

A new political culture for Malaysia

Friday 4 August 2023, by [DEVARAJ \(Dr\) Michael Jeyakumar](#) (Date first published: 25 July 2023).

A few people have asked me what I meant when, at the Press Conference announcing the electoral collaboration between the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM) and Malaysian United Democracy Alliance (MUDA) on July 15, I said that PSM and MUDA would try to introduce a new political culture in Malaysia. With state elections just around the corner and given the rising political temperature, this is a good time to delineate the main features of this new political culture that PSM is trying to promote.

The first aspect is a commitment to not manipulate voters by preying on their fears and anxieties in order to win votes. Sadly, this is currently being done by both the major coalitions. The Perikatan Nasional's (PN) main argument is that Pakatan Harapan/Democratic Action Party (PH/DAP) is trying to undermine the position of Malays and of Islam in Malaysia. PN propagandists argue that it is of paramount importance that Malays vote for the PN to safeguard their race and religion. On the flip side, PH is hyping up the "Green Tide" that, according to it, is threatening to "Talibanise" Malaysia. So, according to PH propagandists, it is crucially important to ensure that people vote for PH and its ally, the Barisan Nasional (BN).

Both coalitions — PN-DAP and PH-BN - demonise the other, creating fear and misconceptions, driving their followers further and further apart, and leaving wounds in our national psyche — wounds that will not quietly disappear after electoral politicking ends on August 12.

The main narratives promoted by both PN and PH are creating a toxic political culture that is intensifying inter-ethnic tensions. There is a significant risk that this strategy could spiral out of control and lead to civil strife. PSM requires all its candidates to take an oath to abstain from using ethnic-flavoured arguments in their campaigns. As politicians, we have the responsibility to enhance inter-ethnic communication and harmony. We must be sensitive to the problems faced by different communities in our society and formulate policies and programs to overcome these. We need to reach out and care for the "other".

Inter-ethnic cooperation can be promoted by focusing on programs that are beneficial to ordinary Malaysians from all ethnic backgrounds, for example, a social protection net for all, rehabilitating the environment, strengthening our health care system, assuring employment for all those who wish to work, etc. Working together on these issues will provide opportunities to understand each other better and promote a dialogue on these and other issues facing the nation.

The second major aspect of this new political culture is linked to the first. We need to develop a full and correct understanding of the nature of the problems facing the country. We are a relatively small country in a globalised capitalist economy dominated by big companies that bully smaller companies as well as governments.

This has led to massive wage suppression in Malaysia and the rest of the Third World. Increases in worker productivity over the past 50 years have led to massive profits for the companies at the apex of the global supply chains, while many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the middle

rungs of the supply chain struggle to keep solvent and the real incomes of workers and small farmers remain dismally low. (Real = inflation adjusted) People are submerged in debt and many are resentful that the system is not working for them.

Governments struggle to collect revenue, as the biggest owners of capital have the option of moving their financial resources to more “business-friendly” countries. The Malaysian government revenue has decreased progressively from about 30% of GDP in the 1980s to its current 15%, as the government has progressively reduced corporate taxes in an effort to retain capital within the country. The resulting fiscal constraints make it difficult for the Malaysian government to commit to expanding social protection or take bolder steps to transition to green energy and mitigate climate change.

These realities have to be acknowledged, and realistic strategies for working within them in the short run, and overcoming them in the longer run, have to be formulated. It is definitely not sufficient to assume that everything will be resolved if we reduce corruption — though that is an important and necessary goal. It is similarly erroneous to assume that everything will be resolved if our political leaders are more pious. Yes, we do need honest and incorruptible politicians, but they must have a proper understanding of the complex world we live in and have a set of comprehensive and internally consistent policies even before they assume office.

PSM is building a coherent set of policies to address the major economic problems that Malaysia is facing. We are doing this in consultation with civil society organisations, activists, academics and others. We believe that the problems that Malaysia faces, while significant and in many ways complex, are definitely not insurmountable. But they need well thought out and realistic strategies to be tackled. We intend to contribute to the building of a political movement that is well versed in these strategies.

The third aspect of this new political culture is a commitment to ensure that democracy is not subverted by the rich and powerful. This has already taken place in many of the “democracies” all over the world. Large corporations have too much influence over democratically-elected leaders. Our political movement has to accept the reality that for the intermediate term (10 to 30 years), the best that can be hoped for in many countries around the world is to have a government of committed socialists managing a nation that is integrated into the global capitalist economy.

One of the major concerns of our movement should be to ensure that there isn’t “corporate capture” of our political leaders. The following are some of the measures we need to put in place:

- Public funding of political parties and caps on the funds that can be given by corporations or rich individuals.
- Annual asset declarations by politicians who hold office.
- Laws that provide for the investigation and prosecution of politicians who amass more wealth than can be explained by their official income.
- Creation of more check-and-balance mechanisms within our administration. For example the power to alienate state land is currently over-concentrated in the person of the Chief Minister. There should be legislation that sets up an independent committee to oversee land alienation. This committee should have the power to pause any particular decision to alienate, until it is discussed and voted upon in the legislative assembly.
- Term limits of 10 years for Chief Ministers and Prime Ministers.

- A requirement that aspiring candidates for parliamentary office agree to submit to monitoring by an oversight committee within the party with regards to his/her wealth accumulation.

We need to move away from the current semi-feudal political culture, where the leader is the boss who distributes the “goodies” – favours, contracts and handouts – and who cannot be questioned by his/her subordinates or constituents, to a culture where the political leader is a friend, a teacher and most importantly, an enabler who builds the capacity of ordinary people to understand their situation and empowers them to play an active role in making their lives better. We are in the process of gathering and building leaders who do not see politics as a stepping stone to personal wealth, but as an opportunity to serve the people and the nation.

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P.S.

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