



CHALLENGES AND CHOICES

in Malaysian politics and society

by

Chandra Muzaffar

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PREFACE

Any concerned Malaysian who has been following the leading events of the eighties would realize at once that this book deals with many of the major challenges of this decade.

The first section is on UMNO politics. There is no doubt at all that the factional feud within UMNO and all that it implies for Malay society and the Malaysian nation has been the most important event of the last three years or so. UMNO politics is of course closely linked to the whole question of democracy, or the lack of it. There is a whole section on this.

The related, though separate, challenge posed by the communal situation in the country is the next subject of study. There are 11 essays, some long, some short, in this section. 'Islam and the Question of Religion' which is of course intertwined with the communal problem is the title of the fourth section in this book. Certain controversies over specific Islamic issues which the Malaysian public is aware of, are discussed in some of the essays.

Three of the essays in the section on 'Education, Youth and Community Service' look at the problem of how we could inculcate moral values among the young. This has been a major concern of not only education planners but also our political leaders right through the eighties. The sixth and last section in the book contains reflections on Malaysian society.

It must be emphasised that while many of the essays analyse the challenges facing us, there is also an attempt to examine some of the choices before our people. A number of the essays on ethnic relations, for instance, suggest remedies to the deteriorating communal situation. Similarly, the section on Islam and religion discusses alternative paths to spirituality and ethics.

It will also be observed that many of the articles are in fact responses to particular episodes. As a case in point, there is an analysis of the UMNO party election of 1984. There is another article on the state of the nation after 25 years of Merdeka. No attempt has been

made to modify these pieces or to update them. These are studies of particular events or reflections on certain periods of our history and therefore provide insights into specific situations as they presented themselves in the ebb and flow of human affairs. It is important to retain the original analysis as it is, so that the reader would be able to see how a certain trend had developed over a period of time. This is particularly true of the sections on 'UMNO Politics' and 'Democracy'.

As far as the essays on democracy are concerned, it must be mentioned, at this point, that this book does not include some of my important writings on the subject before 1986. These writings are in *Freedom In Fetters* (Aliran, Penang, 1986). Nonetheless, the present collection has almost all the articles I had written on the crisis that confronted Malaysian democracy just before and immediately after the infamous Operation Lalang of 27 October 1987.

Readers will also notice that I have left out from this volume, all my essays on the New Economic Policy (NEP), the economy and development. This is because Aliran has published another collection of essays on these topics. It is called *The NEP, Development and Alternative Consciousness*. Aliran, Penang, 1989). All my articles on regional and international affairs have also been excluded. I hope to publish them in a separate volume sometime in the future.

While many of the articles in this book have been taken from the Aliran Monthly, a significant number of these essays have not appeared in any Aliran publication. In each of the six sections there are such pieces, which are either conference papers or articles written for books and journals published by other institutions at home and abroad.

One final word. There are many flaws in the book. I take full responsibility for them. Critical comments from readers would be most welcome.

Chandra Muzaffar

September 1989
Penang

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May God guide and protect all these good people.

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CONTENTS

UMNO POLITICS

Battle for UMNO.....	1
The UMNO Verdict.....	6
Where Have All the Issues Gone?.....	12
Dirty Politics.....	17
The UMNO Election and the Future.....	25
UMNO's Dominance.....	32
The Real Challenge Begins.....	38
Political Parties in Business.....	47
The UMNO Saga.....	56
Destroying Dissent; Lauding Loyalty.....	70
Johore Baru — A Communal Twist.....	78
UMNO Politics and Malay Unity.....	82
Ampang Jaya: Why The Semangat 46 Group Lost.....	88
Do Not Do To Others.....	94
UMNO in the Context of a Changing Malay Society.....	96

DEMOCRACY

Democracy in Malaysia: Greater Control in the Eighties.....	105
Disillusionment and Disaffection.....	109
The Barisan's 2/3 Majority: Why the Opposition Failed.....	114
Democracy: The Real Threat.....	125
Freedom and the Official Secrets Act (OSA).....	130
A Fettered Democracy Remains Fettered.....	144
ISA: The Struggle Goes On.....	149
Whitewash.....	163
The Muzzled Media.....	180
If Democracy Dies.....	188
Demolishing Myths About Democracy.....	193
A Long, Dark Year.....	202
Assault on the Judiciary: Public Perceptions.....	218

ETHNIC RELATIONS

Has the Communal Situation Worsened Over the Last Decade?....	224
The Indian Minority and Cultural Unity.....	259
Malaysian Identity and the Chinese Community.....	263
Integration and Education.....	270
The Protection of Minorities.....	283
Ethics, Ethnicity and Communication.....	305
Ethnic Polarization in Parliament?	312
Breaking the Ethnic Trap.....	315
Ethnic Time-Bomb.....	320
Living in a Multi-Ethnic Society.....	324

ISLAM AND THE QUESTION OF RELIGION

The Concept of Equality in Islamic Thought.....	328
Islamic Resurgence: A Global View.....	346
Art and Islam.....	388
Female Attire, Morality and Reform.....	392
Women, Religion and Humanity.....	405
Whipping: Reflections on the Syariah and the Quran.....	412
The Syariah and its Applicability to Modern Society.....	421
The Satanic Verses: To Kill or Not to Kill?.....	425
An Islamic State: The Solution?	430
Religion: Unity or Disunity?	435

EDUCATION, YOUTH AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

Values in the School System.....	441
Teaching Moral Values.....	453
Saints and Sinners.....	464
Medical Education: The Importance of Fundamental Changes....	469
The Youth Movement Today: An Evaluation.....	475
Service Clubs – Serving Humanity?	486

REFLECTIONS ON STATE AND SOCIETY

The State and Transnationalization in Malaysia.....	489
25 Years of Merdeka.....	507
Our Future.....	523
Stop the Rot.....	529
30 Years of Merdeka.....	539



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**UMNO
POLITICS**

BATTLE FOR UMNO

Politics As If People Do Not Matter

The upcoming UMNO election has already begun to receive wide coverage. Columns after columns in the local dailies are devoted to would-be contestants and the posts they might be contesting for, subtle campaign speeches by prospective candidates and unending pleas for Malay unity and UMNO solidarity. The way in which this event dominates the media could easily lead one to believe that nothing else of importance is happening in the country these days.

While UMNO has the lion's share of the coverage, the other two political parties which will be holding their elections in the near future, namely the MCA and the Gerakan, have also managed to get quite a bit of media exposure. In their case too, it is the nominations, the contestants, the rival cliques, their motives, their manoeuvres which make the news.

The UMNO election in particular which takes place once in three years has become such a big thing now that no other event comes anywhere close to it in terms of its political significance. It is undoubtedly a reflection of UMNO's dominance of the political process. It is UMNO – or rather its leadership – that sets the political mood, that creates the political atmosphere in the country. This is why it would not be wrong to suggest that ours is a one-party dominant system.

Perhaps this is not altogether accurate. The other Barisan National parties too wield some influence. But the total impact of all the other Barisan parties put together is not even half of the power UMNO commands. It may be more up to the mark, therefore, to suggest that ours is a one and a half-party dominant system.

Why UMNO in particular and the Barisan in general enjoy this dominance lies outside the scope of this analysis. At this point, we will merely observe that colonialism, certain other historical circumstances, the ethnic situation, the nature of the Merdeka movement, the limited success of first the Alliance and then the Barisan in various spheres, the

effective control of the ruling coalition over the entire political process, the relative affluence of the middle and upper classes, the general prosperity of the country and indeed the shortcomings of the opposition have all contributed to this dominance.

Whatever the reasons, UMNO and Barisan dominance is clearly unhealthy as evinced by the media coverage of the UMNO election. Firstly, it creates the impression that politics is nothing more than the pursuit of power. This will lead eventually to a Machiavellian notion of politics. Ethics, which should be the basis of politics, as it should be the foundation of life, will cease to exert any influence.

Secondly, the run-up to the UMNO election confirms one of the outstanding characteristics of Malaysian politics: its elitism. The media discussion about the election is confined to who will lead which division and who will be standing for the Supreme Council election, who are being nominated for the Vice-Presidencies, whether Tengku Razaleigh will contest the Deputy Presidency and so on. In other words, it is all about the UMNO elites.

The newspapers tell us very little about how ordinary UMNO members feel about the election. Do their feelings and thoughts matter at all? Are there certain issues which they regard as crucial in the coming contest? Will these issues emerge during the deliberations at the UMNO General Assembly in May? Or, are ordinary UMNO members there only to elect their leaders? Is it true, that once that purpose is served, the ordinary members — 'the little people' — do not count at all?

Thirdly, just as the UMNO election establishes the elitistic nature of UMNO politics, so it renders every other public issue insignificant and unimportant. In the last few months, there have been a number of extraordinary social controversies. It is of course true that some of them — like the constitutional crisis — have lost public appeal. But some of the questions it raised should still be discussed by the newspapers. Should we, for instance, undertake a comprehensive review of the constitution? Then there are other issues which continue to be crucial but are now ignored by the media. What is happening, one may ask, to the BMF probe? Is the Chairman of the internal committee of

inquiry – Tan Sri Ahmad Noordin, the Auditor-General – getting the cooperation of all concerned? At a more elementary level, has he even received his official letter of appointment?

There are other public matters too of great magnitude which the country will have to grapple with in the near future – and which have been pushed into the background by the UMNO election. One of them is a review of the New Economic Policy (NEP) which the government is supposed to be doing. Given the failings of the NEP, it is particularly important that the views of groups and individuals outside government are given maximum attention. There may be other ways of reducing poverty, of narrowing the gap between rich and poor, of restructuring society, which the government may not even have considered. With the overwhelming dominance of the UMNO election there is hardly any likelihood now of new perspectives on development influencing government thinking on the NEP.

Yet another issue of immense social significance which should be on the front pages of our newspapers is the eviction of 200,000 squatters from Malayan Railway land. What is unfolding before us is a human tragedy of colossal dimensions. The squatter problem is one of the most vivid illustrations of what underdevelopment means in a Third World country. And yet UMNO and MCA political leaders are too busy with their election campaigns to do anything substantial, beyond offering the usual token responses. If politics were conducted as if people mattered, they would spend much more time and energy trying to resolve the problem.

The subordination of issues which are vital to the human being, the way in which crucial social concerns have retreated into the shadows in the face of the UMNO election bodes ill for the nation as a whole. What makes it worse is yet another glaring fact: in the UMNO contest itself there are no real issues. Within the larger context of the UMNO philosophy and its policies, there could be different approaches to, varying emphases upon, a whole variety of issues which are important to the Malay community in particular and the Malaysian nation in general. As a case in point, candidate Y may want a rural development programme that emphasises rural industries while candidate Z may be more inclined to heavy industries and urbanisation. Candidate A may feel that more residential schools should be built to improve educa-

tional opportunities for Malay students while candidate B may want the government to overcome the drop-out problem in primary schools first. Or a certain candidate may be of the view that penghulus should be elected while another may be of the opinion that they should continue to be appointed.

Issues such as these do not seem to engage UMNO politicians involved in the election battle. It is not issues that differentiate one candidate from another. What separates them is the clique, the group, the camp to which each belongs. A certain chap may be regarded as so-and-so's man, while someone else may be seen as yet another leader's follower. It is these 'camps' with leaders and followers in each of them which dominate UMNO politics. They exist at federal, state, divisional and even branch levels. Loyalties don't always follow a straight line. This means that a certain branch leader may be in the camp of a certain divisional leader but the state leader he supports may not necessarily be the state leader that his divisional boss supports. This also shows that cliques and groups are not separated by rigid boundaries. There is a great deal of fluidity as members and lower-level leaders switch allegiances from election to election and sometimes from period to period as it suits their convenience. This fluidity and variations in loyalties at different levels are among the many factors which have prevented strong factions from developing within UMNO.

But the fact remains that personalities, not issues, count in UMNO elections. Groups and followings, not policies and programmes, constitute the substance of UMNO politics. If there is any issue which influences candidacies it is the perennial ethnic question. In UMNO, as in other communal parties, it is there all the time. This is why every candidate, no matter what position he is fighting for, is careful to present himself as a protector of the community. What this means in essence is that one must articulate and act from an ethnic perspective. On the economy, on political power, on cultural identity, on national symbols one must be seen as a leader who will not give in to the "others".

Preserving one's ethnic image is not like the other issues we mentioned a while ago. For it is conditioned almost entirely by a sentiment, an emotion which cannot be subjected to reason and

analysis. It is simply a feeling about one's race and its interests. (It is equally strong in the other communities). Unlike an issue like rural industries or dropouts the pros and cons cannot be examined objectively and dispassionately.

At this point we may want to ask: but how does all this make UMNO elections different from what takes place in other countries? Isn't it true that in other multi-ethnic societies too, ethnic sentiments overwhelm other rational issues? Isn't it true that in other societies, whether they are multi-ethnic or not, we also get groups and cliques in their political parties?

All this is true but the difference is that in many other countries socio-economic, educational and administrative issues which are independent of ethnic considerations or group loyalties also engage candidates and voters. For instance, in multi-ethnic India, the ruling Congress party embodies varying ideological tendencies. We can speak of groups that want more socialism and groups that want less socialism. In Britain, within the Conservative party, you have the more 'progressive' conservative group presently linked to Edward Heath and a more 'reactionary' conservative group generally associated with Margaret Thatcher. Even in the ruling Liberal Democratic party in Japan, it is not just a case of factions led by powerful party brokers; on certain issues like Japanese rearmament and international trade they hold different positions.

Why are issues as such not central to elections within UMNO? This is a subject which deserves a separate inquiry.

Explanatory Note

Written in January 1984. It has appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (Vol IV No. 2, February 1984).

THE UMNO VERDICT

Political commentators were right in hailing the outcome of the 1984 UMNO election as a triumph for party President, Mahathir Mohamad. An overwhelming majority of those elected are known to be loyal to him or to those who are identified as his most ardent loyalists. They can be expected to share his vision and support his policies.

The Mahathir triumph reveals itself in several ways. The comfortable victories of Anwar Ibrahim and Datin Paduka Rafidah Aziz as UMNO Youth and Wanita UMNO Presidents respectively; Datuk Musa Hitam's win over Tengku Razaleigh in the fight for the Deputy Presidency by a slightly bigger margin; the election of Datuk Wan Mokhtar and Datuk Abdullah Badawi as Vice-Presidents; and the entry of a number of new faces into the Supreme Council.

More than the victories of his loyalists, it is perhaps the defeats of those who were lukewarm to his leadership which prove his hold over the party. Among the obvious examples would be Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, Datuk Harun Idris and others like Datuk Manan Othman, Datuk Mohammed Rahmat and Tan Sri Othman Saat.

Both the victories and the defeats show that Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir has finally got his own team to lead UMNO. In this connection, it must be remembered that at the last election in 1981 when he first became President, Dr. Mahathir was merely filling the position vacated by Tun Hussein Onn; he had neither the time nor the opportunity to get his own men and women into the party's Supreme Council.

The most obvious explanation for Dr. Mahathir's success lies in his position. An incumbent President who is also Prime Minister has a tremendous advantage on his side. He can use all the resources at his disposal to ensure the election of those who support him.

In the case of an UMNO President, this advantage is further reinforced by a well-known trait in Malay political culture: a strong sense of loyalty and attachment to the leader. The overall leader in

particular is given complete trust. Support for him from the party rank-and-file is guaranteed. This is why in UMNO's 38 years as the country's leading party, the Party President has almost always been returned unopposed – with the exception of one occasion. I have argued elsewhere that this attitude to the top leader is a historical continuity inherited from traditional Malay society with its unquestioning allegiance to that monarch. It is, however, an attitude that is beginning to lose its hold upon the Malay mind.

It is worth observing, at this point, that the UMNO membership withholds its unquestioning loyalty only if it feels that the leader is no longer protecting the vital ethnic symbols of the Malay community or if it thinks that he has conceded too much to the non-Malay communities. This is what happened to Datuk Onn Jaafar in 1951 when he suggested that UMNO open its doors to the non-Malays. It happened again to Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1969 when a substantial segment of the Party felt that it was his alleged concessions to the non-Malays that had resulted in the erosion of Malay political power: In both cases however the leaders were not challenged openly; they withdrew on their own accord.

Dr. Mahathir has, since assuming high office, made sure that the image he acquired in the immediate post-69 years as a champion of the Malay cause would remain untarnished. This is in fact the third factor that accounts for his strength in the party. His continuous emphasis upon Islam and Islamization has established his fidelity to the most significant of Malay ethnic symbols. At the same time, he has often linked his concern for right work attitudes and right values with the "dignity of the race". Besides, he has done nothing which can be interpreted as conceding to "the other side".

However, more important than his image, it is his relationship to those interests that the party really represents that helped secure his triumph. Though the bulk of UMNO members are from the poor and disadvantaged majority, the party is actually the vehicle of a rapidly expanding Malay middle-class. The presence and power of this class has been one of the most significant aspects of UMNO politics since 1969. Dr. Mahathir has always been the spokesman of the dominant segment of this class. His *Malay Dilemma* is proof of this.

As part of its ideology, this segment of the Malay middle-class sees strengthening the Malay economic position mainly in terms of a powerful role for Malay capital and entrepreneurship in the upper echelons of commerce and industry. Policies such as privatization and Malaysia Incorporated would therefore be regarded as providing opportunities for this class to accumulate wealth. Even the "Look East" policy — if one of its objectives is to expand the scope for joint ventures between Malay entrepreneurs and Japanese and South Korean capitalists — would be viewed as active support for the economic interests of this class.

Just as all these policies — privatization, Malaysia Incorporated and Look East — would have endeared Mahathir to crucial groups in UMNO, his conflict with the monarchy last year might have also boosted his standing with that segment of the Malay middle-class. For a growing middle-class aware of its political strength is bound to challenge, sooner or later, the role of the traditional elites. It is essentially a question of the middle-class seeking to widen its political power — for its own sake.

While all these factors explain Mahathir's triumph, there are other influences at work in the party too which must be taken into consideration if we want to understand the overall election results. To start with, there are certain continuing influences in UMNO. The Mentris Besar are still a force to reckon with as the victory of their candidate Datuk Wan Mokhtar proved. This does not mean however that Mentris Besar constitute an autonomous power independent of the Party President. If their candidate was someone that the President did not approve, it is quite likely that he would have lost. Their influence over the delegates merely helped to ensure that one of the President's men obtained the highest number of votes among the three Vice-Presidents.

The voting pattern also indicates that UMNO delegates continue to be mature enough to balance various interests. Thus, while they elected two new Vice-Presidents, they decided to keep Ghafar Baba with his long party experience as the third Vice-President. It is partly because both Tengku Razaleigh and Tengku Ahmad Rithaudeen from Kelantan were defeated, that the state's Mentri Besar, Datuk Mohamad Yaacob, did fairly well in the election for ordinary Supreme Council seats. It is interesting that while there is no one from Pahang in the

upper stratum of the party, the man who topped the election for the ordinary Supreme Council seats was from that state.

Datuk Khalil Yaacob's creditable performance also shows that as a group, school-teachers continue to exert some influence — though their impact had declined considerably. As in the past, media exposure seems to have played some role too. This is reflected in the strong showing of individuals like Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir.

Perhaps more important than all these considerations is the character of the candidate. It has been observed that among Mahathir loyalists those who displayed qualities such as humility and magnanimity and did not run down their rivals in their campaigns did better than those who were boastful and arrogant. Humility has always been a highly cherished personality trait in UMNO circles. It has greater value than ability or knowledge.

These continuing influences in the UMNO polls have to be juxtaposed with what appear to be certain new trends. The rapid rise of young, well-educated individuals in the party hierarchy has been interpreted as a vote for the technocrat. This may be true. However, what is even more evident is the strong endorsement of candidates with clear Islamic credentials. It is part of the explanation for the performance of Datuk Wan Mokhtar, Datuk Abdullah Badawi and Dato Seri Kamaruddin Mohammed Isa.

One might want to ask at this point why the business group which is now a significant element in the General Assembly has not been included as one of the new influences? The influence of the business group is different from other influences upon the party. For as we have already noted the UMNO leadership's philosophy, the party's ideology itself is orientated towards the interests of the business class and of capital in general. By supporting Mahathir, Malay capitalism would be advancing its own position. The emergence of a whole lot of delegates from the business world therefore serves mainly to reinforce UMNO's existing philosophy. For that reason, it does not represent a new influence or new trend.

In the midst of all these trends which are essentially supportive of the present UMNO leadership, one observes that some of the candidates

who went against the wishes of the President not to contest certain positions somehow managed to get a portion of the votes too. What does this indicate? Does it suggest that the Mahathir leadership does not have total control over the party? Does it mean that there are still pockets of autonomous power within UMNO? This is perhaps one way of reading the support that defeated candidates like Tengku Razaleigh, Datuk Suhaimi Kamaruddin and Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail commanded at the polls.

Having autonomous bases of support does not mean however that the individuals concerned are opposed to the Party President. On the contrary, true to the UMNO tradition, they had all pledged complete loyalty to Dr. Mahathir Mohamad when they were campaigning for their respective positions.

What an autonomous base indicates is that within the "loyalty to the top leader" framework there is another, lower level of loyalty to a state or group leader who for some reason or other is able to create a devoted following. More specifically, this means that while not being "disloyal" to the party President, the followers of someone like Tengku Razaleigh may be totally, blindly loyal to him. This was also the attitude towards Datuk Harun among his followers in his heyday almost a decade ago. It is tempting to draw a parallel to the way in which strong-willed, independent-minded Bendaharas and chieftains in the Melaka Sultanate of old exercised total authority over their unquestioning followers while remaining loyal to the monarch. Are we faced with perhaps yet another historical continuity?

As long as UMNO politics is personality-oriented and as long as UMNO does not come to grips with fundamental social challenges, there is every possibility that autonomous bases of support for some leader or other will sprout from time to time. Be that as it may, the autonomous bases of support that exist at the moment do not in any way diminish the significance of the victory of the present UMNO leadership.

The long-term question however is: what will this victory lead to? Will there be a more determined, concerted push for all the policies of the Mahathir government from Look East and work ethics to in-house

unions and heavy industries? What will be the consequences arising from this for the direction of our development? Will it lead to greater inequities or greater redistribution of wealth and opportunities? How will it affect political freedom? Will it have any impact at all upon ethnic relations? More important, will there be a greater emphasis upon Islamisation and how will that influence other nation-building programmes?

It is perhaps a little too early to try to provide answers to these questions. Let us wait and see what happens in the next few months.

Explanatory Note

Written in June 1984. It was first published in the *Aliran Monthly* (July 1984).

WHERE HAVE ALL THE ISSUES GONE?

Why is it that fundamental issues such as poverty, the direction of economic development, corruption and civil liberties are seldom explored in depth within UMNO?

If anything, the 1984 UMNO General Assembly confirmed this. True, there was some concern about poverty. Some doubts were raised about whether all the heavy industries being planned by the government would really benefit the rural poor. Corruption was discussed but only in relation to the Bumiputra Malaysia Finance (BMF) scandal and Jalil Ibrahim's murder. For some delegates the question of democracy within the party appeared to be a major grievance. But none of these issues were probed in a serious, sustained manner. The underlying considerations, the basic values involved in each of them were not brought to the fore and subjected to vigorous analysis and evaluation. For instance, those concerned about poverty did not try to focus upon uneconomic holdings in the rural economy or low urban incomes or the lack of access to capital and technology among the disadvantaged majority. Similarly comments on heavy industries should have led logically to an appraisal of the type of industrialisation and development we are pursuing. The BMF scandal could have been linked to the way in which our public corporations and state agencies are managed. Since the Presidential address gave a lot of attention to UMNO's commitment to Islam, the Assembly should have at least tried to understand why there is an Islamic resurgence in the country.

Instead of sober, serious reflection of this sort the General Assembly chose to be utterly frivolous even on public policies which have far-reaching implications for the future — like the new population target of 70 million. The debate on this issue was an occasion for some delegates to vent their prejudices about women. Indeed, some of the views expressed about women's role in society were downright degrading. Some UMNO males seem to have forgotten that Wanita UMNO is in fact the electoral backbone of the party.

This brings us back to the original question: why isn't there an analytical, evaluative attitude towards fundamental issues within UMNO?

The ideology of ethnicity has something to do with it. Since everything is subsumed within Malayism, issues such as poverty or corruption do not seem to have a validity of their own. This is why even Jalil's murder was viewed from the angle "of the dignity of the race". What Malayism – or for that matter "Sinicism" or "Indianism" – does is that it reduces every other social question to secondary significance. If a certain non-ethnic issue enjoys any importance at all it is in relation to ethnicity, to Malayism.

Now since ethnic security is paramount from the standpoint of the ideology of Malayism, anything that causes controversy or creates conflict within the community is regarded as inimical to its wellbeing. It does not matter if what is at stake is a humanitarian principle or an ethical issue. It does not matter that there are already divergent groups and classes in the Malay community which must logically produce different ideas on social reconstruction and seek different routes to social action. Indeed, recognition of these differences is an important precondition for the development of thought and reflection in any society. However all this does not matter to Malayism. What matters is the fear that debate can lead to divisions, that divisions can result in disunity and disunity can weaken the community's solidarity. When that happens, the ideologues of Malayism argue, the community will feel threatened. This why, they say, in order to maintain the solidarity of the community, analysis and evaluation will have to be set aside.

Besides, continuous articulation of non-ethnic issues along non-ethnic lines will undoubtedly undermine the ideology of Malayism itself. For if the great challenges confronting the Malay community are analysed thoroughly to establish their root causes, Malayism will eventually be exposed as a hollow ideology that conceals and camouflages the truth about the Malay situation. It will be seen as a cloak that shields various vested interests in Malay society. UMNO would not want such a thing to happen since it will spell its own doom as the hero of Malayism. And so the safest line of action to take is to discourage serious thinking and reflection on fundamentals.

However, it is not just the ideology of ethnicity that stifles thought; equally damaging is the practice of unquestioning loyalty to the national leadership. If we want to evaluate public policies we will

have to analyse the leadership that is largely responsible for them. Its strengths and weaknesses will have to be laid bare. But if one has been conditioned culturally, through the perpetuation of certain feudal attitudes, not to question leaders, it becomes very difficult to scrutinize national policies. The feeling has been created that it is not the proper thing to do. Criticising the top leader is sometimes even regarded as an act of rebellion. Because he is above question, because he is given so much trust, the top leader enjoys a degree of latitude that most Presidents of democratic parties do not have. This is why his wish becomes law and his will becomes policy so easily, irrespective of whether it has any merit or not. It is partly because of this relationship between leader and led, that if any adverse comment of the leader has to be made, it is done in such an indirect, roundabout way, often laced with jokes and parables so that the impact would be lessened. Of course this attitude is being slowly eroded as a result of a number of historical and contemporary developments. Still, it continues to exercise considerable influence upon the UMNO mind. In fact, obedience to leadership as a trait in UMNO politics is being sustained by the ethnic factor. What this means is that the fear that one's community will be overwhelmed by the others sometimes persuades ordinary people to give their unquestioning loyalty to their national leaders in the hope that they would protect their interests. The leaders, on the other hand, do not hesitate to manipulate this attitude to their advantage. As a result of all this, crucial challenges facing the nation are often ignored because UMNO had failed to examine them critically.

The lack of political freedom has also been responsible for this sad state of affairs. This is particularly true of the Malay community. Control of political ideas and activities which are opposed to UMNO's perception of society is very rigid. The content of the major Malay dailies which are all allied to the party is proof of this. There is hardly any critical appraisal of UMNO's concept of development or of its policies like the eradication of poverty. Invariably any proposal made by the UMNO leadership receives almost immediate endorsement in Utusan or Berita Harian editorials. Public opinion is sometimes mobilised to support the leadership. Dissenting views on major policy issues are either ignored or severely censored. Radio and Television Malaysia serves as an even more effective channel for perpetuating the government position. Indeed RTM is unashamedly an instrument of govern-

ment propaganda. In such a situation, how can one expect independent thinking to develop within the Malay community? How can one expect UMNO delegates who are strongly influenced by this media environment to provide dissenting perspectives on important social issues? How can one expect even intelligent interest in fundamental questions of development and social change when the media's real purpose is to promote superficial, consumer-oriented, entertainment-centred culture?

The failure of the media to cultivate serious thinking would not have had such a disastrous impact upon Malay attitudes in general and UMNO's values in particular if the quality of Malay dissent was different. For if Islamic dissent – which is the only form of Malay dissent that enjoys widespread legitimacy – was concerned with basic questions such as structural inequalities, the direction of development, the nature of leadership and so on, then UMNO would have been forced to raise its own standard of thinking and analysis. As it is, PAS and other so-called Islamic groups are all obsessed with the creation of an "Islamic State" which they have never been able to explain in depth and detail. It is primarily a slogan which expresses itself once in a while through certain notions of civil and criminal law, personal morality, social prohibitions, and the like. What is worse, since the slogan of an Islamic state is presented as an ideal that every Muslim should strive for, it absolves one from the obligation of analysing and understanding the situation as it is. There is no need to study poverty, to evaluate industrialisation or urbanisation policies, to find out why corruption has become more serious or how the erosion of civil liberties can be stopped for everything will be resolved the moment an Islamic state is established! As a result of this "magic formula" approach, Malay thinking at the level of concrete social challenges remains underdeveloped. There is no real awareness of the root causes of the nation's major social ills or how we can all try to resolve them.

It is interesting in this respect to compare Islamic dissent groups to UMNO. Though political adversaries, they are very similar as far as their impact upon intellectual underdevelopment is concerned. In the case of UMNO, an underlying fear which is the basis of Malayism has, in a sense, smothered thinking and analysis: in the case of the Islamic dissident groups, an overarching hope embodied in the Islamic state has rendered reflection and evaluation superfluous. They are both two sides of the same coin.

To top it all, the absence of a genuine intellectual tradition has also contributed to the type of superficial thinking that prevails at UMNO General Assemblies. By an intellectual tradition here one means a tradition of thinking and reflection in relation to social challenges. One can say that in the ASEAN region, Indonesia and the Philippines have such a tradition. Way back in the 1920's and 30's Indonesian intellectuals were already debating in depth the nature of the Indonesian economy and problems of colonial underdevelopment. It is worth noting, in this connection, that the current concern in Malaysia about Islam and nationalism was discussed in Indonesia about 60 years ago! This is an indication of the intellectual "lag" that exists in our society. I have explained elsewhere why this is so. Of course, there were intellectual groups in our country too who tried to analyse and examine social issues. The Islamic reformers of the 20's and 30's, and the socialists of the 30's would be some examples. But these movements were never really strong and were easily crushed by the British colonial power and the feudal rulers.

From what has been said, it is obvious that there are many complex factors that explain the lack of attention to fundamental social issues within UMNO. It is doubtful if the situation will change significantly in the near future. One can only hope that as the socio-economic environment becomes more difficult to manage, UMNO, the Islamic dissidents and the media will start analysing the root causes of our nation's maladies.

Explanatory Note

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DIRTY POLITICS!

There is an unhealthy trend developing in UMNO. The party President himself had warned delegates to the recent UMNO General Assembly of its dire consequences.

It is alleged that there were actual cash bribes offered to delegates by candidates standing for various supreme council positions. In other instances, dinners and free trips overseas were organised as inducements. Delegates were sometimes promised certain offices and promotions if they backed a particular candidate.

Campaigning within UMNO in fact went beyond bribes and promises. There were even cases of charms and magic being used and reputable *bomohs* were said to have been retained as "consultants" by some of the more superstitious candidates.

As if all this wasn't enough, the smear campaign in this year's party election was far more vicious and vindictive than anything that had happened before. Poison letters containing sordid – often senseless – revelations of a rival's private life were circulated far and wide. Concerted attempts were made to vilify an opponent's political career through cleverly manufactured rumours supported by a craftily orchestrated "whispering" campaign.

What is even more frightening, however, is the use of the death threat against certain candidates. Though hardly pervasive, it is the sort of tactic that can catch on, if left unchecked. An equally alarming development is the outbreak of actual violence at meetings at the level of the branch and division.

Everything considered then it is perhaps not wrong to suggest that UMNO politics have become dirty. Of course even in the past there was quite a bit of manipulation, some underhand tactics. However they were nothing compared to what is happening now.

Why have dirty politics become so pervasive? A direct answer would perhaps be that the desire to seek, and to retain, power has

become so great an obsession that all scruples have been sacrificed. But what one has to find out is why it has become such an obsession.

One of the reasons could be a rapid decline in the sense of idealism within the party. When UMNO fought the Malayan Union and later worked towards Merdeka, there was at least a feeling among leaders and members that a noble mission had to be accomplished, a mission that transcended narrow self-interest. It was a mission which embodied a certain notion of those higher ideals in life such as freedom and dignity. Since it was directed at an external foe, it strengthened the sinews of solidarity within UMNO.

In the task of nation-building there is of course no alien focus which can help to forge internal unity. Nonetheless, nation-building could have elicited the selfless – rather than the self-serving – qualities in the people if it was guided by a different philosophy. This we shall discuss later on.

For the time being let us note that the UMNO and government concept of nation-building is bound to breed negative, unhealthy attitudes which are indirectly responsible for the situation in the party today. Nation-building in countries like ours is seen as a bureaucratic, technocratic process where objectives are planned, resources organised and people mobilised to fit a certain concept of progress. It is a sterile process which stresses growth and GNP and productivity for their own sake. Since it emphasises goals which are so external to the human being – and especially to the altruistic aspect of man – it cannot inspire anyone to subordinate self-interest to a selfless cause. Within such a situation, it is logical to expect party leaders to place their own political ambitions above almost everything else.

What makes it worse is an extremely unequal social structure where small but significant groups at the apex of society control wealth and command power. It is this inequality that whets the appetite of many a politician to get into the elite stratum for there is so much to be gained by being at that level. If a politician is already there he will do all he can to ensure that he remains at the top.

This is particularly true of many developing countries where those at the apex of the political pyramid exercise direct or indirect control

over all the other pyramids on the landscape. It is this that makes our situation different from the liberal democracies of the West where the economic, cultural and intellectual spheres are relatively autonomous and therefore not necessarily subservient to the will of the political elites. For that reason, politics is not the only magnet that attracts the ambitious and the enterprising elements in society. In societies like ours, on the other hand, since politics reign supreme and it is political power, more than economic enterprise, that determines the pattern of development, there is a tendency to seek out the political kingdom – before anything else. This is why it is true to say that the primacy of politics has also served to intensify the competition for political power.

When political power is what matters in an unequal society guided by a technocratic vision of progress, one can be sure that the drive towards development will only strengthen the position of the political elites. The greater the development drive, the more powerful the political elites. For all three factors – the technocratic vision of progress, unequal social structures and the primacy of politics – enable the political elites to concentrate power and authority in their hands as they organise people and resources in the name of development. This concentration of power and authority is what persuades many budding politicians to gravitate towards establishment politics. As they seek elite roles, the struggle for power becomes fierce and furious.

It is this entire process then that is largely responsible for the overwhelming dominance of UMNO elites in national politics. If anything, the situation has been made worse by the way in which UMNO has formulated and implemented policies that manifest the logic of the process we have described. The New Economic Policy (NEP) is an outstanding example. It has allowed the UMNO elites to extend their tentacles everywhere. It has endowed them with unbridled power over all sectors of the economy. Education, culture, the arts and even sports are influenced by NEP considerations. Because the NEP has enhanced the power of the UMNO elites, the scramble for control of the party has exceeded all limits of decency and propriety. Indeed, the NEP has created a situation where an UMNO member's status in some other, totally unrelated area of activity is dependent to a great extent upon his position, or the strength of the clique he supports, within the party.

If NEP power has created more intense competition within UMNO, so has the expansion of the Malay middle-class. In fact, the growth of the Malay middle-class is due partly to the NEP. As the numbers in that class increase by leaps and bounds, as the vast majority of those who are politically inclined among them turn to establishment politics, the upper echelons in UMNO find it more difficult to accommodate these competing political aspirations. And the competitors themselves use all sorts of methods to obtain places of influence within the UMNO hierarchy.

Intra-party competition has become more acute because there are now more than a handful of millionaires within and without UMNO who back rival candidates. For they know how vital the nature of the composition of the UMNO leadership is to their own business interests. By pouring money into the election campaign, these millionaires have indirectly helped to fuel rivalries. They have made vote-buying, for instance, a significant feature of UMNO politics.

Elements in the party leadership who occupy important government positions are also responsible for the deterioration in ethical standards. If money was used by some wealthy political aspirants, the state machinery was exploited by certain government leaders to ensure their victories. Projects were launched, courses organised, subsidies given during the election period to enable them to obtain maximum mileage from all these activities. It is alleged that minor government officials in the party rank-and-file serving particular bosses were even instructed to vote certain candidates — or face the consequences.

In a sense, this blatant abuse of state power is nothing new. In the past it was used, more often than not, against opposition political parties. Indeed, there isn't a single general election where the ruling coalition (of which UMNO is the mainstay) had not manipulated the instruments of state authority for party purposes. It is ironical that the unscrupulous methods it has always used against others, are now beginning to affect its own solidarity and stability. It is as if one's sins are finally turning against oneself. This is why the unethical conduct of UMNO and the Barisan Nasional in past General Elections must also be seen as a major cause of dirty politics within UMNO and the other Barisan parties today. For a bad example was set. Principles of integrity and honesty were trampled upon for political gain. Why should one be

surprised that the same thing is now happening in other types of elections?

This in fact brings us to another point. If UMNO and the Barisan had treated General Elections and the democratic process with greater respect perhaps some of the unethical practices within the party would not have developed the way they have. For if the ruling coalition had not curbed legitimate electoral politics through various manoeuvres, there might still be a viable opposition today. A viable opposition, especially a Malay opposition, would have compelled contending cliques within UMNO to pay more attention to the larger party interest. It would have reduced internal dissension. At the same time, if general elections were meaningful, there would have been greater concern with crucial issues fundamental to genuine social change. It is quite conceivable that it would have led to some re-orientation in UMNO's own thinking. There might have been less obsession with personalities *per se* which has undoubtedly contributed to the intensity of intra-party power struggles. By rendering the electoral process meaningless UMNO has therefore indirectly brought about its own instability.

From our analysis it is apparent that the emasculation of electoral democracy, the abuse of state power in general elections, the misuse of government machinery in intra-party competition, the influence of money through new Malay millionaires, competing political aspirations within an expanding Malay middle class, the pervasive power of the NEP, the concentration of power through the development drive, the primacy of politics, the unequal social structure, the bureaucratic, technocratic character of the nation-building process and the decline of political idealism have all contributed to a weakening of UMNO's moral fibre. Is it possible to arrest this unhealthy trend? Can we check dirty politics in UMNO?

The real solutions which deal with the root causes are long-term ones. They demand the sort of wholistic transformation in both values and structures which the present leadership is not likely to undertake. We shall not discuss these solutions in detail here since they have been analysed elsewhere. There are also other immediate remedies which are feasible within the existing order — provided our leaders are prepared to act with courage and integrity.

If we want to infuse idealism and create a commitment to altruistic values among leaders and people, then we must cease to emphasise nation-building and instead concentrate upon humanizing the human being. For humanization — unlike nation-building — is a process that can be made directly relevant to the well-being of each and every person. It will involve the human being liberating himself from both his inner shackles of greed and hate and his outer bondages of exploitation and oppression. In the process, he will discover the humanity in him which is his true self. It is a humanity which will express itself through a commitment to translate transcendent ideals of freedom and justice and love and compassion into living realities. The act of becoming human in this manner will transform him into a selfless person with sublime ideals. This is one way of checking the politics of power and money — and indeed all that is base and vile in the social order.

But bringing forth the humanity in man is only possible if family relationships, educational institutions, the economic system, the political and administrative set-up are all transformed in such a manner that eternal, spiritual values dominate thought and action in every sense. As an example, working hours, the nature of work, the type of technology and the size and structure of the community should be such that the family will have all the time to enjoy life and love. Similarly, the economy should be so organised that the basic sources of wealth will be in the hands of the community as a whole and individuals and groups will find it necessary to cooperate with one another so that the well-being of everyone is assured. Likewise, the primary political and administrative unit should be the local community. Since the individual will be able to relate to it more easily than to a large, anonymous state, he will feel less alienated. Indeed, it will enhance his involvement through activities which he can identify with since he will have little difficulty in understanding the needs and interests of his immediate community. In this way, he will come to know freedom and responsibility in the real sense. There will be less obsession with seeking power and position. Power in any case will be diffused through numerous local communities.

It follows from all this that there will be no unequal social structures which we observed earlier was one of the causes of the drive towards power. Indeed, there will be no class divisions. By the same

token, development will not lead to the concentration of power which in turn propels political passions since the underlying vision of progress and the structure of society will be defined by the goal of humanizing man – and not by the aim of maximising profits or expanding production.

Leaving aside these real solutions to the problem of untrammelled quest for power, there are some less comprehensive measures which the UMNO leadership can adopt if it wants to. It can, for instance, draw up specific and general rules on intra-party competition. It should ensure the strict observance of these rules through an elections committee which will be a standing committee of the party appointed by the General Assembly. The committee could comprise party elders and respected individuals who are not aligned to any clique nor subservient to the leadership.

Though the committee would not be able to expel any member who violates the election rules, it should have the power to recommend disciplinary action to the party's Supreme Council. It should also be able to check any malpractice and to caution any party member.

To make it more effective, one could consider requiring all candidates at every level – branch, division or supreme council – to sign statutory declarations which state clearly that they will abide by the election rules and the party constitution. These declarations would of course be valid in a court of law.

In the ultimate analysis, however, whether a declaration serves a purpose or not depends largely upon the integrity of the candidate himself. In a sense whether election rules and an election committee will work also depends upon the integrity of its members and of the party as a whole.

As far as both proposals go, the courage and honesty of the party leadership will be equally decisive. For without these qualities at the pinnacle of UMNO, it will not be possible to convince other officials and ordinary members that the leadership is serious and sincere about ridding the party of dirty politics.

However serious and sincere the leadership, we should not forget that these are short-term remedies which will not bring about those fundamental transformations that we talked about. That such transformations are urgent is underscored by the parlous state of party politics in so many parts of the world. In the communist states for instance it is not unusual to employ the most unscrupulous methods to secure positions in the party hierarchy. Even in non-communist democracies in the Third World like India and Sri Lanka, intra-party elections are often characterised by bribes and threats and some of the other unhealthy features we observed in the UMNO case. Party elections in both Japan and the United States have a lot to do with money, manipulation and giant corporations. It is perhaps in the established West European democracies that intra-party contests are relatively free of unethical practices. But even in these societies money and government power do play a role in general elections. This shows that there is still a certain degree of dirt in their politics which is linked to prevailing structures and values.

Hence the importance of a new politics which is part of a new vision of the human being.

Explanatory Note

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THE UMNO ELECTION AND THE FUTURE

Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's victory was expected. An incumbent President of a party who is also the Prime Minister has a tremendous advantage over his rivals. This advantage is to some extent psychological since high office commands the aura of authority and the prestige of power.

In Malaysia, the advantage of incumbency is enhanced by other factors. There is still a certain degree of reverence for the man at the top – reverence rooted in the feudal attitude of unquestioning loyalty to the leader. The strong challenge against the UMNO President and Prime Minister does not mean that this attitude has disappeared altogether. It is there but devoid of its earlier pull. Dr. Mahathir and his supporters were in fact referring to this 'loyalty trait' when they kept on alluding to 'UMNO and Malay tradition'.

Besides, Dr. Mahathir quite unabashedly exploited the facilities of his Prime Ministership for his UMNO campaign. Apart from using the Prime Minister's executive jet in his campaign trips, he had no qualms about mobilising Government departments, statutory agencies and state institutions. Thus, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Works, the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority (MIDA) and Bank Negara all came to his aid with facts and figures to counter some of the allegations made by his rivals. The announcement made by the Minister of Finance two days before the UMNO Election, withdrawing the proposal to scrap the pension scheme for those who had served in the Government for less than 10 years, was perhaps the most blatant example of the misuse of State authority. It showed that the Government was prepared to forego the 852 million ringgit it would have saved annually through the abolition of the scheme for the sake of ensuring victory for Dr. Mahathir's group.

The use of State facilities and State power aside, the Mahathir group also managed to project itself as the only real defender of Malay rights and Malay interests. Of course, their opponents from the Razaleigh-Musa camp also presented themselves as protectors of 'the Malay language, religion and culture'. But the Mahathir group was more

successful partly because it linked its defender's role to certain 'external threats'. The group claimed that there was a Zionist threat, in addition to the threat posed by the West and the Superpowers.

The idea of an outside threat has, in the past, often worked well with UMNO in particular and the Malay community in general. Such threats, whether real or imagined, rapidly assume some credence within groups or communities that are psychologically insecure. Party members or members of the community in question, quickly close ranks and give their unquestioning loyalty to their leaders. This time, however, 'the external threat' did not produce the same impact. It may indicate that the feeling of insecurity is beginning to recede within a community which is not only politically preeminent but no longer perceives itself as economically helpless.

If anything produced a great impact, it was all those allegations against Tengku Razaleigh and Datuk Musa. Backed by both the print and electronic media, Mahathir and his friends skillfully exposed how the two men were also involved in the decision-making process of some of the so-called 'prestige projects' that they were now criticising. More than that, the media was used, without any sense of restraint, to create doubts and suspicions about the character and integrity of Razaleigh and Musa and their followers. All sorts of skeletons were pulled out of their cupboards — while the skeletons in the cupboards of Mahathir and his team could not be dragged out and put on display in the same manner, thanks to a controlled media which, during the UMNO campaign, became incredibly sycophantic. Needless to say, a couple of newspapers refused to cringe in abject servility.

However, in the ultimate analysis, it was not the allegations against them which defeated the Razaleigh-Musa team. Razaleigh and Musa failed to convince the majority of delegates that they could work together. After all they had fought two bitter campaigns against each other for the Deputy Presidency of UMNO in 1981 and 1984. Their followers had been in mutually antagonistic camps for the last six years. It was undeniably true that there had been some victimization of individuals in one camp by leaders in the other camp. There was the fear that if Razaleigh and Musa were elected to the two top posts they would not be able to forge a workable relationship in the party, and

more so, the Government. The earlier rivalry could force one to upstage the other. UMNO wanted a stable, workable pair at the apex of party and Government. Mahathir and his 'running-mate' Abdul Ghaffar Baba, had demonstrated that they could work together. By implication, they were in a better position than their opponents to ensure a stable, secure national leadership. Perhaps this was what clinched victory for them!

Now that Dr. Mahathir has won, how will he handle party and national affairs? This is an important question to ask because the results of the election for the UMNO Presidency show clearly that there is widespread dissatisfaction with Dr. Mahathir's leadership. How else can one interpret the 48.5 per cent vote that went against him? Dr. Mahathir won by the skin of his teeth; he had a majority of only 43 votes! (Mahathir polled 761 votes as against Razaleigh's 718).

The narrowness of his victory is significant for two reasons. There has never been a sustained, organized challenge of the party President by UMNO members. Indeed, an incumbent President has never even been opposed in a party election. In 1951 when there was a vacancy for the President's post, four persons vied for it. In 1978, Tun Hussein was challenged for the Presidency but he was the acting President then. Given this background of a party that is not known to oppose its President, there must be something seriously wrong with the incumbent's leadership, if the challenger can come so close to toppling him. Indeed, old timers in UMNO would argue that even if the challenger had obtained only one-third of the votes, any one of the earlier UMNO Presidents, moved by a sense of honour would have stepped down gracefully. For it is undignified, from the standpoint of a political tradition that is averse to open confrontation, for the man at the top to hang on to his position when it is obvious that he has lost the confidence of a huge proportion of his followers. Of course, no one is suggesting that Dr. Mahathir must step down. He need not. And he should not. Democratic principles would demand that he remains in power. But it is important that he finds out why there is so much unhappiness with his leadership.

This unhappiness is by no means confined to the UMNO membership or to a segment of the Malay community. It must be remembered that in the August 1986 General Election, the overwhelming majority

of urban voters rejected Dr. Mahathir's leadership. It is significant that the issues that had disillusioned the urban voter are, to some extent, quite similar to the issues which have now begun to disenchant the UMNO delegate. Leaving aside important ethnic concerns where they differ, the urban voter and the UMNO delegate are both disturbed by the rapid economic decline and the apparent inability of the Mahathir Government to arrest the trend. Both are perturbed by the lack of foreign and domestic investments, by prestige projects, by the various financial scandals and in general by what they term as 'the crisis of confidence' in the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad. It is worth noting in this connection that opposition politicians and social activists in urban areas, like the dissidents within UMNO, believe there is an ever-growing gap between word and deed under the Mahathir regime.

For these two reasons — his near-defeat in a party that traditionally acquiesces with its President and the urban opposition to him — Dr. Mahathir has a moral responsibility to evaluate the style and substance of his leadership. It is his duty to democracy to ascertain whether something has gone wrong with his policies, whether his manner of conducting Government has alienated others. He must examine himself. He must be self-critical — a virtue which he extolled at the UMNO Assembly. Is it possible that some of his heavy industries, like the Proton Saga, were wrongly conceived especially in view of the recession? Could it be that billion ringgit tourist projects like the one in Langkawi, are largely for prestige? Is it true that the UMBC deal or the EPF-Makuwasa operation benefited individuals close to him? Has privatization been manipulated to serve the interests of certain cronies? Is there any suggestion of this in the privatization of Sports Toto or in the North-South Highway project? Equally important, Dr. Mahathir must ask himself whether he has really been consulting the Cabinet or the UMNO Supreme Council on major issues or are decisions made by an inner group which are subsequently communicated to the Cabinet and the Council? Or, to put it differently, is there a clique around him which allegedly dominates politics and business? As a result of this, is it true that only certain individuals in UMNO and the Government have easy access to Dr. Mahathir? Dr. Mahathir could have laid to rest many of the allegations against him by allowing an independent Commission of Inquiry to investigate his leadership of both party and Government. Alternatively, he could have admitted some of his mistakes and taken

remedial measures on his own. Instead, he continues to insist that he has not made any mistakes and there is no need for him to make any changes to his policies or his political style.

The UMNO General Assembly, however, does not hold the view that Dr. Mahathir is incapable of making any mistakes. That is why almost half the delegates did not vote for him – partly because they were not convinced that his leadership was the best available. Dr. Mahathir must therefore take the cue. The delegates were in fact saying, "We'll keep you but we are also aware of your shortcomings. Hence, our strong support for your rival. So make amends. Change your ways." His victory, in that sense, also contains a plea from the delegates, a plea to make changes to the style and substance of his leadership. The delegates, there is not the slightest doubt, want Mahathir to take into account the various criticisms made by his opponents and to make the necessary changes. Only if this is done would party unity be possible. The unity that the UMNO Assembly pleaded for during its deliberations was the unity of both the contending groups. The Assembly did not want UMNO to continue to be divided into Team A and B. In order to achieve a truly united UMNO after such a fractious intra-party struggle, many of the delegates had hoped that Dr. Mahathir would be magnanimous enough to accommodate some of his opponents. Through such accommodation, they had hoped he would help create a unity within UMNO based upon consensus.

Dr. Mahathir is not even trying to live up to the hopes of the UMNO Assembly. Instead of examining his own leadership and policies as a first step towards establishing consensus and unity, he has chosen to sack his opponents in the Administration. Three Ministers and four Deputy Ministers were dismissed on 30th April. Before that, Tengku Razaleigh who was Trade and Industry Minister, and Datuk Rais Yatim, the Foreign Minister, a committed Razaleigh-Musa supporter, who had failed in his bid to become a Vice-President, had resigned from the Cabinet. The upshot of it all is that all Mahathir's main challengers are now out of Government (Datuk Musa Hitam had resigned as Deputy Prime Minister in March 1986).

Of course, the Prime Minister has every right to dismiss those who are not willing to observe the principle of collective Cabinet responsi-

bility. Those dismissed, it is true, had criticized State policies in the course of the UMNO campaign. But the question here is not whether one should exercise one's legal and constitutional right or not. The question is whether the Prime Minister's decision was wise or not. When a person has just managed to retain power with a wafer-thin majority, when schisms within the party are deep, when the rancour generated by the contest has still not ebbed, it is certainly injudicious to sack one's opponents. It gives the impression that one is arrogant and haughty, that one is not prepared to be humble and accommodating even after one has been chastised by the UMNO delegates. Even if the Prime Minister has very good reasons for dismissing some of his Ministers and Deputy Ministers, he should have first tried to convince the party that he is sincere about making changes to his policies and style. It would have made changes in personnel less unacceptable to his opponents in the party.

As it is, his immediate sacking of his opponents has reinforced factional feelings within UMNO. If Dr. Mahathir continues in this manner, factionalism will become even more serious. Indeed, if the economy does not improve, or worse still, deteriorates further, there is every likelihood that the anti-Mahathir faction in UMNO will become so strong that it will be in a position to overthrow him. This it may do through an Extraordinary General Meeting or at the next UMNO elections in 1990. It should be borne in mind, in this connection, that factions within UMNO today have tremendous staying power, compared to the little cliques of the sixties. For there are fairly independent clusters of Malay millionaires now who are able to bankroll the political battles of a particular faction or its leader.

However, if factionalism within UMNO is not curbed immediately through intelligent, enlightened remedies, both the party and the nation will suffer. Dr. Mahathir and his friends will spend all their time and energy trying to destroy the opposition within UMNO. They will give little thought to the rejuvenation of the economy or to problems of reshaping the nation's financial institutions and ensuring public accountability. The opposition within UMNO, on the other hand, may try to place obstacles along Mahathir's path, in order to score political points against him. The nation will then be bogged down by a fierce inter-factional struggle within that one political institution that matters most to good, effective government in Malaysia.

This is why instead of demonstrating his power and authority immediately after the UMNO election, Dr. Mahathir should have displayed qualities of leadership which will strengthen the sinews of UMNO, — and indeed, the nation.

Explanatory Note

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UMNO'S DOMINANCE

The recent UMNO election was like a General Election. The issues that were raised, the personalities involved, the manner of campaigning, the media coverage, the way in which most dailies, the Radio and Television were exploited by a certain faction, and most of all the intensity of feelings on both sides, all helped to create this impression. Indeed, it is doubtful if there has ever been a party election like this in any other parliamentary democracy in any part of the world. The importance it had assumed for the political development of the country puts it in a category by itself.

It is of course not difficult to explain this. The stakes were terribly high in this election. The delegates to the UMNO General Assembly were not just choosing their leaders; they were electing the nation's Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. That an election within one party — albeit the main component of the ruling coalition — could become so crucial is a reflection of UMNO's significance in national affairs. To say that UMNO dominates Malaysian politics is to state the obvious.

How did UMNO become so important? Why is UMNO so dominant? Its dominance is so great that some analysts are convinced that we are almost like a one-party system. This is not really true for we still have a variety of political parties and a certain degree of inter-party competition. Be that as it may, it would not be wrong to say that we are a one-party dominant system.

There are many reasons why our political system has developed this way. The character of our socio-ethnic structure and the changes it has undergone would be one of the main factors. In a society of diverse ethnic communities, there is undoubtedly a certain bias within the political system towards the Malay community. This ethnic bias expresses itself specifically through a class bias of sorts — that is, a bias towards the Malay middle and upper classes. Such a bias is to be expected in a situation where the control of wealth and power is still concentrated at the higher levels of society. Now, the middle and upper classes within the Malay community have been expanding rapidly in the

last 15 years or so. And the party that articulates and represents the interests of these classes is UMNO. As the Malay middle and upper classes become more and more powerful, UMNO, the party that presides over Malaysian society, is also becoming stronger and stronger.

While the dramatic growth of the Malay middle and upper classes is due largely to education and urbanisation it is undeniable that a specific policy has also contributed to this process. This is the New Economic Policy (NEP) launched in 1969. The NEP has accelerated the development of the Malay middle and upper classes with its emphasis upon the creation of Bumiputra entrepreneurs, executives, managers and professionals.

There are other policies of the post-69 period too which have accentuated "Malayness" and therefore enhanced UMNO's role. The National Education Policy through which Malay has become the main language of education and administration is one of them. The National Culture Policy which accords primacy to indigenous, essentially, Malay culture, is another.

Apart from policies and the socio-ethnic structure, the orientation of the political leadership of the eighties is also responsible for UMNO's dominance. UMNO President and Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad — more than any other UMNO leader in the past — has consciously or unconsciously bestowed the party with a role which has dwarfed all the other Barisan Nasional parties. This became very clear during the 1983 Constitutional Crisis. When he communicated at all, it was with the UMNO Supreme Council. This was also the case in the Sabah upheaval and the Memali tragedy of 1985. Even when Dr. Mahathir is forced to provide some clarification of scandals such as BMF or UMBC or Maminco, it is the UMNO body that is often briefed. So while UMNO has always been the most important element within the ruling coalition, it has, under Dr. Mahathir, become super-important. Of course, his critics would argue — as they did during the recent party election — that it is not UMNO or the UMNO Supreme Council but Dr. Mahathir himself, who enjoys this super-important position within the coalition and Government.

The Barisan's overwhelming electoral power reflected in its control of four-fifths of the seats in the Federal Parliament and most of

the State Assemblies is also a factor. Since UMNO is stronger than all the Barisan parties put together in almost all the legislatures in Peninsular Malaysia, the party has become very dominant. The legislative and electoral dominance of UMNO, in turn, is the outcome of overwhelming weightage for rural constituencies which has been increasing since 1974. This increase in electoral weightage coincides with some of the other changes since the early seventies which we have looked at — changes which have also made UMNO more powerful.

Partly because of UMNO's dominant power and partly because of its own internal problems, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the second most important party in the Barisan, has been getting weaker and weaker in terms of authority and influence in the last few years. The weakening of the MCA, and to some extent, the Gerakan, another Chinese-based coalition party, has enabled UMNO to reinforce its dominance of both the Barisan coalition and the Barisan Government.

Having analysed the reasons behind UMNO's dominance, let us examine some of its consequences for society. It is obvious that it has resulted in the emasculation of the democratic process. When one party becomes very powerful, the significance of other parties whether in Government or the Opposition must necessarily diminish. It becomes almost impossible to compete successfully with that dominant party. What this means is that no other party would be able to offer a viable alternative to the electorate. And yet the possibility of power changing hands is one of the features that distinguishes a mature democracy from an under-developed one.

Besides, the concentration of power with UMNO or its leadership has also led to the decline of Parliament. Since UMNO is what matters, it is UMNO's thinking on national issues or public policies that counts. Parliament's reflections on issues and policies are of secondary importance. This is why it is not what Opposition Parliamentarians or Barisan backbenchers say about the NEP which will influence the policy's future; it is how UMNO delegates feel about it that is crucial.

Like Parliament, public opinion, another pillar of democratic society, also does not enjoy the importance which is its due, partly because of UMNO's dominance. All the earnest, sincere efforts by the

public to compel the Government to become more accountable, before and after the 1986 amendments to the Official Secrets Act (OSA) failed to evoke a response from the Government leadership. However, once accountability emerged as an issue in the struggle for power within UMNO Dr. Mahathir decided to release information to the people on various Government projects which hitherto had been kept confidential. It just goes to show how impotent the general public is, compared to UMNO. This impotence was evident in yet another incident connected with the recently concluded UMNO election. Government leaders had all along refused to budge on their decision to abrogate the pension scheme for those who had served less than 10 years with the Government, in spite of demonstrations and mass meetings organised by public servants and in spite of the various memoranda and appeals submitted by them. However when it became clear to Dr. Mahathir and others close to him that the abrogation of the pension scheme was a major source of dissatisfaction with UMNO delegates, especially the public servants among them, the Government decided to rescind its decision, two days before the UMNO polls. It is obvious that it is not the public opinion, or public interest societies or trade unions or any of the other established institutions of parliamentary rule that the UMNO-led Government is concerned about. Whatever the issue, and whatever its merits or demerits, it is what UMNO thinks and feels that matters most.

UMNO's dominant centre-stage presence has also affected ethnic relations. Because the other Barisan parties, nearly all of whom represent specific ethnic communities, have been reduced to insignificance, there is growing resentment among them of what they rightly perceive as "Malay dominance". Among the non-Malay communities as a whole (and this includes the Kadazans and Dayaks as well), Malay dominance is often regarded as the greatest threat to their interests. As long as UMNO insists upon maintaining and perpetuating its dominant position in the Barisan and the Government, there will be no ethnic harmony.

But more than the impact upon the democratic process and ethnic relations, UMNO's dominance has affected UMNO itself. It is partly because so much power is concentrated within the party leadership that it has become so factionalized. Since the larger democratic

process does not have much meaning, many Malays who aspire for power or seek political change, invariably turn to UMNO. Besides, UMNO is almost synonymous with Government which needless to say, is also a consequence of its political dominance. The authority the party represents and the influence it embodies, serves as a magnet to attract the politically ambitious. Consequently, UMNO has become an arena for fierce competition for power. This ensuing feuds have given rise to factions and cliques.

This is why one of the ways of reducing factionalism within UMNO is to make it less dominant. To make it less dominant, the leadership could, for a start, make the Barisan a little more meaningful. There should be a sincere endeavour to incorporate the other Barisan parties into the decision-making process. National policies should be formulated by the Barisan as a whole through the process of consultation and discussion. Major issues confronting the nation should be debated by all the component parties of the coalition. In this way, the Barisan will, over time, develop a personality of its own. It will acquire an identity which would transcend the individual identities of its coalition partners. After all, the Alliance under the Tunku, in the fifties and the sixties, had an identity of its own. It was because the Coalition had a meaningful role that its component parties felt that there was some sharing of power. It is crucial that the Barisan also develops in that direction. If UMNO demonstrates a willingness to share power and responsibility with its partners it would cease to be dominant, or super-dominant. Instead, it will be seen as 'primus inter pares', the first among equals. In the process, UMNO itself, it is worth emphasising, will become less factionalized and more cohesive.

More important, in order to check UMNO's dominance, parliamentary democracy should be strengthened. If, for instance, the media is given greater freedom to express independent views, if public opinion is given just consideration in the formulation of government policies, if there is much more discussion and debate at the level of the rakyat on major social issues, it is quite conceivable that UMNO would be seen as less dominant. Similarly, if the system provides more space and scope for public interest societies, trade unions and opposition political parties to play their rightful roles, UMNO's power will be held in check.

However, in the long run, the dominance of any one party or group can only be brought to an end through a more equitable distribution of power itself.

Explanatory Note

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THE REAL CHALLENGE BEGINS

After the recent UMNO election Malay politics will not be the same again. Malay politics will not be the same again because UMNO has changed forever. And when UMNO changes, the whole of Malay society changes. For it is UMNO that sets the tone and tenor of Malay, and indeed Malaysian, politics as a whole.

If we had to begin with a negative aspect of this change, we could perhaps say that factionalism has struck root within UMNO. Factionalism is pervasive within the party. Indeed, other institutions associated directly or indirectly with UMNO and the Government, like the Civil Service, the Education Service and the Universities also reflect the same factional characteristics. Individual officers and executives are sometimes regarded as X's men or Y's supporters. This has been happening for some time now. Even in the business sector, individuals and companies are sometimes identified in terms of one faction or the other.

Factionalism can be reduced if not eliminated altogether. Towards this end, the President of UMNO who is also the Prime Minister has a major role to play. He must make sure that he is not linked even obliquely, to any faction. Appointments within UMNO must be free of any bias. Similarly, in the Civil Service or the Universities, it must be clearly understood by both the top personnel and the ordinary staff that loyalty to this person or that faction is of no consequence in the confirmation to a particular post or in the promotion to a higher position. More important, ability, excellence and integrity should be emphasised in practice, and not just talked about, as the only criteria that count. In the business sector too, contracts should be awarded with maximum fairness so that no one feels that his friendship or association with a certain political figure would be held against him — or used to his advantage. If the leadership acts in an even-handed manner in matters where its authority is decisive, with a 'bigness of heart' and not a 'meanness of mind' then factionalism will recede in all sectors of society.

Leaving aside the threat of factionalism, the UMNO election has undoubtedly generated a positive impact upon Malay politics. It has, in

a sense, destroyed that almost sacred aura about the man at the apex of UMNO and the Government. Of course, the aura had already lost much of its sacredness in the course of the last two decades or so but the last UMNO election dealt a fatal blow.

The election has also legitimised the act of organizing a sustained challenge against the party President. This is unprecedented in UMNO's history. By challenging the President and exposing his weaknesses, the dissidents in UMNO have helped to equalise the relationship between leader and led. This, in turn, has forced the leadership to become more accountable to the led. It has compelled the President to explain policies and projects to the members. We know how this happened in the UMNO election. Dr. Mahathir even had to reveal Cabinet documents to convince the UMNO membership that his opponents were not telling the whole truth.

Given UMNO's history and Malay political tradition, this is a remarkable change. Holding leaders accountable, questioning them, challenging them has never been part of UMNO's political culture. It is a weak element in Malay political culture itself. As a result of the election, UMNO members have become acutely conscious of their rights over their leaders. More than that, a segment of the membership is slowly becoming aware that it is in fact their responsibility to evaluate and examine their leadership. It is their duty to check the wrongdoings of the men and women they have elected.

This alone goes to show how a traditional, neo-feudal political culture which UMNO had helped to maintain for so long, is now beginning to see important transformations. It is becoming a more democratic political culture in the broad sense of the term. As a result, UMNO which in the past was a party that acquiesced easily with its leadership is now becoming a party that is prepared to question its leadership. Once a party which condoned almost everything its leadership did, it is now willing to criticise its leaders. Of course, even in the past, there were attempts to upbraid the party elite, including the man at the very top. But often these criticisms were veiled and confined to ethnic issues. Now they are frank and forthright and also cover areas which are clearly non-ethnic.

The important transformations taking place in attitudes and orientations within UMNO can only be understood through an analysis of both long-term trends and immediate events affecting the party and the community. Long-term trends and immediate events are so inextricably interwoven that it is not possible to separate them.

The one long-term trend which has played a crucial role in changing UMNO's political culture in the last few years is the dramatic expansion of the Malay middle-class. Urbanisation, education and of course the NEP as a specific policy, have all contributed towards this. As the Malay middle-class expands, competing interests and aspirations develop. This is a common characteristic of the middle-class everywhere. The State — especially if there is concentration of political power and economic wealth — cannot possibly accommodate all these interests and aspirations. Intra-middle-class conflicts over control of economic resources and access to political positions often occur in situations like this. The contending forces sometimes adopt different stances on policies and issues in order to protect interests that are vital to them or with the aim of pursuing their respective aspirations. This is undoubtedly one of the explanations for the competition for power within UMNO. For UMNO, it should not be forgotten, is that one party that embodies and articulates all that the Malay middle and upper classes want to preserve and accomplish.

If anything has brought to the surface these competing interests within UMNO and the Malay middle-class, it is the prolonged economic recession. When the economy was doing well, when growth rates were high, it was possible to reconcile competing interests. It is very different when the economy stagnates or begins to shrink. Those who are suffering the adverse consequences of the recession become bitter and frustrated and sometimes turn their wrath against the ruling elites. Entrepreneurs who fail to obtain contracts from the Government, business people whose enterprises are in the doldrums, executives who cannot service bank loans, managers and professionals whose incomes are no longer sufficient to finance the foreign education of their children, become disillusioned and disenchanted. Their disenchantment sometimes transforms them into angry dissidents, ever ready to denounce the Government and its leaders. They are not alone in this. Small-time traders, civil servants, teachers, almost anyone in the middle-

class who has been used to some affluence in the past and is now feeling the anguish of lean times, is a potential foe of the Establishment. This explains to some extent why the opposition within UMNO has made the question of the recession and the urgent need to revive the economy as its rallying-point.

However, it is not the state of the economy as such which has enabled the opposition within UMNO to mobilise so much support. The party dissidents have succeeded, to a degree, in establishing a nexus between the ailing economy and four other issues. It is these four issues within the context of an ailing economy, which have prompted a huge portion of the UMNO membership to reject Mahathir Mohamad's leadership.

To start with, during the UMNO elections the dissidents kept on emphasising that the crisis facing the economy was not caused solely, or even mainly, by the international economic environment. The real factor, they argued, was Dr. Mahathir's alleged mismanagement of the economy. His priorities were wrong. He had launched certain heavy industries at a time when the country could ill afford them. The Proton Saga project was often quoted as an example. Even industrial ventures that were perhaps necessary like the cement plant in Langkawi and the steel plant in Kuala Trengganu were badly planned and implemented, according to the critics. Certain other projects like Dayabumi, they argued, turned out to be 'White Elephants'. Billions of ringgit have been lost in all these economic ventures. To make matters worse, foreign investments have declined, partly because — the Mahathir opponents allege — of the antagonistic attitude of the Prime Minister to certain Western nations. The investment situation has been further aggravated by a rapid drop in domestic investments. Again, the opposition to Mahathir has insinuated that it is due primarily to his manner of handling various domestic issues.

Though it is certainly not right to hold Mahathir solely responsible for the economic crisis, it is not hard to understand why in difficult times, a leader who has obviously made some serious mistakes, comes to be regarded as 'the source of all ills'. It is a sort of 'scape-goatism'. Even a passive people, generally well disposed to their leaders, can turn hostile towards them when they are convinced that they (the leaders) are the cause of their miseries.

If any convincing was needed on this score, all that the dissidents had to do was to point to the various scandals associated with the Mahathir leadership. This is the second issue which the UMNO dissidents had used effectively in their recent campaign. The UMBC, EPF-Makuwasa, stock market, Pan-El, Sports Toto, United Engineers and Fleet properties episodes were presented to the UMNO membership as unambiguous evidence of stark malpractices involving individuals close to the UMNO President and the Prime Minister. Mahathir's opponents openly alleged that he tolerated corruption and nepotism. Doubts were even raised about his own integrity, especially in the wake of the award of huge sub-contracting jobs to a company headed by his sister-in-law called Zenecon Bumi. But most of the time, the target was Finance Minister and UMNO Treasurer, Daim Zainuddin, a close confidant of the Prime Minister. It is worth observing that the scandal of scandals of the last few years, namely BMF, was not really a major bone of contention with Mahathir's opponents – perhaps because, as has been alleged, some of them were also implicated in that infamous bank fraud.

When a political leadership is tainted with scandal in the popular mind – regardless of whether such a perception is justified or not – its credibility would sink rapidly to a very low point. The Mahathir regime has discovered that one's credibility would reach the nadir in no time if that scandal-ridden image is further compounded by an alleged incompetence in managing a deteriorating economy which has affected adversely the lives of millions!

Add to all this the accusation that Mahathir plays favourites. It is said that he is surrounded by a small business clique, on the one hand, and an equally small political clique, on the other. Many UMNO members feel that these are the cliques which dominate the economy and politics. As a result, others in UMNO and Government have limited access to Dr. Mahathir. If Daim is central to the business clique, then Anwar is crucial to the political clique. Anwar's alleged "closeness" to Dr. Mahathir in particular, has caused widespread disaffection among other young UMNO aspirants. They not only resent Anwar's dramatic ascendancy within the party hierarchy, they are piqued that a once vocal critic of UMNO should now wield so much influence within the party and Government. Anwar, Daim and cliques in a party where respect for the man at the apex has been greatest when he stands above factional feuds, have also undoubtedly undermined Mahathir's position.

This brings us to the fourth and final issue which Mahathir's opponents have used against him. They allege that he is authoritarian. Some even suggest that he is dictatorial in that he pays little attention to views different from his whether in the Federal Cabinet or the UMNO Supreme Council. To be authoritarian within a system which professes to be democratic does not do much credit to a leader's image. An authoritarian style becomes an even greater burden to the person when it allegedly expresses itself against a backdrop of cliques, scandals, and a declining economy.

It is obvious then that a serious erosion of confidence in Mahathir's leadership occurring within a certain situation is one of the main causes of the growth of a more critical consciousness within the UMNO membership. To put it differently, the crisis of confidence in Mahathir's leadership has, in a direct sense, compelled UMNO and the Malay community to adopt a more evaluative attitude towards the leadership. Mahathir has, unwittingly, made UMNO and the Malay community more democratic!

Of course, the larger social forces at work — some of which we have already noted — have also contributed significantly to this changed attitude. To these forces, we should now add the Parliamentary system itself and the growing awareness of human rights and public accountability which it has witnessed in the last decade or so. Because Malaysia is still a Parliamentary Democracy, however fettered it may be, it cannot help but recognise the legitimacy of the struggle for a freer media, a more effective Parliament, a more independent Judiciary and most of all, a more democratic political leadership. The very presence of this system and its concerns have, willy-nilly, seeped into the consciousness of the ordinary UMNO member. The UMNO membership, in any case, has always been acutely aware that UMNO is, constitutionally speaking, a democratic party operating within a supposedly democratic environment. It is a fact which endows the members with certain rights and the leaders with certain responsibilities.

In the last 10 years a good portion of UMNO members have become even more conscious of the democratic basis of Malaysian society. This is partly because of the work of certain newspapers, public interest groups, political parties and public personalities. They

have always come to the defence of the fundamental principles of a democratic system, whenever these principles are threatened by an exceedingly powerful executive. This was true of the Societies Act controversy of 1981 as it was true of the Official Secrets Act episode of 1986. Through their spirited defence of democratic ideals, these institutions and individuals have made everyone – including the UMNO rank and file – more conscious of what constitutes a good democratic society.

If there is any one democratic ideal which the struggle for human rights in Malaysia has succeeded in etching upon the Malaysian mind, it is the concept and practice of public accountability. Of course, the various scandals since 1983 and revelations about the squandering of public funds and bureaucratic bunglings, have contributed in no small measure to the heightening of awareness about public accountability within a significant segment of both the Malay and non-Malay components of the middle-class. It is as a consequence of all this that UMNO members today demand explanations from their leaders on what really took place in the UMBC deal or on how the Government handled the Memali incident. The growth of public accountability and democracy within the larger Malaysian society has undeniably persuaded the UMNO membership to become more evaluative towards its leadership.

Though a more critical attitude towards Government leaders and State policies has been developing steadily over the years, it would be wrong to conclude that the UMNO masses are no longer influenced by neo-feudal sentiments like loyalty to the man at the top. The tradition of unquestioning loyalty to the leader continues to have some impact. This is perhaps one of the reasons why in the end Mahathir still won. It may also explain why Mahathir supporters are still in a clear majority within the Supreme Council.

At the same time, we must also remember that the growth of more critical consciousness within UMNO does not in any way imply that the party has begun to question the fundamental postulates upon which the entire social system is constructed. As a case in point, the UMNO dissidents, we have seen, criticised the Mahathir leadership for its alleged inability to attract foreign investments. However, they

refused to find out whether the dependence upon foreign investments itself which is a characteristic of a dependent economy like ours is not one of the root causes of the present economic malaise. In a sense, one should not expect the UMNO dissidents to raise such fundamental questions since they too subscribe to the same overall beliefs and policies as the incumbents in the party.

One can think of another example. The dissidents took up the issue of Dayabumi. They saw it largely as a prestige project against the background of a serious economic recession. If they were concerned about fundamentals, they would have gone beyond that. For Dayabumi is merely a reflection of an obvious development bias towards the middle and upper classes in the megapolis. It reveals the unhealthy bias towards "bigness" in the economy.

The intra-UMNO squabble about corruption and other such deviations also shows that both sides were not prepared to come to grips with fundamentals. The dissidents accused Mahathir's group of allowing malpractices to flourish. The Mahathir group turned around and pointed out that the Razaleigh-Musa camp was also guilty of involvement in all sorts of wrongdoings. At the same time, the Mahathir group tried to reply to some of the allegations. It is significant, in this connection, that the dissidents did not suggest any concrete ways of fighting corruption.

Neither did they commit themselves to media freedom as a matter of principle. They were angry that newspapers like *Utusan Malaysia*, *Berita Harian*, the *New Straits Times* and a television station, TV3, were biased against them and went out of the way to tarnish the image of the Razaleigh-Musa camp. What really incensed them was that the newspapers and TV station in question were all owned by UMNO and therefore they, as UMNO leaders and members, had every right to be heard. It is apparent that they were not concerned with the more basic issue of just access to the media for each and every citizen whatever his or her political affiliation. How and why the media is often controlled on behalf of certain vested interests and the sort of consequences arising from this for freedom and democracy, was not a problem for the dissidents.

Likewise, the Mahathir group was not observing the principle of public accountability as such, when it decided to declassify certain Cabinet documents pertaining to the Penang Bridge, Dayabumi, the Proton Saga and the Memali incident. The intention was clear: it was to counter the allegations made by the rival camp. If there was a commitment to public accountability, one would not wait for an intra-party power struggle to reveal information which the public has a right to know in any case.

Finally, neither the Mahathir group nor the Razaleigh-Musa camp seem to be bothered by yet another fundamental challenge facing the nation as a whole – namely, the challenge of ethnic polarisation. Though both Ghafar Baba and Datuk Musa Hitam discussed it in an interview with a newspaper, the question of ethnic polarisation did not figure at all in the UMNO campaign. If anything, both sides raised the ethnic temperature to some extent through their constant emphasis upon 'Malay rights' and 'Islam'. At times, both sides gave the impression that they were operating in a mono-ethnic society, or at least in a society where the other communities were totally irrelevant. One should not expect groups with such attitudes to address themselves to the root causes of the problem of ethnic polarisation.

What all this shows is that the challenge to the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad and the growth of a more critical consciousness within UMNO, though significant, is not the harbinger of fundamental change. That is going to take a much longer while – and much more agony and turmoil.

Explanatory Note

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POLITICAL PARTIES IN BUSINESS

The involvement of political parties in business has become a major ethical issue. Using a question-answer format, I examine this phenomenon.

- 1) A number of political parties from the ruling Barisan Nasional are involved in 'big business'. What sort of impact would this have upon the business climate in the country? What are some of the consequences of this involvement for the nation's economic development?

Political parties from the Barisan are not directly involved in business. They set up companies which participate in a variety of economic ventures. UMNO, the MCA and the MIC have been doing this for some time now.

Political party involvement of this sort in business is bad for the country. It is inimical to the interests of the rakyat. To begin with, when a political party in the Barisan like UMNO, bids for a major Government contract, it has a tremendous advantage over every other competitor. This is the kind of unfair competition that genuine entrepreneurs resent. If it happens once too often, they will begin to feel that there is no point in tendering for Government projects. They will lose confidence in the integrity of the market. Indeed, business people will even start to question the integrity of Government leaders. They will not want to do business here; They will not want to invest in our country.

This is an important consideration which our leaders may want to keep in mind. It may be true, as one of our leaders said the other day, that most investors do not care whether there is democracy or not in a certain country. But they do care whether the market operates on the basis of accepted rules of competition in a free enterprise economy. They become concerned when a so-called private company with so much political clout at its command – and hardly any other requisite qualification – is presented with a delicious plum in the form of a 3.4 billion ringgit highway project.

Their concern about who gets which plum is something which the Government cannot afford to ignore for the simple reason that the investor is "king" in our economic system. Since our economy is so

dependent upon foreign and to a lesser extent, local investors, their uneasiness is bound to aggravate each and every problem associated with the current recession. With less investments, unemployment will continue to increase, businesses will continue to remain sluggish, the purchasing power of the consumer will continue to decline.

- 2) **Isn't it possible that though one of the ruling parties may have been given a particular contract, the decision could have been made by officials who are not connected with that party?**

It is possible though one cannot exonerate officials of that party in Government from blame. When an UMNO-led Government awards a contract like the North-South Highway project to United Engineers Malaysia (UEM), which is owned by Hatibudi, purportedly an investment arm of the party, there is no way that one can pretend to be innocent.

In the case of the North-South Highway project, UMNO leaders in Government were in fact involved, directly and indirectly, in the decision-making process. The conflict of interest element is so obvious that even the most naive amongst us would recognize it at once. How can men in Government entrusted with the power and responsibility of making decisions in the interest of the people as a whole, approve a project whose direct beneficiary is a political party in which they are leaders?

It may be more than a case of conflict of interest between one's governmental role and one's party position. If we examine the creation of Hatibudi, its takeover of United Engineers, the loans that UEM has obtained, the individuals involved in both companies and the corporate manoeuvres of United Engineers in the last few months, one begins to wonder whether the private financial empire of a particular leader has not got enmeshed with the business activities of UMNO and the economic affairs of the State.

The people are justified in demanding that a clear line of distinction be drawn separating private commercial interests from party business activities from the economic operations of certain public agencies and their subsidiaries. If the Government practised accounta-

bility in the real sense of the word it would on its own explain and clarify the situation to the public. Better still, it would, of its own volition institute an inquiry into various allegations of conflict of interest and malpractices arising from the involvement of certain political parties in business.

In this connection, we would do well to observe that it is because wrongdoings do occur, inside and outside Government, that the people should have the freedom to point out how their leaders or fellow citizens may have erred. This is why the freedom of speech and the right of dissent are such crucial values in any just society. It would be terrible if as a result of severe curbs and controls upon democratic articulation, certain serious misdeeds of the powerful remain concealed forever.

- 3) It has been argued that it is not because UMNO wants to accumulate wealth and riches that it has got involved in the North-South Highway project and a number of other lucrative business schemes. It has to find some way of paying for its expensive, luxurious UMNO complex.

Before we deal with the question of whether the debts incurred through the building of the UMNO complex should be settled with the help of public projects, let us consider whether there is any justification for such an expensive, luxurious complex in the first place.

It is most unusual, to say the least, for a political party in a Parliamentary Democracy to have as its premise an opulent, ostentatious edifice. Political parties in Western democracies including those that have been in power for a period of time, do not put up such showpieces. Even with Third World democracies where ruling parties are often firmly saddled in the seat of power for long decades, there isn't a single instance of any group constructing such a luxurious premise. There are however certain one-party States in Africa which are virtual dictatorships that take great pride in the splendour of their party Headquarters.

In all fairness to the present UMNO leadership, it must be pointed out that the idea of an expensive, luxurious party premise was conceived in the early seventies by a different set of people. The

construction of the Complex was completed during the tenure of the current UMNO President, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad.

But the more important issue is the method that is being used to settle the debts incurred by the building of the Complex. We have shown why it is ethically wrong of the UMNO leadership to use its dominant position within Government to channel public projects to the party. In a sense the public is being forced to help UMNO to pay for its premise – as clearly illustrated by the North-South Highway project. It is analogous to a situation where someone purchases an expensive diamond and then compels friends and strangers alike to pay for it! They would of course resent it since they had nothing to do with the decision to buy the diamond.

There are other more conventional, less unethical ways of raising money for the UMNO Complex. The 1.4 million members in UMNO should see it as their obligation to settle the party's debts. It should be possible to collect quite a bit of money from the membership since UMNO has a number of very wealthy people within its ranks. Like other political parties and public interest societies, UMNO can also organize fund-raising activities like dinners and walkathons which, given the party's position as the major element in the Coalition Government, could generate substantial revenue.

