

The Real Malay Dilemma¹

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“Since the Chinese have Chinatown, and the Indians have Little India, we should also have a Kampung Melayu – where our culture, heritage and food can be showcased and preserved. After all, this is our land – the land of the Malays.”

Sitting in the front row of the hall, I immediately turned around to locate the source of that suggestion. Somewhere towards the back, a middle-aged man stood among the sitting audience, microphone in hand. We were in the middle of a question-and-answer session following a forum discussing, ironically, the Malay enlightenment movement spearheaded by Syed Sheikh al-Hadi in the early twentieth century. I cannot now recall the response of the forum panellists to that man’s question, but I remember vividly the thoughts that coagulated in my mind at that very moment.

Chinatown and Little India are references to ethnic enclaves that usually exist where the Chinese or Indians constitute a cultural minority. By that logic, it follows that such enclaves would not exist in countries where they were culturally dominant. For instance, one would neither find a Chinatown in Hong Kong or Taiwan nor a Little India in Sri Lanka. The notion of a Malay cultural enclave in Malay-majority Malaysia is a strange one, being that the entire country is, effectively, one large Kampung Melayu where Malay culture, heritage and food can be found, not merely preserved but alive and thriving in every nook and corner.

As I pondered this, a realisation began to set in. It suddenly occurred to me that a perverse inferiority complex has somehow thoroughly ingrained itself into the Malay psyche. Perverse because it not only contradicted the imperious sense of entitlement encapsulated in the widely espoused nationalist slogan of *ketuanan Melayu*, or ‘Malay supremacy’, but also because it was logically irreconcilable with the fact that the Malays command an ever-expanding

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demographic presence,² are endowed with constitutionally defined privileges including a practically unchallengeable Malay royalty,³ and have, over the years, assumed a position of dominance in both the public and, increasingly, private spheres.⁴ Yet, unfathomably, despite all of the above, the Malays continue to think and act like a minority under siege.

This, I told myself, was a real dilemma.

The Malay Reality

Now, as before, the Malays seem to be teetering between the desire to assert their rights and arrogate to themselves what they consider to be theirs, and the overwhelming desire to be polite, courteous and thoughtful of the rights and demands of others. Deep within them there is a conviction that no matter what they decide to do things will continue to slip from their control; that slowly but surely they are becoming dispossessed in their own land. This is the Malay dilemma.⁵

Perhaps one of the most influential works on Malay, and indeed Malaysian, thought was published more than 40 years ago in 1970. Written by a down-on-his-luck physician-turned-politician, who had then just been relieved not only from his parliamentary seat but also his party membership,⁶ it was a critique of the Malay polity from a social, evolutionary and behavioural perspective.

In the introduction to his magnum opus, Mahathir Mohamad asserts that his treatise was penned with “sincerity”, and meant to “spotlight certain intrinsic factors which retard the

² Malays make up over 50 per cent of the population. More significantly, Malay fertility rates are 40 per cent higher than Indian Malaysian and 56 per cent higher than Chinese Malaysians, according to the most recent statistics published by the Department of Statistics; ‘Vital Statistics, Malaysia, 2014’, Department of Statistics Malaysia, 31 December 2015, at: <https://www.statistics.gov.my>.

³ Article 153 of the Federal Constitution provides protections for the ‘special position of the Malays’. Article 152 defines the Malay language as the national language. Article 3 establishes Islam as the religion of the federation. Article 38 provides for a Council of (Malay) Rulers, from whom the federation’s head of state is elected every five years. Any amendment to Articles 152, 153 or any other laws pertaining to the constitutional position of the Malays requires the explicit consent of the council.

⁴ Malays make up more than 90 per cent of the country’s powerful institutions, including the civil service, police and military. Economically, the practice of state monopoly capitalism has resulted in the pervasive influence of government-linked companies (GLCs) in the private sector.

⁵ Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma*, new ed., Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2005, p. 3, orig. pub. in Singapore: D. Moore for Asia Pacific Press, 1970.

⁶ Mahathir Mohamad was sacked from UMNO after writing an open letter criticising the party president and prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, and blaming the latter’s accommodative politics as the cause of the unprecedented losses suffered by the Alliance government in the third general election and the subsequent racial riots on 13 May 1969.

The Real Malay Dilemma

development of the Malays, particularly those which can be corrected.” With this primordial and deterministic tone, he goes on to sketch a fatalistic account of the history and sociocultural background of the country and its peoples.

The Malay that is constructed by Mahathir is one consumed by a defeatist worldview, insouciant with little propensity for work or adventure, devoid of desire for material wealth, temperate as a product of his climate and geography, self-effacing to a fault, ever willing to compromise, famously non-committal and plagued by an inherent inability to value time and money.⁷ All of which, as a resultant, forms the basis for state protection and direct intervention through affirmative action as the only means of salvation from their genetically predetermined complacency.

As with most constructed personas, a protagonist is never complete without an antagonist. Thus the Malay antithesis is crafted in the form of the Chinese. Aggressive where the Malay is docile, hedonistic where the Malay is stoic, and diligent where the Malay is lackadaisical, the Chinese, we are informed, are a race moulded from the ashes of disaster. Having evolved over thousands of years through the ravages of flood, famine and war, the Chinese life was one of ‘continuous struggle for survival’.⁸ In the process, the weak and unfit were weeded out, while the survivors were necessarily “hardened and resourceful”. Unlike the Malays, there is never contentment but always “a desire for a better life”.⁹

The mass immigration of the Chinese to Malaya thus sparked a ‘conflict between two contrasting racial groups which resulted from two entirely different sets of hereditary and environmental influences.’¹⁰ It was only natural, then, that the Malays would not be able to compete against the evolutionarily superior Chinese. Therefore, preferential treatment for the Malays is not only justified but also desirable, with the caveat that it is not meant ‘to put the Malays in a superior position, but to bring them up to the level of the non-Malays.’¹¹

Much and more can and has been said about Mahathir’s thesis. Critical reviews have pointed out the author’s selective historiography, colonial apologetics, essentialist worldview and an obsessive flirtation with the discredited science of eugenics.¹² Yet, for all its self-flagellating

⁷ Mahathir, *Malay Dilemma*, pp. 154–73.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹² See, for example, M. Bakri Musa, *The Malay Dilemma Revisited: Race Dynamics in Modern Malaysia*, New York: toExcel, 1999; Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its*

masochism, it would be remiss to deny its relevance in contemporary Malaysian sociopolitics.

