

Touching the heart of Malaysian Race Relations

A Malaysian politician dares to speak truth to power

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In one of the most important political speeches delivered in Malaysia in recent years, former de-facto law minister Zaid Ibrahim touched on the heart of race relations when he gave a rendition on the evolving racial politics in Malaysia that has so bedevilled the nation for the past few decades.

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Delivering a speech titled “Malaysia – a lost democracy?” at the Law Asia 2008 conference in Kuala Lumpur on October 31, Zaid recounted how “a shining example of a working democracy” founded half a century ago on the principles of democracy and egalitarianism has degenerated into an authoritarian racist state that is now characterized by incessant racial and religious dissension and economic malaise.

When the country achieved independence in 1957, then Malaya was a model of parliamentary democracy, governed under a written constitution “that accorded full respect and dignity for each and every Malayan.” If at all there was a social contract – which should mean the pre-independence consensus reached among the founding fathers representing the various communities – it must be one “that guaranteed equality and the rule of law,” as subsequently reflected in the federal constitution.

The racial riots in 1969 changed the balance of political power, and the United Malays National Organisation, through the enlarged coalition of Barisan Nasional, eventually assumed absolute control of the country. With its coalition partners unable to put up any resistance, UMNO became increasingly racist and the master affirmative action plan known as the New Economic Policy (NEP), which was intended to eliminate poverty and redress economic imbalance, became synonymous with Malay privileges. By the 1980s, UMNO’s supremacist ideology became entrenched and found expression in “Ketuanan Melayu” (Malay supremacy) and it was then that the term “social contract” started to be flashed around to justify its racist conduct.

In parallel with the growth of racism was the steep rise in authoritarianism through amendments to the constitution and tightening a host of repressive laws. The rule of law became so subverted that democracy in Malaysia became history.

Ketuanan Melayu

Zaid said: “the Ketuanan Melayu model has failed.” This is because “it has resulted in waste of crucial resources, energy and time and has distracted from the real issues confronting the country.”

Citing the rise of Mukhriz Mahahir (who considered judicial reforms threats to Malays) as a sign of UMNO leaning to the right, he said such trend would mean “more inefficiency, more corruption and a more authoritarian style of government.” He further said; “We are a deeply divided nation, adrift for our having abandoned democratic traditions and the rule of law in favour of a political ideology that serves no one save those who rule.”

To cope with globalization, Zaid calls for Malays to discard Ketuanan Melayu and re-embrace democracy and the rule of law to spur an economic renaissance of reviving innovation and creativity through co-operation and competition.

Predictably, UMNO’s reaction to Zaid’s speech was a chorus of abusive language from its leaders, ranging from “traitor to his race” to “apologize and repent, or get out of rumpun Melayu (Malay group)”. And characteristically, none of these vocal critics engaged Zaid on any substance of his wide-ranging speech, which also touched on religion, judiciary, the economy etc., true to UMNO’s traditional role as a bully good at telling people to shut up but unable to articulate why.

UMNO has not only told Zaid to shut up, but his speech has also been largely blacked out by the local press, which is another manifestation of how tightly the press has been controlled to shield the incumbent power from any unfavourable exposure.

That UMNO has not the slightest intention to carry out any reform that may alter the status quo of entrenched racism and corruption is evident not only from its angry rejection of Zaid Ibrahim’s speech, but also from the thumping support given to party ultras in the current round of nominations for leadership post for the coming party election, signaling a resurgence of the Mahathirist type of rule, and needless to say, more Ketuanan. BN component parties, which cherished false hope of political survival through a reformed UMNO, would therefore be well advised to take note of this development.

Racial Equality

UMNO’s rejection aside, this Zaid speech must be studied by all Malaysians, for it touches the bottom line of race relations, which have given us so much heartache and headache in the past and yet still proved to be elusive for a proper solution even to this day.

At the heart of the issue is racial equality. This may be a non-issue in most countries in the world, where racial equality is taken for granted, but not in Malaysia. Due to historical factors, and due to the intertwining of race and religion and economic disparity among the races, racial equality is a sensitive subject in Malaysia.

Suffice it to say that all races recognized the need for some kind of affirmative action in favor of the Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak as they were conspicuously lagging in the educational and economic field at the earlier stage of our nationhood, hence the birth of NEP.

However, the problem arose when UMNO/BN became too powerful and ruled without any checks and balances. That bred unbridled racism and corruption in UMNO, and the NEP, in addition to being used to uplift educational and economic level of Malays, was hijacked to enrich party leaders

and cronies, who used it abundantly as master key to open up all kinds of channels to state wealth. As UMNO's hegemony grew, and through mass indoctrination, many had come to regard NEP privileges as birth rights of Malays, though this belief is fallacious.

The line between constitutional rights and the privileges derived from a political agenda such as the NEP has thus become blurred and indistinguishable. It has deteriorated to the point that even a cabinet minister (Amirsham Aziz) was unable to answer a question from Lim Kit Siang in Parliament on Oct 29 as to whether the NEP could be equated with Article 153 of the Constitution, which provides for the special position of Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak. The answer is: no.

It might be thus asked: is there racial equality under our constitution? The answer is yes, as this is clearly and unambiguously guaranteed under Article 8 and other articles of the Constitution. The existence of Article 153 does not detract from this guarantee. The racial privileges granted under Article 153 are limited to the provision of quotas. And these quotas, which fall in the fields of public service, education and commerce are meant as protective measures, and are to be applied to the extent deemed necessary and reasonable by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. One must also understand that Article 153 mandates the Agong to safeguard not only the special position of Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak, but also the legitimate interests of other communities.

It will be seen from a study of our constitution that many racial privileges and racial discriminations couched under the umbrella of NEP that have been implemented by BN, particularly those accorded to party leaders and cronies, are extra-constitutional.

Then, should Malays worry when NEP is removed as suggested by the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition? Certainly not, affirmative action programs will continue to be implemented, except that these are need-based instead of race-based, which should engender more equitable distribution, promote justice, enhance national unity and eliminate abuses. The anticipated result of this policy should see ordinary Malays enjoying more benefits as the money that would otherwise have been leaked through massive corruption and cronyism could be redirected to the needy.

To UMNO's recalcitrant leaders who are hell-bent to cling on to this racial supremacist ideology for their personal political survival, they should realise that such racial ideology has already become extinct since South Africa abandoned its apartheid policy two decades ago. It has no place in this globalised world. It is an affront to universal values, besides conflicting with fundamental values of all religions including Islam. Finally, it is detrimental to common Malays for whose interests these leaders have professed to champion, as continued racial hegemony will require increased repression which in turn will cause more political unrest and further economic retardation. In such a downward spiral, no community will be spared.

P.S.

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