THE POLITICS OF ACCOMMODATION AND THE PROBLEM OF NATION-BUILDING IN A PLURAL SOCIETY: THE CASE OF MALAYSIA

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Abstract: The issue of pluralism in Malaysia has attracted keen interest among scholars and commentators from this country as well as from outside the region. It is an issue that has pre-occupied the Malaysian government since Malaysia's independence from British colonial rule in 1957. Since then the Malaysian state has been concerned with containing and managing the 'vulnerabilities' that can cause conflicts among diverse ethnic and religious groups in the country. The method used to manage ethnic relations has been termed the 'politics of accommodation' which is essentially based on the principles of bargaining, cooperation and accommodation among different ethnic groups. It is argued that while it has contributed to the peaceful – albeit precarious – coexistence between them, it also has had an impact of delaying the nation-building process in Malaysia. The pre-occupation of the state with 'national unity' and 'national integration' and the constant reminders to the public on the importance of 'unity' are proof that the 'politics of accommodation' as a tool for keeping the country and its diverse segments together are faced with serious challenges. This article attempts to look at the functioning of the 'politics of accommodation' as strategy for managing politics and society in a multiethnic society and its impact on nation-building in Malaysia.

Introduction

Managing a plural society has pre-occupied the Malaysian state for more than half a century and remains its major preoccupation today. According to one local observer, "ethnic pluralism has no doubt been the source of tension and conflict in society".¹ However, it is also acknowledged that "having its sources in major Asian civilisations and great world religions that had interacted with each other since the beginning of history in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, pluralism has also been a source of the country's strength, vitality, and uniqueness. It has contributed to

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multiethnic understanding and cooperation, softening ethno-religious extremism and increasing the prospects for tolerance, civility and social participation.”² But as far as nation-building is concerned, this pluralism has not helped ease that process. Despite the birth of the nation more than half a century ago, it is still grappling with the vulnerabilities of a plural society that can threaten the survival of the regime and the nation. Such a situation has led some to describe Malaysia as a ‘nation in the making’ with diverse ethnic groups that have not been successfully integrated.³

What then is a ‘nation’ and when does it come into existence? There are many definitions of nation, but for the purpose of this article, those of Renan, Stalin and Weber are useful. According to the French philosopher Ernest Renan (1823–1892) a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle, a solidarity sustained by a distinctive historical consciousness. What constitutes this spiritual principle is the consent, the desire to live together, the will to continue to value the heritage which all holds in common. The nation is the end product of a long period of work, sacrifice and devotion.⁴ Joseph Stalin (1878–1953), in turn, defined it as a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up (national character) manifested in common culture. It comes into existence only when several elements have come together, especially economic life, language and territory. It would be sufficient for a single one of these characteristics to be lacking and the nation ceases to be a nation.⁵ Max Weber (1864–1920) examines the nation as a ‘prestige community’ endowed with a sense of ‘cultural mission’. He affiliates nations to ethnic communities as populations unified by a myth of common descent. What distinguishes the nation is a commitment to political project. The elements that make up a nation can be objective and subjective ones. Objective elements consist of territory, language and population, while the subjective ones are will and memory.⁶

Based on the above definitions, it becomes clear that Malaysia is a nation – albeit an incomplete one – and that the process of nation-building is still on-going. It has a common territory, a stable community of people, a functioning government and an economic life. However, the psychological make-up or the national character as manifested in common culture is more difficult to discern. Malaysia’s population is made up of diverse ethnic groups, cultures, languages and identities. Because of this multiethnic character and the differences that resulted from it, Malaysia suffers from a disadvantage in the persistent problem of identifying core values and a national identity accepted by all. The cosmopolitan nature of the Malaysian society and the conditions of a plural society do not make it easy to arrive at a consensus on what these core values are. Thus far, the state has been able to manage these diverse groups and their conflicting interests through a policy that can best be described as the ‘politics of accommodation’. It is both a policy and a strategy based on elite bargaining, cooperation and accommodation of demands and interests of different

ethnic groups in the country. In Malaysia, this has helped contain the vulnerabilities and avoided conflicts that had been predicted for a plural society.

Malaysian Plural Society and its Functions

A plural society is defined as one with clearly discernible ethnic, linguistic and religious differences. In Malaysia, these differences are compounded by the existence of a majority–minority divide along ethnic lines. The main dividing line is between the two major groups – the *bumiputera*⁷ (a Malay expression, referring to the ‘indigenous’ peoples) and the *non-bumiputera* (‘non-indigenous’) populations. The *bumiputera* population comprises of the Malay ethnic group and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo, such as the Kadazans, Dusuns, Ibans, Dayaks, Melanaus and others. While almost all Malays profess the Islamic religion, other ethnic groups are more diverse in their religious affiliation. The *bumiputera* population of Sabah and Sarawak, for example, consists of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Most of the people categorised in the *non-bumiputera* group are non-Muslims and profess different religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Confucianism and Taoism. However, the ‘fault-line’ in Malaysia’s plural society is between the Malays and non-Malays, (essentially Chinese and Indians), a carry-on from the situation found in Malaya (‘West Malaysia’) as a result of British colonial rule. These three main ethnic groups also represent the three great religions and civilisations of Asia, namely Islam, Confucianism and Hinduism. Each of these groups has deep attachments to their respective cultures and civilisations. The Malaysian state recognises this diversity and has allowed these groups to practise their cultures and customs without any attempt to assimilate the minority groups into the culture of the majority. The non-Malays have developed into formidable political, economic and social forces in the country. They have their own aspirations, interests and demands, but like all other groups, they aspire primarily to secure the good and advantages for their respective groups.