Consider, for example, the 2013 general election. With a record turnout of 84.84 per cent, the results saw the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition gaining 50.87 per cent of the popular vote, against the incumbent Barisan Nasional's 47.8 per cent. Nevertheless, decades of gerrymandering and malapportionment ensured that the ruling coalition was able to maintain power with a comfortable 133 seats or 60 per cent of the total 222 seats.¹³

On the whole, while the ruling coalition saw its popular vote decline and its total seats reduced by (only) seven, UMNO,¹⁴ the Barisan Nasional's Malay component party, was able to swim against the tide, increasing its share from 79 to 88 seats. This means that, notwithstanding the systemic irregularities and allegations of electoral fraud and bribery, the Barisan Nasional (or rather, UMNO) was successful in increasing its Malay support.¹⁵

As noted by the political scientist Bridget Welsh, UMNO's victory was achieved through a campaign of "race-based reactionary nationalism" focusing on Malay insecurities. In particular, the fear of the Chinese was "explicitly and implicitly delivered to the Malay community", so much so that the election was "made out to be a crucial vote to protect the status quo from those who were touted to threaten their welfare."¹⁶ Naturally, UMNO was then juxtaposed to the Chinese threat as the only legitimate protector of Malay security, both politically and economically. In the end, the strategy of stoking Malay fears of displacement and marginalisation, as well as their need for continued protection under the UMNO regime had, for all intents and purposes, proved successful.

One can therefore derive two possible conclusions from this. First, one can say that Mahathir was right. The Malays are inferior and ill-equipped to compete, and thus have no choice but to retreat into the familiar shell of protectionism. That is, after all, the purported Malay dilemma. Or, on the other hand, one can surmise that the Malays are inferior and ill-equipped to compete, precisely because of *The Malay Dilemma*, which has, nearly half a century since

Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism, London: Frank Cass, 1977; and Syed Hussein Alatas, *Siapa yang Salah: Sekitar Revolusi Mental dan Peribadi Melayu*, Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 1972.

¹³ See '505: the day BN won the election but lost the contest' in this volume.

¹⁴ The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) is the largest political party in Malaysia, and has been the dominant partner in the ruling coalition since independence.

¹⁵ See Merdeka Centre, '13th general election results: parliamentary-level analysis along regional, ethnic and age cohort voting patterns', Presentation, Kuala Lumpur, 12 August 2013.

¹⁶ Bridget Welsh, 'UMNO's reactionary GE13 "victory"', *Malaysiakini*, 12 May 2013, at: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/229894>.

The Real Malay Dilemma

its conception, become a self-fulfilling prophecy. After all, its author did go on to shape the ideological image of the nation for over two decades as prime minister.

As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels once observed: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.” That is to say, “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.”¹⁷ Drawing on this, Syed Hussein Alatas contends that, being in a position of political, economic and ideological dominance, Western colonial ideology had implanted and propagated the negative image of Asians as “lazy natives” in order to justify and rationalise “European conquest and domination.”¹⁸

In the same vein, *The Malay Dilemma* can be seen as Mahathir’s attempt to construct a sociopolitical reality that justifies the need for, and continued relevance of, conservative Malay nationalism. And because Mahathir went on to wield considerable, if not absolute, influence over three decades as a minister, deputy prime minister and, for 22 years, prime minister,¹⁹ the ideological basis of *The Malay Dilemma* has been internalised and reinforced not only in Malaysian public policy but also in the national narrative, resulting in a false consciousness that has today translated into the ‘Malay reality’.²⁰

Essentially, the real Malay dilemma is not that the Malays are becoming dispossessed in their own land. Nor is it that they are unable to fend for themselves and thus fated to a life indentured to the government. It is that, despite being in dominant control over every aspect of the country, they still think they are. In short, the Malay reality is that they remain shackled to the bondages of what is simply restated colonial ideology.

Even more ironically, the Malay reality is also a paradox. On the one hand, it entails a sense of superiority and entitlement through the concept of *ketuanan Melayu*. At the same time, it also invokes severe inferiority and helplessness, especially when juxtaposed against the

¹⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in Alatas, *Myth of the Lazy Native*, p. 83.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁹ Mahathir was returned to the UMNO Supreme Council in 1973, whereupon his career rose meteorically. He joined the cabinet in 1974 and became deputy prime minister in 1976. Mahathir was prime minister from 1981 to 2003.

²⁰ *The Malay Dilemma* was published in 1970. In 1971 UMNO, through Utusan Publications, produced *Revolusi Mental*. Ideas from both books perpetuate the perception of an inherently weak and constantly oppressed Malay race. These ideas provided the basis for subsequent national policies of state protection and affirmative action in favour of the Malays.

Chinese. One may call this *ketakutan Melayu*, or ‘the Malay fear’. Though contradictory and illogical, this dualism has defined the Malay consciousness for close to five decades.

Ketuanan Melayu

Let us make no mistake – the political system in Malaysia is founded on Malay dominance. That is the premise from which we should start.²¹

A key point of contention in Malaysian sociopolitical literature today is the issue of what has now come to be known as *ketuanan Melayu*.²² This phrase is roughly translatable to ‘Malay dominance’ or, more commonly, ‘Malay supremacy’. Though widely accepted as if it were a primordially predetermined truism, it is actually a modern political concept that is meant to symbolise the primacy of the Malays, and hence the claim to ownership or pre-eminence over the country. Today it is an oft-repeated political phrase used to justify not only the Malays’ special constitutional position but also as a call to arms whenever a right-wing Malay nationalist politician feels the need to rile his constituents.

