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ELECTION 2008

What to expect



The forthcoming elections

Understand the election process and be forewarned of the media's role and hype

by Francis Loh

Malaysia will be holding its 12th general election, probably in mid-March 2008. The Barisan Nasional (BN) and the opposition parties are gearing themselves up for the contest.

The BN government has been spreading propaganda among the *rakyat* about how much development the BN has brought to the country and how much more the *rakyat* will enjoy as they announce one election promise after another. For their part, the opposition parties have been scrutinising carefully the workings of the Elections Commission (SPR), and negotiating among themselves to put together electoral pacts, state-by-state, so that they focus on challenging the BN, instead of contesting against one another.

There is much hype in the mass media reporting on all of these: The SPR is ready for elections! The electoral rolls are now clean! Will the incumbents, especially those associated with scandals, be put up as candidates again? Will there be more women candidates this time? Where will particular leaders contest? Will the Opposition's electoral pacts hold? Occasionally, there has been some reporting of the issues being highlighted by the Opposition. But,



EDITOR'S NOTE

The elections are around the corner! In our cover story, Francis Loh paints a realistic picture of what's in store for the various political parties and assesses their chances in the various types of seats. Election fever may be infectious - but realistically, on the morning after the election, what really will have changed? This is why, he says, it is important to link the electoral process to the larger struggle for broader participatory democracy.

Mustafa Kamal Anuar then peers into his crystal ball to look at how the media will behave. You don't need to be a fortune teller to know that the mainstream media will become propaganda organs of the ruling coalition.

Voters should study the track record of the ruling coalition. Martin Jalleh casts a spotlight on the BN government's record over the preceding year and finds a once looking-good PM, who had the people feeling good, failing to deliver the goods of transparency and accountability.

The BN is actually trapped in a pickle of its own making, says Andrew Aeria. It is high time that it realises that its model of ethnic and religious politics has reached its "sell by" date. Tong Veng Wye develops the theme by looking at the Hindraf movement as a reminder of our communal dysfunctionality. Many of the social problems that led to Hindraf's demands are actually shared by the disadvantaged of a variety of backgrounds, he observes.

It's up to ordinary Malaysians to look at the struggle for justice from a broader perspective. Angeline Loh reports on one such endeavour - a multi-ethnic candlelight vigil on the streets of Penang in support of human rights and justice.

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Detained under the ISA

predictably, there has been little effort to investigate and debate the major issues that ought to be deliberated on by all. And, of course, there has been endless speculation about when the elections will be held.

Indeed, more so than elsewhere in the region, elections are the stuff of politics in Malaysia. As well, democracy, for Malaysians, is narrowly defined in terms of elections and party contests. No wonder the growing excitement.

This article highlights three major points:

- It situates the coming 12th general election in the context of Malaysia's overall political system and the political culture of the *rakyat*.
- It seeks to clarify what is at stake in the coming elections. Are we really going for broke? Or is the BN's victory predictable? Where, really, might the breakthroughs in the BN stranglehold occur?
- It is important to foreshadow how the mainstream media will soon drop all semblance of whatever professionalism they still have and become BN propagandists. Be forewarned!

Framing Malaysia's elections

In spite of the regular holding of elections and other procedures and institutions of parliamentary democracy in Malaysia, power has increasingly been concentrated in the hands of the Executive at the expense of the Legislative, the Judiciary, the mass media and civil society generally. This has been achieved largely through the promulgation of coercive laws and amendments to the Constitution - rather than via outright repression, military coups or suspension of the Constitution as in some other Asian countries. The Internal Security Act (ISA), just used against the Hindraf Five, allows for detention without trial which, together with other coercive laws, actually curb civil liberties and political rights enshrined in the Constitution. These restrictive Acts include the Official Secrets Act, the Universities and University Colleges Act, the Trade Unions Act, the Societies Act and the Police Act. As a result of the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the opposition and critics have found it difficult to publish, while the mainstream mass media have fallen into the hands of the BN coalition govern-

ment or its parties.

The Executive's grip over the conduct of elections and their outcomes has also been strengthened through amendments to election laws. Specifically, the SPR, charged with conducting the elections, has lost its original autonomy. It acts, nowadays, at the behest of the Executive (although technically, it is answerable to Parliament rather than to the prime minister). Every eight to ten years, the EC has redrawn the electoral boundaries ostensibly to cater for demographic changes as required constitutionally. According to an important analyst of Malaysia's electoral system, however, the redrawing of boundaries has benefited the incumbent BN each time. In the 2003 delineation exercise, the EC added 26 new parliamentary seats and 63 state seats especially in the states where the BN had performed very well in the 1999 general election. No additional seats were added to the states of Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah states - where the opposition Parti Islam (Pas) had scored huge successes in 1999. All these new seats, except one (Bukit Gelugor), were won by the BN in the next general election in 2004.

Election-related laws have also been amended systematically to favour the incumbent BN. Following the amendments to the Election Act and the Election Offences Act in April 2002, the list of voters, once gazetted, can no longer be challenged in a court of law - not even when 'phantom voters' are found listed in the electoral rolls. The deposit required of parliamentary candidates has been increased significantly - up to a maximum of RM20,000, among the highest in the world. Already finding it difficult to raise funds to conduct their campaigns effectively, the poorer opposition parties will be even more financially burdened by these increased deposits.

Earlier, during the 1980s, the laws had also been amended to disallow open-air public rallies. Instead, only *ceramahs* (literally 'dialogues') conducted indoors are allowed - and that only upon application to the local police authorities. The legal minimum duration of the official campaign period has been reduced to seven days. In 2004, for instance, campaigning was only allowed for eight days, the shortest ever. This short period disadvantaged the opposition again - since the actual date of the election is not fixed by statute as in some countries; instead, snap elections are called at the most opportune time for the government.

Although the SPR determines the election date, it is the incumbent BN that decides when parliament is to be dissolved. Better informed as to when the impending election might occur, the BN parties also have a head start in making the necessary bookings for the use of

public facilities to conduct their *ceramah* and in placing orders for the printing of posters and the preparation of billboards. The Opposition, on the other hand, can only take the cue from their BN adversary. The BN is thus always better prepared than the opposition for the elections.

The coercive laws and other legalistic arrangements discussed above frame the organisation and conduct of general elections. Add to this, the BN's greater access to the so-called '3 M's' - media, money and electoral machine - and it is no wonder that elections have become predictable affairs: the BN always wins. Indeed, political scientists writing on Malaysia have described our political system variously: as a 'semi-democracy', a 'repressive-responsive regime', a 'statist democracy', and even a system of 'rule by [coercive] laws' rather than 'the rule of law'.

Political culture of electoralism and strong identification with parties

In a survey of the political culture of Malaysia (and several other

Asian countries) conducted in 2000, 70 plus per cent of Malaysian respondents reported that they had voted in all or some of the elections. Some 68.4 per cent strongly agree and another 28.5 per cent agree that citizens have a duty to vote in elections. They further believe that the way people vote decides how the country is run (34.0 percent strongly agree and another 45.6 percent agree). Accordingly, 30.1 per cent strongly disagree and 41.1 per cent disagree when it is stated that 'it doesn't matter whether I vote or not'. Put another way, Malaysians take their elections seriously.

The survey further reported that Malaysians also take their political parties seriously. Almost 20 per cent of Malaysians indicated that they have joined political parties, the highest percentage registered among all Asians in the cross-national survey. Another 22.1 per cent also stated that they 'might' join political parties. Taken together, Malaysians registered an uncharacteristically high regard for political parties compared to other Asians. Malaysians are also more inclined than most other Asians to help a political party or candidate dur-



Table 1: Pride in the way democracy works in eight Asian countries

	Very proud	Somewhat proud	Not so proud	Not proud at all	Don't know
Japan	14.6	38.6	30.5	6.9	9.3
South Korea	4.6	32.9	46.5	12.0	4.1
Taiwan	12.0	47.5	27.2	7.7	5.6
Singapore	20.9	62.6	9.7	2.1	4.7
Malaysia	41.6	35.4	11.2	5.2	6.6
Indonesia	6.4	40.9	42.6	3.6	6.4
Thailand	28.3	35.5	27.1	5.7	3.4
Philippines	35.1	40.3	18.2	5.7	0.7
Asian Average	18.1	37.1	23.8	5.4	4.6

ing election and to contribute financially to a party or candidate (highest among all Asians).

Such positive identification with elections and political parties probably indicates that Malaysian political parties (and elections) are stronger and more enduring institutions than in most parts of Asia, perhaps with the exception of Singapore and Japan. It is also plausible that this positive identification with the parties, especially the BN ones, has a material basis.

But whereas the Japanese, South Koreans and Filipinos who registered positive identification with political parties are also inclined to attend a protest or sign a petition, Malaysians in contrast are disinclined to engage in these extra-electoral political activities. In fact some 36.4 per cent of Malaysian respondents also thought that people should not be allowed to organise public meetings although they might agree that one is entitled to express one's opinion. This percentage opposing the right to hold public meetings is the highest for all of the

Asian countries surveyed. Studies of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the region have also indicated that fewer Malaysians join NGOs compared to most other Asian neighbours.

Yet, Malaysians are also imbued with the notion that their country is very democratic! When asked 'how proud or not proud are you of the way Malaysia's democracy works', 41.6 percent of respondents replied that they were 'very proud' (the highest among all Asian countries) while another 35.4 percent replied that they were 'somewhat proud'. Only 11.2 per cent replied that they were 'not so proud' and another 5.2 per cent 'not proud at all'. The Malaysian scores were also way above the Asian average which was 18.1 per cent very proud and 37.1 per cent somewhat proud. In contrast, only 53.2 per cent of Japanese respondents and 37.2 per cent of South Koreans appeared positive about the way their democracy worked (**see Table 1**).

Obviously, Malaysians have a definition of democracy which is quite narrowly defined. This defi-

nition of democracy privileges electoralism as well as involvement in and support of political parties (which under Malaysian laws must be registered). It also registers high rates of participation in general elections. Apparently, these Malaysians are also wont to reject a more participatory democracy which extends into the extra-electoral realms, as the low rates in support of signing a petition and attending a protest suggest. Put another way, unlike elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia (Singapore excepted), elections and party politics are the stuff of contemporary politics in Malaysia, at least for a majority.

Developmentalism

This penchant for electoralism and the high regard for Malaysian democracy, notwithstanding the many restrictions on civil liberties and political rights as clarified in the first section, is on account of two related factors:

- the rapid economic growth which has occurred and which has improved the livelihood of a majority, and
- the cultural corollary to that

growth that might be called 'developmentalism'.

The discourse of developmentalism emerged in the early 1970s, when the Malaysian state launched its plans to promote economic growth in order to achieve New Economic Policy (NEP) objectives. This discourse came into its own in the midst of rapid economic growth and new opportunities during the 1990s, associated with the neo-liberal policies of economic liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation. This new political culture valorises rapid economic growth, the resultant consumerist habits, and the political stability offered by the BN's rule even when it resorts to authoritarian measures.

Since no other party has ever ruled Malaysia, many ordinary Malaysians including the middle classes cannot imagine that political stability can be maintained in multi-ethnic Malaysia without BN rule. A 'self-policing' system in support of BN rule – believed essential for maintaining political stability, which then attracts foreign investments and facilitates economic growth, and which ultimately results in higher standards of living and consumption – has kicked in.

On the other hand, the Opposition has had no previous experience of promoting development at a national level. Instead, Kelantan and Terengganu, which had been ruled by the opposition PAS government during 1999 to 2004, experienced relatively lower rates of growth than the BN-governed states. Sabah, too, experienced an economic lag when the opposition Parti Bersatu Sabah was in power

from 1985-1994. No doubt, the stunting of growth was partly due to the federal government's redirecting of development funds for those states away from the opposition-led state governments to federally controlled agencies.