The origin of plural society in Malaysia is associated with British colonial rule which began formally in 1874. It is attributed to the way the British developed Malaya’s economy that was geared towards commodity production and a pattern of state intervention.⁸ To develop this economy, the British recruited and brought in immigrant workers from China and India in massive numbers to work in the economic sector and building of roads and other infrastructures since the British thought that the Malay population of the land was unsuited to such economic activities. The British considered Malays as “lazy, unwilling to work for wages and therefore could not be considered as a potential pool of labour in the colonial economy”.⁹ Besides those that were continuously being brought in as labourers into the Malay States, there were also an ever-growing number of assisted migrants sponsored by

family or friends especially after the Chinese government abolished restrictions on emigration in 1893. The Chinese population grew steadily, so did the cultural and economic gap between the Malays and the immigrant Chinese population. While developing Malaya's economy in these ways, the British also created a 'divided' or 'plural society' – rendering ethnicity a more pressing factor, perhaps more than in any other countries in Southeast Asia.¹⁰ While politics and administration have always been Malay-dominated, it was the Chinese who controlled the economy. The Chinese elites operated those economics not controlled by foreign, mainly British investors.¹¹ This trend continues until today, but at a lesser scale than previously, as they now have to share the economic 'cake' with other groups as a result of the economic and social restructuring of the Malaysian society in the aftermath of the 1969 Sino-Malay ethnic riots (the '13 May Incident').

The Politics of Accommodation in Malaysia

The 'politics of accommodation' can be defined as a style and a strategy of managing a multiethnic society based on consultation, bargaining, consensus and cooperation. It is also a form of mediating relations between ethnic communities through elite consensus, which has been the practice in Malaysia. It is an arrangement designed to manage its plural society in order to contain the vulnerabilities and at the same time exploit the advantages. Some labelled it as the '*Barisan Way*' – a style of inter-ethnic cabinet consultations that often yield policies favouring the ethnic Chinese.¹² Specifically, it is an arrangement that involves the policy of bargaining, cooperation and compromise. The origin of this 'arrangement' can be traced back to the efforts at securing independence from the British, negotiated mainly through the political parties and the elites of the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. Political parties play an important role not only in the practice of the arrangement, but also in perpetuating it. The role of political parties is seen as mainly, though not exclusively, to protect the interests and rights of their respective ethnic groups. In the existing social and political framework in Malaysia, the elites continue to galvanise constituent loyalties through ethnic appeals and parties.¹³ However, they also learned to cooperate autonomously across ethnic lines, finally solidifying their relations through a party coalition as manifested in the Alliance Party and later in the grand coalition of political parties known as the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) or the 'National Front', formed in 1971.

Political parties that emerged in Malaysia are either single-ethnic or multiethnic based parties. Single-ethnic based parties have dominated politics in the country since independence, with non-communal or multiethnic political parties having a history of little chance of success. Such trends began as early as 1950 when the leader of the ethnic Malay based political party UMNO (United Malays National

Organisation) tried to open UMNO to non-Malays but was met with protest and had to resign from the party. His subsequent attempt to build a multiethnic political party (Independence of Malaya Party, IMP) failed to attract electoral support. The inability of a political party to remain multiethnic is proven in the failure of another party, the Malaysian People's Movement Party, better known through its Malay acronym GERAKAN, to develop as a multiethnic party as its founders have intended it to be. The GERAKAN party which was formed in the 1970s was soon transformed into another ethnic Chinese political party and today remains an important component party of the ruling BN. The same trend can be traced in the origins and development of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which has always been Chinese-dominated. The latest attempt at creating a multiethnic party was the formation of the People's Justice Party (in Malay *Parti Keadilan Rakyat*, PKR, often known simply as Keadilan, 'Justice') in 1999, soon after the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1998. Despite winning seats in the general elections of 2008, it has not attracted much public support and is constantly being besieged by single-ethnic based parties of the ruling government. With a history of the inability of multiethnic political parties to sustain themselves as such in the Malaysian national political life, the future of PKR is still uncertain, especially in terms of its ability to compete for influence within a social and political framework dictated by the demands of a multiethnic society.