While the former politician-journalist Abdullah Ahmad is widely credited as the progenitor of the term *ketuanan Melayu*,²³ the notion of Malaya as a Malay country has been the subject of social debate dating back to the early nineteenth century. Malay national consciousness was only then beginning to coalesce, mainly as a response to the rising numbers of immigrant Chinese and Indians.

It was the introduction of the short-lived Malayan Union in 1946 that triggered the sentiment gaining mainstream currency. Faced with the need to focus Malay loyalty towards an identity that that could unite a hitherto regionally disjointed people, Malay nationalism was thus articulated through the slogans ‘*hidup Melayu*’ (long live the Malays) and ‘*kedaulatan rakyat*’ (sovereignty of the people).²⁴

Two decades later, as the euphoria of independence waned and socio-economic pressures became more pronounced, the clamour for Malay nationalist mobilisation arose again.

²¹ Abdullah Ahmad, ‘Issues in Malaysian politics’, Lecture, Singapore Institute for International Affairs, Singapore, 30 August 1986.

²² Joseph Chinyong Liow and Afif Pasuni, ‘Debating the conduct and nature of Malaysian politics: communalism and new media post-March 2008’, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2010, pp. 41–42.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See Ariffin Omar, *Bangsa Melayu: Malay Concepts of Democracy and Community, 1945–1950*, 2nd ed., Petaling Jaya: Information and Research Development Centre Kuala Lumpur, first pub. 1993.

The Real Malay Dilemma

However, since the previous movement had at its core the objective of sovereignty and freedom from colonial occupation, further refinement of the concept was required for contemporary purposes. *The Malay Dilemma* was therefore conjured up in an attempt to provide an authoritative narrative for the cause.

According to Mahathir, the Malays are what he terms the ‘definitive people’ of the land, though he acknowledges that they were certainly not the first settlers, having displaced the original inhabitants, the aborigines (or Orang Asli). As the definitive people, the Malays have an undisputable claim to primacy, a premise he bases on the experience of a few other countries, most notably Australia and the United States. For example, the British settlers in Australia had appropriated the land from the Aborigines. Yet Mahathir stresses,

today no one seriously suggests that the white Australians have less right to govern Australia than the aborigines. The [white] Australians are accepted by international consent as the people of Australia. The fact that the whole world negotiates and deals with the [white] Australians and not the Australian aborigines establishes the fact that Australia belongs to the immigrant Australians.²⁵

He then goes on to describe how this primacy eventually results in the shaping of a definitive Australian identity along the image of the British settlers who were

English speaking, practised basically English customs, and followed the Christian faith.... The establishment of this identity meant that the settlers who came later from other European and even Asian countries had to conform to this identity. It is the definitive Australians who decide when the newcomer can call himself an Australian.... Indeed, the whole immigration, administration, and educational policy [sic] is designed to permanently retain the identity of the [white] Australian.²⁶

Mahathir also draws parallels from the American story, where the Native Americans were ‘never regarded internationally as the owners of the United States of America’, but that

by sheer weight of numbers and by wars and negotiation, the English speaking Anglo-Saxon stock dominated America [against not only the natives but also the early Spanish, Dutch and French settlers] and created the definitive image of the

²⁵ Mahathir, *Malay Dilemma*, p. 122.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 122–23.

Americans. Successive waves of European immigrants, though they eventually outnumbered those of pure British stock, were so regulated that the English language and culture remained the basis of the American identity.²⁷

In sum, Mahathir postulates that ‘the definitive people are those who set up the first governments and these governments were the ones with which other countries did official business and had diplomatic relations.’²⁸ In the Malaysian context, the Malays claim primacy and ‘rightful ownership’²⁹ by virtue of being the first to ‘civilise’ the land, so to speak.

This hypothesis is flawed, not least because it is akin to a squatter claiming rightful ownership of a land simply because he was the first to establish residence, cultivation and commercial operations on it – after having chased the original owners out. Not only is Mahathir’s rationale similar to the logic used by imperialist powers to justify colonial expansion,³⁰ it is also problematic when transposed into other countries. For example, who would be regarded as the definitive people of Singapore? The island state traces a civilisation dating back hundreds of years, having first been an outpost of the Sumatran Śrīvijaya empire and later the Johor sultanate before absorption into the British Straits Settlements. In short, an internationally recognised Malay polity had existed for three quarters of a millennium before the current, predominantly Chinese government.

Despite its extensive Malay history, one would be hard-pressed to find anyone who would consider the Malays to be the definitive people of modern Singapore. Having said that, could the Chinese Singaporeans then qualify to assume the mantle of the definitive people? After all, it would be difficult to argue otherwise, considering how the state and its population outwardly reflect a Sino-Confucian identity.³¹ Yet Mahathir’s definition would suggest otherwise, owing to the fact that the Chinese were definitely not the pioneers of civilisation in the country.

In actuality, the very concept of a ‘definitive people’ is a problematic one. Returning to the Malaysian context, the definitive people of the land is considered to be the Malay, but only insofar as the Melaka sultanate is used as the starting point of the Malay-Muslim civilisation.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³⁰ See, for example, Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997, and Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, London: Allen Lane, 2003.

³¹ See, for example, Ong Yong Peng and Zhang Yenming, ‘Singapore’s five national values and the Confucian heritage’, *Chinese American Forum*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1993, p. 12.

