



Malaysia, Identity Politics and the Future of our Democracy

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by Nadia Lukman. IMAN *brief* | April 2022

The Malay-Muslim's identity is inseparable from Malaysia's political arena. Due to the existence of ethno-religious based parties such as United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), and other ethnic minority parties such as Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Council (MIC), ethno-religious issues have always been used for political mileage. The dominance of these parties, particularly UMNO and PAS, whether on federal or state level, further describe the ethnic composition as well as political inclination of the community in certain states. Kelantan and Terengganu, for example, are usually the domain of PAS or Barisan Nasional (BN), the umbrella organisation which sees UMNO MCA and MIC working together for the common good. The practice of patronage politics, especially by UMNO, is common and clearly working for the Malay community, who have been unanimous in their support; UMNO goes down to the ground, meets people and gives some assistance or freebies. Patronage politics practiced by UMNO then created dependency among the working class towards the upper-class Malay. These practices have been contested many times, but they are essentially what the community is looking for. However, how far does patronage politics impact Malay voters' political behaviour? Do patronage politics work for urban Malay voters? This article attempts to unpack the Malay identity and political behaviour post COVID-19, analysing past policies, programmes or approaches by politicians that impacted their current political behaviour as well as current concerns that may influence past and possibly future elections.

Malays pre-Mahathir (1945-1981)

In the early days of Malaya's independence and the establishment of Malaysia, there were two key incidents that should be discussed. The first incident was the protest against Malayan Union which was established in 1946. The establishment of Malayan Union was seen as a very important event that marked Malay participation in politics pre-independence. The protest against Malayan Union was due to the British's attempt to unify British administration in Malaya under a single flag, instead of separate entities for various states in Malaya. However, the attempt in 'unifying' all Malayan states was seen as undermining the position of Malay rulers and privileges which did not sit well with most Malays.

The Malays' strong opposition towards Malayan Union led to the establishment of UMNO in 1946. UMNO demanded for a return of pre-war political structures set up in Malay states, with the British acting as the 'protector' of the Malay states¹. The establishment of UMNO and increasing political participation among the Malays paved the road for independence. This demonstrates how the Malayan Union and the consequential events afterwards relied on patronage. The Malay in general, sees the royal institution as the final gatekeeper of Malay culture and status in Malaya. This is because the Malay rulers are responsible for Islam and Malay culture even during British colonisation in Malaya. As such, any attack towards the institution is seen as an attack towards Malays, and trying to undermine the status and culture of Malays.

Another key event was the 13th May 1969 riots. The riot that happened in Kuala Lumpur was between the Malays and the Chinese that began weeks before. The Malays then were seen to be passive and obedient to the Malay rulers, but the 13th May 1969 riot showed how angry the Malays were. The extensive damage Kuala Lumpur received due to the riot during 13th May 1969 was not limited to the economy, but also human lives. It is estimated that 196 human lives were lost due to the riot while foreign diplomats believed the number should be higher². The riot lasted for a few days, impacting the livelihood of thousands living in Kuala Lumpur, forcing the government to declare a state of emergency. It is important to note that this dark event did not happen only because of the first major win by Gerakan and Democratic Action Party (DAP). It happened due to consistent rifts between the Chinese and Malays, with both parties trading slurs, hate speech, to name a few. Thousands continued to march across Kuala Lumpur's Road, terrorising shop lots and vandalising the streets.

The two incidents above not only showed Malay's participation in social movement, but also the intra-status conflict among the Malays. UMNO, which was established to protect Malay interests, were essentially dominated by the Malay elites who went to English schools and universities. Examples are Tunku Abdul Rahman, Dato' Onn Jaafar and Tun Abdul Razak, who went to English schools before going to the United Kingdom to obtain their degrees. As such,

¹ The Malayan Union and its impact - The Malaysian Bar

² May 13, Never Again: The 1969 riots that changed Malaysia | Malaysiakini

the British encouraged UMNO to pursue independence to protect their interest in Malaya instead of accepting the All-Malaya Council of Joint Action (AMCJA) proposal of the People Constitution. This move had essentially protected the position of Malay elites, and strengthened the patronage and feudalism nature of the government in Malaya. The 13th May was the result of the Malay elite's ignorance towards issues faced by Malay peasants; the administration of Tunku Abdul Rahman failed to address the ethnic tensions that had been happening a few months before the tragedy. The action taken by Tun Abdul Razak in addressing socioeconomic imbalance between ethnic groups was quintessentially the right step to address the economic and education imbalance.