Incidentally, the MCA which is also deep in debts is trying to raise money through more acceptable ways. It has launched, for instance, a life membership scheme as a way of mobilising funds for the party. Perhaps, this is that one rare occasion when UMNO can learn something from its Coalition partner.

- 4) It has also been suggested that apart from the question of debts, UMNO, MCA and other Barisan parties have ventured into business in order to become financially independent, presumably, from big-time business donors. The fear is that these donors may try to influence Government policies if Barisan parties are financially beholden to them.

Becoming financially independent is a worthwhile objective but we do not see how this can be achieved via involvement in business. For by becoming a corporate actor, a Barisan party through its business

enterprises, would develop ties and relationships within a complex web of economic operations. As a political party at the head of a Coalition Government which interacts all the while with Business, UMNO in particular will be required to make decisions which may affect one corporate institution or the other. UMNO's closeness or remoteness to a particular enterprise is bound to influence its decisions. This itself would compromise its position. This is why by venturing into business UMNO or any other Barisan party for that matter will be in an even more invidious situation than if it accepted straight donations from companies. To put it bluntly, UMNO will lose its autonomy and independence if it develops myriad financial relationships within the corporate world.

- 5) **What then should a political party do if it wants to maintain its integrity in a situation where electoral expenditure has increased by leaps and bounds?**

We know what a political party should not do. No political party whether in Government or the Opposition should get involved in business. More specifically they should not set up all sorts of private companies with investments in properties, banks, hotels, supermarkets and even the media. Political parties can of course keep their money in fixed deposit accounts or invest their funds in non-speculative shares. But business activities of the type they are indulging in at the moment, should be prohibited by law.

After all, political parties in Parliamentary Democracies the world over do not aspire to become corporate giants. The Conservative Party in Britain does not own companies which in turn control banks, hotels and TV stations. The Government of India does not award State contracts to the Congress (I) Party.

Apart from barring political parties from business, there is also a need for a law which will require all political parties to declare in a public register the donations and contributions they receive from individuals and groups, including business enterprises. This is to ensure that the public is fully informed of the type of money that goes into party coffers. It will also make it a little easier for the public to keep an eye on those businesses which may be tempted to use their wealth to influence decision-makers in Government.

It is not just the political parties that need new laws to ensure integrity; the financing of elections should also be subjected to review. General Elections at both Federal and State levels, have become extraordinarily expensive affairs with candidates, especially those from the ruling Coalition, pouring hundreds of thousands of ringgit into their campaigns. Expensive election campaigns invariably lead to the involvement of well-to-do business people, who, for their own reasons, choose to bankroll particular candidates. Consequently money politics becomes the order of the day.

In order to check this trend, it may be necessary for the Election Commission itself, which is constitutionally an independent body, to take over the basic financing of elections. This is done in certain other democracies. The Election Commission allocates a certain sum of money to each candidate to finance his or her election. It sets out various rules on how that money is supposed to be used. Each candidate would be required to submit detailed accounts on his or her electoral expenditure. Of course candidates would also be permitted to spend their own money but they would have to observe strict limits.

The active participation of the Election Commission in election financing has a two-fold advantage. First, it prevents candidates and their wealthy backers from pouring money into election campaigns. In that way, it helps to curb, to an extent, the growth of money politics. Second, it ensures that no candidate or party would be able to outdo its rival by virtue of the funds it commands.

Since more than the mere use of money is involved in the corruption of electoral contests, the Commission should also adopt firm measures to prohibit political parties and candidates from bribing, inducing, threatening or blackmailing the voters in any way. This calls for close, effective supervision of each and every electoral contest by the Election Commission – something which the Commission has hitherto refrained from doing. Indeed, it calls for the formulation of a new, more comprehensive code of ethics which every party and candidate would be required to observe. The present code is grossly inadequate. Violation of any aspect of the proposed Code would result in heavy fines and stiff jail sentences.

It is granted that new codes and new laws alone are not enough to cleanse elections of their impurities. Prohibiting political parties from getting entangled in business will not result automatically in a cleaner, healthier political system. In the ultimate analysis, whatever solution we propose will only work if there is an honest commitment on the part of the political and business elites themselves to integrity. Unfortunately, such a commitment is missing. And that is where our tragedy lies.

- 6) **If political party involvement in business is detrimental to the political system, what about the argument that by venturing into business, UMNO, MCA and the MIC are in fact trying to help their respective communities? The real purpose is to strengthen the economic position of the Malays, Chinese and Indians.**

This is a very weak argument. Since the three parties are part of the Government they should be working towards the formulation of fair and just State policies that will benefit the ordinary Malay, Chinese and Indian. There is no need for UMNO, MCA or the MIC to enter the world of business.

If the aim is to help Malays in commerce and industry, there are public agencies like PERNAS, UDA, the various State Economic Development Corporations, among a multitude of other outfits. If the aim is to reinforce the capital base of the community, there is the Amanah Saham Nasional (ASN) scheme. If the MCA is concerned about the plight of poor, deprived Chinese new villagers then it should persuade the Ministry of National and Rural Development to give serious attention to this group. After all, the first of the twin goals of the New Economic Policy (NEP) is the eradication of poverty, irrespective of ethnicity. If, on the other hand, the MCA wants to see some restructuring of Chinese capital and Chinese enterprise then it should let the Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Chinese Guilds and Clans to take the initiative. There is no justification at all for the MCA to assume the role of an entrepreneur. Similarly, if the MIC is genuinely concerned about the grinding poverty of Indian plantation labourers it should use its position in Government to fight for progressive legislation to protect their interests.

What this means, in other words, is that political parties within the Barisan should — like political parties elsewhere — stick to their conventional role of helping to formulate public policies which would of course include policies on the economy and on trade and business. They should leave business ventures to business people. They should not use 'the economic position of their respective communities' as an excuse to further their own economic interests.

7) What of the future? Will this phenomenon of political parties getting involved in business continue?

It looks as if the trend will continue. UMNO's UEM, for instance, is reported to have obtained controlling interests in the Development and Commercial Bank and Cold Storage Malaysia in recent months. It has already been awarded a number of other important Government projects, apart from the famous North-South Highway. Fleet, the other major Holding Company owned by UMNO, is also expanding its activities at the same time.

The MCA's Multi-Purpose Holdings (MPH), though faced with financial problems, is very much alive. The MIC's Maika Holdings continues to grow. Needless to say, they are in no position to match UMNO's success in the corporate world.

Because the vested interests which have developed over the years, through involvement in business are quite formidable, it is unlikely that the Barisan parties will abandon their present economic roles. Indeed, individuals and groups have a lot to gain by keeping political parties in business. Besides, party involvement in business is only an extension, the institutionalization of the phenomenon of the politician becoming an entrepreneur in the course of his political career.

There is, however, very little that the people can do to stop political party involvement in business. The ruling elites are overwhelmingly powerful at this point in time. Nonetheless, in the long run, a more conscious commitment on the part of society to upright and ethical conduct in the relationship between politics and business is perhaps the only sensible cure to this grave disease within our body politic.

Explanatory Note

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THE UMNO SAGA

On 4 February 1988, the Kuala Lumpur High Court declared that UMNO was an unlawful society when its 38th general assembly and election took place on 24 April 1987. The High Court decision was the result of a suit brought against the UMNO leadership by 11 UMNO members. They had alleged that there were irregularities in the election of April 1987.

The implications and consequences of the High Court decision are analysed in the following article using an issue - response format.

The Prime Minister's position is not affected by the High Court decision.

This is true. Legally the Prime Minister, the Attorney-General and the others are right. There is no reason for the Prime Minister to resign.

However, there is a moral dimension to the situation Dr. Mahathir is in, which should not be ignored. Dr. Mahathir is Prime Minister by virtue of the fact he is Chairman of a Coalition called the Barisan Nasional which won the majority of seats in the August 1986 General Election. He is Chairman of the Barisan because he is President of UMNO, the major partner in the Coalition government. UMNO has been declared illegal. He is no longer President of UMNO.

Wouldn't it be morally proper for him to do two things immediately? First, because of the situation UMNO is in, shouldn't he seek formal endorsement of his positions as Chairman of the Barisan from all the Barisan parties? Second, and more important, shouldn't he obtain a formal vote of confidence from Parliament?

The root of the present UMNO crisis is the action of the UMNO II who brought the recent suit against the party.

This is only partially true. Shouldn't we also ask why they had to go to Court? Couldn't it also be because the UMNO Secretary-General did not respond to their grievances about the party elections in the initial stages? Perhaps there are other factors too that we should consider. Is it possible that there was some rigging, some manipulation

of votes and voters at various levels — branch, division, general assembly — by both teams, A and B, which has led to the present mess? Is it also possible that some people feel that everything was not above board at the last UMNO election and are therefore angry? Is it possible that some Team B leaders and followers are hurt and angry that some of their leading personalities were removed from the Cabinet and certain other positions, following the UMNO election? Could the present mess have been avoided if Dr. Mahathir as the UMNO President elected at the April 24 Assembly had been a little magnanimous, a little accommodative? After all, that is what the delegates at the Assembly wanted. They wanted reconciliation; they wanted the two factions to be charitable towards one another.

The problem confronting UMNO is a technical one. There is no crisis.

True, UMNO has become illegal as a result of a technicality in the law. But the implications of the Court decisions are serious. Surely, it is not usual for a party in power to be declared an 'unlawful society'. Has such a thing ever happened in any Parliamentary Democracy? One must regard it as a serious matter with widespread repercussions for the political system for yet another reason. It reflects badly on the ability of the party leadership to manage the party. This is why, there should have been some attempt to reprimand the Secretary-General of the party (who is ultimately responsible for the proper conduct of party affairs) for what happened.

In any case, if it is only a technical matter, why the almost panic reaction from a number of ex "UMNO" leaders? Why the messages of solidarity and support for the Prime Minister? (Dr. Mahathir's position as Prime Minister is not a subject of dispute. This is why it is somewhat ridiculous for ex-UMNO and certain Barisan leaders to pledge support for him as Prime Minister). What is even worse is the way Radio and Television Malaysia have been reporting the episode. They keep on reminding the people that Dr. Mahathir is still the Prime Minister and has a lot of support from everyone.

The media and ex-UMNO and Barisan politicians should be more mature. There is no need to over-react. It is more important to work out a sensible solution to the problem. In other words, legalise UMNO's status. That is the real task before Dr. Mahathir and the others in the now unlawful UMNO.

Perhaps the first thing to do is to establish a pro-tem committee and apply for the re-registration of the party. Once this is done, the branches and divisions can be formally re-established and activities can re-commence. The 30 branches which caused the problem can also be properly registered.

After all this is done, the pro-tem committee can call for a General Assembly and fresh elections can be held and a new Supreme Council can be formally chosen by the delegates.

Let Dr. Mahathir and the other ex-UMNO leaders set the example by resolving the "UMNO" dilemma through proper constitutional channels. This is what leadership by example is all about.

The Malaysian public as a whole, and certainly the vast majority of UMNO members, are completely in the dark as to the full legal implications of UMNO's illegal status.

This is true. People are in the dark because there has not been a single analysis in any newspaper of the full implications of the High Court decision to declare UMNO an unlawful society. Newspapers don't carry any analysis because the ex-UMNO leaders don't want them to. For if UMNO members knew the truth, they would be shocked.

To start with, legally UMNO is dead. It cannot hold any activities, not even a sports function. It cannot hold meetings. It cannot publish its party organ. Its offices have to be closed down. Its buildings cannot be used for any party purpose. Its assets and liabilities would have to be surrendered to the official assignee.

Even if the former leaders of the party attempt to revive the organization they will have to get a new name which could of course be a variation of the present 'UMNO'. The new 'UMNO' will need a new symbol, a new flag. In other words even if a party emerges in place of the illegal UMNO, it will have to have a new identity.

If the legal implications are so serious why hasn't the Registrar of Societies taken action against the party?

Since former UMNO leaders have made it quite clear that they are not going to appeal against the decision of Justice Harun Hashim of the

Kuala Lumpur High Court, the Registrar of Societies should have proceeded to de-register UMNO officially in accordance with the Societies Act. We don't know whether she has done this already. If she has, a public statement to that effect should have been made.

Together with the de-registration letter, she should have informed officials of the de-registered party of all the legal implications. The Registrar could have told them, for instance, that under 17(1)(a) of the Societies Act "the property of the society shall forthwith vest either in the Official Assignee or if any other officer be, by the terms of the order under Section 5, appointed by the Minister for the purpose of winding up the affairs of the society, then in such other officer". The Registrar could have also communicated to UMNO the nature of penalties which an unlawful society has to bear, as contained in Sections 42 to 47 of the Act. It is not widely known that "any office-bearer and any person managing or assisting in the management of any unlawful society shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or to a fine not exceeding ten thousand dollars or to both." (Section 42).

At the same time, it would have been the duty of the Registrar to advise former UMNO officials on how a party made illegal by a Court and subsequently de-registered, can apply for registration. One would have thought that by now a Pro-tem Committee would have been established by those who were holding office at the time UMNO was made illegal and this committee would have applied for the registration of a slightly modified UMNO.

If the series of events following the Court decision have not taken a sane, rational route, it is partly because senior civil servants, like the Registrar of Societies, are so afraid to apply the rules when it involves the power-holders. They are so subservient to their political masters. And yet this is a society where the Civil Service is supposed to be politically neutral, where laws are supposed to be administered impartially! Theoretically at least, bureaucrats should feel confident enough to make decisions without fear or favour.

When bureaucrats adjust to the whims and fancies of the political elites, the consequences are often disastrous. It was because bureaucrats

dared not say 'no' to certain politicians that the Cooperatives scandal assumed such proportions. Similarly if bureaucrats had been firm with certain political leaders the Bank Rakyat fiasco might not have occurred.

In the present UMNO crisis, if the bureaucrat concerned is prepared to act with courage and conviction, there may be less confusion and uncertainty.

However the failure of the Registrar of Societies to act, all said and done, is a small matter. Perhaps, the real impediment to the resolution of the crisis is the attitude of the ruling elites.

It is sad that since the beginning of the crisis all that Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and some of his colleagues in government seem to be interested in is shoring up support for the Prime Minister. As we have emphasised before, Dr. Mahathir's position as Prime Minister is not the issue. He will remain the lawful Prime Minister as long as he commands the support of the majority of the Dewan Rakyat. No one has illegalized his position as Prime Minister. It is UMNO that has become illegal. It is restoring the legality of UMNO in some form or other that should be the concern of the former UMNO elites, particularly its former President, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad.

Instead of focusing upon UMNO's illegal status which affects the political future of its 1.4 million members, the obsession is with the position of one man — an obsession which has no rational basis in the first instance. Of course there may be some other motive behind this highly publicised exercise of getting various groups inside and outside the Barisan to pledge undivided loyalty to Dr. Mahathir as Prime Minister.

What is alarming is that in the process the legitimate fears and anxieties of 1.4 million members about their illegal party have been largely ignored. These members, many of whom are poor fishermen, farmers, rubber smallholders, petty traders, office-boys and clerks, have every right to know whether all their sacrifices on behalf of UMNO have come to nought. Let it not be forgotten that many of these ordinary people have been patiently paying their membership dues for decades. They want to be assured that the UMNO meetings and functions that they have been attending for years on end — in some

instances for as long as 30 or 40 years – will continue once everything is sorted out. They would like to have some idea of when, if ever, UMNO is going to put back on the rails.

A selfless leadership would be more concerned about the position of former UMNO members than with its own status and power. It will set aside the pursuit of its own glory and greatness and instead seek the happiness and well-being of the thousands who constitute "UMNO". By the same token, a genuine leadership will be honest enough to refrain from heaping all the blame upon the UMNO 11 and their sponsors.

Of course the UMNO 11 and their sponsors cannot be exonerated from some of the blame. Power and ambition must have played some part in their persistent refusal to come to some compromise in the earlier stages.

However, others must also be prepared to take a big chunk of the blame. If the insatiable ambition to achieve power at all costs is a problem, so is the unquenchable desire to cling on to power, whatever the consequences. Likewise, both the factions involved in the April 1987 party election allegedly used unscrupulous, unethical means to obtain votes. Each has accused the other side of cheating.

It would be unfair to put all the blame on the UMNO 11 for yet another reason. By sacking all his Cabinet Ministers from the rival camp, and allegedly victimizing others too, associated with his opponents, Dr. Mahathir may have forced the 11 and their sponsors to become more hostile, more defiant and therefore, less accommodative, towards him.

It is also possible that the 11 became more determined than ever to go to Court when they realized that their complaint about irregularities in the UMNO polls was not attended to by the party's Secretary-General. As Justice Harun Hashim put it in the High Court, "If the Secretary-General throws (the complaint) into a wastepaper basket, as he did before, how does it get to the Supreme Council?" Besides, the Supreme Council does not have a specific, established mechanism for handling grievances related to party elections..

The unwillingness of the former UMNO Secretary-General to give proper attention to complaints from certain groups within UMNO, is in fact part of a larger, more complex problem. The former UMNO leadership was not as willing, as it should have been, to listen to the grievances of the grassroots, to establish dialogue with members, to consult the party's elders on various challenges facing UMNO and the nation. When consultations and discussions within the party decline, disgruntled members are sometimes compelled to seek some other avenue for the expression of their unhappiness. This may be why the 11, backed by their sponsors, turned to the Courts for justice.

Indeed, one should not be surprised that they sought a legal remedy. With better education and more exposure to world affairs, UMNO members, like many others in Malaysian society, have become more conscious of their rights. Surely, it is unfair to condemn individuals for becoming more aware of the workings of elections, the character of our Constitution and the aspirations of Parliamentary Democracies.

This is why it makes no sense to argue that the 11 should not have gone to Court since similar irregularities had occurred in the past and no one had complained. We must accept that people have become more sophisticated, and more important, that UMNO politics itself has become more competitive. Besides, a wrong is a wrong and it should be rectified, whatever may be the motives of the person pleading for justice.

Even if we confined our analysis to the Court proceedings alone, it would still appear that the 11 had no desire to see UMNO declared unlawful.

In fact, the leading counsel for the 11, Raja Aziz Addruse, implored the Court not to declare UMNO illegal. The 11 merely wanted the party polls to be declared invalid and fresh elections held. Raja Aziz made it very clear that he would like the Court "only to concentrate on the illegal branches" and not on the status of UMNO.

It was Sri Ram, the leading counsel for UMNO, who sought to link both issues. Indeed, it was he who introduced the question of UMNO's legality into the hearing by drawing the attention of the Court

to Section 12(3) of the Societies Act which says that "Where a registered society establishes a branch without the prior approval of the registrar, such registered society and the branch so established shall be deemed to be unlawful societies".

It is difficult to understand why the lawyer for UMNO was not keen on severing the polls issue from the question of UMNO's legitimacy.

What are we to make of the move by the Tunku and others to register a party called "UMNO Malaysia"?

The Tunku has been very unhappy about the situation in the country in the last few years. The October '87 episode made him even more unhappy. It was not just the detentions; the suspension of the STAR was a shattering blow. For it was the Tunku (who took over as Chairman of the newspaper in 1974), who was largely responsible for making the STAR a newspaper which someone once described as "the only real newspaper in Malaysia". In fact, people who know the Tunku well say he has been so deeply hurt by the total injustice of the STAR's suspension, that nothing will ever restore his trust and faith in the government of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad.

As if the wound created by the STAR's suspension was not enough, the Tunku received an even bigger blow on 4 February 1988. This was the High Court decision that UMNO is an unlawful society. The Tunku was simply devastated.

It was the Tunku, more than any other single individual, who made UMNO into a powerful, dynamic political movement. When he took over from the illustrious Dato Onn Jaafar, the party was in shambles, for almost the entire Executive Council had left together with Dato Onn. The Tunku travelled all over the country assisted by sincere, able lieutenants like Tun Razak, Tun Dr. Ismail, Dato Suleiman, Tan Sri Khir Johari, Tun Sardon, and Ghaffar Baba to establish branches and divisions of the fledgling party. The Tunku, it is well known, sacrificed not only his time and energy but also most of his inherited wealth to build UMNO. He sold nearly all the land and houses he owned for a cause. For the UMNO of the fifties and early sixties was a financially poor party, without any of the luxurious buildings it owns today.

The people have to appreciate the depth of the Tunku's personal sacrifice and the breadth of his struggle, to understand why he reacted the way he did to the sudden 'death' of UMNO. The Tunku knew that the root causes of UMNO's demise are not related to the Court action of the 'UMNO 11'. Party factionalism had become serious; the party had become a hunting-ground for opportunists and charlatans. The style of leadership had also changed. Discussions and negotiations were no longer valued. The spirit of accommodation and compromise was lost. It will be remembered that it was the Tunku who suggested eight months ago that Dr. Mahathir should initiate a round-table conference to resolve the problem of the Court suit by the 11 and to curb factionalism within the party. The proposal was rejected. The Tunku felt that there was no magnanimity any more at the level of the UMNO leadership. Individuals were only interested in acquiring or clinging on to power at all costs.

This is why when UMNO was declared illegal, the Tunku thought that he should move in to save the party from the rot that had set in. Together with some other former UMNO leaders, he decided to form a pro-tem committee with himself as the Chairman to apply for the registration of a party called "UMNO Malaysia".

Aliran feels that it was an unwise move. Normally, it is those holding office at that point in time when a society is declared unlawful, who are expected to take the initiative in restoring the society's legality. It is, of course, true that in the first few days, the UMNO leadership did hardly anything to rectify the situation. But what the Tunku and the others should have done is to keep on urging them to act. If they had failed to move after a reasonable period of time, "UMNO" members could have been organized to compel their leaders to legalise the party.

By moving first the sponsors of "UMNO Malaysia" have hastened the danger of the eventual emergence of two UMNOs. Even if that does not happen, the attempt to establish a new party at this stage, will serve to perpetuate factionalism. To make it worse, most of the individuals in "UMNO Malaysia" appear to be from a particular clique within a certain faction. The Tunku's association with a particular clique will only hamper his own efforts to restore unity and harmony within the party.

It would perhaps be best then if the Tunku decides not to pursue his idea of an "UMNO Malaysia" and instead endeavours to ensure that the registration of a new UMNO is in accordance with democratic principles and constitutional rules.

Finally, as we reflect upon the UMNO crisis we cannot help but observe that it is full of ironical situations.

This is quite true. Over the last 30 years the UMNO-led government has made all sorts of laws – so much so that there is a joke in some circles that Malaysia is a "lawful" society. Now, suddenly, the party that created this "lawful" society has become unlawful.

All these laws – the ISA, the Societies Act, the Industrial Relations Act, the Employment Act, the Trade Union Act, the UUCA, the Legal Profession Act, OSA, the Publication Act, the Police Act – are meant to curb and control others. Now, in an unexpected way, the party that has been trying to control everyone else through laws and regulations has been wiped out of existence by a particular law, a particular regulation.

There is yet another irony. From the October 27 episode it is clear that the UMNO-led government was trying to "ban" all individuals and institutions which dared to question its unquestionable wisdom. Thus, leaders of political parties and public interest societies were "banned" from playing their legitimate roles in society through the infamous ISA. Newspapers were "banned" to prevent them from carrying dissident views. Even Judges were in a sense "banned" from doing their duty to truth and justice. And in the end what happened? UMNO itself gets "banned"!

That's not all. In the last few years various financial scandals and malpractices involving UMNO and its coalition partners, notably the MCA, have come to light. Though the immorality of the actions of certain leaders is so obvious, it has been very difficult to persuade the UMNO membership itself to evaluate their leaders on the basis of right and wrong. Even when they support leader X against leader Y it is not because of the burning moral questions involved in scandals such as BMF, UMBC, EPF, Makuwasa and UEM. Indeed, issues related to corruption and social greed have never been crucial in UMNO politics.

It would not be wrong to say therefore that UMNO, especially in the last decade or so, has been without a strong ethical and spiritual foundation. If anything, the money politics within the party and its myriad business operations have further sullied its image. From a spiritual point of view, an organization without a moral basis, without ethical integrity, has no legitimacy. It has no right to exist.

Declaring UMNO unlawful then is merely the legal expression of a moral illegitimacy which had already sapped the vitality of the party.

UMNO members, and more important UMNO leaders, should reflect on this. There is a law of requitil that we cannot escape. When we do wrong to others, it will rebound upon us, sooner or later. When we commit evil, we will have to pay the penalty. This is one of the eternal truths contained in all the great Scriptures.

This is why, in the ultimate analysis, the question is not whether UMNO's legality can be restored. Can UMNO regain its morality?

Postscript

The above commentary was written before Dr. Mahathir Mohamad announced that he and other former UMNO officials had launched a new party called "UMNO Baru". The formation of "UMNO Baru" was announced on 16 February 1988. We have therefore included a comment on "UMNO Baru".

Why did Dr. Mahathir choose to form a "New UMNO" instead of going to Parliament to amend the Societies Act with the aim of making UMNO lawful again?

From the standpoint of democratic principles, going to Parliament to amend the Societies Act so that unlawful UMNO can become lawful again would have been morally wrong. If this was one of the Prime Minister's concerns we would applaud his decision not to seek a Parliamentary solution.

We are however doubtful that this was his consideration. For Dr. Mahathir and his Ministers have gone to Parliament on at least three occasions since 1983 to introduce retroactive legislation – in spite of public protests. The Petronas Act was amended retroactively in

connection with the purchase of Bank Bumiputra by Petronas; the Dangerous Drugs law was also amended in the same way and so was the EPF Act in relation to wages and allowances for hotel workers.

It seems to us that the Prime Minister was reluctant to introduce retroactive legislation in the UMNO case for two reasons. One, though UMNO would have become lawful again, he would still have to hold fresh party elections. He may not be too happy with the idea, given the bruising experience of the April 1987 election.

Two, restoring legality of the old UMNO would have meant contending with all his old foes again. For they will all still be in UMNO and may continue to question and challenge him.

Considering these factors, Dr. Mahathir may have felt that it is better to register a new party. Both the disadvantages of going to Parliament can be taken care of. Indeed, with a new party not only can he weed out his opponents but he can also ensure an election where he is not challenged.

Now that UMNO Baru has been launched, will UMNO and national politics return to normal?

Since the sudden 'disappearance' of UMNO created an extraordinary state of affairs where the Coalition in power was without its leading partner, the return of 'UMNO' is in the interest of order and political stability. It is good that the vacuum has been filled. One hopes that it will lead to the normalization of UMNO and Malaysian politics.

However, Aliran would be failing in its duty to the public if it does not make certain observations. To start with, we are saddened by the manner in which UMNO Baru was formed and registered. The whole operation was done in cloak-and-dagger style. The former members were not told what moves were being made. State Assembly members and members of Parliament from the old UMNO were in the dark. A number of other former UMNO leaders were also not aware of what was being done to legalise the party. Indeed former UMNO President and Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad hinted in his speech to the Barisan Nasional gathering at the Banquet Hall of Parliament House that a legal remedy might be sought. The impression given was that the Societies Act was going to be amended to help make UMNO

lawful again. This was on 14 February, one day after Dr. Mahathir had formed a pro-tem committee to register a new party called UMNO Baru.

Though certain UMNO Baru leaders may defend this cloak-and-dagger style of setting up a new party as unavoidable, given the presence of another faction in the old UMNO which had announced the formation of 'UMNO Malaysia', they would do well to remember that UMNO, whether 'lama' or 'baru' is supposed to be a democratic party which upholds democratic principles. How can a party that believes in democracy adopt such an approach? A democratic party is expected to be open and honest in its communication with its members and the general public. A democratic party will use democratic means to achieve democratic ends. Besides, was there any need to be secretive when the 'UMNO Malaysia' founders were totally open about their attempt to form a party?

There is yet another aspect about the formation of UMNO Baru which is really quite disturbing. There is a strong suggestion of misuse of power on the part of the party's founders who are also leaders in Government. The speed with which UMNO Baru was registered must have astounded a lot of people. The application was submitted on Saturday 13 February, a half-day and approved on Monday 15 February. While we appreciate the need for quick action, given the role and status of UMNO in national politics, instant registration of this sort makes one wonder whether the Registrar of Societies did in fact weigh and consider all aspects of the application as she is required to do.

By the same token, did the Registrar give due consideration to the application from "UMNO Malaysia"? The application was submitted to the Registrar on 8 February and rejected almost immediately, on 10 February, according to a certain newspaper. Doesn't that smack of indecent haste? Indeed, it is a pity that right through the UMNO crisis the Registrar of Societies has given the impression of someone who is at the beck and call of her political master, of someone who is a mere pawn in the hands of some powerful chieftain.

Though the manner in which UMNO Baru was established leaves much to be desired, Aliran hopes that the founders and supporters of "UMNO Malaysia" will not decide to challenge UMNO Baru, or the

Minister of Home Affairs or the Registrar of Societies through Court suits and the like. It would be tactically wrong to do so for UMNO members and the public are a little tired of wrangles and squabbles of this sort. By all means, show the nation how the establishment of UMNO Baru had deviated from certain moral principles but it would be best to leave it at that.

UMNO Baru founders, for their part, should be magnanimous and accommodative. They should accept all those who apply and are willing to uphold the Constitution of the new party. Loyalty to the Constitution – and not loyalty to any particular individual – should be the only criterion for membership.

If loyalty to a certain individual becomes the obsession of the new party, one can be sure that UMNO Baru will not take off. For such a concept of loyalty will breed suspicion and distrust. Those who are 70 or 80 per cent loyal will be distinguished from those who are 100 or 120 per cent loyal. As time goes on, members and even other leaders will be required to continuously prove their unquestioning, undivided, unalloyed loyalty to a particular person. Those who do not measure up to that individual's exacting standard of loyalty will be blacklisted and then sidelined and finally expelled and even purged. This will breed sycophancy among many. It will breed fear among some. And among yet others, it will breed hatred of the great leader. An organization with such negative attitudes will never grow. It will remain weak and divided.

Aliran is confident that the founders of UMNO Baru realize all this. We hope that they will be guided by the God-given values of mercy, grace and love as they build the new UMNO.

Explanatory Note

Written in February 1988. It appeared over two months in the *Aliran Monthly* (Vol. 7:11 and 7:12).

DESTROYING DISSENT; LAUDING LOYALTY

Malaysian politics appears to be in flux. Amid the flux, a certain pattern is becoming more and more obvious. As events occur and issues unfold, the ruling elite seizes the opportunity to consolidate its position, expand its power and dominate the political system. Two major episodes in recent months which have had a profound impact upon Malaysian politics reveal such a pattern.

After the United Malaysia National Organization (UMNO), the mainstay of the Coalition in power and a party which is synonymous with Government was declared unlawful by a Kuala Lumpur High Court on 4 February 1988, the ruling elite began to adopt certain strategies aimed at strengthening its dominance.

First, organizations and individuals inside and outside the Establishment were mobilized to express undivided loyalty to the leadership of the Prime Minister, Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. It was argued by supporters of Dr. Mahathir that since the party which he led had lost its legal status, it was psychologically important for the people, especially the Malays, to rally around Dr. Mahathir as Prime Minister. Support from all sorts of groups, ranging from rubber smallholders and petty traders to academics and politicians, was harnessed to the hilt. Pledge-taking ceremonies — at which the outstanding qualities of Dr. Mahathir's leadership were eulogised — were telecast in the main news bulletins everyday for at least two weeks. The impression was created through both the electronic and print media that there was an avalanche of spontaneous support for the Prime Minister and to a lesser degree, the Deputy Prime Minister. It was as if the whole nation was swearing total allegiance to a leadership which was its saviour, protector and benefactor.

Second, with pledges of loyalty and oaths of allegiance reverberating through the length and breadth of the land, there was also a concerted attempt to isolate and vilify the leadership's opponents within UMNO. As soon as the party was declared unlawful, the Prime Minister and his faction began to put all the blame upon the 11 members who filed a suit urging the Court to declare the April 1987

UMNO election null and void. It was their suit which led eventually to the High Court declaration that UMNO itself was unlawful. That the suit was the product of intense intra-party factionalism for which both Dr. Mahathir and his opponents should be held responsible and should not be separated from all the allegations and counter-allegations of fraud and malpractices, is something that the group in power will not admit. All that mattered to them was denouncing the 11 members who had gone to Court in the strongest language possible. They, and their so-called sponsors were projected as greedy, selfish, ambitious individuals whose lust for power knew no bounds.

The proof of this, according to the Mahathir faction and the media it controls, was the application submitted by some of these individuals, together with the 'father of the nation', Tunku Abdul Rahman and another former Prime Minister, Tun Hussein Onn, to register a new party called 'UMNO Malaysia', following the Court verdict. The Tunku, and opponents of Dr. Mahathir like Tengku Razaleigh, who lost narrowly to him in the April 1987 election, were accused of splitting Malay unity and wresting power from the legitimate UMNO leadership of Dr. Mahathir. Tengku Razaleigh, though not in the pro-tem Committee of UMNO Malaysia was undoubtedly linked to the endeavour. In a situation where the political cohesiveness of UMNO is sacrosanct since it is regarded as the only guarantee of the Malay community's political pre-eminence in an ethnically-divided society, anyone accused of splitting the community or UMNO, would be the immediate target of overwhelming wrath. This is how the Mahathir leadership managed to discredit both the Tunku and its other opponents in the party.

Third, more than denigrating their political adversaries, Mahathir and his loyalists, tried to present themselves as the only genuine inheritors of the UMNO mantle. They too set up a party called UMNO (Baru) or the New UMNO which was accorded instant registration by the Registrar of Societies who serves in the Ministry of Home Affairs, which Dr. Mahathir heads. (UMNO Malaysia's application was turned down at about the same time. No reasons were given). The launching of this new UMNO should be considered in relation to the first two strategies of the Mahathir faction – mobilising support for him and enhancing his stature and glory on the one hand, and isolating and

discrediting his opponents, on the other. The new party, needless to say, will be built around Mahathir's personality. It will be a party of men and women who owe total allegiance to him. At the same time, the creation of a new party which will register members, branches and divisions all over again, provides Mahathir with the long-awaited opportunity to rid the organization of all his political foes. He will be able to ensure that he and his loyalists are not challenged, perhaps not even questioned. At last, he will be able to exercise maximum control and elicit maximum obedience to his leadership.

If the UMNO episode may have allowed Mahathir to jettison internal party dissidents, then the 'October 27 episode' has enabled him to emasculate dissent within the larger political system. In the small hours of 27 October 1987, the Mahathir government launched a massive swoop under the infamous Internal Security Act (ISA) which provides for indefinite detention without trial. By the middle of November, at least 106 leaders and members of political parties, public interest societies, cultural organizations and religious associations were behind bars. At the same time, three popular newspapers, including the Star, often regarded as the least subservient within a press noted for its readiness to comply with the dictates of authority, were suspended by the Minister of Home Affairs.

The Government's justification for the mass arrests was of course the need 'to preserve national security and ethnic harmony'. It alleged that those detained were responsible for the ethnic tensions that were escalating before October 27. Similarly, the three newspapers that were suspended were said to be guilty 'of playing up ethnic issues'.

However, if we examined the list of detainees it would be obvious that a number of them had nothing to do with ethnic politics of any sort. Indeed, a few of them had even tried very hard to reduce ethnic tensions in the weeks before the swoop. True, these individuals are critics and dissidents but operating within the framework of the nation's Constitution. Besides, if the exploitation of ethnic controversies was the Government's rationale for the arrests, how would one explain why certain prominent politicians from the ruling Coalition who were actively espousing communal causes were not detained together with the rest?

More important, if causing communal tensions was the reason, one wonders why in the last four months since the ISA arrests, the Government has not come out with a single new idea or created a single new institution or formulated a single new policy which responds positively to the deteriorating ethnic situation? Apart from the usual pious platitudes about ethnic harmony, there has been no earnest, concrete endeavour to improve ethnic relations, though 38 of those detained since October 27 continue to languish in jail.

While ethnic relations has received scant attention, decisive moves have been made in the last four months to curb dissent. It is significant, for instance, that in early December, the already restrictive Publications Act was further amended to curb a basic liberty – a person's freedom of expression. The new Act would, undoubtedly, discourage investigative journalism. For it gives the Minister of Home Affairs the right to determine what sort of news and analysis would 'alarm public opinion'. A journalist investigating a certain wrongdoing involving individuals in high places could be accused of 'alarming public opinion' if he raises a few tentative questions about their integrity. The Act also prohibits the Judiciary from reviewing executive decisions on publication and printing licences and the like. Indeed, it contains such severe penalties for the violation of certain clauses, that none but the bravest would dare to challenge the authorities on fundamental policies.

If the Publications Act affects adversely the freedom of expression, then the Police Act, also amended in December 1987, bears certain dire consequences for the freedom of assembly. It has become even more difficult than before for groups outside the Establishment to organize public meetings. For police licences will now be required for all manner of assemblies.

The nation's labour laws are also expected to be amended soon. From all indications, the proposed legislation will further weaken the bargaining power of labour. New curbs upon industrial action are expected which may render public sector unions in particular totally impotent. It has been suggested that tighter laws are being contemplated for groups and organizations in other spheres of society which have been somewhat vocal in the past.

In this connection, it is obvious that the Mahathir leadership has also been a little uneasy about the nascent judicial activism which seemed to be developing in the last two or three years. This is why, since October 27, the Judiciary has been subjected to considerable criticism by individuals within, or associated with, the Executive, who would like to see the former comply more readily with the decisions of the latter. It is no coincidence that during this period there has also been a major reshuffle within the Judiciary which has resulted in the transfer of a particularly courageous and highly respected Judge to another division within the High Court where there are less opportunities to scrutinize Executive decisions. There are also other signs to show – a recent Supreme Court decision on a public interest litigation suit is a case in point – that the Judiciary, like most other institutions and individuals in Malaysian society today, is cognizant of the constraints upon autonomous thought and action in the post-October 27 situation.

And indeed, it is this recognition of the severe limits upon independent, autonomous thinking which has begun to condition the entire social atmosphere. There is an overwhelmingly powerful element of fear within the middle-class – where the articulators of dissent are found – which is the direct outcome of the mass ISA detentions. The ISA, always a psychological deterrent to genuine democratic action, has now become an incubus creating incredible, almost irrational fear among the people. It is true that the October 27 episode has frightened dissent out of its wits. The Mahathir leadership has achieved the real purpose behind the swoop.

With the decline of dissent, the position of the ruling elite has become that much stronger. As it consolidates and expands its power, it has chosen to give emphasis to the ethic of loyalty, of loyalty to 'religion, nation and state', though allegiance to the leadership is also promoted in a very subtle manner. It is worth observing in this regard that in the last four months, a song with a very catchy tune called *Setia* (Loyalty) has been popularized as perhaps no other song has been. School children and Government employees, are often required to sing *Setia*. It has a place of honour that almost equals the national anthem.

The question we must now ask is this: Why is there this insatiable desire to curb legitimate dissent and to promote loyalty to leadership?

Is it just the drive for power? Of course, it has been shown right through history that when the obsession for power transgresses certain limits, ruling elites go out of their way to eliminate dissent and to cultivate unquestioning loyalty to their leadership. But as far as the Malaysian situation is concerned there are perhaps other long-term goals and short-term challenges.

It is perhaps linked to Dr. Mahathir's dream of making Malaysia an industrial nation in the mould of newly-industrializing countries (NICs) such as South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. Since these NICs are hardly showcases of democracy, Dr. Mahathir appears to have come to the conclusion that political freedom and social dissent may well be luxuries in a developing society trying to achieve industrial progress. He may even regard political and social criticism as irritating and irksome, an impediment to his goal of increasing productivity and inculcating values such as diligence and discipline within the populace. It is these work ethics that he wants the people to absorb. He does not want them to be imbued with a passion for freedom or justice. If there is any other value that they should imbibe it is of course the concept and practice of loyalty. Undivided loyalty to the State and its leaders, he thinks, is one of those ingredients in the industrial success of Japan, and to a lesser degree, South Korea.

The emergence of Japan as an industrial power in an earlier period and the current industrial development of South Korea are due to a variety of rather complex causes which we shall not deal with in this analysis. Nonetheless, we can be certain that unquestioning loyalty to the State was a less significant factor than the type of industrial strategy that the Japanese ruling class adopted in the latter part of the 19th century. Similarly, the suppression of dissent in South Korea in the late sixties and seventies was in no way responsible for its industrial growth! Instead of looking at how dissent was treated, one should examine how South Korea benefitted from the tremendous expansion in the international capitalist system from the early fifties to the late seventies. Likewise, the 'gift' of the United States market with all its preferential facilities has been a far more crucial factor in explaining Taiwan's industrial success than the absence of democracy in that state. What all this shows is that it is not necessary to curb dissent or glorify loyalty to leadership in order to achieve industrial progress.

Apart from this long-term goal of an industrial nation, Dr. Mahathir's attitude towards dissent and loyalty may also be conditioned by certain short-term challenges like the current economic recession. Since the recession has led to serious unemployment and a severe decline in business activities, there is a lot of disillusionment within various sectors of society. This disillusionment is partly responsible for increased antagonism towards the Government, especially in those urban centres where the impact of the recession has cut deep. Limiting the scope for the expression of dissent may be the ruling elite's way of dealing with the problem.

However, more than the political and social consequences of recession upon the Government, it is the series of financial scandals and allegations of corruption involving elements in the elite stratum of society, which seem to have prompted the national leadership to act against dissent. Nearly each and every scandal – from the Bumiputra Malaysia Finance (BMF) to the United Malaysian Banking Corporation (UMBC) to Pan-electric (Pan-El), to the Deposit-Taking Cooperatives – was either exposed or pursued by opposition politicians and social critics. In a number of cases, the Star also played a prominent role in not only keeping the public informed but also in investigating and analysing the malpractices and misdeeds of the mighty.

It was because the Government was worried by exposes of this sort that it amended the Official Secrets Act (OSA) at the end of 1986. In spite of that, information about wrongdoings in the Government's privatization programme and deviations from established procedures in the award of contracts, kept flowing out of the bureaucracy onto the laps of the opposition.

In this connection, it is significant that it was the opposition which revealed in the middle of 1987 how the Cabinet had awarded the 3.4 billion ringgit North-South Highway project to United Engineers Malaysia (UEM), a company owned indirectly by UMNO itself! Of all the financial scandals, it was perhaps this that came closest to establishing the venality of certain power holders. Opposition leader, Lim Kit Siang had in fact taken UEM and the Government to Court on the issue. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court sitting in January 1988

reversed its own earlier decision and held that Lim had no *locus standi*. It is quite conceivable that if the actual case had been heard, quite a bit of the truth would have emerged. It has even been suggested that fear of what open investigations into the UEM-UMNO link would reveal was perhaps one of the concealed reasons behind the arrests of certain individuals. True or not, it is undeniable that when some of their misdemeanours are about to be exposed, elites elsewhere have been known to curb freedom of expression and even eliminate democratic channels of articulation altogether.

There is perhaps yet another reason why the Government may want to control criticism. The unprecedented challenge to his position as UMNO President in April 1987 – a challenge which almost succeeded – must have persuaded Dr. Mahathir to reappraise the role of dissent in Malaysian society as a whole. For he may have felt that it was because there was some space for independent articulation and action, that his opponents were able to mount such a powerful challenge.

From our analysis of the reasons behind the attempts to curb dissent, it is apparent that they are closely linked to goals and interests which are vital to the ruling elite. This is why it is doubtful if the situation will change for the better in the foreseeable future. Dissent will continue to be destroyed; loyalty to leadership will continue to be lauded. And as authoritarianism grows in a land that has known some freedom, we cannot help but ask: do Malaysians care enough to resist?

Explanatory Note

Written in late February 1988. The article appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (Vol. 8:4, 1988).

JOHOR BARU — A COMMUNAL TWIST

It is a pity that since the ignominious defeat of the Barisan Nasional in the Johor Baru by-election, Barisan leaders are going all out to give a communal twist to Datuk Shahrir's resounding victory. He, and the UMNO 46 group, are being accused of betraying the Malay cause. They are depicted as traitors to the Malay race since they had teamed up with the Democratic Action Party (DAP), an allegedly anti-Malay party. It is because of this collusion between Shahrir and UMNO 46 on the one hand, and the DAP, on the other, — according to Barisan leaders — that Shahrir won the by-election.

We shall leave it to the DAP to refute what we regard as a baseless allegation: that the party is anti-Malay. Our concern is something else. What is the real motive behind this organized, orchestrated endeavour to inject communal poison into the JB verdict?

It appears that the real motive is to camouflage the truth about how the Malays voted. The vast majority of Malays who went to the polls on 25 August, it is obvious from most accounts, voted for the Independent candidate, Datuk Shahrir Samad. Datuk Mohamed Soviee shows in his detailed analysis of the election results that for every 4 Malay votes that the Barisan candidate obtained, Shahrir must have received at least 11 Malay votes. He also argues that "Datuk Shahrir received less than two votes for every one Chinese vote for Hj. Ma'sud (the Barisan candidate)". Malay votes, rather than Chinese or Indian votes, ensured Shahrir's triumph.

It is this truth that the Barisan, and particularly the UMNO Baru leadership, refuses to accept. For UMNO Baru the JB defeat at the hands of someone representing the original UMNO, UMNO 46, is a bitter pill to swallow. It shows in clear, unmistakable terms that the Malays of Johor Baru reject UMNO Baru. What it means is that the Malays in the city where UMNO was formally established in 1946, do not accept the new UMNO created by Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in the midst of the continuing UMNO crisis. This has added significance when it is also remembered that Johor is the State where UMNO has always been exceptionally strong, the one State where

UMNO has not lost a single State or Parliamentary seat since elections were first introduced in the country in the early fifties. This is why the JB debacle has brought to the fore the whole question of UMNO Baru's credibility.

If its credibility is a question-mark it is because the party is seen in Johor Baru and in some other places as 'a pretender to the throne', a party that lacks the moral legitimacy of the original UMNO. It is seen as Mahathir's party, the party of the Malay elite that is in power today. This is something which UMNO Malays find difficult to accept. For UMNO as they perceive it is an institution which transcends the individuals who lead it at particular points in time. It is an institution which symbolises the community, its identity, its aspirations. UMNO has an image, a character which is not dependent upon, or subject to, the presence or the power of particular personalities. This is why when Datuk Onn Jaafar, the founder-President of UMNO and one of Johor's most illustrious sons left the party and contested against it in Johor itself on two occasions in the fifties, he was defeated. This was irrefutable proof that UMNO was bigger than any individual. It explains why the Malay voters of Johor Baru will not accept an UMNO which they feel reflects the dictates of an individual rather than the spirit of the community.

It is more than UMNO Baru's lack of credibility that the leadership is trying to camouflage by raising the spectre of a Chinese threat to Malay political power. The repudiation of Mahathir's leadership is yet another reason why there is a frantic attempt to communalize the people's verdict in Johor Baru. For as it has been stated many times before in our own analysis and in the writings of a number of other commentators, the major issue in the JB by-election was Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's leadership. What he had done to UMNO was, in a sense, part of this issue. His draconian moves against the Judiciary and democracy in general also provided cannon-fodder to his rivals.

These moves, and not State sentiments and parochial emotions, as suggested by his cohorts, played a big role in the defeat of the Barisan candidate. His cohorts have argued that Johoreans are not happy with a Northerner and would have liked someone from their own State. It has

even been said that there is a certain 'Johore pride' which works against ready acceptance of a leader from Kedah or any other State for that matter. Those who pedal this sort of argument forget that Johor gave total, unanimous support to the Kedahan, Tunku Abdul Rahman, right through the fifties and sixties. In the early and mid-seventies too when Tun Abdul Razak from Pahang was UMNO President and Prime Minister, he received overwhelming endorsement from Johor. So State sentiments had nothing to do with Johor Baru's rejection of Mahathir Mohamad.

If any one issue within the general question of Mahathir's leadership may have evoked a powerful response from the voters, it is the sacking of Lord President Tun Salleh Abas who incidentally is from Trengganu. The sacking was rightly perceived as a grave act of injustice. In the thinking of a lot of Malays and non-Malays in Johor Baru and elsewhere, an innocent man had been made to suffer because of someone's desire to remain in power. Injustices of this kind are easily understood by ordinary people. Within Malay political culture for instance, a social injustice has to be personalized for it to provoke an adverse reaction. When that injustice is also perceived as an extreme act transgressing conventional norms of restraint and moderation, one can expect the Malay community to develop an antipathy towards whoever is responsible for that injustice.

Since the UMNO Baru leadership is not prepared to admit that injustices of this sort and other glaring instances of abuse of power like the mass arrests of October-November 1987, were responsible for its humiliating defeat in Johor Baru, it has chosen to accuse UMNO 46 of 'communal treachery', of selling the Malays to the Chinese. UMNO Baru hopes that by hurling these accusations at UMNO 46, the credibility of its rival in the eyes of the Malays would be destroyed. Once its credibility is destroyed, it would be a lot easier for UMNO Baru to establish itself as the sole protector of the Malay community, as the guardian of the Malay cause.

It is important to observe that discrediting a rival by accusing him of betraying Malay interests and proclaiming oneself as the uncompromising defender of Malay rights, is a communal manoeuvre that has often been employed within UMNO politics. This was how

Dato Onn's image was tarnished after he proposed that UMNO open its doors to non-Malays in the early fifties. This was how the Tunku was more or less forced out of office in the wake of the May 13th riot in 1969. When the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) began to communicate with the non-Muslims with the aim of forming an inter-ethnic electoral pact in 1986, the UMNO leadership moved swiftly to kill its plan by accusing the party of betraying the Malay-Islamic struggle through compromises with the other communities. Now we see the UMNO Baru leadership deliberately distorting the UMNO 46 victory in Johor Baru so that the Malays will begin to suspect the fidelity of the group to the Malay cause.

For UMNO has known all along that the only way it can be dislodged from power is if another Malay party with strong Malay support emerges which is capable, at the same time, of forging a workable link with non-Malays. It explains to some extent why Shahrir's multi-ethnic victory in a multi-ethnic constituency has created a bit of panic within UMNO Baru and Barisan circles.

Explanatory Note

Written in September 1988. The article has appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (Vol. 8:6, 1988).

UMNO POLITICS AND MALAY UNITY

If there is any one goal on which UMNO Baru and Semangat 46 are in total agreement, it is Malay unity. Malay unity is the common aspiration of the two political adversaries. It is an objective which is shared by a number of other formal and informal Malay groupings. It has become such a 'noble ideal', such a 'sublime quest' that Malay unity has begun to acquire a certain aura, a certain sacredness. The idea commands so much reverence in certain circles that it would seem almost blasphemous to evaluate let alone criticize it.

And yet what is Malay unity? What do leaders in UMNO Baru and Semangat 46 mean by Malay unity? There has been no explanation, no detailed exposition of the concept. It is used as a slogan, a rallying-cry but as an idea it has very little substance to it.

Seen within the context of the bitter factional feud that has torn asunder the original UMNO, Malay unity appears to be a plea to the community to unite politically. The aim apparently is to overcome the political dichotomies within the community, to create cohesion and solidarity among the Malays through an all-encompassing political movement or organization directed towards a single, overriding purpose. To the leaders of both UMNO Baru and Semangat 46, it is UMNO – and only UMNO – that can accomplish this goal.

Total unity within the community has never really existed. Even when the Malays were fighting the Malayan Union in 1946 – which was undoubtedly the acme of Malay unity – there were one or two Malay organizations which chose to remain on the outside. Likewise, in the struggle for Merdeka – another event which solidified the community – an important Malay party, Parti Negara, differed from UMNO on some fundamental issues. Indeed, since the late forties there have been Malay parties which do not see eye-to-eye with UMNO. In the earlier period, apart from Parti Negara, there were groups like the Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM), the Hizbul Muslimin, the Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP) and Parti Rakyat which were not part of mainstream Malay politics. The PMIP which has now become the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) and the Parti Rakyat, now known as

the Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia (PSRM), continue to advocate ideas on society and political change which are diametrically different from UMNO's ideology. There were Malays in the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) when it was part of the Opposition who were opposed to UMNO just as there are Malays in the Democratic Action Party (DAP) today, who will not be prepared to endorse UMNO's policies.

What all this shows is that there has been some variety, a certain degree of diversity within the world of Malay politics. It is a diversity that expresses itself through a range of ideas on the economy, on development, on government, on institutions of State such as the Monarchy and the Judiciary, on the media, on ethnic relations, on religion, on women and so on. Of course, it is undeniable that within Malay political thought, UMNO's view-point – or rather the UMNO elite's perspective – has always been dominant. But the continuous presence of other ideas, other attitudes, other approaches and other political organizations should not be ignored.

The significance of organizations and ideas – other than UMNO and UMNO's – is underscored by the relative electoral success of the most important non-UMNO political force within the Malay community, namely, PAS. In the 1986 General Election, PAS obtained 17.12 per cent of the total votes cast though it won only one Parliamentary seat and a handful of State seats. The votes it obtained represented more than one-third of the total number of Malay votes cast in that election. In some previous general elections, PAS had acquired as much as two-fifths of the estimated Malay votes cast. If the Malay electorate equated Malay unity with unanimous endorsement of a particular Malay organization and a particular Malay leadership, it would not have lent so much support to PAS. It appears that the Malays accept political diversity as a reality, that they do not seek political uniformity as an ideal. They do not subscribe to the view that there has to be a homogenous political position within the community to ensure its well-being.

In this sense, the Malay community is no different from the other communities in the country. Though the rhetoric about 'Chinese unity' and 'Indian unity' has not lost its vehemence in the last 30 years since Merdeka, the truth is that both the communities are divided into contending political parties and feuding political factions. The Chinese

community for instance articulates its political aspirations through at least three channels – the DAP, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Gerakan. Chinese issues, as well as national challenges, are perceived in different ways by these parties and by cliques and factions within them. As far as Indian Malaysians go, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), contrary to what its leadership believes, does not exercise total control over the political thinking of the community. A sizeable segment of the community has always supported opposition parties like the Labour Party and the Gerakan in the sixties and the DAP in the seventies and eighties.

Diverse political affiliations and inclinations do not pose a threat to the integrity or the identity of any community. This is a point that must be emphasised over and over again. There are leaders who argue that unless there is complete allegiance to a particular organization and a particular leadership claiming to represent a particular community, the interests of that community would be in jeopardy. To be more specific, it has been suggested that the Malays should unite under the banner of UMNO if they are to assure “their survival in their own native land”. The Chinese, it has been said, should rally around the MCA “to protect their diminishing rights.” Without the MIC, according to one of its leaders, “the Indians will have no say in national affairs.” The same sort of argument has been advanced at various times by Kadazan and Dayak leaders to persuade their respective communities to give undivided support to the political parties they represent.

Since we are discussing Malay unity and UMNO politics, let us ask if it is true that the Malays must all unite under the UMNO leadership to ensure “the survival of the race”. Even if all the Malays were united under UMNO, there is no guarantee that the community’s future would be safe and secure. Only if the UMNO leadership is just, only if there are just policies, would the well-being of the Malays and the others be assured. The eagerness to do justice to all Malaysians should be a more important attribute of leadership than the ability to unite all Malays under the UMNO flag. Our own experience, in a sense, testifies to this.

Between 1973 and 1978, the vast majority of Malays were formally united under the UMNO leadership, following PAS’s entry

into the Barisan Nasional coalition government. In spite of overwhelming unity within the community some of the endemic problems confronting rural Malays, like uneconomic holdings, lack of credit facilities, lack of control over the marketing network, the exorbitant cost of farm inputs etc, remained unresolved. This was also the time when urban slums began to proliferate, especially in the Federal Capital. A law curbing student participation in public life — the amended Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) — was promulgated in 1975. Ethnic polarization also started to rear its ugly head. And, within UMNO itself, clique politics made a mockery of Malay unity.

Ethnic unity, it is apparent then, need not lead to social justice. But the proponents of Malay unity will continue to argue that if the Malay community does not close ranks behind the UMNO leadership, it will not be possible to preserve and perpetuate Malay political power. This was a view that was vigorously propounded by both UMNO Baru leaders and members at the recent UMNO Baru General Assembly. Anyone — so the logic goes — who obstructs Malay unity which is only possible through solidarity with UMNO, is guilty of weakening Malay political power. Weakening, or worse still, destroying Malay political power is a mortal sin in the eyes of the UMNO membership. The Semangat 46 group was accused of doing this through collaboration with the Chinese-based DAP. It explains to an extent why there was such harsh denunciation of the group at the UMNO Baru Assembly.

It is wrong to suggest that Malay political power is dependent upon the Malays uniting under the banner of UMNO. Rural weightage in the electoral system and the delineation of electoral constituencies have much more to do with Malay political pre-eminence than UMNO's strength. Certain political conventions which have evolved over the last three decades of nationhood, have also played a role. The Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, for instance, have always been Malays. That the Constitutional Monarchs are Malays has also an indirect bearing upon the Malay political position. Certain Constitutional provisions pertaining to the composition of the upper echelons of the Public Services and the structure of the Security Forces are not unrelated to the political pre-eminence of the Malay community. Most of all, however, there is a pervasive consciousness of the legitimacy of

Malay political pre-eminence within the Malay community itself. It is this consciousness, linked to the history of the land, which sustains Malay political pre-eminence. Whether UMNO is around or not, this consciousness will remain for a long time to come. Even if some other Malay group replaces UMNO, it is quite conceivable that it will continue to uphold the principle of Malay political pre-eminence. Indeed, even among some non-Malays, there is a certain degree of understanding of Malay political pre-eminence. It is seen as a phase in the evolution of a genuine multi-ethnic society which has its roots in a Malay polity.

If Malay political pre-eminence is well protected by both consciousness and structures, why has the UMNO Baru leadership raised the spectre of a grave threat to Malay political power which can only be averted through undivided Malay support for UMNO Baru? There is perhaps only one explanation. By asking all Malays to unite behind the UMNO Baru leadership, allegedly to preserve Malay political power, the leadership hopes to strengthen its own position. For 'Malay political power', given the complexities of our multi-ethnic situation, is an issue which has tremendous emotional pull. A substantial segment of the Malay community is bound to respond to the call to protect Malay power, since Malay power is regarded as the vital pre-condition for ensuring the economic and social well-being of the Malays.

At the same time, by projecting itself as the only true defender of Malay unity and the only genuine protector of Malay political power, the UMNO Baru leadership hopes to isolate, de-legitimize, and in the end, destroy the Semangat 46 group. It is a classic case of one ethnic advocate trying to outdo another in order to retain its power and dominance over the community. The Semangat 46 group, realizing how crucial it is to pay obeisance to Malay unity, has no choice but to convince its constituency that it is also as capable (as UMNO Baru) of protecting Malay political power.

As UMNO Baru and Semangat 46 vie against each other on the question of Malay unity and Malay power, a significant segment of the non-Malay community has, understandably, become more apprehensive about its own position and its own role. Over-emphasis upon Malay unity and Malay power tends to further alienate non-Malays

who, in the last few years, have become more acutely conscious of their own political marginalization.

It is obvious therefore that the incessant exhortations and declarations on behalf of Malay unity and Malay power are not conducive for the well-being of a multi-ethnic society like ours. Any call for ethnic unity whether it is for Chinese unity or Indian unity or Kadazan unity for that matter will have the same negative effect upon multi-ethnic Malaysia.

This is why it is imperative that we realize what the call to a certain community to unite behind a particular leader or within a particular organization is all about. As we have shown, for the most part, ethnic unity is a myth. Total ethnic unity has never existed. It is used as a slogan often to rally support for the leadership itself. Since it is no guarantee of justice, ethnic unity can well become a source of injustice.

Explanatory Note

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AMPANG JAYA: WHY THE SEMANGAT '46 GROUP LOST

Many political analysts were convinced that Datuk Harun Idris, the candidate of the Semangat '46 group, would win the Ampang Jaya by-election and yet he lost. Why did Datuk Harun lose? Or, to put it in another way, how did the Barisan emerge victorious?

In our view, a variety of factors, some more important than others, explain the Barisan win.

One, there was the Harun factor itself. Among a huge segment of the non-Malays, particularly the Chinese electorate, there was some antipathy towards Harun. This was because of his alleged involvement in the May 13th episode. All the attempts by Tunku Abdul Rahman and Dr. Tan Chee Khoo to clear his name did not help. Harun's alleged link to that ethnic riot which had led to the killing of a number of Chinese Malaysians, was too deeply etched in the memory of the community, to be erased in one short election campaign. The Barisan, for its part, through television, radio, newspapers and pamphlets, constantly reminded the voters of the danger of another May 13th riot. The fear instilled in their minds must have persuaded some of them to support the Barisan rather than Harun.

Among some of the Malay voters, on the other hand, Harun's May 13th image may have given him a hero's stature of sorts. But this was offset by yet another perception of the man: Harun was also seen as a political has-been. He was a leader who had done his bit for the community but he belonged to yesterday not tomorrow. Besides, he had a tarnished reputation for having been convicted for corruption — a full pardon from the King notwithstanding.

Two, Semangat '46 also lost some support when it continued its barbed criticisms of Prime Minister and UMNO Baru President, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, even after he was taken ill. These criticisms were perceived by a section of both the Malay and non-Malay electorate as "bad manners", given the circumstances.

Three, the pointed attacks made by UMNO Baru campaigners against Semangat '46 leaders in connection with their alleged involve-

ment in financial malpractices further eroded Harun's support base. It was the Semangat '46 leaders who fired the first salvo by condemning the alleged corruption of UMNO Baru personalities. But the Semangat leaders were themselves very vulnerable and when their opponents returned the fire, they could not put up a convincing defence. Consequently, their credibility suffered a severe setback. Generally speaking, voters expect critics of those in power to be much more upright than the targets of their criticism.

Four, the Semangat group made yet another mistake. Their leaders tried to introduce the idea of a coalition comprising a number of Malay parties led by Semangat '46, working hand in hand with the Democratic Action Party (DAP), right in the midst of the by-election itself. A by-election, with all the confusion caused by accusations and counter-accusations hurled at each other, is hardly the occasion to launch an inter-party, inter-ethnic coalition. It was simply not possible to explain the concept and objectives of the coalition in the prevailing election atmosphere. Not surprisingly, the voters were not sure what Tengku Razaleigh and his Semangat group were up to. A segment of the Malay electorate was somewhat suspicious of the DAP's presence in the inter-party link up. The UMNO Baru leaders exploited this by projecting the DAP as a Chinese party out to destroy Malay political dominance and the indigenous position of the community. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) was also quick to point out that the Islamic Party of Malaysia's (PAS) participation in the coalition will lead inevitably to the creation of an Islamic State where non-Muslims will be stripped of all their religious freedoms. Apparently this distorted campaign line worked with a lot of Chinese voters.

Five, the MCA mounted an extremely communal campaign to ensure that its candidate, Ong Tee Keat, would retain the Ampang Jaya seat for the Barisan. Since the previous Member of Parliament for the constituency was also from the MCA, the party argued that Ong's defeat would spell doom for Chinese political representation in the Barisan. The MCA urged the Chinese to rally around the party to protect Chinese rights from further encroachment by a dominant Malay leadership. The Chinese, the MCA argued, should vote a Chinese.

The MCA's mobilisation of communal sentiments may be one of the main reasons why the Barisan candidate obtained such a high

percentage of Chinese votes. It is estimated that Ong may have garnered some 80 to 85 per cent of the Chinese votes cast compared to 10 to 15 per cent for Harun.

Six, it was not just the MCA that was communal; Semangat 46 also adopted a very communal posture. Some of its leaders called upon the Malay voters who constitute 68 per cent of the electorate to vote Harun because he is a Malay. Certain PAS officials who took part in the campaign added another dimension to that plea. Muslims, they said, should vote only a Muslim. It is wrong – according to PAS's interpretation of Islamic teachings – for Muslims to vote a non-Muslim into power.

Though this sectarian twist to Islamic universalism had some impact, it failed to help Harun obtain overwhelming endorsement from the Malay (Muslim) electorate. It is estimated that some 40 per cent of the Malays who voted still chose Ong while Harun may have got most of the remaining votes. Equally significant, the Malay/Islamic emphasis on the part of Semangat '46 alienated some of the Chinese and Indian voters who were 'sitting on the fence'.

Seven, if communal manipulation sank to a new depth in Ampang Jaya, political bribery, political thuggery and political trickery descended to its lowest level ever in the by-election. Ampang Jaya squatters who for ages had been denied Temporary Occupancy Licences (TOL) were bestowed at once with these legal rights. Generous adjustments were made to the monthly instalments of low-cost house owners in certain housing schemes.

While all sorts of inducements were offered, the Barisan also resorted to intimidation to win votes. Thugs were stationed outside certain kampungs to prevent Semangat '46 campaigners from approaching voters. Other strongarm tactics – including the threat of transfers and dismissal from employment – were also used to coerce voters into supporting the Barisan. When thuggery did not have the desired effect, the ruling Coalition, it is alleged, sought to manipulate electoral rolls. There is no doubt that bribery, thuggery and trickery combined influenced to some extent the eventual electoral outcome.

Eight, the Barisan's media propaganda also had some impact. More than in any of the other recent by-elections, the major dailies and

radio and television were harnessed to the hilt to secure the Barisan candidate's victory. Television in particular which has an extraordinary presence in an urban constituency like Ampang Jaya was used – or rather abused – without any consideration for fairness or honesty. Be that as it may, abuse of power, though pervasive, was not the major cause of the Barisan triumph.

The above reasons apart, we must also give due weight to certain other factors. Since the Barisan's ignominious defeat in the Johor Baru by-election of 25 August 1988, the Mahathir leadership – in the cosmetic sense at least – has been trying to give the impression that it is more accommodative, less arrogant, less haughty than it was before. There is an attempt to appear less authoritarian and more democratic. Of the five Supreme Court Judges suspended in July 1988, three were restored to the bench. In the Kelantan public service transfers controversy of December 1988, the Mahathir government, in the end, adopted a conciliatory, rather than a confrontational, attitude. This paved the way for a solution of sorts. Perhaps, if the controversy had happened before 25 August 1988, the government may have been inclined to display its might and power.

It is in its handling of the UMNO crisis that this new attitude becomes even more apparent. The Mahathir leadership has opened the doors of UMNO Baru to all and sundry – including Tengku Razaleigh and other leaders of Semangat '46. Dr. Mahathir has offered to talk to Razaleigh and former Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Musa Hitam. In October 1988, he invited the two to join his Cabinet as ministers without portfolio. Shortly after that, Dr. Mahathir asked some of the other Semangat leaders elected in the 1987 UMNO election to join the party's Supreme Council. And, in mid-January 1989, Dr. Mahathir accepted the six-point resolution of the Johor Malay Unity Congress. The resolution, among other things, calls for the restoration of the original UMNO Constitution – a major contention of the Semangat '46 group – and the reinstatement of branch and divisional committees which had held power in UMNO before the party was declared illegal. The resolution however, has yet to be implemented fully, even within the State of Johor.

Though it can be argued that most of the changes in attitude shown by the present leadership are, in some ways, superficial and do

not affect the essence of Mahathir's power over the party and the government, it is undeniably true that they had some impact upon the electorate in Ampang Jaya. A section of the Malay voters in particular felt that the Mahathir leadership was willing to compromise, to give in to the demands of the Semangat '46 group. This perception of the relationship between the Mahathir leadership and Semangat '46 worked to the detriment of the latter.

This perception of the Mahathir leadership may also have been influenced by yet another factor. Issues such as the sacking of the Lord President and the continuing detention of a number of public personalities which were crucial in the Johor Baru by-election, had receded into the background by the time the Ampang Jaya contest took place. Also, almost all the ISA detainees who were in jail in August 1988 were out by January 1989. In the course of the Ampang Jaya by-election, for instance, two batches of detainees were released. For an electorate, and indeed for a populace, which lacks a developed political consciousness, events that have happened and cannot be changed (like Tun Salleh's dismissal) cease to have any significance after a while. There is a tendency to adjust easily and quickly to the new situation, however great the injustice in the preceding episode. Likewise, it is the mere fact that a detainee has been released that counts. Whether his "freedom" with all the restrictions it carries with it, means anything or not is of little consequence to most Malaysian voters. Nor are they bothered by the continued existence of a repressive law like the Internal Security Act (ISA).

One suspects that the Ampang Jaya voters — like an important section of the Malaysian public — had also become somewhat weary of the protracted conflict between UMNO Baru and Semangat '46. Given the apparent concessions that UMNO Baru had made to Semangat '46, a sizeable number of Malay voters in Ampang Jaya were inclined to blame Tengku Razaleigh and his friends for perpetuating the conflict.

Indeed, it can be argued that there was even a desire among the voters for a conflict-free situation which would then result in rapid economic development. When such a mood prevails, it is often the Barisan, as the ruling Coalition with its well-worn pledge to ensure development, that reaps the benefit.

If anything, the economic recovery of the last few months also helped the Barisan candidate. For many of the voters, both Malay and non-Malay, the recovery has been a boost to their business. It has, in some instances, opened up new job opportunities.

While all these and other reasons may explain the Barisan victory we cannot ignore an equally important fact: that in spite of everything the Semangat '46 candidate Datuk Harun Idris managed to secure 19,469 votes to Ong's 23,719 votes. There must be various explanations for this creditable showing by Datuk Harun. To what extent is his support a manifestation of a protest element within a constantly evolving Malay urban political culture? This is a theme we hope to explore in the future.

For the time being we can establish certain conclusions which may help to refute various distortions of the Ampang Jaya by-election.

One, the Barisan victory was not a victory for non-communal politics or multi-ethnic harmony. As we have shown, the Barisan and Semangat were unashamedly communal in their campaign.

Two, contrary to certain analyses in the government-controlled dailies, it is obvious that Semangat obtained more of the Malay votes cast than the Barisan.

Three, this shows, in a sense, that Malay political sentiment in Ampang Jaya, and perhaps certain other places is still divided between Umno Baru and Semangat '46.

Four, in Ampang Jaya, as in Parit Jaya, it appears that it was the Chinese vote that secured the Barisan's victory. In an indirect way, the Chinese of Ampang Jaya had saved Mahathir and his UMNO Baru, for a defeat for him and his party would have spelt doom. It would have revealed that it is not just in Johor that Mahathir's credibility is gone. Even some of his own supporters would have begun to doubt his ability to lead UMNO and the Malays. Just as the Chinese voters helped UMNO to establish a degree of legitimacy within the Malay community, so the Malay voters helped the MCA to prove to one and all that it is still a viable political party.

Five, the by-election also showed that while the Semangat '46 initiated inter-ethnic coalition has some strength, it is still uncertain whether it will survive in the long run. Will Semangat 46 itself lose steam after its Ampang Jaya defeat and other recent political developments? Will the proposed coalition be rendered irrelevant in a rapidly changing, highly fluid political situation?

DO NOT DO TO OTHERS.....

Datuk Harun Idris, the Semangat '46 candidate who was defeated in the Ampang Jaya by-election recently, has complained about the dirty tactics of the Barisan Nasional (BN). A number of other Semangat '46 leaders like Datuk Rais Yatim, Datin Paduka Rahmah Othman, Marina Yusuf, Datuk Suhaimi Kamaruddin and Datuk Zainal Abidin Zin have all condemned the BN for abusing and misusing its power in the by-election. After the Parit Raja by-election in October last year, the BN also came under fire for using unscrupulous methods to secure its victory.

Semangat '46 leaders allege that the BN has introduced a "budaya samseng" (gangster culture) into the electoral process. In both Parit Raja and Ampang Jaya, gangs of youths, often armed with parangs, it has been suggested, tried to stop Semangat '46 campaigners from entering certain kampungs. In Ampang Jaya, some Wanita UMNO members are also reported to have resorted to this tactic to instill fear in their opponents. Hordes of youths on motorcycles were employed to disrupt ceramahs of the Semangat '46 group.

Squatters were threatened with the withdrawal of their temporary occupancy licences (TOLs) while residents of low-cost flats, it is alleged, were told that water and electricity rates would be increased arbitrarily if they supported Harun Idris. In other instances, voters were "bribed" with promises of new housing schemes, new schools, new clinics, new roads. On-the-spot allocations for development projects were made by Federal Ministers and the Selangor Menteri Besar. Indeed, even the salaries of Imams and Kadis in the State were raised automatically in order to win their support!

On polling day itself, an unusually large number of voters were shocked to discover that their names were not on the electoral rolls.

These were people who had voted in the 1986 general election and in previous elections. This has happened before and opposition parties have often lodged formal protests with the Election Commission. However, this time the magnitude involved was simply staggering.

It is all this blackmail, bribery, manipulation and outright cheating which has angered the Semangat '46 leadership. Their anger is justified. The BN undoubtedly played dirty in Parit Jaya and Ampang Jaya — dirtier perhaps than in previous by-elections and general elections.

And yet one wonders whether the Semangat '46 leaders — of all people — have any right to complain. For most, though not all, of the dirty tactics that they now condemn, were in vogue when the Semangat '46 leaders were also part of the BN. In fact, a number of the Semangat leaders were actively involved in plotting and executing vile, vicious campaign strategies against Opposition parties like PAS, the DAP and PSRM. In other words, they had employed most of the dirty tactics which are directed at them today, against the political Opposition at some point or other in the past. Others (in actual fact, their former comrades-in-arm) are doing to them what they have done to others.

As long as they were all in power together, it did not really matter that Opposition parties had to suffer at their hands. What did it matter when others were the victims of dirty tricks and filthy bribes? Now of course everything has changed. The Semangat '46 leaders are disgusted by the coarseness and crudeness of the ruling BN's campaign methods. They are morally outraged — because they are at the receiving end. They are just beginning to experience what others have experienced all along.

Perhaps Semangat '46 leaders should reflect a little on their new experience. They will realise that there is more than a ray of wisdom in that golden rule of life: Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you.

Explanatory Note

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UMNO IN THE CONTEXT OF A CHANGING MALAY SOCIETY

Malay society is in flux. Tremendous changes are taking place at the level of values and structures which will have far-reaching implications for the future. No other community in Malaysia has had to confront such a significant transformation in such a short period of time.

Some of these changes will have a profound impact upon UMNO. They are already beginning to affect UMNO's electoral performance. It is quite conceivable that in the nineties and beyond when these changes have consolidated into a certain pattern, UMNO's role in Malay politics would be quite different from what it is today. It is this changing Malay social milieu that we will now examine in relation to UMNO.

The Rural Community

To start with, important changes have occurred in the course of the last two decades within the Malay rural community – UMNO's traditional political base. As a result of agricultural modernization – new technologies, new fertilisers, new insecticides – farmers who are better situated to take advantage of all these innovations have become wealthier than others in the agricultural community. Consequently, a distinct socio-economic gap has emerged between rich and poor farmers in certain parts of the country. This has happened in other societies too which have chosen to emphasise rapid agricultural modernisation without first introducing fundamental agrarian reforms, like redistributing land on an equitable basis or equalising access to new technologies. This is why in parts of Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu and Perak, there is greater concentration of wealth today in the hands of a certain stratum of the farming community, than twenty years ago. At the same time, those at the lower strata, especially farmers who own uneconomic holdings of two or three relogs, or worse still, agricultural labourers, are much more impoverished now than they were two decades ago.

The political ramifications of this economic change are obvious. While the better-off padi farmers, like the better-off oil-palm small-

holders or the better-off fishermen, on the whole, tend to support UMNO and the Barisan Nasional, the poorer segment of the agrarian community sometimes gravitates towards the Opposition. The resentment of the poor is aggravated by other glaring injustices which they see around them. Since the better-off are also politically well-connected they are the ones who, more often than not, benefit from agricultural subsidies and from kampung rehabilitation schemes. They are the ones who get easy loans from Bank Pertanian and Bank Rakyat. It is their children who get government scholarships. It is they and their families who enjoy social mobility.

For a long while, the beneficiaries of the government's agricultural modernisation programme had no problem organising and mobilising the deprived and disadvantaged to give wholehearted support to the ruling coalition. But the situation is changing now. As income gaps and differences in life-styles become more and more apparent, it is getting more and more difficult to ensure that the poor remain loyal to the UMNO leadership. UMNO's rural base is beginning to erode. Unless the rural development policies of the UMNO-led government undergo a drastic transformation, it is not unlikely that we will witness further erosion of support for UMNO in rural Malaysia in the nineties.

Urbanisation

More than rural development policies, it is the massive urbanisation of the Malay community which has had an effect upon Malay attitudes towards UMNO. At the time of Independence (Merdeka) in 1957, only about six per cent of the urban population of Malaya was Malay. By 1990, it is anticipated that about 45.8 per cent of the urban population of the whole of Malaysia will comprise Malays and other Bumiputras. Few other communities anywhere in the world have experienced such rapid, dramatic urbanisation within the short span of three decades! The usual rural-urban migration, increasing economic and social mobility within the Malay community especially after 1969, and of course, the New Economic Policy (NEP) have all contributed to this.

What are the political consequences of this urbanisation? As long as the Malays were preponderantly rural, it was possible to use certain crucial agents of state authority like the Ketua Kampung (village

headman) or the schoolteacher to ensure that a huge portion of the populace voted UMNO. Even when many of them didn't in a couple of general elections – the 1959 election was one instance, the 1969 election was another – it was partly because of the relatively stronger influence of other rural elites like the Ustaz (religious teacher) or the Imam (the person who leads the congregation prayer), who may have been more inclined to the opposition Islamic party (PAS). With urbanisation however, rural elites as a whole have declined in influence.

The Malay migrant in his new urban environment is subjected to a variety of new influences which are in some ways quite different from the type of ideas that invariably help to mould rural thinking. The Malay urban dweller is in a position to think for himself, to decide on who he wants to choose as his spokesman in the State Assembly or Parliament. He has the sort of freedom of choice which the rural environment, in a sense, denies to his kin in the kampung. Whether the urban Malay consciously exercises that freedom or not is another matter.

Nonetheless, the urban milieu, by its very character, sometimes forces its inhabitants to ask certain questions about why things are what they are. An urban Malay, for instance, is bound to ask, at some point or other, why the public transport system in say the Federal capital is what it is or why there is no secondary school in the vicinity of his home, or why there are long queues at the out-patient clinic of the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital or why the price of powdered milk has increased so rapidly. He may, over time, become a little critical of the type of services available to him. Consequently, he may not accept as readily as his rural counterpart would, the run-of-the-mill UMNO propaganda about 'development' and 'progress'.

The Working-Class

A less uncritical attitude towards UMNO and the government is already evident within one important segment of the Malay urban population – namely, the Malay working-class. The Malay urban working-class – ranging from pump attendants and hotel waiters to clerks and salesmen – is numerically quite substantial. What is more significant, a segment of this class now realizes that one of the favourite

refrains of certain UMNO leaders about how the Chinese control all the wealth of the nation is nothing more than a myth. Malay workers today are acutely aware of the very visible presence of a coterie of extremely wealthy Malays. This is especially true of the capital city, Kuala Lumpur. They know that a vast chasm separates them from those rich Malays who live in palatial mansions and flaunt their fabulous wealth in all sorts of ways. A Malay hotel waiter does not have to be told that a Malay millionaire is no different from a non-Malay millionaire when it comes to spending thousands of ringgit on a lavish banquet in some exclusive restaurant. Likewise, there are many in the Malay working-class who resent the greed and corruption of some of the rich and powerful within their community – just as they have always been angry about the selfishness and acquisitiveness of some of the wealthy Chinese and Indians in their midst. It is only now that they are slowly beginning to understand – after the series of financial scandals of the mid-eighties – that the UMNO-led government cannot be exonerated from blame for all the wrong-doings that have taken place.

In fact, a section of the Malay working-class has shown that it is capable of not just understanding the situation but also of acting on the basis of its convictions. Realising that malpractices in government were becoming endemic, a number of Malay workers joined hands with their non-Malay colleagues to protest against the government's handling of the Employees Provident Fund (EPF)–Makusa affair in early 1986. Malay workers were again in the forefront of the pickets organized by the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) against highway tolls and the manner in which the North-South Highway contract was given out to an UMNO-owned company. These, and other similar episodes seem to indicate that segments of the Malay working-class are more conscious now than ever before of the divergence of interests between their strata of society and the upper echelons of the nation which are linked, in one way or another, to the UMNO Establishment. It is not inconceivable that this consciousness will reach greater heights as the contradictions between those who control wealth and dictate power, on the one hand, and those who are controlled by wealth and dictated by power, on the other, become sharper in the coming decade. It goes without saying that UMNO will do all it can to prevent such awareness from developing within the Malay community.

The Middle-Class

Apart from the Malay working-class, the other component of the urban population which has also become problematic to the UMNO leadership is the Malay middle-class – or rather a small segment of it. When the Malay middle-class was numerically insignificant in the early seventies, it was possible for the UMNO leadership to accommodate the vast majority of the politically ambitious elements from that class. It was even possible to ensure that they enjoyed a degree of political mobility. With the rapid expansion of the Malay middle-class from the mid-seventies onwards – mainly because of education but also because of the NEP – it has become a lot more difficult to provide the new political aspirants with the sort of roles they desire. Some of these disgruntled middle-class Malays have been known to turn against UMNO. As the Malay middle-class grows, one can expect their numbers to increase.

But it is more than a question of political accommodation and political mobility. As the middle-class expands in any society, it becomes ideologically and intellectually more diverse. Different, sometimes divergent, tendencies begin to develop. Though the Malay middle-class is not very large, the earliest signs of this inevitable trend towards intellectual and ideological diversity are beginning to manifest themselves. In the process, the UMNO leadership is discovering that it can no longer be assured of the almost total allegiance of the Malay middle-class.

If anything, economic and social changes within the Malay middle-class have reinforced its intellectual and ideological diversity. In the early seventies, when the NEP was still in its infancy, Malay businessmen, for instance, were, by and large, very dependent upon State support and State patronage. Now, in the late eighties, as the NEP draws to a close, one gets the impression that there are at least a few Malay businessmen who are not tied to the apron-strings of the State. They do not expect favours from the ruling elites. They see themselves as economically self-reliant businessmen. They want others to see them as independent entrepreneurs. Given time, some of them may feel secure enough in their economic roles to offer alternative views on social issues. The more courageous among them may even be prepared to get embroiled in political controversies involving the State.

In any case, a certain degree of friction between private enterprise and the State is inevitable in market economies like ours, even if our businessmen are not politically inclined in any way. Malay entrepreneurs and industrialists, including those who have been spawned by the State, are bound to discover, at some time or other, that certain aspects of their economic interests just cannot harmonize with the political perceptions of the ruling elites. When such situations present themselves, private sector Malays may feel inclined to assert their independence from the State. This would inevitably diminish UMNO's hold upon them.