BN parties – from politics to development

A re-definition of the role of political parties - and even of the meaning of politics - has further accompanied this developmentalism. During this period of economic progress, the BN component parties not only avoided debate over policies, especially when they involved 'sensitive' ethnic issues (such as the status of Chinese and Tamil schools, ethnic quotas for entrance into universities and acquiring business licences and Islamisation). They also de-emphasised the political education and mobilisation of ordinary Malaysians. Instead, developmentalism embedded itself into the everyday lives of local communities through the delivery of public works and services by the BN parties.

Significantly, BN parties transformed themselves into extensions and instruments of the state not merely to assist in the maintenance of the status quo, but also to assist in the delivery of public works and services. The MCA, the MIC and Gerakan each controls a university. The MCA further controls a college (Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman) with five campuses in different parts of the country. Its Langkawi Project further caters to the educational needs of primary school children while Kojadi, the MCA's savings co-operative, pro-

vides low-interest loans for the children of co-operative members to facilitate their entry into universities and colleges.

The BN political parties also established so-called 'service centres' and complaints bureaus throughout the country. These are partially financed by the Constituency Development Funds that are undemocratically allocated by the government only to elected BN politicians. Lower-class Malaysians, in particular, have resorted to these centres and bureaus instead of to the relevant government agencies in order to resolve their everyday problems and needs, whether these are of a personal nature or catering for the local community. Such assistance includes getting their children admitted into a school of the parents' choice; applying for passports, hawker licences and other official documents; obtaining redress for overcharging for utilities now operated by privatised entities; and even looking for children and other loved ones who have disappeared!

Finally, the BN parties have ventured into business activities and



forged close ties with other captains of industry and commerce. Together with them and their associations such as the Chambers of Commerce and Industry and other industry-specific bodies such as the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers, the BN parties have initiated various projects in support of the BN government's post-NEP economic policies, which have been friendlier to the private sector in general. It is significant that the new Corridor development plans were undertaken, not by the government nor by government think-tanks or the universities, but by major corporations.

In summary, therefore, the BN political parties have assumed very different roles from those they performed at the point of Independence whence freedom and justice were clarion calls, and popular mobilisation was their *raison d'être*. Ironically, the political parties seem to be encouraging their members to engage in development activities first and foremost and to disengage from political participation, except, perhaps, during elections.

No politics but electoral politics

Consequently, the high point of the political life of the majority of Malaysians is the election, which occurs every four to five years. In the context of developmentalism, rallying behind the BN can benefit one materially in the form of services and goods, if not licences, contracts and projects. Moreover, at a time 'when the whole world is watching', the usual curbs and restrictions on civil liberties are also relaxed or held in abeyance during the brief campaign period.



And because the tightly controlled electoral system allows for keen competition in some areas, without threatening a surprise defeat of the BN, it encourages the opposition parties to have yet another go at the polls.

On its part, the BN is forced to campaign even more vigorously to deny a breach of its two-thirds majority in Parliament. More than that, the atmosphere of greater freedom encourages groups like the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to seize the opportunity to promote a wider notion of participatory democracy, which extends beyond elections. Some researchers have noted that elections are double-edged weapons in the rise of democracy and in the formation of a dominant, stable and permanent political order. For Ben Anderson, a famous professor of Southeast Asian politics, elections are 'on the one hand... pacifying instruments.... On the other hand ... elections can provide an opportunity for genuinely new groups to enter politics'.

Hence, despite the coercive laws, the electoral laws favouring the incumbent and the predictable

BN victory, much anxiety and excitement bubbles to the surface as elections approach. All this excitement and anxiety is borne out by the high voter turnout rates - more than 70 per cent - for each of the five previous elections in Malaysia; in 2004, the turnout was 76.6 per cent.

BN wins in mixed areas, opposition only in Malay-majority and Chinese-majority areas

Although the BN has won every single general election, securing more than two-thirds of all parliamentary seats on each occasion since 1957, its performance in terms of the popular vote has been less impressive. In 2004, the BN polled an impressive 63.8 per cent. But in 1999, it only polled 56 per cent. Thirty years earlier, in the eventful 1969 election, the BN failed to gain a majority of the popular vote.

When one further analyses the electoral results, it appears that the BN victories have been secured in the so-called multi-ethnic constituencies. There are two types of multi-ethnic seats: the mixed constituencies where no ethnic group constitutes a major-

Table 2: Performance of BN by constituency type

Constituency type	1999		2004	
	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)
PENINSULA				
Big Malay majority (> 67% Malays)	14.0	49.8	26.0	59.9
Small Malay majority (50%-66.9% Malays)	20.2	61.4	21.9	71.4
Chinese majority (> 50% Chinese)	7.8	52.4	6.4	53.7
Mixed (no single ethnic group >50% of the voters)	10.9	59.9	12.3	68.8
Total	52.8	55.5	66.6	63.6
Sabah (including Labuan)	9.3	59.7	11.4	64.9
Sarawak	14.5	65.9	12.3	63.1
TOTAL	76.7*	56	90.4 #	63.8

* no. of seats = 148/193

no. of seats = 198/219

ity of voters and the small Malay majority constituencies where Malays account for 50 to 66.6 per cent of enrolled voters. These seats are also semi-urban in character. Here, it is common for the BN to win 90 to 100 per cent of seats. In 2004, it won all 75 such seats, while in 1999, in the midst of *reformasi* and an uncharacteristic challenge by a united opposition in the polls, the BN still won 60 of 61 such seats (**see Table 2**)

The remaining two types of seats – the large Malay majority seats (more than two-thirds Malays), largely rural and concentrated in the northern part of the Peninsula; and in the Chinese majority seats (more than 50 per cent Chinese), which are found in urban areas – are usually keenly contested between the BN and the Opposition. It is as though a two-party system (as in the US and UK where power shifts from party-to-party) pre-

vails in such seats. Although the BN is armed with greater access to the 3-Ms, opposition candidates have won several seats, time and time again. On several occasions, the BN has failed to poll a majority of votes in such areas. In 1999, the BN won only 27 of 59 large Malay-majority seats. But in 2004, the BN regained the initiative by capturing 57 out of 65 such seats. In the Chinese-majority seats, the BN won 15 out of 24 seats in 1999, and 14 out of 25 such seats in 2004 (**see Table 2**).

The federal make-up of Malaysia, and the holding of federal and state-level contests simultaneously, further contributes towards electoral excitement. Technically speaking, it is possible for the Opposition to lose the contest at the parliamentary level, but capture a few state legislative assemblies. This has happened on several occasions in the large Malay-major-

ity areas. Although the total number of Pas members of parliament has been small from 1957 to 2004, Pas has held power in Kelantan state for extended periods (1959-1978, 1990-2008), and in Terengganu periodically (1959-1964, 1999-2004). The Opposition has also held power in Sabah from 1985 to 1994.

Although a BN victory in the general election is hence predictable, it is not clear by what margin the BN will win. The BN's goal is to secure at least two-thirds of the seats in Parliament – which allows it to amend the Constitution at will, something it has done more than 45 times since Independence. Equally unpredictable, are the outcomes in the urban Chinese-majority seats and the rural Malay-majority seats where a two-party system might be said to operate. Finally, at least in Kelantan and Terengganu, and previously

Sabah too, the opposition can actually emerge as the state government of the day. Provided that the DAP-PKR electoral pact holds, it is most likely that the opposition will perform better in Penang in 2008. The expected keen contest in such areas lends excitement to the upcoming 2008 general election.

Both the BN and Opposition politicians – along with their party supporters – thus engage in the election with great gusto though for different reasons: the opposition will try to break through the BN's stranglehold while the BN will try minimally to secure its two-thirds majority. Both sides target those Malaysians who do not yet identify with any particular party.

Mainstream media h y p e

Finally, let us investigate the role of the mainstream media which are owned and controlled by either the government or the BN parties. Significantly, the media do not resort to crude pro-BN propaganda, at least not in the early stages. Overplaying the pro-BN card could turn off the large group of undecided voters or, equally fatal for the BN, discourage them from coming out to vote if they think that the BN's victory was assured and their votes would not matter.

Rather, the mainstream media highlights the keenness of the election by focusing on the contest for parliamentary seats in the large Malay-majority areas (especially in Kelantan and Terengganu) and in urban Chinese-majority areas where it appears that a two-party

system is at work.

One of the media's major tasks, therefore, is to speculate on when the forthcoming general election will be held. They have been scrutinising the prime minister's calendar to pick up clues about the impending date. So-called pundits have also been interviewed and brought together for 'café latte sessions'.

In the run up to the 2004 election, speculation about the date occurred later than usual - for Dr Mahathir Mohamad had only stepped down as premier on 31 October 2003. Media attention was focused on what kinds of policy or administrative changes, if any, Abdullah Badawi, the new prime minister, might introduce in his 'first 100 days' in office? The political air-waves were also buzzing over who Abdullah would appoint as his deputy.

This time, as on previous occasions, a string of articles has focused on the SPR's preparedness for the polls. Sometimes, the headlines used are even the same: 'All Systems Go', 'Into the final stages of training', and always 'election rolls have been cleaned of phantoms'.

The first round of guessing the election date usually gets linked to some BN meeting. Apparently, a BN leaders' meeting was held in late January although it was leaked to the press that it was 'not a meeting about the elections; only routine stuff discussed'. But really, there is nothing routine about BN meetings. For the BN, as a party, is only activated in the run-up to elections.

At any rate, as soon as the election date has been confirmed, attention will next focus on potential candidates. At first glance, this is a non-issue. Nonetheless, the media is quite capable of creating the necessary hype to excite readers. For example: which of the BN component parties might contest a particular parliamentary or state seat? Will there be a trading of seats? Will an incumbent or someone new be selected as a candidate? Who might the opposition candidate be in a specific seat; indeed, where might some opposition leaders like Pas' Hadi Awang and Mahfuz or the DAP's Lim Guan Eng and Karpal Singh contest? How many women candidates would Pas field?

Nomination Day marks another turning point in the run-up. The media will prepare 'pullout specials' which contain information on the constituencies (the number of registered voters, the ethnic breakdown of these voters, the results of the previous election), the current set of candidates, and their parties. Space will be provided at the end of each entry for the reader to mark in the winning candidates and the votes polled. At the back of the pullout, a 'score sheet' to tally the total number of seats won by each party is also provided. Presented in colour, with maps depicting where these constituencies are located and with photographs of most candidates, these pullouts are geared towards getting the voter excited about the forthcoming elections.

A variation of the pullout is again reproduced on the eve of polling day as an invitation to the readers to get involved in the election - by filling in the names of the win-

ning candidates and their winning margins in the same way, presumably, that punters would record particulars on a scorecard at the race course!

**Professional journalists
or propagandists?**

BN. Sometimes, a few opposition advertisements might appear - but nothing comparable to the space occupied by the former. The media's biased and unprofessional conduct in the run-up to elections has been well documented by scholars, including in the pages of *Aliran Monthly*.



Invariably, serious issues will receive little discussion throughout the campaign period. Instead, editors and feature writers will comment that there are 'no important issues' worth discussing, because those issues have recently been resolved through a new promise or a recent policy initiative.

Watch out! From this point onwards, the mainstream media will begin to lobby unabashedly for the BN. On Nomination Day and again on the eve of polling, the BN media will carry several pages of advertisements supporting the

headlines such as 'Business community hopes for big BN win'. Look out also for graphs showing the Composite Index of the Kuala Lumpur stock exchange on the rise. Keep an eye out for remarks about our 'strong fundamentals', and, oh, reminders of how supporting the opposition, would only create political uncertainty, and undermine investor confidence and all of this development.

The norm is also to carry front-page pro-BN editorials on the eve of polling day. They can sound quite professional. For instance,

in 2004, one such editorial read: 'To meet global competition and to ensure continued power sharing and balanced development so that no group will feel neglected or alienated...Pak Lah is the right man to lead Malaysia at this juncture of our history'. Add this to page after page of the newspapers extolling the BN's virtues, reports rubbishing the Opposition for 'no action, talk only', then, really, we see that these editorials amount to propaganda by editors and journalists who have thrown their professionalism and ethics to the wind.