The Real Malay Dilemma

How does this premise reconcile with the pre-Islamic civilisations that existed on the peninsula such as the great Javanese empire of Majapahit or the Buddhist-Hindu kingdoms of Langkasuka, Kedah Tua and others? Such a contention would invariably invoke the polemics of what exactly constitutes a Malay – an unresolved dispute that is beyond the scope of this essay.³² Furthermore, the attempt to articulate the concept of a ‘definitive people’ in racial terms is even more challenging, and ignorant of the fact that race is sometimes neither relevant nor the sole determining identity with which societies relate to. There are, for example, many countries where sociocultural divisions are shaped along religious or class lines instead of race. In which case, would there be such a thing as a definitive religion, or a definitive class?

Take Indonesia, for example. Who would be considered the definitive people, considering that the archipelago of 17,508 islands encompasses 34 provinces and 260 million people from 300 distinct native ethnic groups? One may contend that the Javanese would be the natural choice, bearing in mind they make up 42 per cent of the population. Yet an argument could be made for the fact that the first grand civilisation that ruled the archipelago was the Śrīvijaya empire, a notably Malay polity. This was succeeded of course by the even more dominant Javanese Majapahit empire. So when does history start? At the same time, modern Indonesia is often less identified as a Javanese country than it is as a Muslim one. With 87.2 per cent of the population professing the Islamic faith, could one instead ascribe the Muslims to be the definitive people?

Such arguments are never-ending and unproductive. In fact, people mobilise according to various identities, all of which may be relevant or irrelevant depending on its context and epoch in history. Therefore any attempt to homogenise people in a single monolithic identity is disingenuously essentialist and ignorant of sociological evolution.

Seen in this context, *ketuanan Melayu* is less a historical fact that it is a political one – that history and reality are invariably defined in the image of the winners. As such, the perpetuation of *ketuanan Melayu* should correctly be seen as nothing more than a narrative to justify the need for cultural hegemony by the current Malay ruling elite.

³² The Malay ethnicity is differentiated from the Malay race, which is also differentiated from the legalistic definition of a Malay as stipulated by Article 160 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution.

Ketakutan Melayu

For suddenly, it has dawned upon the Malay that he cannot even call Malaya his land. There is no more Tanah Melayu – the land of the Malays. He is now a different person, a Malaysian, but a Malay Malaysian whose authority in Malaya – his land – is now not only shared with others, but shared unequally. And as if this is not enough, he is being asked to give up more and more of his share of influence.³³

While *ketuanan Melayu*, or the notion of the Malays as the definitive people of Malaysia, seeks to infuse a sense of superiority and entitlement over what is considered to be a rightfully Malay country, the other aspect of the Malay reality as derived from *The Malay Dilemma* is what one may call *ketakutan Melayu*, or ‘the Malay fear’. This aspect, which is mirrored by the UMNO-produced *Revolusi Mental* (Mental Revolution),³⁴ entails a feeling of inferiority, hopelessness and defeatism arising from what is portrayed to be the intrinsic weaknesses of the Malay race – lack of initiative, lack of curiosity, lack of rational thought, lack of imagination, lack of originality, lack of discipline, lack of determination and a whole host of other traits said to be the source of Malay backwardness.³⁵

Mahathir bases such a hypothesis on the influence of heredity and the environment as the principal determinant of Malay racial character. In other words, the Malays are uncompetitive because they have been so moulded by environmental factors such as their geography, climate, traditional occupations, customs and even marriage patterns. For example, Malaya being a “peninsula with numerous rivers” and ‘plains extending from the foothills to the shores of the sea” was blessed with fertile land and easy accessibility.³⁶ Food was therefore a commodity that could be found or grown in abundance. Due to these geographical advantages, the Malays enjoyed an easy life because “no great exertion or ingenuity was required to obtain food.”³⁷

³³ Mahathir, *Malay Dilemma*, p. 121.

³⁴ As noted, in 1971 UMNO published a book called *Revolusi Mental*, Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications, 2002. Compiled by the secretary-general Senu Abdul Rahman, the book featured essays by 14 writers. Like *The Malay Dilemma*, it was a reductionist critique of the Malay national character, highlighting more than 20 negative characteristics of the Malay race to explain an apparent inability of the race to progress.

³⁵ Alatas, *Siapa yang Salah*, p. 39.

³⁶ Mahathir, *Malay Dilemma*, p. 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

The Real Malay Dilemma

Such surroundings, it is suggested, bred complacency. “Under these conditions everyone survived. Even the weakest and the least diligent were able to live in comparative comfort.” Moreover, “rice cultivation, in which the majority of the Malays were occupied, is a seasonal occupation. Actual work takes up only two months, but the yield is sufficient for the whole year.”³⁸ Eventually, the Malays could not but morph into a languid and unambitious people, particularly when “the hot, humid climate of the land was not conducive to either vigorous work or even to mental activity.”³⁹

Finally, the rural Malays, being detached from social contact with the outside world, also adopted the habit of early marriages and inbreeding, especially among first cousins. Compounding this, the Malays’ “abhor[rence for] the state of celibacy” meant that almost every Malay, whether fit or unfit, would eventually marry and procreate. As a result, “these people survive, reproduce and propagate” their inferior genetics and poor characteristics.⁴⁰ Because of this, Mahathir laments with an air of fatalism, the Malays “were left behind in all fields. The rest of the world went by ... without the rural Malays being even spectators.”⁴¹

Based on the above contention, there is no doubt that the Malays, left to their own devices, would have been able to eke out a comfortable if not meaningless living. After all, there was plenty for everyone. Nevertheless, we all know that hardly a race or nation in this world can exist in isolation, even less in the age of empire. Following colonisation by the Portuguese, Dutch and finally the British, the Malays found themselves subjugated to life as colonial serfs.