The concept of the 'politics of accommodation' and the practice of political power-sharing in Malaysia can be traced back to the pre-independence era. At that time, the Malays accepted that compromise was necessary to gain the cooperation of non-Malays in order to win British confidence about granting the country its independence. The first general elections in Malaya were held in 1955 whereby three political parties (UMNO, MCA, MIC) representing the three major ethnic groups in the country (Malays, Chinese and Indians, respectively) decided to form an alliance. Out of the 52 seats contested, the Alliance coalition won 51. At that time the ethnic Malays formed the majority of voters (84 per cent), Chinese voters constituted 11 per cent, Indians and others 5 per cent. Although Malay voters constituted a big majority, UMNO was allocated only 35 seats while MCA was given 15 seats and 2 seats for MIC.¹⁴ The two seats allocated for MIC candidates were considered a good bargain, as there was not a single constituency which had 50 per cent Indian voters. Although UMNO could have formed a government – that is a *Malay* government – it did not do so in order to keep the cooperation of the other two ethnic groups needed to create a harmonious society. This principle of compromise became an essential element to be observed in the implementation of the concept of politics of accommodation even in later periods of Malaysia's political development. This can be seen in situations where Chinese political parties, despite dismal showing

in some general elections, would still be allocated cabinet posts and maintain the position of being core components in the BN set-up.

Citizenship is another issue that featured significantly in the ethnic bargaining of the early years. UMNO has agreed to accept the principle of *jus soli* as a means of granting citizenship to Chinese and Indians when the country achieved independence in 1957. The Malays, through UMNO, agreed to the notion of common citizenship to be given to non-Malays. This was in appreciation of MCA and MIC's acceptance of the special position of the Malays and the making of Malay language as the sole official language as of 1967.¹⁵ Another reason for this significant concession to the Chinese community was to 'undermine the communist challenge' – in reference to the communist insurgency (1948–60) in Malaysia which was led by the Malayan Communist Party whose membership was largely from the ethnic-Chinese community.¹⁶ At that time too, the British were keen that the Chinese and Indians were accommodated partly because of their own interest in tin and rubber industries.¹⁷ As for the Malay elite, they wanted independence for their country and they knew that the British would not agree to it if their interests were not protected. One other factor that made this concession possible was the presence of the Malay administrators and aristocrats – the 'administrative' elite – at the helm of society. It is asserted that this elite did not feel threatened by the idea of accommodating Chinese and Indians on a massive scale, since they were aristocrats and their positions were not open to competition, and that they could accommodate while not losing out.¹⁸ This developed into the concept of political power-sharing in the government and cabinet in which the Malays are represented by their elites in the UMNO, Chinese through MCA, and Indians through MIC. It is argued that this practice of political power-sharing was the most significant example of accommodation in Malaysian politics.¹⁹ This trend continued in the second phase of Malaysian political development (1957–69) where cabinet posts were bargained and designated to the three communities through their respective political parties.

Challenging the Status Quo: the 1969 Racial Riots and the 2008 General Elections

So far, there have been two events that have challenged the viability of the concept and practice of the politics of accommodation in Malaysia. The first was the 1969 racial riots that broke out mainly between Malays and Chinese. The event is often seen as a 'dark spot' in the history of Malaysian ethnic relations and became a frequent reference for the government to remind its citizens of the importance of national unity and integration in the country. More important, it jolted the Malay community from their perception that the practice of accommodating non-Malay (especially Chinese) desires for citizenship, political power-sharing and economic

dominance would be sufficient for them to accept the status quo. To the Malays, the interethnic riots of 1969 pointed to two things: that in this politics of accommodation, compromise has been one-sided; and that they had to protect their interest for fear that they will be marginalised and edged out of their own country. This led to the formulation, among others, of the 'New Economic Policy' (NEP) aimed at 'correcting' the socio-economic imbalance between the Malays and the non-Malays. However, the NEP, an affirmative action policy became an issue of discord between Malays and non-Malays. A misunderstood and an open-to-abuse policy, the NEP has its detractors and supporters. Non-Malays regard it as a discriminatory policy in favour of the Malays while Malays think of it as an affirmative action and justifiable in an effort to improve their economic situation. Whatever the case, the NEP became one of the factors that reinforced the mistrust between Malay and non-Malay communities.

The impact of the massive granting of citizenship to non-Malays is huge. Because of this, Chinese and Indian communities were increasingly able to express their dissatisfaction through the ballot box.²⁰ In the 1969 general election, a substantial majority of the Chinese and Indian communities voted against the government. This increased the fear of the Malay population that they might be relegated to a permanent status of political inferiority in addition to the economic and social inferiority.²¹ The 13 May racial riots which followed the general elections of 1969 showed, among other things, the failure of the past economic strategy to bring the economic and social status of the Malays to anywhere near that of the non-Malays. The measures which had been taken were too weak and insufficiently comprehensive to make a real dent on the problem.²² It also caused the government to realise that the achievement of national unity and racial economic integration was the most critical problem confronting the country. This led to the re-thinking of the need to accelerate nation-building and how best to proceed with it.