Conclusion

Coercive laws and other restrictions frame the organisation and conduct of general elections in Malaysia as they do vis-a-vis many other aspects of our political lives. Add to this the BN's greater access to the 3-Ms - media, money and machine, elections have become predictable affairs. The BN always win. Despite the predictability of the electoral outcome, nonetheless, Malaysians do get excited about elections

Significantly, much of the pro-BN political advertisements will highlight the BN's development achievements. Page after page of advertisements will recall the major projects the BN has delivered since 1957. Watch out for lots of talk about how the Corridors will usher in a new round of development for Malaysians.

Commonly, there will be

No doubt the mainstream media works us up to a little frenzy by highlighting the contests taking place in the large Malay-majority areas and the Chinese-majority seats. They will also speculate on Kelantan, and perhaps this time Penang too, falling into the hands of the Opposition. Invariably, the mainstream media will show their true colours and rally unabashedly behind the BN ruling coalition a few days before polling. Be forewarned!

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Trapped in a pickle of their own making

For the sake of the country's children and future, it is high time the BN realised that its ethnic and religious model of politics is passé.

by Andrew Aeria



For over 50 years, the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition (and its precursor the Alliance) has dominated national and state politics. It has done this through a combination of political pragmatism and ethnic-based development policies that ostensibly protected and promoted the interests of the various ethnic communities in the country in varying and despairing degrees.

Helmed by the United Malay Na-

tional Organisation (Umno), the BN operates within an ethnic model which sees elites of each component party articulate and negotiate "the interests of their respective communities" but within a unified coalition. The quid pro quo for membership in this governing coalition is acceptance of Umno's political domination since it purports to represent the special position and privileges of the Malays under the *Ketuanan Melayu* concept as supposedly negotiated and implicitly agreed

to before Merdeka. In exchange, all other coalition parties receive a proportionate share of cabinet positions relative to their parliamentary representation reflecting the strength of their respective communities and a slice of the development pie.

Over the years, Umno has slowly but surely reserved unto itself a majority of the more powerful cabinet positions. Presently, only two of the 13 State Chief Minister posts (namely for Penang and

Sarawak) have eluded Umno's grasp. Umno commands just over 50 per cent of the seats in the current parliament. Its 13 other BN coalition partners control about 41 per cent of the seats with the opposition holding the remaining nine per cent. But despite this position of overwhelming strength, Umno has somewhat, to its credit, accommodated its coalition partners under the BN's big umbrella.

Lucky combination of factors

That the BN has held together thus far is also largely due to the success of the New Economic Policy (NEP). All BN coalition parties subscribe to and have benefited from this affirmative action programme for Malays and Bumiputeras. Thus, even as Umno, given its access to power and the levers of patronage, has used the interventionist New Economic Policy (NEP) and its subsequent variants to enrich its membership and to create a new super-rich class of elite Malays (called 'Umnoputeras'), so too all other BN component parties have also benefited from similar patronage and have effectively deployed it to nurture their political support.

Additionally, a serendipitous combination of historical domestic legacies in the early years of independence (e.g. robust colonial institutions, professional administrators and English proficiency), State-led economic development policy coupled with sustained inflows of foreign investment, high petroleum prices (Malaysia is a net exporter) and consistently healthy agriculture commodity prices have on aggregate brought

about prolonged high growth rates since the 1970s. GDP growth has been nothing less but spectacular, rising from GDP per capita of M\$1,937 in 1970 to a PPP-adjusted GDP per capita of an estimated US\$10,318 in 2005.

This has allowed for extensive redistribution of wealth via subsidies and affirmative action which in turn have greatly reduced poverty and successfully restructured society such that there is little identification of ethnicity with economic function. This growth has also been accompanied by all the accoutrements of modern living namely sparkling infrastructure, snazzy shops, better housing, more golf clubs, frequent overseas holidays, budget airline travel, sophisticated cuisine and fancy cars.

Still, although the country's GDP and per capita income have skyrocketed, official data indicates that intra-ethnic wealth and income disparities have deepened with Malaysia having one of the most unequal wealth and income distributions in Southeast Asia.

Even so, by all accounts, the NEP has been a huge success with its original objectives largely met.

Ethnic vitriol

Consequently, one would have thought that in this current era of globalisation, the country with its new-found Malaysia Boleh!, Angkasawan in Space! confidence would be ready to cast off the NEP and embrace meritocracy and a semblance of social democracy for those still poor and marginalised. And that Umno as *primus inter pares* in the BN —

one would have presumed — would be in the forefront, leading this process and all Malaysians into the brave new world that is the 21st Century.

Former Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, attempted to steer Umno in this direction but he failed to get Umno to give up its dependence on NEP state handouts and easy subsidies. Under PM Abdullah Badawi, things have gone from bad to worse. Instead of moving forward, the party regressed further by demanding more of the economic pie, arguing that the NEP had not succeeded since the Malays had not achieved their 30 per cent corporate equity targets. This has been most evident in recent Umno General Assemblies where Umno arrogantly presented its own insatiable agenda for continued handouts as the 'National Agenda'.

Ethnic vitriol was duly served up in support of this insatiable addiction when senior Umno delegates declared that the party would guard 'Malay unity', and uphold 'Malay supremacy' in pursuit of the 'Malay agenda'. Umno members also demanded the NEP be continued 'without any time frame' despite its original 20-year lifespan, i.e. 1970-1990. Ambitious political wannabes - some wielding the keris - deliberately played up ethnicity and religion in order to be recognised as champions of their race and religion.

Many living in the real world were deeply troubled and disenchanted by these overtly racist statements and sentiments at a time when globalisation demands intelligence, openness, competitiveness,



efficiency, productivity and quality. Even BN coalition members, Gerakan, PBS, MCA and SUPP were uncomfortable with these pronouncements. Unfortunately, except for a few brave individual members, the leadership of all BN component parties remained silent, cowed no doubt by Umno.

Then, as if taking a leaf out of Umno's ethnic and religious approach, the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) recently organised themselves in response to what they believe with some justification to be the economic marginalisation and political/religious discrimination of the Tamil community. Frighteningly, many in this group feel they have nothing else to lose! They rallied in Kuala Lumpur on 25 November 2007 in pursuit of demands for equal treatment as citizens of the country. It did not help that their rally was violently broken up by police high-handedness. They have since gone global with their plight. Justified or not, their mobilisation along ethnic and religious lines only echoes that of Umno's and adds a stir to the racial and religious pot. Significantly, the BN

government has since played up the ethnic angle of the rally to the hilt in the Malay vernacular press as a 'racist threat' to national security and a challenge to Malay dominance.

Coming so soon on the heels of the Bersih rally on 10 November 2007 that demanded election reforms and the Bar Council's Walk in Putrajaya on 26 September 2007 that demanded judicial reforms, this Hindraf rally really spooked the government. PM Abdullah Badawi is now threatening to act to restore 'public safety'. Many key Bersih, Bar Council and Hindraf activists have been arrested on trumped-up charges. The PM is now threatening the use of the Internal Security Act (ISA) to detain these activists and dissidents without trial. This is unsurprising since the resort to the ISA has always worked in the past to reassert the BN government's political control whenever the BN faces a stiff political challenge.

Opening a Pandora's Box

But for how long more can Umno

and other BN component parties continue to play this ethnic, religious and authoritarian game without forcing the country to reap its bitter fruit? Is this ethnic and religious approach to politics not akin to playing with Pandora's Box? Is not all this ethnic and religious posturing and resort to authoritarian measures leading us pell-mell into a dead-end alley with serious long-term consequences for the country's well-being?

There is a deepening malaise in the country arising from a distinct lack of political and economic reforms which PM Abdullah Badawi promised before the 2004 elections. Not only are these reforms required if we are to tackle the key social, political and economic ills currently facing the country (and which led to the recent rallies) but they are absolutely required if we are to compete effectively with other countries in a globalised world.

Thus, how can we really believe that mere resort to the ISA and other blunt authoritarian measures to whip all into line is going

Slow but sure decay

Still, the BN coalition remains resilient because its ethnic model of politics allows it to dwell on deep-rooted fears of all ethnic and religious communities. As well, the BN has the power and resources of incumbency and has successfully used a combination of the civil service, patronage, authoritarian controls and a conniving elections commission to its advantage. Nor does the political opposition currently seem able to genuinely unite to take on the BN. Their ideological differences run deep and they have had hitherto little success despite being led by former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim.

Thus, if Umno and the BN were truly courageous and visionary, they would steal a run on the opposition by transforming and re-fashioning themselves into a single party, one that is egalitarian, meritocratic, multi-ethnic and blind to both race and religion. This would necessarily mean dissolving all current ethnic parties within the coalition. Indeed, this move would be so popular, it would likely grant the BN a further 50 years in power!

But can they even see this let alone have the courage to grasp the bull by the horns? With their deep-rooted addiction to the NEP, a current dearth of quality leaders, a lack of unanimity of purpose, sheer government inertia and disregard for deepening socio-political malaise, one can only perceive Umno and the BN coalition continuing down a road of slow but sure decay. Truly, they are trapped in a pickle of their own making. q

to solve our problems? Don't Umno and the BN leadership have the required intelligence to realise the consequences of such extra-judicial approaches on foreign investors? It seems all too glib for government ministers to say that investors will continue to invest in Malaysia as long as they can make money here.

Yet, what they deliberately omit to tell us is that investors prefer situations of political stability and risk predictability where they can generate stable and rising profits. Today, that political stability and risk predictability is far more readily available in our regional neighbours such as India, China, Singapore and Vietnam.

Leadership comes with an obligation of responsibility. And in this case, it is incumbent upon Umno to show responsible leadership within the BN. Unfortunately, more often than not, over these last few years, what we have seen instead is often plain racism and the vulgar stirring up of religious sentiments. It is thus a major pity that Umno is so short-sighted. Similarly, it is a real pity that Umno's coalition partners are unable to get them to see the world realistically, namely in a multi-ethnic, egalitarian and democratic light.

Still, some individuals within the BN are trying. Kota Bahru MP Zaid Ibrahim along with Gerakan Penang State Executive Councilor Dr. Toh Kin Woon are two voices of reason. Unfortunately, their reasoned arguments are being drowned out by jackboots like Khairy Jamaluddin, Nazri Aziz, Zainuddin Maidin, Hishammuddin Hussein, Umno Vice-President Mohd Ali Rustam and

others of their ilk. It is thus a no-brainer that Zaid Ibrahim and Dr. Toh's days in the BN are numbered but in Dr Toh's case he has decided not to seek re-election.

Similarly, the youth wing of Gerakan recently called for the merger of all 14 political parties within the BN coalition into a single Malaysian political party to forge genuine national unity after 50 years of independence. For many Malaysians tired of ethnic prejudice, discriminatory policies and deepening religious polarisation, this was a truly refreshing view.

Unfortunately, BN Chairman and Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi vetoed the call, insisting that the BN's existing ethnic model of politics "ensured proper representation for all the races". Oddly enough, his rejection of the Gerakan proposal came a day after he acknowledged that "religious and racial divisions had brought Malaysia to the 'brink of disaster' in the past and continue to hamper its growth". Puzzling as this contradiction may seem, it is not surprising since PM Badawi is as short-sighted as his party and presently appears to many to be more interested in international travel junkets to exotic locations on public expense than in providing genuine statesman-like leadership.



Toh ... voice of reason

Peering into my crystal ball

You don't need a fortune teller to tell you how the media will perform in the run-up to the general election: 'Tis the season when the media turn into propaganda tools

by *Mustafa K Anuar*



It's that time of the year. You can tell when you flip through the carbon-etched pages of the mainstream newspapers or the normally predictable news bulletin on your television set.