However, according to Mahathir, the colonial experience did not cause significant impact to the Malay environment. After all, colonial development was mostly confined to urban centres and areas of commercial import, while the extent of direct British interference fell short of touching upon Malay tradition and religion. These issues were consciously allowed to remain within the purview of the Malay rulers.⁴²

Instead, Mahathir believes that the single most important change to the Malay environment, aside from the onset of Islam, “was the massive influx of Chinese immigrants”. Following the

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴² In both the Federated and Unfederated Malay States, political and economic power was effectively controlled by the British, who in turn agreed not to interfere in matters relating to Malay traditions and Islamic affairs.

discovery of large deposits of tin, an economic boom erupted. This resulted in the proliferation of new tin mines peppered across the central west coast of the peninsula. This in turn led to the need for labour to work both the mines as well as the mushrooming rubber plantations. The British thus began to encourage the mass immigration of Chinese labour into Malaya, an effort that resulted in substantial changes to the local demography.⁴³

This created a problem because “until the coming of the Chinese, the Malays ... were not only the peasants, but also the petty traders, craftsmen, skilled workers, and ... the administrators in Malaya.”⁴⁴ With the arrival of the Chinese, the Malays were soon displaced by “the industrious and determined immigrants ... in petty trading and all branches of skilled work.” This was, by Mahathir’s logic, a natural consequence bearing in mind that the Malays’ “hereditary and environmental influence had been so debilitating” that they “could do nothing but retreat before the onslaught of the Chinese immigrants. Whatever the Malays could do, the Chinese could do better and more cheaply.”⁴⁵

Before long, the Chinese were firmly entrenched in the towns and came to “establish complete control of the economy”. As a result, “the small Malay shops gave way to rows of Chinese shops. As the Chinese increased in number and their business activities expanded, land prices in the town rocketed. Tempted by the high prices offered for their land, the Malays sold their holdings and began moving further and further into the outskirts of the towns.”⁴⁶ In other words, a vicious cycle had begun, and which is, if the contemporary mainstream Malay media are to be believed, still in existence until today.

The Malays, of course, are not to be blamed. After all, it is certainly not their fault that they were destined to pull the short genetic straw, or that they were cursed with the misfortune of an environment that provided too much comfort. As Mahathir suggests, “it is not the choice of the Malays that they should be rural and poor.” Instead, “it is the result of the clash of racial traits. They [the Malays] are easy-going and tolerant. The Chinese especially are hard-working and astute in business. When the two came in contact the result was inevitable.”⁴⁷

⁴³ In 1835 the Chinese numbered around 8 per cent of the population of British Malaya. By 1921 they had grown to about 30 per cent. At the point of independence in 1957, ethnic Chinese made up 45 per cent of the Malayan population.

⁴⁴ Mahathir, *Malay Dilemma*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

The Real Malay Dilemma

As is now apparent, Mahathir paints a bleak and fatalistic history of the Malays. Obtuse and unambitious, Mahathir's Malay is doomed to a life of mediocrity vis-à-vis his Chinese nemesis. Yet one must wonder whether such a deterministic view is as authoritative as Mahathir makes it out to be. Many have argued otherwise, most adroitly Syed Hussein Alatas in both his acclaimed postcolonial thesis, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, as well as his preceding booklet, *Siapa yang Salah: Sekitar Revolusi Mental dan Peribadi Melayu* (Who is at Fault: On the Mental Revolution and the Malay Character).

In his attempt at deconstructing both *The Malay Dilemma* and *Revolusi Mental*, Alatas points out that the image of the lazy or indolent (in this case Malay) native was, essentially, a biased product of colonial ideology. Such an image, he posits, was necessary for the advancement of colonial capitalism, and consequently the continued dominance of the European colonialists. Hence, any type of behaviour “which did not conform to the (colonial) capitalist conception of labour ... was rejected as a deviation.”⁴⁸ In other words, the Malays, being separated from urban life, remained detached from elements of colonial capitalism such as mining, plantations and construction, preferring instead to continue their way of independent cultivation and smallholdings. Their unwillingness to participate as menial labour in the production system of colonial capitalism was deemed to be indolence.⁴⁹ In truth, Alatas points out that the Malays “were not idlers. Their activities in farming, industry, trade, commerce, war, and government are recorded in history.”⁵⁰ In daily life, they toiled day and night – in their fields, their orchards and their boats. That these efforts went ignored was simply due to the colonial categorisation of labour, which only recognised ‘real’ work as the exploitative kind found in colonial mines and plantations. However, Alatas does concede that the Malays did not display ‘aggressive capitalist spirit’. But that is because, being mostly paddy planters and fishermen, there was simply no need to.⁵¹ The lack of a viable Malay merchant class therefore led to the Malays being conceived as lacking enterprise.⁵²

The Chinese, on the other hand, were generally regarded as ‘industrious’. After meticulously studying numerous colonial accounts and depictions of the Chinese in British Malaya, Alatas

⁴⁸ Alatas, *Myth of the Lazy Native*, p. 70.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁵² This, too, was no coincidence. Alatas goes on to show that a vibrant local Malay trading class had existed, but was destroyed by European conquest beginning from the sixteenth century. By the time the British arrived in the eighteenth century, the Malay trading class had all but disappeared. See *ibid.*, pp. 184–203.

surmises that this image arose not because they were, as a whole, an industrious people (though certainly a few of them were), but because of their willingness (and mostly not out of choice, owing to their status as indentured immigrants) to serve as the ‘lowest form of labour’. In this case, being ‘industrious’ was actually a euphemism for being an effective coolie, or what one colonial commentator deemed as “the mule among the nations – capable of the hardest task under the most trying conditions.”⁵³ Seen in this light, the Malay refusal to succumb to the exploitative system of production fostered by colonial capitalism was, by Alatas’s reckoning, a ‘sound response’.⁵⁴

More importantly, Alatas goes on to challenge another key contention of Mahathir, which is the claim that the Malays are inherently inferior to the Chinese as a result of naturally occurring traits that have evolved from their heredity and environment. Such a claim, according to Alatas, is logically fallacious. If indeed the Chinese, having been shaped and filtered by 4,000 years of social Darwinism, are so superior, why is that they were backwards for hundreds of years leading up to the twentieth century? In the same vein, if heredity and environmental factors predetermine the development of a race, how did it come to be that the superior Europeans suffered nearly an entire millennium wallowing in the dark ages, while the Arabs roosted at the pinnacle of human civilisation?⁵⁵

