

More nuanced, balanced approach needed to build a better Malaysia

Saturday 24 September 2022, by [DEVARAJ \(Dr\) Michael Jeyakumar](#) (Date first published: 22 September 2022).

The FMT [article](#) on Sept 17 covering my short presentation at the forum titled “Dark forces towards GE15” has elicited a fair amount of comments and criticisms. As the issues I flagged are important, I think I had better explain a little more about what I actually said that day.

I had said that about 90% of the owners of small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) with more than 10 employees were Chinese. I mentioned this figure to underline the fact there is gross under-representation of the Bumiputera community in the SME sector and asked the audience whether this should be addressed by the government. But that was not the main point I was trying to make.

A more important point that I made was that Malay support for Pakatan Harapan (PH) was about 25% in May 2018. However, it dropped to about 7% 24 months later. I asked the audience whether this was because Bersatu had left PH and taken some Malay support with it. Or was the erosion of Malay support from PH that led to Bersatu pulling out of the coalition?

PH leaders keep denigrating Bersatu leaders as traitors, incompetent and utterly useless, but do not pause to reflect their (PH leaders) role in the February 2020 debacle. Didn't the withdrawal of subsidies for the traditional fishermen and the rubber smallholders play a role in the migration of Malays away from PH? It certainly provided very useful ammunition to Umno and PAS to agitate the Malay community. I pointed out that if PH had managed to enact policies that helped the B40 (universal old age pension, rehabilitation of low-cost flats, etc), it might have forestalled the severe erosion in Malay support.

This is an important issue. Because winning power is not the only challenge facing reforming coalitions. Holding on to power and consolidating it is a bigger challenge.

If we do not learn what we did wrong in the 2018 to 2020 period, there is a much greater chance we will repeat the mistake if ever we get a second opportunity at forming the government. And there could be a second opportunity!

The Malay working class and small business people are frustrated with the corruption and ostentatious lifestyles of the Umno elite. There is a clear class divide opening up in the Malay society. Umno cannot reform itself that easily. Corruption has become endemic in Umno because money politics is the norm. One cannot rise up in Umno if one does not have lots of cash to hand around. So the rebellion of the Malay masses against the Umno elite is bound to rumble to the surface again in the future.

We need to ask ourselves why the PH finance minister cut these subsidies the month after coming to power. And why didn't the 121 PH and Warisan MPs object to this? Is it because they too had come to believe that the Malay community has been spoilt by too many subsidies and has become lazy and dependent on these subsidies? Has PH ever conducted studies to assess the cause of low income of traditional fishermen (over-fishing by trawlers and damage to ecosystems resulting in reduction in fish catch and market dominance of wholesale buyers) and rubber smallholders (small size of

holdings and the low price of rubber on the world market)?

This brings me to my main point – ethnic politicking has led Malaysia into a dead end. Non-Malay politicians are quite unaware about the structural causes of poverty and marginalisation in the rural Bumiputera community. Many Malay politicians are insufficiently aware of the way in which race-based quotas in education and government jobs have marginalised the non-Malay B40.

We live in our respective ethnic silos and frequently demonise the “other”. Malays are constantly being warned by Umno and several other Malay-based parties that PH is controlled by DAP which has nothing but ill-will for the Malay community and Islam.

Meanwhile, many PH politicians keep painting the leaders of BN and PN as totally corrupt, incompetent, self-serving and hypocritical, and the Malays as lazy and demanding subsidies as their entitlement.

The 61 years of Alliance/BN rule prior to 2018 is portrayed by many in PH as a total disaster with no redeeming features. At this juncture, I pointed out that the rural electrification programme implemented by the BN government brought electricity to about 95% of the population. The social security organisation (Socso) which was enacted in 1969 provides a safety net for six million workers. The “Dawn Raid” brought our plantation wealth back under our control. Petronas is a well-run company that has contributed much to government finances. These and several other programmes refute the allegation that BN rule has been a complete disaster for the nation. This, however, is not an excuse for corruption or kleptocracy.

I also pointed out that the New Economic Policy (NEP) was an attempt to address the under-representation of the Bumiputera in modern sectors of the economy. Only 5% of doctors, engineers and lawyers in Malaya at Merdeka were Malay, whereas Malays represented 50% of the population in 1957. This imbalance had to be addressed.

Certainly, some of the measures taken by the Alliance/BN were over-zealous, and lower income non-Malays were left out because of the racial quotas. And many of these programmes have since been hijacked by the Malay elite. These deficiencies have to be addressed if ethnic-based affirmative action is still required to address imbalances in certain sectors – accounting, the SME sector, the civil service, etc.

The point I was trying to make is that we need to be more nuanced and balanced in our assessment of our performance as a nation up till now. Demonising each other is not going to take us forward as a nation. We need to communicate. For this, there has to be a modicum of respect, and a willingness to listen and understand the concerns of the “other”.

Sixty-five years of race-based politics has polarised our society, and this paralyses attempts to reform it. If we want to build a multiracial coalition to create a better society, we need to have empathy for the B40 and M40 of the “other”. We need to “walk a mile in their shoes”. (This should not be taken to mean excusing the kleptocrats.)

Non-Malay activists and politicians should reach out to lower-income Malay communities and assist them to overcome the problems that they are facing. Malay activists and politicians have to listen and address the frustration over the implementation of the NEP among non-Malay B40 and M40. The problems faced by the B40 and M40 of all races must be seen as Malaysian problems that we are all committed to overcome. Only then can we build a multi-ethnic consensus regarding the reforms we need to bring. Forging this national consensus is the only route to national reconciliation and to building a better nation.

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