

# Malaysia: The Harapan debacle: A clash of narratives?

Tuesday 6 October 2020, by [DEVARAJ \(Dr\) Michael Jeyakumar](#) (Date first published: 12 July 2020).

**Individuals are advised to learn from their mistakes. So too should political movements - if they wish to do things better going forward. Unfortunately, I do not see much insight developing among the supporters of the Pakatan Harapan in the many discussions that I have had with them since the Sheraton Move.**

Non-Malay Harapan supporters have difficulty understanding why there has been a significant drop in Malay support for the coalition. And many of them are exasperated – how can the Malays put up with the kleptocrats who have been allegedly stealing from public funds? Are the Malays so gullible to be taken in by Umno-PAS propaganda? Can they not see that the Umno elite has been enriching itself? And so on.

I would like to suggest a line of analysis that might make things a little clearer. It is to do with a clash of narratives as to the nature of the Malayan/Malaysian nation. Let me explain. The consensus reflected in the Federal Constitution of 1957 is based on the narrative that this is “Tanah Melayu”, a part of the Malay Archipelago, the “Nusantara Melayu”. This narrative is the basis for the assignment of the Malay language as the national language, Islam as the “religion of the federation” (which is somewhat vague), affirmative action for Malays as encapsulated in Article 153 and the continuation of the pre-colonial political system of sultanates, though with a marked reduction in executive power.

At the same time, this narrative recognises the contribution of the non-Malays to the economic development of Malaya. Thus the Federal Constitution accorded non-Malays the right to citizenship, the right to use and develop their own languages, observe their own religions and enjoy equal protection under the laws of the nation. Incidentally, the Nusantara Melayu narrative is also reflected in several provisions of the Peoples’ Constitution that was formulated by the AMCJA-Putera coalition in 1947.

Then along came the PAP in 1963, with the alternative narrative of a “Malaysian Malaysia”. It sounded very nice – we are all Malaysians, and therefore should work together to build a harmonious nation. But the subtext of the PAP narrative includes the following – we are all immigrants, Malays included, because the majority of them came from Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi and even further afield (India and the Middle East).

Therefore all Malaysian citizens should be equal in all respects – Chinese and Tamil should also be official languages, on par with Malay, and all religions should be treated equally. There should be a strict separation between the state and religion, and the policy of affirmative action should be rapidly replaced by a system based on meritocracy so that the nation can develop more efficiently and rapidly.

The PAP narrative, which differs quite markedly from the Nusantara Melayu narrative, wasn’t

acceptable to the Umno leaders of 1963-1965 and Singapore was asked to leave the federation (which may have been what Lee Kuan Yew actually wanted). But the PAP narrative has been kept alive and propagated in the non-Malay communities by the DAP ever since. It still remains anathema to Malay nationalists today including many with progressive views.

### **Muhyiddin explained?**

I initially found it difficult to explain Muhyiddin Yassin's decision to take Bersatu out of Harapan in late February 2020. Here was a man who had been sacked from the post of deputy prime minister by Najib Abdul Razak five years ago (July 28, 2015, to be exact), and who had campaigned hard to bring Najib and Umno down. Now (February 2020), he was prepared to pass power back to a coalition dominated by Umno kleptocrats.

Of course, his detractors have said that it was all due to a lust for power – there is immense power concentrated in the office of the prime minister, and the temptation to go for it is difficult to resist if one is within striking distance.

But there are other factors in play as well. Remember Muhyiddin's answer as to his defining identity when he was challenged by Lim Kit Siang to say that he is Malaysian first – Muhyiddin told reporters "I am a Malay first but I want to say that being a Malay does not mean that you are not a Malaysian". Muhyiddin's quarrel with Umno from 2015 onwards was about the level of corruption that Umno was prepared to tolerate in its top leaders. His quarrel wasn't linked to any disagreement with the Nusantara Melayu narrative.

Could it be that Muhyiddin and other Malay leaders within Harapan were getting increasingly uncomfortable to expressions of the Malaysian Malaysia narrative within Harapan? Many Harapan supporters are not aware of this, but the incoming Harapan government cancelled the RM300 monthly allowance paid out to 70,000 traditional fisherfolks in June 2018. The rubber price subsidy scheme that kicked in when scrap rubber price dropped below RM2.20 per kg was also stopped from June to December 2018. This scheme transferred cash to the accounts of 180,000 rubber smallholders with less than five acres of rubber land whenever the price of scrap rubber dropped below RM2.20.