At the same time, geographical factors were also suggested by Mahathir to be a key determinant in the shaping of racial character. In the case of the Malays, an unchallenging environment with abundance of food meant that the Malays were not groomed to compete. As a result, they suffer from a lack of determination or desire for success. But if that were the case, Alatas does not see how Greece, Rome, ancient Egypt, Lebanon and Syria could have possibly founded and expanded their great civilisations, seeing as they too have been cursed with a relatively tranquil Mediterranean environment. Conversely, Alatas also points out that India and Pakistan, both having suffered from flood, disease, drought and famine throughout their histories, have not been able to advance as quickly as similarly disaster-prone countries such as Japan, Russia or even China in the twentieth century.⁵⁶

Closer to home, such reasoning is also ignorant of the precolonial history of the Malays. Once upon a time, proud Malay civilisations not only ruled the archipelago but also traded

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁵ Alatas, *Siapa yang Salah*, pp. 19–20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

and established diplomatic relations with foreign civilisations. Did the precolonial Malays possess different genes or experience a different climate?

It is obvious, therefore, that Mahathir's hypothesis concerning the influence of heredity and the environment, and thus the basis for Malay inferiority and fear (*ketakutan Melayu*) vis-à-vis the Chinese, is not as sound as it appears to be. Worst of all, he is guilty once again of subsuming colonial ideology into his version of the Malay national narrative.

The Deconstruction of a Myth

It's easier to fool people than to convince them that they've been fooled.⁵⁷

In the preceding sections, we have shown how a false consciousness has emerged from the image of *The Malay Dilemma*. We have referred to this social construct as the 'Malay reality', a paradox of two apparently dichotomous aspects – *ketuanan Melayu* (superiority) and *ketakutan Melayu* (inferiority). We have also established that *ketuanan Melayu*, which represents the concept of Malay dominance based on a historical claim to primacy, is at best a perversion of history to benefit the ruling class, and at worst an apologetic attempt to justify ethnonationalist hegemony. Meanwhile, *ketakutan Melayu* is designed to ensure that the Malay masses are kept at bay and living under the constant threat of the Chinese 'other'. Thus, the Sino–Malay relationship is one of constant apprehension and conflict. However, because the Malays are not designed to win in a fair contest, systemic handicaps are needed.⁵⁸

Bound together, these two aspects encapsulate a Malay reality that is both ironic in character and tragic in outcome. This is apparent for the following reasons. First, *The Malay Dilemma* is not only a reductionist account of history, it is also empirically specious with core arguments derived from conjecture and selective case studies, as we have shown earlier. Nevertheless, this narrative remains prevalent, despite the fact that the socio-economic situation in Malaysia has transformed significantly from what it was in the 1960s. Today the scenario of the Malays losing control and facing dispossession in Malaysia is no longer plausible. Demographically, the Chinese have not only dwindled to less than a quarter of the population; they also exhibit the lowest fertility rate among the major races.⁵⁹ Chinese participation in the public sector has also dropped drastically. When *The Malay Dilemma* was

⁵⁷ A quotation often attributed to Mark Twain.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Chandra Muzaffar, *Protector? An Analysis of the Concept and Practice of Loyalty in Leader-led Relationships within Malay Society*, Penang: Aliran, 1979.

⁵⁹ Yow Hong Chieh, 'Census: population hits 27.5m mark', *The Malaysian Insider*, 22 December 2011.

written, the Chinese made up two-fifths of the civil service. By 2009 only 5.8 per cent of civil servants were of ethnic Chinese background.⁶⁰

Ketuanan Melayu is no longer merely a catchphrase but a matter of fact in almost every sector imaginable – law enforcement, national defence, the judiciary, politics (on both sides) and even the economy through the active role of the Malay-dominated government-linked companies (GLCs). While direct Bumiputera⁶¹ equity stands at roughly 23.5 per cent (a ten-fold increase from 2.4 per cent in 1970),⁶² it must be noted that 54 per cent of market capitalisation in the benchmark Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange composite index and 36 per cent in the Bursa Malaysia are owned by GLCs. In addition, GLCs also control key strategic services and utilities such as electricity, telecommunications, public transport, water and sewerage, as well as financial services.⁶³ In other words, although the conditions precipitating *The Malay Dilemma* are no longer present, Mahathir's unsubstantiated doomsday scenario continues to pervade the Malay national consciousness.⁶⁴

Second, after more than 40 years of Mahathir's direct influence in the public realm, *The Malay Dilemma* has not only permeated into every level of society but has also been subverted beyond its constitutional provisions. For example, Article 153 of the Federal Constitution provides for Malay quotas in education, federal business permits and licences, land ownership and entry-level appointments to the civil service. Somehow, via the advocacy of *ketuanan Melayu*, these provisions have evolved beyond their original remit into blanket discounts for property purchases, eligibility for state-managed unit trusts, preferential initial public offering (IPO) share placements, equity requirements for publicly listed firms and even quotas for private sector employment.

This has occurred through the internalisation of *The Malay Dilemma* into public policy, beginning with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the early 1970s. The

⁶⁰ Lim Kit Siang, 'Lowest Chinese and Indian representation in the civil service in the 53-year history of Malaysia – 5.8% Chinese and 4% Indians as at end of 2009', *Kit Siang Online*, 7 April 2010, at: <http://blog.limkitsiang.com/2010/04/07/lowest-chinese-and-indian-representation-in-the-civil-service-in-the-53-year-history-of-malaysia-%E2%80%93-5-8-chinese-and-4-indians-as-at-end-of-2009/>.