Just as Malay entrepreneurs will have their own interests to preserve, so Malay professionals have their own standards and ethics to protect which again may bring them into conflict with the political leadership of the day. An outstanding example of the clash between professional values and principles, on the one hand, and State interests and objectives, on the other, would be the on-going battle between the Bar Council and the government over the dismissal of the Lord President and two Supreme Court Judges. It is significant that the overwhelming majority of the 500 odd Malay lawyers in the country have taken the side of the Bar. By so doing, they have chosen to back justice and integrity against UMNO and ethnicity. The point about ethnicity is important because the UMNO-led government through party channels, the media and an effete body called the Muslim Lawyers Association, has tried very hard to communalize the issue. Its lack of success may indicate that in certain circumstances, loyalty to the profession is stronger than loyalty to the UMNO leadership.

As the number of Malay professionals increases in not just law but also medicine, architecture, accountancy, engineering, etc, it is quite conceivable that the attachment to certain professional norms will become more pervasive within the community. If that happens, it may not be that easy for the government to impose its will upon an important segment of the Malay middle-class, especially in matters related to professional standards and principles. Of course, professionals themselves may fail to uphold certain values. There may be internal subversion of a profession. But even then, it would be quite an arduous task for the government to exercise total control over each and every professional group. This is particularly true of professions which are fairly well established (like most Malaysian professions), and which

have, over the years, developed some notion of professional norms and are conscious of their professional autonomy.

In this connection, the Malaysian academic community would be a case in point. Though there has been serious subversion of professional norms by both the government and academics themselves, there is still a certain degree of academic freedom in specific spheres of academia. Academics can still design their own courses and determine the contents of their curricula. Ideas and ideologies which are at variance with the dominant philosophy of the State can still be taught in the six State-run universities in the country. Consequently, a number of Malay and non-Malay academics and students remain critical of government policies. The extent and character of criticism varies but the fact is it is in the universities that one will find a fair sprinkling of educated Malays who are not slavish adherents of UMNO thinking. True, compared to universities in many other Third World countries, there is an appalling dearth of intellectual dynamism in our campuses. There have been occasions when Malay and non-Malay academics, faced with clear-cut choices between right and wrong, have failed to prove their integrity. Nonetheless, when Malay academics are placed alongside many of the other groups that comprise the Malay intelligentsia, they appear to be a little better.

Islamic Resurgence

Among Malay academics who are critical of the UMNO Establishment, it is perhaps the Islamic group that may have the greatest impact upon the future. The rise of Islamic consciousness not only among Malay academics but also among other middle-class groups, the Malay urban working-class and the Malay rural population is undoubtedly that one trend in a changing Malay society which will determine UMNO's role in the nineties and beyond. Why there is this rise in Islamic consciousness – or Islamic resurgence – is beyond the scope of this essay. What is relevant to us is how it will affect UMNO.

Islamic resurgence may influence UMNO's future role in at least four different ways. One, it could strengthen the political opposition to UMNO to such an extent that a sizeable segment of the Malay community might come to accept a party like PAS as an alternative to UMNO. However, for this to happen, certain other political and

economic changes must take place which will increase popular disenchantment with UMNO. Two, if Islamic resurgence becomes an overwhelmingly powerful political tide, the UMNO leadership might choose to incorporate as much Islam as possible into its own ideology. This could give UMNO a different role and image both domestically and internationally. Three, it is also quite conceivable that as UMNO tries to become more Islamic, the party might get even more factionalized. Those who want UMNO to remain a Malay nationalist party with a commitment of sorts to Islam as a religion would have to battle against the Islamicists. It is a battle which could further split UMNO. Four, if the Islamicists succeed to transform UMNO into an Islamic party there could be a major change in the entire political and social system. Paradoxically, such a change could well render Malay nationalism – of which UMNO has been the main vehicle for the last few decades – irrelevant to the political process.

Conclusion

Whatever the likely scenario, UMNO, it seems almost certain, will not be the same in the nineties. Islamic resurgence aside, changes related to the rural economy, the Malay working-class and the Malay middle-class are going to shape and mould the UMNO of the future. The impact of all these social forces might be such that a future UMNO will be less dominant, less powerful than what it has been until recently.

It is not just the changing social milieu that could reduce UMNO's strength. UMNO could weaken UMNO. The alleged corruption of some of its leaders, its unceasing factional feuds, its lack of idealism, its obsession with the politics of wealth and power – it is all these afflictions which have weakened UMNO's capacity to deal with the challenges emanating from the larger social environment.

As UMNO declines in strength, it is quite likely that other Malay political parties will emerge. Semangat 46, a product of the most serious factional feud that UMNO has known, is one such political party. In a sense, Semangat is more than the product of an internal power struggle. Its leadership, its organizational strength, its grassroots support and the sort of links it has established are related, in one way or another, to some of the changes in Malay society that we have analysed.

Whether Semangat 46 will develop into a major force or not, should be the subject of a separate inquiry. What we should observe at this point is that any Malay political party that emerges in the wake of UMNO's decline will have to prove its allegiance to certain fundamental canons of Malay politics – namely, the indigenous rights of the Malays, their political pre-eminence, their special economic position, their language and culture and the status of their Rulers. At the same time, it will have to make explicit its commitment to uphold Islam 'as a way of life'. Semangat 46 has pledged to protect these basic tenets of Malay politics.

Such a pledge would bestow legitimacy upon the party but it does not guarantee victory over UMNO. UMNO, in spite of our prognosis, is not a party that can be easily vanquished. Since its founding 43 years ago, it has shown that it has tremendous resilience. That resilience may yet save the party. And the tonic to that resilience is the economy. The predictions are that the economy will continue to perform well right into the nineties. The economy could therefore provide UMNO with a new lease of life.

Explanatory note

This essay was written at the end of July 1989. It was specially prepared for this book.



DEMOCRACY

DEMOCRACY IN MALAYSIA: GREATER CONTROL IN THE EIGHTIES

Malaysian democracy is controlled democracy. While we have some of the features of a real democracy like periodic elections and opposition political parties there are at the same time a whole variety of very authoritarian laws at the command of an increasingly powerful Executive which does not understand public accountability. To make matters worse, the media is tightly controlled and there are serious curbs upon political involvement. It is also obvious that dissent on fundamentals does not enjoy any legitimacy.

Would this controlled democracy continue to exist in the eighties? It would — except that there will be even more severe restrictions. The media and various social groups will be further controlled so that there will not be the slightest whiff of a challenge to the ruling Barisan Nasional and particularly UMNO.

Greater curbs are possible for a number of reasons.

- a. The government is pursuing a type of development and industrialization that tends to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of small groups. It necessitates greater and greater economic and technological control of the majority. This is what explains the authoritarianism of countries which have adopted a similar developmental pattern like South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore.
- b. The economic decline is bound to result in slower mobility, fewer jobs, less subsidies. There is already less revenue and the government is cutting back on public expenditure. All this is beginning to affect the lives of our people, including those at the 'lower-middle-class' and 'middle-middle-class' levels. As these clerks, teachers, and nurses begin to express their dissatisfaction, the government will undoubtedly react with more severe curbs.
- c. The growing power of the Malay middle-class which will reach a high peak in the late eighties and which will therefore lead to an even more dominant State since the State is largely a reflection of the interests of the Malay middle-class. As the political and

economic interests of the Malay middle-class become more pervasive the power of the State will also become more ubiquitous. For the State will be using its overwhelming authority to secure the ambitions and desires of this class. Anything that stands in its way will be regarded as an obstacle to national goals and demolished or destroyed.

- d. However, as the Malay middle-class expands, so cliques and factions will become more widespread both in business and politics. It is quite possible that there will be intense competition for wealth and power among these cliques and factions. Given the connection between the Malay middle-class and the State, the national leadership is bound to be involved in these tussles. If they affect the position of the leadership itself, it could get quite repressive in order to ensure its continued dominance.
- e. Outside the 'Establishment' Malay middle-class there is a rapidly developing 'Islamic' middle-class supported by a significant segment of the Malay working-class. This Islamic middle-class has a different vision of society. It wants to transform the social order in the direction of 'an Islamic State'. Its aspirations are antithetical to the interests of the Establishment. The State is trying to resolve the challenge through cooption and coercion. It is when coercion takes place, that even more authoritarian laws are formulated.
- f. The Islamic challenge, the State's policy of Islamisation, the power of the Malay middle-class, the perpetuation of ethnic dichotomies in almost every sphere of society and the like have created a feeling of alienation among a lot of non-Malays. This could result eventually in the erosion of the electoral strength of the Barisan Nasional, especially its non-Malay component. In order to arrest this erosion, the government may clamp down harshly on dissent in general.
- g. Finally, in Malaysia, as in many other countries, the type of leaders that have emerged is also linked to the question of whether there will be more curbs or not upon democratic articulation and action. Some of our present national leaders seem to be far less tolerant of opposing views than their predecessors. There appears to be an unwillingness to consider other perspectives on many

social issues. There is even a suggestion of arrogance, of contempt in their attitude towards critics and criticism. Such an attitude could easily breed authoritarianism.

However, authoritarianism may not have an easy passage. Some of the circumstances which could result in more severe controls are the very situations that could also bring about a greater consciousness of the importance of freedom. For instance, the economic decline could persuade groups and individuals to evaluate more critically present economic policies and the performance of the government. This is possible for elements within the middle class – as we have shown – are also quite likely to be affected by the economic decline.

Similarly, contending cliques means there will not be a single, monolithic centre of power that can do what it wants. This balance of power among cliques allows others outside the Establishment to exercise some freedom since no one in power is so strong as to be able to crush dissent immediately.

Likewise, the presence of an Islamic movement – whatever its other weaknesses – compels the State to tolerate a degree of dissent partly because it would be dangerous to destroy an Islamic movement totally since it enjoys so much psychological legitimacy among the Muslims.

By the same token, the increase in non-Malay grievances in the last few years has created a more critical attitude among them towards various State policies even if they are not directly connected to ethnicity. It is quite conceivable that this attitude will become more pronounced in the future as a new generation of non-Malays fluent in Bahasa Malaysia and deeply rooted in the local experience, assume positions of importance in society.

Apart from all these reasons which will perhaps prevent the power-holders from establishing a crippling hold, it must also be acknowledged that the government itself may not want to curb democratic institutions and practices beyond a certain point. For it is always better from the point of view of its public image to keep democracy going even if it is just a matter of symbols, shorn of substance. Besides, it is unlikely that the Barisan will lose its comfortable majority in the

next general election, though its overwhelming dominance is bound to be curtailed.

What all this means is that there will still be some freedom and some scope for dissent in the next few years. It is important that our people use these limited opportunities with wisdom and maturity. For reckless action on the part of the dissidents may provide an excuse for the leaders to impose tighter control upon democratic freedoms.

This is why those of us who cherish freedom – whatever our ideological differences – should come together to defend freedom. Even the act of coming together may serve to check the current erosion of democratic rights.

Explanatory note

Written in early 1984. The article was published in the *Aliran Monthly* (June 1984).

DISILLUSIONMENT AND DISAFFECTION

Papan and Tambunan have given us some idea of the conditions and circumstances that provoke people to demonstrate their power. First, there must be a pervasive feeling among the rakyat that the challenge from authority poses a direct, immediate threat to their lives or at least their well-being. Second, they must see their particular group or community as a specific target of victimisation or oppression. Third, the injustice committed against the group or community must be so clear-cut that it is easy for everyone concerned to react with righteous anger. Fourth, the group or community must be so determined to right the wrong perpetuated against it that it would be prepared to pay the ultimate price. Finally, there must be widespread sympathy and support for, and solidarity with, the cause represented by the group or community in question, from a significant cross-section of the general public.

Are these ingredients of effective change present in Malaysian society as a whole at this point in time? While a lot of people have all sorts of grievances, there is no single issue or episode which is perceived by a large number of them as a direct, immediate threat to their well-being. Neither the BMF scandal nor the Sim Kie Chon case nor the salaries dispute has that characteristic. Similarly, the lowly paid public servant may be extremely unhappy about his economic situation but he does not see himself as a specific victim of oppression. Likewise, there is increasing awareness of a whole variety of social injustices; it hasn't however reached the stage where anger and indignation against the ruling elites has become a mammoth tidal wave about to sweep them out of power. This is why while public interest societies, labour organisations and opposition political parties are articulating issues of great concern with courage and conviction, there is little evidence that within the populace as a whole there is a strong determination to bring about a total transformation of the social order as yet.

Nonetheless, it is apparent that disaffection is becoming more and more widespread. There is greater disillusionment with the ruling elites today than at any time in the past. The decline of the economy with all its adverse consequences for people at various levels, and in different

sectors, of society has contributed to this. Apart from the poor and powerless majority even groups within the middle-class and individuals in business and industry are feeling the impact of a listless, lethargic economy.

The instability within Barisan parties, the cliques and factions that have emerged in some of them, the fierce and ferocious competition for power among groups and individuals, the buying and selling of votes even in divisional and branch elections, and indeed the foul filth that oozes out of every pore of Barisan Nasional politics would be yet another factor.

Similarly, the inability of the government to respond with concern and compassion to the legitimate grievances of the rakyat — whether they are Felda settlers, or squatters, or IMG workers or the Papan residents — has also eroded the people's confidence in the power-holders. In fact, the way the government has handled issues such as the Batang Ai Dam, College-General and Bukit China has created the impression that it is quite capable of riding roughshod over the people's feelings. More than that, there is some evidence of the misuse and abuse of power, as manifested in Tambunan, on the one hand, and Lubuk Merbau, on the other.

Perhaps most of all, it is the growing gap between word and deed, promise and performance that has disenchanting the people. One talks all the while of trust and integrity and yet there is no determined, concerted endeavour to unravel the truth about the shameful, scandalous BMF affair. One talks all the while of the danger of corruption and money politics and yet corruption through cronyism and the politics of money are allowed to flourish. One talks all the while of clean, healthy business practices and yet small but powerful cliques and coterie have entrenched themselves in the world of commerce and industry. One talks all the while of thrift and austerity and yet there is lavish spending on prestige projects, tourist complexes, exclusive clubs, expensive mansions, grand celebrations, extravagant ceremonies, and costly trips and travels abroad. One talks all the while of how important national unity is and yet one does not cease to divide the people by racialising issues. One talks all the while of how liberal the administration is and yet one imposes the severest curbs upon ceramahs and publications.

One talks all the while of hard work and yet whenever the apostle of hard work visits a state or district everyone stops working!

It is these blatant contradictions between what is said and what is done which has now led to a serious crisis of credibility. When a government's credibility is at stake, it must know that it is in trouble. For the crisis of credibility is the stage that precedes the crisis of legitimacy. Once a government faces a crisis of legitimacy, it ceases to command any moral authority. It is a sure sign of its downfall. Needless to say, our government is still some distance away from that stage.

But the crisis of credibility that exists — if left unchecked — can result in some significant erosion of the Barisan's present electoral strength. There is every likelihood of a stronger opposition emerging in the elections given the current mood and mentality. Unfortunately, the communal structure of Malaysian politics is such that this will not manifest itself in a united multi-ethnic opposition. There will be instead a more articulate Malay opposition, on the one hand, and a more vocal non-Malay opposition, on the other but governed by divergent ideologies, values and goals.

In this sort of situation, it is quite possible that unscrupulous elements among the ruling elites seeing that both their Malay and non-Malay bases of support have been weakened considerably may in desperation try to create ethnic tensions which may lead to ethnic conflicts. They may then use the resulting ethnic breakdown as an excuse to set aside democratic procedures and rule by decree in order to consolidate and expand their power.

If this happens, it would be a grave blow to the people's power. It would be a betrayal of the will of the rakyat. This is why though we may never be able to prevent a formal authoritarian regime from establishing itself, we should not do anything that will make it easier for anyone to impose such rule.

In this connection, opposition political parties in particular have an important role to play. While it is heartening that certain common perspectives are developing slowly among ethnically — divided parties — as in the Sim case — there is still a lot of distrust and suspicion among

them. This is generally true of the relationship between Malay and non-Malay dissent. This means that while Malay and non-Malay groups are critical of the government they are not complimentary of one another either. This is why we must be honest enough to admit that there is a great deal of communal poison circulating even in the arteries of dissent. For that reason, we must be careful not to communalize the situation further in any way. We should refrain from giving ethnic interpretations to situations which are inherently non-ethnic. We must resist the temptation of mobilising mass sentiments along communal lines. For if we examined in depth some of the major challenges confronting our nation – whether it is poverty or income disparities or political repression or corruption – we will realise that they have nothing to do with ethnicity. Indeed, even ethnic polarisation at its root is not an ethnic problem. It is essentially a consequence of the type of development we are undergoing with all its attendant ills. Very often, ethnic discrimination itself occurs because certain class interests are being perpetuated.

It follows from all this that it is the bounden duty of political parties, public interest societies and labour organisations to analyse and articulate social issues and mobilise and galvanise public opinion in such a way that the people will always understand the true and real situation. This is why they should focus upon the nature of our development, the capitalist concept of change and progress, the power of the State, the role of the elites, the influence of vested interests, the decline of ethical values, and the destruction of the spiritual foundation of the nation in their attempt to raise social consciousness and to organise social action.

Only if there is this new emphasis in our political life will we be able to reduce the impact of communalism. Only then will we be able to at least resist the imposition of a dictatorship in the name of preserving ethnic harmony.

It is with this goal in mind that Aliran has been trying to bridge the ideological and emotional gap between Malay and non-Malay dissent. Our aim is to unite ethnically divergent attitudes by getting Malay and non-Malay dissent to develop a common commitment to certain universal ethical values. Our aim is to get Malay and non-Malay dissent to move away from exclusive communal perspectives.

We have now extended our struggle beyond our own confines to include a variety of other groups through the establishment of an informal, unstructured movement for freedom and justice. This movement is your movement. It is a people's movement seeking to realise their hopes and aspirations. In the ultimate analysis it is a movement that will give meaning and content to the power of the rakyat.

Explanatory note

Written in August 1985. The article appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (October/November 1985).

THE BARISAN'S 2/3 MAJORITY: WHY THE OPPOSITION FAILED

Every time there is a General Election, those of us who yearn for more space and scope for democracy to grow in this land hold out the hope that somehow the electorate would discover the wisdom of strengthening the opposition. In the last 12 years we have waited in vain for that hope to materialize. In the small hours of the morning of 4 August, as the results of the seventh General Election poured in, that hope was dealt a severe blow. It was all the more painful because there has never been another occasion like this when the possibility of reducing the Barisan Nasional's overwhelming parliamentary majority looked so real. It seemed as if that finally the people would be able to curb the dominant power of the ruling coalition and produce an opposition that would have at least one-third of all the seats in the Dewan Rakyat.

The Barisan Nasional not only kept its two-third majority but went on to retain its four-fifth majority in Parliament. It is also in control of all the State Assemblies and managed to secure about 57 per cent of the popular vote. Though there is a slight drop in the percentage of votes and parliamentary seats obtained, compared to 1982, there is no denying that the Barisan scored a stunning victory. (see Tables for details).

It is now beginning to dawn on all of us that it is going to be very, very difficult to reduce the Barisan's two-third majority. For it is not like reducing the parliamentary majority of a ruling party in any ordinary, normal democracy. Opposition parties and the people have to contend with the might of an unscrupulously powerful State. If it is a question of various parties competing against each other for the people's support in a fair, free election campaign, then there would be no problem. But in the seventh General Election there wasn't an iota of fairness. The Mahathir administration had decided that the opposition would be given a little bit of time and hardly any facilities to conduct its campaign, while the Barisan leadership would utilize every instrument of power to maximum advantage. Needless to say, Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM), the information services and other govern-

ment departments and agencies were fully mobilised to ensure a landslide victory for the Barisan. Nearly every newspaper in the country was involved in the ruling coalition's campaign. Journalistic ethics were thrown to the winds, as newspapers manufactured lies, distorted statements by opposition politicians and smeared the reputation of opposition parties.

As far as the Barisan was concerned, it was only right that the newspapers and everyone else slogged for its triumph. It was, after all, the State, the government, and whatever it did had to be in the interest of the rakyat and the nation. Since it was the government, it followed that it was the only party that could guarantee peace and stability! And indeed stability was a major thrust of the Barisan's election campaign. It contrasted its capacity to maintain stability with the possible danger of a May 13th type riot if the opposition became stronger. This manipulation of the voter's inherent fear of riots and chaos undoubtedly had some effect upon the electorate.

If manipulation of fear and media control were not enough to guarantee total dominance, the Barisan had already made another move. It had re-delineated the electoral constituencies in 1984 in such a manner that certain opposition strongholds would be weakened while constituencies inclined towards the Barisan would be reinforced. Gerrymandering of this sort took place all over the country. In the case of certain urban constituencies the aim was largely to dilute huge concentrations of Chinese voters by adding pockets of Malays. The government hoped that the Malay vote in these constituencies would help Barisan candidates to win. Similarly, in rural areas, kampongs regarded as PAS fortresses were sliced out of opposition strongholds and integrated into Barisan constituencies so that the impact of PAS votes would be reduced. There is some evidence to suggest that PAS candidates in certain constituencies in Kelantan, Trengganu and Kedah were victims of this sort of gerrymandering. The entire constituency re-delineation exercise is a glaring example of how authority vested with a ruling party that knows no scruples can be used against the interest of democracy.

To wage a successful campaign against such an unethical ruling party which had bestowed upon itself all the privileges of power, one

must have an electorate which not only realizes that things are seriously wrong with the government but is also prepared to act on the basis of that awareness. More than that, there must be widespread unhappiness, an extraordinary level of anger, and even a certain quantum of disgust among the voters before one can reduce the dominant strength of an omnipotent political force like the Barisan.

It was obvious that significant segments of the rural and semi-urban voting population were not angry with the Barisan government – in spite of all the rot that had set in. Perhaps they did not feel that way partly because they saw themselves as beneficiaries of Barisan's development programmes. To be sure, a large number of Malay families in rural areas have benefitted directly or indirectly from the development process. The Barisan, in turn, has succeeded in convincing these rural folks that it is because of the Barisan leadership's goodness and generosity that they have received various forms of assistance. They should therefore be grateful to the Barisan and express that gratitude by voting Barisan candidates. During the election season, this 'gratitude for development' attitude assumes special significance since Barisan canvassers bribe voters with all sorts of goodies. This distribution of goodies happened on a large scale in Kelantan this time.

Because it is only the Barisan that seems to be providing development assistance (it is of course the government), rural Malay voters form the impression that it is the only group that is capable of protecting their well-being. This role that UMNO and the Barisan have always played as the protector of the Malay community was also perhaps an important factor in the coalition's strong electoral showing. It is quite possible that because of the economic difficulties generated by the recession, the community feels an even greater psychological need to cling to the UMNO leadership. Groups and communities which are burdened by a deep sense of insecurity, tend to turn even more to their perceived protectors for solace during periods of uncertainty. At the same time, UMNO leaders had succeeded in convincing a lot of the Malay voters in Kelantan and Trengganu in particular, that PAS, unlike their party, was no longer capable of protecting the Malay position. They even accused the party of selling the 'birthright' of the Malays to the other communities. This was a reference to a PAS pledge that if it came to power there would be no

bumiputra/non-bumiputra dichotomy and no 'special privileges' for any community. It also promised to provide more opportunities for the use and study of Chinese and other non-Malay languages.

The protector status of UMNO has yet another dimension to it which may have also influenced the electoral outcome. In the relationship between protector and protected, the latter does not question, let alone challenge, the former. This is why, on the whole, the Malay community does not adopt an evaluative, critical attitude towards its leadership. As an attitude, it is rooted in the feudal practice of giving unquestioning loyalty to the Ruler. It is partly because of this attitude that the community – groups and individuals notwithstanding – has failed to subject Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and his colleagues to thorough scrutiny on major national scandals like BMF, EPF and UMBC. This does not connote acceptance of wrongdoings, one must hasten to add, but it does seem to suggest a 'psychological block' when it comes to appraising the national leadership. It explains to some extent why the Mahathir administration has been able to get away with serious misdeeds which in any other society that practises democratic accountability would have led inevitably to the downfall of the erring regime.

Besides that, the rural Malay community in particular had hardly any access to news reports and analyses on BMF and other such scandals. Compared to the English language press, the Malay dailies, even before the election campaign began, gave very limited coverage to these episodes. Once the campaign started, all the major national issues which had occupied so much public attention in the course of the year suddenly disappeared from the pages of our newspapers. It was obvious that the motive behind this was to hoodwink the voter into believing that there were no real issues in the election and that all the allegations and insinuations about the leadership's integrity were without substance. It now appears that this shrewd strategy to prevent the voter from passing judgment on the Barisan government based upon its actual performance worked rather well in the rural constituencies. It was perhaps helped unwittingly by PAS's own inability to focus upon BMF and other concrete issues related to integrity. Tangible issues revealing the Barisan's ineptness were drowned by all the din caused by PAS's clarion call for the establishment of an Islamic State.

Seen against this perspective, the Prime Minister's claim in his post-election news conference that the voters rejected all the adverse criticisms of his handling of various national issues does not make much sense. For a lot of the voters especially in rural constituencies – it must be reiterated – were not adequately informed. He should not therefore misinterpret their vote as endorsement of his management of the nation in the last five years. It would have been different if the scandals which have come to public notice since 1981 were presented to the voters of rural Malaysia as the crucial issues before the electorate. It is significant that in those constituencies within the major urban centres like Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang where BMF, EPF and UMBC were put across to the voters with vim and vigour, the DAP emerged on top. I am not suggesting that this was the only reason for the DAP's remarkable performance but it did play an important part as I shall show in a while.

So far I have tried to establish that the power of the State, the media's role, the re-delineation of constituencies, what has been achieved in terms of development and stability, the position of UMNO as the protector of the Malay community, the fear that Malay rights would not be safeguarded and the ignorance of the rural community all conspired to give Barisan its four-fifth majority. They explain why UMNO in particular did so well in the rural constituencies. But UMNO's success should also be analysed in terms of PAS's own failings.

The greatest mistake PAS made was to try to form an opposition front and adopt a joint declaration with SDP, Nasma and PSRM a few weeks before the General Election. Even before the joint declaration, PAS tried to get Chinese support by establishing a link with the so-called Chinese Consultative Councils (CCC). The CCCs, sponsored by PAS, did not make much headway.

The CCCs, the opposition front and the joint declaration exposed PAS to attacks from two sides. UMNO accused PAS of betraying its 'Islamic' principles and its Muslim supporters by trying to establish political ties with non-Muslim groups and organizations which do not subscribe to the idea of an Islamic State. It is apparent that this line of argument worked in Kelantan and Trengganu, the traditional bastions of PAS. For PAS has all along indoctrinated its rank-and-file and indeed the voting population in those two States, with the belief

that the Islamic rule it promises would guarantee that political power resides exclusively with the Muslims. In fact, this has been one of PAS's main criticisms of UMNO: because it shares power with non-Muslims, it is not faithful to Islamic precepts. This sharing of power, in turn, has often been presented as one of the major causes of the relative weakness of the Malay community in other spheres. After giving so much emphasis to this notion of exclusive Muslim political power, PAS should not have expected its members and followers to be enthusiastic about this novel ideal of political cooperation with non-Muslims groups. UMNO leaders and party workers exploited this 'chink in the PAS armour' with cunning skill.

While UMNO attacked PAS on its attempts to cooperate with non-Muslims, its non-Muslim partners launched an effective campaign to dissuade non-Malay voters in both rural and urban areas from giving any support to PAS because of its commitment to the creation of an Islamic State. PAS was hoping to garner substantial support from Chinese voters in particular in the 1986 election partly because of the widespread frustration with government policies within that community and partly because PAS itself had begun to communicate actively with Chinese groups from the middle of 1985. At the beginning, PAS made some inroads with its dialogues but the moment it tried to get Chinese groups and Chinese-based parties to endorse its endeavour to set up an Islamic State, it ran into rough weather. The Chinese and the non-Muslim communities as a whole have become more and more suspicious of any attempt to Islamize Malaysian society especially in the wake of the government's own Islamization policy and some recent reports of alleged forced conversions of Chinese teenage girls to Islam. This is why it was unwise of PAS to insist that other political parties acknowledge its struggle for an Islamic State in the joint declaration issued on 14 July 1986. This provided the Barisan with the ammunition it was waiting for to discredit PAS's Islamic struggle. The joint declaration was seen as evidence of PAS's desire to impose an Islamic State upon the population. This could have cost the party some support in rural constituencies where the 10 or 20 per cent Chinese vote would have made the difference between winning and losing.

And indeed what a loss it was for PAS. Out of the 99 parliamentary seats it contested, it won only one! It secured a mere 15 State

seats, 10 in Kelantan, two in Trengganu and three in Kedah. Almost all its national leaders were wiped out in the contest.

If PAS blundered strategically, the DAP adopted correct tactics and in the end, performed with distinction. It stayed out of the opposition front and refused to support the joint declaration because it could not accept the idea of an Islamic State. This was an electorally popular stand to take with the non-Muslim voters who constitute its base.

The DAP, in any case, has always been seen by a substantial section of the non-Malay and particularly the Chinese community, as a champion of their ethnic interests. This is an image which other opposition parties seeking non-Malay support like the SDP do not enjoy. This perception of the DAP comes from its role of articulating Chinese grievances on a large variety of subjects with the sort of courage and conviction which few other groups can match. It is a role it has played for two decades now.

There is no doubt that ethnic grievances within the Chinese community have become more serious now for two reasons. To start with, there was a feeling of hope, with the ascendancy of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in 1981, that given his new style of administration he would be able to attend to some of their longstanding gripes about ethnic discrimination in culture, education and business. This hope was one of the reasons for the MCA's and Gerakan's outstanding performance in urban constituencies in the 1982 election. Over the last five years, the community has not seen any changes in policies or even in their implementation which could convince the majority of Chinese that things are going to get better for them. This has led to profound disillusionment especially since it was widely believed in 1982 that working from within the government was the best way out for the Chinese community. Having failed from inside, the Chinese electorate has in a sense reverted to its 'fighting from outside' attitude. Hence the swing towards the DAP.

If anything, the swing is more marked this time partly because of the economic situation. The recession, the retrenchments and the growing unemployment problem in general have all contributed to the

rising tide of anger and frustration against a government which is already regarded as being unfair and unjust to the Chinese community. Economic woes, here as elsewhere, tend to aggravate ethnic sorrows. That the DAP benefitted from this is obvious if one considers its excellent performance in the Kinta heartland which, incidentally, is one of those places where the problem of layoffs and unemployment as a result of the closing down of tin-mines has taken a turn for the worse.

However, it is not just because of the perceived need for a reliable and able ethnic spokesman that the DAP secured 24 parliamentary and 37 state seats in Chinese-dominant constituencies. In its campaign, the party gave equal importance to a whole range of social concerns transcending ethnic perspectives. More than in any other election campaign in the past, the DAP spoke incessantly about the decline of integrity and the rise of authoritarianism. This was certainly true of its campaign in Penang. Colossal financial scandals like BMF, EPF, UMBC, Maminco and Pan-El, on the one hand, and undisputed instances of political repression like Sabah, Memali and the OSA, on the other, provided grist to the mill. An urban electorate, especially its middle-class component, with more education and better access to information, understood the significance of the DAP's rhetoric. Their response through the ballot-box on the 3rd of August is a clear signal to the Mahathir Administration that they are not satisfied with the grossly inadequate explanations given so far of how the scandals occurred. Nor are they happy with the feeble attempts to solve some of these massive financial fiascos. The rejection of the Barisan in most of the major urban centres should also be viewed as a vote against the ever increasing curbs and controls upon various civil liberties and political freedoms. There is no denying that a significant segment of the voting population in the urban centres has protested in clear, unequivocal terms against the Mahathir Administration for its management of the nation's affairs in the last five years. The Prime Minister and his new Cabinet should not ignore that message from the ballot-box.

Having examined Barisan's power and the performance of the two major opposition parties, PAS and DAP, we should now ask ourselves: What does the electoral verdict mean for the future? Since it may be a little too early to answer this question satisfactorily, I shall confine myself to some quick impressions of what the results indicate.

On the positive side, we have an opposition in Parliament with some dedicated individuals who will take their legislative roles seriously.

What has become a matter of concern, however, to many Malaysians about the opposition is its lack of Malay representation. This ethnically lop-sided opposition is a direct consequence of PAS's poor performance in the election. It could have certain unhealthy consequences for the political system as a whole.

Given the tendency of the government to approach issues along ethnic lines, it may dismiss legitimate criticisms of its proposed laws and policies as 'mere ethnic reactions'. Characterising the opposition as 'non-Malay' will do irreparable harm to parliamentary politics, especially if the government comes to be perceived as 'Malay' given the smaller numerical presence of Chinese legislators on the Barisan benches. In any case, it is true that the Barisan after the 1986 election has much less Chinese electoral support than at any time since 1969.

What obtains now is a certain degree of legislative polarization which is a reflection of electoral polarization which in turn, mirrors the ethnic polarization in the larger society. It is not possible to overcome legislative or electoral polarization without first removing the underlying causes of ethnic polarization itself.

Nevertheless, both the government and the opposition can help to reduce the adverse effects of this legislative polarization. Government leaders should show greater appreciation of the multi-ethnic realities of our society and formulate policies accordingly. They should not be obsessed with narrowly-defined ethnic considerations in each and every legislative measure they formulate. Neither should they look for ethnic motives in each and every pronouncement of opposition MPs. Similarly, the DAP as the main opposition party in Parliament, should try to evolve a more multi-ethnic image. The need to move in that direction has become all the more compelling now since the DAP today is electorally and politically the most significant party in the country, after UMNO. This may require a sober, rational reappraisal of its present approach to politics, and even some of its policies, with the DAP's future role in Malaysian society as its primary concern.

TABLE 1

1986 General Election Results

<u>PARLIAMENT</u>	
Barisan Nasional	148
DAP	24
Independents	4
PAS	1
<u>STATE</u>	
Barisan Nasional	299
DAP	37
PAS	15

TABLE 2

	Percentage of Popular Votes Obtained	
	1982	1986
Barisan Nasional	60.54	57.4
Opposition	30.46	42.6

TABLE 3

	Percentage of Parliamentary Seats Acquired	
	1982	1986
Barisan Nasional	87.7	83.6
Opposition	12.3	16.4

Just as the DAP may want to reflect on the new situation that has emerged, so should PAS examine the fundamental premise upon which it is founded. Will it ever be able to realize its potential of becoming the leader of an alternative coalition of parties to the Barisan as long as it persists with its goal of establishing an Islamic State defined on the basis of traditional theology?

Its implications for ethnic polarization and multi-ethnic politics apart, the results of the 1986 General Election, as I hinted at the outset, must have disappointed all those who cherish freedom and democracy. How will the Barisan government use its enormous legislative power? Will it be more accountable in the next five years

than it has been in the last five years? Will it review and perhaps at least modify some of the laws which have hampered and hindered political parties, trade unions, public interest societies, student organizations and academic associations from participating actively in the democratic process? Will it show more respect for democratic norms and principles in the future than it did in the Sabah episode of 1985 and 1986? The answers to these questions will become evident in the next few years, or perhaps in the next few months.

Explanatory note

Written in August 1986. The article appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (August/September 1986).

DEMOCRACY: THE REAL THREAT

The people of Penang should be commended for strengthening democracy in the state in the recent General Election by voting in a bigger opposition. It is our hope that the opposition will discharge its responsibility with wisdom, courage and integrity. It must seek to represent not only urban Penang but also rural Penang, not only the non-Malays in the state but also the Malays in the state.

At the Federal level, however, the sinews of democracy have not been strengthened. The Barisan Nasional continues to command an overwhelming four-fifths majority in Parliament. It is not the Barisan's dominance alone which is the problem. Even more serious is its attitude towards values and institutions crucial for the growth of parliamentary democracy. In the course of the last 1½ months, it has become abundantly clear that dissent and alternative views on society can exist only on the sufferance of the Barisan.

Indeed, many people believe that the UMNO-Barisan government, is moving towards more severe control and dominance. The limited scope for democratic articulation and action may be subjected to further curbs. To do this, the government needs a justification. The alleged threat of Chinese chauvinism to Bumiputra interests, the Constitution, inter-ethnic harmony and political stability could well be used as an excuse to further curtail democratic rights. The anti-Barisan vote in the cities is seen as proof of this chauvinistic threat. Certain leaders are now arguing that chauvinistic elements are spreading rumours about scandals and the integrity of the power-holders to discredit and eventually to de-stabilize the government. All this is part of a plot, a conspiracy, involving Zionists opposed to our government because of its commitment to Islam and the Palestinian cause. The Zionists are allegedly using foreign magazines and local opposition parties and other groups to achieve their goal.

While there was some chauvinistic sentiment in the General Election it must be granted that many of the ethnic grievances among the Chinese and other non-Malays are legitimate. Besides, it was not just ethnicity which produced the urban protest vote. The economic

recession, the performance of the government in the last 5 years and the alleged lack of integrity within the national leadership were also major issues. This is why it would be wrong to use Chinese chauvinism as an excuse to suppress dissent.

Similarly, it would be wrong to dismiss the various financial scandals and the question of public integrity as issues fabricated by Chinese chauvinists and other critics in collaboration with foreign enemies. That a series of scandals had occurred in the last 4 years or so is an undeniable fact. It is true that neither Maminco nor UMBC nor the EPF scandal has been explained satisfactorily. This does not mean that there was corruption. But it does mean that there has been no proper accountability. Even in the much exposed BMF scandal, the whole truth has yet to be told. It is only in the Pan-El scandal that one of the main culprits has been punished. However, he remains a Member of the Malaysian Parliament!

More important, the scandals are not just the concern of Chinese dissidents. The government's handling of these scandals has been criticised and condemned by individuals and groups from all communities. For they know that what is involved is integrity not ethnicity.

Since integrity is the issue, it is totally irrational to chastise those who expose these scandals and oppose dishonesty, as villains and scoundrels. Surely, the culprit is not the person who washes the dirty linen; it is he who dirties the linen in the first instance.

The same lack of logic is evident in the government's allegation about a Zionist conspiracy. We know there is Zionism and Zionist interests. We know of Zionism's antagonism towards Islam. But that is not enough to convince any sane person that there is an active Zionist plot to de-stabilize the present Mahathir regime. The government has not been able to produce a shred of evidence to support its allegation.

In the meantime, government leaders continue to insinuate that local organizations are receiving financial assistance from Zionists to undermine the Malaysian State. It is only fair that the government names these organizations and tells the public how they receive Zionist assistance. For organizations like ALIRAN this is a matter of great concern for we have always stood up against Zionism.

It is obvious that this scenario of a foreign-inspired threat to the nation's stability linked to Chinese chauvinism and local dissent, has no basis at all. The fear of such a threat is being planted in the minds of the people so that when our limited freedom is fettered, they would accept it as a legitimate response to a serious challenge to the State. Why would the government want to curb freedom and democracy at this stage? Three possible reasons can be advanced.

One, the economy is declining rapidly. According to some economists the overall situation is much worse than what many of us think. It is quite conceivable that the government, fearing social unrest, might resort to curbs and controls of basic political freedoms.

Two, just as the last few years have revealed a number of cases of financial mismanagement, it is very likely that in the next few years there will be other similar malpractices. Since the General Election — within the short span of a month and a half — there have been three scandals of sorts. They are connected with the deposit-taking cooperatives, the collapse of the Malaysian Overseas Investment Corporation (MOIC) and the arrest of Abdullah Ang, and the suspension of Promet from the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange. All three scandals involve directly or indirectly, individuals in the elite stratum of society. As the recession gets more serious, we should expect more companies to collapse, more cases of cheating and swindling to surface, more questionable deals suggestive of corruption to emerge. The powerholders and those aligned to them would not want to be challenged to explain these misdeeds. This is why they may choose to curtail civil rights and liberties.

Three, since there are contending cliques and factions in UMNO, the party leadership is psychologically not as secure as it should be. The internal situation within UMNO has undoubtedly conditioned the outlook of its leaders towards the larger political system. Afraid that their power and position in the party may be eroded by challenges within, they impose restrictions upon the political system as a whole. Consequently, democratic dissent in the larger society also suffers because of internal factionalism.

These then are the real reasons why freedom may be shackled in the near future and not because of some conspiracy between foreign

enemies and their local agents. It could happen because the power-holders want to preserve and perpetuate their power at all costs. If this is so, how should groups outside the Establishment, including ordinary citizens, react to the situation? How can we help to overcome the factors which may persuade the elites to become more authoritarian?

As far as UMNO's internal problems go, there is very little that people outside the party can do. Financial mismanagement and corporate malpractices, we can help check by highlighting and analysing them and by making the public aware of good business ethics and standards. However, this is going to be difficult since much of the rot has already set in. Neither will the ordinary citizen be able to fight the economic decline on his own. It is the government that decides on economic policies and at the moment it does not seem to be willing to accept other ideas on rejuvenating the economy, however worthwhile they may be, as long as they do not come from a charmed circle within the elite stratum of society.

Perhaps the best that we who are outside government can do is to ensure that our own attitudes and behaviour do not lead to the sort of situation which will facilitate the imposition of further curbs and controls upon democracy. As we have observed earlier, communalism and chauvinism can provide the excuse for the ruling elites to establish authoritarian rule. This is why both Malays and non-Malays have a sacred responsibility to resist communalism and chauvinism.

Within the Malay community, there should be a sincere attempt to understand how ideas like 'Malay political dominance' and the 'Malay economic position' are manipulated by the elites to camouflage the actual situation. Thinking Malays should realize whose interests these ideas really serve. At the same time, young Malays in particular should develop genuine sympathies for legitimate non-Malay grievances pertaining to educational and job opportunities and to political decision-making.

Equally crucial, non-Malays should not be deceived by emotional catch-phrases like the 'second-class citizenship of non-Malays' and 'ethnic oppression of the non-Malays'. If non-Malays as a whole are second-class citizens, are the dispossessed, deprived Malay rural dwellers

in Kelantan and Trengganu, who struggle to make ends meet, first-class citizens? They have neither economic nor political nor intellectual power at their command. By the same token, would it be right to regard some of the tycoons in the non-Malay communities who not only possess economic power but also have a lot of political clout, as second-class citizens? Apart from trying to understand the true situation, young non-Malays in particular, should also develop a more mature view of the political and historical background of this country. It is an undeniable truth that the present Malaysian State evolved from a Malay polity. Once non-Malays comprehend the implications of this, there will be less antagonism towards the position of Malay as the sole official and national language or Islam as the official religion.

Without better understanding between young Malays and non-Malays especially on those ethnic controversies which tend to divide them at the moment, there is no hope for freedom and democracy in our land. For freedom is a fragile flower. It derives its nourishment from other sources. And in our society, the one source that can sustain freedom is unity among our diverse people. It is this soil of unity that we must nurture carefully in the years to come.

Explanatory note

Written in September 1986, this article has appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (October/November 1986).

FREEDOM AND THE OFFICIAL SECRETS ACT (OSA)

1) What is the background and origin of our Official Secrets Act?

The Malaysian Official Secrets Act is copied from the British OSA of 1911. The first OSA was passed by the British Parliament in 1889. A major object of the 1889 Act was to provide stronger measures against the leakage of official information by civil servants. Another aim was to deal with espionage.

The decision to legislate a new Official Secrets Act in 1911 was caused by a growing concern about German espionage and a few serious leakages of information in 1909 and 1910. The 1911 Bill was put forward by the British Government as a measure aimed at curbing spying. The Bill was passed without much debate within an hour. The British OSA 1911 was amended and extended in 1920 and again in 1939.

The Malaysian OSA is based on the British OSA of 1911. The Malaysian OSA was first promulgated in 1972, although prior to that there was an Official Secrets Ordinance during the colonial period. The Malaysian OSA was amended in 1983 with increased penalties for spying. It is being amended again.

2) Have people been charged under the existing OSA of 1972 amended in 1983?

Yes, Parliamentary Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang, together with P. Patto, a Member of Parliament, then editor of the Democratic Action Party's (DAP) journal, the *Rocket* were charged with possession and publication of military secrets. Former Sabah Finance Minister, Datuk Dzul kifli Hamid was also penalized for revealing secrets pertaining to the State Government. Two journalists, Sabry Sharif of the New Straits Times and James Clad of the Far Eastern Economic Review pleaded guilty to violating the Act.

3) What does the Official Secrets (Amendment) Bill 1986 seek to do?

The Bill proposes to tighten the original Act by defining "Official Secrets" and by seeking a mandatory jail sentence for those convicted under it.

4) **How does the Bill define "Official Secrets"?**

The new Schedule to the Bill defines "Official Secret" as:

- (a) Cabinet documents, records of decisions and deliberations, including those of Cabinet Committees;
- (b) State Executive Council documents, records of decisions and deliberations, including those of State Executive Council Committees;
- (c) Documents concerning relations between Federal and State Governments;
- (d) Documents concerning national security, defence and international relations;
- (e) Documents in the nature of or relating to opinion, advice or recommendation concerning the operation and functions of the Government;
- (f) Documents concerning national economy such as relating to currency, budget proposals and foreign investment; and
- (g) Documents concerning tenders in respect of any official purchase, requisition for works, supplies, services and projects.

The Bill also seeks to introduce a new section giving the relevant Minister the power to add, delete or amend the provisions of the Schedule.

It seeks to introduce also a new section which empowers the relevant authority to certify a document or material as an "Official Secret" and such a certification "shall be conclusive evidence that the document, information or material is an Official Secret and shall not be questioned in any Court on any ground whatsoever".

The Bill also seeks to give Ministers and the relevant public servants the power at any time to declassify any document

specified in the Schedule, including any official document, information or material as may have been classified "Top Secret", "Secret", "Confidential" or "Restricted".

5) What is the penalty for conviction under the OSA?

Section 4(1), 7A, 7B, 8(1), 8(2), 11, 12 and 13(1) of the 1972 Act are to be amended to make a term of imprisonment mandatory. The Courts will have no choice but to impose upon offenders a mandatory minimum jail sentence of one year, going up to a maximum of 5, 7 or 14 years as the case may be. These jail terms replace all penalties of fines contained in the 1972 Act and its 1983 amendments.

6) We have been made to understand that the amendments to the Official Secrets Act (OSA) will curb the freedom of the media. Is this true?

Yes, it is true. The media, whether it is the press or radio and television, have a duty to tell the truth to the public. In order to tell the whole truth, newspapers and even the electronic media, may have to dig up information, probe certain issues, investigate allegations and sometimes even rumours. This is what is called investigative journalism.

It is investigative journalism that was responsible for the revelations about the Watergate Scandal in the United States in the early seventies. The Pertamina episode in Indonesia and our own BMF, UMBC, EPF and Maminco scandals were all brought to public attention partly through investigative journalism.

Investigative journalism is only possible if newspapers and other types of mass media have the freedom to investigate. The Official Secrets Act (OSA) and especially its proposed amendments will deny the media that freedom. If a courageous, enterprising journalist wants to follow up on the leads in the Ahmad Noordin BMF Report, he may get into big trouble. He could be given a one-year mandatory jail term if he reveals a so-called 'official secret'. And the secret could be any information, document or material which any member of the Government or public officer classifies as a secret. The classification can take place even after data from that document has appeared in some magazine or newspaper.

It is not just BMF. Which journalist would dare to investigate the allegations about the stock-market activities of certain political elites? Is there any analyst who will have the guts to publish the whole story about Pan-El, after the OSA amendments become law? Which newspaper would be prepared to publish the value of the recent PERNAS-UMBC transaction even if it knew how much was paid? Similarly, since the Malaysian public does not know for certain how much the people lost in the Government's 'mystery' tin-buying spree in 1982, would any daily or monthly magazine take the risk of conducting its own investigation to find out the truth? One can go on and on with other examples. The allegation about defective pile-caps and the Penang bridge – who in the Press would want to probe this once the amendments become law? For let us not forget that the definition of 'official secrets' is wide enough to include these and many other aspects of national life.

If a journalist out of a sincere desire to protect the interest of the poor, tries to expose some new fiscal measure that is kept under wraps, he can be accused of violating the OSA, especially since 'the National Economy' is part of the Official Secrets Schedule. Likewise, if a newspaper commentator wants to write about some likely shift in foreign policy, he could be charged under the Act since International Relations is also part of the Schedule. The Amendments are so repressive that if a journalist gets wind of something decided at a Cabinet or State Executive Council meeting which may have dire consequences for education or ethnic relations, he will not be able to alert the public.

There are, of course, people who will say, "Why should the Press write about issues which the Government has not made public? Why can't they wait for the Government to inform the people?" This is an absurd argument. If one examines the way our Government performs, it is obvious that it is not in its habit to submit proposals to the people for discussion and debate. It decides and then announces its decision. The people are expected to follow blindly. In other words, if the people waited for the Government to announce new policies and programmes, it would be too late. This is why the Press has to alert the people in advance so that there can be analysis and reflection. As a case in

point, look at the way in which the Government introduced the OSA amendments. Was there any prior consultation with the people? Was there any attempt to seek out public opinion? It just went ahead and formulated legislation which has now been presented to the nation as **fait accompli**.

Considering all this, we are convinced that once the OSA amendments become law, journalists will cease to be journalists in the real sense of the word. They will not be able to probe, to examine, to analyse, to expose issues and events. They will become mere reporters reporting what the Government wants them to report. Newspapers will therefore also cease to be newspapers. They will become Government gazettes. These gazettes will tell the people only what the Government is prepared to tell them. They will be no different from newspapers in controlled, totalitarian states.

- 7) **Is it true that the amendments will also affect political parties and public interest societies? Will Parliament also be forced to compromise on its responsibilities to the rakyat?**

Both political parties and public interest societies often raise a number of issues vital to the well-being of the people. The data that they may choose to use could be classified as 'official secret' by the Government. For instance, some of the information about radioactivity levels and the nuclear dumps at Bukit Merah may well be 'official secret' as far as the Government is concerned. And yet, such information is crucial for environmental groups which are committed to the health and safety of people living in the vicinity of these dumps. Similarly, consumer groups, once the amendments become law, will find it difficult to get the Ministry of Health to reveal data on drugs it has approved which may not be considered safe elsewhere.

More important, both political parties and certain public interest societies receive a lot of information from Government departments and agencies about some of the malpractices which have become more and more rampant in recent years. If one scrutinizes this information, one would agree unhesitatingly that it is this sort of information that the public has every right to

know. Information on corrupt dealings, on gross negligence, should not be concealed from the people. For what is involved is the people's money, the people's welfare. Isn't a political leader doing his duty to the nation when he reveals how much money was squandered in purchasing some military equipment? Isn't a public interest society leader fulfilling his obligation to his fellow citizens when he exposes the weaknesses of some new Government project ostensibly designed to integrate the communities? It goes without saying that once the new, amended OSA comes into force, it would be easy for any Minister or public official to deny political parties and public interest societies, data on any aspect of military expenditure or national integration or any other subject for that matter. Government will be hiding behind a thick, impenetrable *batik* curtain of secrecy.

This also means that even in Parliament it will be almost impossible to extract information from Ministers and other members of the administration. If an opposition Member of Parliament or back-bencher raised a query about the number of allowances paid to Ministers, he or she could be told that it is a secret. On the other hand, an answer might be given but the House could be told that it is confidential information. The newspapers will not dare to publish the datum since they would be violating the Act. What this implies is that Parliament will not be able to play its role as the institution that ensures that the Executive is truly accountable to the people. By keeping vital information within the confines of Parliament, or worse still, within the vaults of the Executive, public accountability will be rendered a dead letter.

If the present Parliament is anything to go by, it is very likely that once the new law is implemented, Ministers and other members of the administration will be even more secretive than they are now. They will have the legal right to refuse to answer questions, to divulge any information, in the name of secrecy. The 'Sulit' syndrome will become all-pervasive. Parliament will become a total farce. It will be worse than even a symbol shorn of substance!

- 8) **Even academic research, it is said, will be adversely affected by the amendments. Is this true?**

Since the Official Secrets' Schedule covers subjects connected to the national economy, international relations, the functions of the Government and Federal-State relations, some of the major concerns of disciplines such as economics, political science and public administration would be affected. Political leaders and bureaucrats who do not want certain unpleasant truths to be published even if it is within academia, could use the Act to prevent research from being carried out. This will have a negative impact upon the pursuit of knowledge. It will retard intellectual progress.

There is little likelihood of the State adopting a somewhat liberal attitude towards academia on the ground that academics – unlike politicians and social activists – do not operate in the public arena. The definition of 'official secrets' is so wide and all-encompassing that there is no way that the special interests of academia can be accommodated. This is why research is bound to suffer.

- 9) **It is said that the other professional group that will be affected by the amendments are the lawyers. How will the lawyers be affected?**

The Act can be used to deny lawyers certain documents, materials or information that they may require from the State in the preparation of their cases. If the case is one which threatens to reveal facts detrimental to the interests of certain leaders, the awesome power of the State through the instrument of the OSA could be brought to bear upon the advocate and solicitor concerned. Harassment and intimidation of the lawyer may take place. If, through some channel or other the lawyer had already obtained certain so-called 'official secrets', he could be charged for violating the Act. Even if they are not 'official secrets' at the time when they are found with the lawyer, they can always be transformed into 'official secrets' in the twinkling of an eye.

Since the OSA permits the Government to withhold and if need be, withdraw, crucial documents from an advocate and solicitor,

it must be regarded as a grave threat to the entire system of justice. The lawyer has a sacred responsibility to protect his client's well-being to the best of his ability. He has an even greater duty to uphold justice. This he has to do by ensuring that the Court is presented with all relevant information to enable it to make a wise decision. How can he assist the Court in its quest for justice if vital documents are denied him in the name of the Official Secrets Act?

10) What about the Judiciary? Is it also a 'victim' of the amendments to OSA?

In a sense, it is. As in the case of certain other laws in the past which have reinforced executive dominance, the OSA amendments tend to curtail further the legitimate authority of the judiciary. The amendments do not allow the Court to question the classification of a document, information or material as an official secret. This is a direct challenge to the discretionary power of the judiciary. At the same time, through the imposition of a mandatory minimum jail term of one year which can go up to five, seven or 14 years as the case may be, the executive has wrested from the judiciary its right to determine how an offender should be punished. This is why we maintain that the 1986 OSA amendments constitute an affront to the dignity, autonomy and independence of the judiciary.

11) If all these institutions and groups – the Judiciary, Parliament, the media, opposition political parties, public interest societies, academics and lawyers – could become the victims of the OSA amendments, how does one assess the proposed law's overall impact upon the general public?

We must first recognise that whatever happens to a certain public institution, whether it is Parliament or the media, must affect society as a whole. But apart from the impact upon the public through other avenues, it is apparent that there are certain direct consequences arising from the amendments which the public will have to bear.

The public will be very ignorant of what is really happening at the level of Government and governance. Most members of the public

will not have the information or the knowledge to decide whether something that the Government has done is right or wrong, good or bad for the nation. For instance, the Government may tell the people that it has built 50 new schools under the Fifth Malaysia Plan. But whether the contracts for building those schools were properly tendered or whether the schools really cater for the disadvantaged are things that will be known only after some probing on the part of opposition parties, public interest societies and the Press. Government leaders may choose to ignore their probings, protected by the Official Secrets Act.

In fact, there are lots of things which the public will not know – especially things which are ‘sensitive’ and ‘controversial’ from the Government’s point of view. And yet these are the very things people have a right to know.

The denial of the individual’s right to know – a right that is as important as any of the other sacred human rights like the right of expression and the right of association – is one of the most terrible consequences of the OSA amendments. The Government can of course argue that the right to know is not affected since the people will still be provided with information on certain aspects of the nation’s policies. But this is not what we mean by the right to know. The right to know is an automatic right, a fundamental right that belongs to a human being qua human being. It should not be equated with a situation where the State provides information to the people prompted by its own whims and fancies. The individual citizen’s right to know is not the same thing as the Government deciding what the individual should or should not know.

When the right to know is denied, it would be difficult for the people to exercise their other rights like the right of expression. For if one does not know, how does one speak, how does one articulate a grievance or champion a cause? Indeed, how does one think if one does not know?

The level of public consciousness which is, on the whole, quite low will therefore remain as low as ever. If anything, we may even

witness the retardation of public consciousness since some of those elements in society which have always helped to develop public consciousness may not want to risk a mandatory jail term! It is quite possible that the new law will create a climate of fear, the likes of which we have never known before. It is not just politicians, social activists, journalists and the other such opinion-makers who will live under great fear of OSA; more important, it is the people as a whole who will be too afraid to stand up and demand to know the whole truth about a certain episode.

A climate of fear is very unhealthy for any society. It reduces the population to mere spectators watching in silence the games of the rich and powerful. It will create a culture of silence. A spectator culture, a culture of silence, is the antithesis of all that a genuine democracy represents. In a democracy, the people, even the most ordinary citizen, must be given every encouragement to speak, to express his or her opinion, in short, to participate. How will this be possible if the cult of secrecy which OSA is bound to create results in a culture of silence? After the amendments become law, how can we expect our people to regard Malaysia as a Parliamentary Democracy?

- 12) **Apart from the various consequences of the OSA amendments spelt out in the answer to question 6 and in other answers, are there other long-term consequences which we must reflect upon?**

The amendments reinforce certain attitudes among both leaders and led. Since the proposed law will strengthen executive power and make Government less accountable, it is quite conceivable that the 'leaders are masters' attitude will become even more pronounced. At the same time, the people, silenced by the law, will see themselves more and more as servants. The master-servant psychology could well become more pervasive.

The OSA amendments by strengthening the position of the leaders as masters and the people as servants will be doing a great injustice to democracy. For in a genuine democracy, the people are masters, the leaders servants. The masters have delegated their power for a period of five years to their servants to manage the house of democracy on their behalf. It is only right that the

servants give a proper account to the masters on how they are managing. The servants must tell their masters everything the latter wants to know because it is the masters' right to know. The servants have no right to hide certain affairs of the household from their masters — especially if these affairs reveal the incompetence or dishonesty of the servants. If the servants persist in hiding things, in cheating their masters, in lying to them, then the masters have no choice but to sack their servants.

If the Government related to the people in this manner, there would be no question of an Official Secrets Act (OSA) for the Government, as the servant of the people, cannot, should not, keep secrets from the people, its masters. Unfortunately, this has never been the case in Malaysia. The people themselves have been conditioned to accept their fate as the powerless masses when in reality it is their power which the leaders are holding on to in trust. It is only logical therefore that the people should demand continuous accountability from those who are exercising power on their behalf. This is why one can argue that by legalizing the betrayal of the principle of accountability through the OSA amendments, the Government has in fact usurped the power of the people.

By so doing, the Government will, in the long run, alienate itself from the people. This is the other consequence that we should reflect upon. For as the Government becomes more and more secretive, it will become more and more removed from the people. Worse, as time goes on the Government will lose credibility. Since important matters may be suppressed by the State, the people will not be inclined to believe what the leaders tell them through the newspapers. As the newspapers carry more and more sanitized news, rumours will gain currency. The 'surat layang' in the end, will have more legitimacy than the dailies. Rumours and the 'surat layang' will reign supreme because of the Official Secrets Act.

- 13) **Having analysed the consequences of the OSA amendments and the impact of the proposed law upon various groups, we must**

now reflect upon the causes. What are some of the factors responsible for the amendments?

There is an underlying reason for increasing executive power of which the OSA Amendments Bill is merely a reflection. Any development which leads to the centralization of economic or political power with the elites is bound to produce laws like the OSA. For these laws are designed to protect elite interests.

Besides, the Barisan Nasional Government has enjoyed massive unbroken power since Merdeka. Most of the time it has ruled with a four-fifths Parliamentary majority. Because of its dominance the Barisan has had no difficulty formulating a whole array of restrictive laws. The OSA amendments, in other words, is a product of the Barisan Nasional's overwhelming power.

However, more than Barisan power and the nature of development, it is the BMF scandal and perhaps all the leakages about tenders and Government purchases which seem to have persuaded the government to amend the OSA of 1972. The first set of amendments was introduced in 1983 — after a couple of regional journals began publishing detailed analyses of the BMF scandal based to some extent upon information obtained from Malaysian executives and even civil servants. Since 1983, there have been other financial scandals and regional publications have played a big role in unearthing some of the relevant facts. It is also true that some of the scandals appear to be connected, directly or indirectly, to certain important political personalities. This is why by the beginning of 1986, after almost three years of exposes of alleged mismanagement and corruption which put the Government in a bad light, it decided to amend the Act to replace fines for offenders with a mandatory jail term of a year. The amendments introduced in March were subsequently withdrawn partly because of the August General Election. Now they are being re-introduced, reinforced further by an all-encompassing definition of 'Official Secrets'. There is no need to emphasize why it is being done in this manner at this time: after a thumping victory in the elections, the Barisan leadership which has many secrets to hide, feels that it must immediately take steps to safeguard its interests.

- 14) **Though one's arguments against OSA and other such laws may sound convincing, the Government has often maintained that such arguments are influenced by Western liberal ideas. Is this true?**

It is wrong to suggest that all those who are opposed to OSA are slavish adherents of Western liberalism. (In any case our 1972 OSA was based upon the British Official Secrets Act of 1911).

Aliran is opposed to OSA primarily because it transgresses the integrity, dignity and sanctity of the human being. This concept of the sanctity of the human being is found in all the great spiritual traditions, be it Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism or Christianity.

Man's rights and freedoms are embodied in the philosophies of all the world religions. The freedom of expression for instance is clearly enunciated in Islam and Buddhism. The duty of a human being to uphold justice and to oppose wrongdoing is part of Christianity, Hinduism and Islam.

In all the religions, there are numerous episodes to show how much value was attached to consultations between rulers and ruled. More important some of the religious traditions require rulers to be fully accountable to their people. In Islam, for instance, the early Caliphs and even some latter-day rulers, gave detailed accounts to their people of even their personal belongings and their daily routine. There is the story of the Caliph Omar Ibn-Khattab obtaining the permission of the people to use some medicine kept in the public treasury in order to cure his illness.

There is no doubt about it at all: the fight against the OSA amendments is a struggle to uphold some of the sacred values contained in all the spiritual traditions found in Malaysia.

- 15) **Since the Barisan is so overwhelmingly powerful, isn't it futile opposing the OSA amendments? They will become law in any case, so what is the point of the anti-OSA campaign?**

Of course, the Barisan will have no problem getting the amendments approved by Parliament but that does not mean that we should all give up.

The struggle against dominance and authoritarianism like the struggle against other injustices is a long, arduous struggle. It will demand a lot of sacrifices.

If through the OSA protest, our people become more conscious of the importance of human rights, of what democracy really means, then we would have won a great victory.

Explanatory Note.

The above article was produced originally as a pamphlet in the campaign against the Official Secrets Act (OSA) amendments from late October to early December 1986.

A FETTERED DEMOCRACY REMAINS FETTERED

Malaysia has often been described as a fettered democracy. The situation has not changed in the last two years. It is still a democracy of sorts. And it remains as fettered as ever.

This brief review of the human rights situation in Malaysia in 1985 and 1986, begins by taking note of some of the positive features. Though the obnoxious Internal Security Act (ISA) which allows the State to detain people without trial for any length of time is still on the statute books, the Mahathir administration continues to use it sparingly. At the end of 1986, there were only 35 political detainees under the ISA. Six years ago, there were about 700 ISA detainees. There is still some scope, however limited, for dissidents and critics to express themselves, to organize and mobilise. Likewise, the actual balloting in the nation's General Election in August 1986, the seventh since Independence, was in the view of impartial observers, fairly clean.

However, there is no denying that in spite of some redeeming signs here and there, the human rights situation in the country leaves much to be desired. In early December last year, the Government with its overwhelming four-fifths majority in Parliament, amended the Official Secrets Act (OSA) of 1972, to make it even more draconian than it was. The classification of a particular document or a piece of information as an 'official secret' by a Minister or a senior civil servant cannot be questioned in a Court of law. Besides that, the Court has no choice but to impose a mandatory jail sentence of at least one year upon anyone who violates the Act.

A significant segment of the urban population protested vehemently against the amendments since they serve to legitimise the present tendency of the Government to be extraordinarily secretive about matters of national importance particularly in relation to finance. The lack of public accountability is undeniably one of the most disastrous political trends of recent years. It is both a cause and characteristic of increasing Executive dominance which is yet another equally dangerous trend that threatens to further emasculate Malaysian democracy.

Increasing Executive dominance, like the lack of public accountability, would not have become dominant trends if the Government had not succeeded in exercising total control over the mass media. Through ownership, licensing laws, admonishments, rewards and punishments, among other mechanisms of control, the Mahathir Administration has created a press that is docile and submissive, ever ready to comply with the dictates of the powers-that-be.

Together with Radio and Television, the press has helped to conceal or camouflage some of the ugly truths about the Government, while projecting certain national leaders as infallible heroes. It is partly because of the mass-media that the Government is able to dominate society so completely and to curb the growth of any effective counter-trend capable of challenging vested interests associated with the State.

In order to perpetuate its dominance, the Government has also stepped up surveillance of not only the political opposition but also public interest societies, professional associations, trade unions, grass-roots groups and vocal, if critical, individuals. Phones are tapped, mail examined, activists harassed. It is through these and other ways that the State has nurtured a 'psychology of fear' within a section of the educated middle class.

However, more than the oppositionists and critics outside the Establishment, the group in power is, at the moment, very worried about the influence of opponents within the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) itself, the mainstay of the ruling Coalition. Since the resignation of UMNO Deputy President, Datuk Musa Hitam, from the post of Deputy Prime Minister, intra-party rivalries have intensified. Musa cited 'irreconcilable differences' with Prime Minister and UMNO President, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, as the main reason for his resignation.

Dr. Mahathir, never known to be tolerant of dissent, has, as a result of his quarrel with Musa, become even more hostile towards critics and criticisms. Indeed, it is alleged that those linked to Musa or other party leaders who may not be happy with Mahathir, are often blacklisted by the Party President.

Within the party and the Government, attempts are made to isolate such individuals and to discredit them. If some of them happen to be in business or are involved in professional work that requires Government cooperation, they suddenly discover that jobs and contracts are not coming their way anymore. This further antagonises Mahathir's opponents.

In retaliation, they try to undermine his authority. Mahathir, in turn, uses his extensive powers to curb their influence within the party. As a result of this infighting, newspapers, radio and television are subjected to even more severe curbs because Mahathir and his loyalists are apprehensive that their opponents would use the conventional channels of democratic articulation and action to mount an effective challenge.

Factional squabbles and inter-clique competition for power would therefore be one of the main causes of the fettering of democracy especially in the last two years. Fear among the ruling elites that certain groups outside the country, allegedly Zionists and American business coteries, are actively promoting disaffection against the Mahathir Administration, may have also prompted them to become more repressive.

The Mahathir administration appears to be convinced that there is some 'conspiracy' to destabilise the Government and force the Prime Minister to quit. Government leaders argue that the Zionists and others have turned against the Mahathir Administration because of its strong support for the Palestinian cause and its vocal denunciation of American and Western economic policies which are detrimental to Third World countries. However, Mahathir and his loyalists have failed to provide any evidence of how the 'conspiracy' operates and what avenues are being used to destabilise the Government.

A more plausible reason for the increasing controls imposed upon democratic life would be the deteriorating economy. Afraid that mounting unemployment, declining incomes and shrinking businesses, would lead to widespread dissent and disillusionment with the Government, the power-holders have chosen to restrict certain freedoms through all sorts of informal ways.

Then there is the problem of corruption. In the last three or four years, there have been a series of major financial scandals which have tainted and tarnished the names of powerful personalities in the upper echelons of politics and business. Even now, the whole truth about many of these scandals like BMF, Maminco, UMBC and EPF, is not known to the public.

The national leadership, it is often alleged, has gone to great lengths to conceal and camouflage the truth for the simple reason that key figures in Government are directly or indirectly involved in the scandals. It is this fear of what the scandals will reveal – more than anything else – that has taken the Government in a more authoritarian direction. The OSA amendments, it is argued, were motivated largely by this desire to cover up, to prevent exposes of corruption in high places. It shows yet again that corruption has a lot to do with political repression.

Though freedom and democracy have suffered because of all these reasons, the overall situation is not all that dismal for there are some new developments which are encouraging. A portion of the English-educated, urban-based middle-class has become very conscious of the importance of defending human rights. The OSA protest, and the middle-class's opposition to the Government over its lack of accountability in the various scandals, prove this point. It is perhaps because the general situation is deteriorating that people are reacting. It is the nature and degree of challenge that very often conditions one's response.

As significant as the public's response, is the willingness of the Judiciary to protect certain fundamental liberties which are being encroached upon by a dominant Executive. The Judiciary, as a whole, has hitherto been somewhat lukewarm about its responsibility towards the preservation of the democratic system. This is now beginning to change as Judges rule against Executive actions which violate the canons of natural justice.

The public and the Judiciary – these are among the forces that may help preserve Malaysian democracy, however formidable the fetters.

Explanatory note

This article was first presented as a paper at a meeting of the Asian Human Rights Commission in Hong Kong in February 1987.

THE STRUGGLE GOES ON

(Below is an interview I gave the Aliran Monthly immediately after my release from the Internal Security Act (ISA) in December 1987).

AM: *Welcome back! Perhaps we should begin by asking how you feel about your release?*

CM: I am happy and yet sad. It is joy mingled with sorrow. Perhaps there is more sorrow than joy. It is nice to be back with one's family and friends. The love and affection of all those wonderful people who stood by me – who showed so much courage and commitment in the midst of great adversity – will sustain and strengthen my spirit in the years to come.

But the joy of returning to society has lost its glory since so many others – 36 individuals in all – have been detained for two years. Since I know a number of these people, the anguish is especially deep. Three of the least servile of our newspapers have been suspended for almost three months now. The suspension of the STAR in particular which, whatever its shortcomings, gave some space to dissident views, is a grievous blow to freedom. The amendments to the Printing Presses and Publications Act curb the freedom of expression as it has never been curbed before. It gives the Executive the sort of powers over a fundamental liberty which has no parallel in any Parliamentary Democracy. To a lesser degree, the amendments to the Police Act also restrict severely yet another fundamental liberty – the freedom of assembly. When fundamental civil liberties have been shorn of substance in this manner, how can we continue to describe our political system as a *Parliamentary Democracy*?

More than anything else, since my release, I have begun to realise that the events of the last two or three months have created a climate of fear among the people. This is especially true of a significant segment of the middle and upper classes. In spite of a certain amount of democratic consciousness within these classes, I have always regarded them as part and parcel of a

spectator society. A spectator society sits and watches; it is not willing to stand up and be counted. A crisis often exposes the inherent shortcomings of a spectator society. The recent clamp-down, it is obvious, has frightened a lot of middle and upper class types. Many of them know that things are wrong but dare not act.

Fear, in the ultimate analysis, is an emotion which diminishes human dignity. A person who is afraid often tries to rationalise, to justify his inaction by putting the blame upon everything around him – except himself. The wide-ranging arrests, so it is argued by certain individuals, generated fear – understandable fear – among a lot of people. Of course there were arrests but was the situation terribly oppressive? Were people being shot in the still of the night? Were military tanks out on the streets? There are governments which are much, much more repressive, there are regimes which use much more violence against dissidents and yet the intelligentsia in these societies have displayed indomitable courage. Bangladesh would be a recent example. No, it was not because there was unbearable oppression that the intelligentsia, that sections of the Malaysian middle-class, caved in. Fear in our society is often linked to an obsession with self-interest. The Malaysian middle-class is a self-centred middle-class preoccupied with its own well-being, to the exclusion of all other considerations. This is partly because it has for long, enjoyed affluence and experienced social mobility of the type which few other Third World middle-classes have known. Our middle-class is not prepared to risk anything, to sacrifice some of its comfort for a larger cause.

This attitude of the middle-class revealed in such a stark fashion in the recent crisis, has saddened me – just as the recent amendments to certain laws and the two-year detentions have wrenched my heart.

AM: *How long were you detained, Chandra?*

CM: For 52 days. I was taken in on Oct 27 and freed on Dec 18. It was a very, very short period. This is why I told Aliran members that I was embarrassed by the *Welcome Home* party they gave me

since hundreds of other Malaysians have been detained for years on end — four years, eight years, even twelve, fifteen years! These are the detainees who have really suffered the agony of imprisonment.

AM: *What was it like in detention?*

CM: I was put in a cell at the Police Headquarters in Penang. It was a small cell, seven feet (breadth) by 16 feet (length). A wooden bench served as the bed and a low wall separated the "living quarters" from the toilet. The ceiling was high and a small bulb transmitted a weak glow throughout the day and night. There was very little ventilation since there was only a small window-pane high on the rear wall of the cell.

After the first five or six days, I was given a mattress and pillow. About the same time, I was given my copy of the Quran I had taken with me when I was arrested. Reading the Quran, praying regularly and doing exercises were my main activities in those early weeks.

Around the 14th day or so, I was allowed to read books which my wife brought on a weekly basis. I read a great deal right up to the last day of my detention, partly because I slept very little, perhaps three or four hours a day. In all, I must have read about 20 books on religion, philosophy, politics and development, apart from a couple of novels. It was only during the last 10 days, that newspapers, were allowed. I discovered that there was hardly anything to read, as far as local news items were concerned!

Since I have long been troubled by gastritis, the Police relaxed some of their food regulations for me. I was allowed to prepare my own cereals for lunch. If the prison food was unsuitable, the interrogating officers would often buy dinner.

My wife and children visited me once a week, sometimes accompanied by my mother from Sungai Patani or my mother-in-law. These visits lasted an hour or so each time. I realised, after my release, that most other detainees were given much less time

with their families. On this, and on a number of other things too, the Police, I must say, were quite accommodative.

AM: *You had said in your statement on the day of your release that the Police "were kind and considerate". You must be aware that this has angered some people.*

CM: Yes, I had said that. I had also said that the investigations were conducted "*in a courteous and civilised manner*".

There is no reason why anyone should get angry. I was talking of my own experience. I was not making a statement on behalf of the other detainees. It is quite possible that their experiences with the Police may have been different.

Certain individuals have even suggested that since other detainees might have been treated differently, it would have been better if I had not said anything. And yet these same individuals are quick to spread allegations of police mistreatment of detainees even if such allegations have been obtained from second, third or fourth-hand sources. When there is something positive about Police behaviour based upon direct experience, from an individual who has been through it all, these people don't want it to be made known.

I abhor this sort of attitude. I have always upheld this simple moral principle: *the truth must be told*. It is wrong to suppress the truth simply because it does not serve one's individual or group interest or because it does not advance one's ideological goals. Similarly, it is wrong to propagate a lie even if it is in one's own interest to do so.

Those of us who base our struggle for justice upon a spiritual world-view and are guided by ethical values will appreciate the importance of adhering to the truth, whatever the situation. It is only those who are prepared to sacrifice the truth at the altar of expediency, it is only those who see right and wrong in terms of their own political or ideological interests, who feel uneasy about the approach I have adopted.

AM: *You mentioned 'investigations' just now. What were you asked in the course of these investigations?*

CM: Most of the questions were about myself, about my role in Malaysian society and in the international arena, about Aliran and its activities. They wanted to know about Aliran's genesis, its growth, its structure, its finances, its relationship to other groups and so on and so forth. They also wanted to get some idea of my participation in regional and international academic meetings and my involvement in human rights work abroad. Quite a lot of what they sought to find out they already knew from my writings and my speeches.

Aliran's activities and my own work, are like *an open book*. We have not hidden anything from the public. Our *Monthly*, our internal newsletter, *the LIDAH*, and other documents record everything we do. We are undoubtedly the most open public interest society in the country.

In a sense, our openness, it appears to me, made it so much easier to convince the Police that I could not be a security threat to the nation. Because of the *nothing to hide* attitude which Aliran and I have adopted all these years, I could argue forcefully that there was no justification at all for my arrest.

AM: *What sort of psychological state were you in during the investigations and when you were confined to your cell? Were you ever depressed or dejected?*

CM: It was my unwavering, unyielding faith in God and the truth that God embodies which sustained me right through my detention. Faith in God and a commitment to spiritual values have been the bedrock, the foundation of my life since my early adolescence. They have shaped my entire outlook on man and society.

I knew that God would protect me since I had done nothing wrong. Urging those entrusted with authority to uphold justice and to refrain from injustice is what God expects every human being to do, in his or her own little way. We have a duty to God to strive for freedom, to seek unity within the human family.

I have tried to fulfil this duty through peaceful persuasion – as we are required to do in all the great religious scriptures. I have always been opposed to the use of violence. I have never been a racial agitator or a religious fanatic. Anyone who dares to level such an accusation against me must be either an incorrigible liar or totally insane. Neither do I subscribe to any ideology of the Right or Left which denies the spiritual basis of human existence. This is why I insisted right through my 52 days in that police cell that there was no justification at all for my detention. My detention was – as it will always be – a *travesty of justice*. My unshakeable faith in my own innocence then was also a crucial factor which helped to sustain me.

The innocent I was confident would triumph in the end. As the Islamic thinker Ali Shariati once wrote, *Life and time no longer leave the pure and innocent alone and friendless. Their life will defend them and time will justify them*. These lines kept coming back to me in the quiet loneliness of my cell.

In any case, as a student of society, I was acutely conscious of the trials and tribulations that thousands upon thousands of men and women had undergone in order to advance the cause of truth and freedom, of justice and love. What I was experiencing was an insignificant ordeal compared to the agony and anguish that others had known. And yet at the same time I realised that this was the path that God has always chosen for those of His servants who dare to join the eternal struggle to create more just and humane abodes on this earth. One has to suffer. One has to sacrifice. Sometimes one has to lay down one's life. From Spartacus to the long line of illustrious Prophets to the contemporary opponent of authoritarianism and oppression – the struggle for justice is a story of pain.

It is a struggle that will go on and on till the end of time. And within each generation and in every land, there will be men and women who will have to pay the price that justice has always demanded of its disciples. I resolved long before I was detained on Oct 27 that when I am called upon '*to bear the burden*' I would neither flinch nor falter. I thank God that I have emerged from this test of faith determined as ever to pursue the ideals which I hold dear.

AM: *Were you asked to sign any statement or to make any confession before you were released?*

CM: No, the Police did not ask me to do any such thing. As you know, I was released without any conditions whatsoever.

AM: *There have been all sorts of speculations about why you were released unconditionally. Would you care to comment?*

CM: I am somewhat amused by the attitude of certain individuals. When I was detained, some of these individuals went all out to highlight my arrest and tried to convince everyone that it was an act of great injustice. The moment I was released they started to speculate. "Is it possible that Chandra has been *bought* by the authorities. Has he gone over to the other side?"

I can only guess as to the reasons for my release. A variety of factors may have been responsible. It was obvious to me after a while that it was not possible for the Police to fit me into one of those usual categories that they employ to designate a person *a threat to national security*. I am not linked in any way to the underground communist movement. That I have been critical of both the theory and practice of Marxism, it is only too obvious to most people — even if they have had only a superficial exposure to my writings and speeches. The Police also realised that my regional and international roles are legal and legitimate. It would have been ridiculous to suggest that my participation in well known and highly regarded human rights and alternative development organisations poses a threat to Malaysia's security! At the same time, it is an undeniable truth that I have not only fought against ethnic chauvinism and religious bigotry but have also endeavoured to strengthen ties among the different communities by getting them to understand one another's apprehension and aspirations.

Once the Police were convinced that there was no basis for detaining me they sought to obtain my release. It must be acknowledged that at least in my case there appears to have been some eagerness to demonstrate that the Police bureaucracy has a notion of fairness, that it is capable of professionalism. Again it must be emphasised that I am not generalising. Police investigations into the activities of other detainees may have been influenced by other considerations.

If the Police played a role of sorts in my release, it was also because of all the arrests, it was my arrest which stretched credulity to its very limit. The Police knew, it seems to me, that a significant segment of the public found it hard to believe that I could be a threat to national security. For over the years, the general public – especially the English-educated middle-class – has come to appreciate the role that I perform through Aliran, as a rational, balanced articulator and analyst of social issues. How could such a role present any danger to the well-being of society? This is why my arrest was particularly unpopular with a lot of thinking, concerned people with no specific political affiliations or inclinations.

Perhaps my physical condition also contributed towards the negative public reaction. My arrest was viewed not only as an unjustified act of political suppression but also as a cruel deed. It allegedly caused some embarrassment to the authorities. Besides, some of the foreign media reports had also emphasised the *physical condition* aspect. In this connection, I must state openly that I was very unhappy with that sort of emphasis. It is the type of sympathy that I do not relish. As a person involved in a struggle, I have never made any concession to myself on account of my physical handicap.

Having said that, I must admit that the tremendous support given to my case on its own merit by the international press was also an important factor in my release. In many instances, newspapers and journals highlighted the constructive role that Aliran and I had played in developing inter-ethnic harmony. They argued that in any society that professed to be democratic the role that I was performing should be lauded.

Like the international press, organisations and individuals from abroad also campaigned vigorously for me. Articles were written and letters appeared on my arrest in some of the leading newspapers in Australia and Britain. From what we have been able to gather, a number of academics and human rights activists also sent letters of protest and petitions to the Government. There were even signature campaigns on behalf of the detainees in

certain foreign capitals. All these activities must have had some impact upon the thinking of the authorities.

Equally significant, some prominent local public personalities outside the present Establishment, also expressed their unhappiness over my detention. The support given by the Tunku, Tun Hussein Onn and Tan Sri Dr Tan Chee Khoo through affidavits filed on my behalf at the Kuala Lumpur High Court was perhaps indicative of how such personalities felt. Though we lost the case, the psychological effect of those affidavits upon local public opinion must have persuaded the authorities to reflect a little more on my detention. It has also been suggested that even individuals within Government had misgivings about an arrest which did not seem to make any sense.

Perhaps, prayer also played a part. Prayers offered in sincerity by good people determined to see an end to a particular act of injustice, can sometimes work wonders. Prayer has a power of its own which man's rational faculties cannot comprehend. The strength of prayer can only be grasped by our supra-rational faculties. The famous sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, like the well-known poet, Alfred Tennyson, were convinced of the invisible power of prayer. Sincere, constant prayers by a number of people from different religious communities must have made what seemed almost impossible at the beginning of my detention, a reality on 18 Dec 1987.

Finally, if I am out today, it is also because of the brave, energetic efforts of a handful of Aliran officials, members and staff. Their efforts, coupled with the devotion and dedication of my wife, family members and close relatives, helped, in an indirect way, to secure my release. All of them slogged and sweated to ensure that I would regain my freedom as soon as possible.

AM: *Since you are out now what are your plans?*

CM: My immediate goal – as I have said many times in the last few days – is to work towards the release of all the other detainees.