The polls date has not been officially declared, but the 'soft campaigning' is already underway judging from the reportage of polls preparations by the incumbent BN parties and the so-called news analyses that are presented to the readers.

Crystal ball gazing

Let's look into our crystal ball to see what the mainstream media

hold for us as the polls draw closer. Apart from the usual crime stories of children being kidnapped, women murdered and raped, and houses burgled, there lurks yet another series of 'feel good' reports and analyses. Such reports could be about the upbeat tempo of the stock markets and the promising economic forecasts for the country.

No doubt the media will invariably remind us – especially those with short memories - of the ruling coalition's past achievements in the economy, national development and 'political stability'. They

will present an array of such achievements - while glossing over certain policy and development failures associated with the ruling coalition. In short, the media will display very little, if any, intellectual and political independence in assessing the BN-led government's past performance.

Soon after the polling date is announced, the incumbent BN will announce its manifesto, which would then get full media coverage. You would be lucky if the manifesto of the Opposition receives a mere mention in the mainstream media.



Another regular feature of the general election and of the mainstream media is the reported ‘exodus’ of members leaving various opposition parties for the greener pastures of the BN component parties. Sometimes the number of people involved is difficult to verify especially if the figures of people fleeing those parties exceed those of the particular party branch to which they are supposed to belong. Normally these ‘liberated’ people would be given ample coverage by the mainstream media. But it doesn’t work quite the same way, though, if and when some BN component party members were to defect to the opposition camp.

The ruling leaders will tell us – and all these would be reported lock, stock and barrel – that development is crucial for ‘all Malaysians’ and therefore they cannot afford to ‘experiment’ with the Opposition nor gamble their children’s future away. And it is here that the ruling parties and their leaders will be projected as a group that is ideologically and

materially no different from ordinary Malaysians. This could be done through, for instance, the conscious choice of inclusive terms on the part of BN party leaders such as ‘ours’, ‘us’, and ‘we’. Thus, for instance, “we all must work together for the betterment of our beloved country”.

May 13 and bicycles

It is in this context that the spectre of the May 13 riots will probably be evoked by government leaders to ensure that ordinary Malaysians appreciate that the socio-economic progress and national security must be placed in the purportedly safe hands of the incumbent BN leaders.

In fact, a top mainstream newspaper editor has even gone to the extent of cajoling readers to prioritise issues of socio-economic development and security at the expense of the otherwise equally important concerns of human rights and democracy.

So expect a regular news diet of ruling party politicians dishing out goodies such as sarongs, sewing machines and bicycles to rural folks (while ignoring the fact that public transport is still not up to mark). And, lo and behold, these activities will be conducted under the constant gaze of the mainstream media, which will then dutifully highlight the politicians’ benevolence towards ordinary Malaysians.

Not only that; as part of the election campaigning fanfare, bridges, mosques, temples, schools and midwife clinics, to

name but a few, will be officially opened by certain ministers in what should merely be a caretaker government. At times, as if to give an extra oomph, a bridge or school that is already open will be officially opened again.

Then, there will be the usual pumping of the flesh, conducted by ministers in their so-called tour of duty, rubbing shoulders – not with the rich and powerful – but with the ordinary Azmawati, Ah Kok and Athimmulai. These politicians will of course kiss and pat toddlers to show how caring they are..

We can also expect certain ‘government activities’ to double up as party campaigning endeavours, and these will certainly gain media mileage for the ruling politicians. There may be a conflict of interests and questions of ethics involved here. This is one area the Elections Commission cannot turn a blind eye to.

These are some of the activities that will ensure a high profile for incumbent politicians in the eyes of the public.

Cartoons and caricatures

The opposition, too, will get an airing from the mainstream media - but often for the wrong reasons. For instance, the squabbles between opposition parties almost always gets automatic media attention. This is not to deny the existence of such conflicts within opposition ranks just as there are similar tensions among the ruling parties themselves.

But the quarrels within the opposition parties will be magnified so that the parties are stigmatised and subject to public ridicule. The opposition parties in question are not likely to be accorded the opportunity to respond to these portrayals in violation of their right to reply. This right is often not observed by the media especially if the aggrieved parties are individuals and groups critical of the ruling elite.

In short, the media reporting of opposition parties will probably be aimed at smearing their public image and subjecting them to public mockery.

In contrast, the media's coverage of the ruling parties predictably will take the form of singing praises for the BN. Not surprisingly, it will also include political endorsements of the BN via paid advertisements and news reports coming from certain celebrities, well-known personalities as well as ordinary people who are projected as 'representing' the hopes and wishes of the entire 'imagined community' of Malaysians. Certain letters will be highlighted in the Letters to the Editor column, giving unqualified support to the incumbent parties.

But it's not all 'dry' stuff, this campaigning via the media. There will be cartoons and caricatures published by the mainstream press, depicting, for example, the 'unholy alliance' among the various parties in the opposition pacts. The idea is to show how politically unreliable these parties - and the people behind them - are.

Thus, looking into our crystal balls - and going by experience - we can predict that the election will most likely be marred by unfair and unjust mainstream media to give the ruling coalition parties an edge over their political rivals.

Such lopsided coverage would also violate the people's right to obtain adequate information (about all contesting political parties) from the media and the opposition parties' right to fair access to the media.

Unfortunately, this would only show the world how far we fall short in upholding democratic norms in the conduct of a free and fair election. q

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Finally, it is important to remember that very little will have changed in Malaysia the morning after the general election. We will still have to get rid of the ISA and the other coercive laws. We will still have to promote inter-faith dialogue and greater acceptance of one another in spite of our different religions and cultures. We will still have to promote sustainable and alternative development which caters for the poor, marginalised and needy, yet preserves our environment and heritage. And in Aliran's case, we will still have to make people more conscious of their rights and assume responsibilities in the struggle for justice, freedom and solidarity. To realise all this and more, it is necessary to link the *formal electoral process* to the *struggle for a non-formal participatory democracy*. It is only when that *participatory democracy* has been strengthened that significant changes will occur in the formal electoral realm.

Engage, therefore, with as much gusto as possible in the forthcoming 12th general election. And then, engage even more with deepening participatory democracy *after* the election. q

Graft galore

The writing on the wall showed that Pak Lah's "zero tolerance for corruption" drew a big zero in 2007. Three years after his announced crackdown on high-profile corruption cases, the PM revealed last year that the government had hit a brick wall and corruption was hurting the economy.

Slowly but surely, Bolehland saw a slew of serious corruption allegations such as those against the deputy internal security minister, the then ACA chief, the Sabah chief minister, the Sarawak chief minister, judges, the top cop of the nation and the Commercial Crime Investigation Department (CCID) chief!

Former police chief Hanif Omar said the expressed inability of both the police and the ACA in cleaning up their own backyards was "sadly disappointing". He revealed that "40 per cent of the senior (police) officers could be arrested without further investigations – strictly on the basis of their lifestyles".

The nation watched with amusement as the parties involved in corruption investigations investigated each other. The police investigated the (then) ACA chief; the ACA investigated the Internal Security Deputy Minister and the IGP... and the Attorney-General decided that all three were clean!

Mahathir and Badawi: Whose record is worst?



According to Opposition Leader Lim Kit Siang, Pak Lah faces the risk of being compared unfavourably with the 22-year Mahathir administration. He gave the following examples:

- The annual Auditor-General's Report of the early Mahathir years revealed pervasive corruption and criminal breach of trust, mismanagement and wastage of public funds. The 2006 AG's Report made public last year showed that the country fared worse by comparison.
- The Mahathir premiership kicked off with the RM2.5 billion Bumiputra Malaysia Finance (BMF) scandal. Pak Lah's premiership started with a greater "heinous crime without criminals" — the RM4.6 billion Port Klang Free Zone scandal.
- Mahathir's 22-year administration ended with Malaysia being ranked No. 37 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index in 2003. Three years after Pak Lah took over, Malaysia's TI CPI ranking plunged to No. 44 in 2006. It is likely to plunge further.

The cult of secrecy grew in 2007. In January, four opposition leaders were summoned to the police headquarters under the Official Secrets Act (OSA) for disclosing a toll concession agreement. The government broke off revealing highway privatisation concession agreements to the public.

The year also saw the resignation of Bernard Dompok as chairman of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Integrity due to differences with Minister in the PM's Department Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz Nazri over the committee's scope of duties. Nazri claimed that Dompok might have been influenced by Kit Siang, who is a member of the committee. Dompok told his colleague that it was "a cheap shot".

Crippling crime



Crime reached endemic proportions in 2007. The rakyat in *Bolehland* did not feel good. They also did not feel safe at all – whether inside or outside their houses! Pak Lah had failed to live up to his pledge to drastically reduce the crime rate.

Instead, the crime rate soared from 156,315 cases in 2003 to 224,298 cases in 2007 – a sharp rise of some 45 per cent in the past four years of Pak Lah's premiership. Furthermore, for the first time in the country's history, the crime index crossed the 200,000 mark. The number of serious crimes increased by 13.4 per cent nationwide, with gang robbery without the use of firearms rising by more than 159 per cent. An average of nine cases of rape were reported daily in the first nine months of 2007 - compared to four cases a day in 2003 and seven cases a day in 2006!

"I am worried and anyone looking at it will be worried. Seriously, I am very concerned about the percentage of crime in Malaysia," said Pak Lah's in a recent response to the rising crime rate. He has come up with a multi-pronged anti-crime strategy.

But any strategy to curb crime in Malaysia will come to naught if it does not include the political will to create a clean, efficient and professional police force. To achieve this an Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC), a key proposal by the Royal Commission on the police, should be set up.

Unfortunately, by the end of the year, the PM committed the "crime" of shelving the IPCMC and replacing it with a toothless Special Complaints Commission proposal.

Lest we be tempted to blame the high crime rate on foreigners, it was revealed by police in October last year that 80 per cent of crimes committed in the country are by Malaysians.

IGP Tan Sri Musa Hassan made a shocking confession that in the war against crime, the police are at times frustrated by some politicians who want the police to "keep one eye open and one eye closed".

Blocking blogs



Last year saw the elite in Umno (also read as "Government") going berserk over blogs. They realised they were losing control over how people receive information and form opinions. They could not "buy over" the countless Internet blogs as they do with newspapers.

For so long, they had monopolised "the truth". The year 2007 saw them doing what they are best at – "criminalising" or demonising what is a major threat to them. Last Janu-

ary, socio-political bloggers Ahirudin Attan and Jeff Ooi were served with different suits by lawyers representing the Umno-linked New Straits Times Press (NSTP) over postings in their blogs that were deemed defamatory. Predictably, the PM supported the unprecedented controversial defamation lawsuit.

But bloggers were not bothered by the blatant intimidation. It made them even bolder. They set up legal funds for the two and formed *Bloggers United*.

In March, Malaysians cringed as they heard Tourism Minister Tunku Adnan Tengku Mansor declare: "All bloggers are liars, they cheat people using all kinds of methods. From my understanding, out of

10,000 unemployed bloggers, 8,000 are women.” It was International Women’s Day!

“All bloggers are not in favour of national unity. Our country has been successful because we are very tolerant with each other, if not, there will be civil war, the Malays will kill the Chinese, the Chinese will take revenge and kill the Malays, and the Indians will kill everyone.” After 50 years of independence, our politicians insult our intelligence by trying to make us believe that we cannot debate, dialogue, discuss and disagree decently and intelligently without destroying each other.

In July, PKR webmaster Nathaniel Tan was arrested and the webmaster of popular political website Malaysia Today, Raja Petra Kamarudin, was summoned to the police station following a police report by Umno information chief Muhammad Muhammad Taib. They even summoned Raja Petra’s wife for questioning. But Raja Petra was the least petrified.

The intimidation intensified. Nazri warned that the government would not hesitate to use the ISA, the Sedition Act 1948 and Section 121b of the Penal Code against bloggers who make disparaging statements. There was also the insistence by ministers that bloggers be forced to register themselves. Pak Lah revealed the foolishness of it all: “Even if we asked them to register there will be those who will go by other names and will use other channels, including using servers outside the country.”