The second major challenge to the existing socio-political framework is the general elections of March 2008. In these elections, the ruling BN coalition received severe blows from the opposition when it lost five states to the opposition coalition. The two northern states of Kedah and Kelantan, where the majority of the population is Malay, were won by the Islamist Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). The other three states of Perak, Penang and Selangor were won by the coalition of opposition parties of PAS, DAP and PKR. The seemingly reduced power of BN has an important impact on both nation-building and the future of the inter-ethnic 'arrangement' through the politics of accommodation that has become the landmark of Malaysian politics. It raises two main issues. The first is the utility of continuing with such an arrangement in the context of a changing paradigm in Malaysian politics. The coalition of the opposition parties, consisting of multiethnic constituencies, seems to indicate a de-emphasising of ethnicity in Malaysian politics. The significance of

this would be that political parties now can focus on issues of national rather than ethnic interest. This would make ‘ethnic bargaining’ and ‘compromise’ contained in the ‘politics of accommodation’ of the past lose relevancy. The second is the extent to which the new environment created in this way can forge nation-building away from the socio-political framework inherited from the colonial past. Such a possibility would give rise to optimism that despite the conditions of ethnic pluralism a harmonious society and a united country can be created.

The Challenges of Nation-Building in a Multiethnic Society

Besides the need to harmonise the demands of a plural society, the Malaysian state is also concerned with nation-building. To this end, it has introduced policy initiatives aimed to create a sense of pride, commonness and tolerance if not acceptance of the different cultures. At the popular or public level, this is done through the recognition and celebration of religious holidays and festivals of all ethnic groups in the country. Activities such as ‘open house’ during these festivals are taken seriously and are often state-sponsored. Detractors of such events consider them ‘mere’ showcase, lacking real depth in helping to understand each other’s culture, while its defenders say that it provides the much needed platform and occasion for social interactions. But for this to develop into a more meaningful encounter that could be the basis of creating and understanding core values of the nation, interaction at another level is needed. It is true that there is basic agreement on the symbolism of a nation such as the national anthem, national flag or national holidays, but the more binding ties such as a national language, national culture and a common national education policy are only grudgingly accepted by some segments of the population. More than half a decade after *Merdeka* (independence), “the agenda of national unity in Malaysia has still not succeeded, but instead, appears to have receded further and further into the distant future”.²³ Despite the efforts of the state to resolve many of the problems related to ethnic relations, contentious issues remain unresolved which complicate – if not delay – the process of nation-building.

There are three persistent issues that affect nation-building in Malaysia. They are the issues of national language, national culture and national education. To reconcile the different expectations and often conflicting demands of different ethnic groups on these, the Malaysian state formulated policies that emerged through the process of ‘ethnic bargaining’. One such policy is the national language policy, which has proven to be one of the most sensitive issues within the context of Malaysia’s nation-building process. When Malaysia became independent, it was agreed that the national language of Malaysia should be the Malay language and that it would replace English as the nation’s official language by 1967. The decision to make

Malay the national and official language is based on many factors. Malay has been the *lingua franca* of the country and wider region and the language of the Malays and their states before the arrival of British colonial rule in Malaysia. The national language was envisaged to give the nation its own identity and would function as a tool for uniting different ethnic groups in the country.

However, in reality, this is only partly true because of the unwillingness of certain groups to accept the Malay language and the roles it was designed to play. The task of developing Malay into a modern 'national' language – a language defining all aspects of our national life and therefore defining the 'identity' of the nation – is still predominantly the concern of the Malays.²⁴ In fact, the national language has not developed into anything more than an 'official' language – a language to be used grudgingly in official situations.²⁵ A more serious defect with implication for nation-building is that the Malay language has not become the language of the national intelligentsia or the enlightened class in society. It is also not the language of its economic elite. Without the active support of the Malay and non-Malay elites, as well as the wider non-Malay population, the making of Malay as the national language has served only to perpetuate perception by non-Malays that they are at the losing end of the bargain, thus creating further divide between the two groups. But despite the ambivalent attitude of Malaysian elites and intellectuals about their national language, Malay remains a vehicle for interethnic communication at the lower end of the societal stratum. There is an increasing trend even among Malay political and economic elites to communicate in English at official functions and on public occasions such as on national television. It is still to be determined whether this is an indication that Malay concern for the language is waning or that it is an admission of the failure of Malaysia's national language policy. Among the Malay general public such a trend creates doubt as to the seriousness of the government to consolidate Malay as the official language. Non-Malays are in general indifferent to it. Whatever the case, without a common language, nation-building in Malaysia is deprived of the most important vehicle with which to express and define its identity. This is quite different from the Indonesian, Vietnamese or Thai situations where the national languages – Indonesian, Vietnamese or Thai – played a unifying role, but also became the languages of culture and of the national intelligentsia. In this way, the national languages of these countries were able to become the vehicle for expressing the wishes and desires of the nation, providing its people with a sense of pride and attachment to its spiritual principle. This has not happened in Malaysia, and even today the issue of a common and 'national' language remains problematic. It puts a strain on nation-building as a major element in the process does not find common acceptance.