Malays during Mahathir Era (1981-2001)

Mahathir Mohamad is the longest-serving politician that has held the Prime Minister seat in Malaysia; 22 years during his first tenure as the 4th Prime Minister and 2 short years during his second tenure as the 7th Prime Minister. Mahathir has been dubbed as The Father of Modernisation, following his aggressive industrialisation approach, shifting from agrarian economy during his predecessor's era. Economically, Mahathir had contributed a lot to Malaysia's economic growth, in which during his era, Malaysia's GDP at one point grew at seven percent. Numerous iconic projects were done in his era: Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur Twin Towers, Kuala Lumpur Tower and Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang, Selangor. On top of these, Mahathir had also aggressively privatised several institutions such as National Electricity Board (LLN) which is now called as Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB). Mahathir's approach towards economic development was influenced by the Japanese Sogoshos through the Look East Policy which was done through state intervention for heavy industrialisation from 1981-1985, to partial privatisation as well as selective economic and cultural deregulation from 1986-1997 before turning to unorthodox counter-cyclical interventions to stimulate economic recovery after the 1997 economic crisis (Jomo K.S., 2003)³.

However, it was not Mahathir's economic management that should be the centre of attention in this article. Mahathir's 22 years of tenure has certainly made an impact towards the identity shift among Malay-Muslim community in Malaysia. Rapid modernisation engineered by Mahathir through industrialisation has created an identity crisis to the Malay society who were at that time mostly from rural areas. A shift of economic activities has provoked the Malay to question their identity, as industrialisation changed their livelihood and culture. Mahathir has branded Malays as lazy⁴. He has been repeating the mantra 'Malays are lazy speech' since the 1970s. Counter narrative works by Syed Hussein Al Atas titled Myth of The Lazy Natives are among the publications published by scholars and other entities to counter allegations by Mahathir. However, the impact of these statements cannot be undermined. Malays' inferiority towards other ethnicities has always been present since the colonial era and Mahathir had made this insecurity even

³ Mahathir's Economic Legacy - Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia

⁴ <https://www.aastroawani.com/berita-malaysia/saya-tidak-fikir-saya-salah-tun-mahathir-pertahan-kenyataan-melayu-malas-219522>

worse. This inferiority and insecurity towards their own identity as a Malay has turned majority of the Malays to use religion as a way to identify themselves.

This pattern was then assisted by the fact that Islamic institutions in Malaysia were tied to symbols of Malay culture; i.e. the monarchy. The administration of Islam falls under the prerogative of the state monarchy, and for states without their own royal household, will be administered by the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (YDPA), advised by the Prime Minister. However, the extensive institutionalisation of Islam was not happening until Mahathir's rise to power. Mahathir implemented various religious programmes and policies, as well as institutionalisation and centralisation of Islamic governance. For example, JAKIM or Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia was established in 1997, replacing the formerly known as Bahagian Hal Ehwal Islam (Islamic Affairs Department) under the Prime Minister, which is formerly just a small unit under the Prime Minister Department. There are also other programmes offered not through JAKIM which are subsidies for religious schools, establishment of Islamic financial institutions, Islamic programmes on traditional media as well as building suraus and mosques⁵. Mahathir's Islamic agenda was not only to establish an alternative version of the Islam proposed by his political enemies PAS, but also to build an alternative strong middle class Malay-Muslim. The various religious programmes and policies implemented by him encourage the establishment of various Jemaah besides PAS such as Jemaah Islah Malaysia (JIM), ISMA and HALUAN.

Malays After Mahathir Era (2001-now)

As the Mahathir era wrapped up, Malays have become more feudalistic, in the sense that the practice of patronage has become more entrenched. Islamic identity has now become more dominant, seen as an alternative to the diminishing Malay culture sacrificed by rapid industrialisation. For politicians after Mahathir, such as Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Pak Lah) and Najib Razak, their reaction was to use Islam as a way to get political mileage. Pak Lah began to heavily promote Islam Hadhari as soon as he became the Prime Minister, painting Islam Hadhari as an inclusive Islamic framework, for both Muslim and non-Muslims. Pak Lah's Islam Hadhari agenda has also provided continuity of Mahathir attempt on reinterpreting Islam to suit the modern era, while pushback by political enemies such as PAS was due to their opposition on this modern reinterpretation of Islam. The major weakness in this Islam Hadhari is the vagueness of the concept. Further dig into the interpretation of Islam Hadhari concept has led me to the 10 principles of Islam Hadhari by Dr Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas; (1) Faith and piety in Allah, (2) just and trustworthy government, (3) free and independent people, (4) mastery of knowledge, (5) balanced and comprehensive economic development, (6) good quality of life, (7) protection of minority group and women rights, (8) cultural and moral integrity, (9) protection of the environment and lastly (10) strong defenses. It is clear that further interpretation on Islam Hadhari was handed over to government sponsored think tanks and intellectuals⁶ instead of being

⁵ Islamic Revivalism and Politics in Malaysia: Problems in Nation Building by Bob Oliver

⁶ Islam Hadhari: A Malaysian Islamic Multiculturalism or Another Blank Banner by Gerhard Hoffstaedter

spearheaded by Pak Lah himself.