Bloggers refused to be cowed by the blather on blogs by the bunch of blockheads mentioned above. They took to heart Mahathir’s description of them as the “only hope” left to speak out on problems in the country. “Umno has become completely paralysed. It cannot do anything (to correct itself). The only hope left is with the bloggers,” said Dr M during a two-and-a-half hour speech to some 100 bloggers on 15 August at his Perdana Leadership Foundation headquarters in Putrajaya.

Puerile Parliament



“Parliament’s importance has not diminished even after 50 years of independence” - so declared Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak in August 2007. He added that the role of the country’s legislative should be given due respect not only from elected representatives but also the people.

Not many MPs, especially those in the BN, shared Najib’s conviction. In April, Nazri, who is the minister in charge of parliamentary affairs revealed the problem of high absenteeism rate in Parliament last year was “becoming bad and has to be stopped immediately”.

Such was the importance of the role of Parliament after 50 years that, on 10 July, the Parliament grounds were insensitively occupied by six cows and 10 goats waiting to be slaughtered for a dinner scheduled at the banquet hall in the hallowed

grounds of Parliament to celebrate Pak Lah’s wedding.

A severe and recurrent roof leak in Parliament in May and the “*bocor*” comments of two BN MPs that followed further revealed how “important” Parliament was to the powers-that-be as the country celebrated her 50th anniversary. Najib should be the last to speak of “due respect” in Parliament for he defended the two MPs whose sexist and most insensitive remarks were far from being an isolated incident but ingrained and systemic.

It also showed how easy it is to be an MP of a component party of the Barisan Nasional. It is really peanuts. One only needs to be spineless, silly, sexist and of course ‘stupid’. And to lead the way was none other than the minister in charge of parliamentary affairs, Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz himself. Nazri’s level of “respect” for the country’s legislative was matchless. Judging from his sterling performance in 2007, surely the Minister in the PM’s Department will continue to take us to greater heights in hype, hypocrisy and, of course, hysterics and histrionics in Parliament!

Coming back to Najib, the Deputy PM should have been present to observe how the police gave “due respect” to Parliament when they arrested over 20 people within the parliamentary precincts on 11 December, in spite of strong protests by the

Opposition Leader and his colleagues. They had turned up to hand over a memorandum to protest the extension of the Election Commission chief’s retirement age via a constitutional amendment.

Idiocy and the ISA



The year 2007 was the 20th anniversary of Operation Lalang. To justify the continued use of the ISA, Pak Lah and his cohorts dished out some of the most incomprehensible statements ever heard before. For ex-

ample, in March, foreign affairs ministry parliamentary secretary Ahmad Shabery Cheek foolishly claimed that “no one has demanded that the ISA be abolished”.

In July, the PM declared that the ISA “is still relevant and useful”. He added that “matters pertaining to the rights of detainees will be given due consideration and assessment”. How can this be done when the basic tenet of the ISA is to detain a person without trial – a grave violation of a basic human

right?

Then came Bernard Dompok’s assertion that there had been no ISA detention after Pak Lah took over as PM in 2003. The Abolish ISA Movement (GMI) called Dompok’s statement “a blatant lie”. It provided the statistics of ISA arrests and renewal of detention orders during Pak Lah’s premiership.

Just before the 20th Anniversary of Operation Lalang, Kuala Lumpur High Court judge Mohd Hishamudin Mohd Yunus, in a landmark decision, courageously ruled that ex-ISA detainee Abdul Malek’s arrest was unlawful and that he was assaulted in custody. He was awarded RM2.5 million in damages.

On 13 December, police arrested five leaders of the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) under the ISA on the false notion that they were linked to terrorists - without providing a shred of evidence.

Muzzled media



“I think this government under Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is a very, very liberal government,” Nazri tried very hard to convince himself as he spoke at a National Union of Journalists (NUJ) forum in September. “(But) I must tell you that it is not easy, because there are many

leaders who are not comfortable with the present

liberalism given by the prime minister to the press. This is something we have to manage properly.”

How and when was Pak Lah’s government “very, very liberal”?

Was it when Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin (Zam) summoned top media editors to a special briefing and, in the name of the PM, laid down the law that the PM’s repeated pledges to “listen to the truth” did not mean that the media have the green light to “practice unrestrained reporting”?

Was it when Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission Chairman Halim Shafie or-

dered broadcasters against giving airtime for speeches by opposition political parties? (This, however, was reversed by Energy, Water and Communication Minister Lim Keng Yaik.)

Was it when the media were barred from covering the public hearing on crime held by the Parliamentary Caucus on Human Rights and Good Governance in Petaling Jaya because, according to Caucus chairman Nazri Abdul Aziz, the meeting had to be a closed-door session so that some parties would not be uncomfortable due to media reports?

Was it when all editors were rounded up to take specific instructions from the “Fourth Floor Boys” in Putrajaya as to how to report the Pak Lah’s wedding?

Was it when Zam told local newspapers not to quote from blogs or use them as sources of information?

Was it when the Internal Security Ministry issued a directive to all mainstream media not to publish any news on the issue of Malaysia being an Islamic state and only to publish statements from Pak Lah and his deputy?

Was it when editorial interference led to self-censorship, which in turn resulted in stories being slanted heavily towards the government such as the public rallies by Bersih in Batu Burok, Terengganu, and in Kuala Lumpur, and the one organised by Hindraf?

The “liberalism” which Nazri spoke so proudly about resulted in Malaysia achieving the worst-ever ranking in the latest annual worldwide press freedom index released by the Paris-based watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF). It saw the sharpest plunge of 32 spots in Malaysia’s ranking - from 92nd to 124th place, which is also Malaysia’s worst ranking since the rankings began in 2002.

Judicial jesters



The defects that began to show on nine occasions in a three-month period after the opening of the second largest court complex in the world in Jalan Duta were symbolic of the state of the judiciary. It became apparent that the manner in which Pak Lah’s administration saw and handled the judiciary was similar to how the Mahathir government regarded it: the judiciary was made to serve the government’s (also read as “Umno’s) interest and not the *rakyat*’s.

The government is not even shy about this fact. Nazri, who is also the de facto law minister, put it unashamedly: “...the concept of separation of pow-

ers between the legislative, judiciary and executive is ‘too idealistic’ to be implemented in the country”.

Chief Justice (CJ) Ahmad Fairuz and Nazri were ready to do whatever it took and to utter the most naïve and nonsensical opinions in order to maintain the status quo. Nazri would insist: “There is no crisis in our judiciary” - in spite of Sultan Azlan Shah’s “disquiet about our judiciary” and the new CJ Abdul Hamid Mohamad’s “house-cleaning” pledge.

Fairuz mocked the proposal for the setting up of an independent judicial commission on the appointment and promotion of judges by comparing such an effort towards transparency to nudity! **In August several newspapers reported that Fairuz had advocated the abolition of Common Law, favouring its replacement by an Islamic legal system in the country. Nazri later denied - on behalf of Fairuz - in Parliament that the CJ had made such a proposal.**

Kit Siang provided Nazri with a newspaper tape transcript as proof that Fairuz had indeed made such a proposal.

Nazri played down its significance, claiming that the Chief Justice was pressed by reporters to offer his opinion that there was “no need” for the country to continue with Common Law!

When Karpal Singh revealed the name of a Federal Court judge who had not written judgments in as many as 35 cases, including four in which the convicted were languishing in jail despite being sentenced to death seven years ago, Nazri declared: “the writing of judgments was not the only criterion to promote judges”!

When the country did not have a Chief Judge for eight months, Nazri would absurdly insist that there “is no law that says the Chief Justice cannot act as the Chief Judge of Malaya”. He would challenge them: “Show me where it says, either in the Constitution or elsewhere, that it cannot be done.”

The Bar Council pointed to the fact that provisions in the Constitution state that the posts of Chief Justice and Chief Judge of Malaya are independent of one another and therefore if read together with the Courts of Judicature Act 1964, the CJ should appoint a Federal Court Judge to act as the Chief Judge of Malaya.

Once in a while, unwittingly, they would blurt out the truth, such as Fairuz’s frank admission of the existence of (a) judges who were often seen socialis-

ing with lawyers, prosecutors and corporate figures while hearing their cases in court; (b) judges who were “constantly angry and foul-tempered”, who portrayed themselves as being the most brilliant or perfect judge in court; and (c) judges who accept bribes. His admission was a terrible indictment on the entire judiciary, crying out aloud for a complete judicial review.

When asked to explain why he had issued a denial on behalf of Fairuz in connection with the Lingam video scandal, Nazri said: “I am his Minister”. It was ignorance *par excellence* but, to be fair, it was one of those rare moments when the *de facto* law minister told the truth! The Executive, Legislative and Judiciary are in reality not independent of one another.

On the super **fast-track appointment of Zaki Azmi as Court of Appeal president, Nazri said that the government was “not doing something unconstitutional”**. He failed to realise that the government was passing a vote of ‘no confidence’ in the judiciary and saying there was no one in the judiciary worthy of the position!

Fairuz was put on a fast-track to retirement. It was perhaps the most “correct, correct, correct” thing that Pak Lah and his government did in 2007 when it came to the judiciary. It would also give Fairuz a lot of time to recall his infamous alleged telephone conversation with V K Lingam.

People Power



Last year will be well remembered as a year when the ordinary citizens of Bolehland courageously decided to exercise their right to peaceful assembly and to freedom of expression. The *rakyat* were fed up of being fed with lies and half-truths. It was time to give the powers-that-be their feedback.

They told Pak Lah the truth – on 8 September, when 750 people gathered near Batu Buruk, in Trengganu for a Bersih ceramah, and on 26 September, when 2,000 lawyers and others marched to the Prime Minister’s Department in Putrajaya to hand over a memorandum asking for a Royal Commission to investigate the Lingam video clip.

They also told Pak Lah the truth on 10 November, when 50,000 converged at Istana Negara to express their concern over the conduct of elections in Malaysia to the Agong; on 25 November, when some 30,000 Indian Malaysians protested against their marginalisation and discrimination; on 9 Decem-

ber, when several dozen human rights lawyers and activists attempted to march in commemoration of Human Rights Day.

The government's response to these assemblies was predictable and pathetic. Malaysians could see that it was not those who protested on the streets who damaged the country's good name (for street protests are so common overseas) but the less-than-eloquent ministers who stammered and struggled in front of the international media to justify the authorities' desperate responses such as charging demonstrators for "attempted murder" (a charge that was later dropped).

Except for the lawyers' "Walk for Justice", the powers-that-be sent in the police – a force ever ready to pander to the wishes of its political masters and protect the interests and "internal security" of Umno.

The police proudly ensured law and order – the PM's "law" and his orders. They pranced, pounced on and provoked. They pushed and pulverized. They pummelled and reduced to a pulp. They sprayed jet-streams of chemically laced water and shot canisters of tear gas.

But the people, especially in the Bersih and Hindraf assemblies, showed they were no longer afraid. There were even moments when they stood their ground.

The police lost all authority; fully armed, they were

helpless!

After every public assembly it was depressing to see how low journalism had sunk as the country celebrated her 50th anniversary. Can anything be sadder than seeing a servile press sucking up to their political superiors and giving stories a spin and a slant that suits, soothes and serves the government?

But not all was lost. The citizens of Bolehland would hear the Raja Muda of Perak, Raja Dr Nazrin Shah declare that "the desire to maintain public order should not be an excuse for never allowing peaceful assemblies". He emphasised that freedom of expression through peaceful demonstrations "is a right people can reasonably expect to enjoy in a democratic society." Would the government care to listen to this: "The right to live in peace and harmony in a safe environment is also a right people can reasonably expect to enjoy in any well-run society. The government is responsible for public order."