⁶¹ Bumiputera, literally translated as 'sons of the soil', is the collective label used to describe the Malays and indigenous people.

⁶² Najib Abdul Razak, 'Majlis Pemerkasaan Ekonomi Bumiputera', Office of the Prime Minister, 14 September 2013, at: http://www.pmo.gov.my/home.php?menu=speech&page=1908&news_id=672&speech_cat=2.

⁶³ See 'Frequently asked questions', Khazanah Nasional, at: <http://www.khazanah.com.my/faq.htm>.

⁶⁴ See Clara Chooi, "'Malay supremacy' still relevant to help Malays, says Umno veep', *The Malaysian Insider*, 20 July 2012.

The Real Malay Dilemma

NEP, devised with the stated objectives of eradicating poverty and eliminating the identification of race with economic function, was implemented over two decades through aggressive rural development and poverty eradication programmes, as well as a host of affirmative action policies in favour of the Malays and Bumiputeras. Although the NEP officially ended in 1990, its successor policies retain most of its key features of positive discrimination.

Four decades on, many of its goals have been realised. The rate of poverty has shrunk drastically from 49.3 per cent to 1.7 per cent. Local ownership of corporate equity has increased, and along with it the Malay and Bumiputera share. Interethnic income inequality, which was a major rationale for the NEP, has also reduced, although intraethnic income inequality has now emerged as a significant problem. While the NEP has been successful in lifting millions of Malays out of poverty and creating a sizeable urban Malay middle class, many critics have pointed out how, under the pretence of assisting the Malays, the implementation of these policies has been hijacked to serve as a tool of patronage and rent-seeking, resulting in the creation of a small elite class of state capitalists.⁶⁵ Today the collusion between the Malay ruling class (UMNO) and the elite Malay capitalists (UMNO-linked cronies) has become so entrenched⁶⁶ that it is in the personal interests of those in power to perpetuate *ketuanan Melayu* in its current policy manifestations.

Third, although *The Malay Dilemma* is supposedly an attempt to conceive an empowering Malay nationalist narrative, the outcome is, ironically, a perspective shaped by colonial ideology. This captive mindset is true not only in the disparaging image of the Malays as articulated by *The Malay Dilemma* and *Revolusi Mental* but also in its insistence in sustaining the racist worldview of the Malaysian polity. While Mahathir himself pins blame for the fractious relationship between the Malays and the non-Malays (the Chinese in particular) on the British policy of divide and rule, it is clear that the narrative he proposes is no different. In fact, the two core aspects of *The Malay Dilemma*, that is, *ketuanan Melayu* and *ketakutan Melayu*, are predicated on the very same divisive paradigm. As Mahathir states: ‘the Malays are the rightful owners of Malaya, and ... if citizenship is conferred on races other than the Malays, it is because the Malays consent to this. That consent is conditional.’⁶⁷ Alatas suggests that the racist colonial narrative continues to endure because there has never been

⁶⁵ See Raja Rasiah, ‘Market, government and Malaysia’s new economic policy’, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2001, pp. 57–78.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Mahathir, *Malay Dilemma*, p. 126.

a ‘sharp break in the ideological consciousness of the Malay elites’, due to the ‘absence of a long and profound political struggle for independence in Malaysia and the continuity of the ruling class.’ This, he continues, explains the striking ‘resemblance between *Revolusi Mental* [as well as *The Malay Dilemma*] and the colonial ideology.’⁶⁸

In short, despite nearly six decades of sovereign nationhood, we have not managed to free ourselves from the psychologically suppressive colonial ideology. And so long as we continue to believe that membership of the Malaysian polity remains ‘conditional’ we will never be able to.

There have of course been attempts at paying lip service to the wider Malaysian electorate, usually following electoral setbacks for the ruling party. For example, Mahathir proffered ‘*bangsa Malaysia*’ in 1990, while Najib came up with ‘1Malaysia’ after 2008. Both were presented as ostensibly inclusive national identities for all Malaysian peoples. However, both have also proven to be superficial slogans that are unable to mask the true underlying ideology of the government.

A case in point would be Najib Razak’s pronouncement in 2013, in which he assured that the government “is always in realisation and cognisance of the Bumiputera agenda as the national agenda. This is because, if the majority Bumiputeras are not defended and feel themselves threatened or marginalised, then the country will never achieve peace, stability and ... become a developed country that is prosperous and secure.”⁶⁹ In the same speech, Najib went on to promise a barrage of goodies, including special allocations in affordable housing schemes, more Bumiputera-exclusive unit trusts, a special coordination unit in every ministry to improve Bumiputera participation in procurement, and many such others before emphatically declaring that “we call this the Bumiputera Economic Empowerment. All this is to safeguard Malays and Bumiputera, from then, now, and forevermore.”⁷⁰ And that was how 1Malaysia celebrated its third birthday.

Finally, the greatest tragedy culminating from the narrative of *The Malay Dilemma* is that the quintessential Malay today, as a result of the bipolar nature of his reality – self-entitled and superior on the one hand, fearful and insecure on the other – has evolved into a contradictory, confused and dependent creature. This is evident simply by examining contemporary Malay

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁶⁹ Najib, ‘Majlis Pemerkasaan Ekonomi Bumiputera’.

⁷⁰ See Nigel Aw, ‘Najib Showers Post-GE Rewards on Bumiputera’, *Malaysiakini*, 14 September 2013, at: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/241110>.

discourse, in which the Malays constantly behave like an oppressed minority despite being the dominant majority. They are constantly under siege and perennially in fear of something – the Chinese, the Christians, the Shia.⁷¹ They are also unable to wean themselves off the ‘opiates’ of race-based affirmative action,⁷² and have become apologists for corruption and rent-seeking behaviour in the name of *ketuanan Melayu*.⁷³

Worst of all, this Malay reality is a self-perpetuating phenomenon. The deeper the Malays are mired in the paradox, the harder it will be to escape.