Meanwhile during the Najib era, an Islamic agenda was really scarce. Besides Najib Razak's attempt on riding on Rohingya issues under the banner of Islamic Ummah (which refers to global Muslim community), there has been no substantial move by him to solidify Islamic elements into his administration. Issues on Rohingya was not the only ummah issue he attempted to include in his political mileage, but also issues on Gaza as he was the first Prime Minister of Malaysia to step foot on Gaza. The Islam Hadhari agenda promoted by his predecessor Pak Lah was not continued, instead the concept of 1Malaysia became Najib Razak's administration tagline.

Islamic Movement and Democracy

While the discussion above has pointed out on the waning of Malay identity, institutionalisation of Islam, Islamisation agenda and Malay inter-class relations, another thing that should be pointed out is the growth of Islamic movements in Malaysia. Post-13th May 1969, many Malay students were offered scholarships to pursue their studies locally or overseas either to Western countries or Middle East. The first Islamic movement was Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) which was established at Universiti Malaya in 1971. One of its founders is Anwar Ibrahim who later joined UMNO and became the Deputy Prime Minister under Mahathir Mohamad. Since then, various Islamic movements have been established in Malaysia, for example Jemaah Islah Malaysia (JIM) in 1990 which was later disbanded. A few others such as IKRAM was formally established during Najib's tenure in 2009 while ISMA was established in 1997, during Mahathir's administration.

The budding of Islamic movements in Malaysia also help in strengthening and identifying Malay identity as Muslims in Malaysia. These Islamic movements have youth wings, recruiting members either through activities on campus or out of campus. Through activities catered for different age groups, these movements provide Malay youths the circle of friends they need as well as Islamic knowledge during their identity development. The youths were then raised in an environment which emphasised on being Malay-Muslim, analysing every part of the society through the lens of Malay-Muslim ideology that has been taught to them. The impact? The Malay-Muslim community sees the importance of implementing Islamic ideologies in Malaysia's democratic institutions. Madinah, Khulafa Ar-Rashidin and Turki Uthmaniyyah are seen as examples of Islamic countries of the past that Malaysia should follow, since Malaysia is supposed to be an Islamic state. And this worldview has restricted the way these groups approached various issues.

Unless the opposition does not address the question of Islam in their democratic fight, the Malay-Muslim will always sees them as their enemy. DAP

⁷ Najib Arrives in Gaza, First Malaysian PM to Visit Palestine | Astro Awani

missed their chance to address this during their 18 months in power as part of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) administration. However, as long as Pakatan Harapan does not offer a better multicultural alternative than PAS's restricted idea of Islamic state, it would be very unlikely for the Malay-Muslim community to vote for them. The current political gameplay might benefit the oppositions (PH) due to the fight between Malay-bumiputera party infighting. The Malacca state election shows how UMNO benefited from the current situation. Our past interviews with locals in Malacca suggest that the Malays now tend to look more at the most 'stable' political party that is consistent with their Malay-Muslim narratives. 'Stable' here refers to the strongest, less prone to political frogs (debatable), but a known risk to the Malay community. In their opinion, it's better to pick a well known villain than picking someone unknown.

The problem here is that how does the Pakatan Harapan (PH) or even MUDA plan to appeal to the Malay-Muslim community in Malaysia? Pakatan Harapan as a political alliance is shaky, especially as PKR decided to use their own logo in Johor state election. Not to mention the fact that AMANAH as part of PH party alliance has yet to give a good impression to the Malay-Muslim community with their Rahmatan Lil Alamin framework. PH so far fails to offer a solid alternative framework for the current culture of patronage, as well as the Islamic institutions. Bureaucracy practiced by Islamic institutions in Malaysia has tarnished Malay-muslim community wellbeing.

This is why religion should be community driven, not institution driven. Issues such as religious conversion for example can be classified as a personal matter and if in some cases involves children, it should be solved through resolution by the community without the interference of government agencies. Marriage that is powered by the community through local imam, surau and mosque is more accessible to the family institution in terms of advice, immediate needs and emergency. A community driven religious practice also means that there is no issue in practicing different interpretations of Islam and will encourage the community to study various schools of interpretations. There is absolutely no need to strict your whole nation to a single Mazhab without realising the effect it has on the Malay-muslim community in Malaysia. We need to be less judgemental and encourage interreligious, intercultural interaction in Malaysian society. Then, we can move forward as a nation. 