Equally pertinent was Musa Hitam's spontaneous answer when he was asked whether Malaysia is ready for peaceful assemblies: "Yes! Come on, we have been independent for 50 years." The former deputy PM also suggested that Malaysia move forward and away from the mentality of equating "demonstrations" with "violence". He also proposed that peaceful demonstrations be allowed by the government, with the responsibility for ensuring that the demonstrations are peaceful placed on the organisers.

Rage on race and religion



"2007 has proved to be one of the most divisive and troubled years in the half-a-century of Malaysia's nationhood – with religious polarization assuming its most serious dimension, compounding an already difficult problem of racial polarisation in the nation-building process," wrote Opposition Leader Lim Kit Siang.

"These are troubling times. We have every reason to be troubled. Race and religion seem to be running riot and upsetting the equilibrium of our lives and portending a dangerous future for the nation. The silent majority must wake up and take a stand against opportunistic politicians who are using race and religion to stir the cauldron," warned Aliran president P Ramakrishnan in his pre-Merdeka deliberations.

Equally concerned was civil rights activist and lawyer Malik Imtiaz Sarwar: "There is a general sense on the ground that things are getting out of hand.

My fears are that we'll become even more racially divided, the economy's going to plunge, the Islamist aspects will become even more pronounced, and what you'll have is a wholesale dismantling of the rule of law."

"Due to several high profile court cases regarding religious freedoms, we see an increasing polarisation of Malaysians that is chipping away at the national unity block that our leaders have strove so hard to build since independence," commented Ramon Navaratnam, a Malaysian socio-economic expert.

Pak Lah would contradict himself time and again on matters concerning race and religion in 2007. For example, he would preach the virtues of inter-religious dialogue but would go on to ban the *Building Bridges Conference*, a seminar meant to bring together Christian and Muslim scholars of international reputation. He would insist on Malaysians being sensitive to each other but he would defend the brandishing of the *keris* at the Umno annual general assembly. He emphasised that Malaysia is not a secular nor a theocratic state but later decided to follow his deputy by

declaring that Malaysia is an Islamic state. In his Christmas message, he called on Malaysians to move forward and put the country's interest before any "narrowly-defined demands". He would be "narrow-minded" enough to ban the use of the word "Allah" by those of non-Muslim faiths, and its use in *The Herald*, a Catholic weekly.

In a recent forum recently, Anwar Ibrahim gave a good reason for the disturbing reality that confronts us: "The ruling BN coalition is appealing to Muslim sentiment to reinforce its support in elections which could come in March...Malaysia's problem is not radicalism...The real issue is what I would describe as state-sponsored Muslim puritanism more by racist sentiments than religious principles.

"For some reason it is the belief of the present administration in Kuala Lumpur that playing the puritanical card would be the best bet for the Umno-dominated ruling coalition to secure electoral success in the coming elections... By holding themselves out to be the staunchest defenders of Islam, Umno hopes to garner greater support..."

Flip-flopping into the future



Throughout 2007, whether it was on matters concerning the economy, the judiciary, parliament, police, race relations, religion, health, education Pak Lah and his government appeared incompetent, inconsistent and even ignorant, adept only at incendiary propaganda. The once looking-good PM, who had the people feeling good, increasingly failed to deliver the goods of transparency and accountability. Indeed in 2007, the Pak Lah's supposed fairy tale of change became what it really was - a full-blown farce.

A general election is near. Will Bolehland citizens re-elect the "flip-flop" PM, whom well-known writer M Bakri Musa calls "His Howness the Imam of Islam Hadhari"? Will they still want to give the PM - who had to insist in June 2007 that "I am no sleeping PM" - a fresh mandate? Will Malaysians want to bring back the many soiled reputations, spent characters and self-seeking Umno and Barisan Nasional politicians? May the realities of the year 2007 serve as our guide in making a wise and crucial decision. Q

Hindraf: A reminder of our communal dysfunctionality

Many social issues related to the Hindraf demands are, in fact, shared by the disadvantaged of all communities

by Tong Veng Wye



More than a century ago, when the Eiffel Tower was newly constructed, a well-known writer in Paris of that time became a very vocal critic of what he saw as the tower's exceeding lack of pleasing appearance. Everywhere he went he would make known his great dislike for how that new marvel of technology looked.

Yet every day he would have lunch inside the tower. That, naturally, led to him being queried why and how he could lunch daily within the very structure that he was so overly critical of. He simply answered that was the only way he could eat in peace in

Paris without having to look at the tower!

By choice and circumstance, Malaysians share a common nation and, hence, share a common destiny. Like the Parisian writer, we constantly see our many imperfections. But, unlike the Parisian writer, we probably do not have the luxury of criticising and then just happily have lunch. We could hardly do that; the Parisian writer was considered insane in the last years of his relatively short life!

Our society, like others, has both its appealing and its less than appealing aspects. One of the

least appealing is our enduring sense of racial separateness. This article attempts to look at how that sense of racial separateness continues to press itself into our consciousness as Malaysians. It also looks at how, what may be termed a communal industry, perpetuates that sense of racial separateness. It then considers two examples from other parts of the world of how politics can influence the way people see one another in sweeping or prejudiced ways that, because of politics, can be played up, sometimes with violent results.

It finally attempts to remind ourselves to fight against the racial

conditioning that is so much a part of life in Malaysian society and considers some simple things we could do towards that.

Racial consciousness

Racial consciousness seems indelible from our public and private persona. Racial identification is pervasive throughout our politics, our elections, the government structure, the administrative forms we fill in from time to time, and even our sports. Prejudice continues to exist in the way we think of, talk about and deal with members of other racial groups. It affects the way we hire employees and it finds expression in the way we apply derogatory terms to members of other racial groups when we find ourselves in the false comfort and security of the company of members of our own group.

Despite a laudable veneer of racial harmony enveloping us, we are accustomed to the idea that there is much that differentiates and separates us. We, perhaps, even accept this as an unavoidable aspect of our society. So we tolerate and accommodate. This is, in a sense, a dysfunctionality. It is our communal dysfunctionality, and it is manifested in the fact that we cannot think of Malaysian society without being conscious of how it is riven with racial consciousness.

In the same way that families are considered dysfunctional when relations are such that empathy between family members is replaced by suspicion or, worse, antagonism or anarchy, race relations are dysfunctional when apparent surface harmony is underlain by a mutual distrust and

sense that we are still far from being the family we are supposed - or sometimes claim - to be.

The Hindraf protests over an array of grievances serve as a reminder of our communal dysfunctionality as a society - grievances finding expression through intensely communal language and demands, on the one hand, and on the other, perceived by *others* to be communal and, hence, exclusivist. One is not, here, attempting to disregard the fact that there are grievances that genuinely affect segments of a particular racial group.

Of concern here is how in the recent Hindraf protests it does not strike many of us as sad that Malaysians *continue to have and express communal grievances*. More significantly, it is also sad that issues related to low wages, poor living conditions, and increasingly unequal development that affect all races should find expression and protest through exclusivist race-based channels.

The concern is how we seem to slip so easily into acceptance of communal grievances as normal in our society. We are both so subliminally and consciously communal in our minds that when we witness something that expresses itself in a communal way, we simply take it in our stride and accept it as a part of our inevitable social reality.

This is not surprising when we consider the historical genesis of independent Malaya. It is even less surprising when we think of how the entire political system is built on communalism and that the everyday Malaysian grows up and lives under a pervasive at-

mosphere of racial consciousness.

Issues of common concern

We should fight this; this cancer of racial separateness that can be found in our own minds and most certainly in our social and political system. We have to consciously remind ourselves that there is an entire range of issues that simply do not respect racial boundaries. Poverty and the increasing fissure between rich and poor affect all communities. Rising costs of living affect all communities. Large groups of workers are finding that their salaries cannot keep pace with rising costs - and this affects all communities.

The lack of real channels for grievances to be effectively heard and addressed - other than the almost meaningless statements by BN politicians that people are free to vote if they are not happy - affects all communities. The threat of a sullied judiciary perceived as lacking in independence and integrity affects all communities. The threat of detention without trial and its abuse affects all communities. The scourge of corruption affects all communities. The unholy alliance between business and politics with the creation of a small group of so-called elites wielding disproportionate power and influence in the country is also a matter that affects all communities.

Indeed, there is much that we share in common values. There is much in common in what we aspire for our families. All communities share a common need for access to education. So too with our religions and faiths, and at the level of religious philosophy, a

great deal indeed can be said for common spiritual precepts that should bind us as a people. At the same time, no one community cherishes justice more than another for we all do. No one community yearns for good governance free of corruption more than another for we all do. And no one community is more human than another for we share a common humanity.

Communal industry

Yet, we so easily become fodder for a system that thrives upon and ingrains in us communal thinking and sentiments. There practically exists an industry – a communal industry – in our country that plants and nurtures seeds of communalism in Malaysian society.

This industry has tentacles that extend into politics, government, administration, education, the media, public discourse – everything that has to do with the life and breath of society. It is not a coordinated industry with a nerve centre but it is an industry all of whose parts play a role in making us very aware that we are Malays, Chinese, Indians, Kadazans, Eurasians, etc.

Why, for instance, do we commonly refer to ourselves as Malaysian Chinese instead of Chinese Malaysians, Malaysian Indians instead of Indian Malaysians? Why is it that, in public discourse at least, Americans who are ethnic Chinese refer to themselves as Chinese Americans and not American Chinese? A subtle difference in the way we call ourselves but perhaps a significant reflection of the way we think of ourselves. At root of this, of course, is how we primarily see ourselves.

The communal industry includes us, the ordinary citizens: ordinary Malaysians who think and act communally, whose actions are guided by ethnic prejudice, who employ according to ethnic prejudice and who vote along communal lines. Ordinary Malaysians who will unthinkingly pass on their racial prejudices to the next generation and the next are very much part of the communal industry. Ordinary Malaysians who are given to stereotyping, often in a derogatory way, members of racial groups other than their own.

The most significant part of that industry, however, is the race-based political system in the country. Political parties that are founded on race and which appeal and pander to racial identification are the life blood of our politics. Race is the base from which the majority of our politicians and, hence, the government operates, and this seeps into our consciousness. There is little that has not been influenced by race-based politics, and the influence is totalitarian. There is little that we do or are that has not been touched by divisive race-based politics.

The communal industry keeps us inwardly and outwardly conscious of our racial differences beyond a level that can be considered healthy. In that way it is an assertion of power - but it is power of an invidious kind, for it is sectarian instead of universalistic, separating instead of unifying.

Effect of politics on understanding

Given the power over our minds exerted by the communal indus-

try, it would be both interesting and useful to go further afield to understand how popular perceptions can be shaped by politics - even if those perceptions are factually wrong. It is useful for us to understand that politics can create or result in distorted perceptions in the minds of people.

Ill-informed understanding feeds, suits and reinforces prejudices we may already have - especially in a society like ours where it would not be difficult for, say, non-Muslims to develop misconceptions about Islam and its role in history.

Two examples from other parts of the world will show the importance of properly understanding history and the potentially distorting effects politics can have on inter-communal relations.

Muslim-Jewish conflict

An example to look at is the issue of Arab/Muslim-Israeli/Jewish relations. It is conceivable that the incessant conflict between Jews and Muslims that we watch on TV and read about in the papers reinforces misconceptions we may have about Islam. Such misconceptions may lead us to believe that Islam has a long history of violent behaviour against Jews. Let us consider this.

There are at least two factors why it would not be difficult to think that historically Arab Muslims and Jews have “always been fighting each other.” One is the spectacle of the on-going, long drawn, and apparently intractable conflict between Arab Palestinians, most of whom are Muslims, and Jews in Israel. The profile of the conflict is enhanced by the further spectacle of Palestin-

ian suicide bombers killing Jews which seems to fit well enough into the image of Muslim terrorists driven by a radical religion.