National Culture Policy

Another persistent problem in the construction of the Malaysian nation is identifying its national culture. In trying to create and develop a national identity, Malaysia has formulated a National Culture Policy. The National Culture Policy, formulated in 1971, takes into consideration three main principles. The first is that the national culture of Malaysia is based on the culture of the 'indigenous' people of the region. Secondly, other cultural elements which are 'suitable' can be accepted as part of the national culture. Thirdly, Islam is to be an 'important element' in shaping national culture.²⁶ The state reasoned that in a multiethnic society there is a need to project a national identity so that the nation is known through a national identity and not the identity of each ethnic group. It is also a means of de-emphasising ethnicity, although this aim has not been very successful as Malaysian society became increasingly politicised and divided especially as of the 1980s. The main reason for this is the changed social and political environments in the country after the end of the 1970s. When the National Culture Policy was formulated, its 'designers' at that time were not narrow-minded 'cultural nationalists' as some would be quick to think in today's environment. On the contrary, as evidenced in Tun Razak's speech,²⁷ this national culture should be inclusive and open to external influence. He emphasised the need to "accept and expose the best elements of foreign cultures that have been universally accepted. In the field of music for example, knowing more about famous composers such as Beethoven, Rachmaninov and Mahler is equally important to our society so that we can produce indigenous music of high quality."²⁸ This, in some ways, reflects the cultural and social openness of Malaysia – at that time – in comparison to its social and political realities of today. The process of the 'closing' of the Malaysian – and in particular *Malay* – mind, which began in the early 1980s, has resulted in each ethnic group becoming more aware of what they have gained and lost in the ethnic bargaining that has characterised their society and politics thus far. Increasing politicisation of Islam and the adverse reading of the 'Islamisation' process also contributed to the growing social gap between Malays and non-Malays. In this context therefore, it is safe to conclude that the third element – Islam – as proposed in the National Culture Policy, would *not* find a general acceptance. Even if it does find acceptance, it will only be so grudgingly. Further attempts at 'injecting' Islamic values into the nation's culture or identity will only serve to complicate the already difficult nation-building process in this plural society.

Finding the right balance between the needs of nation-building and accommodating the inclusive demands of different ethnic groups within the nation is a prime concern of 'nation-builders'. Thus despite the emphasis on the indigenous culture as the basis of the national culture, there is always a reminder of the social reality of the country. Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's Prime Minister at the time when the

National Culture Policy was formulated, recognised that “in searching for and in determining the kind of national culture, we should not forget the reality of our multi-racial society. We should always be guided by the desire to form a nation which is united.”²⁹ Malaysia’s pluralism in this case, can be said to delay and puts a break on the flow of the process of nation-building as defined above.

National Education Policy

Education is another element that may influence the ease or difficulty of the process of nation-building in Malaysia. Inter-ethnic negotiation on the issue of education began even before independence in 1957. The issue of education is also closely related to the issue of national language. The 1957 National Education Policy, known as the ‘Razak Report’, became the basis of the Malayan³⁰ National Education Policy. It had at least three main aims, namely to make Malay as the main medium of instruction, to formulate a common curriculum based on the local context and needs of local schools including the English, Chinese and Tamil school; and to foster patriotism in order to create a Malayan nation. However, when it was made known, the National Education Policy came under attack from various quarters, both from Malays and non-Malays. Many non-Malays considered it as giving too much priority to the Malay language.³¹ Malays on the other hand, especially Malay schoolteachers, felt disappointed at the government’s failure to establish Malay medium schools at secondary level in early 1958 as had been planned.

Due to the widespread dissatisfaction, the Alliance government revised the policy and replaced it with a new policy known as the Education Act of 1961. The objective of making Malay the medium of instruction remained, although in reality its implementation had to face many challenges. The Chinese political party, the MCA, began to campaign for a Chinese language University as early as 1964. It was able to convince the government that if the demand of the Chinese to have their own university was not accorded, the government might not get Chinese votes in the coming general elections of 1969.³² The government finally agreed and Tunku Abdul Rahman College was established using mandarin as the main language of instruction. The Malay desire to have a university with Malay as the language of instruction also materialised when in 1970 the National University of Malaysia (*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*, UKM) was established. In the 1990s, with the government emphasis on the use of English as well as responding to pressures from interested parties and stake-holders, the government ‘liberalised’ its education policy to allow private institutions of higher learning to use English as the main medium of instruction. Many public institutions of higher learning soon followed this trend. But government policy on education is not without challenges. There are groups outside the political parties that have placed pressure on the government

with regards to education and language policy. Malays have associations such as the *Gabungan Pelajar Melayu Semenanjung* or GPMS (Association of Malay Students of Peninsular Malaysia) who wanted to ensure that the National Language and Education Policies are implemented. On the other hand, there are non-Malay organisations that were formed for the purpose of securing the interest of the ethnic groups in the education field. Besides having a powerful political party to represent them politically (MCA), the Chinese also have associations that can act as pressure groups on the government. Groups like the Dong Jia Zhong, a coalition of ethnic Chinese school-related organisations, have been active on a national level since 1951 to secure their primary interests of providing political protections for Chinese language, education and culture.³³