Let us hope that this goal is achieved in the very near future, within the next few months, if possible.

My long term mission remains what it has always been. Prison walls have merely strengthened my resolve. As a human being, as a vicegerent of God, I shall strive to ensure that justice triumphs and unity prevails in order that peace may reign on earth. This task I will have to carry out in active cooperation with my fellow human beings, whatever their ethnic background or religious affiliation. It is my prayer that as the years go by, more and more people will realise that this is the real task before each and everyone of us. However humble or exalted our station in life, we have to get involved in this struggle, participate in this unending quest for justice and unity, based upon the principles and ideals contained in God's eternal message to humankind.

However, as far as Malaysia is concerned transforming that eternal message into reality is going to be a daunting challenge — more formidable than it has ever been before. For the sort of climate that is conducive for the germination of ideas that may result in the evolution of an alternative social order is simply not there. Indeed, the events of the last few months have made it much more difficult for a just and humane society to emerge in the long run.

First, there is much less freedom today to articulate non-establishment ideas through the mass media. Communication with the general public has been severely restricted, as we have already noted. Even if there is a little more leeway in the future as a result of perhaps some change in the political arena, the overall scope for the growth of alternative ideas on the economy, politics, administration, culture and ethnic relations is likely to remain limited. For authoritarian laws and policies have a way of perpetuating themselves.

Second, the *fear syndrome* within the middle-class which I have already talked about at some length, is much deeper and more pervasive than I had expected it to be. This fear syndrome will be a major psychological obstacle inhibiting concerned elements within the middle-class from committing themselves wholeheartedly to a struggle for justice and freedom. Without the

participation and indeed the leadership of middle-class elements, it would be almost impossible for an effective human rights movement to develop. The experiences of India and, to some extent, the Philippines show clearly that a significant segment of the middle-class must commit itself to the struggle for human rights if authoritarianism is to be checked. South Korea is yet another example of how middle class participation in the human rights movement has helped to tame the authoritarian excesses of a military dictatorship. I do not see our middle-class which, to make things worse, is ethnically divided, performing such a role for a long, long time to come.

Third, and perhaps most important of all, the 27 Oct clampdown revealed the stark power of something that we have known all along: the *power of the ethnic argument* and how that power can be used to crush all manner of dissent. Indeed, judging by the number of individuals detained in that clampdown who had nothing to do with ethnic issues, one realises that any attempt to bring about change, however non-communal, however multi-ethnic, however universal, can be easily destroyed simply by using the sledge-hammer of *ethnic tensions, ethnic violence* and *ethnic riots*.

The ethnic argument in fact is that one argument that can be used to strangle freedom, choke justice, throttle the truth. If the growth of democratic awareness threatens someone's power, the ethnic argument can be pushed to the forefront to curb all debate and dissent. Even dissidents are sometimes afraid to pursue democratic protest to its logical conclusion for fear of *ethnic repercussions*. Similarly, if the poor and the jobless are getting restless and are starting to protest against economic injustices, this fear of *ethnic turmoil* can be resurrected to keep them in check. If some of the malpractices and wrongdoings of the elite are about to be exposed, all that a Machiavellian politician has to do is to engineer an *ethnic crisis* in order to keep his group in power. If a leader's position is threatened by competing cliques and factions he can always attempt to consolidate his power by manipulating *ethnic apprehensions* to his advantage.

The ethnic argument then – and mind you, it is not the mere presence of different ethnic communities which is the problem – is our big bugbear. It is going to be used at every turn and corner to prevent genuine change from taking place. It is that weapon that will be used to perpetuate the status quo, forever and ever. The ethnic argument, plus the fear syndrome, and the lack of political and intellectual freedom, give the impression that the situation is quite hopeless, at least for now, as far as we are concerned – we who dare to dream of a more just and united Malaysia where the dignity of the human being, and not just productivity, is the highest good.

AM: *Is there any other final comment you would like to make? Some advice, an opinion?*

CM: Since this is the beginning of 1988, it may not be inappropriate to express certain hopes about the future.

Let me begin with public interest societies since Aliran is one. Then I'll go on to opposition parties and finally the Government. Taken together, they represent some of the most decisive forces in present-day Malaysian society.

Public interest societies

It is my hope that we will be creative enough to discover new, imaginative ways of functioning in this difficult environment. But we should always adhere to peaceful methods of achieving change. And we must be honest and open in all our activities. We must be willing to commend the Government if it does something good, just as we should not be afraid to criticise the Government if it does something wrong. Let's be rational and balanced at all times. Just as we seek public channels of communication to get our ideas across, so should we convey our thoughts to the Government and other institutions through meetings, dialogues and memoranda. Most of all, before we seek to transform society, let us examine ourselves critically and see how we can become better human beings.

Opposition Political Parties

It is my hope that opposition political parties will continue to champion just causes, though the situation today is hardly conducive

for the growth of the opposition. At the same time, one hopes they will not succumb to the politics of communal heroism. They should be more sensitive to the complexities of a multi-ethnic society. A less sectarian, less dogmatic approach is called for. Justice for instance should not be viewed from the narrow perspective of a particular ethnic community or a particular religious tradition. Perhaps, opposition political parties should also realise that they may be able to serve the poor and powerless better, if they are less adversarial and less belligerent.

The Government

Let us hope that there would be solidarity and cohesion within the Government. Let's hope that the Government will address itself to the major challenges facing the nation – such as the economic recession, increasing unemployment, corruption, abuse of power, ethnic polarisation and the growing feeling of alienation from the State within the urban community. Let's hope that it will be more concerned with these problems than with enhancing its dominance or clobbering its critics. The Government should realise that the real culprit is always the fellow who dirties the linen and not the chap who says that the linen is dirty.

In this connection, one hopes that the Government will be humble enough to examine itself to find out where it has gone wrong and how it can improve itself. It requires great courage to admit one's mistakes. Humility is the mark of true statesmanship.

Let's hope that there will be more consultation and communication between the Government and other sectors of society. Let's hope that the Government will try to persuade, rather than attempt to silence, those who disagree with it.

Most of all, let's hope the Government will be honest and upright, that it will tell the truth at all times to the people. For now, more than ever before, with the Opposition crippled and the media muzzled, there is a crying need for public accountability. Of course, in the ultimate analysis, both Government and people, leaders and followers, have to account to a Power that is far mightier than all of us. As the holy Quran says, *"Have they not journeyed through the land and seen the*

fate of those who went before them, people far mightier than they? There is nothing in heaven or earth beyond the power of God. All-knowing is He and Mighty." (35 : 44)

(AM stands for the Aliran Monthly, CM are my initials.)

Explanatory note

The interview first appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (vol. 7:11)

WHITEWASH!

WHITE PAPER ON ISA ARRESTS

The Government's White Paper on the October 27 episode is disappointing. It has failed to convince thinking elements in Malaysian society that the Government's analysis of what led to that episode is fair, just and balanced.

It was because the Government had not told the whole truth about the mass Internal Security Act (ISA) arrests, the ban on political activities and the closure of certain newspapers, that it was so reluctant to let the public debate its White Paper. It did not want the media (which it controls) to carry critical and evaluative commentaries on the White Paper's version of the October 27 episode let alone grant the public and the media the opportunity to discuss the White Paper. The Government was not prepared, initially, to allow even Parliament to debate the document! In the end, it was the Opposition which managed to persuade the House to hold a debate of sorts.

The unwillingness of the Government to discuss the White Paper in an open and honest manner may stem in part from a real fear of being exposed and ridiculed. For the document is full of allegations and innuendoes which the Government, it is doubtful, will ever be able to substantiate. It talks of Marxist infiltration of Christian organisations, of the establishment of "a dictatorship of the proletariat", of an organisation that planned to provide military training, of deliberate attempts to rouse religious and ethnic sentiments. The individuals and groups who have been accused of all these nefarious activities and diabolical objectives (from the Government's point of view) have not been given the chance to explain their position. They have been denied the right to defend themselves. The right to defend oneself, the right to be heard, is what natural justice is all about. To deprive a human being of such elementary justice is one of the greatest acts of inhumanity.

What makes it worse is the attempt in the White Paper to attribute certain statements to some of the ISA detainees — statements which implicate them and others. Since these statements have been

elicited from the detainees in abnormal conditions they cannot be regarded as reliable evidence of what they really think or how they really feel. No respectable tribunal of justice would accord any credence to statements made under duress.

These two points, about natural justice and duress, must be kept in mind as we examine each of the Government's justifications for the clampdown in the White Paper.

Sensitive Issues

To start with, it is obvious from allegations of how the so-called sensitive issues were exploited, that for the most part, groups like the Democratic Action Party (DAP) were actually reacting to decisions, actions and situations for which others were responsible. The controversy surrounding the Deposit-Taking Cooperatives (DTCs) for instance, arose because their leaders, a number of whom were Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) officials, had committed criminal breach of trust (CBT) or were involved in various types of fraud. If these DTC leaders in whom a lot of ordinary Chinese had reposed so much trust, were honest and upright, there would not have been a DTC issue in the first instance. Of course, the DAP as an opposition party competing for support within the same Chinese constituency as the MCA, exploited the issue to the hilt. But it is wrong to see the DAP as the main culprit and not condemn the MCA officials involved in gross malpractices for their moral laxity. This is one of the glaring shortcomings in the White Paper. In the DTC controversy, as in many of the other issues that it seeks to highlight, the White Paper criticises those who cry out that the linen is dirty but fails to chastise those who dirty the linen. Surely, it is those who dirty the linen that deserve the wrath of society.

The same attitude manifests itself in the Bukit Cina and University of Malaya electives controversies. It is significant that in the Bukit Cina controversy the White Paper does not take to task the UMNO politicians and bureaucrats in the Melaka State Government who showed a total lack of sensitivity to the cultural and religious sentiments of the local Chinese community. This was the main reason for the eruption of the controversy. Similarly, there may not have been a controversy over electives at the University of Malaya if certain academics had not persisted in changing an established rule on choice

of subjects for students without any academic justification. These academics, known for their strong ethnic tendencies, are not upbraided anywhere in the White Paper.

In fact, on the whole, the Paper downplays the role of individuals and groups who are associated with, or part of the Establishment, in creating ethnic tensions prior to October 27. The MCA, for instance, went out of its way to raise various ethnic issues, especially after the August 1986 General Election. Its Deputy President Lee Kim Sai in particular, projected himself as an ethnic hero willing to enter any communal fray. The MCA's dismal performance in that election had a lot to do with its eagerness to prove to the Chinese that it could stand up for the rights of the community. It was the MCA, we should remind ourselves, which first questioned the pledge (or prayer) that the Melaka Education Department had introduced in certain schools in early 1987. It was the MCA's Selangor branch that provoked Malay feelings by challenging the validity of the community's indigenous status.

Like the MCA, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) had also adopted some very communal postures following the 1986 election. Piqued by the erosion of electoral support for the Barisan Nasional (BN) in urban Chinese constituencies, UMNO officials did not hesitate to lash out at the Chinese community for its failure to endorse what they perceived as legitimate 'Malay political dominance'. This was the theme of a speech by a prominent UMNO backbencher Datuk Abdullah Ahmad a few weeks after the General Election. UMNO President and Prime Minister Dato Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad also delivered a Presidential address at the 1986 UMNO General Assembly which was significant for its strong communal overtones. He argued that critics had been more vocal in their denunciation of the Government in connection with the BMF affair than they had been in their condemnation of the directors of the Pan-Electric (Pan-El) company who were also involved in a major financial fiasco. He was quite explicit in suggesting that this was because BMF was a Malay folly while Pan-El was Chinese.

Dr Mahathir was not only wrong about the reactions of critics to the two scandals; he was also being mischievous in giving a communal interpretation to issues of integrity and honesty. It was not the first

time that he had attempted to camouflage the BMF scandal by dressing it up in communal attire. One is tempted to ask at this point whether the White Paper which accused the DAP of racialising the DTC issue shouldn't also question the UMNO President's motives in injecting an ethnic element into controversies such as BMF and Pan-EI?

Indeed, if the White Paper was really concerned about how ethnic tensions had developed over a period of time culminating in the October 27 episode, it would have assumed a harsher attitude towards some of the extremely communal utterances of certain other UMNO politicians. As UMNO leaders began mobilising the party for the mammoth November 1 rally in Kuala Lumpur to celebrate UMNO's 41st anniversary, their speeches took on a more and more belligerent tone. Some of the slogans displayed during the October 17 rally organised by UMNO Youth to counter the coalescing of the Chinese community over the Chinese school administrators issue, reflected this anger and antagonism. The White Paper mentions some of those slogans and rightly refers to the UMNO rally as a reaction to Chinese communalism. But it fails to observe that by threatening to spill blood and to create another May 13 type riot, UMNO reactions had gone beyond the limit. The individuals involved directly or indirectly in all this communal posturing like Datuk Najib Abdul Razak, Datuk Muhammad Taib, Datuk Mohamed Rahmat, Datuk Seri Sanusi Junid, Dr Hamid Pawanteh, etc. should have been punished severely — as severely as Chinese, Indian, Kadazan or Iban communalists from whatever political party or social organisation.

Provoked

This brings us to yet another failing of the authorities in controlling the ethnic situation prior to October 27. The White Paper does not explain why, in the midst of escalating ethnic tensions, the authorities granted a permit to various Chinese groups to hold a meeting at the Thean Hou temple on October 11, 1987 to discuss the Chinese schools issue. Was it because of pressure from the MCA leadership? Or was it because the authorities wanted to be 'liberal'? Or, was it because some individuals in power had their own reasons — which we shall not speculate upon — for giving a permit for the gathering? Then after Thean Hou, the authorities granted permission to UMNO Youth to organise its own huge rally on October 17, partly in

retaliation to the Chinese meeting. Again, couldn't the authorities have persuaded the UMNO Youth leadership not to hold the rally? Why didn't the authorities, especially the Police, after seeing what had happened at the two earlier meetings, and after the tensions caused by the Chow Kit incident on October 18, take a firm stand against the holding of the November 1 Malay assembly (Perhimpunan Melayu) initiated by the UMNO leadership?

More than any single event, it was the mass mobilisation for the November 1 congregation – half a million Malays from all over the country were expected to attend – which heightened ethnic fears and anxieties. It was not so much the number involved (which was certainly mind-boggling) that worried everyone.

What caused all the apprehension were the preparations that were going on for the rally which gave the impression that people were being brought to Kuala Lumpur for an ugly showdown with both ethnic and political repercussions. The White Paper makes no attempt to explore how a function organised by the leading party in Government could have developed into such a hysterical event threatening national security. In this connection, one should also ask why the 41st anniversary of UMNO should assume such tremendous importance. UMNO had not celebrated any of its previous birthdays on such a massive scale. Besides, the venue was changed from Johor Baru, UMNO's birthplace, to Kuala Lumpur, a change which was announced in the midst of rising ethnic tensions. Why? Why?

There are a lot of other questions that beg to be answered. Can we separate the ethnic-based issues and events of the four or five months preceding the October 27 episode, from certain other issues and events which came to the fore during the same period? More precisely, shouldn't we ask if there is any connection between the controversy surrounding United Engineers Malaysia's (UEM) North-South Highway contract with the Government and the October 27 episode? What is the connection between the Court case brought by the "UMNO 11" seeking to declare the UMNO elections of April 24 last year null and void and the October 27 episode?

Isn't it true that both these legal proceedings challenged the power and position of the ruling elite within UMNO as no other event did?

By the middle of October, after first the High Court and then the Supreme Court held that Lim Kit Siang, DAP Secretary-General and leader of the Parliamentary Opposition, had the *locus standi* to seek an injunction to stop United Engineers from signing the Highway contract with the Government, it became quite clear that if the substantive issues in that deal were brought out into the open, a lot of the dirt on UMNO's colossal business empires would be put on public display. This could have caused quite a bit of embarrassment to some people. Similarly, once the UMNO 11 (originally the UMNO 12) filed their petition it became apparent to top UMNO officials themselves that they had very strong grounds for invalidating the April 24th UMNO elections. This must have generated fear and concern in certain circles, given the bruising experience of the 1987 contest. What if the wafer-thin majority of 43 votes in the election for the UMNO Presidency last year disappears – and one is defeated by one's erstwhile rival?

It is a truism that people in power who are determined to cling on to their power at all costs often act in a certain way. Is it possible that the fear of being exposed for certain misdeeds and the desire to protect one's power, had something to do with the October 27 episode? Because the White Paper does not deal with these questions, it has very little credibility.

Neither does the White Paper take cognizance of what is obvious to any observer of Malaysian politics. How can one complain about the exploitation of sensitive ethnic issues, as the Paper does, and yet not make any comment on how communalism has become institutionalised over the years. In the economy, in politics, in culture, in education, in almost every sphere of public life, policies with ethnic characteristics and biases have become commonplace. Indeed, in the last two decades or so, communal thinking has become so deeply entrenched in Malaysian society that any form of multi-ethnic endeavour is now dismissed as "Utopian". And whether one likes it or not, the ruling elite is, to a great extent, responsible for this state of affairs. For it is the ruling elite and the Barisan parties as a whole that benefit most from the perpetuation of communalism in the public arena.

Having said that, we will not deny that groups outside the Establishment have also contributed towards the deterioration of

ethnic relations. If we took the period before the October 27 episode as an example, it could be argued that the DAP's habit of presenting each and every ethnic controversy as the ultimate threat to the well-being of the Chinese and non-Malays had only served to arouse unnecessary fears and anxieties. It was wrong for instance, to view the Melaka State Government's so-called development plan for Bukit Cina as the death-blow of Chinese culture and heritage or to regard the emplacement of non-Mandarin speaking Chinese administrators in Chinese primary schools, as an attempt to annihilate the Chinese language and Chinese education. Exaggerating the situation in this manner tantamounts to an inaccurate, unjust depiction of actual social realities. For the Chinese language, education, culture and heritage continue to survive within the context of a multi-ethnic society with a certain historical background. There are of course a number of instances of how some of the legitimate rights and aspirations of the Chinese and other non-Malay communities have not been accorded the attention they deserve. But it would be unfair, nonetheless, to paint a picture of the Government as totally oblivious of, and unresponsive towards, the interests of the various non-Malay communities.

What this means is that exaggerations, distortions and sweeping generalisations of ethnic situations do a great deal of damage to the fabric of multi-ethnic societies. It is vitally important to articulate ethnic grievances in a rational, restrained, balanced and most of all, honest manner. If non-Establishment groups had developed a more temperate style of ethnic communication, they may not have fallen prey to the elite manipulation which appears to have occurred in the October 27 episode.

Christianisation Issue

The White Paper also alleges that the Christianisation of the Malays and the exploitation of that issue threatened national security.

It is true that missionary activities conducted by Christians or followers of other religions among Muslims are bound to produce an adverse reaction within that community. This has more to do with Malay-Muslim perceptions of ethnic identity and ethnic solidarity than with the Islamic faith as such. Because fears, whether real or imagined, that Malay-Muslim solidarity is being undermined by another faith can

generate hostilities between the followers of the religions concerned, the authorities are not wrong in regarding organised proselytisation among the Muslims as a threat to inter-religious peace and harmony.

If the authorities are so acutely aware of the consequences of non-Muslims proselytisation among Muslims, why then did newspapers and a television station linked to the Government play up the Christianisation issue? Why was so much publicity given to Salleh Omar and Kamaluddin Tahir who both claimed to have christianised a large number of Malays? This is an important question to ask for right from the outset it was obvious that the two were making preposterous claims which were patently false. Salleh and Kamaluddin were not even Christians and had not converted hundreds of Malays to Christianity. Though they were impostors, arrangements were made for them to give talks at several Government mosques, schools and departments. Their audio-tapes were widely circulated by school-teachers and government officials. It is worth noting that in one of Salleh's tapes he speaks favourably of certain UMNO leaders and Government ministers while insinuating that another UMNO leader from Team B may have been behind the Christianisation of the Malays!

All this makes one very suspicious of aspects of the whole Christianisation issue. Was there an attempt by certain individuals in UMNO to exploit the Christianisation issue in their inter-factional conflict within the party? Was there a deliberate endeavour to create fear among the Muslims by exaggerating and exploiting the issue? Was it part of a plan to deliberately create ethnic tensions?

It is significant that the Salleh and Kamaluddin media revelations came in the wake of the mysterious burning of a few old mosques in Pahang. To this day, the authorities have not been able to explain these unprecedented acts of arson. Who was, or rather who were, behind the burnings?

The White Paper makes no mention of the 'mosques incident'. Yet for a moment at least it caused some anxiety among both Muslims and non-Muslims. It may or may not be linked to the Christianisation issue but like that issue, it exacerbated Muslim fears and for that reason was also responsible for the deterioration in the ethnic climate.

The 'mosque incident', like the Christianisation issue, raises a larger question about inter-religious ties in a multi-religious society like ours. With the resurgence of religious sentiments amongst almost all communities, the time may have come to establish certain firm, clear ground rules which would guide inter-religious interaction. Since we are concerned at this point with proselytisation, perhaps all the religious communities in the country should agree that there will be no organised missionary activities among the followers of another religion. This rule should apply equally to all religions. Of course, individuals from whatever religion should have the freedom to embrace another faith of their choice. However, no religious group or institution should have as its objective the conversion of people of another faith.

This should not be seen as a curb upon any religion. It should not be seen as a denial of one's right to propagate one's faith. For the propagation that really matters is the propagation of universal spiritual values which are found in all the great religious traditions. Likewise, the conversion that really counts is the conversion of the self – from our lower self to our higher self. It is the transformation of our own character through the assimilation of ethical principles that we should emphasise – not the conversion of our neighbour.

Manipulation Of Islam

The White Paper is of the view that like the exploitation of ethnic issues and Christianisation, the manipulation of Islam is yet another threat to the nation's well-being.

It is pathetic however that it should open its case on how Islam is manipulated by citing examples of so-called Islamic deviationist groups. It is difficult to understand how such groups which are often inclined towards either Sufism or cult practices or both, could be a threat to national security. There is nothing to suggest that the groups mentioned in the White Paper had advocated violence. Nor is there the slightest hint that they had intended to impose their religious teachings upon the rest of the Muslim community.

Being deviationist by itself is no crime. Deviationist groups have existed within the fold of Islam for hundreds of years. As long as they do not disturb public order, no one has the right to assume that these groups are a threat to the nation's security.

The White Paper also alleges that a group of Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) members, without the blessings of the party's leadership, had established a clandestine organisation called Jundullah or Allah's army on August 29 1987. Its purpose was "to set up an Islamic administration in Malaysia through militant action. It was also to be the saviour of the Muslims should racial riots break out."

Those who are under detention in connection with the Jundullah idea will not be able to confirm or refute what the White Paper says. In any case, the allegation itself raises so many other questions that very few people will be convinced by it.

However, if it is true that Jundullah was going to provide military training and obtain firearms – as the White Paper alleges – then we would consider it an unwise move. We reject the use of violence, in whatever form, as a means of advancing one's cause. All political parties and social action groups committed to change should be very clear in their minds on the question of the use of violence. It is because violence breeds violence, it is because it brutalizes the human being, it is because it tarnishes one's ideals, however noble, that one should not resort to the use of violence in order to achieve one's goals.

It is quite possible that as democratic space diminishes, individuals and groups who find that even the limited avenues of articulation and action are not available to them, may become desperate and turn to violent methods of achieving change. This is why the authorities – if they really care for peace and harmony – should ensure that democratic space in societies like ours is not only maintained but also expanded. Unfortunately, since the October 27 episode, the little space that was always present, appears to be shrinking rapidly.

"Marxist Group"

Of all the allegations and accusations contained in the White Paper, those directed at the so-called 'Marxist group' are perhaps the most absurd – if only because the authorities have made elementary mistakes about organisations, activities and concepts.

To start with, the White Paper talks of a 'Marxist group'. Does this mean a single group, a group held together by a single

organisational structure or operating within the same framework or under the same leadership or with the same aims and objectives? Where is this Marxist group? Who are its leaders? What is the history, the background of this group?

We raise these points because the individuals mentioned in the Marxist section of the White Paper come from all sorts of occupational and educational backgrounds. Some of them may not even know each other. Indeed, they espouse different ideas and function in different ways. Some of the organisations these individuals are supposed to be working with have very little to do with one another. They may even be pursuing conflicting objectives through divergent approaches. This is why it does not make sense to talk of a single ideological group striving towards a certain goal with a single-minded passion.

The White Paper is also completely wrong about the links that this 'Marxist group' has "with foreign organisations which are international communist fronts". The Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA), for instance, is mentioned as a pro-Communist organisation. PETA is a highly respected drama movement in the Philippines. It is a legal body and is recognised as such by the present Aquino Government in Manila. Even the Malaysian government invited PETA to participate in the Kuala Lumpur Arts Festival in 1985. Isn't it odd that the same organisation should now be described by the authorities as pro-communist? Most Filipinos in the know, including those with a strong anti-communist orientation, would be surprised to learn that PETA is a pro-communist organisation. They would regard PETA simply as a nationalist organisation whose main concern is the promotion of social awareness through popular drama.

The Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) or May First Movement is also described in the White Paper as a pro-communist organisation. This again is not true. The KMU is a labour Federation which aims to improve the conditions of the poor through the democratic process. On many occasions the mainstream Catholic Church has given support to the KMU's advocacy of fundamental reforms to Philippine society. Though it is left-leaning, it is certainly not communist. It operates legally and interacts with the Aquino Government.

But more than its misrepresentation of certain foreign organisations, it is in its total misconception of Liberation Theology that the White Paper reveals its intellectual bankruptcy. It describes Liberation Theology as "a concept upheld by the "Marxist group". In a footnote the White Paper says that "Liberation Theology as practised by the Marxist group is an approach which stresses that Catholicism contains teachings that human freedom can be achieved through the class struggle and force may be used when all other means have been exhausted."

The impression created is that Liberation Theology is a philosophy or a set of ideas which is somehow linked to Marxists. Indeed, it is presented as an intellectual tool which Marxists own and Marxists use. This sort of reasoning reflects incredible ignorance of not only Liberation Theology but also Marxism.

Since our purpose is to clarify Liberation Theology, as succinctly as possible, let it be emphasised that Liberation Theology is a legitimate child born of the womb of Christianity. It is a theology which seeks to achieve the liberation of the human being from sin, both personal and social. This is why it is concerned not only with personal greed and dishonesty but also with the destructive, dehumanising effects of poverty, exploitation and oppression upon whole societies. The inspiration for Liberation Theology comes from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the long line of Hebrew Prophets who struggled against the sins of injustice and tyranny.

Copy-cat Claims

It is a pity that instead of trying to understand Liberation Theology within the framework of Christian thought, the Malaysian authorities have swallowed hook, line and sinker the vicious lies about Liberation Theology invented by the Singapore Government. In order to justify its detention under the ISA in May last year of young church workers and professionals committed to the growth of human rights in that Republic, the autocratic leadership of Lee Kuan Yew has gone all out to equate Liberation Theology with Marxism and even militant Communism.

The Singapore Government, it is obvious, fears the development of human rights consciousness in not just the island State but also

within the Southeast Asian region as a whole, and particularly in neighbouring Malaysia. Given the intimate economic and security ties between the two countries, the Singapore government knows only too well that if the Malaysian public develops a profound commitment to human dignity and social justice, the authoritarian capitalist system it wants to perpetuate on both sides of the causeway could be in jeopardy. This is why the Singapore Government is determined to ensure that pro-human rights and anti-capitalist ideas which are nonetheless non-Marxist, are not allowed to blossom anywhere in Malaysia or Singapore. Does this then mean that the Singapore authorities had some influence over the October 27 security operations in Malaysia, especially in relation to church activists?

This is not inconceivable though one must remember that maintaining and perpetuating an authoritarian capitalist system is an essential aspect of the ideology of the Malaysian State too. It explains to some extent why genuine non-communist but anti-capitalist ideas and activities of groups outside the Establishment are often regarded with deep suspicion. The White Paper reflects this. It discusses "the emergence of the Marxist group", describes certain organisations as pro-communist and then goes on to elaborate upon the activities of various individuals and local bodies which, in essence, is directed against the existing authoritarian capitalist system. The assumption is then made that because these social activists and their groups appear to reject the system they must therefore be pro-communist or Marxist. It is significant, in this connection, that the only evidence (if it can be termed as evidence) the White Paper offers of their Marxist inclination are phrases quoted from statements obtained from them during detention. Thus, a particular social activist is supposed to have admitted that "the motive of his activities was to establish a government of the "dictatorship of the proletariat". Another is supposed to have attended Marxist study sessions which "used the idea of Lenin, Trotsky and Marx to explain the relationship of their theories with the history of communism in Malaysia." The reliability of statements such as these obtained under duress has already been discussed.

As far as the actual activities of so-called Marxist detainees go, it is quite obvious their real concern was largely with pointing out the inadequacies of the present authoritarian, capitalist system. It is true

they highlighted "problems relating to poverty, oppression, injustice". They tried to conscientise the people through pamphlets, drama, educational sessions, seminars and conferences. Some of them may have even hoped that through these endeavours of theirs they would be able to "change the present social system" and establish a more egalitarian social order. What is crucial is that these social activists pursued their ideals through peaceful persuasion. They used democratic channels of articulation and action. Their activities were legal and legitimate. There is no suggestion anywhere in the White Paper that any of them advocated violence or used violence to achieve his or her goals.

In a democratic society, citizens have a right, indeed a duty, to work towards change in a peaceful manner. They are perfectly justified in criticising their leaders, in exposing weaknesses in Government policies, in espousing alternative solutions to social problems. If they feel that the Government is incompetent or public officials are corrupt or the state's ideology exploits and oppresses the people, they are free to work towards the evolution of a new social order — as long as they adhere to peaceful, democratic methods. It must be stressed — though it is an elementary principle of democratic government — that there is nothing subversive about wanting to replace the people in power. One cannot be accused of being a Communist simply because one desires a change of government or because one yearns for a more just and egalitarian society.

Communist Bogey

However, the present Government, like its predecessors, has always found it convenient to trot out the Communist bogey every time it feels threatened politically — even if the threat comes from groups other than those that it classifies as 'Marxist' or 'Communist'. There is no better bogey than the Communist one for in the eyes of the ruling elite the entire question of security and stability, of peace and harmony, is inextricably intertwined with the perennial Communist threat. In a sense, for a significant segment of Malaysian society too, national security is inseparable from the challenge posed by the Communist movement. This is why in every mass ISA exercise since Merdeka (Independence), the Communist threat has been used as a justification for detaining all sorts of people without trial. It happened in 1964 though the real issue then was Indonesian Confrontation. It

happened again in 1969 though the problem was ethnic. In the 1974 arrests, the Communist bogey was raised again, though the underlying problem was related to inflation, low rubber prices and peasant grievances. In 1976, the Communist, especially the Soviet threat was the excuse for arrests within UMNO. And in 1987, the Marxist threat served as a useful camouflage to conceal an elite attempt to consolidate power and to control the political system.

If we want to be more precise about how the Communist bogey serves the interests of the elites in the present situation, we should ask some simple questions. What is the relationship between a couple of drama workshops and the controversies involving public integrity which preceded the October 27 episode? What is the connection between Marxist study sessions and the ethnic tensions prior to the October 27 episode? How is the Lenten campaign of the National Office of Human Development (NOHD) linked to the political crisis that led to the October 27 episode – a crisis that continues to plague the nation to this day?

Having said all this, we are not suggesting for one moment that Marxists or Communists do not exploit crises, or infiltrate organisations or manipulate individuals. We are very much aware of how Marxists operate in situations like ours. They often justify on the basis of their own ideological scriptures, the use of unethical methods to achieve their goals. We know how they exploit ethnic loyalties and religious sentiments for their own ends.

But the ISA is not the answer to the challenge emanating from 'Marxist ideologies'. Locking up individuals who believe fervently in a certain cause is not the solution. Since Marxism involves ideas and ideals, we must be able to convince Marxists through reason and analysis that their ideas are flawed and their ideals are false. More than that we must demonstrate to them through deeds rather than words that the alternative that we offer is far more capable of achieving justice, of upholding freedom, of enhancing human dignity. As we approach the last decade of the 20th century, we are in a better position than ever before to prove to even the most dogmatic Marxist that the god he worships has failed – and failed miserably.

Newspaper Involvement

After analysing the activities of various groups, the White Paper discusses briefly the role of newspapers in creating ethnic tensions. It accuses certain newspapers, the *Star*, the *Sunday Star*, *Watan* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* of projecting news and views "which built up racial feelings".

The White Paper does not provide specific evidence of what sort of news or what sort of reporting contributed to such feelings. Even when these four newspapers were suspended on October 29 1987, the Ministry of Home Affairs failed to quote "book, chapter and verse" to show how they played a role in the escalation of ethnic tensions. An allegation made against the *Star* in connection with the pictures of detainees it carried on its front page on October 28 was so ludicrous that the newspaper had no problem refuting it.

In the absence of concrete evidence of how the *Star* and the other three newspapers had strayed from the straight path, all we can say is that in a multi-ethnic society, ethnic issues have to be reported and analysed. Of course, it has to be done in a mature, responsible manner.

On the whole, Malaysian newspapers have been quite restrained in their presentation of ethnic news and views. Of course, there have been lapses. Aliran itself has on occasions, pointed this out to certain newspapers. But it is unfair to single out the *Star*, *Sunday Star*, *Watan* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, as the only guilty ones. Some of the other newspapers were perhaps even more culpable.

What distinguished the four newspapers – and especially the *Star* – from the others was their reluctance to be totally subservient to the power-holders. The *Star* in particular tried to give some space to alternative views on social issues from non-Establishment groups. This is perhaps why the *Star* and the others had to pay the price.

Of course, they have now come back after an almost five month interval. If they are not willing to display some courage at least in their coverage and analysis of non-ethnic news of vital importance, then it will be apparent to everyone that it was not the way they "built up

racial feelings" that was responsible for the suspension of their publishing licences on October 28 1987.

If there is a short, simple way of concluding our analysis of the White Paper on "Preserving the Nation's Security" it is this: the White Paper fails to tell the truth. It is biased, it conceals, it distorts. Our reflections, on the other hand, may not have thrown light on all the dark and hidden corners. But one day, the truth – the whole truth – will be known, God-willing.

Explanatory note

The article has been published in the *Aliran Monthly* (vol. 8:2).

THE MUZZLED MEDIA

The media is sometimes described as a watchdog. It is supposed to be alert, ever vigilant, ready to bark at the slightest hint of injustice.

In Malaysia that watchdog has never been allowed to play its rightful role. It has always been on a tight leash. And the leash has been getting tighter and tighter every year. Now, finally, since the 'October 27th episode, the watchdog has been muzzled.

It would be useful to see how the muzzled media has been performing in the last six months or so. Our analysis will be confined to the daily newspapers. It is these dailies which have been muzzled. Some of the bi-weeklies, weeklies and monthlies do try to do a little of barking now and then. This is commendable, given an environment which has become increasingly hostile to independent comment and criticism. We have no quarrel with these journals whose readership in any case is not very large. What this means is that the barking they do, however loud at times, is paradoxically drowned by the deafening silence of the muzzled media.

The term 'muzzled media', it should be clarified at this stage, merely describes a certain state of affairs. While it is the Government that is mainly responsible for the muzzling, we are very much aware of how owners and editors of newspapers also contribute to it. Some of them are not only prepared to be muzzled; they even take the initiative to muzzle themselves!

In this essay, we are concerned with Bahasa dailies like Berita Harian and the Utusan Malaysia and the English language daily, the New Straits Times. We do not know what the situation is like with Chinese newspapers like the Nanyang Siang Pau or Tamil newspapers like the Tamil Nesan. The English language tabloid, the Star, is also not part of our analysis. The Star, which was suspended by the Government from 29 October 1987 to 25 March 1988 could not respond to most of the issues that will be examined to show how newspapers have been faring since the October 27 episode. Nonetheless, the Star, judging by its performance in the last few weeks, appears to be over-cautious

especially in its treatment of certain political issues which may involve the interests of Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Perhaps the Star has also been muzzled or has chosen to muzzle itself.

To show how muzzled our dailies are, we shall look at issues related to five major events since the October 27th episode.

ISA Arrests

After the first few days of arrests, following the mass Internal Security Act (ISA) operations of 27 October, the Government ceased to provide the names of those detained or the total number taken in. And yet not a single daily pressed the authorities to reveal this information. How can a newspaper in a democracy call itself a newspaper when it cannot even provide such basic information to an anxious public which did not know what was going on in those terrible days? In this respect, how different are we from repressive, dictatorial States where dissidents and critics disappear suddenly and nothing is heard of them for months on end?

And indeed, for about two months, after October 27 all sorts of rumours were rife about the detainees and what was happening in the various detention centres. No newspaper dared to investigate these rumours with the aim of quashing unfounded tales so that the truth would be known. There was no legitimate reason why newspapers could not have interviewed family members of detainees since they were at least in touch with their loved ones. Newspaper editors did not dare to probe because the Government had told them that news on the ISA detainees should be kept to the minimum. The editors obeyed faithfully.

More important, one would have thought that with all those adverse reports in the foreign media on the 'real intentions' behind the October 27 clampdown, local newspapers would have at least attempted to analyse the underlying reasons. Here was a great opportunity to do some fantastic investigative journalism. Was the Government right in insisting that ethnic tensions — and ethnic tensions alone — prompted it to act? Or were there other motives? Who stood to gain by locking up a whole variety of people? The newspaper editors decided early in the day that it was better to be silent and safe than to investigate and be incarcerated!

Amendments To Various Laws

The way the newspapers have responded to amendments to the Publication Act, the Police Act and the Societies Act — all within the last 4 months. — is yet another indication of how servile and subservient they have become. The significance of these amendments cannot be emphasised enough for each one of them affects drastically one or the other of the three most fundamental liberties in any Parliamentary Democracy. The amendments to the Publication Act threaten the freedom of expression; the amendments to the Police Act strike at the freedom of assembly and the amendments to the Societies Act jeopardise the freedom of association. There was no critical evaluation of these far-reaching changes to laws that have a direct bearing upon our most precious rights as citizens of a nation which professes to be a democracy. In fact, a couple of dailies even wrote editorials justifying amendments to the Publication Act. It is hard to imagine whether newspapers anywhere else in the so-called 'free world' have gone to such lengths to display their masochistic tendencies.

Assault On The Judiciary

If basic freedoms have been curtailed through amendments to the Publication, Police and Societies Acts, the removal of Judicial power through a recent change to the Constitution demolishes one of the fundamental premises upon which our political system is founded. A constitutional amendment with such a devastating impact should have provoked the newspapers to protest. We had hoped — foolishly of course — that even if the newspapers dare not roar with rage they would at least whimper in indignation at what the Government was going to do. For the Mahathir regime, consciously or unconsciously, was going to destroy the very character of the Constitution. It was set to smash that one institution that is capable of checking the arbitrary exercise of Executive power. Once that is done, it would be so easy to establish dictatorial rule. Given the magnitude of the threat to democracy, we had expected the newspapers to be a little critical.

We were disappointed. All the dailies cooperated with the authorities in downplaying the significance of changes to Article 121 of the Federal Constitution. They gave the impression that the purpose of the amendment was merely "to define clearly" the powers of each of the three branches of State. The newspapers accepted unthinkingly the

Prime Minister's ridiculous argument that the amendment sought to enhance 'the separation of powers'. While Dr. Mahathir's speech was given maximum coverage in all the dailies, alternative views were almost totally ignored.

It is because of the newspapers' shameful betrayal of constitutional principles and democratic values that the public at large to this day, remains ignorant of the ominous danger of the amendment to Article 121. Even within the educated stratum of society, a lot of people are in the dark. This is what happens when there is no critical analysis in the mass media of crucial constitutional and legislative developments.

The UMNO Saga

But more than the three episodes since October 27 analysed so far, it is the newspapers' attitude in the unending UMNO saga that exposes their bias toward those in authority and especially towards Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. When UMNO was declared unlawful by the Kuala Lumpur High Court on February 4 1988, Dr. Mahathir put all the blame on the 11 UMNO members who had filed a writ asking that the April 24 1987 UMNO Supreme Council election be nullified. They were accused of causing chaos, of destroying the party, of weakening Malay political power. The newspapers plugged the same line. They portrayed the UMNO 11 as selfish, opportunistic men manipulated by greedy, power-hungry politicians out to topple Mahathir Mohamad. Mahathir, on the other hand, was projected as the saviour of UMNO and the Malays. Nearly every daily gave full prominence to all the pledge-taking ceremonies expressing loyalty to the Prime Minister's leadership. The Prime Minister's *Semarak*, mass loyalty campaigns were also given maximum publicity.

If the media blitz on behalf of Mahathir is contrasted with the glaring dearth of news on his opponents within UMNO, one begins to understand why even neutral observers have described the local dailies as "disgustingly one-sided". In a society where there is genuine press freedom and a sincere commitment to journalistic ethics any number of newspaper editors would have invited Mahathir's opponents to tell their side of the story. There would have been interviews with the UMNO 11 and with Mahathir's arch rival, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. Other UMNO personalities who are unhappy with Mahathir's

leadership like the Tunku and Tun Hussein Onn would have also been given some space. It is a sad reflection on the state of the press in Malaysia today that even former Prime Ministers who in the past had received all sorts of accolades are now blocked out of the media.

The public would have liked to know through mass circulation dailies like the *Berita Harian* and the *New Straits Times* why the Tunku and Hussein Onn decided to form a party called 'UMNO Malaysia' as soon as UMNO was declared unlawful. What the readers of these dailies know is what Mahathir has told them: that 'UMNO Malaysia' is a diabolical attempt to split Malay unity. Is it possible that the two former Prime Ministers feared that the present Prime Minister was not keen initially to revive UMNO so that he could rule without having to account to a party which almost removed him from power? By the same token, is it true that the UMNO 11 turned to the Courts for a remedy only after they were convinced that the then Secretary-General of UMNO was not responding to their complaints of irregularities in the UMNO branch elections? Is it possible that they suspected — perhaps wrongly — that the Secretary-General had certain ulterior motives for acting the way he did? None of the dailies, needless to say, have bothered to discuss any of these issues.

Neither have the dailies attempted to explore the various ramifications of the formation of 'UMNO Baru' by Dr. Mahathir and other former UMNO leaders. UMNO Baru, it is obvious, is not a simple, straightforward successor of the old UMNO. For Dr. Mahathir, the establishment of the new party affords an opportunity to ensure that only those who are loyal to his leadership become members. In an indirect sense, by excluding from UMNO Baru his rivals, his critics and even those who are lukewarm to his leadership, Dr. Mahathir is in fact conducting a party purge. The newspapers have refrained from analysing this purge and all that it implies for UMNO and Malay politics in the future.

Neither the *Utusan Malaysia* nor the *New Straits Times* is prepared to question the morality of treating UMNO Baru, on the one hand, as a new organization when it comes to membership and stucture and, on the other hand, as the old UMNO when it comes to the party's symbols, its ideology, its struggle and even its assets.

In the same vein, no newspaper has dared to ask whether there is any logic at all in that new rule in the UMNO Baru Constitution which stipulates that a candidate nominated for the Presidency or Deputy Presidency by a particular division would automatically receive 10 votes. The newspapers have been merely pedalling the argument used by UMNO Baru leaders that the 10 votes rule will strengthen grass-roots democracy within the party for it will give greater weight to the feelings of members at the divisional level on who should be President or Deputy President of the organization. If the UMNO Baru leadership is really sincere about grassroots democracy why doesn't it introduce direct voting where every ordinary member would have the right to choose the President or Deputy President or, for that matter, Supreme Council members? No newspaper has posed this question. Nor has any leader, writer or commentator asked that other very obvious question: is there a self-serving element in the 10 automatic votes provision since in the last UMNO election Dr. Mahathir was nominated by over 80 out of 133 divisions as against the 30 odd divisions which chose Tengku Razaleigh and yet won the Presidential post only by a mere 43 votes?

It should be apparent now that when newspapers regard as their primary 'responsibility' the preservation and perpetuation of the power and prestige of the 'great leader' they serve, they will not want to tell the truth about his crafty manoeuvres and manipulations.

Financial Misdemeanours And Accountability

This misconceived notion of 'responsibility' has given rise to a situation where nearly all the newspapers in the country have chosen to stay away from the sort of investigative journalism which might expose the financial misdemeanours of the national leadership. This explains why the signing of the North-South Highway contract between the Government and the UMNO-owned United Engineers (M) Limited (UEM) on 18 March 1988, was reported in the dailies without any critical comment or analysis. And yet it was this same contract which had generated so much heat just eight months ago because it involved vital principles of democratic accountability and public integrity.

Apart from the absurdity of the Government awarding a project to a firm owned indirectly by the leading party in the Government, the terms of the contract, though modified, still fail to protect the

public interest. The Government has undertaken to provide "supportive construction loans" amounting to 1.65 billion to UEM. It has also agreed to provide currency fluctuation and traffic volume guarantees to the company. None of the dailies has queried the Government on these guarantees for one would expect a private company to bear such risks on its own as any genuine entrepreneur would.

Indeed, the North-South Highway contract is a revealing example of what the Mahathir Government's privatization programme is all about. But the newspapers are not prepared to subject privatization to close scrutiny. Since October 1987, there have been further developments in the privatization of the Postal Services and the Lembaga Letrik Negara (LLN), the National Electricity Board. Unfortunately, the public is in the dark on what is really happening. The public has a right to know for the future of basic public services is at stake. A lot of people are beginning to wonder if as a result of privatization, postal and electricity rates will go up. Are recent press reports on increased postal rates for foreign mail, for instance, related in any way to the impending privatization of the service? Only if the press is prepared to probe will the public obtain answers to this and other questions.

Conclusion

The inability, the unwillingness of our newspapers to probe, to investigate, to analyse, to expose the truth – especially in a situation where authoritarian rule has become a reality – is undoubtedly one of the gravest threats to the well-being of our society. It is because our dailies are muzzled that our people are ignorant of the implications and consequences of crucial political developments which will change their lives drastically in the years to come.

This ignorance serves the Government well. For an ignorant populace will not demand accountability. And since there is no newspaper that is prepared to compel the Government to be truly accountable, our national leaders can now afford to be less and less accountable to the people.

Since public accountability is the essence of democratic responsibility, a Government that is less accountable is also a Government that is less responsible. The newspapers have contributed

in no small measure to this state of affairs. It is ironical that newspapers which are supposed to remind the government of its obligation to be accountable to the people should instead legitimize and sanctify the Government's betrayal of its democratic responsibility.

Once a Government betrays its democratic responsibility, it would have no qualms about camouflaging the lie, or worse, suppressing the truth. The newspapers have been partners of the Government in the perpetuation of this reprehensible crime. Our experience since the October 27 episode has convinced us once again that a muzzled media invariably muzzles the truth.

Explanatory note

The essay has appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (vol. 8 no. 3, 1988).

IF DEMOCRACY DIES

Authoritarianism is on the rise in Malaysia. Democracy is dying in this blessed land of ours. The evidence is overwhelming.

- (a) The Judiciary which in a democracy should be independent of the Executive has become totally subservient to the commands of the ruling elite. It adjudicates as the Executive wants it to adjudicate. The Judiciary acts according to the wishes of the political leadership.
- (b) Consequently, the rule of law has been undermined. The rule of law operates only when the administration of rules and regulations is guided by principles of justice. What we have today is not the rule of law but rule by law. Everything is ostensibly done according to certain established procedures but the procedures themselves violate fundamental canons of natural justice. This was obvious in the manner in which the former Lord President was dismissed from office. The re-arrest of Karpal Singh was also a gross violation of the rule of law. The recent amendments to the Internal Security Act (ISA) are also contrary to the values enshrined in the concept of the rule of law. The mere observance of certain laws and rules does not mean that the rule of law is being upheld. The Philippine dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, observed legal procedures but he trampled upon the rule of law at the same time. The apartheid regime in South Africa follows legal niceties but no one will say that there is the rule of law in South Africa because the basic principles of justice have been destroyed totally.
- (c) Other institutions which are vital to a democratic society like an independent media with the courage to evaluate critically the power holders, autonomous public interest societies, effective opposition political parties and a meaningful Parliament have all been subjected to increasing elite control. There is so much control and dominance by the ruling elite today, that it has become very, very difficult to ensure democratic accountability.
- (d) At the same time, democratic space, which has always been confined, has diminished even further. Whatever little dissent there is, exists on the charity of an intolerant ruling elite which

is quite capable of crushing that dissent if it suits its purpose.

- (e) In the type of authoritarianism that is developing today, the ruling elite does not display any sense of restraint. The sacking of the former Lord President, the suspension of the five Supreme Court judges, the way in which UMNO is being transformed into an authoritarian political party, and the ISA arrests of October last year, indicate that the ruling elite no longer recognizes limits to the use of its power.
- (f) As the abuse of power becomes the order of the day, society as a whole chooses to be servile and subservient. This subservience is reinforced by a pervasive "culture of fear". This "culture of fear" in turn is due not only to repressive laws like the ISA but is also the result of a strong element of self-centredness in the psychological outlook of the Malaysian middle-class.

Though the growth of authoritarianism is so apparent to any discerning Malaysian, some of our leaders continue to insist that democracy is alive and well in our country. They are only fooling themselves. They argue for instance that since those opposed to the ruling elite can still go to Court, there is democracy in Malaysia. It is not the presence of courts or the persistence of litigation on the part of adversaries of the ruling elite which determines whether a society is democratic or not. What is important is whether the courts are prepared to decide as justice demands or not.

These leaders who have no inkling what democracy means also argue that since elections are still held we are a democracy. Again, elections by themselves do not make a society democratic. The electoral process itself should be democratic. This means that there must be genuine democratic competition with sufficient scope for groups opposed to the ruling elite to present their alternative viewpoints to the electorate. Electoral competition is most undemocratic in Malaysia since the odds are heavily stacked in favour of the ruling elite. What this implies is that holding undemocratic elections — as Marcos did from 1978 onwards under martial law — does not make us a democracy.

Some of our leaders also argue that since some dissent is still allowed, democracy is flourishing. They do not realize that even

dictatorships allow a certain degree of dissent. There is some dissent in communist states like Poland and East Germany and even in a quasi-military dictatorship like Indonesia but no one in his or her right mind would describe them as democracies. As long as dissent is controlled on a tight leash by a ruling elite which denies its opponents meaningful space to work towards peaceful change, there is no real democracy.

This is why we should all stop deluding ourselves. The truth is that since 27th October 1987, the Malaysian political system as a whole has become highly authoritarian. This is the reality that confronts us. The political system has become highly authoritarian because one man is determined to remain in power whatever the costs, whatever the consequences. In his obsession to stay in power, he has no qualms about destroying democratic principles, destroying democratic institutions, destroying democratic values. It is his power and his position that matter – nothing else. He equates his power with the integrity of his party, the dignity of his community and the stability of the nation. He refuses to acknowledge that it is his blatant authoritarianism which threatens the integrity of UMNO, the dignity of the Malays and the stability of Malaysia.

There is no doubt at all that once authoritarianism is firmly established in Malaysia our people will undergo immense suffering.

One, there will be no meaningful socio-economic development for the vast majority of the people. Most authoritarian regimes have failed to bring about real development for the people. The few that have succeeded have done so because of other factors – not their authoritarian control and dominance. Authoritarianism cannot ensure real development for the simple reason that it concentrates political, economic and cultural power in the hands of a few.

Two, authoritarianism will also result in the decline of accountability on the part of the ruling elite. Abuse of power, corruption and mismanagement will go unchecked. The poor in particular will bear the burden of all the inequities and injustices which an authoritarian system characterizes.

Three, in an authoritarian system it will be more difficult to integrate the various ethnic communities and to create social harmony.

For ethnic integration — if it is to be effective — must be carried out through discussion, dialogue, consultation and persuasion. These are the modes and methods of governance of a democratic society. Force, coercion and regimentation can never achieve ethnic integration. These are the weapons of authoritarian regimes.

Four, equally important, authoritarianism poses a grave threat to any federal structure of government. This is because an authoritarian elite will concentrate all power with the Centre. The states will have less and less authority and influence. They will be excluded from the decision-making process. They will not be able to check the power of the elite at the Centre for it goes without saying that an authoritarian leadership resents any attempts to limit or to restrain its power. Checks and balances, different layers of authority and power-sharing mechanisms which are part and parcel of a federal system of government would be anathema to an authoritarian elite.

Five, as we have hinted, in the long run, authoritarianism must lead inevitably to instability and even chaos. The very fact that power will be concentrated in the hands of a few, perhaps a single individual, will encourage intense competition for the plums of privilege. Cliques and factions will be locked in perpetual battle within the elite stratum of society. This will create schisms and conflicts which the system will not be able to resolve. This is why all authoritarian regimes have been forced, in the end, to face the spectre of violence and bloodshed. Burma is but the latest example.

If Malaysians do not want their country to travel the road to authoritarian rule, or even dictatorship, they must be prepared to stand up and be counted. They must stand up now for time is running out. There are a lot of peaceful, democratic ways of stopping the slide towards authoritarianism. Malaysians can send letters and postcards to the Prime Minister and other government leaders at federal and state levels expressing their sorrow and disappointment over what has been happening to the country. They can send letters of solidarity, support and sympathy to the ISA detainees, the suspended Supreme Court judges and the sacked Lord President. They can put their signatures to forms that are being circulated on behalf of the ISA detainees. They can also endorse the campaign that ALIRAN has launched to defend the Merdeka Constitution and the Rukunegara.

Let us act now for the sake of ourselves, for the sake of our children and for the sake of their children. Let us rise to the defence of freedom and justice. Let us never forget that if democracy dies, human dignity perishes.

Explanatory note

The above article is based upon a talk given at Kota Kinabalu on 12 August 1988.

DEMOLISHING MYTHS ABOUT DEMOCRACY

There are many myths about democracy. In this essay, we have chosen to analyse and demolish three such myths – about elites, about what people's support means, about majority rule. Each of these myths is treated as a separate subject.

Who are the Elites?

The public would have noticed that certain Government leaders often criticize and condemn "elitistic groups" for imposing their will upon the people, for trying to influence the people's thinking. Elitistic groups have even been accused by one or two Government personalities of "wanting to seize power" from the people, of planning to depose the leaders elected by the masses.

Who are these elitistic groups? In the Government's vocabulary groups like Aliran and the Bar Council, among others, would be elitistic. The Judiciary is the latest addition to this list.

It is worth observing in this connection that in a speech in Sarawak at the beginning of July, the Prime Minister alleged that 'a certain institution was out to 'wrest power from the people' – the institution alluded to, given the context, was perhaps the Judiciary according to various political analysts. The Malaysian Judiciary must be the first Judiciary in history to have such an accusation hurled at it! We know of Colonels and Generals conducting coups, but a coup by Judges would be really an unique event. It would have given us a place in the Guinness book of records.

It is not the first time that such a preposterous allegation has been made. In August last year, the Prime Minister accused Aliran of attempting to usurp the authority of the Government and the power of the rakyat. It is hard to believe that anyone can even conceive of a public interest group seizing power!

Since these accusations against public interest societies like Aliran and institutions like the Judiciary are symptomatic of the Government's aversion towards "elitistic groups" we should now find out what the term "elite" means for we suspect that the term itself has been wrongly used.

The term "elite", according to one authority was originally applied to "commodities of particular excellence". Later crack military units and the higher ranks of the nobility were called elites. As far as its usage in social and political writings goes, the term 'elite' began to acquire a certain meaning in the late 18th century. It is this usage that concerns us here.

Two of the most outstanding students of elites known to the world, Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca used the term to describe "groups of people who either exercised directly, or were in a position to influence very strongly the exercise of, political power." It is obvious from their studies that it is those who have political power, or are linked to political power, that deserve to be called "elites". The leadership in Government, and those who are able to influence them, directly or indirectly, would be the elites in our context.

Another famous thinker, the French sociologist Raymond Aron, also viewed the elite "as a governing minority". Harold Lasswell, a well-known American political scientist, was more explicit. For him, "The political elite comprises the power holders of a body politic".

If we took all these concepts of elites into account, there is no doubt at all that the real elites are those who castigate others as "elitistic groups". It is, of course, true that sociologists like T B Bottomore, have employed the term elites to describe individuals from groups that enjoy high status in society. But even when used in this very loose sense, the elites are, more likely than not, individuals associated with the Establishment.

As a case in point, within the university community, the Vice-Chancellors, their Deputies, the Registrars, the Deans, etc. would be the elite. It would be wrong to fix that label upon every lecturer or tutor. Similarly, within the business community, those who own and control the big corporations and earn huge incomes would be the elite. The retailer along Penang Road selling wrist-watches is not part of the business elite; neither is the hawker selling sugar-cane water in Kuala Kedah.

Elites are elites only if they command power, authority, wealth, influence, status and privilege. What this implies is that the political, economic, cultural, academic and legal elites of our society are those who enjoy a direct or indirect relationship with power, wealth, authority and status. Seen from this perspective, Aliran is certainly not part of the elite stratum of Malaysian society. Neither is the Bar Council though there may be individual lawyers who by virtue of their personal statuses occupy niches in the elite stratum. Within the Judiciary, the Lord President and the Chief Justice because of their offices would be elites.

This explanation and analysis of who are actually the elites is important. There has been so much confusion over, and distortion of, what the term really means due largely to the elites themselves especially the ruling elite. It is not just because of ignorance that this has happened, though ignorance is often one of the underlying causes of some of our social ills. The ruling elite has an ulterior motive for projecting the Bar Council, Aliran and other such groups as "elitistic". The aim is to show the public that the causes they advocate and the issues they espouse have nothing to do with the well-being of the masses. In this way, the elite hopes to isolate these groups from the people and create the impression that they are exclusive and high-brow. They are made to look selfish and insincere.

It is absurd that the ruling elite should denigrate others as elitistic when its own elitism is so transparent. A number of its economic policies, for instance, are elitistic. Large scale industries have priority over small-scale enterprises; big plantations over smallholdings; expensive technologies over capital-saving tools. At the same time, the elite's conduct of politics does not allow or encourage the active participation of the ordinary citizen in the policy formulation process. Indeed, in the last few years, political power has become more and more concentrated in the hands of a few individuals.

This obviously elitistic trend in politics is paralleled by an equally dangerous elitistic pattern in the cultural sphere. Today's ruling elite has much greater power than its predecessors to determine what sort of cultural fare the rest of society is entitled to enjoy.

More than its policies, it is the ruling elite's lifestyle that makes it elitistic. The luxurious homes members of the elite own, their exquisite furniture, their fabulous clothes, their expensive cars, their extravagant holidays abroad, set them apart from the masses they claim to represent. If one's lifestyle is any indication of one's orientation, then leaders of certain public interest societies have much more affinity with the masses than those who condemn them as "elitistic".

Perhaps this is what it is all about: because the elites want to conceal the truth about themselves, their policies, their lifestyles, they portray others as elitistic. It is a glaring example of that phenomenon called sin transfer – transferring one's sins to others. Sin transfer, needless to say, is a skill in which the present ruling elite is highly accomplished.

Support of the People?

The present ruling elite sees itself as a great champion of the people, the rakyat. It regards itself as the voice of the people. Since its power is derived from the people, it argues that whatever it does is in accordance with the wishes of the people. It claims that it has the support of the people for all its policies and actions.

It is true that as a Government elected by the people, the elite has the right to rule. It has the mandate from the rakyat to make policies and to implement programmes. But the policies it formulates, the decisions it makes, the actions it takes must be in harmony with the letter and the spirit of the nation's Constitution. For the Constitution provides the framework for the governance of Malaysian society. No one – not even the ruling elite – has the right to as much as deviate from the Constitution. What more if the ruling elite violates the Constitution – as it has done in recent months. It cannot seek refuge in its 'mandate from the people'. The people have not given any mandate to the elite or to anyone else to transgress Constitutional principles and values.

It is not just the nation's Constitution that the ruling elite is expected to uphold; it must also remain faithful to the manifesto upon which it was elected. The mandate from the people which the elite is so proud of is, in a sense, a mandate bestowed upon the elite's manifesto,

the Barisan Nasional manifesto. By trampling upon the authority of the Judiciary, the ruling elite has betrayed the manifesto which it presented to the people when it was returned to power in the August 1986 General Election.

Indeed almost everything the ruling elite has done since October 1987 — from the manipulation of ethnic fears, to the ISA arrests, to drastic amendments to laws governing fundamental liberties, to the suspension of the Lord President and the five Supreme Court Judges — shows utter contempt for the Barisan Manifesto and the Federal Constitution. This is why there is no basis at all to the ruling elite's claim that it is acting "in accordance with the wishes of the people". The people want leaders in power to protect and not to subvert the Constitution. They want democratic institutions to be preserved and perpetuated. The people did not confer a mandate upon the UMNO and Barisan elite to establish a highly authoritarian political system. When the people re-elected the Barisan two years ago they were not voting for the kind of arbitrariness in the exercise of authority and the sort of abuse of power that we are witnessing today.

We are convinced that a substantial segment of the populace does not support the present ruling elite. That the people endorse the elite's actions, especially in relation to the Judiciary, is one of the great myths that is being propagated. The elite should find out whether the people are behind it by holding a General Election immediately. It is obvious that it does not dare to do so. This in itself shows that the ruling elite, in its heart of hearts, does not believe that it has the support of the people.

If it is not prepared to find out how the people really feel through a clean, honest General Election then it can at least allow the people to express their genuine sentiments about the present situation through the mass-media. The daily newspapers in Bahasa, Chinese, Tamil and English and Radio and Television should be given all the freedom and opportunity to create effective channels for the unfettered articulation of the rakyat's views on what is happening in the country today.

Of course, for people to speak up, the prevailing political climate should also be conducive. The fear of arbitrary arrest generated by the

wide-ranging ISA detentions of October 1987 must recede. If the Government chooses to release unconditionally all those who are still detained from the October crackdown, there is every likelihood of the political climate changing for the better. More people will be more prepared to exercise their democratic right of free expression. The very fact that the ruling elite has to perpetuate a climate of fear in order to quell dissent and to sustain its own power and position, is indicative of its lack of genuine support among the people. It is an indirect admission on the part of the elite that it has lost the moral mandate to rule – even if its legal mandate has yet to be repudiated formally.

An elite that clings on to power after it has lost its moral authority to rule cannot have much respect for the people that it is supposed to represent. Unwilling to return the mandate that it has betrayed to the people who put it in power, the ruling elite is likely to employ more and more coercive measures in order to remain at the apex of Malaysian society. It is quite conceivable that at the same time it will continue to pretend that it is the champion of the people, the voice of the masses. By putting on this show, the elite is, in effect, making use of the people – or rather the aura that the term ‘the people’ conveys. It is undoubtedly a form of exploitation of the people for the selfish ends of the ruling elite itself.

Majority Rule = Democracy?

The Malaysian ruling elite has a very simplistic notion of democracy. Democracy means majority rule. Since the principle of majority rule is observed, Malaysia is a Parliamentary Democracy. Prime Minister, Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad has gone even further. In a democracy, it is wrong, he argues, for the minority to question or challenge the majority. Minority opinion should be sacrificed for the sake of the majority.

It is of course true that majority rule is one of the characteristics of democracy. But it is not the only one. In fact, outstanding students of democracy like Robert MacIver, Robert Dahl and Barrington Moore Jr would even argue that it is one of its minor characteristics. Individual freedoms; the legitimacy accorded to dissent; tolerance of diverse opinions; sufficient scope for the articulation of minority views; widespread participation of the ordinary citizen in the decision-making

process; the institutionalization of public accountability; the effectiveness of curbs and controls upon the power of the State; the independence of the Judiciary; respect for the rule of law; the presence of a media that is not subservient to the State; the acceptance of the rightful role of political parties and public interest groups etc. are far more important features of a democratic society than majority rule as such. Most of these features help to define the character of a democracy. They help to distinguish a democratic system of government from other systems.

Majority rule, on the other hand, by itself will not reveal the uniqueness of a democracy. Even in political systems which are diametrically different from democracies, it is quite conceivable that the majority supports the Government of the day. As MacIver put it, "Quite possibly in Russia, at the time of writing (in the forties) a larger proportion of the people approves and supports its government than may be found in democratic countries to support their governments. But that fact is quite irrelevant to the question of democracy. In the Soviet Union, under these conditions, there is no free exercise of opinion on matters of policy, nor any constitutional means by which the changing currents of opinion can find political expression. It would therefore be the sheerest confusion to classify the Soviet system as democratic."

It is obvious from our analysis that it is fallacious to regard 'majority rule' as that one characteristic which establishes the identity of a democratic society. Besides, those within the Malaysian ruling elite who are so eager to equate majority rule with democracy, do not pause to ask a vital question: how is the support of the majority obtained?

Majority support in a democracy should be acquired through democratic means. And yet we know that in almost every General Election since 1969 – and especially in the 1986 contest – the ruling elite has used all sorts of dirty tactics to win. Voters have been bribed by promises of development assistance. Voters have been blackmailed by threats of withdrawal of development aid. Television and the Government-controlled Press have campaigned actively for the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition. The Barisan has no qualms about mobilising all available State resources including Ministry of Information personnel, Kemajuan Masyarakat (KEMAS) officers, and school teachers to ensure its electoral victory.

At the same time, the severe limitations under which Opposition parties operate between general elections become even more restrictive during the election period. The mass media gives hardly any coverage to their campaign. Often the dailies and both the public and private Television networks go all out to discredit and denigrate them. The Opposition is denied its legitimate right to counteract their 'smear war' via the same channels. Other avenues of mass communication are not easily available to Opposition parties. Since 1969, election campaign periods have become exceedingly brief. Public rallies — an important channel for the dissemination of opposition ideas — have been effectively banned since 1978. In the last 7 years, the only person who has been allowed to hold mammoth rallies at any time and at any place is Dr. Mahathir Mohamad himself.

Obtaining majority support in this manner and through these circumstances is not what democracy is all about. By acquiring power in a most undemocratic fashion, the ruling elite has, in fact, deprived its 'majority rule' argument of democratic legitimacy. What is worse, majority support is sustained through equally undemocratic methods. As we have already hinted, the daily newspapers and Radio & Television are determined to ensure that the overwhelming majority of the populace remains uncritically loyal to the ruling elite, however dismal the latter's performance may be. In this mission, the media receive generous assistance from a whole gamut of laws ranging from the ISA and the Police Act to the Industrial Relations Act and the Societies Act. The ruling elite's complete dominance over Parliament, the Universities, the Public Services, the Security Forces and now of course the Judiciary also helps to perpetuate its strong grip upon the mind of the majority. Most of all however, it has been able to manipulate to its advantage, the rural weightage in the electoral system; ethnic anxieties and hopes in a ethnically-divided society; the neofeudal psychology within a segment of the Malay community; the post-immigrant mentality of a section of the non-Malay communities; the acquisitive, materialistic thrust of a huge proportion of the middle-class; and the passivity of the poor and powerless majority.

It is as a result of all this then — the manipulation of certain social realities, the dominance of vital institutions of State, the strengthening of repressive laws and the increasing control over the media — that the ruling elite has managed to retain majority support.

Of course, it cannot be denied that the ruling elite has also attended to some of the basic economic, social and cultural needs of the majority. It is not bereft of a sense of justice. Nor is it incapable of responding to some of the demands of the public which is why, in spite of everything, it continues to enjoy a degree of genuine support.

Even if the ruling elite deserves some support, it would not have been able to keep itself in power in the present circumstances, if it had not resorted to undemocratic manoeuvres and machinations. If there was a truly democratic environment which allowed a mass protest movement to develop and challenge the ruling elite, it is quite conceivable, given the widespread disaffection with the present leadership, that some sort of political change would have occurred by now. It is a supreme irony that a ruling elite in a democracy has to indulge in blatant authoritarianism – as illustrated by the suspension of the six Judges – in order to retain the allegiance of the majority.

Explanatory note

These three short pieces based upon a single theme, *Demolishing Myths About Democracy* appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (vol. 8:5 1988).

A LONG, DARK YEAR

Is Malaysia on the road to dictatorship? Has it already become a dictatorship? These are questions which many Malaysians have been asking since the crackdown on democracy that started on Oct 27, 1987.

Before we can decide whether or not Malaysia is becoming a dictatorship, we must recognise that Malaysia has always been a fettered democracy – long before the crackdown began last year. A fettered democracy has some of the characteristics of a genuine democracy but lacks those crucial ingredients which would make that system of government strong and sturdy. A fettered democracy may provide some electoral choice to the voters but the actual competition for power is bound to be blatantly unfair. It may tolerate some criticisms of the ruling elite but will never bestow moral legitimacy upon dissent. It will uphold the right of the majority to rule but will never undertake to protect the views of the minority. In a fettered democracy, the ruling party may seek to renew 'its mandate from the people' at regular intervals but it will not be prepared to be fully accountable to the public on various aspects of its management of the nation. The power-holders in a fettered democracy are eager to rule *by* law but are often averse to the rule *of* law.

The essence of Malaysia's fettered democracy is reflected in a Parliament which continues to function but is hardly important to the nation's destiny. There are Opposition political parties like the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) which are allowed to operate but the opportunities available to them for organising and articulating dissent are severely limited by the ruling elite. Independent trade unions exist but have very little impact upon the political decision-making process. Peripheral weeklies and monthlies are critical of public policies but the mainstream print media and of course, the electronic media are at the beck-and-call of the national leadership.

If democracy is fettered, it is partly because since Independence in 1957, the State has armed itself with a whole host of laws to curb and control democratic freedoms. The justification for this was the

security situation at the time of Independence arising from an underground communist guerilla movement. Consequently, the freedom of expression was curtailed through a Printing Presses Ordinance, the freedom of assembly was restricted through a Police Act, the freedom of association through a Societies Act. The most serious encumbrance upon freedom however, was the Internal Security Act (ISA) promulgated in 1960. The ISA provides for indefinite detention without trial. Though its original aim was to check communist subversion, the ISA, right from the beginning, has also been employed to detain non-communist opponents of the government. It is this draconian law, so susceptible to abuse, which is the most formidable psychological obstacle to the growth of democratic values and attitudes within the populace. It strikes fear among both actual and potential dissenters since no one really knows when he or she has crossed the line. The line is arbitrary because the law is arbitrary. As long as the ISA remains, Malaysian democracy will stay stunted – a deformed, distorted creature which is afraid to grow.

In a sense, Malaysian democracy has not just remained stunted. Over the years certain democratic rights have declined even further. In the sixties, active trade unionists could hold office in political parties. They lost this right in the seventies. University students in the sixties could set up political clubs in their campus and could participate in the electoral process. Let alone participate in politics, since 1975, student associations have been barred from adopting a public position on any political matter. Right up to the mid-seventies, political parties could hold public rallies during election campaigns. This is not allowed any more.

It is this democracy – a fettered democracy that had become even more fettered in the seventies – which the present Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad inherited in 1981. Dr. Mahathir continued to restrict fundamental liberties. He introduced the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984 to increase the powers of the Executive over the production, distribution and importation of publications. Worse still, the Official Secrets Act was amended in December 1986 to provide for mandatory jail sentences ranging from one year to 14 years as penalties for those convicted of leaking official secrets. The amendment was perceived rightly or wrongly, as an attempt to cover up

financial scandals which had tarnished the image of the ruling elite. At the same time, Dr. Mahathir continued to bombard public interest groups and sections of the local and foreign Press for allegedly 'imposing their minority views upon the majority' and for 'challenging the authority' of the Government. Around the middle of 1986, he also began to admonish 'fiercely independent Judges' who sought to interpret the law as they liked.

While his overall tone was clearly anti-democratic even in the initial years of his stewardship, Dr. Mahathir nonetheless chose to release a large number of ISA detainees. This was perhaps his only worthwhile concession – and contribution – to democracy. But he kept the law and used it – rather sparingly one must add – until the October '87 crackdown.

Though democracy remained fettered, the Mahathir years also witnessed for the first time the active involvement of a segment of the urban middle-class in the public controversies of the day. A democratic consciousness of sorts was on the upsurge. This was evident from the overwhelming support urbanites gave to forums and seminars on issues such as the OSA amendments and the Bumiputra Malaysia Finance (BMF) scandal. The concern for democratic rights expressed in the large number of letters published in a leading English-language daily was also an indicator.

This growth in democratic consciousness was partly due to the expansion of the middle-class and the crystallisation of contending interests and differing perceptions within that class. This is a phenomenon that has also occurred in other societies. Besides, the middle-class has the advantage of education and is exposed to the type of information that most other groups have little access to.

The economic recession of the mid-eighties also played a big part in the development of social awareness within the Malaysian middle-class. Since the recession had an adverse impact upon the financial well-being of a huge portion of the middle-class, elements within it were forced to think about the larger social environment that affected their lives. If anything the series of financial scandals of the early and mid-eighties involving certain political and economic elites made these

middle-class elements even more conscious of what was happening around them. They began to react. They began to articulate their fears and their grievances.

It was in the midst of this increasingly vocal trend within the middle-class that the crackdown of October 1987 took place. It sent shock waves through the length and breadth of the land. The main prong of the crackdown was the mass ISA arrests that began in the small hours of October 27. The arrests covered such a wide spectrum of individuals and groups that no one knew who would be the next target. People were confused. There was tremendous uncertainty. And more than that, there was real fear. The leader of the Opposition in Parliament, a number of Members of Parliament, prominent social critics, religious figures, educationists, academics, community organisers and even unknown men and women were all detained. Four newspapers – the least servile of the nation's newspapers – had their publishing licences suspended. All political activities were prohibited. These actions were so drastic that many people were convinced that even the fettered democracy of the past had come to an end. Some even opined that Malaysia was on the road to dictatorship.

This view was reinforced by some of the other moves made by the Government between December 1987 and March 1988. Dr. Mahathir once again amended the Publication Act, this time to abolish any form of judicial review of Executive action vis-a-vis publications. Any organisation or individual who is denied a publishing licence or whose licence has been revoked will not be able to go to Court any more. If this has strengthened the hand of the Executive, so has the Police Act which makes it more difficult for people to exercise their right of assembly. Then there is the amendment to the Federal Constitution which, to all intents and purposes, has made the Judiciary subservient to the Executive. The amendment has in a sense changed the very character of the Constitution since it challenges the concept of the separation of powers embodied in that document. Because the Judiciary has been emasculated at least in the Constitutional sense, it is quite conceivable that a leader with strong authoritarian tendencies would be able to impose his will upon society, without having to bother how the Judiciary would interpret his actions. He would be able to rule without checks and balances. He would, in other words, be able to

behave just like a dictator. It was felt at that time that nothing worse than this could happen to the Judiciary and the democratic system.

But something more terrible happened two months later in May 1988. The Lord President (the head of the Judiciary) Tun Salleh Abas, was suspended by the King on the advice of the Prime Minister. A number of allegations were brought against him and a Tribunal, as provided for in the Constitution, was established to inquire into his 'misconduct'. The Tribunal found Tun Salleh guilty and he was dismissed from office on Aug 8.

The dismissal of Tun Salleh was perceived by the general public as a travesty of justice for the allegations against him were totally ludicrous. It is absurd to charge the head of the Judiciary with misconduct because he had defended the independence of the Judiciary in a couple of academic lectures and had complained to the King in a letter about the Prime Minister's constant attacks upon the Judiciary. The Tribunal, whose composition itself raised a basic question about its own integrity, made no attempt to find out why Tun Salleh had to defend the Judiciary and what motivated the Prime Minister's trenchant comments against the Judiciary. It was obvious the Tribunal (Tun Salleh himself did not appear before it as a matter of principle) was determined to remove Tun Salleh.

The general public knew, without having to be told, that this was what Dr. Mahathir wanted. It is significant that Tun Salleh was suspended soon after he had indicated that a full bench of the Supreme Court would hear an UMNO case which would have had a bearing upon Dr. Mahathir's own political future. Dr. Mahathir did not want a full bench for he feared that the majority of the Judges who would have sat, with their reputation for independent thinking, might decide against his interests. Once Tun Salleh was suspended, the Acting Lord President could be counted upon to establish a bench which would return a verdict that was more favourable to the Prime Minister. And this was exactly what happened on Aug 9, 1988.

If this unfair, unjust move against Tun Salleh was not enough, the Acting Lord President went further and advised the King to suspend five other Supreme Court Judges who had come to Tun Salleh's

defence. These Judges – Tan Sri Wan Suleiman, Datuk George Seah, Tan Sri Azmi Kamaruddin, Tan Sri Eusoffe Abdoolcader and Tan Sri Wan Hamzah – had at the request of Tun Salleh's counsel held an emergency sitting of the Supreme Court to consider his application to restrain the Tribunal from submitting its report to the King until Tun Salleh's legal proceedings against the Tribunal were completed. The Supreme Court Judges granted Tun Salleh's application since they felt the High Court, where the application was first made, was not acting the way it should in a matter of such urgent importance. Four days after they made this decision, on July 6, the five were suspended for 'gross misbehaviour' and are now pleading their case before a new Tribunal.

The suspension of the five Supreme Court Judges and sacking of Tun Salleh have had a far greater impact upon the public mind than any other issue or event since the crackdown of October 1987. More than the mass ISA arrests, more than the amendment to the Constitution of March 1988, more than the manner in which UMNO Baru (the new UMNO) was established, it is the Tun Salleh and five Supreme Court Judges episode (henceforth the 'Tun Salleh plus five' episode) which has convinced the man-in-the-street that the Mahathir regime is dictatorial. The whole episode – especially the sacking – is seen as 'wrong', 'cruel', 'inhuman' even 'oppressive'. The sacking is perceived as an extreme act, as going beyond limits, as a deed which has transgressed the norms of propriety. It is perceived this way partly because the office of a Judge commands a great deal of respect. It is held in awe and reverence. Ordinary people do not expect Judges to be kicked around or humiliated in public. Besides, Tun Salleh is viewed as the innocent victim of someone's political game, of someone's desire to protect his own interests at all costs, of someone's obsession with his own position. This is why there is a widespread feeling that there has been total abuse of power.

This abuse of power is not merely at the level of overstepping one's authority. It is not as if one has broken a few rules of the game. As a result of the Tun Salleh-plus-five episode, there are people who are beginning to wonder whether the game itself will be changed altogether – if it suits the purpose of the man at the helm. To use a metaphor from football, the spectators are a little worried for suddenly they have

begun to realise that the captain of one of the teams is not playing the game as it should be played. He has even ordered out the referee and suspended the linesmen. And what is worse, he keeps on changing the rules to ensure that he stays on top. The spectators are not sure whether it is football any more or something else.

Why has Dr. Mahathir, the captain, ordered out the referee? We have explained that he was afraid he would lose the match – namely the UMNO case. This needs further clarification. How was Mahathir's position threatened by the UMNO suit? To answer this, we have to analyse the UMNO crisis which is the direct, immediate reason for Dr. Mahathir's moves against Tun Salleh and the Judiciary.

Though there has been serious factionalism within UMNO since 1981 when Dr. Mahathir took over as party president, the present crisis leading to the Court case and Tun Salleh's sacking can be traced back to the UMNO triennial election of April 24, 1987. In that election, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah the former Trade and Industry Minister challenged Dr. Mahathir for the party presidency and lost by a narrow margin of 43 votes. His running mate Datuk Musa Hitam, the former Deputy Prime Minister lost by 40 votes to Ghafar Baba, the present Deputy Prime Minister. Musa was making a bid to retain the deputy presidency of the party.

After the election, the unambiguous message from all the UMNO delegates at the General Assembly was that they wanted the Mahathir-Ghafar and Razaleigh-Musa factions to bury the hatchet and work together in harmony for the larger good of the party and the nation since UMNO is the backbone of the Government. Unfortunately, within a few days of the closing of the Assembly, Dr Mahathir chose to sack all those Ministers and Deputy Ministers associated with the Razaleigh-Musa faction. This created bitterness and anger among Mahathir's opponents within the party.

As a retaliatory measure, some of Razaleigh's supporters decided to challenge the validity of the April election in Court. These supporters (known as the UMNO 11) submitted that delegates from unregistered branches had voted in the election and therefore the election had to be declared null and void.

The High Court Judge who heard the case, Datuk Harun Hashim, agreed that there were unregistered branches but went on to argue that according to the Societies Act, the presence of unregistered branches would make the parent organisation itself unlawful. UMNO, he ruled, was already an unlawful society when the election took place in April 1987. As soon as UMNO was declared unlawful on Feb 4, 1988, the first Prime Minister and elder statesman Tunku Abdul Rahman called on Dr. Mahathir to hold an urgent meeting of all UMNO leaders from both factions in order to find ways and means of restoring the legality of the party. There was no immediate response from Mahathir. The Tunku then went ahead, with the support of Tengku Razaleigh and some of his followers, to form a party called 'UMNO Malaysia' to take the place of the unlawful UMNO.

Dr. Mahathir saw this as an attempt to upstage him and mobilised the mass media to the hilt to discredit the Tunku's move. He then acted quickly to set up his own UMNO called UMNO Baru. His UMNO Baru was registered on Feb 13, 1988. At the same time, the Tunku's UMNO Malaysia was denied registration.

For Dr. Mahathir, the formation of UMNO Baru afforded a great opportunity to create an organisation which would exclude all his opponents. He made it very clear that UMNO Baru will not accept Tengku Razaleigh and his staunch supporters, those involved in the establishment of UMNO Malaysia or those who had filed the law suit to have the April '87 UMNO election declared invalid.

UMNO Baru was going to be Mahathir's organisation – a party over which he would have total control. Towards this end, the proposed Constitution of UMNO Baru, which is expected to be adopted at the party's assembly on Oct 28, 1988, allows the president to appoint the heads of the party's women and youth wings. The party's Supreme Council will have the sole authority to approve applications for membership and will have the right to establish and dissolve the party's branches. Also, candidates nominated for the presidency and deputy presidency by various divisions will receive 10 bonus votes with each divisional nomination. Most of these rules and regulations, which seek to centralise power at the apex of the party, are quite different from practices and procedures of the original UMNO which was, on the whole, more democratic.

However, UMNO Baru unexpectedly hit a snag in April 1988 when Judge Harun Hashim produced his written judgement on the case of the UMNO 11. In his written judgement, he suggested that the way to restore the lawful status of UMNO would be for the Supreme Council elected in the 1984 contest to hold fresh polls. UMNO as an organisation, he implied, was not legally dead. It had merely become unlawful during the material time before the 1987 election because of the presence of unregistered branches.

The Judge's remedy if upheld by the Supreme Court would have meant fresh elections in UMNO. The UMNO 11 had, in the meantime, appealed to the Supreme Court to declare that only the 1987 election was null and void, but UMNO was still alive. The one thing that Dr. Mahathir did not want was a fresh election, especially after his near defeat in the 1987 contest. Indeed, the indications were that he might lose the presidency. This is why he was determined to see that the Supreme Court rejected the UMNO 11 appeal. Tun Salleh with his idea of a full bench was not helping matters. Therefore, he had to go.