The other factor that engenders belief in a long historical, endemic conflict between Muslims and Jews is that it is not only Palestinian Arabs who have, at some point in modern history, been fighting the Jews of Israel but also Egyptian Arabs, Jordanian Arabs, Iraqi Arabs, and Syrian Arabs. And where they have not actually fought, they have been antagonistic. At the same time, the governments of non-Arab Muslim countries invariably support the Palestinian cause while condemning - rightly - the excesses of Israel. Thus, it seems, Jews can have no other form of relations with Muslims than conflict and antipathy.

Further, because Israel has been so closely supported by the US and various European countries at some point or other, it would not be too difficult to acquire the further notion that Jews and the West are somehow naturally aligned against Muslims.

But such notions are historically unsupportable.

In fact, Jews have historically fared far better when they lived in lands under Muslim rule than Christian rule. As a case in point, prior to the Spanish reconquest of the old Muslim territories of al-Andalus in 1492, the three religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam had been able to live together in relative harmony for 600 years under Muslim rule. The Jews in particular had enjoyed a cultural and spiritual renaissance in Spain. Unlike Jews in the rest of Europe, Jews under Muslim rule

in Spain were not subject to pogroms, expulsions, and deportations.

After victory by the Spanish Catholic armies over the Muslims, the Jews of Spain were forced to either convert to Christianity or to leave, something they did not have to do under Muslim rule. Of those who left, many chose to go to the new Muslim Ottoman empire where they were warmly welcomed.

Thus, contrary to popular belief of endemic conflict and war between Jews and Muslims, historically, the two peoples have actually had far more peaceful and enriching coexistence than what we see today.

What we witness today is primarily the result of global politics and hegemony and not religious conflict as such. In fact, it is instructive to note that in 1903, the sixth Zionist Congress actually voted to consider Uganda as a possible Jewish homeland. What if that had carried through? Would our conclusion then now be that black Africans (instead of Arab Muslims) and Jews cannot help but fight each other because conflict between them is congenital?

Even the forced conversions and inquisitional pursuit of Jews and their expulsions were not the result of religion as such but were the consequence of attempts by the Catholic monarchs, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, to weld together hitherto independent and separate kingdoms into a unified realm in the process of which they sought to enforce uniformity. The consequence, in other words, of the pursuit of po-

litical objectives and not religion *per se*.

The Balkan War

In similar fashion, the Balkan war of the nineties that followed the break-up of the former Yugoslavia was visited by carnage - ethnic cleansing. It would not have reached the proportions it did had it not been for the way in which political propaganda played up those things that divide people and set them in fear of each other.

It is amazing that for all the fighting and atrocities that took place among them, Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims are ethnically the same: all South Slavs, and they spoke much the same language. Of the population of the former Yugoslavia, 83 per cent spoke one language with differences between the literary versions resembling the differences between British and American versions of the English language. And yet they fought on the basis of different nationalist identities.

We are not saying there were no differences amongst them; there were. The most politically significant difference was religion; they were respectively Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, and Muslims. But it was the differences that were politicised and presented as obvious and intrinsic. Radovan Karadzic once remarked to journalists, "Why do you...keep insisting that Serbs must live with Muslims? Serbs and Muslims are like cats and dogs. They cannot live together in peace. It is impossible."

Yet, as with Muslims and Jews, history does not necessarily support such sweeping conclusions

which assert that certain peoples cannot coexist but must fight and be separate. For the fact was Serbs, Croats, and Muslims had been neighbours for generations. They had gone to school together, worked together, and to a significant extent even intermarried. It took a lot of propaganda to make them first begin to fear one another and then slaughter one another.

As a case in point, during the Second World War, there was an SS unit of Hitler's Nazis (called the Handzar Division) that was populated by Muslims. It was a unit for whom the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem at that time helped recruit for the Nazis in Bosnia. This was practically a fringe occurrence. Of far greater significance was the fact that many, many more Bosnian Muslims fought and lost their lives fighting the Nazis. In fact, in proportion to their population, Bosnian Muslims suffered the greatest losses of any national group in Bosnia during the Second World War.

But at the hands of propagandists and the communal fires they stoked, it was the fringe fact of the Handzar Division that was used to motivate and propel the murderous actions of young Serbs against Bosnian Muslims - never mind the losses of the Muslims during World War Two. Serb fighters were fodder for a vicious propaganda machine. They were told repeatedly, and falsely, that their comrades were being castrated, roasted alive on pits, and drowned in their own blood. They had no alternative sources of information and before long they were replying in kind, retaliating against what they believed were Muslim atrocities as the propaganda had had them believe.

Breaking the mould

The point of all this is to emphasise that politics and the exercise of power exert a great deal of influence over how we think and what we believe. It serves the purposes of institutionalised racial politics and politicians to maintain a high degree of racial consciousness and the sense of separateness amongst people. We must fight against becoming fodder to a system of racial conditioning that encourages such consciousness.

The examples we looked at above are far larger and far more violent than what we have. But the principle is the same; the exercise of power through racially sectarian politics can be and often is aggressive. At the very least it is invidious. By definition sectarian, politics will tend towards playing on differences. In the long term that cannot be good.

The mould of enforced racial consciousness has to be broken. It is necessary for us to try and break the stranglehold of racially sectarian politics.

We can start in small ways. We could articulate a desire to have change by writing to the media. We could even talk over the dinner table and explain to our families and within our own communities why we disagree with the use of racially sweeping language or terms that not only do not reflect reality but also reinforce our ignorance of each other. We could explain that sweeping prejudices simply do not promote understanding. We could vote for an opposition candidate who evokes non-communal arguments that speak for all ethnic groups in-

stead of an incumbent government candidate who promises development but whose candidacy is completely dependent upon communal politics.

For the upcoming elections we could organise and muster opinion groups within our constituencies. These could make known to the candidates by letter, petition, phone calls, SMS, and email that we reject communal politics and campaigning and that we see that as cancerous to society and inimical to the welfare of future generations of all races. We should let them know we want them to represent the under-represented and to speak for the common interests and grievances of *all* Malaysians.

Our common humanity

Vol 27:No 9 of the *Aliran Monthly* contains an article by Jeyakumar Devaraj on how there are many - though not necessarily all - social issues related to the Hindraf demands that are not unique to the Indian community. Such issues are in fact shared by the disadvantaged of all communities. They are not difficult to see or identify.

What is more difficult to do is for us to shake off the shackles of disproportionate racial consciousness so that issues that affect all races are articulated as such and not as issues exclusive to any one race or religious group. Understandably, this is all the more difficult when we remember how, in this country, there is little that escapes getting filtered through some race-related sieve or other.

But if we can, it is far better for us to stand on the platform of our common humanity. q



A record of Aliran's stand on current affairs.

**Herald permit:
PM must make
his stand in the
national interest**

Aliran is flabbergasted that the usage of a single word 'Allah' could be the basis for the denial of a fundamental right guaranteed under the Federal Constitution. The *Catholic Herald Weekly* has been warned it could lose its publication permit over its use of the term in its Malay-language section.

Malaysians are truly dumbfounded that the use of a single, widely used term to refer to the Almighty could be the basis for denying a basic right – the freedom to publish.

The term 'Allah' has been used for centuries without any problem or confusion. It has been the common term used by Muslims and Christians alike in the Arab world to refer to God

It has also been widely used in Malaysia to refer to the Almighty.

There was no problem, no confusion and nobody got upset by this common term of reference. Deputy Internal Security Minister Johari Baharum's sudden claim to exclusivity for the usage of the word thus does not make sense.

Languages are the common heritage of humanity. Because of this, the various languages developed and grew rich in expression. They

absorbed words and expressions from one another and, in the process, languages became expressive, expanded and spread across the world.

Our own Bahasa Malaysia is littered with numerous words absorbed from many foreign languages. We have even stopped using existing words in preference to newly coined terms to reflect modernity and the scientific world. If foreign countries were to claim exclusivity for all these terms, what would become of Bahasa Malaysia?

Aliran also understands that the line, "Ya Allah Yang Maha Kuasa..." forms part of the Pahang state anthem. Does that mean that non-Muslims should not sing the Pahang state anthem? Johari must state his stand in this matter.

In the meantime, Malaysians wait with bated breath for the Prime Minister, who has been preaching tolerance and promoting Islam Hadhari, to clarify this matter and



state his stand. Specifically, Malaysians would want to know whether he shares Johari's stand.

Aliran Executive Committee
22 December 2007

Malaysia won't be bankrupted – Reveal Petronas' accounts

We take umbrage to Datuk Seri Najib Razak's statement which was reported in the NST on 31 December 2007. He was quoted as saying, "The country will go bankrupt if the government reduces oil prices, which are sky-rocketing in the world market. It is not possible for the opposition to bring fuel prices down. It simply does not make sense...they are just trying to fool the people."

"We can use Petronas' profits to reduce fuel prices, but only if we forego development projects like building schools and universities."

It is truly regrettable that Najib did not provide any facts and figures to give credibility to his statement that "the country will go bankrupt if the government reduces oil prices". Without these statistics it will be well nigh impossible for ordinary citizens to believe that Najib himself is not "trying to fool the people".

Facts and figures are far more persuasive in convincing people to accept the line of argument that Najib is promoting. Mere rhetoric will not persuade people to believe that "the country will go bankrupt" if the opposition were to reduce fuel prices when they form the government.

What is Najib's basis in claiming that "the country will go bankrupt"? Why should it go bankrupt? How does he come to this conclusion?

Instead of employing scare tactics as an election ploy to garner support for the Barisan Nasional, he should table Petronas' detailed accounts in parliament to substantiate his claim. He owes a duty to Malaysians to provide the detailed accounts so that the people can be convinced that he is justified in claiming that the "the country will go bankrupt". In the absence of the detailed accounts, Malaysians have a right to dismiss his claim as an extreme exaggeration of a politician who is unable to counter an argument with truth.

When we talk of Petronas' revenue we are talking about the income generated by our national assets. Our national wealth must be accounted for in a transparent manner. We need to know how much is earned by Petronas and we want to know in detail how this acquired wealth is being managed and spent. We need to know how much those in the ranks of hierarchy are being paid and how they are rewarded. What kinds of bo-



nuses do they receive? How much is their gratuity when they retire?

This and much more have to be answered honestly.

Why must the earnings and accounts of Petronas be kept away from Malaysians? Why is parliamentary scrutiny into the accounts denied? What is the problem? Does this information fall under the ambit of "national security" that it cannot be divulged? Why should the Prime Minister alone be privy to the details of how this colossal wealth is being managed?

If answers to all these cannot be made public, then Najib should stop fooling the people.

If Parliament cannot exert its authority to demand that the accounts of Petronas be tabled for scrutiny by the elected members of Parliament, then it should stop pretending to be the legislative authority of the Federation. To safeguard its own image "as the source of governmental energy and the seat of national power", Parliament must act "as the main channel of democratic impulses". It shouldn't play a subservient role to the executive and be seen and accepted as doing the biddings of the executive. It shouldn't strengthen the hand of the government by surrendering its own authority to the executive through insidious legislation.

Najib's statement that "we can use Petronas' profits to reduce fuel prices, but only if we forego development projects like building schools and universities" cannot be taken seriously. This must be a derisive comment. If indeed the

profits were used for developmental purposes like building schools, can Najib please explain why 1,555 national schools in the rural areas are without toilet facilities and 794 schools are without electricity as revealed by the Minister of Education last year?

Would the cost of providing such basic amenities to these schools run into billions of ringgit making it impossible to achieve all these years? Does it mean that Petronas has not made that kind of profit all these years to provide such facilities to the poor pupils in rural areas? How can Najib justify such cruel and callous neglect of the most deserving people in the rural areas in a country that is richly endowed with wealth and the means to rectify such deprivation?

It is a widely held belief that the absence of accountability and transparency over the income and expenditure of Petronas has led to an unbelievable squandering and plundering of the nation's wealth.

To preserve our dignity as a nation and to justify ourselves as a democracy, we must be ethical in all that we do. Foremost in that we must be transparent and accountable in all our dealings concerning the wealth of our nation. This demands that the accounts of Petronas must be subjected to parliamentary scrutiny.