Education, culture and language policies in Malaysia are products of negotiation, bargaining and consensus done within the framework of the politics of accommodation designed to facilitate the functioning of a plural society. The aspects of education, language and culture are important because they constitute the elements necessary to bind the different groups together and to deepen their sense of connection to each other. However, after more than half a decade, ethnic groups in Malaysia have not come to a consensus on these issues that are important to resolve if nation-building is to be consolidated. The lack of consensus over these issues also brings into question whether or not the politics of accommodation has outlived its purpose. The failure of the ethnic bargaining principle in creating a conducive environment for the flourishing of national unity points to the need of another formula towards accelerating nation-building. As has often been highlighted by the Malaysian state, national unity is the prerequisite to further advancement and development of the nation.

Whither Nation-Building in Malaysia?

The conditions of pluralism in Malaysia render nation-building an uphill struggle since the state has to come to terms with different demands and expectations of various ethnic groups in the country. The political leadership has no illusion that the problem would be extremely complex and difficult to resolve. But it has to resolve these issues before the nation-building process can be accelerated. Ethnic strife will lead to political and social instability and economic deterioration. The bargain, arrangement and consensus achieved when the nation became independent now seem to be questioned. The Malays begin to feel that they have lost out in this bargain and the Chinese and Indians feel that they ought to be given more. But these feelings of 'injustice' and 'mistrust' are not articulated in the open, nor are they manifested in the violent manner experienced in some other countries. Why is this so?

Some scholars have asserted that in the post-colonial period, Malaysians have had to come to terms with nation-building. Public discourse has been dominated by issues such as the question of national language, national education, national culture, national integration and national identity.³⁴ All these are important elements of nation-building, though not the only ones. However these issues are seen almost exclusively through the lenses of the ethnic rather than the national paradigm. Discussions on these issues have been associated with ethnic nationalism which focussed on getting the best out of the system for the respective ethnic groups. There is no form of popular or mass movement consisting of *all* ethnic groups at the national level in support of the national language and its use as the language of unity and national identity. Instead there has been resistance to it from the non-Malays; those among them not willing to express resistance would choose to remain silent. Advancing ethnic nationalism, which covers political, social and economic aspects, seems to be the rule rather than the exception in Malaysia. The trend towards a movement away from ethno-religious solidarities towards interest-based ones is still limited because citizen participation is restricted to the marketplace while politics is reserved for entrenched elites.³⁵

In 1991, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Mahathir Mohamad presented his vision of Malaysia by the year 2020. He enumerated nine major challenges for the nation to become a fully developed one by that year. Dr Mahathir considered the challenge of establishing a united nation as the “most fundamental, the most basic” of these challenges.³⁶ To him, this challenge entailed the establishment of a united Malaysian nation with a sense of “common and shared destiny”. His idea of the Malaysian nation was that “this must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and in full and fair partnership, made up of one *Bangsa Malaysia* (lit. a ‘Malaysian race’) with potential loyalty and dedication to the nation”.³⁷

To some, this may sound like a call to embark upon a Malaysian nationalist movement, while to others this is an admission of failure of Malaysian nation-building. Otherwise, why would such a call be made more than three decades after the nation’s independence in a peaceful way that it did not have to waste energy and time fighting for it? The idea of national unity and national integration is not new. Every Prime Minister and government of independent Malaysia stressed the importance of it as indispensable for nation-building – with the exception perhaps of Mahathir’s successor, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. His recipe for advancing Malaysia’s peace and progress is packaged in *Islam Hadhari*, or ‘Civilisational Islam’, a well-meant but little understood concept – in particular misunderstood by Malaysians in general. At any rate, as discussed above, it is to complicate matters when Islam is involved at the national level that will have to include both Muslims and non-Muslims. The present Prime Minister Dato’ Sri Najib Tun Razak who

succeeded Abdullah in 2009 has stressed the importance of national unity and integration in his approach to nation-building as contained in the *1Malaysia* concept.

So what has changed in terms of nation-building since 1957? Nothing much, as sceptics would be quick to respond. The main issue remains the same: the lack of unity and integration among the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. This is despite the many initiatives and commitment of the political leadership, nationalist groups and individuals. After the 1969 racial riots, the BN government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) with the hope to create a more equitable distribution of income and sharing of the economic cake. Forty years after its implementation it has not fully achieved its objectives. And it has not erased ethnic discontentment over both economic inequality and the perceived discriminatory nature of the NEP. What had been agreed upon through the ethnic bargain under the concept of the 'politics of accommodation' has also been challenged by a generation of Malaysians who are historically removed from that period. Ignorant of the circumstances that produced such policies, imbued with a sense of injustice on the part of the non-Malays and a sense of 'betrayal' on the part of the Malays, Malaysians revert to the old rivalries that ethnic bargaining, compromise and consensus had successfully, albeit provisionally, managed to contain.

