

Malaysia: What are Harapan's 'progressive' values?

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“Status quo, you know, is Latin for ‘the mess we’re in’.”

- Ronald Reagan

When “progressive” political operatives talk about the middle ground, what exactly are they talking about? Honestly, I do not know what a “progressive” Malaysian political operative is.

What are the values that separate “progressives” from ethnoreligious ideologies sustained by cronyism and feudalism? I know where religion-focused PAS is coming from and we know that Umno and Bersatu will do anything to be the “centre” of whatever power-sharing formula they concoct. But what are these “progressive” values some people keep yapping about?

The DAP has shown that they will grovel at the heels of any Malay power structure that would have them. To them, the “middle path” is anytime they can hold onto public office without being held accountable to whatever principles the party’s ideology is premised on.

PKR has always been imploding, with its president Anwar Ibrahim unwilling or unable to control the narrative. “Malay rights” over the years has been a problem for this multi-racial party simply because the “reformasi” movement has been chipped away when the mandarins of the party who tasted political power realised that reforming the country would not be to their benefit.

When it comes to racial politics, it is painful to watch minorities squabbling for the political interests of majority stakeholders. At least the Malays from both sides of the political divide can sometimes meet halfway on those politically-designed issues of race and religion.

Anwar’s latest rejoinder of ditching race-based policies in favour of needs-based policies and his justifications of such is a return to the rhetoric that he has used in the past. And I say good for him. If everyone in PKR was committed to that instead of committed to the infighting that wrecked Pakatan Harapan, it is a good start.

Former deputy defence minister Liew Chin Tong says there is a need to define what this new Malaysia stands for. Liew says for him, it means that we all see ourselves as primarily Malaysian citizens. What does this even mean?

Everyone in Malaysia has always seen himself or herself as a Malaysian citizen - that is, if we are lucky enough to have our citizenship acknowledged by the state. The problem has always been that the state does not view us as equal citizens. Put simply, politics does not view us as equal citizens.

What exactly does the “middle ground” mean in this milieu? Most Malaysians, especially non-Malays

and non-Muslims, define it as the middle ground between the religious and racial politics of the majority and the “rights” of minority communities.

The middle ground has nothing to do with secular governance, nor does it have anything to do with egalitarian policy. Most of the time, it is political rhetoric. This is why we get all this aggravation when it comes to educational opportunities, for example. But the private sector thinks that it is free from racism and bigotry.

Now, of course with the Perikatan Nasional government running around like a headless chicken, even participants in a “Youth Digital Parliament” are intimidated by the police.

When it comes to political rhetoric, the middle ground normally means engaging in false equivalences and blaming others for certain problems, instead of attacking ethnocentric narratives and policies. Is hooking up with Bersatu the middle ground or is it just political strategy?

To Malay power structures, “moderation” is defined by acquiescence to the concerns of the minority communities. By how pliant their non-Malay counterparts are to their racial and religious agendas.

Maintaining hegemony in a multiracial and multireligious coalition is the only form of governance that Malaysians understand. This is why we got all these Bersatu members attacking the DAP and warning them not to trespass into rural enclaves or warning them not to disrespect the elite of their party.

Hence, the middle ground has always been defined, not by values or policies - which are predicated on not spooking the majority - but rather on compromising at the expense of oversight and accountability.

I am not even looking for vanguard progressive ideas but simply baseline ideas that everyone in Harapan can get behind. For example, take the vast religious bureaucracy. Instead of hounding “deviants”, indoctrinating the majority to believe that their religion is under siege and issuing decrees banning the majority from engaging in ideas that the rest of the world are grappling with, did the Harapan regime attempt to change the narrative?

Why not spend the money on welfare work, on education in maths and science, and education into whatever language that would make the majority competitive in this ever-changing geopolitical landscape?

And for heaven’s sake, there must be some kind of strict parliamentary oversight, instead of retreating to the idea that some people cannot “interfere” in the religion of the state, which is why there have been so many corruption scandals involving religious agencies.

Instead, what we got was a Harapan religious czar who was disgusted that LGBTQ elements had infiltrated a women’s march, sucked up to an alleged money launderer and fugitive, hyped the introduction of a syariah-compliant dress code, was content with the hounding of de-hijabing activists, and carried out a host of other religious issues that did nothing to alleviate the social-economic distress of the majority community. Nevertheless, we still get Harapan operatives lecturing us about “caring” for the plight of the urban Malay poor.

Harapan was not interested in creating a counter-narrative. A counter-narrative that Harapan’s Islam was about promoting a first-class education for Muslims, weeding out corruption in the political and religious class, ensuring the healthcare system is one of the best in the region and ensuring a plurality of Islamic voices so that young people do not join extremist groups that pose a danger to the citizens of this country. You could, if you were smart, define this as a “Malay” right.

This is not a “progressive” idea. This is about reforming an institution that political operatives say the majority cannot do without. This is not some sort of radical reimagining of politics and religion in Malaysia but rather streamlining and reforming an entitlements programme.

The first step in solving a problem is recognising that there is one and Harapan should stop acting like it is not part of the problem.

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