If fear of losing the UMNO presidency and therefore, the Prime Ministership, was the main reason behind Mahathir's action against Tun Salleh and the Judiciary, then the fear that UMNO's dirty linen might be washed in public was perhaps one of the reasons behind the mass ISA arrests and the suspension of newspapers. Some elaboration would be useful.

Some time in June 1987, in the course of a debate in Parliament, it was revealed by a Government Minister that United Engineers Malaysia (UEM), which had been awarded the \$3.4 billion North-South Highway project was in fact owned by a company called Hatibudi which in turn was owned by UMNO. The leader of the Parliamentary Opposition Lim Kit Siang and a number of other public personalities, public interest groups and opposition parties alleged that there was an obvious "conflict of interest" since Dr. Mahathir, Finance Minister and UMNO treasurer Daim Zainuddin, Deputy Prime Minister and Deputy UMNO President, Ghafar Baba and Agricultural Minister and former UMNO Secretary General, Sanusi Junid, were trustees of Hatibudi and yet, at the same time, as members of the Cabinet, had participated in the decision to award the highway contract to UEM. Besides, the terms of the contract were not beneficial at all to the Government and people of Malaysia.

Lim decided to take the matter to Court. The Penang High Court, however, held that he had no *locus standi* (legal standing) to seek an order to restrain UEM from entering into a contract with the Government. On appeal, the Supreme Court comprising three Judges, reversed that decision. UEM then filed an application with the Kuala Lumpur High Court seeking to remove the restraining order. High Court Judge V.C. George rejected the company's application and upheld Lim's right to seek an order. This was on Oct 5, 1987. Three weeks later Lim, and his lawyer Karpal Singh, also an MP and DAP deputy chairman, together with a number of other individuals were arrested under the ISA.

Three months later in January 1988, UEM's appeal against Judge George's decision was heard before a bench of five. The Supreme Court decided on a three to two vote that UEM should not be restrained from signing the highway contract because Lim had no *locus standi*. That placed a firm seal upon any legal probe into the controversial contract.

If the Supreme Court verdict had been different and if the substantive issues involved in the contract were scrutinised through the legal process, it is quite conceivable that a lot of information on UMNO and Hatibudi, on who is really behind Hatibudi, how it was established, its relationship with UEM and so on, would have surfaced. Mahathir and other power-holders might have been a bit embarrassed if the whole truth about the contract was revealed through the Courts. In a situation where Mahathir was facing a strong challenge from within his own party, such a revelation would have almost certainly undermined his position.

This may explain to some extent why even now after the highway contract has been signed, the ruling elite is still somewhat apprehensive about releasing Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh. Since there was a chance that Lim and some other detainees might be released because of some defects in their detention orders, hasty amendments were made to the ISA in the July session of Parliament which legalised detention orders, even if they contained substantive defects. The amended law duly signed by the King and gazetted was produced in Court on the day Lim's *habeas corpus* trial commenced. Karpal Singh was put in an even worse situation. In early March he was freed from detention on a tech-

nical point by an Ipoh High Court Judge. Nine hours later he was re-arrested under the ISA.

Keeping Lim and Karpal in detention at all costs may also be a way of punishing them for their role in the Highway controversy, just as the suspension of the newspapers especially *The Star* may have been motivated by the same vengeful attitude, for *The Star* played a significant role in reporting and analysing the Highway controversy. It gave prominent coverage to attempts by Lim to compel the Government to be fully accountable to the people on what was after all the single largest public sector project undertaken by the Government. On a number of other issues involving public accountability like BMF, Maminco, United Malayan Banking Corporation (UMBC), Employees Provident Fund (EPF) – Makusawa, Sports Toto, etc, *The Star* – and *The Star* alone in the media galaxy – tried to investigate, to inquire, to explore the truth. It is apparent now, as it was apparent even then, to experienced journalists and perceptive political analysts that Mahathir had never wanted the paper to 'blow the whistle' on the financial scandals that had erupted during his tenure of office.

The Star whose licence was restored on March 26, 1988 is a rehabilitated *Star*! It knows that investigative journalism, balanced reporting and analytical evaluation, which were some of the attributes of the newspaper before Oct 27, belong to the past. The other newspapers which have been given back their licences also know this. They have become 'responsible' newspapers in the eyes of the ruling elite with a commitment to 'national aspirations'.

At this point it must be emphasised however that it is not simply because of the Highway contract controversy or other financial scandals that the crackdown on democracy took place on Oct 27, 1987. As we have hinted earlier, the rise of democratic consciousness accompanied by the growth of dissent within the middle-class posed a challenge to the Mahathir regime. The Prime Minister was irritated by the comments and criticisms made by public interest societies like ALIRAN and professional bodies like the Bar Council on issues pertaining to human rights, democratic accountability and social justice. The crackdown gave him the opportunity to lock up some of the social critics and leaders of public interest societies who had helped in a modest way to

develop democratic consciousness. The idea was to warn them, to frighten them. And through them Mahathir hoped to scare the middle-class into silence.

Middle-class criticism was of particular concern to Dr. Mahathir because of the economic recession. As we have noted, the recession which affected adversely sections of the middle-class had made them more vocal than before. The Prime Minister was afraid that given their economic frustrations — thousands and thousands of unemployed graduates in the country — they would become overly antagonistic towards the ruling elite. The crackdown sought to check, to forestall this possibility.

Of course, the ethnic tensions that escalated dangerously just before Oct 27 also provided a justification for the crackdown. There is no denying that a variety of groups and individuals, both Malay and non-Malay, in Government and within the Opposition, were responsible for the rising ethnic tensions. What is strange however, is how certain Government leaders allowed ethnic controversies like the question of non-Mandarin-speaking Chinese administrators in Chinese primary schools to drag on and on. Even when the Cabinet had worked out a solution which was acceptable to most of the groups concerned, some of these leaders refused to compromise and persisted with their communal utterances. In fact the situation was allowed to deteriorate. Gatherings where communal sentiments were exploited without restraint were allowed to be held — though Government leaders knew that such gatherings would only aggravate ethnic tensions. One is forced to conclude that perhaps certain individuals wanted the situation to develop in a certain direction. It gave them the excuse to arrest a whole array of individuals — which is exactly what happened on Oct 27.

Now that the situation has changed — social criticism is muted, newspapers are subservient to the ruling elite, the Judiciary has succumbed to pressure from the Executive, financial scandals are unlikely to be exposed, the economy is beginning to recover and most of all, Dr. Mahathir has managed to remove all his opponents from UMNO Baru — is it possible that the leadership will become a little less authoritarian and allow some democratic space to develop? After all, since the beginning of the year a number of ISA detainees have been

released, though many of them with conditions. According to an official source, there are only 27 detainees still in Kamunting from the October mass arrests. It is not inconceivable that by the end of the year a number of the remaining detainees will also be released.

These releases, however, should not delude us into believing that authoritarianism is coming to an end or even that the fettered democracy of the earlier decades is about to return. If the amount of democratic space available to those outside the elite stratum is determined by, and dependent upon, how Dr. Mahathir perceives his own position, then it is obvious that the scope for freedom will remain severely limited. For Dr. Mahathir knows he is still not in control of the total situation. He knows that there is significant opposition to his leadership from within the Malay community itself which is his power-base. This is why one should not expect any real improvement as far as democratic rights are concerned, in the immediate future.

Even if Dr. Mahathir's political position stabilises, it is very doubtful that he will make any serious attempt to strengthen democratic values and institutions. Democracy has never been part of his agenda for the nation. Dr. Mahathir's overriding goal — a goal which surpasses all other social concerns — is development and modernisation through industrialisation. His stated objective is to make Malaysia a Newly Industrialising Country (NIC). Using the NICs of Asia like South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore as examples, he has even argued that those countries which have industrialised successfully do not give any emphasis to freedom and democracy. Indeed to achieve the status of a NIC it may even be necessary, he once observed, to minimise democratic politics.

This is why one should not be surprised if he uses the situation that has emerged following the Oct 27 crackdown to channel politics in a different direction. He may well seek to limit further the already diminishing democratic space, especially if he is able to consolidate his own political base. For once he is secure in his power, he will not have to make any concession to those who are demanding more democracy. He will then justify the decline of democracy in the name of development. Industrialisation will be used to legitimise authoritarianism.

But it is not going to be easy for him. First, as we have noted, there is, within the Malay community and in particular among members of the original UMNO, considerable disaffection towards Dr. Mahathir's leadership. The undemocratic way in which he set up UMNO Baru, his attempt to centralise power in his hands, his abuse of authority and most of all his sacking of Tun Salleh and his destruction of judicial independence have, as we have seen, made him very unpopular. A lot of Malays, it is apparent, are not prepared to accept his authoritarian style of leadership.

Second, among other Malaysians, especially Chinese Malaysians, Dr. Mahathir appears to have very little genuine support. He is seen, for a variety of reasons, as a leader who is not sympathetic to the needs and aspirations of the Chinese community. In a sense, the DAP serves as a conduit for the articulation of this feeling of unhappiness. It is a feeling which will make it difficult for Dr. Mahathir to perpetuate his political dominance.

Three, sections of the English-educated commercial, professional and administrative middle-class do not have much confidence in Dr. Mahathir's leadership. This lack of confidence began to manifest itself two or three years ago. It is mirrored in the critical postures that certain professional bodies and public interest societies have adopted vis-a-vis, some of his policies and actions. Since sections of the middle-class are concerned about human rights and democratic freedoms, Dr. Mahathir's assault upon the Judiciary in recent months has increased their antipathy towards him.

Four, even within State institutions, which are outside the political arena but crucial to political development, there is growing uneasiness about some of Dr. Mahathir's political utterances and decisions. Within a segment of the nation's Public Services, for instance, doubts have begun to arise as to whether the Prime Minister really cares for democratic principles and procedures. Even among some of our monarchs, there is concern about the extent of the present leadership's commitment to Parliamentary Democracy.

Five, it is not just particular communities, classes or groups that are worried about the danger of authoritarian rule. Ordinary people, as

we have shown, are even more fearful of the future. Their apprehension was expressed through the ballot-box on Aug 25, 1988. The ordinary men and women of Johor Baru told the world in no uncertain terms that they rejected the authoritarianism of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. This is what the winner of the Johor Baru contest had asked them to do. Standing as an independent candidate on behalf of the "original UMNO", Datuk Shahrir Samad, who had forced the by-election by quitting his Parliamentary seat, asked the voters to send a clear message to Dr. Mahathir that they will not tolerate his authoritarian style of leadership.

The message could not have been clearer. Shahrir obtained 23,581 votes defeating Mahathir's candidate by a huge margin of 12,613 votes. If the mood of the voters of Johor Baru which, in a demographic sense, is a microcosm of Peninsular Malaysia, is any indication of how the rest of the population feels about what is happening to the country, then Dr. Mahathir would do well to adopt a less authoritarian and more democratic approach to government and politics.

Six, domestic politics apart, there is also a lot of criticism in the international press about the growing authoritarianism of the Mahathir regime. The criticism has had a negative impact upon Malaysia's image abroad. Human rights groups in Australia, Japan, North America and West Europe have also been espousing the cause of ISA detainees in Malaysia. Since June 1988 they have taken up cudgels on behalf of the Malaysian Judiciary.

The campaigns of all these human rights groups and the adverse publicity in the foreign media must, at some point or other, compel the Mahathir Government to scrutinise its performance since October 1987. It must realise that we are living in an age where universal human rights principles are beginning to shape a new international moral environment which no nation-state can afford to ignore. It is an environment which seeks to exert international moral pressure upon each and every Government to observe certain human rights standards. In the course of the last one year, the Malaysian Government has, for the first time, begun to understand what it is to be subjected to such pressure.

For these and other reasons, the Mahathir Government may not be able to establish the sort of authoritarian rule which characterises certain NICs in Asia. Nonetheless, we should not forget that as the man at the helm, as the man who controls the levers of power, Dr. Mahathir has a tremendous advantage over all those who hope to check his authoritarian manoeuvres. Through the power amassed in his hands he is in a position to defeat and, if need be, destroy anyone who opposes his designs. Or he could use the wealth, prestige and privileges the State commands to lure people to his side, to win allegiance to his cause.

In this endeavour to consolidate his position, Dr. Mahathir will be helped by the economic recovery that is taking place. The recovery, which is due largely to the excellent prices for our basic commodities and the international demand for some of our manufactured products, will, nevertheless, refurbish the image of the Mahathir Government. The Government will be seen in a positive light. At the same time, the economic recovery will make it possible for the Government to create more jobs which will alleviate, to an extent, the serious unemployment problem in the country. Businesses may also pick up and both foreign and domestic investments may increase. All in all, the economic recovery is bound to strengthen the Mahathir regime politically.

Who knows, Dr. Mahathir may then be able to eliminate some of those obstacles which stand in his way, as he seeks to establish a strong authoritarian State that will make Malaysia the next NIC. But one year after the crackdown on democracy of Oct 27, 1987, it is still not certain whether he will succeed or not. And that at least is worth one cheer.

Explanatory Note

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ASSAULT ON THE JUDICIARY: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

There is no denying this: no event, no episode in recent years has shocked the ordinary citizen as much as the suspension and then the sacking of the former Lord President, Tun Salleh Abas. The suspension of five Supreme Court Judges a little more than a month after Tun Salleh's suspension, followed by the dismissal of two of them, also sent shock waves down the spine of the nation.

Of course, not everyone was affected by the sacking of these three senior Judges. A huge segment of our society – leaving aside those who may be ignorant or illiterate – is known to be indifferent and apathetic when it comes to politics and public affairs. These Malaysians just cannot be bothered by issues such as the independence of the Judiciary or the rule of law or fundamental human rights.

Nonetheless, a lot of other Malaysians were concerned about Tun Salleh and the five suspended Judges (Tan Sri Wan Suleiman, Datuk George Seah, Tan Sri Azmi Kamaruddin, Tan Sri Eusoffe Abdoolcader and Tan Sri Wan Hamzah. The first two were subsequently removed by a Tribunal. The last three were re-instated) as reflected in the result of the Johor Baru Parliamentary by-election. In that by-election, the first to be held after the suspensions and the sacking, the candidate who won, Datuk Shahrir Samad, made the assault on the Judiciary one of the most important issues in his campaign. From numerous accounts of voter sentiments, the sacking of Tun Salleh and the suspension of the five Supreme Court Judges, it is said, was that one issue which had the greatest impact upon the mind of the Johor Baru voter. It was largely responsible for Datuk Shahrir's mammoth victory margin of 12,613 votes over the candidate from the ruling Barisan Nasional.

The Johor Baru protest against the assault on the Judiciary is significant for a number of reasons. It is one of the most multi-ethnic parliamentary constituencies in the country, a microcosm of the population structure of Peninsular Malaysia. Unlike other major cities in the country which had been badly mauled by the recession of 1985-87, Johor Baru has remained quite prosperous. If, in spite of this prosperity, the majority chose to protest against the assault on the Judiciary, then that issue must have stirred the emotions of the people.

Besides, the Barisan Nasional Government offered all sorts of inducements in the name of development in order to entice the voters. It must also be borne in mind that Johor Baru is a constituency that had always been in the hands of the ruling Coalition. In fact Johor is a State where the ruling Coalition has been almost invincible.

The electoral verdict in yet another constituency in Johor – Parit Jaya – can also be used as a measuring-rod of the people's feelings about what has been happening to the Judiciary. Though the Independent candidate who campaigned vigorously for the restoration of Tun Salleh as the Lord President lost, his narrow defeat was, nonetheless, indicative of sentiments in a rural State constituency. The dismissal of Tun Salleh and the other Supreme Court Judges, according to most analysts, was undoubtedly one of the most crucial issues in that by-election, ranking next to the UMNO crisis in importance.

Parit Raja and Johor Baru taken together show that rural and urban Johor, Johoreans of all communities and in all walks of life, are unhappy about the Government's assault upon the Judiciary. There is no reason to believe that these sentiments do not exist in other parts of the country. From my own interactions with individuals and groups, it is apparent that Malaysians in other places also regard the removal of the three Judges as a travesty of justice. The general feeling is that a terrible wrong has been done.

The injustice itself is, however, perceived in different ways by different groups in society. The middle and upper classes especially those lawyers, academics, civil servants, business executives and so on, who are critical of the assault on the Judiciary tend to focus upon the hollowness of the allegations against Tun Salleh in particular. They are disgusted that the Executive had gone out of the way to knock down the former Lord President by exploiting and distorting every little word and deed of his in order to concoct a case against him. Thus, his attempt to explain why interpretation is part and parcel of the law is distorted to impute that Tun Salleh was advocating an Islamic legal system for the country. Thus, his adjourning *sine die* an appeal concerning a minor who had converted to Islam is given a mischievous connotation when in fact the former Lord President was only responding to an application from the Appellant's solicitors. Thus, some innocent comment he had made about budgetary allocations for

the Ministry of Justice and the Courts is blown out of proportion with the intention of tarnishing his integrity.

Most of all, the middle and upper classes are piqued that Tun Salleh should be accused of undermining "public confidence in the Government's administration of this country in accordance with law" just because he had chosen to defend the Judiciary in the face of a barrage of attacks upon the Judiciary by the Prime Minister. In his excellent reply to the allegations against him, Tun Salleh has shown that he was merely performing his duty as the head of the Judiciary by clarifying what the independent authority of the Judiciary means, in a situation where the Prime Minister was making increasingly virulent criticisms of the institution.

It is interesting that among the working class in the urban areas it is not so much the hollowness of the allegations against Tun Salleh as the motive behind his sacking which appears to have angered them. They are clear in their minds that the former Lord President was removed because the Prime Minister and perhaps other leaders too were afraid that the Supreme Court quorum which Tun Salleh was planning for the appeal of the 'UMNO 11' would decide against their interests. Removing Tun Salleh in that context was perceived as a grossly unfair act. A Judge, in the thinking of the average Malaysian, is like a referee in a football match. He has to be neutral. It is wrong to get rid of a referee simply because one fears that his impartiality may lead to one's own defeat!

The idea of an impartial Judge is also strongly embedded in the psyche of the rural population. Indeed, what a Judge is, and what his role is, are concepts which are easily understood by the rural community, given its Islamic background. The Qadi who mediates in disputes within the community, who is expected to be fair and just in his decisions, parallels the modern Judge. For that reason, the Judge as an institution commands respect and demands reverence. It is because the institution is held in such high esteem that the Government's action against the former Lord President and the two Supreme Court Judges, provoked so much antipathy and even antagonism among the rural voters of Parit Raja. It was seen as an extreme, somewhat arrogant act bereft of respect and consideration for one of the highest offices of the land. In the eyes of rural Malays with their Islamic values and

principles of living, the Prime Minister had violated the norms of moderation and restraint. He had abused his power. They felt this way because they also knew that the real motive behind the removal of the Lord President was to ensure that the Prime Minister's position would be secure. When the pursuit of self-interest becomes too vulgar, the rural Malay-Muslim community sometimes displays its revulsion. And when the victim of the pursuit of that self-interest is seen as a pious man, as an innocent human being, one can expect an effusion of sympathy for him.

It is apparent from our analysis of the perceptions of different groups within the Malaysian public that the justifications put forward by Government leaders for their action against the Judiciary have not convinced a lot of people. If it has been difficult to persuade people that the Government was right, it is partly because the sacking of Tun Salleh and of Tan Sri Wan Suleiman and Datuk George Seah came in the wake of a series of events which had already eroded the credibility of the Mahathir administration. Daruk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's restructuring of UMNO to guarantee his absolute control over the party, his amendments to laws affecting freedom of expression and freedom of assembly to reinforce Executive power, his wide-ranging Internal Security Act (ISA) arrests to curb dissent and to discourage the rapidly growing demand for public accountability, had all created serious doubts about the Prime Minister's professed commitment to democratic principles and practices. Indeed, the evidence showed that the Prime Minister was becoming increasingly authoritarian. This is why when he moved against the Lord President it was as if he had taken that ultimate, decisive step to ensure his total control and dominance over the entire political system.

The assault on the Judiciary, needless to say, is bound to have an adverse impact upon Malaysian society as a whole. Ordinary citizens will have less and less faith in the independence and integrity of the Judiciary. This lack of faith will manifest itself especially in litigation involving the State and the interests it represents, both directly and indirectly. The Judiciary for its part – after what it has gone through – may decide that it is safer to serve authority than to seek justice. Subservience and servility may then become acceptable norms. Sycophancy may develop into a fine art.

There is no doubt that a Judiciary that can no longer command the respect of the people will sooner or later bring the political leadership itself into public odium. For the Judiciary's subservience will be attributed to the political leadership's desire for unquestioning obedience to its will. At the same time, a political leadership – as it should be obvious by now – which is not held in check by an independent Judiciary will become more arrogant, more haughty, more authoritarian. Since neither institution nor individual, neither Court nor custom, neither principle nor practice will be able to restrain the leadership's power, it could abuse its authority according to its whims and fancies.

Though the destruction of judicial independence has adverse consequences for society, there is enough evidence to suggest that the entire 'suspensions and sackings' episode has helped to raise public consciousness on certain aspects of democracy. Malaysians at all levels of society – and especially the poor and powerless – are much more aware today than ever before of the significance of an independent Judiciary, of the distinction between law and justice, of how the rule of law can become rule *by* law, of the separate spheres of authority of the Judiciary, the Executive and the Legislature. Terms and phrases such as 'controlling Judges', 'interfering with the authority of the Judges', 'concentrating power with one man', 'no checks and balances' have seeped into the vocabulary of the people – including those living in rural areas who are often shielded by the authorities from the influence of non-establishment ideas on freedom and democracy.

Indeed, the assault on the Judiciary which is of course part of the larger UMNO crisis has, ironically, accomplished much more by way of mass political education than all the pamphlets and booklets produced on democracy and human rights for the intellectual consumption of the ordinary Malaysian. For that reason it is, in a sense, fortunate that the assault on the Judiciary is so closely intertwined with the crisis in UMNO. It has hastened the diffusion of ideas on the Judiciary and democracy to the padi-roots of our society in an unprecedented manner.

This is how it should be. For in the ultimate analysis it is not the Courts or the laws, it is not Parliament or the Legislators, it is not the policy-makers or even the political dissidents, who can protect the independence of the Judiciary. It is only the ordinary human being who can ensure that Judges remain free to judge. When the commitment to

an independent Judiciary is deeply rooted in the hearts and minds of each and every Malaysian, we can be sure that Judges will be safe and the Judiciary will be secure.

Explanatory Note

The above article was presented as a paper at a seminar on The Independence of the Judiciary organised by the Bar Council in November 1988.

**ETHNIC
RELATIONS**

HAS THE COMMUNAL SITUATION WORSENERD OVER THE LAST DECADE?

I could, in typical academic fashion, begin by trying to define the word 'communal' since it is a key concept in the title.¹ But it would not serve any purpose. For definitions of the term 'communal' or 'communalism' tend to be static. They are often bound by time and circumstance and cannot be applied to a situation in flux. For instance, if communalism is interpreted to mean "a negative attitude towards the out-group" it would merely capture the essence of an attitude, a relationship in a particular situation at a particular time. And yet communalism describes a dynamic, not a static, situation. It is a process rather than an event, an attitude. This is why I have chosen to allow my analysis to show what a 'communal situation' is.

In order to do this, I shall first examine seven types of social groupings closely linked to public life, from the point of view of ethnic relations before and after 1969. The trends this analysis suggests will in turn be evaluated to establish the nature of the larger forces at work in Malaysian society. These forces will be examined to determine whether the situation has become more communal over the last decade or not.

The seven social groupings whose ethnic patterns will be subjected to scrutiny range from political parties to trade unions, to commercial associations, to professional bodies, to public interest societies, to cultural and religious organisations, to student movements. 1969 is the dividing-line not because of the ethnic riot of that year or because of the new leadership that emerged following the riot and the declaration of the Emergency. For us what is more significant is that 1969 marked the end of a period in Malaysian politics dominated by certain ethnic arrangements and the beginning of another era reflecting the growing strength of new social groups and classes.²

Political Parties

Even the earliest political parties in Malaysian history like the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) of the twenties and the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM) of the thirties evinced community consciousness.³ This continued in the post-war years. The Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) on the one hand, and the Parti Kebangsaan Melayu

Malaya (PKMM), on the other, for instance, represented views and articulated issues which were more closely orientated to their respective communities. It explains to some extent why the Pan-Malayan Council For Joint Action (PMCJA) which the MDU initiated was, in spite of its profession of multi-ethnic ideals, basically a non-Malay coalition. Similarly, the Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (PUTERA) led by the PKMM, was essentially a grouping of Malay organisations though ideologically it transcended the interests of the community *per se*⁴.

Other political parties that emerged in the forties were more obviously ethnic. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) was the best known of these. The Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), also founded in 1946, had a somewhat muted ethnic image in the initial period partly because of its class analysis of the social situation which, by implication, cut across ethnic boundaries. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), on the other hand, right from the outset made no pretense about its commitment to ethnic welfare.

If anything, electoral competition introduced in 1952 confirmed the dominance of community-based parties. The UMNO-MCA coalition scored a resounding victory over the multi-ethnic Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) in the Kuala Lumpur Municipal elections to be followed by a series of other triumphs in local government elections culminating in its almost complete sweep of the first Federal Legislative election in 1955.⁵ By this time the coalition had a conservative MIC as its third partner. The IMP, incidentally, was the first genuinely multi-ethnic political party in the country in that it had, within its own cloisters, significant representation from all the communities. Unlike the short-lived PUTERA-PMCJA coalition of 1947 it was not a grouping of ethnic-based parties.

The defeat of the IMP and the success of the UMNO-MCA-MIC coalition — now known as the Alliance — set the stage for community-oriented politics in the post-Independence period. Of course, it must be recognised that the defeat of one and the success of the other was, in itself, a reflection of deeper social forces which we shall explore later.

For the time being, we should observe how, as in many other newly-independent states, issues revolving around language and culture became important concerns for the ruling Alliance. Because the Malay

Opposition wanted immediate, effective implementation of Malay as the sole official and national language and because the non-Malay Opposition wanted more leeway for the use of their languages, the Alliance which had to mediate these demands often found itself in an unenviable position.⁶ It could not prevent the rise of communal consciousness on the language issue. For it is true that among segments of both the Malay and non-Malay communities there were evidences of growing antagonism towards the other side as a result of differences over the relationship between Malay and non-Malay languages.

Language aside, economic and political relationships also contributed towards communalism. The Alliance continued to perpetuate a social system where political and administrative pre-eminence remained with the Malay elites while crucial intermediary economic roles were performed by the Chinese. At the same time, the special position of the Malays and other indigenous peoples in regard to land reserves, civil service positions, business licences and scholarships continued to be given constitutional protection. The scope of this assistance was in fact widened through more institutionalized state participation in the economy. While all this created some resentment among a section of the non-Malays, Chinese ubiquity in the economy and the stronger non-Malay representation in the upper echelons of commerce, industry and the professions in turn, gave rise to feelings of apprehension among some Malays.⁷

In spite of this, however, the communal situation was well within control. It is significant, in this connection, that the Alliance – the ethnic image of its component parties notwithstanding – succeeded in developing an identity of its own. The Alliance as an inter-ethnic proposition counted for real. It expressed its identity through certain national issues where there was a degree of unanimity among all its component parties. The structure of the economy, the limited role of state capital in development, the emphasis upon private enterprise – on these matters there was fundamental agreement within the Alliance which in a way helped to reduce the ethnic thrust in other policies. Likewise, the Alliance as a whole believed in cultural diversity and showed some appreciation of the importance of democratic institutions like Parliament. Most of all, its leader, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister, was perceived as an Alliance leader in as much as he was seen as an UMNO leader. The multi-ethnic personality of the Tunku

characterised by his ability to mix easily with the various communities endowed the Alliance with an 'ethnic-transcendent' image.⁸ This is perhaps why in spite of a brief rupture between a new MCA leadership and the UMNO elites in 1959, the position of the Alliance as an inter-ethnic coalition remained intact right up to 1969.

During this period the Opposition manifested features which could sometimes be described as 'ethnic' and sometimes as 'non-ethnic'. The major Malay Opposition party, the exclusive Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) bemoaned the alleged loss of Malay sovereignty through the accommodation of the non-Malays and argued forcefully for an 'Islamic state'.⁹ Its position was diametrically different from that of non-Malay opposition parties like the People's Progressive Party (PPP), the United Democratic Party (UDP), the People's Action Party (PAP) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) who wanted to end what they regarded as Malay political and cultural dominance. Their advocacy of a 'Malaysian Malaysia' which showed very little understanding of the historical and cultural background of the country or of the sociological effects of colonial economic policies, was vehemently opposed by a substantial segment of the Malay community who viewed the slogan as a threat to their position and to the very identity of the nation.¹⁰ The ethnic antagonisms that these two irreconcilable perspectives on the nation engendered led invariably to a heightening of communal consciousness. The separation of Singapore from the rest of the Federation in 1965 which was due partly to this conflict established the seriousness of the ethnic problem.

Nonetheless, in the midst of rising communalism there were certain non-communal trends too. As an endeavour, the Socialist Front (SF), comprising the Partai Rakyat and the Labour Party, was aimed at breaking down ethnic barriers and creating new solidarities based upon class interests. Though the Partai Rakyat was largely Malay and the Labour Party was preponderantly non-Malay most of the issues which SF representatives raised in Parliament were of a non-ethnic nature like foreign control of the economy, poverty and exploitation or the erosion of democratic liberties or corruption in high places. It is true of course that in spite of this apparent unity of purpose one of the main reasons why the coalition split eventually was because of marked differences over language and cultural policies.¹¹

Be that as it may, it is undeniable that there were still elements within the Partai Rakyat and the Labour Party who remained attached to multi-ethnic ideals. The new leadership of the Partai Rakyat in 1967 – which was re-named the Partai Sosialis Rakyat Malaya (PSRM) – reflected these sentiments. So did the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan), a new party formed in 1968 from remnants of the SF and UDP, together with certain trade unionists and academics. The 1969 General Election demonstrated that the Gerakan had a measure of multi-ethnic support.¹² It is a reflection of the political atmosphere that existed that it could garner votes by emphasising socio-economic rather than ethnic issues.

It is apparent then that while communalism was a powerful force even before 1969, there was still some scope, however limited, for non-communal initiatives in the political arena.

After 1969, ethnic considerations began to permeate those sectors of society where their influence was not as great in the past. The economy, for instance, has now become ethnicized to a considerable extent. The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), an expanded version of the old Alliance, is committed to creating a Malay commercial, industrial and professional community of some significance by 1990. By deploying the political and economic resources of the state towards this goal, the BN has created a lot of resentment among various categories within the non-Malay communities.¹³

For the repercussions of this policy – the New Economic Policy (NEP) – are both direct and indirect as far as ethnic relations are concerned. It need not be emphasised that it affects certain aspects of non-Malay businesses and industries related to employment, recruitment, expansion and the like. It has also got a direct bearing upon capital ownership, distribution of shares, and even marketing and sales activities. Similarly, professionals in the public sector and even those in the private sector are affected to a certain degree by the new recruitment and promotional policies.

Indirectly, it is education more than any other activity that has been influenced by NEP goals. Ethnic quotas in recruitment into institutions of higher learning which are weighted in favour of the

Malay community are expected to assist in the rapid growth of a Malay commercial, industrial and professional class. At the same time, scholarships, and loans for the community have been increased tremendously for further education both at home and abroad compared to the pre-69 period. When scarce public resources which are so closely linked to mobility and status are allocated in this manner, there is bound to be a great deal of ethnic unhappiness.

In a sense, non-Malay grievances are related to yet another policy of the post-69 period. The implementation of the national education policy in 1970 in schools and universities which compelled non-Malays to seriously study the national language also provoked a negative reaction among them especially at that time.¹⁴ The frustrations of teachers who cannot function effectively in the Bahasa Malaysia medium, of government doctors who cannot pass national language examinations, of lawyers who have to prepare for the switch to Malay in the future, have been partly responsible for the perpetuation of an atmosphere that is inimical to ethnic relations.

The consequences of the national education policy and more so the New Economic Policy (NEP) are most obviously felt in the attitudes of, and relations between, political parties in the BN. UMNO is of course firmly committed to the education policy and the NEP but the MCA, while professing adherence to the NEP, has always been lukewarm about the policy in reality. Other coalition partners like the MIC and the Gerakan have, at various times, expressed misgivings about actual programmes connected to the NEP. As a result of the NEP and the political climate it has generated, the component parties of the BN have differed openly on various issues with an ethnic connotation.¹⁵

UMNO Youth and MCA Youth for instance are poles apart on controversies involving the content of the national culture, recruitment into colleges and universities, the composition of the Civil Service, and the activities of huge, ethnic-based trading corporations.

It is the ethnic orientation of the component parties of the BN that dominates the political scene. The BN, unlike the Alliance of old, does not have an inter-ethnic image of its own. While the individual parties may be agreed on certain matters pertaining to the capitalist

character of the economy or the state's definition of national security, there is hardly any consensus on a wide variety of issues pertinent to community relations. And since ethnicity pervades the whole system today, this means that the area of agreement among the parties is really very limited.¹⁶ What keeps the coalition together is the glue of power; it is not a coalition united by common values and common goals.

If BN partners have moved further apart in relation to values and goals, so have the opposition parties. As part of its desire to achieve an Islamic state – fuelled by the Islamic resurgence of the seventies and eighties – PAS insists that political power must be exercised exclusively by Muslims. In a situation where non-Muslims (non-Malays) have become indigenized not only through generations of domicile but also via the Malay language and aspects of Malay culture, such insistence on political monopoly will undoubtedly be rejected outright.¹⁷ The DAP, on the other hand, continues to demand the sort of equality for non-Malay cultures which is historically untenable. For a new generation of Malays who regard the question of national identity, of cultural policy as a closed chapter, such a demand can only be received with anger and indignation.

The fact that these two parties dominate the opposition arena is itself an indication of how deep communal feelings are. Indeed, the vast majority of issues which both parties articulate are inextricably intertwined with their respective community positions. Even issues which should be espoused by the two parties given their official ideologies and which have nothing to do with ethnicity *per se* are invariably given a communal twist. PAS for instance, has not questioned the hangings carried out under the Internal Security Act (ISA) and the Essential Security Cases Regulations (ESCAR) though both laws are clearly against Islamic tenets.¹⁸ It so happens that almost all the victims so far have been of Chinese origin. The DAP – its democratic socialism notwithstanding – failed to speak up on behalf of the Palestinians during the recent conflict in Beirut mainly because their plight is seen erroneously in local circles as a Malay-Muslim cause.¹⁹

The unprecedented growth of communalism within opposition ranks has made it extremely difficult for non-communal parties to expand. It is worth noting in this connection that the PSRM has not

won a single state or Parliamentary seat since 1969. In fact, there are signs to show that the party has also tried to adjust to the new ethnic winds. The incorporation of Islam into its otherwise secular ideology could be interpreted along these lines. Besides, on certain public controversies which involve questions of social justice but which have subsequently succumbed to ethnic manipulations, the PSRM has chosen to remain silent for fear, perhaps, of being labelled 'pro' this or 'anti' that community.

Communalism in the party system then is complete. The post-69 period has none of the saving graces of the pre-69 period. If anything, negative characteristics of the past have become more pronounced today.

Trade Unions

While communalism in relation to political parties has the greatest impact upon Malaysian society, one should also examine other institutions which are less significant. Trade Unions would perhaps be next in importance.

Like political parties, trade unions too were associated in their genesis, with particular communities.²⁰ At the beginning, in the thirties, mainly because of the position of Chinese labour in the towns, unions were perceived as Chinese institutions. At the same time, the organisations of Indian labour in the plantations gave rise to Indian-dominated unions. The creation of public sector unions with substantial Malay participation came later, after the Second World War.

History therefore accounts for the non-Malay image of the trade union movement. More specifically, it had a very Indian image right up to 1969. This was due partly to the leadership of many of the more active unions but also because of the role of the numerically large National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) which wielded greater influence than any other group within the labour movement from the early fifties onwards. One should perhaps add that the movement may have had a different image if in 1948 the British had not crushed some of the anti-colonial unions whose leaderships were more multi-ethnic.²¹

Despite its image, the trade union movement from Independence to 1969 or so was not really affected by the prevailing communalism.

Labour issues were seen as labour issues. Ethnic considerations were not major factors in the relationship between labour and capital, on the one hand, and between labour and the state, on the other. This was illustrated in the 1962 Railwaymen's Union of Malaya (RUM) strike. RUM, a union with both Malay and non-Malay members but led by an Eurasian managed to sustain its strike without having to contend with ethnic pressures largely because the prevailing social situation allowed it.

The only exceptions were teachers' unions. There were Malay teachers' unions and non-Malay dominated teachers' unions reflecting different language media in the school system. When it came to wages and working conditions, their capacity to negotiate successfully with the government depended upon their closeness to UMNO. Since segments of the Malay school-teacher population were important UMNO grass-root elites, the Malay unions often had greater leverage with the government. This created schisms between the Malay and non-Malay unions. Besides, the Malay unions were in the forefront of the drive to implement Malay in the education system while non-Malay dominated unions were quite apathetic and sometimes even hostile to the effort.

In the last decade or so, there have been some paradoxical developments within the labour movement. Labour has become much more multi-ethnic. Trade Unions are beginning to mirror these changes both in membership and leadership. There are a number of unions now, for instance, which have a majority of Malay members and Malay leaders. This is happening even in private sector unions like textile and transport unions. Malay urbanisation brought about mainly by rural-urban migration but expedited by the NEP is the main reason for this visible change in the ethnic composition of the labour movement.

The growth of multi-ethnic unions however has not resulted in the spread of multi-ethnic attitudes and values among workers.²² On the contrary, there is a certain degree of polarization among them. Workers tend to associate with their own ethnic kind. The ethnic origin of the personnel manager in say, a factory or the ethnic background of the management seem to be important considerations. Malay and non-Malay workers sometimes have opposite reactions to management if it happens to be the state. More crucial is the emergence of Islamic

welfare societies in many work-places both in the public and private sectors. These societies confined to Muslim workers, established to cater for their economic and spiritual welfare, have taken over some of the normal functions of a union. In the process, they have become 'unions within unions' and tend to further divide Muslim (Malay) and non-Muslim (non-Malay) workers.²³

It has now reached a point where unions are afraid to respond to larger societal issues concerning education, the economy, political freedom and public integrity, for fear that it will lead to ethnic divisions within. This is because workers are not thinking and acting as workers. Their primary, perhaps their only, identity is their ethnic identity. This means that the concept of workers' interests – if it ever existed at all – is subordinate to the reality of ethnic interests. This is why even in the election of union office-bearers ethnic factors are now brought into play.

In the midst of the communalization of the labour movement, there are perhaps a couple of exceptions. Firstly, as a result of the development of a common language in the school system some of the old language-based unions have come together to form a National Union in the Teaching Profession (NUTP).²⁴ For what it is worth, this is a positive achievement in the context of deteriorating ethnic relations. Secondly, and more important, in February 1979, the multi-ethnic Airlines Employees Union (AEU) which embarked on an illegal work-to-rule succeeded to a great extent in preserving its solidarity in spite of blatant ethnic manoeuvres by groups within the government designed to break up the union.²⁵

Albeit these accomplishments, it is undeniable that the overall trend is in the opposite direction. Unions are becoming more and more communal not only because of external pressures but also because of their own internal attitudes.

Commercial Associations

As with labour, so with capital. Before 1969, commerce and industry were almost completely dominated by non-Malay interests, both local and foreign. Non-Malay Chambers of Commerce and other trading institutions exercised considerable influence over the state in what was a typical post-colonial market economy.

Malay commercial interests, in contrast, were very weak. The Malay Chambers of Commerce were in no position to determine the pattern of decision-making at the level of government though there was Malay political pre-eminence. Special privileges in the issue of certain business licences were not enough to enable the community to make any impact upon commerce and industry as a whole since it was handicapped in other spheres like capital, skills, market contacts and so on.²⁶ This is why Malay businessmen and contractors in the sixties were largely interested in obtaining only a toehold in the business world rather than playing a dominant role as such. The two Buntiputera congresses of the sixties reflected this sentiment. Also, the government was not inclined towards intervening in the economy beyond a certain point on behalf of Malay commerce.

Because Malay commerce did not offer any competition, non-Malay business interests were seldom agitated by the ethnic dimension. They did not press for their interests along ethnic lines for the simple reason that there was no need for it. It would be wrong therefore to conclude that non-Malay business elites were free of communal thinking. From another angle, one can perhaps even argue that since they made no attempt to assist Malay entrepreneurs or to promote a truly national system of commerce incorporating all communities, these elites were not capable of seeing beyond their own business and community interests.

After 1969, the implementation of the NEP has, as we have seen, begun to change ethnic relationships in commerce and industry. Non-Malay reaction to active state involvement in the creation of a Malay commercial and industrial community has taken two forms. One, there is organised resistance to state regulation and intervention. The protest against the Industrial Coordination Act (ICA) is a good example. Two, there is actual mobilisation of non-Malay capital and skills through ethnic parties in the BN like the MCA and MIC. The MCA for instance has helped to set up a National Cooperative Society (KSM) and a Multi-Purpose Holding (MPH) Company. The MIC has also established a cooperative society. Because these business organisations – especially MPH – are involved in massive capitalist operations in the name of protecting the economic interests of their respective communities, we should describe their activities as outstanding examples of corporate, communal capitalism.²⁷

When sections of the non-Malay communities see corporate, communal capitalism as the answer to state intervention on behalf of Malay commerce and industry, or what could be called Malay bureaucratic capitalism, than one can expect communal antagonisms to increase. As we have already observed, this is the present pattern. For as state agencies like FELDA or FELCRA, or UDA or the SEDC's are perceived as helping only the Malays (whether the perception is totally accurate or not) both Malays and non-Malays are going to regard the MCA's and MIC's efforts as attempts to create an 'alternative' economy. Mutually antagonistic economies like mutually antagonistic cultures must lead eventually to a completely polarized situation.

Professional Bodies

Like organisations in the economy, professional bodies such as the Malaysian Medical Association and the Bar Council tended to be dominated by non-Malays in the first twelve years of Independence. Malay membership was conspicuously small.

As a whole, these and other similar societies were mainly concerned with professional matters without being involved in larger social questions. Ethnic considerations did not seem to intrude into their professional concerns. But here again it is understandable since there was no ethnic competition.

Since 1969 the ethnic composition of almost all the professions has undergone a steady transformation. Though non-Malays are still in the majority in law, medicine, engineering, architecture and other professions there are sizeable numbers of Malays in some of these fields to make their presence felt.²⁸

Despite increased numbers, however, Malay involvement in many of the existing professional societies is still insignificant. This may be due to a variety of reasons. Firstly, those who are active normally tend to come from the private sectors of the professions concerned since they are less encumbered by restrictions. The majority of Malays in the legal or medical professions for instance are with the public sector. Secondly, even when they are part of the private sector, Malays, perhaps more than their non-Malay counterparts, are inclined towards nurturing ties with the state which may or may not be directly connected to their professions. Indeed, the state itself, as a matter of policy,

seeks to establish relationships with, say, Malay legal firms as a way of helping to strengthen their position financially. When Malay professionals and the state share mutual links of this sort, it becomes difficult for the professionals to adopt evaluative postures on state policies which is required of anyone who wants to play an active role in genuinely autonomous professional groupings in a democratic society. For, willy-nilly ideas and actions emanating from the state which affect the professions will demand the sort of response which proves that the societies concerned are independent and therefore capable of protecting professional interests from political or bureaucratic encroachments.²⁹ Thirdly, it is perhaps true that even if there were no tangible ties the intangible, psychological relationship that obtains between the Malay community and the state would have militated against the emergence of a critical and courageous Malay leadership in professional bodies. It is a relationship that is marked to a great extent by almost unthinking acceptance of, and obeisance towards, state authority. The ethnic factor – the perception of the state as the protector of the ethnic community – plays an important part in this psychology.³⁰

Such varying perceptions of, and relationships with, the state among Malay and non-Malay professionals have been partly responsible for the delayed crystallization of a truly multi-ethnic character within most professional societies. Of course, there may be one or two societies which are different but the general pattern manifests these centrifugal tendencies. There is perhaps no better illustration of this than the formation of separate, exclusive Islamic societies catering for Muslim professionals. There is, for instance, a separate society for Muslim scientists just as there are attempts to set up Muslim societies among academics.

Public Interest Societies

Fortunately, however, these separatist trends have not begun to affect public interest societies involved in consumer and environmental issues, or those concerned with human rights and national unity.

In any case, before 1969 there were hardly any public interest societies of the type we know today. This in itself is a reflection of an expanding middle class, segments of which are now seeking expression through avenues other than political parties and professional associations.

Existing public interest societies like consumer associations in the various states or environmental forums in Kuala Lumpur and Penang tend to be more non-Malay than Malay. However, they and other such organisations have succeeded so far to articulate issues without the slightest tinge of ethnicity. As a result, at least sections of the different communities are prepared to identify with the non-sectarian causes that these groups espouse.³¹

But then, the moment a cause is perceived to be ethnic, whether rightly or wrongly, the societies concerned, however non-ethnic their image, run the risk of alienating segments of one community or the other. This happened to the various societies that had been working together quite harmoniously on a number of non-sectarian issues until it came to the Palestinian struggle. Chinese-based societies were not prepared to commit themselves wholeheartedly. Similarly, a Malay-based association has become a little reluctant to speak up for those convicted under ISA and ESCAR partly because many of them are Chinese.³² Both the examples and the responses are similar to what we discussed in connection with political parties earlier on. This goes to show that public interest societies, though free of some of the electoral pressures that political parties have to contend with, are nonetheless also susceptible in their own way to the communal atmosphere. Besides, given the minor role of the Malays in them there is every danger that as circumstances change, these societies may be misconstrued by political opportunists as non-Malay reactions to a Malay government.

Cultural and Religious Organisations

Even if that happens, it cannot be half as bad as the situation with cultural and religious organisations. This is perhaps understandable for unlike groups promoting 'consumer consciousness' or advocating 'development alternatives', cultural or religious organisations are, by their very nature, concerned with ethnic welfare or community well-being.

In the sixties, both Malay and non-Malay organisations assumed powerful, sometimes potentially explosive, positions in regard to their respective languages and cultures. As we have observed elsewhere, influential segments of Malay society wanted vigorous implementation

of the national and official language and the dynamic promotion of the indigenous culture. Malay literary and cultural organisations mushroomed all over the country as part of this crusade. Expectedly, there was considerable overlap between the membership of these organisations and Malay teachers unions and Malay political parties especially UMNO and PAS.

We have already noted how non-Malay political parties had their own ideas of the role of non-Malay languages and cultures. In fact, these ideas were, in some instances, far more vocally articulated by Chinese cultural societies in particular. Though not as numerous nor as active as their Malay counterparts, these societies were nonetheless committed advocates of Chinese education.³³ Often based upon clan or dialect loyalties, they exercised an emotional hold upon their constituents. Chinese commercial organisations like the various Chambers of Commerce provided massive financial support to these cultural societies. In fact, the Chinese Chambers of Commerce, their trade functions aside, were rightly perceived by many analysts as the driving force behind the Chinese 'education and culture' movement of the sixties.

As language realities changed in the seventies, the orientation of both Malay and non-Malay cultural societies also began to change. Since Malay was being implemented as the main medium of administration and education, Malay groups were more concerned with reminding the state of its obligation to language and culture rather than fighting new causes. This is why the 1982 Malay Cultural Congress in Malacca failed to evoke the sort of emotions which the 1971 Congress did. In 1971, the full implementation of Malay in schools and universities had just begun and sentiments were still strong.³⁴ By 1982, a whole generation, educated completely in the national language, had come into being. The cause seemed to have been won.

Non-Malay groups, on the other hand, continued to demand a bigger role for Chinese education and culture. The protracted campaign to establish a Chinese-language university – the Merdeka University – which was brought to a legal end only recently in 1982 was a reflection of the determination of sections of the community to attain even the unattainable. But underlying the campaign was an implicit recognition

of new realities. Though the official demand was for a Chinese-language university it was apparent that the real concern of a larger proportion of the community was about the availability of places for their children in institutions of higher learning.³⁵ The medium, the language, was a secondary issue. Besides, Chinese educationists were cognisant enough of the new environment to know that rather than persist in pursuing the impossible, it was better to preserve what they already had. This is why their energies today are directed towards protecting the status of Chinese primary education within the state school system.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that just because new realities have emerged, communalism itself has declined in the post-69 period in relation to language and cultural questions. It is the character of language and cultural communalism that has changed – but the communal dynamic remains. There is still resistance to Malay cultural elements among a large number of non-Malays. There is still an unwillingness to acknowledge the legitimacy of these cultural forms. Among the Malays, there is no real desire to integrate non-Malay cultural characteristics into the main stream of national culture. Indeed, both Malay and non-Malay cultural elites seem to have very little understanding of what the evolution of a truly national culture entails.³⁶

If anything, the adverse effects of the absence of a clear conception of cultural evolution upon inter-ethnic ties are more acutely felt now than ever before with the growth of religious revivalism. It began with Islamic resurgence. Young Muslim groups in urban areas, especially Kuala Lumpur, are actively involved in propagating a return to Islamic purity as embodied in the Quran and Sunnah. Why this is happening will be discussed later. For now, let us note that while many aspects of Islamic resurgence are intra-community, there are yet other dimensions which affect the position of other religious groups and the nation as a whole. When Muslim societies express reservations about social intercourse with non-Muslims or articulate misgivings about certain non-Muslim religious concepts, reactions begin to develop among non-Muslim communities. More than that, the demand of Islamic resurgence for an Islamic state where everyone, Muslim and non-Muslim, accepts Islamic laws and precepts, very often generates apprehension among non-Muslims.³⁷

As a result of all this, non-Muslim groups have also become very concerned about their religions. Religious revivalism among non-Muslims is of course not just a reaction to Islamic resurgence. There are other reasons too which will be examined in a different context. What is obvious, however, is that 'born-again' Christians, Shiva adherents among Hindus and Buddhist purists are not only creating schisms within their own religious communities but are also inhibiting the process of discovering common, shared universal values among different traditions since they are so convinced of the exclusive righteousness of their own bigoted beliefs.

Religious revivalism then has reinforced already formidable communal barriers,

Student Movements

There is perhaps no place where religious revivalism is more obvious than in the institutions of higher learning. In order to find out how this has come about one has to trace very briefly, the development of the student movement from the early years of Merdeka.

Like commerce, the professions and labour, the ethnic composition of the University (there was only one University before 1969, the University of Malaya) was also largely non-Malay in the pre-69 period. Malay involvement in student affairs was confined to societies like the Malay language society and the Islamic society. The non-Malay dominated Student Union did, once in a while, exhibit a non-Malay orientation on national affairs especially when the PAP was in Malaysian politics. But on the whole, it proved quite capable of espousing causes from a non-ethnic perspective. Questions pertaining to landlessness, land reform, foreign investments, the Internal Security Act (ISA), the Certificate of suitability for student entry into the University and so on were their dominant concerns. Even international issues – apartheid and Vietnam – figured prominently in their public positions.

The influence of this trend in thinking was clearly manifested in the popularity enjoyed by the University's socialist club in those days. It was in a position to help establish a non-partisan, multi-ethnic platform in the 1969 General Election through the Student Union. Though not part of the electoral battle, the Union and the issues it raised attracted a lot of public attention.

After 1969, partly because of the NEP but also because of the dramatic expansion in rural secondary education, the number of Malays in universities (which by the early seventies had increased to five) grew by leaps and bounds to a point where by 1975 there were more Malays than non-Malays in all the five universities put together.³⁸ As always, the juxtaposition of communities which are numerically more balanced in relation to one another produces a certain degree of ethnic consciousness.

For the Malay majority in the campuses of the post-69 period, it was inevitable that the expression of identity in an ethnically-divided situation would be through Islam. Islam has always enjoyed an intimate relationship with Malay identity. Besides, the Malay language had ceased to be an effective, emotional rallying-point. There was a need for another channel which only Islam could provide since it touched Malay identity at a thousand different points — in a way in which language could not.³⁹

Given the pervasive perception of Islam as something that is exclusive and exquisite, separate and superior from other civilisational experiences, Islamic resurgence within the student movement has led to attitudes which insist on seeing both campus and national issues in dichotomous terms. It has given rise to activities which do not bring the communities together on the basis of common values and common interests. The non-Malay, non-Muslim reaction to this has also taken the form of increased emphasis upon the superficial, external trappings of their respective religions. Thus, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Bahai Societies in the Universities are rapidly becoming centres for non-Muslim student activities. Societies based upon academic disciplines like economics or history or development studies do not influence student values and attitudes in the same profound manner as religious societies. Besides, even discipline-based societies are invariably dominated by one community or another. What is worse, responses to them from the student community as a whole are conditioned by the ethnic character of their leadership and membership. This explains why the Humanities Society at Universiti Sains Malaysia is seen as a Malay outfit while the Computer Society is regarded as a non-Malay show.

Ethnic polarization of this sort goes beyond student societies. It is reflected in the sports field, the lecture theatre, the tutorial room, the library, the canteen, the hostel, indeed in almost every facet of

university life. Student elections in the last ten years or so have, on the whole, reflected ethnic tendencies.⁴⁰ Even in the choice of courses ethnic factors seem to dominate. The ethnicity of the teacher is often an important consideration.

After examining the student movement and six other social groupings it is only too apparent that the communal situation is bad. It has certainly got worse in some instances but only because the conditions which have contributed to a deterioration of ethnic relations were not present in the earlier period. In other words, it is not because pre-69 society was more harmonious on account of its structures and attitudes. In a sense, the communal problem became extremely serious only in the post-69 period because the social situation began to change.

Communalism: The Background

Before we analyse the forces behind this change, let us reiterate — lest we are misunderstood — that we are acutely aware that the communalism of today has its roots in the pre-Independence era. There is no need to emphasise that British colonial policies in regard to business, trade, land, agriculture, education, training, administration and citizenship created deep ethnic chasms which have remained, in one form or another, to this very day.⁴¹ Nor do we have to be told that the psychological impact of colonialism⁴² upon the various communities produced ethnic prejudices and spawned ethnic stereotypes which continue to influence personal and social attitudes twenty-five years after Merdeka.

Colonialism, however, was not the only source of communalism from the pre-Independence era. The political bargain struck between the UMNO elites, on the one hand, and the MCA and MIC elites, on the other, in the fifties was, in retrospect, yet another cause of communal uneasiness in later years. In the hurry to fulfil one of the conditions laid down by the British for the transfer of power — a clear demonstration of the ability of the Malay and non-Malay communities to work together — the UMNO leadership acceded to MCA and MIC demands for the liberalization of citizenship rules to such an extent that the concept of cultural identity was diluted altogether. Although a knowledge of Malay was one of the qualifications of citizenship, this requirement was upheld more in its breach than its observance.

Consequently, the new citizens were legally, but not culturally, part of the land. This absence of cultural identification, so evident among such a large proportion of the new citizens, has remained one of the main causes of non-Malay communalism in the last two decades.⁴³

The bargain of the fifties was disastrous for yet another reason. In return for a non-cultural concept of citizenship, non-Malay elites agreed to the special position of the Malays and by implication the perpetuation of an indigenous – non-indigenous (bumiputra – non-bumiputra) dichotomy in the life of the new nation. In effect, this meant that while there was common citizenship there were two different categories of citizens. These differences could not be confined to specific areas within the special position clauses in the Constitution for the simple reason that the moment a deep-rooted sentiment – the indigenous sentiment – was institutionalized it was bound to lead to the development of interests and attitudes which would create an entire belief-system out of a primordial feeling. This is precisely what has happened with the 'Bumiputra' concept. It has become a belief-system with the Malay community as a whole which impedes the community's acceptance of the non-Malays as equal and legitimate partners in nation-building.

Apart from colonialism and the bargain, the inability of the Alliance elites to understand that the capitalist economic system created by almost eight decades of colonial rule was itself a cause of communalism was yet another major obstacle to national integration. Why capitalism in the Malaysian context is partly responsible for communalism we shall discover later. Coming back to the Alliance elites it was perhaps not just a question of understanding. These elites by virtue of their class background, the administrative and economic roles that some of them performed in colonial society, their myriad links to the colonial system were undoubtedly favourably disposed to capitalism.⁴⁴ They could not be expected to transform a system from which they benefitted. They could not, therefore, be expected to resolve the communal problem.

Communalism Under Control

In spite of the burdens produced by history and the shortcomings of the elites, the communal situation managed to hold for the first twelve years, as we have noted before. Why was this possible?

Firstly, given the perpetuation of a capitalist system, it was inevitable that the interests and values of the middle and upper classes would determine the tone and tenor of society. Within the middle and upper classes, there was no Malay – non-Malay conflict since the non-Malays were overwhelmingly dominant at those levels. This was due to the headstart that segments of the non-Malay communities had as a result of English education and their location in the middle echelons of the export-oriented sector of the economy during the colonial period. Those non-Malay groups that constituted the majority in the middle and upper classes at the time of Merdeka were able to enhance further their advantaged positions through the continued operation of an economy which emphasised unlimited expansion of private capital and entrepreneurial activities. And so during the first twelve years, they did not perceive any Malay threat to their dominance. This gave the impression that communalism was not a problem. It was deceptive for the power and influence of non-Malay elements in the middle and upper classes were to a large extent the result of the perpetuation of an iniquitous system inherited from colonial rule. It was bound to be challenged sooner or later. In fact, changes were already taking place which would eventually undermine their position.

Secondly, even outside the economy, the UMNO elites, as we have seen, did not really seek to regulate or restrict the educational, cultural and political interests of the non-Malay middle and upper classes. Once again, it was obvious that there wasn't a powerful Malay element at those levels to push for its own ethnic interests especially in relation to education and culture. True, without the citadel of power, PAS elements, Malay teachers and literary figures wanted a re-definition of politics, of culture which, in their opinion, would favour the community. But the UMNO leadership chose to maintain its own version of a balance which, while proclaiming Malay as the main medium of administration and education, continued to allow for the use of English in particular. This amounted to a generous accommodation of the interests of the English-speaking, non-Malay middle and upper classes. In this connection, it might be noted that the UMNO elites, given their educational background and their adulation of the British had greater faith in English as a language of modernisation than in Malay.

Thirdly, it is quite conceivable that this overly accommodative attitude was also, in a sense, a product of the administrative and

aristocratic antecedents of some of the more crucial leaders in UMNO's elite core.⁴⁵ Of these leaders, it was the Tunku who exercised immense influence. His political attitudes and values coloured and conditioned the thinking of the government as a whole. Being of aristocratic origin, the Tunku may have had a different view of ethnic competition and challenge from non-Malays than say, a Malay professional or businessman in his position. An aristocrat's status is inherited; unlike a middle-class professional who may fear competition from his non-Malay counterpart, a Malay prince knows that his position and prestige are ascriptive. His position is not for the taking. This may have given the Tunku a sense of confidence which others did not have. He could afford to accommodate the other communities. He could afford to be generous to the non-Malays since they posed no threat to him or his aristocratic class.

Fourthly, the non-Malay elites in MCA and MIC too were of a particular psychological disposition. Since the Chinese and Indians had been granted citizenship through such liberal laws, there was a feeling of gratitude especially among the elites who had worked out the terms with their UMNO counterparts.⁴⁶ More than the citizenship laws *per se*, the UMNO leaders had allowed them to share political power and to perpetuate an economic system in which the planting, mining and commercial interests that MCA and MIC elites represented could continue to prosper. Elites who had gained so much would not be inclined to challenging the UMNO leadership and the prevailing pattern of ethnic relations.

Finally, the Alliance elites had developed certain common perspectives on inter-community ties as a result of their united quest for Merdeka. They had learnt the importance of give-and-take, of compromise, the art of balancing diverse interests in a multi-ethnic society. Because they had a common external force to deal with in the British, because they had a common goal to achieve, they forged strong bonds of friendship which sometimes transcended ethnic considerations. Without any doubt at all, links within the Alliance played some part in maintaining ethnic relations on an even keel before 1969.

To these five factors one should perhaps also add a point that has been made before. Ethnic friction is more likely to occur when

communities begin to interact as equals. When one community is very strong, and the other very weak, there will be less tension. The numerical weakness of the Malay community in a whole variety of areas in the pre-69 situation – from labour to commerce to the professions to the university – was partly responsible for the superficial sort of inter-ethnic harmony that prevailed. It was a harmony that was bound to break down the moment the Malay component of the middle and upper classes, indeed of the urban community as a whole, began to increase.

Communalism: Deterioration

This is precisely what happened after 1969. In fact, the seeds of eventual change were planted in the early years of Merdeka. We have already mentioned in passing that rural secondary education expanded rapidly in the sixties thus enabling thousands of Malay students to achieve greater social mobility. Indeed, the democratization of education as a whole helped large numbers of young Malays to improve their economic status, to move up from lower-income to middle-income levels. As a result, the ethnic composition of the towns and cities, especially Kuala Lumpur, began to change. The ethnic-class structure was also beginning to show signs of a gradual transformation.

Education, though the most important factor in affecting the change, was not the only cause. As in most third world countries, development, which because of various structural deformations, is urban-oriented, encouraged the inevitable rural-urban migration. This meant, in reality, the movement of young Malays from the countryside to the cities. Kuala Lumpur, the political heart of the land, was invariably the popular target of this migration. It contributed substantially to the urbanisation of the Malay community.

A third factor was, of course, special position itself. Though limited in its impact in the sixties, its various provisions helped to increase the number of Malays in the university and the colleges, in the transport business, in the contracting and retailing businesses and in the upper echelons of the public services. All in all, special position served as a conduit in strengthening the Malay component of the middle and upper classes.

Though all these three factors – education, migration and special position – helped to change the situation, the real impetus came with the inauguration of the NEP. The NEP not only incorporated the three processes which we just discussed into policy and actual programmes but also expanded and extended existing goals and activities concerned with commercialising, industrializing and professionalizing the Malays in such a manner that it has become the main preoccupation of the government in the seventies and eighties. Needless to say, NEP activities have contributed in no small measure to the increase in the number of Malays in urban areas and at various levels of the social structure. The national education policy – which we have also analysed in another context – by making knowledge and skills available in Malay right up to the apex has played its part too in the expansion of the Malay urban working class and the Malay middle and upper classes.

If the change-over from a one-community dominant situation to a multi-ethnic situation creates some ethnic discord in most circumstances – as stated elsewhere – it is bound to be even more disharmonious when it has been brought about to some extent by ethnic quotas in factories, firms, offices and colleges. Viewed against this backdrop one can understand why communal feelings are so rife in the post-69 period.

They are particularly rife at the level of the middle and upper classes – though they permeate the entire social fabric. For it is those levels which have received most attention from the state in its endeavour to restructure society ethnically. This, in turn, is a reflection of the dominant significance of the middle and upper classes in a capitalist system. Most of the government's energies as far as the NEP is concerned have been directed towards the incubation of Malay contractors, wholesalers, importers, executives and professionals. This bias in the NEP is amply illustrated by the emphasis given to ethnic quotas in university recruitment compared to the lack of attention to the massive drop-out problem among Malay pupils in rural schools. Similarly, the paucity of Malay executives in a foreign firm or the lack of Malay directors in an established company generates much more concern within government circles than say, the low wages paid to Malay workers in an electronics factory or the lack of mobility for junior Malay clerks in a shipping enterprise.

This middle and upper class thrust of the NEP was obvious right from the outset. In fact, it can be argued that the NEP came into being in the first instance to cater for the economic and political aspirations of middle-class Malays who discovered that the administrative Alliance leadership of the sixties was not quite capable of accommodating their ambitions.⁴⁷ It was not prepared to intervene extensively in the economy on behalf of the Malay middle-class; it allowed Chinese capital to operate freely and widely. The vast majority of policies and programmes under the NEP — some of which we have examined elsewhere — proves its middle and upper class orientation.

This then is the essence of the ethnic problem in the country. The largely Malay government is committed to the creation of a Malay middle and upper class. This class and its aspirations have brought it into direct conflict with an established non-Malay middle and upper class which grew out of the colonial era. An emerging Malay middle and upper class backed by, indeed an extension of, what is perceived as a Malay state *versus* an established non-Malay middle and upper class deriving its strength from what is essentially a market economy linked to international capitalism — this is the scenario of the post-69 period that has influenced the entire pattern of ethnic relations in the country. As an aside, one wonders how ethnic relations would have been if there was a substantial Malay component in the middle and upper class of the first twelve years of Merdeka. The delayed birth of the Malay middle and upper class is therefore a vital dimension in the communal problem.

It goes without saying that Malays who benefit from ethnic policies will want these policies to continue. Middle and upper class Malays will defend privileges and special opportunities in the name of the interest of the community as a whole. In this way, the sentiments of the community will be mobilised on behalf of the interest of the middle and upper classes. This will undoubtedly reinforce communal feelings.

Similarly, reactions from non-Malay middle and upper class types have also contributed towards the communalization of the situation. We have already looked at the form and content of these reactions. In a sense, it is not just reaction to a particular policy. Non-Malay communalism of this sort arises from a selfish desire to preserve and, if possible, strengthen one's existing dominance. This is obvious from the

fact that in rejecting the state's 'middle-classing' policy there is an unwillingness to suggest an alternative which will benefit the poorer majority of all communities. Rather, the solution very often is to curb Malay capitalism but to allow non-Malay capitalism to flourish.

If conflict within the middle and upper classes has aggravated ethnic relations, it is also because the character of development remains capitalistic – even though the state is much more interventionist today. But then, as we have already observed, it is intervention on behalf of Malay capitalism. Such intervention does not in any way alter the basic framework of economic and social relations. Capitalist relations emphasise the acquisition of commodities, the maximization of profits, the pursuit of wealth as an end in itself. When the attitudes and values in such relations intrude interactions between communities, they invariably distort underlying human ties.⁴⁸ The wealth of an individual – his acquisitive capability – becomes the criterion of community success in a capitalist society. Communities are judged against each other on the basis of these capitalist values. Individual successes in acquiring immense wealth become representative of the total well-being of the community since capitalism is founded upon the notion of individual enterprise and affluence. This is why for the Malay political leadership the riches of a handful of Chinese millionaires becomes the motivation for the creation of a Malay commercial and industrial elite.⁴⁹ This is why the Malay middle and upper class like the non-Malay middle and upper class tends to equate the well-being of their particular classes with the welfare of their respective communities. Seen from this perspective one can understand why communalism cannot be divorced from capitalism.

So far we have studied various closely related processes which have led to a deterioration of the communal situation. There are, however, specific elements in them which must be re-examined from other perspectives. Malay urbanisation, for instance, has not only had an impact upon the ethnic composition of Kuala Lumpur; the uniqueness of this urbanisation lies in the fact that an indigenous community suddenly realizes that it is culturally alien in its own premier city. The non-Malay environment of Kuala Lumpur and the other cities, given the incessant emphasis upon the Bumiputera – non-Bumiputera dichotomy, thus becomes a traumatic experience for the young Malay migrant. For the non-Malay city-dweller, the entry of the Malay –

again, given the ethnically-divided atmosphere — is perceived as an encroachment. His attitudes becomes even more negative when he has to adjust to the Malay presence because of the early morning call to prayer or some such cultural element. As a result of all this, communal sentiments on both sides begin to coagulate.

The ethnic reaction to the city which we have just analysed is related to yet another cause of the decline in communal relations. This is religious revivalism. One of the main reasons for Islamic resurgence in particular is the non-Muslim, non-Malay, and therefore, culturally-alien city environment. The Malay/Muslim migrant becomes very conscious of his identity in his new setting. He has to seek some form of psychological sanctuary.⁵⁰ Religion, as we have seen, provides that security. We have also noted how this leads eventually to the proliferation of religious movements which become impediments to inter-ethnic social intercourse. Non-Muslim reactions through the establishment of new, exclusive religious coteries make matters worse.

It is quite possible that the new interest in religion among non-Muslim youths, long settled in cities, may also be due to the contemporary city itself. The city — Kuala Lumpur, for instance — has become huge and impersonal. It compartmentalizes life and living. It separates inner man from his outer self. It creates a feeling of emptiness, of a vacuum. This is often reinforced by the lack of meaningful communication, of the absence of community solidarity, of a sense of belonging.⁵¹ In his endeavour to overcome both his inner dilemma and his outer predicament, the city dweller affiliates with a religion. Superficially, at least, his new affiliation creates an inner peace; externally, it provides him with a sense of fellowship through its co-adherents.

The character of the city as a contributory factor in the reinforcement of religious sentiment is certainly not confined to local non-Muslim groups. It may be part of the explanation for religious revivalism even in many Western cities.⁵² It may also be an additional reason for Islamic resurgence in the country. It is ironical that the city, often seen as the focal-point of cosmopolitanism, as the centre of universal values, should become a source of parochial sentiments, a barrier to inter-ethnic harmony.

Finally, as in other multi-ethnic societies too, the emergence of new elites as part of a generational change has also brought about a certain degree of deterioration in ethnic relations. As we have observed earlier, the Alliance elites – whatever their ethnic backgrounds – developed some common perceptions through the efforts to obtain Independence. The post-69 elites do not have the benefit of a ‘community-transcending’, ‘nation-embracing’ experience. Development does not have the same effect especially when it is defined in ethnic terms. This is why these new elites tend to be more ethnic-oriented. They are community leaders first; national leaders only afterwards.⁵³ Their attitudes and values have influenced the thinking of a whole generation – a generation which has been indoctrinated to view ‘nation-building’ as a ‘community-building’ process.

Conclusion

Colonialism, citizenship laws, special position, the Bumiputera – non-Bumiputera dichotomy, a lack of understanding of the historical and cultural background of the country among non-Malays, a lack of appreciation of contemporary realities among Malays, the language problem, the capitalist system, the determination of the non-Malay middle and upper class to protect and expand its position, the desire of the state to create a Malay middle and upper class, the vested interests of this class among both communities, religious revivalism, urbanisation, the modern city, the change in elites – all these and perhaps other factors have been responsible for communalism. But the deterioration in communal relations in the last decade has been due mainly to the conflict between an emerging Malay middle and upper class and an established non-Malay middle and upper class.

There is no way in which this conflict could have been avoided – as long as one sought solutions to the communal problem within the framework of a capitalist system. For it would have been impossible to resist pressures to use state power to create a Malay middle and upper class enjoying wealth and prestige through commerce and industry as long as there was such a class dominated by non-Malays.

Of course, it can be argued that once a Malay middle and upper class has established itself, there would be harmony between the Malay and non-Malay components of this class which would then produce unity at all other levels of society. This is not likely for as long as

society is vertically structured there will always be other tensions between say the lower and upper echelons which in a multi-ethnic society could be manipulated to take the form of an ethnic conflict.

This is why instead of creating more vertical structures, instead of 'classing' society further, one should seek to de-class society, to establish horizontal relationships.⁵⁴ Vertically-structured societies will need 'vertical' ideas and ideologies to sustain their power. The Malay-non-Malay, Bumiputera - non-Bumiputera, Muslim - non-Muslim dichotomies are all vertical intellectual structures. They merely serve to camouflage class and communal tensions.

Horizontal relationships are relationships between human beings in a classless society. These relationships allow people to share common values and common interests that transcend ethnic and cultural differences. For that reason, they have the potential capacity to overcome communalism.⁵⁵

It is only too obvious that a classless society - as the antidote to communal dichotomization - can only be achieved through a wholistic social transformation. It is a transformation whose core must embody a spiritual conception of man that impels each of us to recognise that universal humanity which is the essence of our being.

Explanatory note

Reproduced from *Ethnicity, Class and Development in Malaysia* S. Husin Ali (editor) (Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia, 1984).

1. Though I have not used any particular definition of communalism, my thinking on the subject has been influenced by specific readings such as Philip Mason, *Race Relations*, Oxford University Press, 1970; O.C. Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, Modern Reader Paperbacks, 1970; Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan (Eds.), *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Cambridge, 1975 and Cynthia Enloe, *Ethnic Conflict and Development*, Boston, 1973.
2. A detailed treatment is available from my "Some Political Perspectives on the New Economic Policy", *Fourth Malaysian Economic Convention*, Persatuan Ekonomi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 1977.

3. See Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian Politics*, University of London Press, 1970, Chapters 6 & 7.
4. See Ahmad Boestamam, *Merintis Jalan Ke Puncak*, Pustaka Kejora, Kuala Lumpur, 1972.
5. For details see K.J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process*, University of Malaya Press, 1965.
6. There is an elaborate analysis of the language controversy in my "Protection of the Malay Community: A Study of UMNO's Position and Opposition Attitudes", Masters Thesis, University Sains Malaysia, 1974.
7. Various aspects of Malay and non-Malay sentiments are discussed in my "Some Dominant Concepts and Dissenting Ideas on Malay Rule and Malay Society from the Malacca to the Colonial and Merdeka Periods", Phd. Thesis, University of Singapore, 1977.
8. The Tunku himself has written profusely about the Alliance's personality. See for instance his *Looking Back*, Pustaka Antara, 1977 and his *As A Matter of Interest*, Heinemann, 1981.
9. A thorough study of this is in John Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia*, Heinemann Educational Books, 1980.
10. See various articles in *Aliran Speaks*, Aliran 1981, especially Chapter 1.
11. See R.K. Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1971.
12. See R.K. Vasil, *The Malaysian General Election of 1969*, Oxford University Press, 1972.
13. This is analysed in my "The New Economic Policy and the Quest for National Unity" *Fifth Malaysian Economic Convention*, Persatuan Ekonomi Malaysia, May 1978.
14. See my "Protection of the Malay Community", *op. cit.*, especially Chapter III.

15. See my "25 years of Merdeka", *Aliran*, Vol. 1 no. 3, July-September 1982.
16. This is why it is so difficult for the BN to get too specific in its election manifestos. The only way in which ideological unity within the coalition can be maintained for electoral purposes is by remaining vague and general. See for instance *Barisan Nasional Manifesto for the 1982 General Election*, Kuala Lumpur, July 1982.
17. See Funston, *op. cit.*
18. ISA is against Islamic jurisprudence for it denies the accused an open trial; ESCAR is also a violation of Islam for it denies elementary justice to the accused through serious curbs upon the rules of evidence, the role of witnesses and so on. For some comments on this see Siddiq Fadhil, "Garis-Garis Besar Haluan Perjuangan", *Ucapan Dasar*, Muktamar Sanawi Abim Ke II, Pctaling Jaya, Selangor, September 1982.
19. A couple of years ago, however, DAP Secretary-General Lim Kit Siang had expressed some support for the Palestinian struggle and even suggested that scholarships be given to Palestinian students to study at local universities. But at that time, the issue did not have such a powerful impact upon the public mind. On this recent occasion when a strong stand by the DAP would have helped to reduce the ethnic connotation, the party was significantly silent.
20. See Charles Gamba, *Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaysia: a study of colonial labour unrest*, Donald Moore, Singapore, 1962.
21. See Michael Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya: Prelude to the Communist Revolt of 1948*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1970.
22. I have discussed this in various articles in *Aliran Speaks*, *op. cit.*, especially in Chapter 10.
23. *Ibid*, p. 228-231.

24. The NUTP brought together a huge 'English language' union, the National Union of Teachers and the leading Malay teachers union of the day. There are smaller unions which are still outside the fold. Ethnic feelings are still there within the NUTP but there is also genuine, multi-ethnic cooperation.
25. Aspects of the AEU action are discussed in my *Protector? an analysis of the concept and practice of loyalty in leader-led relationships within Malay society*, Aliran, 1979, p. 102-3.
26. This issue is well covered in Mahathir bin Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma*, Donald Moore, 1970 especially Chapter 4.
27. This phenomenon is discussed in my "The 1982 Malaysian General Election: An Analysis", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 4, no. 1, June 1982, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1982.
28. See *Fourth Malaysian Plan, 1981-1985*, National Printing Department, Kuala Lumpur, 1981. For instance, according to 1979 figures, 13% of lawyers, 11% of architects, 7.6% of accountants, 11.6% of engineers and 8.6% of doctors were Malays, page 60 table 3-12.
29. As an example, it is obvious that this sense of independence and autonomy hardly exists among academics. Indeed, many of them seek to attach themselves to the state. For some remarks on this, see my paper on "Problems of University Education", Academic Staff Club Forum, University of Malaya, 8 December 1982.
30. This argument is elaborated in my *Protector?, op. cit.*
31. This is based upon the sort of multi-ethnic support that Aliran, the reform movement that I am involved in, has managed to obtain on certain issues related to human rights, public integrity and economic development.
32. The association referred to is the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement (ABIM). One of its leaders expressed concern that taking a stand would affect ABIM's credibility with the Malays. The

writer was also at that meeting. Earlier on, however, ABIM had appealed for stay of execution on behalf of those convicted. This was part of a joint stand, together with other societies.

33. A good example would be societies which campaigned for the Merdeka University. See their *University Merdeka*, Statements and Commentaries, Universiti Merdeka Bhd., 1979.
34. The Malay Cultural Congress of 1971 laid out (a) indigenous cultures (b) Islam, and (c) suitable elements from outside, as the bases of a national culture. See *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan*, Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia & Sukan, Malaysia, 1971.
35. See *The Merdeka University: The Real Issues*, Aliran, 1979 for a detailed analysis.
36. See my "What is National Culture?" *Five Controversies*, Aliran, 1982.
37. This is discussed in the "Introduction" to *The Universalism of Islam*, Aliran, 1979.
38. See *Third Malaysia Plan, 1976-1980*, Government Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1976, p. 401.
39. For a discussion on the relationship between Islam and Malay culture see S.M.N. al-Attas, *Islam Dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, Kuala Lumpur, 1972.
40. For a comment on ethnic polarization in the Universities see *Aliran*, Vol. II no. 3, July-September 1982.
41. Some aspects of these are discussed in S. Husin Ali, *The Malays: Their Problems and Future*, Heinemann Asia, 1981 especially Chapters VI & IX.
42. An excellent analysis of the psychological impact of colonialism can be found in C. Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: the Psychology of Colonization*, London, 1956.

43. For further analysis see my "Why is there communal polarization?", *Five Controversies*, Aliran, 1982.
44. The link between the ruling class and capitalism is studied in Jomo Kwame Sundaram "The Ascendance of Bureaucrat Capitalists in Malaysia", *Alternatives*, Vol. VII no. 4, December 1981.
45. This point is made as part of a more elaborate discussion on democracy in my "Freedom of Association: The Malaysian Situation", *Access to Justice Workshop*, Tagaytay, Philippines, February 1982. It also appears in the *Asian Huridocs*, No. 2 June 1982.
46. A detailed analysis of the citizenship laws formulated before Merdeka can be found in K.J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process*, *op. cit.*, Chapter III.
47. An evaluation of this aspect of the NEP is contained in my "Some Political Perspectives on the New Economic Policy", *op. cit.*, The term 'administocrats' which I first used in 1974 is derived from the words 'aristocrat' and 'administrator'.
48. To understand this problem Oliver C. Cox, *op. cit.*, has been very useful.
49. This thinking is suggested in *Revolusi Mental*, Senu Abdul Rahman (Ed.), Utusan Melayu, Kuala Lumpur, 1971. Also, see Mahathir Mohamad in *Trends in Malaysia*, Patrick Low (Ed.), Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1971, p. 74.
50. This aspect of Islamic resurgence is discussed briefly in my "Islamic Resurgence", Seminar at University of Washington, Seattle, June, 1980.
51. A brilliant analysis of some of the sociological problems of the big city is found in Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: its origins, its transformations and its prospects*, A Harvest/HBJ book, 1961, especially Chapters 17 & 18.

52. Certain aspects of this revivalism in relation to religion and urban living are discussed in Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends*, Anchor Books, 1973.
53. This trend is by no means confined to Malaysia. See for instance Selig Harrison, *India, the Most Dangerous Decades*, Princeton, 1980 for a discussion of the growth of provincial leaders and provincial sentiments.
54. This idea is from Mahatma Gandhi. See his *India of My Dreams*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1947, p. 100.
55. I have tried to show how new, egalitarian forms of social organisation can also be mobilised to fight corruption. See my "The Scourge of Corruption", *Corruption*, Aliran, 1981.

THE INDIAN MINORITY AND CULTURAL UNITY

An ethnic minority with an immigrant background linked to colonial rule has to overcome a powerful psychological barrier before its cultural elements can be accepted enthusiastically as integral to the local culture. This is due, in part, to the impenetrable wall that colonialism had erected separating the local community from the immigrants. In the post-colonial period, this "external" minority has to undergo a process of "internalization".

Internalization means, in essence, a willingness on the part of the ethnic minority to develop fluency in the Malay language, acquire some knowledge of Islam and appreciate the significance of certain other aspects of Malay culture. It is wrong to regard this adjustment to local realities as an unfair demand upon the Indian minority. Malay culture, given its historical relationship with the land, will have a bigger role to play in the evolution of a national culture than the other cultures. Anyone who understands integration between indigenous and non-indigenous elements will realize the legitimacy of this position.

However, the majority community must also help expedite this adjustment. As the minority adjusts, the majority should remove gradually those indigenous-non-indigenous dichotomies in education, economics and politics which tend to perpetuate the "outsider" image of the minority. At the same time the majority must be prepared to accept certain crucial facets of the cultural life of the minority like its language and religion as legitimate dimensions of the nation's culture.

It is obvious that this mutual adjustment is not taking place harmoniously as it should. If the Indian minority learns Malay, it is mainly because of economic and educational requirements. Similarly, if the Malay majority is aware of an Indian presence it is largely because of the need to co-exist.

Instead of working towards integration from a holistic perspective we have consciously or unconsciously reinforced existing ethnic divisions. Almost every issue and institution is perceived along ethnic lines. Most individuals are seeking out "ethnic homes" in the

hope that their interests would be taken care of. Indeed, the situation has become so serious within the Indian community that various sub-ethnic groupings have become stronger in the last 10 years.

There are many reasons that explain this situation. Apart from colonialism and the implementation of citizenship laws in the past, one can also argue that the government's ethnic policies and competition between Malay and non-Malay elements in the middle class are partly responsible. More important perhaps is the influence of vested interests in the economy and politics which benefit from the perpetuation of ethnic policies.

As a result of all this, social realities are no longer analysed and understood as they should be. Indian culture for instance, is seen as a homogenous entity which carries the same meaning for every person of Indian origin. This is not true for if culture is a way of life, then the culture of a wealthy Indian professional cannot be the same as that of a poor Indian rubber tapper though both of them may be able to speak Tamil. Likewise, an Indian in a rural locality may have different values from his city counterpart though both may profess the same brand of Hinduism. In other words, income, locality, education, family, personality and other factors influence culture to such an extent that groups and individuals who speak the same language and practise the same religion may have completely divergent values, interests and aspirations.