As has been stressed by the political leadership and constantly echoed by politicians of all origins and political leanings, nation-building in Malaysia hinges upon national unity. But few agree on what form this national unity should take, or how to create it. Fewer still would know why it is the crux of nation-building. Most people are ignorant of who or which group should lead in advancing the nation-building process. So far it has been left to the political leadership and politicians with the expected consequences of delaying rather than advancing the process. In most countries in the region and elsewhere, the torch of nation-building is carried by the group that has better than any others the ability to conceptualise and promote nation-building – the national intelligentsia. In Malaysia, for a long time its intellectuals have become either dejected, disinterested, indifferent or divided over the issue of nation-building such that they prefer to turn to other issues that can bring them political as well as material benefits. The lack of leadership from the intellectual elite is also due to the fact that a national intelligentsia does not exist in Malaysia. There is a Malay intelligentsia, a Chinese intelligentsia and an Indian intelligentsia, but they lack the political and intellectual willingness to collectively reflect on the notion of the nation that is to be created. This is perhaps the most important reason as to why the nation-building process never really progressed beyond official pronouncements and superficial manifestations. For some countries in the region such as Vietnam, it was the new national intelligentsia who carried on the tradition of providing leadership to the people as was done by the old intelligentsia of the pre-colonial era.³⁸ There is no convergence of Malaysia's intellectual elites of various races to

give the nation moral and spiritual unity, the social and philosophical content to a national movement in the making. The lack of a common language is the main reason for this lack of assimilation and deepening of understanding of each other's culture that could be the basis of national unity and integration. This is a problem unique to Malaysia, a problem caused by a plural society where groups continue to coexist peacefully side by side, but without real integration.

As for the peaceful coexistence among the different ethnic groups, it was assured through the ethnic bargaining which has become an essential feature of the politics of accommodation. It did not result from any deep understanding and appreciation of each other; it is merely a means to avoid conflict and to secure the political-cum-material gains in the bargain. One may ask then how could this peaceful coexistence last that long if there is no integration among the people? The answer lies in the political culture of the people, especially the Malays. Malaysians have a political culture of deference to authorities; in many ways they 'trust' their government to do what is 'good' for them. As such, they do not question their political leadership's decision and initiatives in the ethnic bargaining process. In later years, this quiescence came to be assured through other means, such as legislations to regulate public security such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) which may be used to counter threats to national security. Again, the main objective of national security in Malaysia is to contain threats to national unity. It is also to be observed that economic prosperity and internal peace in Malaysia contribute to the contentment of the people, thus convincing them that the 'politics of accommodation' are so far the *only* workable formula for managing Malaysian plural society.

Can the Malaysian 'model' be transposed to other countries with similar situations of pluralism such as Lebanon, Afghanistan, Switzerland, Bosnia, Nigeria, Pakistan and others? While there are lessons to be learned from the Malaysian experience of governing a multiethnic nation, the conditions specific to Malaysia – history, political culture, level of economic development, population make-up itself – are not present in those countries. But there is a feature in this practice of the politics of accommodation in Malaysia that has kept the country together: that is the existence of political elites in each ethnic group whose continuity and wellbeing depends on the working of the formula. This essentially means cooperation and consensus among the elites. Thus at the top and at the bottom of the pyramid there is a congruence of purpose to keep the system going. In the Malaysian political culture it is pragmatism that dominates, resulting in giving preference to what is workable rather than to what is right. It has also been the characteristic of the politics of accommodation in Malaysia, shaped by its pluralism.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Looking at the development of Malaysian politics and society in the last 50 years, it can be concluded that the ‘politics of accommodation’ as a policy has succeeded in providing peace, political stability and social harmony in the country. However, it is also acknowledged that this is a fragile one because the vulnerabilities of a plural society have not entirely disappeared. In recent years it has been observed that the social gap between the different ethnic groups has grown, partly due to the increasing politicisation of the Malaysian society and competing interests among groups. The peace and economic prosperity the country has enjoyed over three decades has not helped to facilitate the nation-building process. The issue of national unity and integration which had been the major concern of the Malaysian state at its formation still remains a major pre-occupation. The concept of *1Malaysia* which was introduced by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak when he came to power in 2009 is a renewed attempt to accelerate the process of nation-building.

