are being replaced by, among others, values such as universal human rights and democracy. Loh’s analysis itself would indicate that these values have begun knocking on the door of the Malaysian state. Herein lies the politics of “new politics”; that is, a perception of politics informed by the neo-liberal discourse and the language of globalisation.

CONCLUSION

If as Malcolm Bull (2001) writing on art history in *Between the Cultures of Capital* suggests that “there was, and is, every indication that people of all educational levels . . . find the endless inventiveness of commodity culture to be pleasurable, plausible and spiritually satisfying”,⁶ then, there is no consolation. The spread of commodity culture attendant on globalisation is imminent. It will pose a major challenge to governments

⁶ See also Mann (2001) and Gowan (2001).

in the Third World in the 21st century. In the case of Malaysia, the struggle between the goals of modernisation, on the one hand, and demands and pressures of economic globalisation and neo liberalism arising from within and without, on the other, will mark politics. Under Mahathir rule, the ruling ideas were/are that of modernisation. His successor Abdullah Badawi's position remains to be seen.

The 1999 General Elections were indeed significant by all counts, both in terms of popular support for the opposition and the stark relief how "Malaysia's first-past-the-post system, weightage given to rural constituencies, money politics and gerrymandering", work to the advantage of the ruling government. To this end, analysing election results can help illuminate on aspects such as voter behaviour, voting patterns, plotting trajectories and making predictions based on degrees of disenchantment, for example.⁷ But to infer from such analysis that a decided shift in the form of "new politics" has emerged is another matter.

Celebrating ontology can be therapeutic. But in order that it may not be misplaced, a deeper structural analysis of the phenomenon is needed. In adopting a Popperian-like approach Loh has emerged as a spokesperson of globalisation and the entire intellectual baggage attendant on it. More important, as a professorial inaugural lecture whose epistemological foundations is centered on a wholesale uncritical adoption of the state defined ethnic categorisations of the polity is seriously wanting.

⁷ In a scenario where party politics are the norm inferring from election returns too can make the added mistake that it is the electorate that determines who rules the country. Rather, from a study presently undertaken by the writer as part of a project team on leadership it was found in the case of Malaysia, it is the 2000 or so members of the UMNO (United Malays National Organization, the leading member of the ruling BN - a coalition of 13 political parties) General Assembly who decide who rules. Deciding from what is essentially amoral factors they thus differed from the more moral conception held by the popular mass.

In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Karl Marx (see Marx and Engels, 1888) sees globalisation as containing within it the seeds of the downfall of capitalism. The process of capital accumulation and the periodic crisis inherent to it engendered with increasing frequency and now daily manifesting itself as a global phenomenon provide the tools for the overthrow of the bourgeois mode of production. "The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself". (Marx, 1869). If the historical present is what matters it should be seen in the manner of Marx as a contemporaneity full of possibilities, where politics takes precedence over history in deciphering tendencies. The political reverberations against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and global capital in Seattle, Genoa, Bangkok, and Johannesburg are already pointing the way ahead. But lest we adopt wholesale the challenge of the radical Marxist discourse such as that directed against globalisation, for example, it would do well to note the origins of this discourse in the North. For the peoples of the Third World the struggle should not only be about securing a more equitable order within the prevailing system. It is about having the system itself subverted and overthrown. The same goes for the state centered ethnic categorisations of the polity. It is has to be subverted and overthrown. This is where the intellectual challenge lies. Loh in the meantime, caught in the euphoria of "new politics", laments its sustainability.

REFERENCES

1. Balasubramaniam, V., 1999, "Asean Cooperation: Reconsidering Non-Involvement", *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 16.
2. _____, 2003, "Thinking Ethnicities: Federalism and State-Connected Identities in Malaysia", (forthcoming) in *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*.
3. Bull, M., 2001, "Between the Cultures of Capital", *New Left Review* 11: 95-113.
4. Gowan, P., 2001, "Neoliberal Cosmopolitanism", *New Left Review* 11: 79-93.

5. Kassim Ahmad, 1991, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
6. Loh, Francis, 2002, *Politik Baru di Malaysia?*, Professorial Inaugural Lecture, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang.
7. Mann, 2001, "Globalisation after September 11", *New Left Review* 12: 51-72.
8. Marx, K., 1869, "Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" in Feuer, L.S. (ed.), 1969, *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, New York: Doubleday, pp. 360.
9. Marx, K., and Engels, F., 1888, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" in Feuer, L.S. (ed.), 1969, *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, New York: Doubleday.
10. Popper, K.R., 1961, *The Poverty of Historicism*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
11. Raja Ali Haji, 1982, *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (The Precious Gift) ed. and trans. Virginia Matheson and Barbara W. Andaya, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
12. Shakibu, M., 2002, *The Tale of Genji*, New York: Penguin (translated by Ronald Tyler).
13. Winstedt, R. 1938, *The Malay Annals or Sejarah Melayu*, Singapore: Printers Limited.