By ignoring vital differences within the community, we will continue to neglect the underlying causes of some of the more fundamental cultural challenges confronting Indians in Malaysia. The servility and subservience of the poor majority which affects the dignity of the entire community is one of those challenges that has not received any attention from Indian 'culture wallahs'. And yet this degrading attitude can only be overcome if the 'neo-caste' structure within the Indian community which worships wealth and power is destroyed.

This is why there is an urgent need for young Indians to think in terms of groups, classes and structures within the community and to relate these to the larger Malaysian situation. In this way, you will not only understand Indian society in greater depth but will also be able to

integrate the community in a more meaningful manner with the rest of the nation.

You should, in this connection, set yourselves two major tasks which are pertinent to the evolution of a Malaysian culture.

One, you should encourage more and more young Indians who are fluent in Malay to write essays, short stories and novels in Malay. This will ensure that the particular experiences of groups within the Indian community in various spheres of life will reach a larger Malaysian audience. It could contribute to a better understanding of poverty among PWD labourers or the sufferings of street-beggars or even the opulence of business tycoons. As this understanding percolates, ethnic barriers will break down. Common interests arising from our common human condition will begin to engage our energies. Besides, you will help to change the very content of literature in Malay and in the process develop truly Malaysian literature.

Two, you should persuade young Indians to study Indian culture and philosophy in depth so that the eternal, the universal values that are embedded in them can be brought to the surface. Since these values of truth, justice, freedom, compassion and love are universal they could well transform the very outlook of the Indian community. A community that emphasises its universal, rather than its exclusive, traits is better suited for a multi-ethnic society. Also, it will enable Indians to work on the basis of common principles with other communities since these values are found in their traditions too. For example, the sacredness of nature is part of Hindu philosophy: it is also an important aspect of Islamic, Buddhist, Taoist and Christian thought. Similarly, restraint in consumption is a value upheld in all the traditions present in Malaysia.

Emphasising the eternal and the universal means a radical shift from Tamil film gossip to the Thirrukural, to Gandhi, to Aurobindo and to Tagore. Such a shift is bound to affect the very content of Indian culture. For all those rituals and practices which are antagonistic to this universal, progressive spirit will have to be discarded. Art, music, drama and indeed attitudes, values and relationships will have to reflect this new culture.

It should be apparent now that the cultures of the ethnic minorities in Malaysia should be prepared to undergo a massive transformation. Only by entering the mainstream of Malaysian culture through the promotion of the universal, progressive elements in their own ethnic traditions can they hope to strengthen their position within the national milieu.

The obscurantist revival of meaningless cultural forms which has become so pervasive now among ethnic minorities partly as a reaction to a similar trend within the majority community will, in the long run, reduce their cultures to empty shells devoid of substance.

Explanatory note

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MALAYSIAN IDENTITY AND THE CHINESE COMMUNITY

What do we mean by a Malaysian identity? If we look at most societies language seems to be an important factor in establishing the identity of a nation. In our case, the situation has been made easier through the acceptance of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language by the various communities. It is only right that Bahasa Malaysia occupies this position since it has been the main medium of communication between different ethnic groups in the region for centuries. As more and more non-Malays speak Bahasa fluently, as more and more of them use the language in their daily lives, Bahasa Malaysia will become the identity symbol of our multi-ethnic society.

Once Bahasa Malaysia is regarded as our common language, other aspects of our identity as a people will also become clearer. Literature written in Bahasa Malaysia will be truly Malaysian since it will include the contributions of non-Malay poets and novelists too. They will undoubtedly introduce ideas and ideals which will make the Malaysian literature of tomorrow very different from the Malay literature of today. Like literature, drama and films in Bahasa Malaysia will also assume a more Malaysian character. So will music and songs since not only the participants but even the audience will come from both the Malay and non-Malay communities. In that sort of situation, we will be able to say that our literature, drama, films, music and songs do reflect a Malaysian identity.

Even as it is, there are already certain other aspects of our cultural life that have nothing to do with language which most Malaysians are quite capable of identifying with, whatever their ethnic origin. Food is an outstanding example. At completely Chinese functions, one finds that satay or roti canai or muruku are sometimes served together with traditional Chinese food. Similarly, bee-hoon, keow-teow, pau and so on are eaten quite freely by Malays and Indians. They have of course been adapted to suit the taste and cultural requirements of each community. Foods that have successfully crossed ethnic barriers in this manner should be regarded as our common heritage.

Art is another example. Even in the fifties and sixties Chinese artists associated with the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts were painting scenes of Malay life. In 1952 for instance, Chan Chong Swee produced a piece on Kampung life as an adaptation of the traditional hanging scroll. Another artist, Soo Pieng, did a painting of a fishing village in 1961. Malay and Indian artists in turn have often created works which depict Chinese trisha-pedlars or hawkers as part of the attempt to capture the spirit of the city on canvas. Malaysians from whatever community have no problem in empathising with these artistic endeavours. This is why it is not wrong to suggest that Malaysian art is one of the most effective transmitters of a Malaysian identity.

Exposure to, and interaction with, certain elements of cultures which are not one's own has been mainly responsible for the evolution of a Malaysian identity in food and art. Through the same process it may be possible to evolve Malaysian architecture or even a Malaysian attire. Of course, as demonstrated by food and art, we will do well to remember that we cannot and should not force the pace. Exposure and interaction through a long period of time in a conducive social atmosphere – and not fixed regulations or artificial experimentation – should be our guiding principle.

At the same time in working towards a national identity we cannot afford to ignore the impact of the past upon the present. Just as an individual's identity will be influenced by his background so a nation's identity will be determined by its history to some extent. In encouraging interaction among the various communities, we should not forget this important fact. Architecture and attire bring out this truth very clearly. It is simply not possible to evolve a distinctly Malaysian architecture without taking into account the cultural, historical and geographical setting. Likewise, the attire that will mirror our identity will have to be something that has been adapted from dress forms that have developed in the region over time. It needs to be stressed that it should not be created artificially and must be acceptable to all the Malaysian communities.

Quite apart from all these conventional aspects of national identity like language, art and attire, we have not yet explored how

certain other features like historical landmarks and even ordinary places can be harnessed to develop a common feeling of identification with the country. There is no reason why young Malaysians in particular, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, should not be encouraged to identify with an Islamic tombstone in Trengganu or a Buddhist temple in Penang or a Hindu shrine in Kedah or a Portugese church in Malacca as part of their common historical tradition. More than historical landmarks, places that we are all familiar with like beaches, hills, forests, the rural locality that one came from, the urban centre that one belongs to, can also help to strenghten one's sentiments for the country. Indeed, very often especially when one is abroad it is these ordinary places – sounds and smells associated with them – that make one conscious of one's unique relationship with the land. To the individual, places and the people that go with them are what constitute the nation's identity.

All this gives us some idea of the sort of underlying considerations that should be borne in mind in forging a Malaysian identity. First, our national identity will comprise elements that all communities can identify with. Second, it will have some relationship with the historical background of the country just as it must be relevant to the contemporary setting. Third, it must evolve through time, as a result of inter-ethnic exposure and interaction. Finally, this means that a Malaysian identity in its totality does not exist at the moment though elements of it are already present.

If we are to evolve a national identity, does it mean that community identities must disappear? Community identities will remain; though, with the growth of a national identity, identification with one's community will not be as strong as it is today. There are certain aspects of culture which can never really become part of a national identity since they are so closely linked to particular communities. Chinese and Tamil as languages will continue to be identity symbols of their respective communities. Jawi will always be identified with the Malay-Muslim community. Similarly, the Chinese opera and the Indian Bharatha Natyam, like the Dikir Barat or even the Wayang Kulit will be confined largely to their respective communities. This is significant for though the wayang kulit has a Bahasa base it is unlikely that it will evoke the all-embracing Malaysian response that a modern drama in the national language can.

Obviously the Malay, Chinese and Indian community identities will continue to exist for a long while through cultural practices that will never be able to transcend completely their own ethnic characteristics. There is nothing wrong with this. On the contrary, community identities within a national identity may even serve a useful purpose in that they provide people with a sense of emotional well-being; they anchor them to a certain cultural reality which carries deep meanings.

What we should avoid, however, is a situation where practices within a certain cultural community generate suspicion and distrust among others. This is why one should explain one's culture to members of other communities. Otherwise, the impression may be created that one is trying to assert one's community identity at the expense of the national identity. The best way of avoiding this is to emphasise the underlying values rather than the outward forms. A specific example would be the lion-dance. Wouldn't it be better if we can point out to everyone that the lion-dance actually symbolises cherished universal values such as justice, harmony and righteousness? If these values with which Chinese and non-Chinese alike can identify are brought to the fore, it is quite possible that the dance itself will become more acceptable to others.

Indeed, it is not just in regard to community identity that underlying values should be emphasised. National identity itself should lay stress upon these values. More than language, literature, drama, art, architecture, attire and food, it is these eternal values of justice, truth, freedom, equality which should determine a nation's identity.

In the ultimate analysis there is no doubt at all that eternal, universal values should constitute the core of our national identity. A nation in that sense is like an individual. When we first come into contact with an individual it is his appearance, his looks, his speech, his gait that help to identify the person. But when we really know and understand the person it is his character that makes the stronger impression. We begin to judge him on the basis of his qualities. Is he honest? Is he kind? Is he generous? Or is he a cheat, is he cruel, is he stingy? It is his values or disvalues which will decisively determine his identity.

Malaysia should be known to the world as a nation that seeks the truth, that is just and fair, that upholds freedom and equality, that abhors communalism and chauvinism, that is revulsed by bigotry and fanaticism. We should be known as a people who are compassionate and kind and friendly; a people who are, at the same time, diligent and disciplined; a people who are honest and upright, a people with honour and dignity. We should be known as a people who are capable of thinking, of reflecting, a people who love knowledge. We should be known as a people who will defend the weak against the strong, who will fight for the oppressed against the oppressor.

This is the real identity that we should seek. It is the only identity that is worth striving for. This is the identity that should be the noble dream of every Malaysian.

This concept of identity is in harmony with all the cultures present in the country. It is certainly in line with the ideal of Chinese philosophy. Wasn't Kung Fu-tzu concerned with man's humanity? It was he who said that "to be able to practise five virtues everywhere in the world constitutes humanity". His virtues – courtesy, magnanimity, good faith, diligence and kindness – are in fact some of the values which we regard as important in our concept of national identity. In the same way, wasn't Meng-Tzu concerned with justice and fairness? Wasn't he concerned with restoring the innate goodness in people? Didn't Mo-Tzu through his very life show the importance of service to others? Didn't the distinguished statesman, Wang An-Shih, emphasise honesty and uprightness? Isn't it true that in the growth of modern China over the last 100 years, equality, compassion, love of the oppressed and disadvantaged, and other such values have helped to forge the identity of the nation?

It is a pity that these aspects of Chinese philosophy and culture have not been given the attention they deserve by the influential segment of society, either at the level of ideas or through actual policies and practices. Consequently the Chinese community is often stereotyped as greedy, selfish and interested only in material advancement. This is a prejudiced view of a community whose philosophy embodies some of the most sublime ideals known to man. It is forgotten that Mo-Tzu, the great advocate of universal love, wanted us to regard others

as one's self. He argued that to be a superior man one should take care of his friend as he does of himself and take care of his friend's parents as he does his own. When he finds his friend hungry he would feed him, and when he finds him cold he would clothe him. In his sickness he would minister to him and when he is dead he would bury him. Mo-Tzu extended this idea of compassion to the whole of humankind.

What is needed then is a group within the Chinese community that is willing to disseminate the eternal, universal values that lie at the core of its culture. I have often argued for a similar group within the Malay and Indian communities too. It is obvious that the group has to function outside the electoral process, for it is impossible to bring about an intellectual transformation of this sort if one has to respond to the pulls and pressures of party politics. As the group tries, through social education, to persuade the people that these values should emerge as the essence of Chinese culture and Chinese identity it must seek constant communication with like-minded groups in the other communities. Through this interaction, segments within all communities will eventually realize that the common values that unite them are far more fundamental than the different practices that separate them. When common values are perceived as fundamental to each cultural tradition our national identity which will embody these values will also have a more secure foundation.

It is of course granted that becoming aware of a Malaysian identity based upon shared, universal values alone is not enough. For it will not be possible to sustain this awareness if the social structure as a whole negates and nullifies these values. For instance, how will it be possible to convince people that selflessness should mark their identity when the entire economic system is geared towards selfishness, greed and acquisition? By the same token, can we persuade people that honesty should be our badge of identity when the corrupt are protected and even rewarded by the political system? How can we show the young that thinking and reflection are vital, when the education system ensures the success of the slavishly uncritical?

In other words if we want a new human being, a new identity to emerge, society must undergo a massive transformation. Needless to say at the moment it is the government, given its overwhelming power, that

is in a position to achieve this wholistic change. It has the authority to work towards a Malaysian identity which embodies the time-honoured values of freedom and equality, of compassion and dignity. The question is: does it have the will? Does it have the wherewithal?

As for us, like the sages of ancient China, we can only offer for the time being ideas and visions in the hope that the rulers will listen and respond. However, unlike the men of old we know that ideas are of no use if they cannot inspire action. And it is only through action, guided by the right motives and directed towards ethical ends, that real change will be accomplished.

The determination to achieve change is an outstanding characteristic of modern man. Let us show the world that it is also the hallmark of a Malaysian identity.

Explanatory note

This article was first presented as a talk to an education group within the Chinese community in Penang. It has appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (April 1984).

INTEGRATION AND EDUCATION

Aliran believes in a unified, integrated education system from primary to university level. The main medium of instruction in this system would be Bahasa Malaysia. English would be an important second language. Chinese, Tamil and other Malaysian languages would also be taught. It must be emphasised that while Bahasa Malaysia is the main medium it will not be the sole medium. What this means is that instruction in other languages for specific subjects and specific purposes would be perfectly legitimate. This is provided for in our present National Education Policy but its full implications have never really been spelt out.

For us this relationship between Bahasa Malaysia as the main medium of instruction, on the one hand, and the other languages, as subsidiary media, would imply that apart from Chinese, Tamil and English, even some of the other subjects like Mathematics, or Science or Geography especially at secondary and university levels, can be taught in the other languages.

Of course, the evolution of this unified, integrated education system will take a long while. It should be developed gradually over a period of time. As a first and fundamental step in the evolution of this integrated system both the Government and society should strengthen Pupils' Own Language (POL) in the present national schools. POL should not only be part of the ordinary school timetable, it should also have a well-developed curriculum from standard one up to form six. At the moment, a POL class can be started on the request of 15 pupils in a particular standard or form. We feel that even if five pupils want a class they should be given the opportunity to attend one during regular school hours. This will enhance the significance of learning one's mother-tongue.

Teachers should be specially trained for POL teaching. This would require some major changes to the current programmes of teacher training colleges in the country. At the same time, POL should be available as an examination subject at various levels.

It would be a logical extension of the integration of Chinese, Tamil and other languages into the national school system to have Chinese, Indian and English Studies Departments in not just the University of Malaya but all the other universities as well. This would ensure that these languages are well entrenched within the mainstream of national education.

Other Crucial Aspects of the Education System

But language is only one dimension of the unified, integration education system we have in mind. Another equally important aspect would be the way in which pupils are treated. Aliran strongly believes that pupils should not be discriminated on the basis of ethnicity or religion. When they enter school they should all be classified as 'Malaysian'. Their ethnic origins should not be brought into the picture. Financial assistance should be given based upon need and nothing else. Similarly, scholarships and places in post-secondary colleges and universities should be awarded on merit and scholastic ability. In short, no Malaysian pupil should be made to feel alienated. There should be justice for all.

Teachers, headmasters and others in the education service should also be made to feel that there is complete justice in the treatment accorded to them. Ethnic considerations should be minimised in recruitment and promotions. There should be greater upward mobility for non-Malay teachers. More of them should be given positions of responsibility within the education service.

It is Aliran's view that some of the ideas suggested here can be implemented right away. All pupils entering standard one in national primary schools next year, 1988, should be classified as 'Malaysian'. There should be no ethnic dichotomization as far as they are concerned. Why only those in Standard One of the National Primary Schools? Because these schools use Bahasa Malaysia as the main medium which is what our unified integrated education system of the future will do. Besides, it is Bahasa Malaysia that is supposed to signify our identity as Malaysians. This is clear from our citizenship laws. The only provision in our citizenship laws that brings out our Malaysian identity is 'knowledge of Malay'. All the other provisions, like loyalty, allegiance to the Head of State and period of residence can be found in

any citizenship law anywhere in the world.

Let us begin 1988, our 31st year of Merdeka, by embracing each and every child who enters Standard One in our national primary schools as a Malaysian. And let us treat this 1988 generation, and all pupils who come after them, as Malaysians in every respect.

Apart from equality and justice in the relations among pupils of different ethnic origins, our unified education system will also give a lot of attention to character formation and the development of sound ethical values among the young. It is a pity that in their obsession with the perpetuation of a separate education stream in the Chinese language, Chinese educationists appear to have forgotten this vital dimension of education.

Similarly, there has been hardly any discussion in the Chinese Press about the importance of creating a thinking, analytical generation of young Malaysians. Such young Malaysians are vital for the future of our nation. For the success of democracy depends upon the capacity of the populace to think critically and to act intelligently.

In responding to the proposed review of the Education Act, Chinese educationists have also failed to analyse the structure of control and the mode of administration of schools. This is an important issue. For a few years now Aliran has suggested a de-centralized education system in which the local community plays a very big role in the administration of schools.

To ensure that this de-centralized system achieves its objectives of encouraging local participation in decision-making and of involving parents and the community in the education process, Aliran has also proposed that the formal education system as a whole be placed under the control of an independent, autonomous Education Commission. This Commission which will be appointed by the King and will be directly accountable to the people through Parliament will be protected by the Constitution. It will make all major decisions connected with the implementation of the national education policy. In this way, we hope to de-politicize education. The development of education must be guided by educational – not political – criteria. One of the most

important causes of the decline of education in this country is the politicization of education.

Our educationists, whatever their ethnic origin, should ponder deeply on all these matters. For there is no point talking about the medium of instruction in primary or secondary schools if we are not prepared to work towards an ethically sound and intellectually dynamic education system. After all, whatever the medium of instruction, the quality of the individual who emerges from our school system depends on the type of education he or she has received. What is crucial is whether he or she is a thinking, morally upright person.

Language and Its Social Usage

Just as many educationists fail to see the other dimensions of education which must influence the question of the medium of instruction, so they are incapable of understanding how the larger society can help sustain Chinese and the other languages. Aliran has always argued, for instance, that while Bahasa Malaysia will continue to be the main medium of communication in our Radio and Television services, other languages should also be used for all time. Indeed, we feel that the Broadcasting Act should be amended to give a permanent place to minority languages. Likewise, the Printing and Publication Act should include a language clause. While recognising Bahasa Malaysia as the primary language, Chinese, Tamil, Iban, Kadazan, English and other languages should be accepted as secondary languages. In this way, we will ensure that the other languages will always remain part of the electronic and print media. And as long as they are part of the written and spoken word, they will remain living languages of the land.

This brings us to the question of the literature of the land. It follows from our analysis that literature produced in all the Malaysian languages is Malaysian literature. It is the literature of the nation. Of course, for now and in the future, the bulk of Malaysian literature will be in Bahasa Malaysia since it is the main language of the people. But literature in the secondary languages — including Kadazan and Iban — should also be included in national literary awards. Aliran has advocated this since its founding in 1977.

Justice and the Larger System

More than that, Aliran has from the beginning realized that many of the grievances of the Chinese and other non-Malay communities go well beyond issues of language, literature and the education system, though they may find expression in these areas. Ethnic discrimination in matters pertaining to economic and social justice is undoubtedly a major source of non-Malay, non-Bumiputra unhappiness. We have never condoned such discrimination. This is why Aliran has always asked for fairness in the allocation of licences, in job recruitment and even in promotions. It has always been our view that ability and integrity should be given due weight whether in the public or private sectors. At the same time, we have often asked the non-Bumiputras to understand why the economically-deprived Bumiputras should be given special assistance, as provided for, in the 'Special Position' clauses of the Constitution.

Aliran is also committed to greater integration and accommodation of the non-Bumiputras in the public services, police, military and in agriculture. We have, therefore often pleaded for a more earnest attempt to recruit non-Bumiputras into FELDA schemes and the like. Most of all, as the years go by, there should be the willingness to allow and to encourage non-Bumiputras to play more prominent roles in Government and politics.

However, integration is not a one-way street. Non-Malays and non-Bumiputras should also extend sympathy and support to efforts to increase Bumiputra participation in commerce, industry and the professions. There must be genuine concern for the plight of the Bumiputra poor in both Peninsular Malaysia and in Sabah and Sarawak. Only if there is concern for, and commitment to, each other's well-being will there be unity and harmony among the communities.

It is obvious from this analysis that for us in Aliran the question of language in the Education System cannot be isolated from the larger challenge of justice in the entire social order. If there is justice and fairness in society, the problem of how much Chinese should be taught in schools would take a different meaning. Unfortunately, many Chinese educationists do not see the connection between the two. What is worse, even when they talk of justice in the larger society, they adopt

a very sectarian, communal approach.

The Unified System: the Advantages

Having looked at the question of the Chinese language in the school system from a broad perspective we must now find out why the unified, integrated education system is good for the Chinese community and the Malaysian nation.

One, by bringing Chinese and other non-Malay languages into the mainstream, these languages would acquire the sort of psychological legitimacy which they will not have as long as they are the media of instruction in separate, distinct school systems. To put it in a more pointed manner, through integration within the national education system, the Chinese language for instance, will become 'internalized'.

The concept of internalization is a crucial concept to understand. The languages and cultures of communities that had migrated to a particular country during the colonial period tend to be viewed by the settled population as 'alien' and 'external' long after these communities have developed roots in their new setting. This is partly because the locals, as a subjugated people, would have had little say over the migration and settlement of these outsiders. It would have been different if the domestic society was not colonized and domestic elites had presided over the domicile of these outside elements. Though there would still have been the usual problems of adaptation and adjustment, the resentment might have been much less. The accommodation of Chinese and Indians in pre-colonial Melaka is a case in point. This is a point that has also been made about Thailand and its assimilation of the Chinese minority. In the case of colonial Malaya, the Malays were not only a subjugated people; the immigrant influx was numerically overwhelming. Given these facts of history, the Malays have continued to regard the Chinese and their language and culture as external to the nation — as facets of the Malaysian scene which don't really belong to the nation since they were part of the colonial experience.

To change this perception is no easy task. Maintaining and perpetuating a separate education stream in the Chinese language will not help. It will only perpetuate the language's 'external' image. This is why it is important to integrate the Chinese language into a national

education system based upon Bahasa Malaysia. It is – to reiterate the main argument – an attempt to internalize the language, to secure its roots within the Malaysian milieu.

Two, the internalization of the Chinese language will also mean expediting the integration of certain aspects of Chinese culture and philosophy into the mainstream of national life. This is something that should be encouraged in the interest of the nation. Certain Chinese educationists do not seem to realize that by clinging on to the idea of a separate education stream, it is going to be difficult to convince even moderate Malays that there are certain rich and dynamic ideas in Chinese thought that should become part of our shared heritage. On the other hand, once Chinese is linked to Bahasa Malaysia in a secondary-primary language relationship, Malay attitudes to Chinese culture and philosophy could well change.

Three, what this also means is that by integrating the Chinese language into mainstream education, it will be easier to secure the support and commitment of everyone – and especially the Malay community – for the growth and development of the Chinese language. POL taught in Bahasa schools, in other words, has a much better chance of evoking a total national commitment than say, a separate Chinese education system.

Four, it follows from this that the integration of Chinese into the national system will ensure wider usage of the language not just among Chinese pupils but also among the others. For one thing, those Chinese who have never wanted to be part of a separate stream will also be able to study the language and its literature under our unified, integrated system. At the same time, since the language would be part of the mainstream, it is quite conceivable that a number of Malay and Indian pupils will also avail themselves of the opportunity to study something new. In the process, the position of the Chinese language will be strengthened considerably within both the education system and the larger society as a whole.

Finally, an integrated, unified education system will undoubtedly facilitate greater social interaction among pupils of different ethnic origins. Social interaction is a crucial ingredient in creating inter-ethnic

harmony. If young Chinese, Indians, Malays and others have the opportunity to share experiences in the classroom and on the playing-field from standard one to form six and beyond, they'll come to understand — and even care — for one another.

There are some proponents of a separate Chinese system who maintain that the 'social interaction' argument is sheer nonsense because there is a great deal of ethnic polarization in present-day national schools. True, there is ethnic polarization but the national school attended by different ethnic communities is not the cause. The real causes of polarization are to be found in the larger society, in Government policies, in the economic structure, in the nature of political mobilization, in certain Malay and non-Malay attitudes and so on. It is absurd to blame the national school since it is, to a large extent, a mere reflection of social realities. If the general situation was different, it is quite likely that ethnically-mixed schools within a unified, integrated education system would make a tremendous contribution to national integration.

The Separate System: Weaknesses

Apart from all these positive features of a unified system, there are certain negative characteristics in the separate school idea which must be examined. A separate Chinese stream will only serve to perpetuate segregationist attitudes among both Chinese and Malays. These attitudes will not be confined to the school; they will permeate the entire social fabric.

Segregationist thinking, in turn, will breed narrow communal attitudes. When a large part of one's life from childhood onwards, is conditioned by a particular language, a particular culture, and a particular education system which can never represent the total reality of Malaysian society, one is bound to become sectarian in outlook. This will not be conducive for the building of a united Malaysian nation.

As segments of the Chinese community cling on to this concept of a separate Chinese education system, it is quite possible that Muslims, especially in the wake of Islamic resurgence, will demand that more and more Arabic-religious schools be set up. This is already beginning to happen. Separate school systems in two different

languages, one for the Chinese, the other for the Muslims – what will this lead us to eventually?

Even if such an extreme situation does not develop, and Chinese pupils study Bahasa Malaysia and English in their Chinese schools, the question is this: Would a person be able to cope efficiently with three languages? This is something that is worth pondering upon. As it is, a significant number of Chinese school pupils are reported to be weak in both Bahasa Malaysia and English.

This is indirectly linked to yet another weakness in the 'separate Chinese stream' argument. Those who graduate from Chinese schools or a Chinese-language University may not be able to find employment as easily as their counterparts from the national language stream since their command of Bahasa and/or English may not be up to mark. The Bahasa/English orientation of both the public and private sectors of the economy will remain for a long while to come. This is why Chinese-language graduates may be confronted with formidable obstacles especially in relation to jobs.

The Separatists' Position

Having analysed the weaknesses of a separate Chinese school system, we must now reflect upon some of the points raised by its advocates. One of their main contentions is that education in one's mother tongue from the lowest to the highest level is a question of human rights. They claim that the United Nations Covenant on Political and Civil Rights and its Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights guarantee this.

This is not really true. No United Nations' Covenant or Declarations states that a person has a right to expect his mother-tongue to be used as the medium of instruction from the lowest to the highest level in the education system. What various United Nations documents recognise is the right of a person to study and use his mother-tongue. Aliran challenges the proponents of a separate system to show us the Article or Articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 or the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1976 or the International Covenant on

Civil and Political Rights 1976 that promises an individual the right to be educated in his or her mother-tongue from primary to university level. The Article that provides clearest protection to the right to study one's own language is Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which states, "In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language." It need not be emphasised that the unified, integrated education system that we have proposed enhances that basic human right.

If one persists in arguing that it is one's human right to be educated in one's mother-tongue right up to the university, then it is only proper that we find out how it will work within the context of our society. Since there are so many ethnic groups and so many mother-tongues in our country, we will have to provide education with the mother-tongue as the medium of instruction for each and everyone of these groups. This will mean having separate school systems for not only the Chinese, but also the Tamils, Punjabis, Telegus, Malayalees, Ibans, Kadazans etc. Malaysia will be transformed in no time into a Tower of Babel. It would be wrong to deceive ourselves into believing that in such a situation, Bahasa Malaysia will be able to act as a binding force. For when there are so many separate media of instruction, the social milieu is also bound to reflect these dichotomies. Bahasa itself will be a mere bazaar language for the non-Malays as it was before it became the main medium of instruction in schools in 1970. It will be too ineffective to emerge as a viable language of inter-ethnic communication. What this shows is that an erroneous interpretation of human rights applied to the Malaysian situation may even lead to social disintegration.

The proponents of a separate system have also suggested that a unified, integrated approach will lead to the dominance of one community and the suppression of the other communities. If Bahasa Malaysia is the main medium of instruction, the other language users will lose their rights. This is an illogical view which does not make any sense at all.

As we have pointed out on numerous occasions, by agreeing to Bahasa as the main medium of education, the right of the non-Malays to study and use their own languages will not be affected in any way. More important, non-Malays will not become unequal or inferior in status to the Malays simply because their main medium of education is Bahasa Malaysia. If a non-Malay pupil in a Bahasa medium school begins to 'feel unequal' it would be because of discrimination in the allocation of financial assistance or scholarships, or because of the inability to gain entry into a college or university as a result of ethnic quotas or other such factors. That non-Malays are using Bahasa would not be a factor of any consequence. For non-Malay pupils have not only mastered the national language but a number of them have even begun to excel their Malay friends in the use of the language. The forces responsible for non-Malay inequality then, are policies related to the education system and social structures which seek to perpetuate ethnic elite dominance. These are the factors which should be the foci of our attention. Bahasa's role as the main medium of instruction in schools is not, and has never been, the real cause of the non-Malay community's ethnic woes.

There is a third argument that has often been raised by the proponents of a separate Chinese education stream. They say that the unified, integrated approach to education which we advocate is no different from what UMNO is doing. Our eventual aim, in their thinking, is the same as UMNO's: to cast everyone within the same Malay mould. We are, therefore, accused of pursuing an assimilationist policy on ethnic issues.

As far as UMNO is concerned, it is true that certain aspects of its language and literature policies are clearly assimilationist. Its concept of 'national literature', for instance, which excludes writings in the non-Malay languages is a reflection of this tendency. On other aspects, UMNO's thinking is fuzzy and confused. It tolerates a certain degree of cultural diversity at the social level which is certainly not indicative of an assimilationist approach. And yet it has no clear concept of how to establish unity within this diversity.

The Integrationist Approach

Aliran's approach to language and cultural questions, on the other hand, is clear and unambiguous. We are totally committed to an integrationist philosophy. Our stand on a variety of vital national issues will attest to this. Recognising that there are both primary and secondary languages in our country, that these languages should be taught in the school system, that linguistic diversity should be maintained, are some of the elements of this integrationist philosophy. Indeed, Aliran's concept of, and approach to, the role of Chinese within a unified, integrated education system, is an outstanding example of the integrationist philosophy applied to issues of ethnicity.

An integrationist philosophy must have the following characteristics. One, it must recognise the validity and the legitimacy of cultural diversity within a certain setting. Two, it must endeavour to bring these diverse elements into some relationship within a common framework. Three, it must, while acknowledging the unique individuality of these diverse elements, nonetheless, try to discover certain common characteristics among them. Four, these common characteristics must be able to serve as a binding force. If these four features of an integrationist philosophy are applied to Aliran's concept of the position of the Chinese language in the school system, it will be obvious to anyone why it is ridiculous to describe it as an 'assimilationist approach'.

The integrationist approach is the only workable solution to our language and ethnic problems. It is an approach which takes into account both the desire to preserve one's ethnic identity and the need to emphasise one's national identity.

Just as the assimilationist approach is bad, so the separatist approach is wrong. The Chinese educationists and others who support them are in fact espousing an approach — the separatist approach — which must lead to the perpetual dichotomization of our society along narrow communal lines. The separatist approach will in fact institutionalize ethnic polarization.

This is why Aliran calls upon the Chinese and all other Malaysians to reject both the assimilationist and the separatist concepts of nation-

building. We urge all Malaysians to work selflessly towards the realization of genuine unity among all our communities through an integrationist approach. This is perhaps the only way to ensure the harmony and happiness of our people.

Explanatory note

The above analysis was actually part of a polemic on the role of the Chinese language in the education system. It appeared as a series of articles in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* in early October, 1987.

THE PROTECTION OF MINORITIES

The term 'minorities' conveys all sorts of meanings. The control of wealth or power by a few is often described as the dominance of a minority. Shridath Ramphal, for instance, sees the wealth and power at the command of a few nations as the control of a minority over the majority — the majority of nation-states which are poor and powerless.¹ Within nation-states there is the same phenomenon of a minority directing the destiny of the majority. Minorities of this sort do not need any protection. If anything, it is the majority that needs to be protected from the rapaciousness of such a minority!

Then there is the idea of a minority as a small, sometimes insignificant, group which adheres to, and advocates, a certain point of view. In a number of countries, including certain societies which profess to practise parliamentary democracy, minority views or opinions are ridiculed and treated with utter contempt by the powers-that-be. Minorities such as these need protection from ruling elites which claim to represent the interests of the majority. The 'majority', the 'people' becomes a convenient camouflage for the brutal suppression of minority ideas. What makes it more sickening is that very often such suppression is justified in the name of protecting democratic principles — principles such as the right of the majority to rule. The importance of protecting minority ideas in such situations cannot be overemphasised. Nonetheless, this paper will not concern itself with this vital aspect of protecting minority rights since the orientation of this conference is something else.

The Minorities: Classification

Our focus will be upon the ethnic and religious minorities of Malaysia. Who are these minorities? This is not a strange question to ask considering the complexities of the Malaysian situation. To start with, the majority community, the Bumiputras, are about 58.1 per cent of the total population.² The community's slight edge over the minorities means that there is no clear-cut majority/minority dichotomy. The distinction between the two categories is further blurred by other factors. If the population is classified on the basis of Bumiputras (indigenous peoples) and non-Bumiputras (non-indigenous

peoples), as hinted just now, then the minorities would be Malaysians of Chinese, Indian and other such ethnic origins — that is, those who are descended from immigrants who came to the Malay world in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If, on the other hand, a Muslim/non-Muslim classification is used, some of the indigenous groups would become part of the non-Muslim segment of the population while some of the Indians and Chinese would be categorised under Muslims. Likewise, if the population is divided on the basis of Malays and non-Malays, a section of the indigenous and Muslim communities would join the non-Malays, while the Malay group would be confined to those who speak Malay habitually, observe Malay customs and practise Islam.

A Malay/non-Malay classification, like a Muslim/non-Muslim division, will not give any one community an unambiguous majority status. Besides under these two categories some of the issues which separate the majority from the minorities tend to get a little murky. For instance, the Muslim/non-Muslim or Malay/non-Malay categories will not bring out the differing perceptions of the historical background of the country which is basic to a proper understanding of minority sentiments and majority expectations. Neither will they do justice to certain political and economic dimensions of the majority-minority conflict. For all these reasons, we shall use the Bumiputra/non-Bumiputra categorization. In any case, all Malays and most of the Muslims in the country are Bumiputras just as most of the non-Malays and non-Muslims in Malaysia are also non-Bumiputras.

What this suggests then is that this paper will be devoted to the study of the Chinese and Indian minorities. Malaysians of Chinese origin comprise 31.4 per cent of the total population which makes the community a numerically significant minority. The Indian minority is smaller, accounting for 9.9 per cent of the population. Eurasians, Europeans and other non-Bumiputras constitute tiny percentages in the national census.³

We shall begin by looking at the objective situation of the non-Bumiputras. Then, we shall spell out their grievances. This will be followed by an evaluation of these grievances within the larger context of Malaysian society. We shall try to find out the underlying reasons for

the minorities' grievances and the majority's attitude. And finally, an attempt will be made to reflect on future trends that may affect the minority question.

Minorities: The Actual Situation

The economic situation of the minorities would be a good starting point. The Chinese community, as a whole, is better off than any other ethnic group in the country. It is very well represented within the middle and upper classes and is much stronger than either the Bumiputra or Indian community at those levels. Individuals from the Chinese community dominate commerce, industry and even the professions. Of course, there are also a lot of Chinese at the lower middle-class level and among the poor. They would be involved in petty trade or would be doing other low-paying jobs in the urban and semi-urban areas. Nonetheless, the Chinese component within the Malaysian poor is proportionally smaller than the Bumiputra or Indian group.⁴ As far as the Indians go, a huge segment of that community remains poor. But there is a significant Indian element within some of the professions. And Indians can also be found in commerce and industry.⁵ The Eurasian community is engaged in administrative and clerical jobs; a number of them are also professionals. A big section of the community could also be classified as 'poor'.

The political profile of the Chinese community is different from its economic profile. The vast majority of Chinese living in Malaysia have the vote. 36 per cent of all voters in Peninsular Malaysia are Chinese, according to figures produced after the 1986 General Election.⁶ However, Chinese dominant constituencies comprise only 20 per cent of the 132 Parliamentary constituencies in Peninsular Malaysia.⁷ This is partly because of rural weightage in the electoral system. The Chinese are a largely urban community. It is also because of the gerrymandering of electoral constituencies with the aim of maintaining Bumiputra electoral dominance. As a consequence of this, Chinese representation in Parliament and most of the State Assemblies does not match the total voting strength of the community. This is also true, to a great extent, of its presence in the State Executive Councils and the Federal Cabinet. One could also add that within the public services as a whole, and certainly at the level of Division One of the civil service, the Chinese community has a very, very limited role.

Outside formal electoral-cum-governmental structures, there is a great deal of Chinese participation in the political process. There are Chinese-based political parties and outstanding, able politicians of Chinese origin who articulate the interests of the community with vigour and courage. There are also a number of public interest societies and voluntary organizations in which Chinese professionals and executives participate actively. Through such participation, they are able to contribute, in a modest way, towards the political development of Malaysian society. Besides, Malaysia is a capitalist State and certain wealthy, well-connected individuals from the Chinese community are in a position to influence the shape and content of economic policies even if the influence of such individuals has declined considerably in the last few years compared to the sixties.

The political role of the Indian minority is, understandably, even more limited. Voters of Indian origin constitute 8 per cent of the electorate in Peninsular Malaysia.⁸ Because Indian voters are numerically fewer compared to the Chinese, and because they are widely dispersed in both urban and rural areas, there isn't a single Parliamentary constituency with an Indian majority. Like the Chinese, the Indians are also, in a sense, under-represented in Parliament, the State Assemblies, the Federal Cabinet and State Executive Councils. Within the public services as a whole, Indian participation, in proportional terms, is perhaps somewhat better than that of the Chinese.⁹ But it is still quite insignificant, especially at the upper echelons where Bumiputra preponderance is obvious.

Of course, like the Chinese, Indian individuals and groups are also active in the larger political process. Apart from participation in political parties — in particular opposition parties — Indians are involved in trade unions too. There was a time when working-class Indians dominated unions in both the public and private sectors. Though their pre-eminence has declined noticeably in the last decade or so, they continue to play important roles at all levels of the labour movement. However, since labour itself has limited influence over the decision-making process, the political impact of Indian trade unionists is hardly felt.¹⁰ In contrast, middle-class Indians in public interest societies and professional associations appear to command much more respect and wield much more influence with the Malaysian public. The prominent roles they play in this sector within the public arena is a recent phenomenon.

Eurasians and other smaller minorities have not developed a political role of any consequence. In a situation where the importance of an ethnic group is determined by either numbers, wealth or political power, these minorities lose out completely. The Eurasians in particular are undoubtedly the most politically marginalised of the minorities – unless of course one includes a group which is theoretically, part of the Bumiputra community but is often treated as a distinct category, namely, the Orang Asli or the aborigines of Peninsular Malaysia.

As far as cultural rights go, the minority communities are able to use and study their languages and practise their religions and customs. The Chinese language, for instance, is a medium of instruction at primary level in the official school system. It can also be studied as a subject in State secondary schools and in the nation's universities. There is a Chinese language network in the State-run radio service and Chinese is also used by the national television station. Chinese songs, dances and other cultural items often feature in the nation's cultural festivals presented over Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM).

Apart from these formal, official channels, Chinese language and culture are preserved and perpetuated through countless other informal, unofficial avenues. There are a variety of Chinese language dailies, weeklies and monthlies. Chinese films and now videos are shown all over the country. Chinese plays and operas are staged during important religious-cum-cultural festivals of the community.¹¹

Besides, the Chinese language is used for purposes which go beyond cultural propagation. It is a language of education since there is an ever growing number of private Chinese secondary schools. Chinese is also a language of commerce. At the middle and lower levels of domestic commerce, Chinese dialects are perhaps more important as media of communication than any of the other tongues spoken in the country. Because of its significance in trade and commerce, the signboards of most businesses carry Chinese letterings. What all this indicates is that the Chinese language and Chinese culture are very much alive in the nation's daily life.

The official status and role of the main Indian language in the country, Tamil, and of Indian culture, are very similar to that of the

Chinese language and Chinese culture. There are State-run Tamil primary schools; Tamil is available as a subject of study at secondary and tertiary levels; there is a Tamil radio network; and Tamil is used over the national television service. At the same time, Indian songs and dances are part of national cultural presentations. At the unofficial, informal level too, Indian culture is sustained through endeavours and activities which are indetical to what the Chinese community does. Just as the Chinese community maintains its temples, so the Hindus who are the bulk of the Indian community take great pains to keep their temples and shrines going. However, the difference is that the Hindus, and the Indian community as a whole, do not have the same huge financial resources to draw upon. As a result, Indian culture practised in Malaysia lacks the vitality of its Chinese counterpart.

Minorities: Their Grievances

It is apparent then that the political, economic and cultural rights of the minorities have been protected, to a certain degree, by both Government and community. More than that the minorities have been given some space and scope to develop. And yet, it is generally recognised that they have various grievances. What are these grievances?

Non-Bumiputras — or a segment of the community — feel aggrieved by what they perceive as Bumiputra political dominance. It is alleged that government is largely Bumiputra, more precisely Malay, in character and orientation. Bumiputra interests and aspirations have priority. Non-Bumiputras have very little say over government policies. They are in no position to influence the direction and destiny of the nation. Non-Bumiputras who feel this way point to the overwhelming importance of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) (the leader of the inter-party Coalition that rules the country), in national politics as evidence of untrammelled Bumiputra or Malay power. The composition of Parliament and the State Assemblies, structure of electoral constituencies, the ethnic character and orientation of the top brass in the civil service — these are some of the other unmistakable signs of Bumiputra dominance in the eyes of certain non-Bumiputra groups. There are also non-Bumiputra groups which resent the preponderance of Bumiputra personnel in the nation's armed forces.

However, non-Bumiputra resentment of the Bumiputra position is much stronger on economic rather than political matters. Ethnic quotas which favour Bumiputra applicants to institutions of higher learning, for instance, have incensed a lot of non-Bumiputras. These quotas are part of a whole array of State policies and programmes which are geared towards Bumiputra interests. Special institutions have been established to promote Bumiputra aspirations in education, commerce, industry, the professions and even agriculture. There are what have come to be known as "special privileges" for Bumiputras in the allocation of houses in certain projects, in the award of business licences, in the acquisition of banking loans. Bumiputras are often given preference in employment in not only the public sector but also at certain levels and in certain areas within the private sector. Bumiputra professional firms in the private sector are often engaged by Government agencies. Big Government contracts like building a billion-ringingit highway or constructing an expensive tourist complex often go to Bumiputra companies which are invariably linked to some foreign enterprise or other.

It is this bias towards the Bumiputra expressed in a multitude of ways, which has convinced the ordinary non-Bumiputra that there is no fairness or justice in the Government's economic policies.¹² The New Economic Policy (NEP) launched in 1970, which embodies many of these preferential programmes for the Bumiputra, has thus become the target of non-Bumiputra anger and indignation. The NEP is explicit about its ethnic orientation. Its aim is to ensure that within 20 years, 30 per cent of commerce, industry and the professions, from ownership and control down to management and participation, would be in Bumiputra hands. However, even before the NEP there was already the concept and practice of giving special assistance to Bumiputras because of their 'special position'. The special position of the Malays (later extended to cover all Bumiputras) is contained in the Malaysian Constitution.¹³ This 'special position' is, in essence, a recognition of the economic backwardness of the indigenous community in relation to the others, and the imperative need to rectify the imbalance.

Because both the special position of the Bumiputras in the Constitution and the NEP, are intended to help a depressed community, Bumiputra Government leaders since Independence (*Merdeka*) have

maintained that they are not guilty of ethnic discrimination of any kind. Bumiputra biased policies and programmes, they argue, should be viewed as 'affirmative action'. The neglect of the vast majority of Bumiputras during the period of British colonial rule, and even before that, necessitates the pursuit of such remedies.¹⁴

A huge portion of non-Bumiputras, however, remain unconvinced. While a number of them would concede that poor Bumiputras should be helped because of what colonialism had done, they will still insist that by denying them equal opportunities for academic and career advancement, the Bumiputra-dominated Government is adopting a discriminatory attitude. We shall see in a while if these non-Bumiputras are right. Or is the Bumiputra leadership justified in arguing that there is no ethnic discrimination as such?

On cultural issues too, non-Bumiputras, as we would have guessed, complain of discriminatory treatment. For a long while, a section of the Chinese community demanded equal status for all the main languages of the country. They wanted Chinese in particular to be recognised as one of the official languages. Though this demand is no longer articulated openly, partly because of a law prohibiting any questioning of the status of Malay as the sole official and national language of the country, a number of Chinese cultural associations and Chinese-based political organizations continue to clamour for wider use of their language.¹⁵ They feel that there should be a Chinese-language University — a request which the Government has already turned down. These Chinese groups and others have also asked that the teaching of Chinese as a subject of study within the national school system should be carried out with greater earnestness. Similar sentiments have been expressed by the Indian community in relation to Tamil and the national school system. Both Chinese and Indians have also pleaded with the authorities at various times for more programmes in their respective languages over the national television network.

One of the main reasons why these two communities persist with such demands is because many Chinese and Indians are convinced that the Government is simply not interested in protecting and developing non-indigenous languages and cultures. A significant segment of the Chinese community in particular contends that the Malay language and

Malay culture have begun to encroach upon their rights and freedoms. The rule established by local authorities that all business signboards should accord prominence to the national language and not just emphasise Chinese characters, has been interpreted as an assault upon the language and culture of the community. The unwillingness of the Government to accept 'the lion dance' as an integral item in the nation's culture is often cited as another example.

More than these facets of culture, the real fear among many Chinese and Indians is that eventually they will lose their religious rights as well. As the Government gives greater and greater emphasis to Islam (or what it regards as Islam) in the nation's public life, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians from the Chinese and Indian communities have become more and more apprehensive of the future of their own religions. The lack of facilities for these religious minorities in the structure plans of a number of cities and big towns in the country reinforces their apprehensions.¹⁶ Restrictions are sometimes imposed upon the display of the religious symbols of this or that community in certain public places. There have been occasions when the authorities have objected to the importation of religious texts of some of these minorities on the ground that it may offend Muslim sensitivities. It is also alleged that over the last few years it has become much more difficult for non-Muslim groups to bring in foreign missionaries even for brief visits. The propagation of Islam, on the other hand, through all the channels of communication available to the State, knows no restraint — according to the perceptions of certain non-Muslims leaders.

These leaders and others like them, believe that in its attitude to minority religions and languages, the State is little more than barely tolerant of the non-Bumiputras. Because they are around, there is passive acquiescence with their presence. They contend that there is no real acceptance of the Chinese, Indians and other minorities. This is why in everyday parlance these minorities are still regarded as "orang asing" (aliens or people 'on the outside'). As 'outsiders', they do not have the same or equal rights as the Bumiputras, to determine the future of the land. At best, they are allowed to play a secondary role of sorts, especially in politics and administration. The Bumiputras must always remain dominant. It is this attitude on the part of the Bumiputra elites which has alienated a substantial segment of the non-Bumiputra community.¹⁷ Non-Bumiputra leaders feel that this

psychological alienation of the non-Bumiputra minorities is perhaps at the root of their grievances. For it raises a fundamental question: are the minorities seen as part and parcel of the life and soul of the nation?

Minority Grievances: An Evaluation

To answer this, one has to analyse and examine the specific grievances of the minority communities. On religion, for instance, many of the grievances mentioned are grievances that should be attended to by any Government with a sense of justice and fairness.

That such grievances do occur is a reflection of a larger problem connected with the majority community. The Bumiputra Muslims, or the Malays, who constitute the core of Government are somewhat reluctant to see the non-Muslim faiths as religions which belong rightfully and legitimately to Malaysian society. This is part of the reason why Buddhist, Hindu, Christian or Sikh religious teachings are not part of radio and television fare. By giving some air-time to each of these religions, the position of Islam as the official religion of the country would not be jeopardized in any way. Neither would it threaten the faith of the individual Muslim in his religion.¹⁸ This is also why the Ministry of Education does not allow Government schools to teach the non-Muslim religions as regular subjects within the school curriculum.

The reluctance to accommodate these religions within a national framework explains the Government's ambivalent attitude towards attempts to emphasise the common values embodied in the different spiritual traditions. On the one hand, Government leaders do, now and then, talk of the importance of realizing that Islam and the other faiths share certain common values. On the other hand, it is obvious that the Government as a whole does not want to approach the crucial question of infusing ethics and morality into national life from a totally non-sectarian, universal perspective. In fact, the Government's Islamization programme which seeks to promote what are essentially universal values as unique Islamic virtues is antithetical to genuine universalism.

While non-Muslims are justified in expressing fears about the divisive consequences of such an approach to Islam in a society which is

already polarized along ethnic lines, it would be wrong nonetheless to exaggerate the gravity of the present situation. Non-Muslims are not being persecuted. Non-Muslims are not oppressed. In spite of some of the narrow attitudes which have become pervasive as a result of Islamic resurgence, there is still a lot of freedom for non-Muslim religions. By and large, they have been able to observe their religious practices and rituals without any hindrance.¹⁹

This point has to be made for in the process of ventilating their legitimate concern about how Islamic resurgence will affect their faiths, many non-Muslims have chosen to ignore the role and position of Islam in the historical and political development of the country. Islam is, after all, the religion most intimately linked to the history and culture of this region. It was the basis of law and State organization before the advent of colonial rule. Besides, Islam provides tremendous social cohesion to the Malay community. The non-Muslim minorities must try to understand this.

As with religion, so with language. Of the non-Bumiputra grievances, the alleged inability of the Government to develop the non-Bumiputra languages as subjects of study within the national school system is perhaps the most valid. Once again, it reveals an unjustified fear on the part of the Malay ruling elite that if the other languages are developed, the position of Malay as the national language of Malaysia would be threatened. By encouraging Chinese or Tamil as subjects within a Malay language-based school curriculum, there is no danger at all of any other language displacing Malay! The fear about how far one could go in accommodating non-Bumiputra languages is, however, not as great as the elite's paranoia about non-Muslim religions. This is why the elite has allowed non-Bumiputra languages in schools and over Radio and Television Malaysia. It has, in a sense, bestowed some legitimacy upon them. The attitude towards non-Muslim religions is different perhaps for two reasons. One, Islam defines Malay identity in a much more total manner than the Malay language. And in the ultimate analysis, the real fear is whether Malay identity would be overwhelmed by the other languages, cultures and religions. Two, from a narrow, orthodox Islamic angle, it would be wrong to bestow any legitimacy upon other faiths, especially the non-Semitic ones, since it could be viewed as upholding false teachings.

Though the attitude of the Malay elite towards the other languages could be better, there is no denying that some of the non-Bumiputra grievances about their languages are unjustified. Giving more prominence to Malay in business signboards for instance is not an affront to Chinese or Tamil or any other language. Similarly, it is not unfair to make Malay the main language of education or administration. There is nothing unjust about seeing Malay as the primary language of the land, while accepting Chinese and Tamil as secondary languages. For Malay has enjoyed a role and status in the evolution of Malaysian society which none of the other languages can boast of. It has served as a lingua franca – a language of inter-ethnic communication – within the Malay archipelago for over 600 years.²⁰ This was true even during the colonial period for a non-English speaking Chinese or Tamil would communicate with a Malay in the Malay language. Indeed, it was the language that a non-English speaking Sikh would use to talk to a Tamil. Thus, Malay was undoubtedly the informal national language before it became the formal national language. Given this background, it is not right for non-Bumiputras to demand that their languages be accorded the same status as Malay. To regard all Malaysian languages as equal and on par is to degrade the Malay language since it would tantamount to a repudiation of its unique significance. The non-Bumiputra minorities must learn to appreciate this point.

Similarly, the non-Bumiputras should realize that while many of their grievances on the economy are legitimate, there are larger issues which they must also come to grips with. Their unhappiness with ethnic quotas and the way they are implemented and with the preferential treatment given to Bumiputras in public service promotions, business licences and bank loans is not without justification. These policies constitute various types of ethnic discrimination and cannot simply be defended in the name of affirmative action for at least two reasons. First, affirmative action is almost always undertaken by the State on behalf of minority groups which are not only economically but also politically weak. This is the situation, for instance, of Blacks in the United States and Harijans in India. In Malaysia's case, it is a majority community – albeit an economically weak one – discriminating on its own behalf. Besides, as a community, it also enjoys political preeminence. Second, and more important, if one looks back at the implementation of the 'special position of the Bumiputras' and all that

goes with it, it is apparent that over time, certain powerful vested interests have grown around 'special position'. These are the interests – often located at the middle and upper levels of society – which have benefitted most from preferential treatment for the Bumiputras. No genuine policy of 'affirmative action' would result in the growth of vested interests at the higher echelons of society.

It is a pity that with the exception of a handful of individuals and groups, Bumiputra society as a whole has not been prepared to evaluate its 'special position' from these perspectives. The injustices that the NEP and other policies related to special position may have perpetrated against not just non-Bumiputras but also Bumiputras have not provoked the community to engage in honest reflection and serious analysis.

What is even more disturbing is that the notion of justice, the sense of right and wrong – as proven by the reticence of the Bumiputra community on the consequences of special position and the impact of other such policies – appears to be influenced by ethnic considerations. What this means is that there has yet to emerge a significant number of Bumiputras who can transcend the narrow confines of ethnicity and empathize with the genuine economic woes of non-Bumiputra groups and individuals. In other words, because justice has an ethnic name, the minorities are sometimes side-stepped.

Having said that, we must hasten to add that on the non-Bumiputra side too, there is a similar problem of empathy. Non-Bumiputras want ethnic preferences to be abolished but very few of them appreciate the fact that to abolish ethnic quotas and the like without a massive transformation of the rural economy (which is the economy of the majority of Bumiputras), would be detrimental to the Bumiputra community. For the majority of Bumiputras are disadvantaged in terms of resources and skills. Sections of the non-Bumiputra community, on the other hand, are better placed to compete because they have greater access to, and command over, vital resources. Very few non-Bumiputra politicians and intellectuals have argued in a consistent, persistent manner for a total economic transformation as a pre-requisite for the elimination of ethnic privileges. Neither have they acknowledged the necessity for some form of quotas

in the interregnum while waiting for fundamental structural changes to make their impact felt. Such quotas, which need not be ethnic-based, should be reviewed from time to time and abolished the moment their short-term objectives have been accomplished. Non-Bumiputras as a whole have not given any attention either to the paucity of Bumiputras in commerce, industry and the professions. In short, for the majority of non-Bumiputras it is merely a question of getting rid of ethnic biases in economic policies which stand in the way of their progress. In the ultimate analysis, they too lack a truly non-sectarian, all-encompassing vision of justice.

In politics, one sees the same pattern. Non-Bumiputra groups are right about their subservient role in politics. They are right about Bumiputra political dominance, or more precisely, Malay elite political dominance. There is even a grain of truth in their assertion that this dominance is getting stronger by the day.

However, while elite dominance camouflaged in an ethnic cloak, should be opposed by both Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra Malaysians alike, non-Bumiputras should also try to comprehend how they became part of the present political system, how they acquired the right to citizenship in recent decades. It is often forgotten that Malaysia evolved from a Malay polity. Malay Sultanates with mainly Malay communities became multi-ethnic through the pressures of colonial rule. The large-scale migration of Chinese and Indians into the Malay Peninsula was something which the Sultanates did not bargain for. Viewed against this backdrop, the willingness of the Malay elite in the late forties and early fifties to grant citizenship to Chinese and Indian immigrants on an extraordinarily liberal basis was an act of magnanimity. With citizenship, came political rights and political participation.²¹

It was the political accommodation of the non-Bumiputras from 1948 onwards which changed the character of the Malay polity of earlier times. It was now a Malayan, later a Malaysian, nation. What this meant was that the Malays (the Bumiputras) had, in a sense, lost their status as a nation. They had become a community among communities.²² If non-Bumiputras can understand what this loss must have done to Malay identity, to the Malay psyche, they would approach Malaysian politics in a less simplistic and less superficial manner.

Minorities And The Majority: The Reasons Behind Their Respective Attitudes

Our evaluation of minority grievances has shown that both the minorities and majority are not able to appreciate each other's position. Why is this so? Why is it that the minorities do not understand the historical background of the country which in turn affects their perceptions of politics, the economy, language and religion?

Part of the explanation lies in history itself. The non-Bumiputra minorities were not part of early Malay history. Being 'outside' that history, they do not see why it must condition the present or influence the future.

But more than a mere lack of understanding of history, there are vested interests in the political, economic and cultural life of the non-Bumiputra communities which have a stake in perpetuating a sectarian, communal approach to various issues, whether ethnic or not. It is essential to the communal approach to repudiate the historical background of the country. For only then would communal mobilization be more effective. Likewise, the communally-inclined advocate of Chinese or Indian interests would not want his people to view issues from a more holistic perspective which takes into account the differing positions of various ethnic groups, for the simple reason that it would jeopardize his hold over them.

The communal approach is linked to the emergence and, indeed, the continued power and potency of community-based and community-oriented political parties on the side of both government and opposition. The growth of community-oriented economic conglomerates in the last ten years or so is further testimony to the lure of communalism. Cultural and religious bodies pursuing communal goals with vigour and vehemence are also reflections of the strength of sectarian sentiments in an ethnically-divided society.

Apart from those vested interests which communal thinking has bred, one could argue that the class structure of the Chinese community in particular (the largest ethnic group among the non-Bumiputras) also militates against the growth of a more holistic

approach to the problem. For the presence of a numerically significant middle-class linked to a wealthy upper-class has led to a situation where particular class interests are invariably projected as the interests of the entire Chinese community. Because it is the middle and upper classes that dominate, there isn't much sympathy for the sort of comprehensive structural transformation we discussed earlier. Consequently, the Chinese and the non-Bumiputra middle and upper classes as a whole remain estranged from the Bumiputra masses.

The influential segment of the Bumiputra community, on the other hand – as we have seen – has also adopted an ethnic attitude to politics, economics and religion. The question is: why is there so much obsession with preserving the community's ethnic position, its ethnic identity?

The answer has actually been given in the earlier part of this essay. As we had noted, the conferment of citizenship status on a huge immigrant population perceived as economically powerful by an indigenous community which saw itself as economically weak, was a traumatic experience for the latter. The new citizenry had transformed a Malay polity into a Malaysian nation.^{2 3}

Since 'national identity' was in a sense compromised, the Malay community has become very conscious about defending its own ethnic identity. This is what it has been doing through politics, the economy, language and now religion. The identity it seeks to protect, preserve and perpetuate could be either a Bumiputra or a Malay or an Islamic identity depending upon situation and circumstance. But what is important to understand is that this articulation of identity – if our interpretation is correct – is essentially a defensive rather than an aggressive stance. It emerges from a sense of insecurity as a consequence of that political development we have already described – a sense of insecurity underscored (to repeat a point) by the economic vulnerability of the community and, we should add, its narrow numerical majority. For these reasons then the majority community is afraid to embrace the minorities fully, to accommodate them totally. It is afraid of granting complete equality to the minorities – lest it should be overwhelmed.

These fears and apprehensions, it should now be obvious, have given birth to a variety of national policies in almost every sphere of public life. These policies, in turn, have generated institutions, individuals and attitudes which taken together, constitute the ideology of Bumiputraisim. The vested interests which have multiplied around this ideology are determined to preserve and perpetuate ethnicity and identity at all costs. This is what prevents them from supporting, or even understanding, some of the just grievances of the minority communities.

What would be these vested interests? A party like UMNO, whose entire rationale for existence is the defence of Bumiputra rights, would be one of them. Government departments, agencies and other institutions charged with implementing Bumiputra policies would also seek to perpetuate the ideology of Bumiputraisim. Universities and certain Colleges would be specific examples of this. Business people and entrepreneurs dependent upon contracts and licences set aside for Bumiputras would be yet another important category. Indeed, all those who benefit directly from preferential treatment for Bumiputras would have a stake in maintaining the Bumiputra/non-Bumiputra dichotomy. The list of such individuals and groups would be infinite. It could go down to the lowest levels of society – to the exploited farmer who owns or rents a tiny plot of land in a Malay reserve, to the poor student who is given a scholarship meant only for Bumiputras to enable her to continue her studies. Of course, as observed earlier, it is the upper echelons, not the lower levels, of society which have most to gain from the Bumiputra bias in public policies.

Nonetheless, we must recognise that the vested interests within the majority community which would want to preserve and perpetuate the Bumiputra/non-Bumiputra dichotomy have become quite ubiquitous. It also means that it would be extremely difficult to get the majority community to resolve some of the legitimate woes of the minorities especially those which are linked to their demand for equality.

Conclusion

If this is the situation, how would the minorities obtain redress? Organizing and mobilising their ethnic groups along communal lines, as

this analysis has shown, is not the solution. It will only exacerbate the situation. Ethnic tensions will increase as the contending ethnic forces harden their attitudes. Besides, by adopting a communal approach, the non-Bumiputra minorities will not be able to achieve the equality and justice they desire.

Should the non-Bumiputra minorities get the majority community to agree to a Charter for Minorities? While the idea of a Charter has some merits to it, it is also full of flaws. A Charter for minorities could result in a permanent majority/minority dichotomy which will not conduce towards true ethnic integration. It is also quite conceivable that the rights contained in such a Charter will be so abstract and universal that they would have no relevance to the power dynamics of the specific, concrete situation which in the end will determine the sort of rights the minorities enjoy in reality. Once a Charter is promulgated it is quite possible that 'the concept of minority rights' itself would be used to confine the role of minorities to certain aspects of the nation's public life.

What then is the solution? There is no easy, ready-made solution. Perhaps the solution lies with the majority community. If the majority community, or at least a significant segment of it, develops a sense of confidence about its own identity, its own role, then genuine integration of the minorities may be possible. This could happen with the rapid expansion of the Bumiputra middle-class. As it expands, as it produces more executives, managers, engineers, lawyers, doctors, academics and teachers, there could emerge individuals and groups who would no longer be dependent upon Bumiputtraism for their material progress. Having established themselves – albeit through the NEP in the initial stages – they would now want to be more independent of the State and its ideology. This desire for independence and autonomy, the desire to be master of one's own destiny, is a powerful instinct. Besides, whatever the influence of Bumiputtraism, middle and upper class entrepreneurs and professionals are bound to discover, sooner or later, that their businesses and careers are sometimes dictated by considerations which may bring them, as individuals, into conflict with even the ethnic ideology that spawned them in the first instance. As a case in point, for an entrepreneur to succeed, growth and expansion of the economy would be important; and yet ethnic quotas and rules on Bumiputra equity may at times constrain that growth. Or Bumiputra

individuals and groups may choose to move away from Bumiputrahism because it no longer benefits them directly. This may be a consequence of competition among Bumiputra companies and professional firms, with those that are favoured by the ruling elite making a kill while others are left in the lurch. Indeed even the sheer growth of the Bumiputra middle-class could result in the economic or political marginalization of a section of the community since it is simply not possible to absorb everyone into the privileged circle of wealth and power. Even now, there are signs to show that all these changes are taking place.

At the same time, there is the phenomenal growth of the Bumiputra working-class in cities like Kuala Lumpur and Penang. First generation Bumiputra urban workers will, of course, remain loyal to the NEP and Bumiputrahism. They have always felt that without the State's ideology and policies they would never have got jobs in the cities. But this attitude is likely to change, especially with the second generation Bumiputra workers. They will realize that the interests of the State and the direction of its ideology are inimical to their own well-being. This is because the State has always been more inclined towards capital rather than labour. As workers begin to see that the Bumiputra State does not protect the poor Bumiputra, they may decide to look towards more egalitarian and universal notions of justice for support and sustenance.

If these changes in outlook and attitude among the working and middle-class within the majority community are to make any inroads, the minorities must also develop a more universal and less sectarian perspective. As we have indicated right through this analysis, some of the issues articulated by the minorities are indefensible from the standpoint of the larger Malaysian society. If minority leaders and their followers realize this and are prepared to distinguish just grievances from unreasonable demands, then the process of integrating the majority and the minorities would be all that easier.

For it is only through genuine integration resulting in the readiness of both State and society to accept wholeheartedly each and every Malaysian as a human being with equal rights and responsibilities, that the protection of the minorities would be assured.

Explanatory note

The above article was presented as a paper at a seminar organised by Lawasia in Kuala Lumpur in July 1987.

Notes

1. See his 'Human Rights Today. Must The Few Be More Than Many?' *MINORITIES A QUESTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS?* Ben Whitaker editor (Great Britain: Pergamon Press, 1984)
2. See *FIFTH MALAYSIA PLAN 1986-1990* (Kuala Lumpur: National Printing Department, 1986) p. 129
3. *IBID*
4. *IBID* p. 99. The information however is obtained through indirect analysis.
5. *IBID* p. 119-20.
6. See *ELECTION RESULTS '86 COMPUTER ANALYSIS* (Kuala Lumpur: National Union of Journalists, 1986).
7. *IBID*
8. *IBID*
9. For some discussion on the importance of a multi-ethnic civil service see *ALIRAN MONTHLY August/September 1985*.
10. See my 'The Political Marginalization of the Indians' *INDIANS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA*. S.T. Mani editor (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies). Forthcoming.
11. For more details see *THE MERDEKA UNIVERSITY: THE REAL ISSUES* (Penang: Aliran, 1979);
12. This unhappiness was expressed clearly in the 1986 General Election. For an analysis see my 'The Barisan's Two-Third

Majority: Why the Opposition Failed' *ALIRAN MONTHLY*, July/August 1986.

13. The Special Position of the Malays and other Bumiputras is elaborated in Tun Mohamed Suffian bin Hashim *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CONSTITUTION OF MALAYSIA* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer, 1976).
14. See for instance Tunku Abdul Rahman *MAY 13 BEFORE AND AFTER* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Melayu Press, 1969).
15. For their demands in relation to Chinese schools see Kua Kia Soong *THE CHINESE SCHOOLS OF MALAYSIA*. A Protean Saga (Kuala Lumpur: United Chinese School Committees Association, 1985).
16. See for instance Rev. Dr. Paul Tan 'Human Rights – Freedom of Expression and Belief' *HUMAN RIGHTS IN MALAYSIA* (Kuala Lumpur: Democratic Action Party, 1986) p. 98 - 120.
17. A good example of this is the speech made by an UMNO Parliamentarian, Datuk Abdullah Ahmad. See K. Das *MALAY DOMINANCE* (Petaling Jaya: K Das Ink, 1987).
18. For a discussion see my *ISLAMIC RESURGENCE IN MALAYSIA* (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti, 1987).
19. See my 'Islam in Malaysia: Resurgence and Response' *RELIGION AND ASIAN POLITICS: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 1985).
20. See my 'Language and Cultural Rights' *FREEDOM IN FETTERS* An analysis of the state of democracy in Malaysia (Penang: Aliran Kesedaran Negara, 1986).
21. The citizenship issue is discussed in B. Simandjuntak *MALAYAN FEDERALISM 1945-1963* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1965).

22. This point is made by K.J. Ratnam *COMMUNALISM AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN MALAYA* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1967) p. 67.
23. For a fuller analysis of the communal situation see my 'Has the Communal Situation Worsened Over the Last Decade? Some Preliminary Thoughts' *ETHNICITY, CLASS AND DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA* S. Husin Ali, editor (Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia 1984).

ETHICS, ETHNICITY AND COMMUNICATION

We live in a multi-ethnic world. We live in a world that is becoming increasingly conscious of its multi-ethnic character. There is hardly any society today that is totally mono-ethnic.

Today's multi-ethnic societies and today's multi-ethnic world pose a tremendous challenge to all of us. We have to learn to live together. We have to begin to understand each other. Cultures and communities must embark upon an unending quest to establish and enhance communication between and among themselves.

This is the colossal task that confronts communicators everywhere. Professional communicators in particular have not given adequate attention to the question of inter-ethnic communication. They have been more concerned with State — people communication and with business — consumer communication. And yet it is the communication between ethnic communities which is vital to the future of humanity. For if we fail to ensure easy and harmonious relations among the diverse ethnic communities of our planet, it is unlikely that we will be able to guarantee the continual survival of our species.

To evolve easy and harmonious relations, we have to place inter-ethnic communication on a sound ethical foundation. Indeed, ethics is the *sine qua non* for effective communication among the communities. In order to understand this important role of ethics, we have to first find out what the obstacles are to inter-ethnic communication at both national and international levels. Then we shall analyse the causes of the various flaws that mar inter-ethnic communication. Finally, we shall suggest some specific measures designed to overcome the problem.

Ignorance

Ignorance is undoubtedly a major obstacle. In Malaysia, there is a great deal of ignorance among the various communities of one another's values, attitudes, customs and habits. We are, in some ways, a nation of strangers though we have been living side by side for a few decades now.

What is true of Malaysia is true of a number of other multi-ethnic societies. Even the intelligentsia within the majority communities of countries like Sri Lanka and India live in blissful ignorance of the most basic cultural characteristics of their minorities. Likewise, a significant segment of the Caucasian population in Australia is quite ignorant of some of the deep nature-based values of their Aboriginal compatriots. Similarly, the Russians on the whole, are not really concerned about their lack of empathy for the cultures and religions of minorities in the Soviet Union.

At the international level, the situation is even more appalling. The educated stratum of Western society for instance, is perhaps only slightly less ignorant than the rest of that society about the history and culture, the sciences and traditions of non-Western civilizations. Many do not even regard their total lack of knowledge of other cultures as a serious intellectual and indeed, ethical problem.

Lack of knowledge, however, has not deterred media commentators, politicians and even academics within one community from analysing and evaluating another community. Sweeping generalizations are sometimes made. These generalizations which more often than not are pejorative tend to increase antagonistic feelings between one community and another especially if inter-ethnic ties are already problematic. This is true for instance of Pakeha (Caucasian) – Maori relations. Large sections of both communities hold negative views of one another which emerge partly from ignorance.

Ethical Issues

Ethical antagonisms stemming from ignorance raise important ethical issues. Isn't it one's ethical responsibility – especially if one is in a position of authority and influence – to acquire sufficient knowledge and understanding of a certain culture before passing judgement? Indeed, isn't it our moral duty, whoever we are and wherever we are, to overcome ignorance? Even if we have not become as knowledgeable as we should be about another community or culture, shouldn't we convey our views in such a manner that we do not create ill-feelings? Isn't our lack of sensitivity to sentiments and aspirations cherished by another ethnic group a reflection of an inability to adhere to lofty ethical principles in our conduct of public affairs?

Prejudice

Like ignorance, prejudice also has adverse implications for inter-ethnic communication. In many heterogenous societies, religious and ethnic prejudices are rife. Muslims in Malaysia, for instance, display certain prejudiced attitudes towards non-Muslim religions. The non-Muslim communities, in turn, harbour certain prejudices against Islam. Religious prejudice is strong at the international level too. The Western media, on the whole, has treated developments within Islam in a highly biased and often derogatory manner. Certain Muslim weeklies and monthlies from North America and Western Europe, on the other hand, give the false impression that the West has sunk to the lowest depths of moral decadence.

Prejudiced writings of this sort, whatever the source, should be rejected as totally unethical. The inability or unwillingness to overcome one's prejudices through analysis and introspection is a serious flaw in human character. Of course, prejudices are also often sustained by group or community attitudes. This is why it is important for individuals especially in the media, in academia and in politics, to transcend the prejudices held by their ethnic kind.

Causes: History

The question we have to ask now is this: why have ignorance and prejudice become such powerful obstacles to harmonious inter-ethnic communication? Part of the explanation lies in history. Though there has always been some interaction among different communities right through history, it is only in the last three centuries that diverse cultural groups have been forced to establish a common basis for existence either through shared allegiance to a common territory or through shared adherence to a common identity. The modern nation-state is, after all, a recent phenomenon in man's long and chequered history on this planet.

Causes: Technology

Besides, advances in modes of travel and in communication technology have been so rapid and dramatic that cultures and communities that are brought into contact with one another, have not had enough time to understand and empathize with each other. This is also one of the factors that is causing a crisis of sorts in inter-ethnic

communication. While technology has helped to achieve physical proximity, culture has failed to accomplish social fraternity.

Causes: Dominance

Inter-cultural communication is also impeded by past and present patterns of economic, political and technological dominance. During the 4 or 5 centuries of Western colonial dominance, a notion of 'a superior culture and people' and 'subordinate cultures and peoples' took root in the minds of both the colonizer and the colonized. This has been largely responsible for the emergence and perpetuation of distorted perceptions of non-Western cultures among Westerners and Easterners alike. Since Western civilization remains a dominant force in the present post-colonial era, it is difficult for Western and non-Western cultures to relate to one another in the spirit of true equality and harmony. Indeed, the view that is generally held among most elites everywhere is that nations and communities must progress along the lines of the West. Societies and cultures which have not attained the hallmarks of Western civilization – material prosperity, efficiency, capital-intensive technology, high urbanization, complex industrialization – are considered backward and primitive. As long as influential groups in both the West and East do not realize that there may be values and goals in life – other than those that are characteristic of the dominant urban-industrial civilization – which are worth pursuing it will not be possible for genuine inter-cultural respect and love to flourish.

Causes: Vested Interests

But more than problems linked to dominance, technology and history, harmonious inter-ethnic communication has been obstructed by various vested interests. The politician, whether in Government or the Opposition, in multi-ethnic societies, is perhaps the most guilty. Very few politicians in such societies can restrain themselves from exploiting ethnic fears and ethnic prejudices for narrow political gain. Each time a politician whips up ethnic feelings, he drives the different communities further and further apart. Sometimes, certain unscrupulous politicians go even further. They create ethnic tensions so that they can emerge as ethnic heroes. It shows that power can become such an obsession that every ethical principle is thrown to the wind.

In their game of ethnic manipulation, politicians often depend upon media personnel for assistance. Those working in newspapers or radio or television stations controlled by particular political parties often have no choice but to do the bidding of their bosses. However, there are media people who of their own volition sensationalize ethnic issues. Sometimes the purpose is to increase the circulation of their newspaper or journal. There are times however when ethnic conflicts are sensationalized because the journalists concerned are ignorant of the complexities of the issue at hand, or because they have strong communal prejudices. Exaggerating, distorting or sensationalizing ethnic issues, needless to say, does irreparable damage to inter-ethnic ties. Once the media has created the havoc, it takes a long, long while to restore a modicum of trust between the communities.

Some Possible Solutions

Creating trust among the communities, improving inter-ethnic communication, is something that cannot be accomplished overnight. Whatever measure is taken is necessarily a long-term one. Schools and universities should incorporate ethnic and cultural studies in their curricula. The ethical or moral dimension of caring for and loving a person of another community should be emphasised. The young in particular should be given plenty of opportunities to interact with, and in the process, to learn to respect, members of other ethnic and religious groups.

The home, the family, also has a crucial role to play. Ethnic prejudice and cultural ignorance can be fought by both parents and children if they are conscious of what multi-ethnic living entails. Through bed-time stories for children, dinner-table conversations, family excursions and the like, universal values and non-communal attitudes can be transmitted to the new generation.

Religious and cultural bodies can do even more for effective inter-ethnic communication. For religions are crucial avenues for the growth and development of values and attitudes. If each and every religion attempts to show that love and kindness to people of another faith or another community is a vital aspect of its doctrine, then there is hope for better understanding among the different ethnic groups.

The media is yet another powerful channel that should be harnessed. A single daily committed to genuine multi-ethnic thinking can achieve much more than all the songs and slogans dedicated to national unity. In this connection, it is a matter of deep regret that there isn't a single Malaysian daily that attempts to demolish ethnic prejudice and ignorance or tries to make people aware of their shared values. No newspaper is willing to expose how certain vested interests benefit from ethnic manipulation. The inability of dailies here and in other multi-ethnic societies to launch a war against communalism (whoever the communalist) has helped the scourge to spread.

Last but by no means least, institutes and centres of public relations should get deeply involved in the question of inter-ethnic communication. They can help organize short courses, weekend seminars, vacation workshops and other similar programmes on various aspects of ethnic relations. They can introduce participants to modes of communication which take into account the cultural sensitivities of various communities. Institutes of Public Relations can even provide information to the general public on some of the more outstanding features of the various cultures that constitute a particular society. Whatever the activities they undertake, their role and goal should be clear: Institutes of Public Relations should be in the forefront of the struggle for greater ethnic harmony. For ethnic relations is concerned about the style and substance of communication. And communication is an important dimension of public relations.

However, if ethnic communication is going to become more ethical, there will have to be other fundamental changes to society too. Re-distributing power within and among nations on a more equitable basis, as we have hinted earlier on, is certainly a vital pre-condition for genuine acceptance of cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity.

Conclusion

The structural and attitudinal changes necessary for improved inter-ethnic communication should in the long run lead to more than the mere demise of ignorance and prejudice. They should give rise to love and compassion among the diverse communities of this planet. It is only through the ethic of love and compassion that we will be able to realize the cherished dream of every great spiritual tradition – the

dream of global unity. It is a dream that the Quran presents as if it were a reality, "You are of one nation" (Al-Baqara: 213). In another place it says, "O people, we created all of you from the same male and female and made you into nations and tribes in order that you may know one another. The best among you is the most righteous". (Al-Hujuraat: 13)

Similarly, the great Chinese sage, Kung Fu-tse (Confucius) attests to the oneness of the human family in one of its sayings, "Within the four seas, all men are brothers". Likewise, Rabindranath Tagore the illustrious Hindu poet and mystic expresses his faith in the unity of humankind in lucid language, "The God of humanity", he notes, "has arrived at the gates of the ruined temple of the tribe. Though he has not found his altar, I ask the men of simple faith, wherever they may be in the world, to bring their offering of sacrifice to him".

If inter-ethnic communication has any ultimate purpose then, it is this: to unite humankind which is one of the greatest ethical quests of all times.

Explanatory note

The above article was the keynote address at an international conference on public relations held in Kuala Lumpur in June 1987.

ETHNIC POLARIZATION IN PARLIAMENT?

At first glance, there appears to be a certain degree of ethnic polarization in the new Parliament. 93 out of the 148 Barisan Nasional representatives in the Dewan Rakyat are Malays or Muslims while 21 out of the 29 opposition members of Parliament are Chinese Malaysians. On the other hand there are only 27 Chinese MPs on the Barisan side and only two Malay MPs with the Opposition.

Compared to past Parliaments, the present one mirrors much more the ethnic polarization within the larger social system. It is perhaps indicative of the deterioration in ethnic relations over the last decade or so.

Nonetheless it would be wrong to exaggerate the polarization in the present Parliament. Since 1969, there have been more non-Malays than Malays on the opposition benches just as the Malay presence in the Alliance and later the Barisan has always overshadowed non-Malay representation. Besides, the Barisan in the 1986 Parliament is, all said and done, still fairly representative of the various communities in the country. Though it no longer has the support of the overwhelming majority of Chinese and other non-Malay voters in the major urban centres, it continues to command the loyalty of a significant number of rural and semi-urban Chinese voters, as the election results show.

Because the Barisan can claim to be more multi-ethnic in its composition than the Opposition, it has a greater responsibility to ensure that Parliament does not succumb to the pulls and pressures of ethnic politics. The Barisan, furthermore, is the government and is therefore in the best position to set a multi-ethnic tone for parliamentary proceedings. It should, for a start, curb some of its intemperate backbenchers from injecting communal poison into serious debates. This happened once too often in the last Parliament. Neither should government leaders disparage genuine criticisms of its policies and actions by imputing ulterior ethnic motives to opposition MPs. It was only last year that we witnessed the sad spectacle of an important public figure accusing critics of his handling of the BMF scandal of trying "to topple Malay leadership". Such remarks will not help to check ethnic polarization inside or outside the Dewan Rakyat.

More than the style of communication it is the substance of policies that should change. If the Barisan considered the electoral verdict as a whole, it will realize that a lot of voters in the cities are not happy with some of its ethnic-oriented social policies. Some of these pertain to public sector employment, the scope for new businesses, opportunities for tertiary education, the allocation of loans and the teaching of the pupil's own language (POL). By modifying certain policies and their implementation, with the aim of accommodating the legitimate grievances of a segment of the non-Malay communities, the Barisan government would be helping to reduce the ethnic content in Parliamentary debates. This in turn would negate the impact of whatever polarization that exists in the Dewan Rakyat.

More than its approach to ethnic issues, it is the extent to which the Barisan is prepared to allow Parliament to perform its rightful role as the bulwark of our democratic system which will determine the public's perception of the institution. If the new Parliament emerges as the protector of justice, the defender of freedom and the custodian of integrity, the question of the ethnic composition of the Government benches as against the Opposition benches is going to recede into the background. More specifically, what this means is that Parliament must be willing to use its legislative power to take care of ordinary workers adversely affected by the consequences of the recession, to remove the fetters from the Press, to fight corruption, to expose scandals and to correct wrongdoings. Once Parliament acquires the image of a true champion of the people, it will endear itself to all the ethnic communities in the country.

What are the chances of the new Parliament fulfilling these hopes? If the old Parliament which was also dominated by the Barisan is anything to go by, we should not expect too much. Given the Barisan's overwhelming four-fifths majority in the Dewan, it is very likely that the Legislature will merely serve to legitimise the power of the Executive. And the Executive will continue to further the interests of the upper rather than the lower classes, of Malay corporate wealth rather than the Malay poor, of big industry rather than small business, of foreign capital rather than local enterprise. In order to perpetuate these interests, the UMNO-led government will continue to camouflage the real situation by projecting itself as the only defender of Malay rights and the only guarantor of inter-ethnic harmony.