‘Ethnic bargaining’ has been successful in resolving specific issues of citizenship and the political power-sharing practice among ethnic groups in Malaysia. While this is a successful formula to keep interethnic conflict at bay, it has not helped to facilitate or accelerate the process of nation-building in the country. The ‘politics of accommodation’ which became a hallmark of Malaysian politics helped reduce tensions and strains in interethnic relations, but it has not been able to eliminate them. This is because the arrangement focussed mainly at determining the gains and losses of each ethnic group and at reducing the possibilities of interethnic tensions rather than reflecting on the notion of the nation that is to be created. Furthermore, attempts to shift from the ethnic paradigm to that of identity which appeared in the forms of advocacy³⁹ again focussed on group interests, many of which are being negotiated along ethnic lines rather than from the national perspective. Malaysia has not yet found an arrangement or a model to replace the old concept of ethnic bargaining and compromise. This strengthens the rationale for perpetuating the politics of accommodation as there is no other alternative to governing and managing the Malaysian plural society, at least at this juncture. Defenders of such policy consider the arrangement as the only viable method of keeping the country together. Without it, they argue, Malaysia will go the way of many countries with similar conditions such as Lebanon, Afghanistan, Fiji, Bosnia, Rwanda, and many others. But critics of this formula question its ability to find a permanent solution to the problems of Malaysia’s plural society. They are also concerned that this peaceful coexistence is precarious, aptly described in a Malay proverb as *bagai telur di hujung tanduk* – “an egg perched on a buffalo horn” – a situation that may explode anytime and which therefore needs extremely careful handling. In addition, it has failed to forge national unity and national integration – the two main concerns of nation-building

in Malaysia. There is a growing feeling that ethnic bargaining should be a thing of the past, that it was useful when Malaysia gained independence. To move on with nation-building, a new formula is needed, one which is reconceptualised and reformulated *outside* the mindset moulded in the colonial era. The conditions of a plural society prevailing in Malaysia make nation-building an uphill task.

The following points may provide the basis of policy formulation:

- Malaysia's politics of accommodation and management of conflicting interests is fragile and should not be taken for granted.
- Ethnic bargaining as a component of 'politics of accommodation' has not been effective to reduce interethnic tension. This is because the arrangement is focussed on the gains and losses of each ethnic group rather than those of the nation as a whole.
- Pragmatism dominates in the 'politics of accommodation' giving preference to what is workable rather than to what is right.
- *1Malaysia* is a renewal attempt to accelerate the process of nation-building.

Notes

1. Abdul Rahman Embong, "The Culture and Practice of Pluralism in Postcolonial Malaysia", in: Robert Hefner (ed.), *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 60.
2. Ibid., 60.
3. Syed Husin Ali, *Ethnic Relations in Malaysia: Harmony and Conflict* (Kuala Lumpur: SIRD, 2008), vi.
4. Ibid., 17.
5. Ibid., 20.
6. Ibid., 4.
7. Lit. 'son of the soil', a 'race-based' concept of supposed sole Malay 'rights' to the land.
8. William Case, *Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less* (London: Routledge Curzon Press, 2002), 102.
9. Barbara Watson and Leonard Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 176.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 103.
12. Case, *Politics*, 124. *Barisan* is referring to *Barisan Nasional*, the Malaysian 'National Front' coalition that is ruling Malaysia.
13. Ibid., 103.
14. Zainal Abidin Wahid, *Malaysia: Warisan dan perkembangan* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1996), 337.
15. Ibid., 350.
16. Chandra Muzaffar, "Islam and the Future of Inter-Ethnic Relations in Malaysia", *IAIS Occasional Paper Series 1* [Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia, 2008], 5.
17. Ibid., 6.
18. Ibid., 7.

19. Ibid.
20. Just Farland, Jack Parkinson and Rais Saniman, *Growth and Ethnic Inequality: Malaysia's New Economic Policy* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications, 2003, repr.; first publ.: London: Hurst & Co., and New York: St Martin's Press, in association with the Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen [Norway], 1990), 22.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Syed Husin Ali, *Ethnic Relations*, viii.
24. Rustam A. Sani, *Failed Nation? Concerns of a Malaysian Nationalist* (Petaling Jaya [Malaysia]: SIRD, 2008), 71.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 142.
27. Speech at the opening of the National Culture Congress, 16 August 1971.
28. Sani, *Failed Nation?*
29. Speech at the opening of the National Culture Congress, 16 August 1971.
30. Malaysia was formed only in 1963, then comprising of the Federation of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore.
31. Zainal Abidin Wahid, *Malaysia*, 385.
32. Ibid., 388.
33. Shamsul A.B., "The Redefinition of Politics and the Transformation of Malaysian Pluralism", in: Robert Hefner (ed.), *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 210.
34. Ibid., 208.
35. Ibid., 209.
36. Cited in Sani, *Failed Nation?*, 67.
37. Ibid.
38. Ruhanas Harun, "Harmonizing a Violent Encounter: France and the Making of a New Intellectual Class in Vietnam", in: Nordin Husin (ed.), *The Easternization of the West: Europe Meets Asia* (Shah Alam [Malaysia]: UiTM Press, 2008), 192.
39. Shamsul A.B., "The Redefinition of Politics", 208.