The reason given for the suspension of these two programmes was that the government did not have enough money. Yet, at about the same time, the government settled the GST and income tax refunds amounting to about RM37 billion by arranging a special RM30 billion dividend payment from Petronas. It is right that these refunds were paid out, but at a time when programmes for the Malay B20 were being stopped? Was that wise? Did they believe that the civil servants would not notice the cessation of aid to the B20 Malays?

And there was this video of a senior DAP leader (recorded in 2018) extolling how Rajendra Chola I from Tamil Nadu had built cities in Kedah about 1,000 years ago. This is a fact of history, but it was quoted by the DAP leader to support the Malaysian Malaysia narrative that all of us are immigrants except for the Orang Asli. There was also some talk about stopping the pension scheme for new civil servants. Single B40 individuals, including single mothers, were excluded from the BRIM programme that has been renamed the BSH. Malays were scolded by the prime minister for being lazy. The list of ill-considered statements and decisions goes on.

All these incidents and policies created some unease in the Malay intelligentsia, including among those initially supporting Harapan. Malay support for Harapan was about 25 percent overall at the time of GE14. It dropped to around 17 percent towards the end of 2019. The Harapan spin is that ordinary Malays are gullible and have been taken in by PAS-Umno propaganda.

This is a superficial analysis. What about the Harapan missteps that provided live ammunition for Umno propaganda teams? What about Harapan's inability to see that the Malaysian Malaysia narrative was untenable as it was in serious conflict with the Nusantara Melayu narrative? Many in the Harapan were (and are still) blind to the reality that there are two contrasting narratives regarding the nature of the Malaysian nation.

### **Would Anwar have done any better?**

I think he would have. Ever since his sacking in 1998, Anwar eschewed playing the race card to attack Umno for not doing enough for the Malays. Instead, he focused on better governance, stopping corruption of the BN elite so that government aid could get to the poor who needed it. He also repeatedly emphasised the importance of expanding affirmative action to include poor non-Malays and he linked this with Islamic principles of justice and fair play.

He also vowed to stop the looting of national wealth by the self-serving Umno elite. Non-Malays were happy with his inclusive approach. Urban working-class Malays too responded to his message as they were struggling with low incomes and high cost of living and they could see that the Umno elite was living very affluent lives.

Anwar's approach would have set right some of the worst excesses of the NEP – the marginalisation of poor non-Malays as well as the siphoning of subsidies by the Umno elite – without challenging the Nusantara Melayu narrative. That would have been politically sustainable as it would not have alienated the Malay majority. It would have moved our country in a positive direction.

Sadly, that window of opportunity has passed. Not only has Malay support dropped significantly, non-Malay support for the Harapan has also dropped. Many Harapan supporters whose expectations are based on the Malaysian Malaysia narrative cannot understand why the changes that the DAP promised could not be implemented speedily. Their expectations had been raised too high by DAP's politicking over the past 50 years.

As long as the DAP was in the opposition it could make unrealistic demands based on the PAP narrative. But once in government, the reality that there are contradicting narratives which have to be navigated set in. But their supporters saw this as back-peddalling and were/are angry.

### **Sayonara to the Reformasi dream?**

The pendulum is now swinging away from Harapan. It appears likely that Harapan will lose perhaps up to a third of the seats it now holds should an election be held sometime this year. But those of us who supported the ideals of Reformasi should take note of the social and economic megatrends that have led to urban migration and the class differentiation of the Malay community into a large under-class of inadequately paid wage earners and a small super-rich politically connected elite.

These trends are ongoing, and if the Perikatan Nasional elite does not handle growing urban poverty and the corruption and ostentatious consumption of the Malay upper class, the socio-economic base for Reformasi II will be created.

Hopefully the second time around, the leaders of the Reformasi movement will be more politically savvy. Apart from being more aware of the tension between the different narratives regarding the nature of the Malaysian nation and handling this (perhaps by adopting Anwar's approach and ditching the PAP narrative), the leaders of Reformasi II should also spend a lot more time on defining their position on food security, migrant labour, climate change, political funding, international trade agreements, waste management and the many other important issues facing the country in multi-ethnic discussion groups so that well-considered national consensus can be

developed on all these issues.

In 2018, the “reformers” were poorly prepared to take over the running of the country. Each minister was left to extemporise the best he or she could without the benefit of a properly debated and synchronised master plan for the country.

We really need to do better the second time around. And that opportunity might come sooner than we imagine. We need to be prepared.

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