A New Malaysian Narrative

You can replace lies with truth; but myth is only displaced with a narrative.⁷⁴

Soon after the 2013 general election, I was invited to be a panellist in a forum hosted by national Malay-language daily *Sinar Harian*. Sharing the stage with me was a recently defeated UMNO deputy minister and supreme council member, as well as a famous architect-turned-MP from the rural Malay heartland of Kuala Terengganu. The title of the forum was ‘Pasca PRU13: ke manakah halatuju politik Melayu?’ (Post GE13: Where is Malay politics headed?). When it came to my turn to give concluding remarks, I opined that, after 56 years and 13 general elections, the fact that Malay national discourse has not moved beyond this question is a clear indicator of a most tragic dilemma. I went on to elucidate the obvious – that the Malays would never, ever, lose power by virtue of three safeguards: Malay demography, the Federal Constitution and the Council of Rulers. The Malay fear (*ketakutan Melayu*) is self-evidently an irrational one. My riposte was received with rapturous cheers by the capacity crowd. However, I knew that despite my assurances, the paradoxical superiority–inferiority complex of *The Malay Dilemma* remains deeply entrenched in their psyche. A narrative constructed over four decades would not be erased in one moment of sanity.

As it stands, the UMNO-led government is doing everything in its power – producing films, rewriting history textbooks, brainwashing teenagers through national service and civil servants through the National Civics Bureau – to perpetuate this narrative. After all, it is their bread and butter. As long as racial divisions remain and the Malays are kept under constant

⁷¹ See ‘Of sectarianism, secularism and power politics’ in this volume.

⁷² See Zaid Ibrahim, ‘On leman, keramat and opiates’, *The Zaidgeist*, 8 August 2013, at: <http://www.zaid.my/?p=874>.

⁷³ See Trinna Leong, ‘Don’t sabotage Umno, Dr Mahathir advises Malays’, *The Malaysian Insider*, 18 August 2013.

⁷⁴ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Bed of Procrustes: Philosophical and Practical Aphorisms*, New York: Random House, 2010, p. 20.

fear and in need of what the former prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi calls ‘crutches’,⁷⁵ the ruling elite will maintain their stranglehold on social, economic and political power.

Of course, it goes without saying that the prevalence of UMNO’s nationalist narrative will bring no positive returns in the long run. Not only is it counter-intuitive to national unity, the Malays themselves will not be able to progress and compete until and unless they manage to break through the glass ceiling that was constructed by Mahathir and fortified by UMNO. As long as the Malays are perceived to be weak and government dependent, they will forever be victims of discrimination, particularly in the private sector. As long as affirmative action continues to be implemented in its current racialist guise, any Malay success will never be truly legitimate.

Therefore, it is critical for Malaysians, and even more so for the Malays, to unravel themselves from this captive ideology. In attempting to do so, perhaps lessons from the past can be useful consideration. Take, for example, the notable effort to formulate an alternative narrative during the heady days following the introduction of the Malayan Union. While UMNO sought to mobilise along the lines of Malay nationalism, there was a parallel attempt to engage the British government by a multiracial coalition of political and civic organisations comprising the Pusat Tenaga Ra’ayat (PUTERA) and the All-Malaya Council for Joint Action (AMCJA). On 10 August 1947, the Putera-AMCJA coalition conceptualised a document called the People’s Constitutional Proposals. Besides suggestions such as a popularly elected government and equal citizenship rights to all who would be loyal to Malaya, the constitutional proposals included the adoption of a national identity called ‘*Melayu*’ for all citizens, as well as a Council of Races to block any discriminatory legislation based on ethnicity or religion. This attempt to craft an inclusive and non-discriminatory national identity was so groundbreaking that the *Straits Times* described it as ‘the first political attempt to put Malayan party politics on a plane higher than that of rival racial interests, and also as the first attempt to build a political bridge between the domiciled non-Malay communities and the Malay race.’⁷⁶ However, as was the fate of most left-wing

⁷⁵ See Paddy Bowie, ‘The accession of a servant leader: Dato’ Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’, *Management*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2006, pp. 4–9, at: http://library.perdana.org.my/Digital_Content/Serials/Management/2006-JAN-MAR/The%20Accession%20of%20a%20servant%20leader%20%5B4%20-%209%5D.pdf.

⁷⁶ Fahmi Reza, ‘First all-race political action and the People’s Constitution’, *The Malaysian Bar*, 1 August 2007,

The Real Malay Dilemma

movements in Malaya, its proposals failed to achieve mainstream traction. In 1948 the British inaugurated the Federation of Malaya and the Putera-AMCJA coalition was eventually crushed.⁷⁷

Half a century on, such an inclusive narrative remains elusive. There is now an urgent need to construct a new national consciousness that is able to integrate and dignify every Malaysian race, community and culture. This narrative must necessarily embrace every Malaysian as equal and legitimate before the law, and cannot allow one Malaysian to be more Malaysian than another based on narrow, unsubstantiated arguments. This new narrative must be a positive one, which neither aggrandises nor denigrates, and certainly not one that does both. It needs to replace fear with hope, superiority with solidarity and inferiority with equality. This narrative must also be one that cares not where a Malaysian comes from but is instead only concerned about where all Malaysians are headed to collectively as a nation. In other words, it needs to replace the constructed 'other' with a constructed 'us'.

This new narrative does not need to dismantle affirmative action, but merely reorientate it away from being race-based to needs-based. This will ensure that positive discrimination will be targeted towards those who truly require support and assistance, and not implemented blindly in favour of a certain race, a provision which has been easily abused.

Most critical of all – if we are to move on as a nation – this new narrative must be one that is unshackled from colonial ideology. Moving forward, there is little choice but to actualise this new Malaysian narrative. Failure to do so will condemn us to be forever haunted by one man's dilemma.

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⁷⁷ See *ibid*.