*P Ramakrishnan
President
3 January 2008*

The word "Allah" and the controversy in its usage

The term "Allah" has been used

before the advent of Islam. It has been the common term of reference to the Almighty for many centuries. The various communities using this common term of reference had no problem in understanding this word and what it referred to. There has been no confusion whatsoever. Nobody has objected to the use of this term of reference until narrow-minded politicians got involved and created the present unnecessary controversy. Ordinary people from all faiths have better common sense in understanding this term of reference; they know what it means and what it alludes to in their respective faiths.

As we have pointed out in our statement of 22 December 2007, "Languages are the common heritage of humanity. Because of this, the various languages developed and grew rich in expression. They absorbed words and expressions from one another and, in the process, languages became expressive, expanded and spread across the world."

This being the case, no community can claim monopoly to the use of any word. It would be an absurd claim. Further, the word "Allah" is not a local word derived from Bahasa Malaysia for anyone to lay claim to its exclusive usage.

By taking a political decision and making a political stand on its usage, the Barisan Nasional is creating confusion in the minds of thinking Malaysians. The harmony that the Prime Minister is trying to preserve and promote is being muddled and our unity is being threatened by the actions of uncaring politicians. The PM, unfortunately, is unable to rein in

these politicians.

While in the past, certain individuals were involved in claiming exclusive right to the usage of the word "Allah", now it is the cabinet that has decided that except for Muslims others cannot utter this word or use it in their writings. In other words, this is the decision of the BN government supported by all the 14 component parties represented in the government.

We need no further proof that what Umno wants it gets. All the other component parties play only second fiddle to the demands of Umno. The rest of the component parties very apparently do not have a say in this issue except to give in to the demands of Umno.

We would like to pose a question to the BN with regard to the Rukunegara and the five principles which have been adopted as the guiding principles of the nation. The first principle states, "Kepercayaan kepada Tuhan". Now, according to the cabinet logic, will the Muslims be confused when they recite the Rukunegara because the term used in reference to God is Tuhan instead of "Allah"? Going by the cabinet's logic, can non-Muslims sing the state anthems of certain states where the word "Allah" is included in the text of the song?

Now, Malaysians will know how absurd and ridiculous the BN government sounds and behaves in a plural society.

*P Ramakrishnan
President
5 January 2008*

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Lights for Human Rights and Justice

The government's paranoia is beyond reason and logic; it is apparently a symptom of insecurity

by *Angeline Loh*

A small crowd of NGO activists huddled in the shelter of a shop front at the junction of Lebuhraya Campbell leading to Jalan Penang at about 8.50pm on 13 December 2007. It was raining, but that did not deter the handful of human rights supporters. Even police warnings had done nothing to dampen their determination to carry the light for human rights in united comradeship.

Yet, there was a solemnity in the atmosphere, as they braced themselves to hold a candlelight vigil in support of those who had been arrested in Kuala Lumpur in November 2007 and during the 9 December 2007 International Human Rights Day celebrations. They had been detained for claiming and exercising their right to free assembly and free expression.

We were not the only ones on the pavements. Police too had turned up in numbers, with Special Branch agents and press photographers armed with juggernaut cameras. Thankfully, there appeared to be no riot squads around.

There was a build up of traffic, intermittently caused by the traffic lights and the road works on Jalan Penang - not by the small group standing on the corner with their banner reading, "The Freedom to Assemble Peacefully is a Human Right. Stop the Arrests of Peaceful Protestors Now."

As a few more vigil participants turned up and a few passersby and onlookers gathered out of curiosity, pinpoints of candlelight lit up the narrow shop front. The police appeared to be tolerating this gathering with some restraint.

Lau Shu Shi, Suaram's Penang coordinator, read out a short speech:

"We are gathered here this evening to peacefully show our solidarity with all those arrested at the Bersih, Hindraf and Human Rights Day marches in Kuala Lumpur. Freedom to assemble is a basic human right, recognised in our Federal Constitution as well as in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The recent crackdown and government-coordinated media cam-

paign against those exercising this right is a denial of a basic freedom for all Malaysians. We call on the Malaysian government to work towards safeguarding the freedom of assembly and all other basic freedoms for all Malaysians, and (to) unconditionally release those who are still arrested."

(Source: "Light for Justice" pamphlet distributed at the Vigil)

Shu Shi would have gone on to repeat the message in Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin had she not been stopped by a police officer standing nearby. The police would not permit speeches. Nonetheless, NGO activists distributed copies of the speech to the public who had gathered.

With the speeches cut short, representatives and supporters from Suaram Penang, Aliran, Amnesty International, WCC, the Phoenix Group for Chinese Education, and Hindraf (Hindu Rights Action Force), other friends and concerned members of the public burst out singing "We shall Overcome":

"We shall overcome, we shall over-

come, we shall overcome one day,
Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall
overcome one day..."

The strains of this song apparently worried the police, with the OCPD himself driving up in his patrol car to issue a warning to the small crowd of about 150 to disperse or face arrest. This somewhat paranoid reaction by the police to a peaceful gathering was not unusual and certainly predictable. NGOs see paranoia in the authorities as characteristic and inherent in their nature, particularly when the authorities seem to be struggling to justify their actions.

Reluctantly, the assembly slowly dispersed for the sake of keeping the peace. Yet, the nearly 20-minute vigil was seen to be a success, as the one that took place in KL on 9 December, 2007, was only tolerated for 15 minutes, according to someone who was there.

There was no noise – apart from that of passing traffic, the OCPD's voice through the megaphone, and the murmur of people's voices. There was no slogan shouting, no violence. It started peacefully and ended peacefully.

The police in Penang, perhaps have become slightly more familiar with non-violent demonstrations than their counterparts in big-durian KL. As far as this writer can remember, the police have seen large labour demonstrations during the mid and late 1980s when foreign investors, particularly from the United States began to axe workforces in their foreign

operations to slow the effects of economic depression in the US. The foreign plants doing primary manufacturing and assembly were first in line for the redundancy fire.

These were real protests led by trade union veterans of the labour movement. Penang was one of the major hubs of industrialisation and was known as "Silicon Island" at that time.

So what is a candlelight vigil compared to that? Nonetheless, while the police in Penang appeared to take the vigil as a matter of course, albeit pressured by HQ big-wigs to ensure things were kept to a minimum, the paranoia still remains.

A light for ISA detainees

Gerak Mansuhkan ISA (GMI), the "Abolish the ISA Movement" held its own candlelight vigil at Dataran Merdeka on 5 January 2008. It seemed an even more poignant affair, as family members of ISA detainees were present, including those of the Hindraf leaders recently detained under that law.

The police took a similarly negative stance and even tried to smear the GMI organisers by publicly making them out to be unreasonable. According to *Malaysiakini's* report, "Dang Wangi OCPD ACP Zulkarnain Abdul Rahman claimed that GMI had "refused" to submit an application form for the gathering when told to do so..."(*Malaysiakini*, 5 January 2008).

Syed Ibrahim Syed Noh, chairperson of the GMI coalition, refuted this when speaking to the press, saying that documents had been submitted to the police on 26 December 2007, and a subsequent letter sent two days later. Zulkarnain had even acknowledged this letter but refused the permit on 2 January 2008. As grounds for his refusal, he cited national security considerations and claimed that GMI was not a registered organisation.

The candlelight vigil, nevertheless, went ahead after the GMI expressed its determination to proceed with it. They negotiated with the police to spare them just a few minutes for their vigil.

The 20-minute vigil was a peaceful and apparently a quiet one with the 200-strong crowd agreeing to disperse when police 'threatened' to move in. Syed Ibrahim, himself urged the crowd to disperse, concluding that the aim of the vigil had been achieved. His words reveal the attitude and mood in which the vigil was carried out, "We wanted it to be a peaceful gathering, despite the police restrictions. We didn't want to be confrontational."

Given the nature of the issue and the poignancy of the event – families of ISA detainees were present to peacefully oppose the existence of this oppressive and draconian law in support of their loved ones – it is not difficult to understand the deep and painful emotions of those who wanted to continue the vigil. It felt like a wake for the death of human rights.



down Jalan Ampang to dodge arrest. What would they be arrested for?

Would they be arrested for being slow to comply with an unreasonable order? Would it matter if they stood on the sidewalk all night holding candles as one might do at a graveside? Would it matter if the general public chose to stare at them out of curiosity or simply walk past ignoring them? After all, one can choose whether to pay attention or not to things around oneself.

National security threat?

The Government's rigid hard-line stance – apparently to 'crush' all objections to its policies and laws by Malaysians – seems to be its unflinching response to these peaceful protests. The common denominator of police-initiated brutality and violence persists.

What and who is the threat to national security? Is it a group of people standing silently in the street holding lighted candles?

The paranoia is beyond reason and logic; it is apparently a symptom of insecurity. In this grievous state of affairs, where reason is increasingly diminishing, we can only hope that the light of human rights will continue to burn, although like a "candle in the wind" (Elton John).

"Truth will set us free, truth will set us free, one day. Deep in my heart, I do believe, the truth will set us free, one day"
(Song: "We Shall Overcome") q

V Raidu, the brother of V Ganabatirau, a detained Hindraf leader said, "I'm not just supporting my brother but all ISA detainees. I know the pain the detainees' families go through."

One would have expected the police to, at least, respect the feelings of these people, having shown themselves to be somewhat reasonable and sensitive until then.

Unfortunately, less humane and violent tendencies got the better of them.

The mourning was cut short by blasts from water cannon, drenching the peaceful 'mourners' as if they had been a brawling crowd. Authorities responded heavy-handedly to a peaceful gathering. The stragglers found themselves running

A year of bull, broken promises, “blog-heads”, bigots and bravehearts

by Martin Jalleh

Last year, 2007, was a “revealing” year indeed for Bolehland. Truth surfaced in spite of the spin and *sandiwara* by the experts of Pak Lah’s government.

It became clearer that Pak Lah’s chant of change was merely a charade. He had no concrete results to show – just cheap claptrap. Whatever the change, it was merely cosmetic. With a somnolent Prime Minister, surrounded by small-minded and self-serving sycophants

spewing out nonsensical verbiage, the Government stumbled from one comic caper to another.

Very symbolically, as the government’s delivery system fell apart, so did things in buildings such as Parliament, the world’s second largest court complex in Jalan Duta and even Putrajaya.

Below are some examples of a country in disarray, a government in denial and citizens in disgust.

Expanding economy?



Fifty years ago, in terms of economic development, we were second in Asia after Japan. In 2007, we lost out to Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong and now risk being overtaken by Thailand, Vietnam and even Indonesia. A United Nations

Conference on Trade and Development (Unctad) report on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) showed that Malaysia has much lower FDIs than many other countries in Asean such as Thailand and Indonesia

But the above sorry and scary scenario did not seem to bother the sedated government in 2007. A BN MP even declared in parliament that Malaysia had great cause to celebrate, for the country is 10 times more advanced than Ghana, which became independent in the same year as our country.

In June, the European Commission’s ambassador to Malaysia, Thierry Rommel, sparked a firestorm by declaring that the New Economic Policy (NEP) was discriminatory and amounted to protectionism

against foreign companies.

Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak called Rommel’s remarks “factually disputable”. But he did not go on to show where the latter had erred. Umno Youth leader Hishammuddin Hussein preferred to organise a BN Youth protest (an illegal gathering?) instead of an intelligent debate.

Yet Pak Lah would drop some of the NEP rules to lure foreign firms in health care, tourism and four other service sectors in the Iskandar Development Region (IDR) in southern Johor. This was consistent with the advice given by the project’s advisor, Musa Hitam, a former deputy premier.

The overly positive economic indicators by the government were eventually questioned by government backbenchers themselves. They expressed disappointment that the grassroots were not benefiting from domestic economic development (*theSun*, April 19, 2007).

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