In this sort of situation, the Opposition in Parliament, particularly the Democratic Action Party (DAP), has a crucial role to play. There is no doubt that the DAP with 24 out of the 29 Opposition seats will live up to the people's expectations and speak out with courage on each and every act of injustice. However, in the next 5 years, it must marry courage with wisdom as it carries its mission to yet another stage. As it articulates urban grievances, so must the DAP give equal attention to rural woes. As it defends the Chinese language and culture, so must the DAP promote the wider use of Malay especially in the private sector. As it expresses the frustrations of non-Bumiputras with the NEP, so must the DAP try to understand the legitimate aspirations of the Bumiputras in commerce, industry and the professions. In short, the DAP must make an earnest endeavour to become more multi-ethnic in its policies and more wholistic in its approach to the challenges facing the nation.

If the Government and the Opposition can make fundamental changes in their thinking along these lines, then there is hope for the future. Parliament will come to reflect not the polarized fears of a divided nation but the synthesized hopes of a united people.

Explanatory note

Written after the 1986 General Election, it appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (September/October 1986).

BREAKING THE ETHNIC TRAP

Though the government now acknowledges that there is ethnic polarisation, it has not taken any concrete measures to check this threat to our well-being. Indeed, it continues to pursue policies and implement programmes which have contributed to the present polarisation.

The only encouraging thing is that since the government recognises the problem, various social groups have begun to reflect upon the danger of ethnic polarisation. In the last two years or so, a number of trade unions, youth organisations and student societies have been holding talks and seminars on this issue. It is significant that this concern is shared by segments of both the Malay and non-Malay communities.

If the government does not respond to this growing concern, its credibility would be affected in the long run. It will only create the impression that when it comes to major social challenges, it is incapable of acting earnestly and decisively in the interest of the people. Its handling of the BMF scandal would be offered as yet another proof of this attitude.

There are other reasons too why the government should act with a sense of urgency. Ethnic polarisation itself is becoming more serious by the day. Since polarisation develops by stages we are now at a point where interaction between the communities is merely functional, and therefore, minimal. In certain spheres and at certain levels, there is a great deal of distrust between the communities. There is even communal antagonism in some instances. If we are not careful, ethnic polarisation could reach a more serious stage characterised by a total breakdown in ethnic relations. In such a situation, there could even be ethnic violence.

Increased ethnic polarisation is made worse by the general economic and political situation. Our economy is on the decline. In the past, it was rapid economic growth which enabled the government to accommodate the competing aspirations of crucial groups among the

different communities. This, in turn, contributed considerably towards an inter-ethnic harmony of sorts. It is quite conceivable that the situation will now change. At the same time, it is obvious that there is less political stability now. The centralisation of power with the Executive, increasing authoritarianism, the excessive emphasis upon money and status in politics, the emergence of cliques and factions within UMNO, the alienation of various social groups and the general lack of attention to the disadvantaged have all been responsible for this. As political stability diminishes, it will become even more difficult to maintain that semblance of ethnic stability.

In this deteriorating ethnic situation, the primary concern of the government should be to reduce distrust and suspicion between the communities. Towards this end, it should create a channel of communication among the influential elements of the various communities which would allow for the frank exchange of views even on topics considered sensitive. For that reason, this communication should not take place in the open arena of public debate and controversy. Otherwise there might be a tendency to play up to the ethnic gallery since our major political leaders are essentially community leaders who thrive upon communal mobilisation and manipulation.

What is needed, in other words, is a consultative council on national unity comprising leaders of all the political parties, the major trade union confederations, the important commercial and industrial bodies, professional associations, and the significant public interest societies in the country. The leading personalities in the various religious, cultural and community organisations should also be included.

The Council should have the power to discuss every dimension of the ethnic question. It should work on the basis of consensus and whatever recommendation it makes should be presented direct to Parliament. The consultative council should have a legal status as an advisory body appointed by the Yang di Pertuan Agung and responsible to the rakyat.

Apart from a consultative council on national unity, the government should initiate a number of other policy measures aimed at lessening ethnic grievances.

FIRST, in the area of education, a pupil entering a primary school using Bahasa Malaysia as the main medium of instruction should not be required to state his or her ethnic origin. There should be no ethnic differentiation; every Malaysian pupil in such a school should be registered – and respected – as a Malaysian. Financial assistance at all levels of education should be based upon need – not ethnic affiliation. Similarly, only academic performance and socio-economic background should be considered in student recruitment into colleges and universities. There is no reason why this cannot be done right away in the non-science faculties in the universities since the number of qualified Bumiputra applicants is expanding tremendously in any case.

SECOND, the government must be seen to be looking after the poor of all communities – without bias or discrimination. This is why the poor of the new villages and estates should also be given emphasis in development programmes, just as the poor from the kampungs.

THIRD, there must be a more concerted effort to use Bahasa Malaysia in the private sector in particular. This will help change the existing perception of the private sector as culturally alienated from the land. At the same time, private sector elites should show greater sincerity in the recruitment and promotion of able bumiputras. There should not be any prejudice against any community.

FOURTH, the government should gradually increase the non-Bumiputra intake into the civil service. The public services as a whole should reflect the multi-ethnic character of our society. Greater weightage should be given to ability, integrity and dedication in appointments and promotions within the public services.

FINALLY, the media have also got a responsibility to ensure that ethnic issues are not exaggerated or exploited to serve certain interests. Newspapers and radio and television should manifest greater sensitivity towards the complexities of a multi-ethnic society like ours. The media should help develop a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural background of the country among non-Bumiputras by showing how Malaysia has evolved from a Malay polity into a multi-ethnic nation.

In similar fashion, Bumiputras should be inculcated with values and attitudes appropriate to the multi-ethnic realities that prevail today. Among both communities, there is a need to demolish ethnic stereotypes and ethnic prejudices which have become quite pervasive. Most of all, the media must endeavour to show our multi-ethnic population that it shares many fundamental spiritual values, in spite of superficial cultural differences.

Even if a portion of these proposals can be implemented immediately, there is every likelihood that the ethnic atmosphere in our country will change for the better.

However, the real long-term solution lies in a holistic transformation of the structure of power in society. For communalism will remain a potent force as long as political, administrative, economic, cultural and intellectual power is not equitably distributed. What this means is that if economic or political power in a society is concentrated at the upper levels, the elites who benefit from this are bound to manipulate ethnic sentiments so that they can continue to remain on top. At the same time, the ordinary people who are deprived of power may choose to interpret their deprivation along ethnic lines. It is situations like this that give rise to ethnic dichotomies, communal quotas, and the like.

In our case, for instance, the vast majority of our people have neither economic nor political power. A segment of the Bumiputra community sees this lack of economic power in communal terms. Likewise a section of the non-Bumiputra community views the lack of political power in ethnic perspectives. The feelings of insecurity among both communities are cleverly manipulated by Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra elites so that they can perpetuate their dominance and control within this unequal social structure. This is why the equitable distribution of power to enable every human being to exercise the autonomy and authority that is rightfully his, is a vital step in the struggle against ethnic polarisation.

Of course, enhancing the power and position of the human being will not serve any purpose if the human being does not free himself from communal thinking. We cannot transform society if we do not transform ourselves. Just as we cannot fight corruption in the larger

society unless we ourselves are honest and upright, so would it be impossible to curb communalism without first eradicating our own ethnic prejudices.

Explanatory note

First written in December 1984, it was revised and published in the *Aliran Monthly* June/July 1987.

ETHNIC TIME BOMB

Ethnic relations have deteriorated to such an extent today that almost any issue can become a heated communal controversy overnight. It is so easy now to excite ethnic passions.

Indeed, inter-ethnic ties, especially at the elite level, are assuming the characteristics of a strained marriage. Any little incident can trigger off an angry exchange. And what is worse, the bitterness remains — until the next squabble.

Why have ethnic relations become so bad in recent months? Part of the explanation may lie with political parties. Community-based political parties like the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and to a lesser extent, the Gerakan, which lost considerable Chinese support in the last General Election may be trying to project a strong ethnic image in order to regain their stature. Their political rival, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), on the other hand, buoyed by its good electoral showing in urban Chinese constituencies is dead set on maintaining and expanding its popularity. The ethnic posturing that ensues from this inter-party competition has perhaps aggravated the communal situation.

But this is not the whole explanation. For very often, Chinese-based parties appear to be reacting to ethnic issues — ethnic issues which may have originated to some extent within other organisations, like the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) for instance. The situation within UMNO may therefore also be an important factor. UMNO today is more factionalised than it has ever been before. Each faction, (and the cliques and individuals within it) tries to outdo its adversary by playing up some so-called 'communal threat' or other to the Malays. Given the magnetic appeal of communal blandishments, it is not surprising that this approach has brought success to many aspiring politicians.

If factional and clique feuds within UMNO have led to a deterioration in the ethnic situation it is also because the leadership itself is involved in the game. Since its own position is hardly secure, it seems to be more inclined than before to 'playing up to the ethnic gallery'.

More important, however, the leadership may at times view communal controversies as useful ways of diverting public attention from other issues threatening its position and power. It is perhaps no coincidence that a couple of the most acrimonious communal debates occurred in the last few weeks in the midst of all the Court wrangles over Hatibudi-UEM and the North-South Highway.

It is not just in matters related to 'conflict of interest' or corruption that communal controversies play a diversionary role. While ethnic passions were being aroused by certain politicians on the University of Malaya electives and the Chinese schools issue, top political leaders were taking potshots at the Judiciary and Judges. Because of the power of communal sentiments in societies like ours, the public, unfortunately, has not been as vigilant as it should be about more significant longterm threats to democracy and the Judiciary.

This may also explain, to a certain degree, why simple administrative issues are sometimes allowed to drag on and on for weeks or even months, without any solution in sight. It cannot be plain incompetence or indecisiveness on the part of the authorities. By allowing issues to remain unresolved for a long period, the Government is, perhaps, wittingly, encouraging ethnic perceptions to pervade the entire social fabric.

If anything, sections of the media have also played an adverse role in this. Some of the dailies and weeklies keep ethnic issues alive through slanted reports and biased interpretations. They have no qualms about stoking the communal fires since they know that it helps to promote their sales. Besides a number of the major newspapers are, in any case, owned indirectly by certain Barisan Nasional parties and are therefore expected to reflect certain communal tendencies. They – and others like them – have served to strengthen narrow sectarian attitudes among a huge segment of the populace.

Of course, over and above all these explanations for the rapid deterioration in ethnic relations, is the impact of the recession of the last few years. Recession has made it more difficult to accommodate the competing economic demands of Malay and non-Malay elements in the middle and upper classes. On hindsight, it was perhaps the

prosperity of earlier times which blunted some of the sharper edges of potential ethnic antagonisms. In a sense, the recession has also increased both the extent and intensity of social frustration. This is now expressing itself through ethnic discontent.

There are, admittedly, many other perhaps more important causes for the deterioration in ethnic relations which go beyond the scope of this analysis. The emergence of a State, since the seventies, with a pronounced orientation towards the economic and political interests and aspirations of the Malay middle and upper classes is one of those causes. The concomitant decline of Chinese capital in certain spheres of the economy and the diminishing influence of non-Malay political elites is another. This has undoubtedly increased non-Malay unhappiness with what is perceived erroneously as a totally Malay Government. It is a perception which has coloured ethnic attitudes to a considerable degree.

This is why if there is any immediate step which should be taken to improve ethnic relations it is trying to change the popular non-Malay perception of Government. The Government can assist in the process by projecting a Barisan Nasional rather than an 'UMNO plus others' image of itself. The inter-ethnic character of the ruling coalition should emerge through public pronouncements and state policies. For this to happen, the Barisan Nasional must begin to function as a political grouping that discusses, debates and proposes policies to the Government which rules in its name. Needless to say, there must be regular formal and informal consultations among the coalition partners. If there were such consultations, some of the communal controversies of the last few weeks might have been less confrontational.

A genuinely inter-ethnic Barisan led by UMNO is only part of the solution. Yet another urgent measure which the Government should consider is the establishment of a National Consultative Council on Ethnic Relations. This is a proposal which Aliran first made in 1984. The Council should comprise all shades of opinion pertinent to the question of ethnic integration. All religions and cultures in the country should be represented. At the same time, all political parties, public interest groups, the media, labour confederations, employers federations, chambers of commerce and industry, professional bodies and educational and literary organisations should be invited to participate in

the proceedings of the National Consultative Council on Ethnic Relations.

The Council, to be established by an act of Parliament should have the power to make recommendations to Parliament without going through the Executive. Its proceedings could be 'in camera' to enable its members to discuss sensitive issues with full freedom. The Council could have the following objectives:

- To suggest solutions to ethnic disputes which may arise from time to time.
- To formulate long-term remedies to perennial ethnic controversies related to language, religion, culture, education and the economy.
- To work out concrete measures aimed at eradicating ethnic misconceptions and ethnic prejudices among the people.
- To propose reforms in various areas of public life which have a direct or indirect bearing upon ethnic relations.
- To evolve a philosophy of, and an approach to, ethnic integration and unity which is acceptable to all communities.

This idea of a National Consultative Council on Ethnic Relations is being put forward to the Government and people because we know that the deterioration in ethnic relations can only be checked if Malaysians of all ethnic origins achieve a degree of consensus on the ethnic issues which divide us today. More specifically what this means is that we should not only agree on what the national language is (an issue which was resolved in 1957) but on what this implies in terms of education, literature, administration, commerce etc. Consensus of this sort at a more concrete level is required on a variety of other issues where the major communities hold diametrically different views. The proposed Council, it is hoped, would serve as a channel in the quest for consensus in an ethnically divided nation.

Explanatory note

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LIVING IN A MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETY

One of the main reasons why multi-ethnic Malaysia has held together in spite of everything, is because of a 'live and let live' attitude among the people. This is due to certain cultural, economic and political factors. All the cultural and religious traditions in the country value mutual tolerance and respect. At the same time, right through the sixties and seventies we experienced a certain degree of economic prosperity which allowed for some accommodation of competing ethnic aspirations at the middle and upper levels of society. Besides, some form of balance and accommodation has been a characteristic of Malaysian politics, especially in the first decade and a half after Merdeka.

Perhaps, the 'live and let live' attitude is also a product of a type of caution in ethnic relations that has developed since the May 13 incident in 1969. Malaysians are now very afraid of provoking anyone from another community just in case it leads to an ethnic conflict. This caution, this fear of trouble breaking out, appears to be a crucial aspect of the Malaysian psyche. It is similar to the way Japanese feel about the danger of earthquakes!

However, in the last 10 years or so, there has been a significant deterioration in ethnic relations. There is less social interaction among the different communities at all levels. There is more distrust and suspicion than ever before. Among all communities there is a feeling of insecurity, of deprivation. This is compounded by fear of 'the other community'. Unfortunately, these feelings are seldom articulated openly. In the presence of individuals of 'the other community' one often avoids talking about ethnic issues. However, within one's own ethnic circle, one is often vocal and vociferous in expressing all sorts of ethnic gripes. This is a good example of 'closet communalism'. Closet communalism is slowly creating a 'two-face' culture among Malaysians — one, the face presented to the person outside your community and two, the face you reveal to your own kind.

What are the major causes of this deterioration in ethnic relations?

- Unnecessarily divisive public policies in education, the economy and the administration. A certain degree of veiled discrimination in the private sector.
- Manipulation of ethnic sentiments by politicians in both government and opposition parties.
- Vested interests in the economy and politics which are determined to perpetuate communalism in public life.
- Sectarian notions of society and social issues supported by either religious or cultural ideologies which command emotional support among a section of the people.
- Lack of understanding of each other's position, interests, aspirations and sensitivities among both Malays and non-Malays. This is made worse by ignorance of one another's religion and culture.

In order to check this deterioration in ethnic relations there are certain pre-requisites that must be fulfilled.

- A national leadership of high ethical and intellectual calibre with a clear vision of how the communities would be integrated. The commitment should be to integration not assimilation or segregation.
- A sincere commitment to justice and fairness in dealings with the various communities on the part of all those who exercise power and authority in all sectors and at all levels of society.
- Effective inter-ethnic communicators within the intelligentsia who will strive to increase understanding among the various communities and reduce misconceptions and apprehensions.
- Economic growth and economic expansion accompanied by a concerted effort to eradicate poverty among all communities. Growth will help to reduce ethnic antagonisms which often increase when the economic pie is shrinking while the eradication of poverty could result in a lessening of ethnic insecurity and ethnic anxiety.
- A willingness to communicate, to consult and to seek consensus on ethnic issues. There must also be an attempt to encourage people's participation in finding solutions to ethnic challenges. Consultation and participation are vital in a multi-ethnic society;

otherwise whole communities may feel that they are being ignored and neglected. This could lead to ethnic alienation.

Apart from these pre-requisites there are certain specific measures that can be introduced in the short run.

- Establish a National Consultative Council on Ethnic Relations comprising representatives of all political parties, public interest societies, cultural and language organisations, religious bodies, professional groups etc. The idea is to provide a channel for frank communication on ethnic issues.
- Establish the equivalent of this Council at the district level. These district Councils will consist of local community leaders. Unlike the National Council, they will be more concerned with day-to-day ethnic problems.
- Establish an independent, autonomous Institute of Ethnic Relations to study in depth the ethnic problem in the country and to recommend solutions.
- Re-vamp the primary and secondary curriculum in relation to certain subjects like history and civics with the aim of inculcating a multi-ethnic outlook among the young.
- Review radio and television programmes so that programmes with ethnic biases will be eliminated. Introduce programmes that would help non-Malays understand the history and background of the country and the role of the Malay language and Islam in the evolution of our society. At the same time, introduce programmes which will enable Malays to appreciate better the realities of a multi-ethnic society and the legitimate aspirations of the non-Malays. Equally important, Radio and Television should give special emphasis to the values, principles and ideals which Malaysians of different communities share in common. Indeed, shared values should be the basis of our national identity and the foundation of the nation-building process.

Finally, Malaysians should realise that learning to live harmoniously in this multi-ethnic society is our greatest challenge. We should strive to become a shining example to the world of harmonious multi-ethnic living. If we can achieve that goal, we would have made a priceless

contribution to humanity – of far greater value than joining the ranks of the industrial giants of the Pacific.

Explanatory note

This is a summarized version of a talk given at a forum on multi-ethnic living organised by Aliran in Kuala Lumpur in early April 1988.



**ISLAM AND THE
QUESTION OF
RELIGION**

THE CONCEPT OF EQUALITY IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Equality as an idea is deeply embedded in Islamic philosophy. Its sociological manifestations are also lucidly expressed in both the Quran and the Sunnah (the way of the Prophet Muhammad) on the one hand, and in other Islamic traditions, on the other.

The philosophical basis

To start with, the idea receives support from the philosophical view of what the religion is all about. It is said that Islam is the 'natural religion' of man.¹ By this is meant that it is the way of life, the code of conduct that is most harmonious with the development of man's humanity. And man's humanity is intrinsic to his nature. The right social conditions must be created to enable man's nature – in the sense in which it is used here – to blossom.

By linking Islam to man's nature, the commonality of all human beings is unequivocally established. All human beings are essentially the same – as far as their basic nature goes. It is this that makes them equal.

As an aside, it is this view of Islam as a path that cultivates man's humanity in line with his nature that defies its classification as a religion in the conventional way in which the term is used in Western anthropology. Islam, in other words, is a way of life with values and principles which guide almost every sphere of human existence. The aim of this guidance is to facilitate man's service to God.

The oneness of man which this idea engenders is further reinforced by the Islamic conception of Adam. Adam is the symbol of man – of all human beings. He represents a vital point in the creative evolution of life.² He symbolizes the beginning of consciousness – man's consciousness of his own nature and its inclination towards goodness. It is this consciousness which helps to emphasise man's common humanity. Once again, it makes all human beings equal in their awareness of their nature.

However, Adam represents equality in a much more tangible manner. Since all human beings are descended from Adam and Eve,

the original pair, they are all equal in their common origin. The Quran repeatedly stresses that this common origin is the basis of human solidarity, of man's equality. More important, since Adam is made from dust, his descendants should remain ever conscious of their humble genesis. Indeed, the Quran reminds man of this as a way of making him perpetually aware of the need to struggle against unjustified inequities and to strive for legitimate equality.

The equality that is related to the position of Adam is developed more thoroughly in the Quranic concept of Prophecy. The Quran recognizes all the prophets – those it mentions and those it does not mention – who were sent to various lands as legitimate messengers of the same God. It implores humankind not to distinguish one from the other. This implies the universality of truth, on the one hand, and its particular manifestations, on the other. Its relevance to equality lies in two related spheres: first, it shows that the eternal truth, whatever its form or its channel, has the same value, and second, it indicates that the truth is accessible to everyone.

Within the Quran itself there are a number of verses which incorporate these ideas of equality. At one place, for instance, it says: 'Mankind was one single nation, And Allah sent Messengers With Glad tidings and warnings....'³ At another point it says,

*O mankind: We created You from a single [pair] Of a male and a female And made you into Nations and tribes, that Ye may know each other (Not that ye may despise Each Other). Verily the most honoured of you In the sight of Allah Is [he who is] the most Righteous of you: And Allah has full knowledge And is well acquainted [with all things].*⁴

It is significant that the latter verse is addressed to the whole of humankind, though the verses that precede this particular verse in the Quran are directed specifically to 'the believers'.⁵ It can be argued, therefore, that the oneness of humankind is a truly universal concept which transcends not just the barriers of gender, language, community and nation but also surmounts the boundaries created by religion.

One of the best known *hadiths* (sayings) of the Prophet Muhammad lends forceful support to this non-sectarian perspective on the unity of humankind. In his farewell address during his last pilgrimage,

he reiterated: 'All of you are from Adam and Adam was created from dust. An Arab is not superior to a non-Arab; neither is a white man superior to a black man, except on the basis of righteousness.'⁶

If we reflect upon the philosophical basis of equality, it is apparent that there are various aspects to it. It is equality based upon a certain conception of man's nature, his humanity, his origin and his purpose. More than that, it is equality born of the oneness of the universal message, and therefore equality which repudiates all man-made dichotomies. Most of all, it is equality which derives its strength from its recognition of righteousness as the only factor that makes one human being unequal to another. And righteousness itself embodies faith in God and carrying out good deeds, which mean essentially helping the poor and needy, bringing freedom to others and proving one's honesty and sincerity.⁷

The sociological dimensions

This philosophical concept of equality finds specific meaning in various spheres. This is one of the unique attributes of Islam. However, in the process, certain changes have been wrought to the universal purity of the idea of equality, as we shall discover in a while.

In law, all persons are recognized as equal and 'entitled to equal opportunities and protection of the law'.⁸ Similarly, all persons have the same right to a fair trial, and to protection against abuse of power and torture. At the same time, 'every persecuted or oppressed person has the right to seek refuge and asylum'.⁹ It is significant that these rights are given to everyone, irrespective of sex, colour, ethnicity and religion.

However, Quranic law also makes some differentiation when it comes to women – a point which will be considered separately. Likewise, by placing the Muslims as a whole under a distinct legal system, the Sharia, it differentiates them from non-Muslims who may be living in the same country. This again will be discussed later when we consider ethnic relations in the context of equality.

In politics every person has equal right to freedom in all its forms, just as every person has the right to struggle against oppression, to pro-

test against injustice and to criticize and correct the wrongdoings of those in power. Indeed, the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights even asserts: 'It is the right and duty of every person to defend the rights of any other person and the community in general (*Hisbah*).'¹⁰

Among these rights is the right of a person to express his thoughts and beliefs and his right 'to participate individually and collectively in the religious, social, cultural and political life of his community'.¹¹ As part of this, Muslims and non-Muslims can choose, on their own free will, leaders to administer society on the basis of the Quran and Sunnah.

The core of the political and administrative leadership in a society guided by Islamic tenets should, however, comprise Muslim males who are devout and knowledgeable. This of course excludes both non-Muslims and women. The justifications given for this in Islamic thought will be spelt out in due course. Towards the end of this section we shall evaluate the legitimacy of these justifications.

For the time being, let us turn to economic rights in Islam. There is, on the whole, the same stress upon equality. Various ethical guidelines are provided to help man in his economic decisions and actions. By and large, the concern is with encouraging people to give and share rather than hoard and acquire.¹² This is why the resources of nature are seen as God's bounties meant for everyone. A contemporary document describes them as 'blessings bestowed by God for the benefit of Mankind as a whole'.¹³ At the same time every person has the right to own property, individually or together with others. To ensure that this does not lead to inequalities, Islamic thinkers have suggested that all means of production should be used or controlled in the interest of the community. The religion also forbids usury, huge profits, monopolies and the like, with the aim of achieving equality. By the same token, Islam requires that workers are treated with utmost dignity.¹⁴ It condemns exploitation and stipulates clearly that wages should be such that they would be sufficient to meet all basic needs. Indeed, providing food, clothes, shelter, medicine, education and employment is sometimes considered the responsibility of the community as a whole. Also, all persons are entitled to equal wages for equal work.

However, in spite of all these principles directed towards the quest of equality, the Quran appears to accept the poor as an inevitable element in the social panorama. It assumes that social disparities will always be there, and seeks to mitigate the effects of poverty by bestowing upon the poor the right to a prescribed share of the wealth of the rich through the institution of the *Zakat*.

In the relations between the sexes too there are traces of inequality just as there is also an undeniable commitment to equality. Women enjoy the same status as men when it comes to strictly spiritual matters — her prayer and her fast, for instance, have the same spiritual value as his. As human beings with a transcendental purpose which has to be realized through a life of righteousness, there is no differentiation in the position of the woman as against the man. Similarly, there is a clear recognition of the mutuality of rights and obligations. The Quran says, for instance, 'they are your garments and ye are their garments'.¹⁵ It also notes that 'to men is allotted what they earn and to women what they earn. But ask Allah of His Bounty For Allah hath full knowledge of all things.'¹⁶

This equality is reflected in many specific spheres of human activity — at least as far as Islamic thought is concerned. A woman's labour has the same intrinsic value as a man's and has to be rewarded accordingly. Women can do whatever work is suitable for them as long as it is ethical and does not infringe upon their other roles as mothers and wives. They are entitled to own property, to engage in business on their own and to enter contracts in their own name. Education is a woman's right inasmuch as it is a man's. A woman can also participate in public affairs to some extent, provided that her role does not interfere with her more fundamental duties as mother and wife.

The woman's position in the home, either as mother or wife, is not the only basis for distinguishing her from the male. There is also the view that the woman is somehow the lesser of the sexes. The Quran itself maintains: 'And Women shall have rights similar to the rights Against them, according To what is equitable; But men have a degree [of advantage] over them And Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise.'¹⁷

In law and public affairs, as we have alluded, the lesser status of women becomes a little obvious. Her share of inheritance is less than the male's; her value as a witness is limited, compared to a male. It is generally accepted that she is temperamentally unsuited for certain public offices. Judgeship would be one of them. The leadership of government would be another. It has been argued that the physiological and psychological changes that women undergo during monthly periods and pregnancy affect their temperaments, and that leadership roles, 'require a maximum of rationality and a minimum of emotionality — a requirement which may not coincide with the instinctive nature of women'.¹⁸

With ethnic relations, the question of equality and inequality assumes yet another shade which makes the problem even more complex. Islam, as we have seen, acknowledges the common humanity of man. More than that we have been shown how by making righteousness, not religion, the criterion for differentiation between one person and another, Islam becomes truly universal in an all-transcending sense.

And yet, there is this idea of a separate unity among Muslims. The Quran, for instance, observes that 'The Believers are but A single Brotherhood: So make peace and Reconciliation between your Two (contending) brothers'.¹⁹ While intra-religious unity of this type need not necessarily lead to chauvinism, it is nevertheless true that it creates a distinction of sorts.

Of course, the distinction in itself does not indicate any inequality. For non-Muslims enjoy equal and reciprocal rights and duties in most areas within an Islamic polity. These rights and duties are sanctified in Islamic legal theory by bestowing upon non-Muslims the title of *ahlal-dhimmah*, or 'those whose obligations are a trust upon the conscience and pledge of the state or the nation'.²⁰ The Charter of Medina drawn up by the Prophet Muhammad himself, his treaty with the Christians of Najran and the attitudes of the righteous caliphs were outstanding examples of tolerance and compassion towards non-Muslims.

The principles derived from this past allow non-Muslims to have their own laws based upon their own legal traditions or opt for the

Sharia. They can preserve their own languages and cultures, practise their own religions, and perpetuate their own groups as distinct communities. They have every right to carry out their own economic activities with the full protection of the state. Non-Muslims are also entitled to participate in public affairs. They can comment upon any issue, including issues which are specific to Islam and the Muslim community, like the implementation of Islamic laws. They can help choose leaders for the state and can hold certain public offices. In this connection, non-Muslims can even sit in an Islamic legislature as representatives of non-Muslim interests.²¹

While all this is possible, non-Muslims, as we have noted earlier, cannot however perform any of the vital roles in the political and administrative set-up of an Islamic state. This would include serving as president, prime minister, a cabinet minister in a crucial Ministry, the head of the judiciary, the chief of the police or commander of the armed forces.

This exclusion would not be regarded as a form of discrimination by many Islamic political theorists, since policy formulation and leadership in an Islamic state should logically be in the hands of those who subscribe to that world-view. It would be the same in any social system guided by a particular social philosophy.

Reflections on equality

Before we reflect upon these sociological dimensions of equality in Islamic thought, it is necessary to clarify the status of the ideas expressed so far in relation to law, politics, economics, women and ethnicity. Most of the ideas belong to mainstream thinking on Islam. For in Islam, as in other belief systems, whether religious or secular, one should expect varied perspectives on philosophical ideas, especially when it involves a theme that is as complex as 'equality'. By selecting interpretations which can be traced back most easily to the Quranic revelation and the Sunnah, we have tried to evolve a view of equality which would represent the consensual middle. This does not mean, of course, that every interpretation on equality in this analysis has an unchallengeable Quranic base. Neither does it mean that there would be unanimous endorsement of the interpretations selected as reflective of consensual thinking on equality. Nevertheless, this perspective is, from

the standpoint of an individual at least, an honest depiction of the general perception of what constitutes equality in Islamic thought.

It is apparent that while equality is the central concern of law, politics, economics, male-female relations and ethnic ties, there are also unmistakable elements of inequality. How does one explain the co-existence of what appear to be contradictory tendencies within the same doctrinal structure? Or are they, after all, part of one harmonious whole?

One can argue for instance that the so-called inequalities exist because of the natural state of affairs. As an example, men have to lead; women have secondary roles in certain areas. This is integral to God's plan. It is part of His perennial wisdom.

There is a flaw in this argument. We know that there is no natural law about man's leadership. Neither is it true that just because women are physically and temperamentally different they cannot lead society. Indeed, women are as rational or irrational as men are. They are capable of making judgements which are as sound as anything men are capable of. There is sufficient evidence to support this view of the female sex.²²

Similarly, one cannot deny that emphasis upon unity within a particular religious community will eventually create an in-group — out-group dichotomy. This is inevitable since a grouping based upon a certain identity must mean the reinforcement of its sense of collective oneness through symbols, rituals and ceremonies. This must result in the erection of barriers between one group and the other.

This is why we find it difficult to understand how Muslim unity can contribute towards the universal brotherhood of man — which is the ultimate Islamic ideal. For the former means maintaining and perpetuating a particularistic tendency, the latter seeks to liberate the human being from all such tendencies so that he discovers his spiritual essence shorn of sectarian attachments.²³ It does not make sense, therefore, to pursue Muslim unity and universal brotherhood at the same time.

Besides, group identities must breed group interests. In fact, they reinforce each other. Confining certain leadership roles to one's

own kind is part of this desire to protect the interests of the group. By so doing, one restricts – even if it is unconsciously done – the opportunities for others who are not part of the in-group to realize their full potentialities as human beings. What this means is that if one is convinced that it is righteous conduct, and not religious affiliation, that counts, then there is no justification to preserve certain positions for Muslims.²⁴ The same argument would apply with equal validity to the right of women to lead.

If sexual and ethnic inequalities have no basis, then neither does class inequality have any basis. We have enough knowledge now of the possibilities of structural transformation to realize that poverty can be eradicated and social disparities eliminated if we pursue egalitarian policies formulated and implemented by honest, dedicated men and women. This is another way of saying that the rich-poor dichotomy is not eternal. Of course individual differences in attainment will always remain, but they need not – and should not – be allowed to develop into class divisions. In other words, with the growth of science and technology and the emphasis upon the masses in the restructuring of society, we do not have to require the rich to help the poor in order to achieve justice and equality. What this implies is that the institution of the *Zakat*, like the rules on inheritance or the prohibition on usury – just and wise as they are – cannot by themselves help to evolve a more equal social structure. And a truly equal society where ‘Mankind is one nation’ without being divided into classes is undoubtedly the aspiration of the Quran, viewed from its underlying philosophy.²⁵

If that is the case, how does one explain those traces of inequality that we encountered? The explanation is perhaps related to the nature of the Quran and the character of its Divine Revelation. The Quran has a twofold purpose. First, it enunciates a universal message relevant for all times and pertinent to human beings in all circumstances. This it does by laying out eternal values and principles which one discovers through reflection and analysis of specific verses and the overall thrust of the Holy Book. Second, to make this exposition of a universal message meaningful to a particular people who had to practise it and, thereby, establish its validity for future generations, the Quran draws upon ideas and institutions, laws and lores which belonged to that specific, time-bound, place-bound context.

If anything, this testifies to God's infinite wisdom. For a universal truth would have lost its significance if it could not be transformed into a living truth demonstrated by a people operating within a particular setting. In the process of transformation, that universal truth takes on certain external features which may give the outward impression of distorting its inner qualities.

This is why if one studies the actual rules on inheritance, for instance, one realizes that some of the ideas makes sense only within the tribal-communal context of seventh-century Meccan society where the male had a dominant position. And yet the underlying emphasis even within that context is unambiguously clear – the aim is to achieve complete equality.

That equality of the sexes is the real goal becomes obvious when one examines the status of women in that society during that period in relation to the far-reaching reforms affected by the Quran. A thing like the woman's position as a witness in judicial matters will be seen in a different light when one realizes that all the changes to her status brought about by Islam were so fundamental that it transformed the entire value system of the Arab male for a few decades. Indeed, as far as the position of women goes, there is no denying that the spirit of the Quranic message is irrevocably committed to liberation.²⁷ It is the failure of succeeding generations to continue with the reforms – to transform the spirit of the message into the letter of the law – that one should condemn.

Similarly, one understands why Muslim unity is given some significance in certain parts of the Quran. A new community had just come into being. It was under siege, threatened by more powerful forces without any moral scruples. Unity became imperative to defend the integrity, indeed to ensure the very survival, of the nascent Muslim community.

But more important, the community was expected to embody the great virtues contained in the Quran. To preserve those virtues, it had to establish its own separate identity; it had to distinguish itself from the corruption and decadence of the surrounding milieu. The call to unity must be viewed within that context. That what was intended was essentially a unity of virtues was obvious from the Qura-

nic warning that even among the believers the evil would be separated from the good.²⁸ This harmonizes well with the notion of righteousness — that is, devotion to God and good deeds — which, as we have shown, is the only criterion for distinguishing one human being from another.

The preservation of certain leadership roles for Muslims should also be evaluated against this background. The real purpose was the protection of certain righteous qualities, particularly vital in the context of the struggle that was taking place at that time. The Quran does not say that Muslims are entitled to certain positions simply because they are Muslims. That would be against the entire spirit of the Quran. For the Quran places so much emphasis upon the actual deed, rather than the professed word, in judging human beings. Besides, it sees the strengths and weaknesses of human character as applicable to all groups and communities. There is nothing in the Quran to suggest that Muslims are exempt from the laws of human behaviour — or the laws of history. This is why claiming an exclusive role, preserving a privileged position for oneself by virtue of one's professed faith is certainly a betrayal of the tone and tenor of the Quran.

There is perhaps no greater authoritative support for this than the writings of that illustrious savant, Abul Kalam Azad. Azad was convinced that the Quran did not intend to create an exclusive religion. Its only goal is the unity of man. As he put it,

*no other truth of the Quran has been kept so deliberately out of sight than this. Should one study the Quran with an open mind, with every predilection strictly kept aside, and look into its numerous clear assertions in this respect, and then look at those who nevertheless regard the religion of the Quran as nothing else than an exclusive religious groupism, even as other religions, one will assuredly cry out that either the eyes of such people deceive them or that they deliver their verdict on anything even without looking at it.*²⁹

Just as Muslims have come to wrong conclusions about religious exclusivism without comprehending the real meaning of the Quran, so they have failed to appreciate why the spirit of the Quran is against class divisions. Without any doubt at all, the spirit behind the *Zakat*, the inheritance laws, the prohibition of usury, monopolies and so on is

the quest for equality. However, within the context of a largely tribal, pre-modern society whose economy was dominated by merchant capital this could only express itself through various exhortations and injunctions against the accumulation of wealth. Here again, the underlying motive of controlling the rich, of dividing property equitably, of raising the status of the poor should have inspired latter-day Muslims to institute fundamental changes – changes which would have brought them closer to their ideal of an egalitarian society.

So strong is this ideal in the religion that a contemporary Muslim scholar has argued that in Islam, 'All realities are on the same level. No top and no base. No higher and no lower. Transporting this linear concept of human life, we will have a society without classes. All members of this society are equal. The horizontal dimension of life not the vertical one is history.'³⁰

To arrive at such an interpretation of what equality means in Islam, it is apparent that one has to emphasize the underlying spirit rather than particular verses. The importance of doing this is perhaps best demonstrated by examining briefly yet another spiritual value – freedom. That the Quran advocates human freedom is an understatement. Nearly every major idea or episode in it is somehow related to the question of freedom, from man's creation, to the exercise of free will as man's unique gift from God, to his position as the vicegerent of God, to the plea to uphold freedom of speech and association, and finally to the call to enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong. And yet there is no specific verse in the Quran that prohibits slavery – though there is outright banning of other forms of social evil. In spite of this no one who has studied the Quran will deny that Islam is against slavery. The encouragement to free slaves, the advice to treat slaves as if they were part of one's own family, apart from the Quranic commitment to freedom are all evidence to show where the religion stands on this question. Of course, slavery could not be abolished that easily because it was one of the pillars on which the economic edifice of Meccan society rested. But the Quran indicates nevertheless, through the overall thrust of its message, the illegitimacy of the institution. This is why a philosophical understanding of the deeper meaning of the Quran is imperative.

The validity of such an approach is suggested by the Quran itself. If we reflect upon the verses revealed at Mecca we will notice that they are, on the whole, more directly universal, more concerned with the general human condition. The verses revealed at Medina, on the other hand, are much more specific and deal with particular situations and specific circumstances.³¹ This is understandable, for during his Meccan years Muhammad's sacred mission was to disseminate the universal truth about *Tauhid* (the oneness of God), the central doctrine of Islam, and all that it implies in terms of spiritual values. In Medina, he had to govern a community – the first Muslim community – and God's guidance therefore dealt with the specific issues of law, politics and the economy. It goes without saying that unless one is able to derive universal principles from these particular injunctions, one will not understand why it is said that Islam is applicable to all times and all places.

Equality: progressive and conservative perspectives

What all this shows is that in Islam it is possible to develop a perspective on equality which is far more progressive than even the consensual middle would allow. At the same time, yet another approach could result in a conservative conception of equality which is more retrogressive than provided for by the consensual middle.

In order to obtain a clearer understanding of all the examples we have given of how equality can be linked to the underlying spirit of the Quran, it is necessary to elaborate some of the characteristics of a progressive perspective on Islam. They will be contrasted with some of the features of conservative Islam.

First – and perhaps most obvious of all – progressive Islam emphasizes the spirit rather than the details contained in the scriptures of the religion. It is the underlying philosophy that it cherishes most, the reasoning, the thinking, the emotion behind a particular instruction or prohibition.

Second, this means that the historical, sociological context of the divine teachings and of the mission of the Prophet Muhammad would be taken into account in any endeavour to understand the values and principles of Islam. It must be emphasized that this is in no way a repudiation of the Quran's, or even the Sunnah's, eternal, universal

significance. It cannot be. For by separating the contextual from the perennial one would be reinforcing faith in the unchanging fundamentals. In that way, some of the doubts and uncertainties about the validity of certain practices in the religion which have often plagued modern Muslim minds would be overcome.

Third, the moment one emphasizes the spirit of Islam, on the one hand, and acknowledges the importance of the sociological dimension in the analysis of the philosophy of the religion, on the other, one begins to see Islam as an evolutionary, dynamic movement through time. It ceases to be a revelation whose universality and perennality were established in an immutable form at a certain point in history. Islam becomes a continuous unfolding, an unceasing process which seeks rejuvenation from age to age through the absorption of new knowledge.³²

Fourth, the absorption of new knowledge must necessarily lead to an active dialogue with other intellectual traditions. It must mean a willingness to allow new ideas and values to shape and mould the eternal truths in the religion.

Finally, as important as dialogue with other intellectual traditions is constant interaction with other spiritual traditions. Progressive Islam would place a high premium on this, for it recognizes that God is one and Truth is indivisible. It would even acknowledge that in their concept of good deeds, in their perception of good values, in their vision of the meaning and purpose of life, and indeed in their view of the ultimate reality (especially the mystical perspective on this) all the great religions share many common positions.

All these attributes of progressive Islam are absent in the conservative conception of Islam. In a nutshell, it is an Islam that is obsessed with scriptural details, that negates reason and reflection, that is opposed to distinguishing the contextual from the perennial, that refuses to admit fresh currents of thought, that denies the need for interaction with other religions, that encourages, if unwittingly, static, fixed attitudes and beliefs which in reality repudiate universal truths.

It is a tragedy that conservative Islam has a greater hold upon the Muslim mind than progressive Islam at this stage in history. Why

this is so lies outside the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that the consolidation of hereditary power, class stratification, the country-city dichotomy, the destruction of the major centres of Islamic civilization in the Middle Ages, the onslaught of colonialism, the unequal distribution of either wealth or political power or both in many post-colonial Muslim states, and the continued existence of an unequal international system have all contributed towards the emergence and perpetuation of conservative Islam.

Conclusion

It is only too apparent that liberation from conservative Islam is vital for the future of Muslims everywhere. But progressive Islam can triumph only if the various forces which keep conservative Islam ascendant – forces which we mentioned earlier – are totally defeated.

It is in this connection that the quest for equality is important because more than anything else, this quest has compelled Muslims to reappraise class, community and sex relations to find out to what extent Islam seeks equality. And since the quest for equality is one of those irreversible trends in human history, it is quite conceivable that it will continue to challenge existing structures and attitudes within the Muslim world, as elsewhere. In the process, we may witness one of the major transformations in Islamic thought – a transformation which will finally bestow supreme significance upon one of its most cherished values.

Explanatory Note

The above essay has appeared in *EQUALITY AND THE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF ASIA* R. Siriwardena (ed) (Frances Pinter, London, 1987).

Notes

1. It is often referred to as Ad-Din, or the way of life suitable to man's nature. For a fuller analysis see Mawlana Abdul Kalam

- Azad, *The Tarjuman-al-Quran*, vol. 1, tr. Dr Syed Abdul Latif (Lahore, 1968), especially section VII.
2. There is a brilliant exposition of the spiritually guided creative evolution of life in the Quran in Maurice Bucaille, *What is the Origin of Man?* (Paris: Seghers, 1982).
 3. See Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran*, text, translation and commentary (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1972), Sura II:213
 4. *Ibid*, Sura XLIX: 13.
 5. *Ibid*, XLIX: 10, 11 and 12.
 6. This message is quoted in various texts with slight variations. See for instance, M. Aman Hobohm, 'Islam and the Racial Problem', in Altaf Gauhar, ed., *The Challenge of Islam* (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1978), p. 275.
 7. This idea is expressed in Kalam Azad, *Tarjuman-al-Quran*, p. 159.
 8. See *Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights* (London: Islamic Council of Europe, September, 1981), p.7.
 9. *Ibid*, p. 9.
 10. *Ibid*, p. 8.
 11. *Ibid*, p. 11.
 12. These values are well articulated in Sayyid Qutb, *Social Justice in Islam* (Washington, 1953).
 13. See *Universal Islamic Declaration*, p. 11.
 14. See various essays in Hobohm, *The Challenge of Islam*, including Mouloud Kassim Nair Belkacem, 'The Concept of Social Justice in Islam'; A.K. Brohi 'Islam & Human Rights'; and Khurshid Ahmad, 'Islam and the Challenge of Economic Development'.
 15. See Yusuf Ah, *The Holy Quran*, Sura II: 187.
 16. *Ibid*, Sura IV:32
 17. *Ibid*, Sura II:228
 18. See Gamal A. Badawi 'Woman in Islam', in Khurshid Ahmad, ed., *Islam – its Meaning and Message* (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1976) p.143. See also M. Mazheruddin Siddiqi, *Women in Islam* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1979).

19. See Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran*, Sura XLIX:10.
20. See, for instance, Said Ramadan, *Islamic Law, its Scope and Equity* (Geneva, Said Ramadan, 1970), p. 122 for some reflections.
21. See A. A. Maududi, *Islamic Law and Constitution*, ed. and tr. Khurshid Ahmad (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1960), for a detailed exposition of the position of non-Muslim minorities in an Islamic state.
22. This is the sane, rational position associated with some of the best thinkers on the female question. For an early analysis on this see, for instance, Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).
23. This universalism in Islam is stressed by certain writers, among them, Ali Shariati *On the Sociology of Islam*, tr. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979). See in particular his 'The World-view of Tauhid'.
24. In law and politics, one of those persons who comes closest to this form of thinking is Asaf A.A. Fyzee, *A Modern Approach to Islam* (Lahore: Universal Books, 1978). See especially his 'The Reinterpretation of Islam'.
25. Muhammad Iqbal is one of those who takes this view. See his *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Dehh: Kitab Publishing House, 1974).
26. This is discussed in C. Muzaffar, 'Al-Quran: Nilai & Peraturan (the Quran: Values & Rules), *Dewan Budaya*, February and March 1980.
27. This is acknowledged even by a radical feminist like Nawal el-Saadawi. See her *The Hidden Face of Eve*, ed. and tr. Shariff Hetata (London: Zed Press, 1980).
28. See Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran*, Sura III:179
29. See Kalam Azad, *Tarjuman-al-Quran* p. 153.
30. See Hassan Hanafi, *Religious Dialogue and Revolution* (Cairo: Anglo Egyptian Bookshop, 1976), p.206.
31. This illuminating point has been made by some Sudanese mystics among them Ustaz Mahmoud Mohamed Taha. See his *The*

Religion of Man, A new Conception of Islam and *An Introduction to The Second Message of Islam* (pamphlets produced by the Ustaz and his followers, who call themselves the Republican Brothers, in April 1980).

32. This view of rejuvenation in Islam is conveyed in Syed Hussein Alatas, *Kita dengan Islam* (Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 1978).

ISLAMIC RESURGENCE: A GLOBAL VIEW

Definition

To start with, there is perhaps a need to explain why I am using the term "resurgence" – and not "re-assertion" or "revivalism" which are also in vogue.

"Resurgence", which the Oxford dictionary defines as "the act of rising again", has a number of strong points. Firstly, it is in a sense a view from within, a way in which many Muslims see the growing impact of the religion among its adherents. It conveys the impression that Islam is becoming important again, that it is regaining its prestige and self-respect. Secondly, "rising again" suggests a phenomenon which has happened before. There is a hint that there are elements in the present rise of Islam which are linked to the past. And indeed, the past glory of Islam – the cherished path trodden by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions – exerts considerable influence upon the thinking of those who are committed to the "Islamic way of life" today. Thirdly, "resurgence" as a term embodies the notion of a challenge, even a threat to those who adhere to other world-views. Many Muslims regard the espousal of an Islamic alternative as a challenge to the dominant social systems. Groups outside Islam, including those who are being challenged, would similarly perceive the rise of Islam as a threat to the positions they hold. For that reason, resurgence reflects the actual reality of perceptions on both sides.

"Islamic re-assertion"¹ has many of the same advantages. However, it does not convey the idea of a challenge to existing social arrangements. It does not even come close to suggesting that dominant paradigms are being questioned. It merely connotes insistence upon one's cause, one's position. It is essentially a positive statement, a declaration. But the Islamic movement, as we shall demonstrate, is more than that.

"Revivalism" on the other hand, brings out clearly the idea of returning to the past and a desire to revive what is antiquated. While this may be true of certain segments of the Islamic movement, it

certainly does not represent the outlook of the movement as a whole which would insist that its emphasis upon the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the way of the Prophet) is merely loyalty to eternal values.

Clarifications

For all these reasons, the term "Islamic resurgence" is preferred. But there are certain clarifications that have to be made. The social phenomenon we are about to study is not as recent as some would like to think. It can be argued that the rise of Islam began more than 200 years ago, after centuries of stagnation. It is associated with names such as Muhammad ibn Abd. al-Wahab of Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century (the founder of the Wahabi movement), Sayyid Muhammad bin Ali al-Sanusi of Algeria in the nineteenth century (the founder of the Sanusiyyah movement), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in the nineteenth century, Muhammad Abduh of Egypt in the nineteenth century, Zia Gokalp of Turkey in the early twentieth century, Mulla Hadi Sabziwari of Iran in the early nineteenth century and Shah Wali Allah Dilhawi of India in the eighteenth century. Though there were significant ideological differences between say, al-Wahab and al-Sanusi, on the one hand, with their emphasis upon conservative purity and al-Afghani and Shah Wali Allah on the other, with their commitment to progressive reinterpretation of Islam in the light of reason and knowledge, all these great personalities of what has been called the Islamic renaissance were equally dedicated to restoring the greatness of their religion.²

Here in Southeast Asia, the early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of Islamic intellectuals like Daud Patani, Tok Kenali, Sayyid Syaikh al-Hadi and Tahir Jallaluddin who, though lesser lights compared to the illustrious thinkers of the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent, were nonetheless distinguished pioneers of a more reformist approach to Islamic laws and concepts. As far as Malaysia in particular is concerned, they were in fact the first resurgents to call for a return to the Qu'ran and the Sunnah.

What distinguished these early resurgents from their present day counterparts was mainly the environment in which the two respective generations operated. The writings and activities of most of the leading personalities in the first generation were directed towards colonial, political and constitutional dominance and how it affected Muslim

identity and the Muslim struggle for Independence. For the present generation, its main concern is not just the Western-controlled international system but also the domestic situation in post-Independence societies beset with overwhelming challenges in almost every sphere of human activity. Islamic resurgence in the second phase is deeply involved in the whole question of the character and direction of Muslim societies.

It is precisely because we are dealing with the character of a variety of Muslim societies that any attempt at presenting a global view sets its own limitation. The high level of generalization which is inevitable in an essay of this sort is bound to do some injustice to specific contexts and situations. Indeed, even within regions some of the arguments may not hold. For example, Islamic resurgence in Indonesia appears to be much more concerned with issues of poverty, income disparities and economic exploitation³ than Islamic resurgence in Malaysia which seems to be more involved in the question of identity and the symbols and rituals which help define it. Similarly, Islamic consciousness in two Muslim minority communities in the region may express itself in very different ways. In South Thailand it is on the whole ideologically conservative while in the Southern Philippines it tends to be more radical. It shows that Islamic resurgence is conditioned to a great extent by history, the political culture and the local economic and ethnic milieu.

What makes it more complicated is that in Southeast Asia as elsewhere, the movement is in a state of flux. It is simply impossible to provide precise answers to many of the crucial issues involved in its growth. All that I will attempt to do is to suggest some tentative responses to what I regard as the five basic questions associated with this resurgence. Firstly, who are the initiators and participants in this resurgence? Secondly, what are its dominant intellectual characteristics? Thirdly, what are the factors responsible for its emergence? Fourthly, what are the reactions to it? Fifthly, what is its significance to Islam and civilization as a whole?

There is a tendency in the West in particular to view Islamic resurgence as a return to religious faith, to belief in God and the hereafter. It is equated for instance with the way in which atheists and

agnostics sometimes rediscover God through Christ. What is happening within the Muslim world is quite different. Muslims have never really ceased to believe in God. Even urbanized, westernized elites who may be negligent in their religious duties like praying regularly or fasting and may have violated rules on alcohol or gambling somehow retain their belief in God. Why this is so will be explained later. For the time being let us remember that the atheism which is widely professed among urban, educated elites in Western society has no parallel in Islam. Thus Islamic resurgence has nothing to do with restoration of faith as such. It is rather an endeavour to adjust to what is perceived as Islamic behaviour, to adhere to certain Islamic attitudes and practices and to advance an Islamic world-view.

Groups

Given the pervasive influence of Western life-styles in the post-colonial cities of the Third World, Islamic resurgence which in one sense is a reaction to this, is closely linked to urban centres rather than the rural areas where the majority of Muslims live. Its geographic and demographic impact is, therefore, more confined than is generally thought. Within these urban centres it is only a segment of the population that is actively or passively involved in this movement.

This does not mean, however, that Islamic resurgence has not seeped into rural localities. There is some evidence to show that in rural parts of south Thailand, Sumatra and northeast and northwest Malaysia young village women are becoming more conscious of what is perceived as Islamic attire. But even in these cases, it is not inconceivable that the influence is via urban centres especially as there is so much interaction between these two sectors of society. Teachers in rural schools who have graduated from universities in the cities are among the most active agents of this change in habits and life-styles.

Within the Islamic segment in the cities, three interrelated groups can be identified. The most significant is the young, middle-class element with incomes and occupations that are reasonably comfortable. Educated in a secular school system with rudimentary exposure to religious knowledge, they have on their own sought out Islamic norms and values as an alternative way of life. The underlying reasons for this will become clear in a while.

A much smaller group which has also played an important role in the resurgence comprises teachers and civil servants with a strong background in traditional Islamic education. In countries like Indonesia, Pakistan and Egypt the struggle for nationhood brought this group to the forefront. Though economic and administrative structures in the post-Independence period failed to accord sufficient recognition to the members of this group they have, nonetheless, succeeded in carving out significant roles for themselves in the political and cultural life of these countries. Indeed, the secular ruling elites in many Muslim countries have been compelled by events to accommodate some of their aspirations if only because of the real and potential influence they exercise over the masses.

The third group is numerically much larger than the other two groups though its actual power has yet to be realized. This group is from the urban working class. With low incomes and little formal education, whether secular or religious, these workers in firms, factories and government offices are to some extent newcomers to the urban environment. Their consciousness of Islamic practices has now begun to assume a manifest form compared to its latent nature in their traditional rural communities.

How these three groups interact is worth reflecting on. Islamic politics in Malaysia affords some illustration. In the leadership of the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement (ABIM), the first group is significant though there are elements of the second too. From time to time, there is some uneasiness in the relations between the two which is linked to how much knowledge of Islam each commands and how "Islamic" or "secular" each group is both in terms of personal behaviour and public roles. The present leadership of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), however, is dominated more by the second group and this could well condition its view of ABIM and of elements from the first group in the United Malays National Organization (UMNO)-led government espousing the Islamic ideology. The first group – rather than the second group – at the moment appears to have much more influence over the third group partly because it is more capable of articulating issues of direct relevance to the latter especially those that pertain to the urban socio-economic environment.

As we have already noted there is tremendous intellectual heterogeneity conditioned by varying structures and experiences and for that reason any generalization should be treated with some caution. Nonetheless, a cursory analysis of Islamic movements in places as removed from one another as Kuala Lumpur and Istanbul seems to reveal certain common characteristics. It is even possible to identify both a dominant and a subordinate intellectual trend in this resurgence.

Characteristics

The one outstanding characteristic of the dominant trend is its fervent belief that society should be organized on the basis of the Qu'ran and the Sunnah (the way of the Prophet). This means that the values, principles, rules and regulations contained in the Qu'ran and the Sunnah should be upheld in the political, economic, cultural, educational, legal and administrative spheres. Fundamental to this belief is an explicit recognition that the Qu'ran and Sunnah lay out a complete way of life whose sanctity and purity should not be tarnished by new interpretations influenced by time and circumstances. New ideas and institutions are acceptable as long as this supreme principle is not compromised in any manner.

At a more specific level, this outlook on Islam has expressed itself in a number of ways. It is, perhaps, most obvious in the rejection of old habits such as gambling or consuming alcohol or frequenting night clubs and in the acquisition of new attitudes which could stretch from faithful observance of daily prayers to dressing in proper Islamic attire.

While female attire in particular tends to catch the eye of both Muslims and non-Muslims and for that reason is given exaggerated emphasis as evidence of a "return to Islamic living", the more subtle changes in conduct and behaviour are seldom observed. A more restrained attitude towards the opposite sex is, for instance, one of those transformations which accompanies this new outlook.

Specific attitudes in politics, economics, culture and in other areas of public life brought about by an Islamic consciousness have also passed unnoticed. It is only the insistence upon certain modes of punishment for certain types of crimes — cutting off the hands of the thief is a prominent example — which has received maximum

publicity in the Western press. It would be only fair if the advocacy of greater political freedom, of more widespread consultation between leaders and masses is also accorded some attention. Similarly, the opposition to paying or collecting interest in the banking system and the commitment to the rights of non-Muslim minorities including their right to equal treatment in matters of social justice should also be viewed as legitimate aspects of Islamic resurgence. In fact, some of the more profound elements in this resurgence have called for the establishment of an education system directed towards the creation of ethical human beings as an alternative to the functional, utilitarian type of education available in most Muslim countries.

Indeed, the initiators and participants in the dominant trend of this movement have been vehement critics of Western civilization. They argue that the secularization of life, the subversion of eternal values, the pervasive growth of materialism are all indications that Western civilization which has long been in a state of crisis is on the verge of collapse. Invariably, they point to increasing crime and divorce rates, juvenile delinquency and suicides as symptoms of a deeper *malaise*. They further argue that Western civilization has to be rejected. Though some of them are willing to accept achievements of the West in science and technology, all of them are agreed that the concept of development associated with Western civilization is inimical to the interests of the Muslim world. Their basic thesis is that Western models of growth and social change negate man as they subordinate the human being to materialistic goals and desires.

The dethronement of the West as a civilization worthy of emulation and the importance of returning to the Qu'ran and the Sunnah are ideas which have gained tremendous popularity among Muslim youths particularly in the last decade or so. The writings of Maudoodi from Pakistan and other lesser known personalities like Hassan Nadvi and Khurshid Ahmad have contributed towards the growth of this awareness in South and Southeast Asia. In the Middle East, on the other hand, Hassan al-Banna, Syed Kotb, Muhammad Qutb, and others associated with the Ikhwan-ul-Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood) figure prominently as proponents of this approach to Islam. At the philosophical level – in contrast to popular propaganda – the works of Hussein Nasr have been especially significant in providing

a certain degree of intellectual credence to this trend in Islamic resurgence.

The subordinate trend stands in symbiotic relationship to the dominant trend in resurgent Islam. It shares many of the features of the dominant trend including its emphasis upon the Qu'ran and the Sunnah and its rejection of Western civilization except that it gives much more importance to the underlying values and principles of Islam. Consequently, the philosophical premises upon which the Qu'ran, for instance, is founded emerge as the crux of the religion. It interprets the equality of the sexes, the need to abolish social dichotomies and the significance of the unity of mankind in a much more comprehensive manner than the dominant trend is inclined to. Also, it extends its vision of social reconstruction beyond the eradication of social injustices within a particular community to include the transformation of the international social order. As a result, economic imperialism with all its attendant evils is also subjected to some scrutiny. Elements of this approach to Islam can be found in the writings of Ali Shariati whose essay on the "philosophy of Tauhid" (oneness of God) is an example of the emphasis upon the underlying principle, the inner meaning of the Qu'ran. The writings of the Egyptian philosopher Hassan Hanafi should also be included in this category.⁴ They are beginning to make some inroads among Indonesian groups.

In Indonesia it is now possible to talk of a cogent subordinate trend which is philosophically more holistic and sociologically more progressive than the dominant trend. In Malaysia, such a subordinate trend does not exist.

There are reasons for this. The precarious ethnic balance between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia, and the accompanying emphasis on ethnic solidarity has expectedly given rise to a conservative Islamic ideology which does not provide any room for a progressive alternative. In Indonesia, the Muslim community which is nominally at least 90 per cent of the population feels much more secure. Besides, a tradition of examining and evaluating Islamic teachings had developed during the Dutch colonial period partly because the colonial administration

through its policies directly challenged the position of Islam in Indonesia. The British attitude to Islam was quite different. They chose to leave it alone. If anything, by placing Islam under the authority of the Sultans, both the British and the monarchs ensured that the religion would remain a conservative force. Also, Malay society did not experience the sort of changes in the class structure which would have provided the basis for a more progressive interpretation of Islam. In Indonesia, a middle-class seeking legitimacy in new values derived from democracy and socialism, and through them establishing linkages with a more contemporary and less orthodox version of Islam, had begun to challenge the traditional structure during the nationalist struggle. It is a pity, in this connection, that in Malaysia the emergence of a Malay middle-class in the post-Independence decades has not brought about a similar development partly because this new class derives both its strength and its world-view from an all-pervasive culture of ethnicity. Since a subordinate trend will have to challenge this culture, it cannot strike root.

Causes

This analysis of the intellectual characteristics of Islamic resurgence gives us some idea of the factors responsible for the growth of this movement. Doubtless, disillusionment with Western civilization is one of the reasons though it is certainly not the most important. This disillusionment is the product of a conviction that Western civilization has failed humanity. It has contributed directly to the quest for an alternative which in the opinion of the participants in this resurgence is more genuine because it is based on divine revelation.

This disillusionment with the West represents a significant shift in attitude for the Muslim world as a whole. When Muslims first began to react to Western domination during the colonial era, they manifested two distinct tendencies. Among some there was a desire to absorb all that was good from the West including its political ideas, its economic organization, its educational system and its technology while retaining Islam mainly in the form of rituals and rules of personal conduct. It was the opinion of the advocates of this position that Western civilization was a great blessing to mankind, and colonial rule – its unsavoury aspects aside – at least enabled Muslim societies to come into contact with a magnificent tradition. After all, Islam encouraged modernization

which was the essence of Western civilization. Syed Ahmad Khan of India and Taha Husayn of Egypt espoused this view in some of their writings.

Others, however, argued that many of the important ideas and practices of the West were already in Islam. Democracy, socialism, science, reason were all part of Islam. There was, therefore, no question of imitating the West. What was urgently required was a reinterpretation of Islam in accordance with these ideas and practices from the West. Tjokroaminoto, the Indonesian nationalist, for instance, was of the view that both democracy and socialism were integral to the Qur'annic tradition. He linked the prohibition of usury (*riba*) to the surplus theory of value. Muhammad Iqbal, too, suggested that socialist principles of equality and justice could be found in Islam. He, like the famous Syed Jamaluddin Al-Afghani, spoke of an "Islamic socialism". Al-Afghani was also a firm believer in the importance of imbibing the modern sciences which had developed in the West. His disciple, Muhammad Abduh, the Egyptian philosopher was keen on establishing that reason and rationality as understood in the Western intellectual tradition were highly regarded in Islam. There were others, too, who tried to show that what they perceived as the positive side of the West was not alien to Islam.⁵

If one has to explain this attitude one could perhaps attribute it to a certain degree of awe of the West among the Muslims at that point in time especially in the case of those associated with the first reaction. As a subjugated people, the Muslims — like others in similar positions — could not help but admire their colonial overlord. Even after Independence, for a decade or two, Western social systems and Western ideologies had a mesmerizing effect upon the former colonies especially since many of them were then unaware of the need to revolt against the continuing economic and cultural domination of the West. Young Muslims who studied in the West or those who attended Western-type educational institutions in their own countries contributed in no small measure towards the perpetuation of this image as soon as they joined the elite stratum of society.

However, all this began to change with changes in the West. As its crisis in values became more and more apparent, as liberal-capitalism,

democratic socialism and Marxist socialism — ideologies spawned in the West — found it increasingly difficult to cope with the problems of post-industrial society, the Muslim nations of the Third World began to wonder whether they should proceed along the same path of development. This new perception of the West, reinforced by an increasing consciousness of their economic and cultural rights, has endowed the Muslims with a sense of identity which was absent in the colonial past. Unlike their predecessors, Muslims studying in the West today are not enamoured by a civilization which appears aimless and uncertain.⁶ Hence, the clarion call for a new Islamic order.

There is, however, a more important reason. Because most Muslim states had, at the time of Independence, opted for some variety or other of socialism with a few choosing a modified form of capitalism, it became apparent that sooner or later the performance of these ideologies would be judged critically. The failure of elites operating these ideologies to overcome problems related to poverty, widening social disparities, economic exploitation, political oppression, corruption, social greed and ethnic tensions has convinced Islamic elements that capitalism and socialism are incapable of meeting the challenges confronting developing societies. Of course, it can be argued with some justification that it is not fair to condemn an ideology on account of the ineptness of its operators. Nonetheless, this is how it is perceived by young Muslims in particular.

Socialism, partly because it is more widespread, has been the special target of Islamic resurgence. This is why in recent years, Arab socialism and Baathist socialism in the Middle East have come under vigorous criticism just as socialism in Pakistan is on the wane. Even in secularized Turkey, democratic socialism is being compelled to defend its ideas against the onslaught of Islam. There are certain elements in the theory and practice of socialism in the Muslim world which makes it particularly susceptible to criticisms from the dominant trend in Islamic resurgence. Firstly, for all the efforts of Muslim societies to distinguish their brand of socialism from the type of Marxist socialism which denies the transcendental dimension in human existence, Islamic critics have somehow managed to persuade a portion of the populace that socialism is a godless philosophy. Secondly, in most of the so-called socialist states in the Muslim world there is heavy concentration of

power in the hands of a small number of elites. This is usually accompanied by political repression. Since Islamic groups have been among the victims of this repression – Ikhwan-ul-Muslimin in Nasser's Egypt for instance – their antagonism towards socialist regimes is all the greater. It is significant that capitalism which betrays many of the values of justice and compassion that are highly cherished in Islam and is equally guilty of political repression has never been subjected to the same degree of harsh criticism by some of the leading lights of the resurgence movement like Maudoodi. I shall try to explain this towards the end of this essay.

For the time being, we shall turn to the third reason for Islamic resurgence. It is not just their ideologies but the very life-styles of Muslim elites which have prompted Islamic-minded youths to turn to their religion for inspiration. Muslim elites, like many other Third World elites, whatever their ideologies, are often distinguished by their conspicuous consumption. This is especially true of many of those who rule oil-rich states though it is by no means confined to them. The situation has prompted Islamic groups to conclude that the real reason why Muslim elites are capable of living in style in the midst of squalor and neglect is because they are estranged from their religion. They lead lives divorced from Islamic values of moderation and simplicity. They have become materialistic because they are no longer governed by spiritual considerations. Invariably, their materialism is linked to the ideologies they profess and the culture they seek to emulate – at least as far as their Islamic critics are concerned.

Thus, the life-styles of Muslim elites, socialism, capitalism and Western civilization are all interrelated. Of the three factors, it is perhaps the life-styles of the elites that has had the greatest impact upon the Muslim mind. It provides "tangible proof" to the masses of the "evil" of Western civilization and foreign ideologies. It is something that is easily understood by ordinary people. It is expressed at the level of the houses the elites own, the cars they drive, the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the parties they attend. Whether it is true or not, tales about these elites are almost always inter-woven with lurid lore about their decadent habits with the emphasis upon their sexual misdemeanours. That is why, if Islamic groups opposed to existing regimes ever succeed in mobilizing the people on behalf of their

puritanical concept of Islam it would have been partly because of their condemnation of the alleged moral decadence, the materialistic life-style of the elites – since it is an issue that has so much potential mass appeal.

Indeed, one should expect Islamic groups to use such an issue. For the desire to gain political power is also one of the factors that has helped to propel the movement. In order to understand this, one has to analyse one of the most significant sociological phenomena in Third World societies in the post-Independence period – the expansion of the middle class. As the middle class expands through the availability of education and economic development, the accommodation of the new entrants within the arena of establishment politics becomes more and more difficult. This is because the political arena especially for those who are interested in leadership roles associated with the establishment does not offer too many opportunities. Middle-class types expect to lead; yet the apex cannot hold all of them. And so a segment of the middle class becomes the opposition. In a sense, this process has taken place in a number of countries both developed and developing. In Britain, a portion of the expanding middle-class with expectations of power and influence became the opposition from the early part of this century. This fragmentation of the middle class has also occurred in India, Indonesia, and Egypt. It is beginning to happen in Malaysia.

In the case of most Muslim countries, the opposition that emerges from middle-class fragmentation often turns to Islam as its ideology. Islam in that sense serves as a vehicle for the pursuit of its political aims. Islam becomes a conduit in the quest for political power. This is one way of interpreting the role of the Jamaat-i-Islam in Pakistan or Ikhwan-ul-Muslimin in Egypt. Muslim political parties in Indonesia in the fifties and early sixties like the Masyumi and the Nahdatul Ulama could also be included in the same category. If anything the manoeuvres and manipulations of some of these parties and their readiness to separate means from ends dictated by their interests further establishes that, in reality, political power precedes ethical principles in their calculations.

It must be stressed, however, that by suggesting that Islam may be used as an avenue for achieving power, one is not denying the

idealistic aspect of the resurgence which have already been noted. Nonetheless, it is only right that attention is given to some of the less altruistic considerations which in most social movements also tend to shape their tone and texture.

In a sense the political goals of the Islamic segment of the middle class have, in recent years, been reinforced considerably by yet another sociological development. This is the rural-urban drift, an outstanding feature of most Third World societies. Unlike earlier settled groups in urban centres, these recent migrants manifest different psychological traits. They come from traditional communities where religion is the most significant thread in the social fabric. The urban centres that they arrive at, especially the post-colonial cities, have seen some secularization of life. There is, therefore, a serious cultural dichotomy they have to contend with. Often, these migrants take on very poor jobs in settings where the display of wealth and affluence is quite stark, especially when compared to rural localities that they are familiar with where disparities are not significant. This is also bound to affect their perceptions. Most of all, the migrants, for a while at least, are completely lost and uprooted in their new environment, bereft of all the traditional support which made life secure in the past.

It is this insecurity that sometimes persuades a migrant to seek psychological comfort in a religious movement. Islamic resurgence which emphasizes a Muslim identity in the face of the challenges posed by a "morally decadent", "materialistic" city environment can under such circumstances provide much needed solace. Besides, it gives the migrant the feeling that he has not lost contact with his village and its religious mores. At the same time, his new urban ties with Islam furnish him with easy though superficial explanations of the cultural and economic dichotomies that pervade his environment. He is told that the cultural and economic evils around him are the consequences of an absence of religious faith and all that he has to do is to fortify his commitment to Islam.

As the Islamic commitment of the poor migrant increases, it becomes easier for the better-educated, better positioned middle class elements to recruit him for their political struggle. This alliance between the migrant element in the working class and the fragmented element in the middle class — both connected indirectly to post-

Independence changes in society – is one of the most significant characteristics of Islamic resurgence. It shows the close relationship between Islamic resurgence and actual sociological change.

In some societies, there is yet another dimension to the sociological change wrought by the rural-urban drift. This is the ethnic dimension. In addition to the usual insecurity and apprehension associated with the urbanization process, a migrant moving into an ethnically alien city, which may in some specific instances display traces of hostility, could feel even more threatened and intimidated. If the city is largely non-Muslim and if the Muslim component is more prominent at the lower echelons (as is the case in certain cities in India and Malaysia) the concomitant resentment and frustration can be utilized to strengthen Islamic resurgence. Indeed, in such circumstances, assuming a Muslim identity is not just a reaction to the city *per se*, it becomes a way of preserving one's ethnicity in relation to the out-group which does not share one's religion.

There is every reason to believe that in Malaysia at least, Islamic resurgence has a great deal to do with the ethnic question. It is no coincidence that the resurgence has become more apparent in the late seventies after a decade or so of concerted efforts to urbanize the Malays (who are all Muslims) which in effect means drawing them into what have been largely non-Malay and therefore non-Muslim cities. Even in other countries where the nexus between community and urbanization, religion and location, Islam and occupational pattern is not as obvious as in Malaysia, ethnicity does contribute to the emergence and sustenance of Islamic resurgence.⁷ This is certainly true of certain parts of India. This is why in Malaysia equality for non-Muslim minorities which is integral to the progressive trend in Islamic philosophy has very little support among Muslims. Similarly, solidarity with the non-Muslim majority is a slogan that has restricted appeal among the Muslims of India. It merely goes to prove that sometimes a religious ideal loses its impact when confronted by social reality which forces action in another direction.

While there is no doubt that the ethnic atmosphere in certain cities has contributed to Islamic resurgence, it is quite conceivable that the contemporary city itself may have something to do with it. Over the last two or three decades large urban centres in many Muslim states

and indeed the Third World as a whole have begun to acquire some of the unhealthy features of the Western city. Traditional communal solidarities which managed to linger on for a while in some of the Third World cities created by colonial rule are now beginning to break down. Individualism and atomized families are rapidly becoming aspects of city life in the Muslim world. Clear dichotomies between home and factory, work and leisure, material pursuits and spiritual yearnings are beginning to appear. The nature of modern urban occupations has become such that an individual's public personality often contradicts his private self. There is an outer man as against an inner man. Unintegrated, fragmented existence of this sort, a characteristic of the city in the West, is now threatening to overwhelm many a Muslim city.

The dichotomization of human existence which expresses itself in an environment of unquenchable materialistic pursuits tends to create a spiritual vacuum in man. There is a feeling of emptiness, of life devoid of meaning. In such a situation some turn to religion. For religion can act as a sort of sanctuary in the midst of the irreconcilable tensions of urban living. It serves to console and to provide a certain degree of emotional strength and solidarity to lives stripped of spiritual joy by the god of wealth and power. The contemporary city then which generates certain psychological pressures upon its inhabitants has also played a role in Islamic resurgence.

In a sense, this point about city life is not confined to Islamic resurgence alone. It explains to some extent why even in the secularized West it is the city — and not the countryside — that is beginning to witness a religious revivalism of sorts. For all the factors responsible for creating a spiritual vacuum in the city-dweller of the Muslim world are present on a much more comprehensive scale in the Western city. The born-again Christian who frequents Bible meetings, the American youth who joins the Hare Krishna consciousness movement, the German student who forsakes his middle-class comfort to become a Buddhist monk are, in fact, all reaching out for that sacral experience which the city by its very nature, denies all and sundry.

It might be observed in this connection that it is perhaps the nature of the Western city which persuades Muslim minorities in London, Paris, Frankfurt and New York to become such ardent — if

sometimes intolerant – resurgents. This is why there are cases of Turkish workers in German cities displaying a zeal for religious rituals which is completely out of character with their family backgrounds or domestic surroundings in Turkey. Of course, the need to assert one's identity – which we had analysed earlier – may also be a factor.

So far we have looked at perceptions, changes and the environment – perceptions of the West, of the workings of Western ideologies, of ruling elites; changes in the middle and working classes; and the environment created by the city – to explain Islamic resurgence. Now we shall consider the impact of certain events in the last ten years or so which have had a profound effect upon the economic viability and political ideals of Islamic resurgence.

As far as economic viability goes, the restructuring of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) into a powerful cartel the majority of whose members are Muslim states and its subsequent success in obtaining better oil prices from Western companies was the crucial turning point. These new oil prices brought in economic wealth to exporters like Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Libya and Iraq among others from the seventies onwards. Both their ability to force the Western companies to accept higher prices and their newfound wealth added to the prestige of the exporting nations – especially among Third World countries.

The leadership in Saudi Arabia and Libya in particular felt that their riches – a gift from God – should be used to promote Islamic teachings. In the last few years, Saudi Arabia for instance has given millions of dollars to projects such as the construction of mosques, the building of libraries and offices and the training of missionaries in a number of Muslim and even non-Muslim countries which include Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia on the one hand and South Korea and Australia on the other. Libya has also given considerable financial assistance to Islamic missionary work.

There is no denying that all this money has helped to maintain organizations and activities associated with Islamic resurgence. Without this aid, Muslim groups in non-Muslim countries in particular may not have been able to popularize the religion among the young. This is true to a great extent of South Korea and Australia as well as

Western Europe. Of course, there are other places where the spread of Islam has not been helped directly by the flow of money from outside, for example, certain parts of Africa where Islam is growing rapidly.

If OPEC and oil have strengthened Islamic resurgence economically, then the Egyptian victory over Israel in the 1973 war served to boost its political ego. For the first time in more than two decades – and after a series of humiliating defeats – a Muslim state managed to recapture the Suez canal and regain lost territory from Israel. To understand the significance of this episode one has to remember that the creation of Israel, the eviction of the Palestinians from their homeland in 1948, and all the encounters between Israel and its Muslim neighbours since then were traumatic experiences for the international Muslim community as a whole. They were seen as direct challenges to the honour and integrity of the Muslim world. This does not mean, however, that the Palestinian issue was regarded as a Muslim-Jewish squabble; the majority of Muslim nations perceive it, rightly, as a struggle against the ideology of Zionism. Nonetheless, what was at stake was not only the future of more than four million homeless Palestinians but also Muslim pride which was badly hurt by Israel and its occupation of Jerusalem long regarded as the third holy city of Islam. Viewed against this background, one can begin to appreciate why the 1973 victory was so crucial to the Muslims.

However, more important than 1973 in the political resurgence of Islam is the 1979 Iranian revolution. Even critics of the revolution and avowed supporters of the former Shah's regime admit that the revolution has left an indelible mark upon the Muslim mind. This is largely because it is the first revolution in modern history that has been conducted in the name of Islam. By this one means that the philosophy and goals of the revolution, the broad principles of its reconstruction programme, its major personalities, its songs, its slogans are all connected to Islam – as far as most of its initiators, participants and supporters are concerned.

Whether every action or even some of the important decisions of the revolutionary government reflect Islamic ethics is another matter. Certainly, the executions of opponents of the system, of dissidents and of members of religious minorities, apart from drug pushers and hard-core criminals, without any regard for judicial processes⁸ would be

completely repugnant to Islam. By the same token, Islam cannot be held responsible for the thirst for vengeance that is reflected in some of Iran's domestic and foreign policies. Most of all, is there anything Islamic in a constitutional and state structure which bestows unquestioned authority upon a single individual — the Imam? In spite of all this, however, the irony is that the revolution is still perceived by many Muslims all over the world as an Islamic revolution.

This is due to three other factors. Firstly, right from the beginning the Iranian revolutionaries displayed an unshakeable resolve to fight American imperialism. The last four years have demonstrated the strength of their determination. Iran's ability to survive an American imposed economic blockade, its success in obtaining "ransom" from the United States for the release of its hostages in Teheran and its disclosures of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operations in the country have convinced others that it is capable of confronting the United States.⁹ Secondly, there is an equally strong determination on the part of Iran to remain an independent, Islamic entity outside the control of both the American and Russian super-powers. Indeed, it is, in a larger sense, a desire to remain outside the capitalist and socialist orbits of influence. The dominant as well as the subordinate trends in Islamic resurgence would see this as a genuine attempt to preserve the integrity and sanctity of an Islamic state which is seeking to develop a distinct social system based upon its own religious tradition. Thirdly, in spite of all the turmoil and chaos often highlighted by the Western press, Iran has succeeded in maintaining its viability as a nation. This is remarkable when it is remembered that both internal and external pressures have been tremendous. Apart from American moves against Iran, supported directly and indirectly by some of the conservative, pro-Western Arab states, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, there have been serious schisms within, brought about by factional and ideological disputes which have almost destroyed the national leadership. Besides, the Iranian revolution, like most other revolutions, has been accompanied by massive economic and social dislocations. If in spite of all this, the nation is able to survive, this is bound to have some impact upon Muslims elsewhere. And in that way it has helped propel Islamic resurgence.

The other event which has also had an impact of sorts upon the resurgence is of a different type. According to the Muslim calendar, the

world has just entered the fifteenth century. The first seven centuries, in the view of some Muslim historians and mystics, marked the rise of Islamic civilization. The next seven centuries saw its decline. Starting from the fifteenth century Islam is expected to rise again. Those who believe in this theory of the rise and fall of Islamic civilization argue that Islam will be the dominant force in the world replacing existing civilizations and exercising an unprecedented influence in the affairs of human beings everywhere as no civilization has been able to do in the past. Such a school of thought has gained some currency among Muslim religious elites and youths and can persuade groups and individuals that the Islamic movement is the inevitable wave of the future. It can, therefore, help to strengthen and solidify commitment to Islamic resurgence.

To summarize, it can be said that Islamic resurgence has been inspired by the following factors: (a) disillusionment with Western civilization as a whole among a new Muslim generation (b) the failings of social systems based on capitalism or socialism (c) the life-style of secular elites in Muslim states (d) the desire for power among a segment of an expanding middle class that cannot be accommodated politically (e) the search for psychological security among new urban migrants (f) the city environment (g) the economic strength of certain Muslim states as a result of their new oil wealth; and (h) a sense of confidence about the future in the wake of the 1973 Egyptian victory, the 1979 Iranian revolution and the dawn of the fifteenth century in the Muslim calendar.

Reactions

One can now ask, what are the reactions to this phenomenon? In the West, as we have hinted elsewhere, the media have created a somewhat distorted picture of the resurgence. Apart from sensationalizing female attire, and certain types of punishment like the cutting of hands or stoning the adulterer or adulteress, most Western newspapers tend to give the impression that the "return of Islam" is a return to the past, a journey back into the Middle Ages, and a retrogressive development. In order to establish this, attention is often focused on three areas (a) the severe nature of punishment for various types of moral crimes (b) the unequal position of women with some stress on polygamy and (c) the importance given to various types of religious rituals and practices.

While there may be some truth in some Western criticism about the severity of punishment for certain crimes like theft and adultery, it is also apparent that misinterpretations have arisen partly because these and other laws have not been presented in their total context. There has been no attempt to point out, for instance, that a person can be charged for adultery only if the actual act has been witnessed by four pious persons. This makes it almost impossible to prosecute a person for adultery under Islamic law.

Similarly, the Western media that berates the allegedly inferior position of women in Islam should balance their exposition with an analysis of the rights that women enjoy under Islam – rights which were unknown to their Western counterparts until the beginning of this century. In Islamic jurisprudence, a woman has the right to equal education, the right of inheritance, the right to own property, the right to work, the right to do business, the right to enter a contract in her own name, the right to divorce and the right to keep her maiden name after marriage. It is worth noting that many of these rights were fully enforced in certain societies at certain periods in Islamic history before the epoch of Western dominance.

By the same token, rituals and practices in Islam are no more prominent than in other religions. All religions enjoin their followers to pray and fast and require them to observe certain rituals associated with these practices. Of course, there are many Muslims who adhere rigidly to these religious practices. In itself, this does not mean anything. It should not be equated with fanaticism. It is pertinent to ask, in this connection, – as Edward Said has – why segments of the Western media should regard ritual observations in Islam as fanaticism when they accept the wide variety of religious rituals practised in Israel as normal behaviour?¹⁰

Obviously then, some of the biased writings in the West on Islam are not the products of sheer ignorance. If they were, the problem of communicating the correct perspectives would have been less difficult. Doubtless, prejudice has also coloured some Western views of Islam as it has always conditioned its thinking on non-Western civilizations as a whole.

Why is there this element of prejudice in the dominant Western attitude towards Islamic resurgence? Recent history has something to do with it. When OPEC raised oil prices in the early seventies, the industrialized economies of the West decided to blame the oil producers rather than the big oil companies for their difficulties though the latter were exploiting the situation to their advantage. It was, of course, more convenient to blame the producers since a critical attitude towards their own companies would expose the truth about Western capitalism. As part of this sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious, effort to transfer blame to foreign elements, a segment of the Western business and political community supported by some important groups in the media began to promote distorted and derogatory views of the Arabs, the mainstay of OPEC. In the process, Islam was also subjected to biased criticism without any attempt to separate the actual behaviour of Muslims from the ideals of the religion. Cartoons for instance were used to caricature the Arabs and Islam.

However, it was the Iranian revolution which heightened American antagonism in particular towards Islam, since it brought about the overthrow of the Shah of Iran, Reza Pahlavi. Iran was for long the linch-pin of American interests in the Middle East. The fall of the Shah was, therefore, a serious blow to the United States.

This is why the political leadership in the United States – out of anger and frustration – sought to denigrate Iran and the Islamic revolution. Leadership attitudes buttressed by propaganda from the media and business elites have contributed immensely towards distrust and suspicion of Islam. Islamic religious elites more than other groups have been the butt-end of caustic comment. If anything, the holding of the hostages – an act that was unjust as it was foolish – increased American antipathy towards Islam. It confirmed the worst prejudices of ordinary Americans in regard to what they feel is Islamic behaviour.

But American and Western attitudes towards Islam cannot be understood merely on the basis of recent events. One has to explore, however inadequately, the history of Christian-Muslim ties which span centuries of contact and cover different spheres of interaction. To start with, there are certain theological differences which in some ways have hindered meaningful communication. In spite of their common

allegiance to the Prophet Abraham, Islam's acceptance of Jesus as a prophet — and only as a prophet — with its explicit rejection of his status as the son of God juxtaposed with Christianity's non-acceptance of Muhammad as the last prophet, present a major theological barrier. This is why, when the Catholic church first came into contact with Islamic teachings it dismissed them as the utterances of a false prophet. This remained the church's official outlook on Islam for centuries. Islam, on the other hand, regarded latter-day Catholicism and indeed Christianity as a deviation from Jesus' original teachings.

Theological differences, however, cannot affect the psychology of an entire people unless there are other reasons for antagonism brought about by more tangible historical episodes. The Muslim conquest of parts of Western Europe (especially its subsequent governance of Spain) and the crusades were two such episodes. It is important to observe in this connection that Christian Europe right through its history never had to confront another religious civilization on its own continent. Though in the end, the Muslim advance was checked at the battle of Tours in 732 A.D., the capacity of an alien religion to conquer and administer an important segment of Europe left a deep imprint upon Christian society. The eventual outcome of the crusades after a long series of engagements over 600 years from 1095 to the middle of the fifteenth century did not help to restore Christian pride either. More than that, after each successive failure, the popes, kings and princes who organized these crusades became even more bitterly opposed to Islam and this opposition was transmitted to various sections of the populace so much so that even navigators like Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama regarded the demolition of Islamic control over sea routes as one of their primary goals.

Christianity and Islam, it is apparent, have had an antagonistic relationship in history. It is a relationship which has coloured perceptions of one another in the contemporary world. It explains to a great extent Western attitudes towards Islamic resurgence.

Historical influences, however, are one aspect of the story; the position of Western civilization today, its perception of itself and of other cultures also constitute an important factor. Religion in contemporary Western society has a restricted role. Religion does not exercise any direct influence on the state. Indeed, the separation of religion

from state is one of its main features. Similarly, religious elites do not pursue political power through actual participation in the political process. The religious and political domains are recognized as separate and distinct.

More important, the dominant elites in Western society are convinced that these and other facets of their society represent an advanced stage in social evolution. They believe in a linear conception of change and progress with each new stage representing an improvement over the previous stage. This means that Western society today is the pinnacle of human progress. Its characteristics, its goals are worthy of imitation and emulation. All societies which wish to progress will have to proceed along the same path. It is the only path that can rescue mankind from backwardness and stagnation.¹¹

This notion of progress was very much a part of the thinking of two philosophers who superficially at least appear to be diametrically opposed to each other: Herbert Spencer with his emphasis on individualism and Karl Marx with his emphasis on the collectivity. It shows how at a deeper level there are certain elements of thought which suggest a Western world-view as distinct from other world-views. There is little doubt that this world-view had emerged partly through the role that the West has played in the last 500 years or so as the planet's dominant civilization. After all nothing could have provided a more convincing justification for colonial conquest than a view of the world which places the West at the apex and other societies at lower levels of development.

Now this notion of progress is being challenged by a civilization that argues that the West is not advanced. It is a civilization that argues for religion and religious ethics as the foundation of society. It does not recognize any division between religion and politics since every sphere of life is subjected to moral principles derived from religion. Further, it is a civilization that is convinced that the survival of society does not lie in the path laid out by the West but rather in a return to perennial religious values which were revealed in their entirety 1400 years ago.¹²

It is apparent that the dominant trend in Western civilization has not even begun to comprehend Islamic resurgence. It cannot

understand how and why such a movement can gain so wide a following in this day and age. It is a phenomenon that is outside its psychological framework. Understandably, the dominant Western trend regards it as a threat and a challenge to its status.

This reaction to Islamic resurgence is shared by others outside the West. The middle and upper classes in many Third World societies hold a similar view. We shall deal with the non-Muslim component in these strata first since there are other aspects as well in the reaction of their Muslim counterparts which must be considered in some depth.

The non-Muslim attitude towards Islam and Islamic resurgence has been influenced to a great extent by reports and interpretations from Western news agencies which appear in local newspapers and magazines. In other words, the non-Muslim Third World learns about the Muslim Third World through the West. Since the Western press has been less than fair, the non-Muslim middle and upper classes in the Third World also tend to have a negative attitude towards the resurgence. Besides, they too believe that modernization and development – the Third World gods – are attainable only with the secularization of life and the decline of religion. It is a notion of change which they have imbibed from the West. Indeed, there is often uncritical absorption and assimilation of Western ideas on society and progress among the middle and upper classes of the Third World. It is truly an excellent instance of the “demonstration effect” of Western civilization which has such a powerful impact upon the rest of the world.

Western interpretation of Islam and Western ideas of progress aside, the Islamic resurgents that Third World non-Muslims come across have also conditioned their thinking. To many non-Muslims, the obsession among resurgents appears to be with attire and social intercourse. In some cases, the rediscovery of Islamic ways leads almost automatically to a decline of interest in non-Muslims. An in-group attitude develops very quickly which sometimes breeds suspicion and even hostility towards the out-group. In contrast to Muslims who have become “Islamic”, other Muslims with a veneer of Western liberalism continue to be relaxed and open in their relations with their non-Muslim friends. This difference in attitudes has undoubtedly reinforced non-Muslim antipathy towards Islamic resurgence. For this, the resurgents have only themselves to blame.

As far as secular Muslim elites are concerned, Western news agencies also interpret Islamic resurgence in other countries for them. Their concept of progress is also derived from the dominant trend in the West except that they believe that religion, too, should receive some attention. Consequently, they often advocate spiritual and material development, meaning, that there is one sphere for spiritual development and another for material development. This is, of course, at variance with the Islamic notion of a religious basis in all spheres of society.

This difference in approach is part of the larger problem confronting secular Muslims in their relations with Islamic insurgents. For the secular Muslim elites know that it is not just their ideas on society, but their very life-styles and, in the ultimate analysis, the political power they command, which the resurgents regard as their targets. It is a fact that the greatest dilemma they face today is how to cope with this challenge.

They are at a disadvantage in this confrontation though they have all the resources of power within their control. Firstly, some of the allegations hurled at them pertaining to their life-styles are, as we have seen, well-founded. Since it is not possible to defend themselves in Islamic terms — after all alcohol and gambling are prohibited in the Qu'ran — and since they profess Islam as their religion, these elites suffer from perpetual guilt. These guilt feelings tend to weaken their position considerably.

Secondly, these secular elites are on the whole not well versed in Islam whether it is its philosophy, history, ethics or theology. This lack of knowledge inhibits them from engaging in debate and discussion with religious elites associated with the resurgence. Even if some of their ideas are beneficial to society as a whole — like encouraging women to play a more active role in public affairs or reforming certain aspects of the laws on inheritance or abolishing certain modes of punishment — secular elites would prefer not to articulate them publicly for fear that they would be branded as “un-Islamic” or *Kafir* (unbelievers). This is because they are not intellectually convinced themselves that such reforms are possible within a progressive concept of Islam. That a progressive interpretation is legitimate in Islam is something that does not occur to them because of their own lack of knowledge.

Thirdly, even if some of them have the knowledge, they are unwilling to deal with retrogressive thinking among Muslims because of the nature of their societies. The masses often follow, unquestioningly, the ideas and instructions of their religious leaders who are almost always inclined towards orthodox interpretations of religious texts. This orthodoxy is a product both of their own religious education and the surrounding religious atmosphere which in most cases does not encourage an innovative approach. Besides, strict literal interpretations which tend to emphasize "dos" and "don'ts", "rights" and "wrongs" in a rigid, authoritative manner help to strengthen the position of those who have the power to decide and determine. There is, thus, an element of self-interest, as far as religious elites are concerned, in preserving the orthodox approach. And the secular elites, knowing that the religious elites exercise a great deal of influence over the masses, would not want to alienate them since it could lead to the erosion of their own political power.

Given these circumstances, secular elites appear to have decided upon two courses of action in their response to Islamic resurgence. It is often not a case of choosing one or the other; both are combined depending upon the needs of the situation. In some instances, secular elites feel that it is in their own interest to accommodate Islamic resurgence. So there are those among them who become "Islamic" at least in its outward manifestations. They may give up gambling or alcohol or embellish their speeches with Arabic phraseology. They may decide to embark upon a massive mosque-building programme or to increase the amount of time devoted to Islamic education in schools or to enhance the Islamic content in radio and television programmes. In Malaysia and now Indonesia they have been holding Qu'ran-reading competitions as a way of demonstrating their commitment to Islam. In fact, in Malaysia there has been yet another unique achievement. For the first time in the Muslim world, the state organized a "missionary" month (Bulan Dakwah) in December 1979. This is considered unique because every Muslim is expected to remind himself and others of his mission to Islam without the help of a special "missionary month". Quite apart from all this, secular elites have also — when pressurized — pledged to implement Islamic laws in full and establish an Islamic economic system.

Accommodation is, however, often accompanied by a contradictory stance: the suppression of Islamic resurgence. This, more than

anything else, reveals that the secularists' response is motivated by their own political survival. In some Muslim countries Islamic resurgents are not allowed to speak in state mosques; their publications are controlled or banned. In other countries, the leaders of the movement are sometimes imprisoned for long periods. This has happened in Tunisia and Libya. It is reported that in both Syria and Iraq, some well-known leaders of the Islamic resurgence have been killed by their respective Baathist governments.¹³

Whether this carrot-and-stick approach to Islamic resurgence will enable the secular elites to stem the tide or not, it is difficult to predict at this stage. A great deal will depend upon the social situation in each Muslim country and upon global conditions. In the ultimate analysis, corruption, social disparities, suppression of divergent opinions, abuse of elite power, extravagant elite life-styles and the exploitative international economic system — and not Islamic rhetoric as such — will, it seems to me, determine the fate of the secular elites. It merely goes to show that the causes of major social change are no different in Muslim or non-Muslim societies, in modern or ancient polities. An analysis of the underlying causes of the Iranian revolution will establish this point. This is why it is wrong to suggest that the Islamic vitality of the Iranian revolution — which we have already observed — will, on its own, lead to the fall of secular Muslim regimes elsewhere. Indeed, in certain respects — the absolutist nature of the monarchy, the pervasiveness of its control over the nation's finances, its obsession for grandeur, its massive corruption, its harsh, brutal suppression of dissent, its utter neglect of the urban poor, its callous destruction of the rural economy — the Shah's regime was almost an exception even among feudalistic monarchies and repressive governments. Secular elites can perhaps take some comfort from this. But it does not ensure the permanence of power they desire unless, of course, they are prepared to affect radical changes to existing structures directed towards the economic and political well-being of the masses.

Significance

What then is the significance of Islamic resurgence to Islam and the world? By raising questions about Western civilization, about Muslim elites and the whole concept of development prevalent in both the West and the Third World, Islamic resurgence has contributed immensely towards the search for alternative life-styles. Though one

may not agree with important aspects of the analyses of Muslim thinkers on the state of Western civilization, there is little doubt that the pattern of social organization which it has propagated to all corners of the earth in the last two centuries has reached a critical phase. Problems of unending consumption, of over-production, of ecological imbalances, of personality crises, of the erosion of family ties, of ethnic tensions are some of the evidences of the illness that afflicts the West.¹⁴ Muslim critics of the West are not the only ones who are aware of the disease; many others in the Third World are equally conscious of the need for an alternative civilization. However, Islamic resurgents have been singularly vocal and vehement in their criticism.

Criticism of Western civilization aside, the contributions of Islamic resurgence at this stage of history have been very minimal. And yet, they could, if they chose, make a significant impact in one important sphere at least. They could help nurture "God consciousness" among secular elites both in the West and the East. The Islamic conception of God is particularly suited for the task of making modern man, with his emphasis upon rationality, aware of the importance of believing in a transcendental reality because it is so intimately linked to reason. For it is not mere faith which is expected to convince man of the existence of God but his own observations of the workings of nature, the processes involved in the biological conception of the human being, the physiological structure of man, the specificity and variety in animal and plant life, and the pattern of growth, decay and death in all life-forms. Even in the rise and fall of human civilization which it is believed coincides with the consolidation or the erosion of certain social values, there is a message for mankind. The Qur'an argues that all these phenomena are the signs of God. The whole of creation with all its complexities and the entire gamut of human activity manifest the power of God. Thus, to understand God one has to study man, nature and society. This helps to establish a link between God and scientific investigation.

In a larger sense, it also explains why the early Muslims, without any scientific background, succeeded in a short while to emerge as the founders of modern science. As Briffault once observed, it was Islam between the eighth and twelfth centuries which incorporated detailed observation, investigation and experimentation into traditional science.¹⁵ The inspiration for this obviously came from the Qur'an. This is why the Muslim professional or academic – his learning and

training notwithstanding — remains faithful to the idea of God. He does not see any contradiction between reason and science, on the one hand, and faith and God, on the other. They are all part of the same continuum. It is for this reason that atheism, as we had pointed out earlier, has failed to make any inroad into the educated stratum of Muslim society.

Because God is so rationally conceived, it would be easier to harness the concept as an antidote to some of the ills that threaten the life of contemporary civilization. One is not suggesting, however, that the concept by itself can resolve major challenges many of which are related to economic and political structures prevalent in both Western and Eastern societies. But, insofar as consciousness influences social action among individuals and communities, an attachment to the idea of God as the basis of one's world-view could undoubtedly generate certain attitudes and values which would in turn determine the direction of change.

The consumer mentality, the insatiable desire for change and the creation of production techniques and a production system that cater for these cannot be overcome merely through social restructuring as proven by the experiences of the Soviet Union and the East European states. The underlying consciousness must also change for all said and done the consumer psychology is also the product of a civilization that confines its notion of man's destiny to the "here and now". Since it is the "here and now" that matters more than anything else, unbridled consumption, unlimited growth and untrammelled change become inordinately important. There is, after all, only this material plane of existence to think of. If, on the other hand, there is a concept of God and the hereafter — if one believes in a spiritual destiny — one will be more inclined towards limiting consumption, limiting growth, limiting variety, limiting pleasures, for the material world has only transient value. There will be a greater tendency to seek permanence rather than constant change — permanence in economics, permanence in political institutions, permanence in social and sexual relations.¹⁶

In this connection, permanence as a spiritual value should not be misunderstood as the permanence of an economic system that contains various inequities. If permanence is considered in conjunction with equality, justice and other important values, one arrives at a situation

whereby a system is regarded as "permanent" only because it has eliminated the inequitable conditions that would render it unstable and therefore "temporary". Similarly, by emphasizing a spiritual destiny and by regarding the world as "transient", one is not encouraging the neglect of material pursuits, including the development of science and technology directed towards ameliorating human miseries on this planet. Such a tendency need not arise in Islam since it does not admit any dichotomy between the material and spiritual dimensions of existence. In Islam, matter itself is spiritualized since man is supposed to exert on the material plane in accordance with certain divine values so that he will be adequately equipped for the spiritual hereafter. Not to do so would amount to a neglect of a Muslim's duty to God. Thus, Islam avoids both the negation of matter of certain traditions and the repudiation of a spiritual destiny so obvious in the dominant consciousness of contemporary Western civilization.

By spiritualizing matter, by making life and living itself sacred in this manner, Islam and indeed religious-consciousness as a whole becomes even more relevant to present day society. The absence of a sense of the sacred is certainly one of the root problems of the Western psyche. It manifests itself in a rapacious attitude towards nature and its bounties: it manifests itself in the profanity that pervades relationships within the family. It is also borne out in the devaluation of roles which had always been regarded as sacred — such as the roles of the father and mother or of grandparents or of uncles and aunts. The crisis that confronts the Western family at this juncture establishes the importance of restoring sacredness to life. And yet there can be no restoration of the sacred unless God is returned to its primary position in the consciousness of Western man.

More importantly, God-consciousness is fundamental for the establishment of an ethical order founded upon perennial, absolute values.¹⁷ The erosion of absolute values is perhaps at the very crux of the spiritual crisis that plagues modern man. For the ethical relativism that has dominated Western thought and action in the last two centuries has had certain adverse consequences. It has indirectly removed crucial areas of human activity from the purview of ethics. Business and industry, science and technology, politics and power, sex and social relations are no longer subjected to moral judgements based upon

some perennial conception of right and wrong. Circumstance and situation are used to justify greed in industry and lust in sex just as the development of destructive weapons and territorial aggrandisement are legitimized in the national interest. Of course, all these have been part of previous civilizations too, including the devoutly religious ones. The crucial difference is that sexual laxity or political aggression is perceived today as right and proper because there are no absolute values which can be used as criteria for judging human action. Consequently, confusion and chaos reign in the realm of ethics.

Absolute values, whatever their shortcomings, do not permit circumstance or situation, or location or interest to interfere with moral judgments. They, therefore, provide a sound moral foundation for society. By establishing certain immutable criteria of right and wrong in all spheres of human activity, diverse and varied social roles and relationships are held together in a harmonious whole. This leads to the integration of the human personality itself since the same values are supposed to condition the different roles a human being must perform in life. In this connection it is quite obvious that the problem of the fragmented individual, one of the most pathetic phenomena of contemporary society, compelled to adopt contradictory stances, alienated from work, estranged from family and isolated from community, cannot be resolved merely through a reorganization of the production system. It requires a willingness to live by absolute values.

It is significant then that Islam regards loyalty to God – which needless to say is the whole purpose of life – as loyalty to these perennial values. A good society is one that allows these values to flourish both at the level of the individual, and more important, at the level of the collectivity. Progress and development are meaningless without the cultivation of these values of truth, justice, freedom, unity, equality, compassion and restraint. Since these values are fundamental to development, since the human being realizes his loyalty to God through these values and since loyalty to God is the purpose of existence, it can be argued that there is an intimate relationship between development and the meaning of life. One of the crucial dilemmas facing all the paradigms of development spawned in the last few decades is their inability to establish a link between development and the meaning of existence. It is a link that has to be established; otherwise development will remain divorced from the great questions

confronting man. As long as this is so, the problem of whether there should be limited or unlimited growth, controlled or uncontrolled consumption, fully socialized or partially socialized production will continue to be vexatious. These are not mere economic questions; in the ultimate analysis, their answers are interwoven with fundamental metaphysical considerations.

What is involved in these issues is the very conception of man and his destiny. If one's conception is spiritual then everything else in society, from production and technology to art and education to the organization of the city and the nature of architecture will change accordingly. Architecture is perhaps one of the best testimonies to this. The design and construction of a house in medieval Islam for instance was very much a reflection of underlying philosophical concepts in the religion including those relating to space, the cosmos, man and the community. Similarly, contemporary Western architecture is closely connected to its dominant world-view which in turn accounts to some extent for the prosaic, functional approach where change rather than permanence is the crucial factor. This is why any attempt to promote development without giving sufficient consideration to the values and world-views involved in the process is bound to come to grief.

God-consciousness, then, is strongly linked to not only sacred roles and perennial values but also to the meaning of development and the purpose of life. Ordinary Muslims are vaguely aware of this. A number of Muslim scholars are acutely conscious of this link but they have failed to explain and analyse society from that perspective. Some of the links explored in this essay like that between God-consciousness and the problem of restraint in production and consumption have yet to engage the energies of more than a handful of Muslim thinkers.

Analysis

This is indicative of a larger and deeper problem. There appears to be a general inability to examine critically the Islamic tradition just as Muslims have not developed an intelligent understanding of the West. What we have is an exhortative attitude towards Islam accompanied by a condemnatory stance towards Western civilization. What we need, however, is an analytical approach with regard to Islam and an evaluative perspective on Western civilization.

An essential attribute of the analytical approach would be the willingness to apply historical and sociological knowledge to the study of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. By so doing a better understanding of the perennial as against the ephemeral, the essential as against the inconsequential will develop. Muslims will understand for instance that adultery, as a violation of the sacredness of sexual relations which in turn is connected to the sacredness of life itself, should be distinguished from the mode of punishment prescribed for it. While prohibition of adultery has occurred over and over again in civilizations antecedent to Islam, the mode of punishment has changed from period to period. In the punishment prescribed in the Qur'an, the influence of the surrounding culture and the prevalent legal norm is obvious. It is a manifestation of the infinite wisdom of God that the mode of punishment is also part of the revelation so that the first Muslim community would be able to understand the practical significance of a moral prohibition. This nexus between moral prescriptions and prohibitions and their juridical and legal manifestations runs right through the Qur'an and the Sunnah since universal, perennial ideals had to be translated into a particular, contextual reality. In distinguishing the former from the latter, the status of the Qur'anic revelation or the example of the Prophet Muhammad, will not be affected in any way. On the contrary, there will crystallize a deeper understanding of the perennial meaning of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Revelation and reason, divine truth and sociological reality will be brought into closer harmony. It will pave the way for the sort of creative dynamism in Islam which has been missing in the last few centuries.

History and sociology, reason and analysis must also be brought into play in trying to comprehend the development of Islam since Prophet Muhammad. The injunctions and writings of various caliphs, *imams* (leader), saints, and philosophers must be studied not just in relation to their Qur'anic tradition but also in connection with their sociological environment. It is undeniable that the structure of society, the political atmosphere, economic relationships, the level of knowledge at a certain point in history, the state of technology, among other variables have a profound impact upon thought-processes. Thus, the Caliph Omar Ibn Khatab's attempt to help the poor through the *Baitul-mal* (a sort of state treasury) must be understood both from the perspective of the impulse for justice in Islam and from the perspective

of the type of society that existed at that time. Similarly, Imam Al-Ghazali's (died 1111 A.D.) pronouncements on the nature and function of poverty should not be accepted as a divinely-ordained truth without analysing the social relationships and social consciousness that prevailed in eleventh century Persia and in the Middle East in general.

By adopting this approach, the strengths and weaknesses in the ideas and actions of individuals who have exercised tremendous influence in Islamic history will be better appreciated. We will know why Muslim societies failed to live up to Islamic ideals. There will be a firmer grasp of the sort of transformation that is required if the perennial values embodied in the religion are to find expression through new structures and institutions.

As with Islam, so with Western civilization. The sweeping condemnation of the civilization is a travesty of justice and truth. This is why in this essay we note specific areas of crisis and specific attitudes which are inimical to the development of the human being rather than condemn Western civilization in its totality. For the West like the East is far too complex for that sort of superficial judgement. There are various trends and tendencies in that civilization. Even within its dominant consciousness certain contradictory attitudes are discernible. Generally speaking, one has to make at least two fundamental qualifications in any analysis of the West. Firstly, there are attitudes and values which are part of man's universal heritage. Pride and happiness, sorrow and death, niggardliness and generosity, envy and love elicit more or less similar responses and reactions in most cultures. In other words, there are certain common elements in human behaviour which bind East and West. There is no reason to suspect that an American mother would feel any less unhappy about the illness of her child than a Pakistani mother. Secondly, social structures condition social behaviour to a great extent. There is more of a community feeling and less individualism among rural dwellers compared to urban dwellers in most parts of the world. Dominant classes tend to defend the status quo everywhere; subordinate classes are easier to mobilize against the system anywhere. Capitalist societies whether in the West or the East tend to encourage the development of certain positive and negative qualities like enterprise and initiative at certain levels on the one hand,

and greed and selfishness among various groups, on the other. Similarly, socialist societies inside and outside Western civilization help to cultivate virtues like the need for equality and assist in propagating certain vices like the necessity for conformity. It is obvious, therefore, that one cannot judge Western civilization in its entirety without considering the role of prevailing social structures.

Only after these qualifications — about universal human behaviour and social structures — have been made should we examine the unique features of Western civilization. To be sure, the Renaissance, the development of science outside religion, the conflict between scientific reason and religious faith, the different stages in the struggle between classes, and the consequent crystallization of various attitudes towards religion, science, faith and reason are peculiar to European history. Some of the adverse consequences of these attitudes have already been observed.

However, if Muslim critics want to be fair to the West they must not only highlight these negative characteristics but also acknowledge some of the positive elements in that civilization.¹⁸ Even if one has some misgivings about aspects of the philosophy that accompanies scientific inquiry in the West, one cannot deny that its achievements have alleviated the sufferings of millions in Europe and America. No other civilization in history has managed to reduce poverty, improve health and hygiene, expand the opportunities for work and leisure, provide access and mobility to the socially disadvantaged and generally uplift the standard of living as successfully as the West. Few other civilizations have legitimized the right of dissent and institutionalized the right of participation for its people as the West has done in the last few decades. By the same token, it is a civilization that is capable of protecting its citizens from the arbitrariness of those in authority. Most of all, it has the capacity for introspection, analysis, self-criticism and self-correction — attitudes spawned by a dynamic intellectual tradition.

Muslim critics have seldom recognized the fact that this willingness to evaluate oneself has time and again enabled the modern West to overcome its own shortcomings. Indeed, great Western minds have been far more competent critics of their own civilization than the vast majority of Muslim critics. Decades ago, Spengler, Toynbee,

Schweitzer, Northrop and Sorokin had analysed, albeit from varying perspectives, the spiritual crisis of the West. In the last 20 years or so, historians, sociologists, economists and political scientists like Theodore Roszak, Paul Goodman, Christopher Lasch, Peter Berger, Daniel Bell and others have dissected in brilliant detail the culture, religion and politics of Western civilization to show the need for new values and new visions. Though one may not agree with some of the analyses, the intellectual content of their works outshines most of the critiques of the West produced by Muslim scholars and propagandists. More specifically, there is hardly any Muslim writer who can match Lewis Mumford's profound analysis of how the underlying philosophy of man, life and society in the West has shaped its urbanization and technology.

The question we must now ask is: why isn't there an analytical approach towards Islam and an evaluative attitude towards the West among the Islamic resurgents? Two sets of reasons can be advanced. Firstly, there is a "civilizational" problem. The Islam that we see today had just emerged from a long period of colonial subjugation and dominance. Like any culture that has just emerged from subjugation it is bound to assert its identity at least in the first few decades of its independence. The notion of identity, in addition, will tend to emphasize the puritanical aspect of the religion since this will help enhance its uniqueness, its distinctiveness. This has happened in other cases too. The initial reactions against colonial rule in India, Burma and Indonesia were often clothed in cultural obscurantism. The obsession was with asserting one's distinctive identity. It can be argued that psychologically a once-dominated culture feels a much greater need to assert its uniqueness in this manner.

A culture that is caught in this process will not want to examine itself or analyse its strengths and weaknesses. On the contrary, it will maintain that there is no need for reinterpretation of its philosophy or world-view. If there are any problems, it is because the adherents are not prepared to be Islamic in the fullest sense. And being Islamic to the hilt often means accepting a rigid, doctrinaire version of the religion without question. Only then is one faithful to the character and identity of Islam. Analysis, therefore, becomes anathema.

This fear of analysis has another dimension to it. After the destruction of the great centres of Islamic learning in the thirteenth

century and the subsequent general decline of Islamic civilization, a conservative mood began to set in. Because of this historical trauma, the earlier eagerness to invent and experiment, to innovate and invigorate which was mainly responsible for the rise of Islam as a dynamic intellectual civilization, was replaced by a pronounced desire to preserve and perpetuate whatever little was left. If anything, the advent of colonialism further reinforced this conservative tendency.

It is also because of colonialism and its traumatic historical experience, that Islamic resurgence is unwilling to evaluate Western civilization in a more objective manner. For such evaluation can only come from cultures that are secure and confident — as Islamic civilization was between the eighth and twelfth centuries. It was a civilization that was secure enough to absorb the finest ideas and techniques from other cultures. As it absorbed and synthesized these alien elements, it realized that in the process its own growth and development had become even more dynamic. Islamic civilization became eclectic while retaining the essence of its identity.

A religion that is just emerging from subjugation, and has yet to create a contemporary social system embodying the perennial values at its core, a religion that is nowhere at the apex of its glory, cannot possibly be expected to demonstrate the sort of confidence that characterized the illustrious Islamic civilization of the past. Understandably, therefore, it is afraid of absorbing ideas from outside. It is ambivalent about assimilating technics from the West. There is a lurking fear that selective assimilation from Western civilization will lead to the eventual erosion of its identity.

In this connection, what Islamic resurgence fears most is the loss of its God-based identity as a result of adopting ideas born of an "atheistic civilization". It explains to some extent why within a significant segment of the resurgent movement there is much greater hostility towards socialism (especially Marxist socialism) with its overt repudiation of God than towards capitalism which at least appears to tolerate religion.

What the resurgents do not realize is that some of the concepts developed in the West on the causes of exploitation and oppression, on how economic disparities are perpetuated and why civil liberties are lost

may be very relevant for the creation of social structures which will ensure that the values associated with God-consciousness are sustained for all times. Since socialism has contributed immensely towards the growth of knowledge on the structure and organization of society, Islam which seeks to provide institutional meaning and content to its eternal values has everything to gain by absorbing selectively whatever is useful from that school of thought.

The reluctance of Islamic resurgence to try to understand socialism and indeed the social sciences as a whole in greater depth is connected with the second set of reasons we must now explore. The dominant elements in the Islamic resurgence have very little understanding of the social sciences. This is especially true of those with traditional religious education. If social science means the scientific study of society, then the conventional curricula of Islamic instruction in most Muslim countries have never really been concerned about it. The unspoken fear of Islamic resurgents is that accommodation of the social sciences will create a situation whereby their own leadership of the movement will be endangered. By not allowing ideas from the social sciences to gain root within the Islamic intellectual tradition, the resurgents are consciously or unconsciously preventing the development of an analytical approach to Islam. Self-interest, then, is part of the problem.

It is also one of the reasons why the resurgents are not prepared to adopt an evaluative attitude towards the West. For selective assimilation of aspects of Western civilization will require knowledge of its history, its philosophy, its economics and its politics. This the resurgents do not possess. Once again, the fear is that such interaction with the West will create the sort of intellectual momentum that will render them irrelevant.

At this point, it must be emphasized that resurgents with a background in secular education tend to be a little better in this respect. But unfortunately the need to react constantly to their political competitors, the liberal elements and the Marxist socialists – apart from other factors discussed in the earlier part of this essay – have compelled them to eschew innovation within Islam while condemning Western civilization in its entirety. Like the resurgents from traditional

backgrounds, they are also trapped in that larger civilizational challenge confronting Islam at this stage of its history.

Conclusion

This challenge — and indeed everything else that we have discussed in this essay — establishes quite clearly that what Islamic resurgence needs are thinkers and leaders who are imbued with Islamic values, whose world-view is Islam, but who, at the same time, understand not only the weaknesses but also the strengths of Western civilization. At the moment such human beings are rare in the Muslim world. But then this is not their hour in history. The present phase will have to yield to a more mature period.

After all, Islam — so it appears from our analysis — is experiencing its resurgence in the dark night of an epoch in crisis. It is an epoch that is about to seek new meanings and new ideals in a new age.

The new Muslim and revitalized Islam belong to that new dawn.

Explanatory note

Reproduced from *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1986).

Notes

1. The term "Islamic Re-assertion" has been used by Mohammad Ayoob of the Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore. I may not have done justice to its meaning in this short exposition.
2. For some discussion of Islamic renaissance see M.M. Sharif ed., *A History of Muslim Philosophy* vol. 2, book 8 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1966).
3. See *Pergolakan Pemikiran Islam, Catatan Harian Ahmad Wahib* (Jakarta: LP3ES, September 1982).
4. For more of their writings see Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979) and Hassan Hanafi, *Religious*

Dialogue and Revolution (Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, 1977).

- 5 For a more detailed discussion of all these writers and their writings see John L. Donohue and John L. Esposito eds., *Islam in Transition, Muslim Perspectives* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
- 6 There are many profound critiques of contemporary Western civilization authored by Westerners themselves. See for instance, Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973) and Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).
- 7 This is elaborated in my introduction to *The Universalism of Islam* (Penang: Aliran, 1979).
- 8 There are clear hints of some changes in its very anti-American policy of the past. This can be seen from newspaper reports appearing in the last two or three months (April – June 1983).
- 9 For the data see *Amnesty International Report, 1982* (London, 1982), pp. 323-26.
- 10 See Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).
- 11 This notion of the superiority of Western civilization in relation to non-Western cultures is brilliantly discussed in Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
- 12 See selected articles in Altaf Gauhar, ed., *The Challenge of Islam* (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1978).
- 13 The struggle of the resurgents is discussed in a somewhat dogmatic way in Kalim Siddiqi, ed., *Issues in the Islamic Movement 1980-81* (London: The Open Press Limited, 1982).

- 14 For an analysis of the personality crisis in American society and related issues see Christopher Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism* (London: Sphere, 1980).
- 15 R. Briffault, *Europa: The Days of Ignorance* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1935).
- 16 For some reflections on problems of constant change and the need for permanence see E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (London: Blond & Briggs, 1973).
- 17 See my "God-consciousness" for a detailed treatment of the subject in *Aliran Quarterly*, Vol. 2, no. 4 (1982).
- 18 Some of the positive achievements of Western civilization are elaborated in a balanced manner by Peter Berger, *Pyramids of Sacrifice* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976).

ART AND ISLAM

Why is it that a piece of art has to be explicitly religious in the conventional sense before it can be accepted as Islamic Art? Surely, Islamic Art is more than that.

Any artistic endeavour that gives meaning to Tauhid (the unity of God) and the role of the human being as Khalifah Allah (the vicegerent of God) is Islamic Art.

Tauhid is not just the recognition of the oneness of God. It is the subordination of power and wealth, the individual and the State, the family and society to the unifying principle of God. It is the affirmation of the unity of man and all living beings, of man and nature. It is the unity between inner man and outer man, spirit and matter, this world and the other world. It is the proclamation of the unity of humankind. It is the acknowledgement of the unity of values that governs the life of man and society.

A Khalifah Allah is not just someone who declares his faith in Allah and Muhammad as his messenger or does his prayers regularly, or fasts, or pays the Zakat, or performs the Haj. More importantly, he is someone who strives to translate the ideals of Tauhid into realities through righteous deeds.

Thus, a person who through his art exposes the unbridled quest for power, or the untrammelled acquisition of riches or the pervasiveness of corruption or greed or decadence is an Islamic artist. Similarly, a person who through her music or paintings makes society aware of poverty, exploitation and oppression is an Islamic artist. Likewise, those poets and dramatists who protest against the destruction of the environment are being Islamic in their own way. Finally, writers who reveal the evil wrought by ethnic chauvinism and religious fanaticism are embodiments of the real spirit of Islam. Needless to say, in each and every case one is behaving like a true Khalifah Allah dedicated to the cause of Tauhid.

This conception of an Islamic artist is universal enough to accommodate both Muslims and non-Muslims. A Muslim artist is not automatically an Islamic artist. Neither is a non-Muslim artist automatically excluded from the arena of Islamic Art. For, in the ultimate analysis, it is whether the motive, purpose and character of one's art conforms with the unity of God and the vicegerency of man which determines one's position.

Why is it that Islamic Art is not seen in this way? Why is Islamic Art seen in such narrow, exclusive, superficial terms? To answer this, one has to find out why the practice of Islam as a whole at this stage of history is largely ritualistic, symbolic and superficial. Among the major reasons would be:

- a) Foreign conquest, the destruction of the centres of learning and subsequent colonial domination for centuries which thwarted the spirit of free inquiry that characterised early Islam. The Islam that developed during and after the period of domination was conservative to a great extent and concerned about preserving its exclusive identity.
- b) The intellectual control of Islamic societies by conservative, theologically oriented Ulama who revelled in providing narrow interpretations to the Quran and Sunnah. Such interpretations made the Muslims more dependent upon the Ulama and discouraged intellectual creativity.
- c) The failure of the non-theological Muslim intelligentsia to assume leadership for the development of a progressive, universal approach to Islam partly because of its own scepticism of religion derived from its fascination for the West and partly because of its own colossal ignorance of religious values and philosophies.
- d) The parasitic ruling classes in many Muslim societies in the past who were determined to keep their people poor, ignorant and illiterate so that they could continue to bask in their power and glory. The vast social inequalities that existed contributed towards the intellectual retardation of Muslim societies everywhere.
- e) The pervasive power of the State today which encompasses even the intellectual, cultural and artistic spheres of society and its

desire to maintain its strong grip by promoting a ritualistic, symbolic concept of religion among the people. In this way, religion will not become a liberating force which will inspire the people to demand justice and dignity.

- f) The situation is made worse by the equally strong influence exerted by market forces over the development of ideas. Progressive thought in art and culture does not grow rapidly because the market gives greater support to those ideas which help maintain the dominant position of capital and profits. Indirectly, this attitude favours the perpetuation of conservative values in Islam.

Apart from all this, the communalism that is channelled through Islam in our own country in particular has also hindered the growth of a progressive, universal approach to religion.

As long as a progressive, universal approach to Islam does not develop, Islamic Art is going to remain in its present form, obsessed with its religious character in a superficial, exclusive sense. Islamic Art of that sort will mean very little to the lives of ordinary people. Artists who are part of such a tradition would be betraying their positions as 'Khalifah Allah' and negating the 'Tauhid'.

What is the way out? For a more progressive, universal approach to Islam to develop, there must be a concerted endeavour to understand Islamic philosophy, its values, its world view in depth. At the same time, there must be an eagerness to absorb knowledge in a creative manner from other sources. Muslim societies should be intellectually re-invigorated through active interaction with other civilisations. For the question of how to overcome those economic, political and technological structures which prevent Tauhid from becoming a living reality, can only be resolved if Muslims are prepared to open the windows of their mind to the world. Similarly, it will not be possible to make the human being a true Khalifah Allah as long as Muslims do not have the knowledge to liberate the human being from all those social conditions which dehumanize him now.

However, this mission will not be accomplished if the present trend of dividing all knowledge and activities into Islamic and non-Islamic components goes on. We are now talking, for instance, of

Islamic science, Islamic medicine, Islamic politics, Islamic economics, Islamic sociology and Islamic anthropology – apart from Islamic Art. While this distinction may serve some purpose in certain areas, it is wrong to apply it to every sphere of knowledge.

By dividing knowledge in this way, one creates a barrier which hinders communication and cross-fertilisation. One introduces the notion of an area of legitimate knowledge and an area of less legitimate knowledge. It will undoubtedly dissuade Muslims from imbibing ideas which may well be vital for their well-being. Intellectual stagnation could be the long-term consequence of this dichotomisation of knowledge.

Besides, one is not even sure if such a dichotomy is valid in the first instance. For as the great thinker, Sayyid Jamaluddin al-Afghani, once put it, "The strangest thing of all is that our ulama these days have divided science into two parts. One they call Muslim science, and one European science. Because of this they forbid others to teach some of the useful sciences. They have not understood that science is that noble thing that has no connection with any nation, and is not distinguished by anything but itself . . . The father and mother of science is proof. The truth is where there is proof, and those who forbid science and knowledge in the belief that they are safeguarding the Islamic religion are really the enemies of the religion."

Instead of dividing knowledge along Islamic and non-Islamic lines, we should be concentrating on finding ways and means of harnessing ideas for the liberation of the poor and downtrodden in the Third World – a huge segment of whom are Muslims – from the shackles of exploitation and oppression.

In this challenging task, the artist has a special role to play. He should try to raise the consciousness of his fellow human beings about the injustices that confront their lives.

By so doing, he will become truly human which is to become truly spiritual in the service of God.

Explanatory note

Originally written in Malay, the article was presented as a paper at a seminar organised by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in August 1984.

FEMALE ATTIRE, MORALITY AND REFORM

The rapid diffusion of what is widely regarded as Islamic attire among Muslim females in the last 10 years or so is a reflection of the character of the dominant trend in Islamic resurgence in Malaysia.

It shows how form rather than substance, has become the major preoccupation of the resurgents. By and large Muslim women who adopt the attire make no attempt to inquire into the rationale behind it. There is no desire to understand what sort of function the new attire performs. On the whole, the relationship between the attire and its users appears to be an unquestioning, unthinking one. The instinct to conform to the dictates of the group seems to have played a big part in the spread of the attire.

Attire: The Assumptions

Because of this there are certain underlying assumptions about the social role of the attire which have never really been explored by Muslim women in particular and Muslim society in general. It is assumed, for instance, that attire is a vital criterion of the moral standing of the individual. This is not true at all. It may or may not be indicative of the person's moral propensities. In other words, how a person dresses is not conclusive evidence of whether he or she is inclined towards puritanical values or promiscuous conduct. Besides, attire itself is conditioned by a whole variety of factors including the history and culture of a people, the extent of social contact between the sexes, exposure to the media, prevailing notions of style and beauty and of course, the climate of a particular place. This is why it is somewhat naive to use attire as the main yardstick of individual morality – however narrow our definition of morality.

Similarly, it is wrong to assume that it is female morality that has to be protected through female attire in order to preserve the moral standards of society at large. The unstated premise upon which this fallacy rests is that it is somehow the female (more than the male) who is responsible for the moral decay of society. Apart from being utterly baseless, this sort of faulty reasoning is a grave insult to the dignity of women as a whole – more specifically, the dignity of our mothers, our wives, our sisters, our daughters. Surely, it is not difficult to

understand that men exert as much — if not more — influence upon the moral norms of a society, compared to women who have always had more restricted public roles. In any case, more than women or men, it is the moral atmosphere of the system as a whole which, to a great extent, shapes the moral conduct of the individuals within it. And the moral atmosphere itself could be the product of a number of social forces at work at different times, including the ethical values of the elites. Individual women, or men for that matter, have very little control over these forces. It is therefore grossly unfair to regard women as the sex that has some special responsibility for safeguarding the moral character of society.

Seeing women and morality in this jaundiced way is, in fact, part of a more general problem. There is a tendency among a lot of Islamic resurgents to view women's position in contemporary society as a cause of certain maladies. It is often assumed that if divorce rates have increased, if premarital and extramarital sex have become more widespread, if juvenile delinquency has become more serious, it is all because women are now working outside their homes and participating actively in public affairs. It is conveniently forgotten that since time immemorial women have worked outside their homes. In some of the earlier agrarian societies, women not only performed the bulk of outside work but also took on leadership roles in certain instances. And yet marriages lasted, the family system remained intact and some of the crimes that are rampant today were almost unknown then. Just as one should not try to explain what was positive in the past by attributing it all to the role played by women, so one should refrain from heaping upon women all the blame for some of our contemporary ills. There is little doubt that the crisis of the modern family has a great deal to do with the decline of organically united communities, the type of industrialization and urbanization that has taken place, the impersonalization of work, the rigid work-home dichotomy, the nature of technology, rapid mobility and the spiritual alienation of the individual, among other causes.

What all this means is that increased juvenile delinquency or unstable marriages cannot be explained in simplistic terms. To understand the underlying causes of some of these social diseases, there has to be vigorous analysis of social realities. This the dominant trend in

Islamic resurgence is not prepared to do. In fact as we have seen earlier on in relation to the question of attire, there is a reluctance to examine the sociological truth behind an opinion or belief fervently subscribed to. It is of course much easier to hold on tenaciously to a view, however wrong it may be, as long as it is possible to provide some dubious religious rationalization for it. It becomes even easier to do it when the target group involved is politically and economically weak, as is the case with women. Making the weaker section of society the scapegoat for problems which are beyond one's capacity to understand is not an unusual practice.

A More Profound Morality

Having shown that the underlying assumptions about female attire, female morality and the female role in society are largely erroneous, the question that now emerges is this: if the moral ballast of a society is not solely dependent upon what a woman wears or how she behaves or what she does, then aren't Islamic resurgents guilty of giving too much emphasis to issues of minor significance? Is this yet another example of obsession with the trivial and superficial while what are vital and fundamental remain unattended? Isn't it sad that those who are so concerned about how women should be attired have given so little thought to the millions of women and children in Africa and Asia who do not have proper clothes to wear?

It is this more profound concept of morality – morality born of justice and compassion in the truest sense – that is missing from those who are so fastidious about female attire. They do not understand that upholding morality is, in the ultimate analysis, defending the integrity of the human person inspired by justice and compassion. This is the spirit of morality embodied in the Quran. The Quran urges humankind to commit itself to the more demanding – rather than the less demanding – concept of morality. It says, "But he hath not attempted the Ascent – Ah, what will convey unto thee what the Ascent is! – (It is) to free a slave, And to feed in the day of hunger, An orphan near of kin, Or some poor wretch in misery, And to be of those who believe and exhort one another to perseverance and exhort one another to pity. Their place will be on the right hand." (90:11-18).

The Importance of Reason

It is not just in their inability to appreciate the deeper meaning of morality that the resurgents have failed to uphold the genuine spirit of

the religion. Their unthinking attitude to attire is also at complete variance with the emphasis given to reason and reflection in Islam. In fact, Islam celebrates the capacity to reason and reflect as the hallmark of the human being. This explains why the Quran encourages humankind to reflect upon the wonders of nature, the physical state of man, the rise and fall of nations. It guides human reason to the discovery of the oneness of creation which in turn is a reflection of the oneness of God. Indeed, even in leading the human being to the belief in God, the Quran urges him to reason on the meaning of existence and to reflect upon the mysteries of the universe.

The Formal-Legalistic Approach

The profound logic and rationality of the Quran is lost upon the resurgents partly because of their own approach to Islam. It is a formal-legalistic approach which gives tremendous importance to laws, rules and regulations. It is not interested in the spirit behind laws and regulations. Neither does it want to find out the inner meaning, the ultimate objective, of a particular idea or injunction in the Quran. Formal legalism adheres strictly to a narrow interpretation of the text of the Quran. It makes no distinction between what is universal and what is contextual. It does not differentiate underlying values from outward institutions. It does not realize that while universal values are perennial, contextual institutions are not.

On the whole, the formal-legalistic approach has a static rather than a dynamic vision of Islam. It is conservative rather than progressive. This is why it keeps on looking back to the past for models and examples. This is why it is so attached to the legal opinions, prescriptions and formulations of religious elites from the past. Formal legalism does not dare to admit that while these elites sought to formulate their intellectual responses to the social issues of their time guided by general principles from the Quran, their ideas were nonetheless circumscribed by the level of knowledge obtaining during their particular period in history. For that reason many of their prescriptions and analyses are no longer applicable. The reluctance to acknowledge this apparent truth is what makes formal-legalism traditional to the core.

However, it is the formal-legalistic approach that dominates Islamic resurgence in this country as in most other places. Why this is

so I have explained elsewhere. For now let us merely reiterate that the traditional religious elites – the traditional Ulama – have always had a stake in perpetuating this approach to Islam. For it is an approach that endows them with power. They become the sole interpreters and arbiters of the religion. It is they who decide, who judge, who punish – as long as Islam revolves around rules and regulations, 'do's and 'don'ts'.

The Philosophical-Sociological Approach

There is of course another approach to the Quran, which is very different from the formal-legalistic tradition. It too recognises the Quranic message as eternal and universal. But it also realizes that the universal message, valid as it is for all times, was conveyed through a particular people in a particular context. It therefore has a socio-historical dimension to it. This is why the Quran abounds with metaphors and symbols, laws and lores, ideas and practices drawn from that sociological setting. It had to be that way. For if God's eternal message to humanity did not have a context, a setting, it would have been nothing more than a lifeless litany of abstract principles. It would have been detached from reality, devoid of power, of emotion, like some declaration on civil liberties. In a nutshell, then, the universal truth could become a living truth only because it was embodied in the flesh and blood of a living community. If it had not touched the heart of that seventh century community, the message could not have reached the hearts of later generations.

This is something that later generations should understand: that the Quran operates at both the contextual and the universal levels. If this is not properly understood, we will continue to get trapped by contextual references bound by the specificities of time and place. A rational perspective should enable us to reflect upon, and analyse, specific verses in order to discover the underlying meaning, the universal message, contained therein. We should be able to distinguish eternal values from contextual practices. We should be able to separate foundational principles in the Quran from laws and rules conditioned by the ecology of seventh century Arabia.

Most of all, we should remember that precisely because the Quran is eternal and universal, its underlying values will keep on evolving, achieving newer and newer meanings, even if some of its laws and institutions wither away with the march of time.

This other more rational, more progressive approach does not have a name as such. I hesitate to give it one since it represents, in effect, the entire spirit of the religion. Nonetheless, there is a need to distinguish it from the formal-legalistic approach. Shall we therefore call it the philosophical-sociological approach? 'Philosophical' because it takes cognisance of the importance of reflection in establishing the eternal values and principles of the religion; 'philosophical' because it is deeply aware of the inner meanings, the underlying themes in the religion; philosophical because it acknowledges that there is a comprehensive world-view in the religion. This approach is, at the same time, sociological because it understands that the universal has also got a contextual dimension; sociological because it realizes that there is a close relationship between environment on the one hand, and ideas, laws and institutions, on the other; sociological because it emphasizes the social nature of the religion. However, the philosophical-sociological approach, it must be reiterated, is essentially a way of categorising a certain method of understanding Islam — and nothing more. As a concept, it has undoubtedly its flaws.

Both the two approaches, the philosophical-sociological and the formal-legalistic, have been discussed at some length with a certain purpose in mind. It is mainly to show that views on female attire and morality, as with other subjects within the religion cannot really be considered in isolation from our overall approach to the Quran and Islam. For that reason, one must have some understanding of differing perspectives on, and approaches to, Islam. Using the philosophical-sociological approach as our perspective, we shall now provide some idea of how we view female attire and morality.

Attire From Our Approach

From the various verses in the Quran which deal with female attire both in a specific and general sense (7:26; 7:31; 16:81; 24:31; 33:33) it is quite clear that the actual emphasis is upon the universal values of restraint, moderation, simplicity and modesty. It is significant, in this connection, that it is inner restraint, more than outer form, that is cherished. Surah 7:26 notes, "O children of Adam! We have revealed unto you raiment to conceal your shame, and splendid vesture, but the raiment of restraint from evil, that is best. This is of the revelations of Allah, that they may remember."

Later on, the Quran tells believing women "to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers" (24:31). It will be observed that even in this verse which is often used to justify a certain type of attire, the specific instructions are confined to just two areas — covering the bosom and "revealing only that which is apparent". The latter is subject to interpretation. That it allows for rational, sensible interpretation guided by the general values of modesty and restraint is something that the philosophical-sociological approach would want to stress. Unlike the formal-legalistic tradition, it will not insist that the form of attire that prevailed during the Prophet Muhammad's time is universally valid. It will view that particular attire as a contextual response to general prescriptions on modesty and restraint. The philosophical-sociological approach will argue that each age and each society must evolve its own dress form guided by its own cultural traditions and climatic constraints provided of course that it does not transgress the universal values and guidelines contained in the Quran.

Those of us who subscribe to the philosophical-sociological approach would further contend that an obsession with female attire derived from a certain environment and a certain period in history is totally unjustified because it exaggerates the importance of the woman's responsibility towards modesty and restraint. It is often forgotten that in the Quran the male responsibility towards modesty and restraint is also emphasized. A verse says ". . . . and men who guard their modesty and women who guard their modesty" (33:35) As with women, there is no specific attire for men either. The only difference is that there is a general notion of modest dressing for women which does not exist for men. But for both sexes it is the guiding values of modesty and restraint that matter most. Both are advised to avoid ostentation in attire.

Why are all these emphasized in relation to attire? Our approach places a high premium on trying to understand the purpose of a certain value or practice in the Quran. Apart from the danger of stimulating lust in human relations, values such as restraint, modesty, moderation and simplicity are crucial because they help to develop the human personality. The Quran suggests that they enable the human being to

realize the ideal dimension of his nature. In the process, he will discover his spiritual essence.

More than that, by eschewing ostentation, vulgarity and intemperance in dressing, some of those superficialities that stand in the way of genuine human relations would lose their grip. It would be easier for a human being to relate to another as a person – without extraneous factors intervening to distort human love and compassion. Incidentally, this was how the late Ayatollah Talegani, perhaps the most progressive of the religious leaders in the Iranian Revolution, and Bani-Sadr, the former Iranian President, saw the role of modest, decent attire in society.

The more profound explanation of the function of values such as modesty and moderation vis-a-vis attire attempted in this analysis, is one of those strengths of the philosophical-sociological approach that distinguishes it from the formal-legalistic approach. By finding out what purpose a particular value serves, the underlying meaning, the inner message, is brought to the surface.

Through a similar process of reflection we shall discover that the meaning of an eternal value like restraint also evolves in the course of human history. From certain aspects of the Quran and Sunnah (The way of the Prophet Muhammad), it is evident that restraint as a value was sustained through social regulation and the enforcement of the law. Yet the Quran also holds out the possibility of restraint being observed in a situation where there is active and continuous interaction between the sexes. This is why the Quran does not encourage seclusion of the female. It does not prohibit social intercourse between men and women. Indeed, the freedom it gives women to earn their own incomes, to work outside their homes, to seek knowledge and to participate in the shaping of society's future, must logically envisage a high degree of cooperation and interaction between the sexes. If a society is to be true to these women's rights visualized in the Quran, restraint as a guiding value cannot possibly express itself through laws and rules that keep the sexes apart. Rather it has to manifest itself as a deeply cherished value in the active interaction between the sexes sustained by self-awareness of its significance and by social norms. This is how the inner meanings of eternal values evolve through time.

In a nutshell then, the philosophical-sociological approach not only refrains from imposing a particular type of attire upon women but also understands how values like modesty, moderation, simplicity and restraint must develop more profound meanings if they are to remain eternally valid. Even in other issues important to the position of women like polygamy, inheritance and judicial witnesses, the philosophical-sociological approach offers interpretations which are more in harmony with the dignity and honour of the female sex than what the other tradition contains. We shall examine briefly each of these three issues from our progressive perspective.

Polygamy From Our Approach

In dealing with polygamy, for instance, this perspective goes at once to the root of the question. The real purpose, the main objective of allowing polygamy is to bring about justice. The relevant revelation itself reflects a compassionate desire to do justice to widows and orphans in the wake of a war. Polygamous marriage is permitted to protect the well-being of these widows and orphans. It is to ensure that they do not suffer. Even while allowing polygamy, the Quran insists that the man treats each of his wives with equal justice – justice which is to cover both the material and spiritual sides of life. At the same time, it opines that such justice is humanly impossible and advises the Muslim male to marry just one – if he fears that he will not be able to do justice to all his wives. What this shows is that in an indirect, yet profound way, the Quran is, in fact, espousing monogamous ties. This was how the great Muslim savant of the late 19th century, Muhammed Abduh, interpreted the polygamy-monogamy question in Islam. For him the spirit of the Quran was clearly monogamous. This was evident, he argued, if one examined the underlying motive, the overriding purpose, of the verses pertaining to polygamy. Needless to say only within the philosophical-sociological approach is such thinking possible.

Inheritance From Our Approach

Similarly if one examines the Quranic rules on inheritance it is abundantly clear that the ultimate goal is justice to both sexes. However, this is accomplished by giving due consideration to the varying roles and responsibilities of different family members. This is where the contextual question comes in. In a situation where the male was mainly responsible for the economic security of the family, his

share of inherited wealth was naturally higher. It is obvious in the Quran that it is his role as provider — and nothing else — that entitles him to a bigger share. If this underlying reason — the motive behind unequal apportioning of inheritance — is used as the guiding principle in re-thinking and re-interpreting the relevant laws, there is no doubt at all that justice will be done to the female sex. For both in terms of responsibility and role, a woman today is often protector and provider of the family's economic well-being in as much as the man is. This is why the well known Muslim thinker, Muhammad Iqbal, stressed the importance of re-appraising inheritance laws in the light of contemporary circumstances. For he realized that the impulse for justice in the relationship between the sexes and the commitment to equality were powerful and potent enough in the Quran to warrant a re-examination and re-interpretation of those rules and regulations with a contextual character.

Witnesses From Our Approach

Like Iqbal a present-day Muslim scholar, Fazlur Rahman, has also argued for the reconstruction of Islamic laws guided by the spirit rather than the language of the Quran. He feels that, "a systematic and bold interpretation of the Quran must be undertaken". Using the question of female witnesses in the Quran as an example he points out that, "It has been all too often overlooked by non-Muslims and Muslims alike that the Quran normally gives reasons for its specific legal pronouncements. Two women's evidence in lieu of one man's, why? — 'so that one woman should remind the other in case the other forgets'. This is a clear commentary on the sociological setting of the Prophet's Arabia and an insistence that correct evidence must be produced as far as possible."

The importance of correct evidence is a foundational principle that cannot be changed. It is part and parcel of the whole question of justice itself which is an eternal, universal value. Within the context of 7th century Arabia, it expressed itself through certain specific legal procedures. Since the contextual character of these procedures is beyond dispute it follows automatically that new laws should be formulated that would be in harmony with the underlying foundational principle and universal value, and would, at the same time, do justice to the equal status of women. It must be stressed, at this point however,

that in the philosophical-sociological approach to Islam contextual rules or arrangements need not always be set aside; there may be cases where they are still socially valid because they reflect a foundational principle or universal value in a manner that conforms to the perennial Quranic vision.

Conclusion

The philosophical-sociological approach has very little support within Islam. This is not surprising given the state of Muslim civilization at this point in time. A civilization which for various historical and sociological reasons, is more interested in asserting its exclusive identity and character would not be willing to allow intellectual reform to take place through re-examination and re-interpretation of its ideological basis. This is why the philosophical-sociological approach is often dismissed by most Islamic resurgents as an attempt to adjust to 'modernity' or what is worse in their reckoning, 'secularism'. They regard it as a concession to 'isms' like liberalism and socialism, that originated in the West.

Nothing can be further from the truth. This essay itself has shown that the entire perspective on female attire, women's position and reform is a product of the philosophy of the Quran, interpreted in a rational and progressive manner. All the underlying values and principles analysed in this study are fundamental to Islamic ethics. The very fact that restraint, modesty and moderation are given importance puts our approach in an entirely different category from those dominant perspectives on values ordinarily associated with 'post-enlightenment' Europe.

More significant, the purpose of re-interpreting various ideas in the Quran pertinent to women is to enable them to live their role as "Khalifah Allah" (the Vicegerent of God). The concept of Khalifah Allah is crucial to Islam. To put it simply, it is because the human being is the Vicegerent of God that he or she has to carry out God's mission on earth – the mission of upholding righteousness and struggling against injustices. It is because of this status of Khalifah Allah, that the human being has to commit himself or herself to certain eternal values. The purpose of this commitment, according to the Quran, is to realize the real meaning of Tauhid (the Unity of God) in our existence on

earth. Tauhid is, in fact, the other concept that lies at the heart of Islam. To seek the Unity of God through the unity of humankind, through unity with creation itself, is our ultimate goal. This requires active involvement on the part of the human being in all the processes that influence the unity of humankind. It is quite apparent that the interpretation of polygamy or inheritance or witnesses or attire or morality upheld by most of the Islamic resurgents cannot help women to perform their God-given roles as Khalifah Allah attempting to realize Tauhid. They will always remain subordinate 'Khalifahs' which is not the intention of the Quran. Any endeavour to re-interpret Islamic teachings, guided by the philosophy of the Quran, with the aim of ensuring that women can also play an equal role in achieving a social order inspired by Tauhid is therefore a move in the right direction. It is an Islamic deed – or nothing else.

Besides, Islamic resurgents who regard the philosophical-sociological approach as a consequence of western colonial influence tend to ignore that re-interpretation of rules on polygamy, inheritance and other such issues with a social import, has been going on for centuries. The Mutazilites of the 9th century, who represented a significant intellectual current in early Islam were, for instance, serious advocates of monogamy. The encyclopaedic Ikhwanus Safa of the 10th and 11th centuries was already giving a progressive interpretation of inheritance laws – long before the advent of western colonialism.

Muslim women, like Muslim men, should therefore realize that what we call a philosophical-sociological approach is in fact deeply rooted in Islamic history. It began perhaps with the second Caliph Omar Ibn-Khattab who re-interpreted laws on zakat, marriage and crimes like theft by taking into account the sociological setting. The fourth Caliph, Ali, provided a concept of state defined by its commitment to the underlying values of justice and freedom rather than by its adherence to specific rules and regulations. Likewise, one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, Abu Dhar Al-Ghiffari, inveighed against the corruption of the ruling elites in his time and pleaded for a return to the spirit of justice embodied in Islam as against the outward forms of religion.

Through the centuries right up to the present, thinkers like Ibn Taimmiyah, Shah Waliullah, Ubaidullah Sindhi, Syed Jamaluddin

al-Afghani, Sheikh Muhammad Abduh, Ameer Ali, Muhammad Iqbal, Kalam Azad, Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Talegani, Hassan Hanafi, Fatima Mernissi, Fazlur Rahman and Ashgar Ali Engineer among others have sought to re-interpret various dimensions of Islam in a rational and progressive manner. Though there are serious differences in interpretation among a number of them on various issues all of them without exception recognise the importance of the sort of reflection that will bring out the essence of the religion. From our own part of the world, Indonesians like Mohammed Roem, Muhammed Natsir, Syariffuddin Parwiranegara, Abdurrahman Wahid, Nurcholish Madjid and Dawam Rahardjo have been involved in serious reform work of a similar kind. In our own country, Syed Hussein Alatas, from the fifties onwards, and Kassim Ahmad today have been trying hard to propagate a more enlightened attitude towards Islam which does not deny the rationality and wisdom that constitute its heritage. Unfortunately, the odds against them, and others who share certain perspectives with them, have been simply overwhelming.

However great the odds, Muslim women in particular and Muslim society in general should know that there is also another perspective on Islam. At this point in time, that perspective is still a small, tiny voice much like the voice of women in many parts of the world today. But it is a voice which will grow in significance as Muslim societies move into a mature phase. It is a voice that will triumph in the end – whatever the present trials and tribulations. For it is the voice of truth and justice. It is a voice that will not be silenced.

Explanatory note

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WOMEN, RELIGION AND HUMANITY

Women in Malaysia should be concerned about their future. The conservative nature of Islamic revivalism and revivalisms within other religions, the decline of the economy and the subsequent pressure upon jobs and the government's new population policy could all generate a negative impact upon the status and role of women in society. Of the three factors, it is religious revivalism that is the most significant simply because it is so closely interwoven with the direction in which society as a whole seems to be moving.

Women – especially Muslim women – have been responding to religious revivalism in three ways. A number of them have chosen to adjust to the dictates of religious revivalism by changing attire and behaviour. Yet others do not want to face up to revivalism and try to avoid coming to grips with its implications by ignoring the challenge. A third group has sought to defend what it sees as the interests of women and society from a perspective which has been described as 'secular' and 'western'.

The 'Western' perspective lacks sufficient credibility to emerge as a serious challenge to the conservative view of women. Besides, the crisis in the family and in sexual roles in the West raises important questions about the usefulness of that perspective as an alternative.

Trying to run away from revivalism is not a solution either. Religious revivalism is a trend that shows every sign of getting stronger and stronger. On the other hand, justifying and rationalising the revivalist concept of women is going to do immense damage to society as a whole. For, in the ultimate analysis, it denies women the scope and space to develop into total, complete human beings. It places them in a subservient, secondary position. This does not mean that there is no merit at all in the revivalist concept of women. It is after all a reaction – however inadequate – to some of the pitfalls in the status of women in contemporary western society.

What is urgently needed now is the evolution of yet another perspective on women rooted in a progressive concept of religion. Such a concept will not only have considerable credibility from a religious

standpoint but will also be in harmony with modern knowledge and modern society. It will therefore have a better chance of establishing itself as a serious alternative to the existing revivalist view of women.

The progressive perspective on religion is derived from its perennial core. It is the essence of religion. It is this perennial core that embodies a religion's ideas on the meaning and purpose of life, on what death signifies, on what the human being's mission on earth is, on the sort of eternal, universal values that should guide human action and so on. As far as this perennial core is concerned, there is no distinction between man and woman. Both male and female need freedom, both male and female should enjoy equality, both male and female are required to seek justice. Similarly, faith and trust, love and loyalty, compassion and concern, discipline and diligence, modesty and chastity are cherished attributes which both men and women should possess. In other words, in her spiritual journey on earth, the woman shares an equal role, bears an equal responsibility with the man.

However, while there is equality between the sexes, the perennial core of religion also recognises sexual differentiation at the physiological level. The physical and some of the temperamental differences are necessary to ensure a complementary relationship between the sexes and to establish the wholeness of the human family. This is why it is often said that in religion there is equality, not uniformity, in the relations between the sexes. This also explains why the perennial core in religion repudiates the notion of a unisex society.

At the same time, it acknowledges the importance of sustaining the special spiritual bond between mother and child – especially in the latter's formative years. It is this bond, linked in turn to the sacredness of life and the creativity of birth, which endows the mother with her privileged position in the philosophies of all the major religions. This life-generating activity is also part of the explanation for the significance of the family. More than that, the family in itself as the basic unit of society, is regarded as a crucial transmitter of those eternal, spiritual values which perpetuate human civilisation.

The question now is how does one arrive at this perennial core in religion? Three closely related processes are involved. First, there has to be sincere, serious reflection on the underlying meanings, the

fundamental philosophies contained in the great religious doctrines. For instance, in the case of the Quran it is only through reflection that we will understand that the vicegerency of God (Khalifah Allah) devolves upon both man and woman. Both man and woman must strive with equal ardour to achieve the Unity of God (Tauhid) in the unity of humankind through the abolition of ethnic and class dichotomies.

Second, just as we examine the underlying meanings of the great religious teachings, so should we study the great doctrines from a socio-historical standpoint with a view to distinguishing the contextual from the eternal, the peripheral from the perennial, the particular from the universal. If such distinctions are made property laws in the Quran and female rights of inheritance for instance will not be put in the same category as 'Tauhid' or the human being's position as 'Khalifah Allah'.

Third, to reinforce further our separation of the contextual from the eternal we should test both against those social realities which have expressed themselves through the ages. These realities will reveal, without any doubt, that all religions contain many injunctions and rules which are conditioned by the social environment. For that reason they may not be applicable to present-day circumstances. This is very true of the status of women in particular since male political and legal dominance has been a characteristic of most of human history.

At the same time, by weighing the doctrines against social realities we will show that truth, honesty and justice are indeed eternal values which have accompanied the human being in all climes and in all ages — though in different forms and in varying modes.

However, this perennial core which constitutes values, social principles and general guidelines cannot furnish us with the actual apparatus for social transformation. Hence the need to create those structures which will give greatest meaning to the perennial core. Of course, the transformation has to be a total, wholistic process which we cannot discuss in depth at this point. Of those proposed structures of change the following would be most relevant to women.

The creation of medium-sized political and administrative communities — primary communities — which will be the foundation of the life of the nation. In such communities, it will be easier for women

and men to provide tangible meaning to those values which lie at the perennial core. After all, it is in moderately-sized 'grass-roots' communities that values like love and compassion come alive!

Given their closer relationship to homes and families, such communities will also enable women to play active roles in politics and administration. It is no coincidence that in history it was when political communities were small and cohesive that women enjoyed greater public prominence. What is equally significant is that it is in such communities that democratic involvement and egalitarian diffusion of power can be brought into fruition.

The political and administrative framework will be aligned to the nature and scale of economic production. With the primary community as the basis of living, economic activities will revolve around the community and for that reason, there will be a preponderance of small and medium-sized units of production. Such units will provide women with the flexibility to mediate between work within the home and work outside the home. Also, as has been proven over and over again, small and medium-sized units increase the scope for autonomous management. They also tend to be more productive, (on a per unit basis), more effective and less wasteful of energy and raw materials. This is yet another proof of the indisputable fact that what is good for women is also good for the economy and ecology.

This does not mean however, that there should be no huge, complex economic organisations. Such outfits will also be necessary for the development of a progressive society. Nonetheless, it should be emphasised that they too should be managed on a decentralised basis allowing for as much autonomy as possible at various levels.

For the primary community-based economy of this sort to succeed, there must also be the right type of technology. It must be technology that reduces dull, monotonous work within and without the home. At the same time, it must enhance human intelligence and utilise physical labour in a creative manner. Such technology which seeks to improve the quality of work both inside and outside the home will be of special significance for women.

It will also have a tremendous impact upon the pattern of work in society. Given the primary community, with its political structure, economic activities and technological apparatus, women and men will find it less of a burden to divide time adequately between the home and the community. In this connection, it is important that men do their equal share of work at home. There would be no rigid barrier dividing home from the primary community for each will adjust to the other as far as the demands on time go. Since the concept and meaning of work itself would have undergone a transformation in such a setting, house-work would have acquired the sort of social prestige that it lacks now.

However, for work to acquire a new meaning, the institutions which define the value of work presently will have to be transformed completely. The production system and the bureaucracy that manages it (as in communist states) must cease to be the determining force behind work; instead it must become a means which enables the human being to develop his humanity. Similarly, the market with its emphasis upon the maximisation of profits (as in capitalist states) must no longer be the decisive factor that controls the character of work; it must be replaced by a system where the value of work is determined by a human being's material and spiritual needs. It goes without saying that for such a system to evolve its economic, political, cultural and intellectual resources should be in the hands of the community as a whole.

It is apparent then that only in a new society – in an alternative social order – can women discover the true meaning of the perennial core of religion. In other words, for the progressive conception of women in religion to sustain itself, there has to be an alternative social order. This is why, women, as a gender, must strive for an alternative society – for therein lies their hope for a better tomorrow.

Of course, the religious revivalists will dismiss the alternative society envisaged here as something that is far removed from religion. They will argue that it has nothing to do with the position of women embodied in the religious doctrines. We must counter them by pointing out that the reason why they do not understand the progressive view of women is because they have a static, superficial attitude towards religion itself. They do not realize that religion must evolve from age to

age so that its fundamental truths, its eternal values will emerge as dynamic forces in a constantly changing world. A few examples will serve to illustrate this point.

For the religious revivalists modesty and chastity among women depend largely upon their attire. For the progressive elements, on the other hand, these are values which have to be internalised, which express themselves in the actual interaction between the sexes. Modesty is not upheld by keeping the sexes apart. It is only when the sexes have the freedom to intermingle and yet manifest attributes of modesty and chastity in their relations that we can say that these are real, living values.

An analogy will help to reinforce the argument. In the distant past, people regarded nature as sacred but thought that the sacredness inhered in the forces of nature themselves. This sometimes resulted in an irrational relationship with mountains and trees and stones and the like. Today, there are many individuals who see sacredness as part of the divinity in creation itself and therefore espouse the importance of a sacred relationship with nature. The end product is a more protective attitude towards nature which is at the same time rational and humane.

This evolution in the idea of sacredness is what one means by the evolution of religion. We must allow and encourage spiritual ideas to develop in this manner if religion is to be a progressive force in our lives.

By the same token, in education, it is not separate schools and colleges for males and females which is the central issue, as the revivalists would have it, but whether the schooling system itself is capable of educating people in the real sense of the word. This is an important question in religion for religion has always proclaimed that its aim is to develop the human being, to make him truly educated. And yet the empirical evidence from throughout history indicates clearly that formal education has not really succeeded in inculcating ethics. How do we then, through education, make human beings more loving, more caring, more thinking?

At a more concrete level, surely the problem of overcrowded classes, malnourished pupils, badly trained teachers, the decline of professional standards and the absence of a learning atmosphere are far more crucial to the future of Malaysian education than separate schools for males and females. For in the ultimate analysis, the inability to develop total human beings means the inability to realise the spiritual essence of the human being which is what realigion is all about.

Similarly, in an area like health, it is foolish to be obsessed with 'religiously-correct' uniforms for nurses when there are so many serious challenges that have been left unattended to. Isn't it spiritually more important to ensure that the poor are given proper medical care, that everyone has access to good health, that medicine is not corrupted by the quest for unlimited profits?

In the same vein, why should the religious revivalists be so much against women holding public office when their real concern should be the integrity, the wisdom, the compassion of our public office-holders irrespective of whether they are male or female? Shouldn't the revivalists ask whether our leaders are really accountable to the people, whether ordinary people are able to exercise control over their own political destinies? Aren't these spiritual concerns? If the ultimate purpose of religion is to enable every human being to live like a human being, isn't denying people the right to shape their own futures, an act of dehumanisation, a sacrilegious deed?

From various examples given, it is only too apparent that the revivalist concept of women is not only an injustice against women, it is also a travesty of the truth that religion embodies. Indeed by denying women their humanity, the revivalists have de-spiritualised life itself.

We should not allow life to be de-spiritualised in this way. This is why both women and men must be prepared to defend the right of women to realise their humanity. For in the end what is at stake is the right of all of us to be truly human. If we do not have the courage to commit ourselves to this challenge we would be condemned forever as the consorts of cowardice.

Explanatory note

The article has appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (Vol. 7:12).

WHIPPING: REFLECTIONS ON THE SYARIAH AND THE QURAN

It is a pity that some of the *uiama* and certain politicians, youth leaders and students have chosen to respond to criticisms of the introduction of whipping for criminal offences under the Syariah, by accusing the critics of 'heresy' and of betraying Islam and insulting the religion.

The response of these individuals, in a sense, reveals some of the major flaws in their whole approach to Islam. They are quick to label their critics. Worse, they often demand punitive action against them which exposes their own total lack of tolerance of views different from theirs. It also suggests a highly authoritarian streak in their outlook on Islam. They are simply not willing to discuss issues rationally or to analyse ideas sensibly.

Though this is the typical attitude of an ever-expanding community of mainly young Muslims who see themselves as the champions of the Faith, we should go on trying to persuade them to reflect on Islam and to ponder upon various dimensions of their own commitment to the religion. This modest contribution to the on-going discussion on the Syariah is part of that endeavour.

Education

To start with, let us assume that it is proper to impose whipping for consuming alcohol in public and for illicit sex and other such crimes. Before implementing such laws, shouldn't a *Majlis Ugama* organise a systematic campaign to educate the Muslim public of the adverse consequences of alcohol consumption or illicit sex for the spiritual development of the human being, the moral climate of society and indeed, the physical well-being of the individual? Such an education campaign should appeal to intelligence and rationality and should be supported by cogent arguments.

After all, education is the way of the Quran. This is why the Quran advises and exhorts and sometimes admonishes. Meting out punishment is not even a secondary aim of the Quran. Only a small

portion of the legal prescriptions in the Quran deals with types of penalties for specific crimes. And even the legal prescriptions constitute less than one-twentieth of the total injunctions in the Quran! As the Muslim scholar, Said Ramadan once put it, "The major portion of the Quran is, as with every Holy Book, a code of Divine exhortation and moral principles."

That the Quran seeks primarily to raise moral consciousness through persuasion is borne out clearly by the verses that deal with the consumption of alcohol. Sura Al-Baqarah: 219 for instance observes, "They ask you about intoxicants and gambling; say, "there is gross evil in them, and some benefits for the people. However, their evil outweighs their benefit."

The approach is to try to convince people by conceding that while there are some advantages, the disadvantages are greater. This is not an example of a rigid, superficial black and white morality. In the other verses on alcohol, Sura Al-Nisaa: 43 and Sura Al-Maa'idah: 90-91, the Quran warns Muslims against performing prayers under the influence of intoxicants and advises them to abstain from abominations like intoxicants. The Quranic style contrasts glaringly with the fire-and-brimstone stance of some *ulama*.

Justice and Equality

It is not just in their inability to understand why social education should precede the implementation of certain laws that the *ulama* have been disappointing. They have also failed to consider whether the canons of justice would be violated if they hastened to punish the guilty. It is a cardinal principle of Islamic jurisprudence that the strong should not escape the law simply because they are strong.

This principle is closely inter-twined with one of the fundamentals of Islam, namely, the equality of all human beings in the eyes of the law. So important is this teaching in Islam that if there is a likelihood that justice will not be done, a Ruler or administrator is advised to defer the implementation of a particular regulation. Indeed, there is an authentic hadith (saying of the Prophet Muhammad) that warns Muslims against implementing laws in such a way that only the poor and powerless are punished while the rich and powerful are

protected. It is significant that the 21 year-old worker who was sentenced to whipping by the Kelantan Syariah Court for consuming alcohol in public also asked that the punishment be meted out fairly regardless of social status.

This is an important point to consider because the existing structure of Muslim society makes it difficult to apply Islamic laws with equal fairness to all strata and all individuals. The recognised position and established status of certain dignitaries would undoubtedly exempt them from punishment, however apparent their guilt. This would make a mockery of the law. It would be a travesty of justice itself.

Even as things stand, there is an abundance of evidence to show that with the exception of a few negligible instances, the vast majority of those who have been penalised for *khalwat* (close proximity) and *zina* (adultery) come from the weaker segment of society. And yet we know that those in the upper echelons are not all angels and saints!

Surely the *ulama* must be concerned about this – if they cherish justice and fairness. How then can they, without a twinge of conscience, implement laws which they claim will uphold justice?

Syariah and Critical Analysis

So far we have analysed the implications and possible consequences of enforcing certain forms of punishment for certain crimes. But what about the forms of punishment themselves? Are they justified from the perspective of a rational, progressive approach to Islam?

The *ulama* and a number of young Muslims claim that punishments like whipping for consuming alcohol and fines for *khalwat* should not be questioned by anyone since they are all part of the Syariah. The Syariah, they argue, is sacred.

The Syariah, which means a “way” includes not only beliefs but also rituals, rules, practices and laws pertaining to both the private and public life of a Muslim. As a body of ideas, it developed over a long period of time and is, on the whole, quite comprehensive. However, it

is wrong to regard each and every aspect of the Syariah as divine. Of course, those laws within the Syariah which are derived directly from the Quran are part of Divine revelation. But a lot of the other laws, rules and practices in the Syariah were actually developed and elaborated by jurists and administrators on the basis of their own interpretation of Quranic prescriptions and more important, their understanding of hadiths and the life of the Prophet Muhammad, apart from the edicts of the illustrious Caliphs of antiquity.

There is nothing sacred about these laws and regulations which the learned jurists and *ulama* of the early and medieval periods of Islam had formulated. Like other scholars, these men, pious though they were, could not transcend the limitations imposed by their epoch in history. They made laws guided by their wisdom and by the quantum of knowledge available to them. Indeed, some of these jurists like Abu Hanifa and Ahmad Ibn-Hanbal were humble enough to recognise the time-bound character of their laws.

The punishment for consuming alcohol in public, like the penalties for *khalwat* are part of the multitude of laws forged in the course of Islamic history. They are not sacred or divine. The Quran does not suggest any form of punishment for consuming alcohol. There is not even the concept of *khalwat* as a sexual sin in the Quran, let alone penalties for it!

There are many other elements in the Syariah pertaining to education, health, commerce, taxation, foreign relations and of course the position of women which have little direct relationship to ideas embodied in the Quran. It can even be argued that in some cases, Syariah concepts have developed in total variance with the spirit of the Quran.

For instance, the Quran has enunciated the payment of *zakat* as a basic principle of Islam because of its commitment to redistributive justice. But it does not lay out a specific rate of payment. The rate and the mode of taxation have, however, turned out to be unjust to agriculturalists partly because the classical jurists did not give enough attention to the economic and sociological factors which influenced the Prophet's implementation of the *zakat* in his time and environment.

This is the danger of blind, fanatical adherence to the Syariah. It will not only result in grave injustices but also retard creative thought and intellectual growth. This is why for centuries now many wise Muslim thinkers have called for critical analysis and reflection on various aspects of the Syariah. They want certain laws especially those conditioned by the customs and practices of a particular age, to be re-interpreted and re-formulated in accordance with the spirit of the times.

Abdul Rahman Ibn-Khaldun, perhaps the first sociologist in history, was one of the earliest to demand such a re-appraisal. He, like the others, felt that a major portion of Syariah laws and practices had to be subjected to vigorous re-evaluation through *ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* in essence is the endeavour to re-interpret existing laws and to formulate new rules guided by Quranic principles and the example of the Prophet.

A Muslim academic, Subhi Mahmasani has even argued that, "the closure of *ijtihad* violates the provisions and concepts of Islamic jurisprudence and condemns all Muslims to permanent stagnation and exclusion from the application of the laws of evolution. It imposes upon them to maintain the same conditions prevailing at the time of ancient jurists, and to follow the pattern they had set for themselves and for the Muslims of their days and the days that will follow until eternity. The error, all the error, lies in blind imitation and restraint of thought. What is right is to allow freedom of interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, and to liberate thought and make it capable of true scientific creativeness". Another well-known Muslim intellectual Asaf Fyzee has asked rhetorically, "By the relentless pursuit of logic and the critical method, history, economics, politics and modern law, can we not forge a new critique of the Syariah which will galvanise society into a healthier fabric?"

The Quran and Reinterpretation

More than a critique of just the Syariah, some of the noblest Muslim minds throughout the ages have pleaded for a deeper, more profound relationship with the Quran itself. Deeper reflection is imperative since the Quran embodies underlying values and meanings which cannot be understood if one merely concentrates on a formal

literal interpretation. For there are undeniably specific responses in the Quran to concrete historical situations which will reveal their universal, ethical principles only if one is prepared to probe and ponder.

The reason for this is not difficult to comprehend. The universal, eternal message in the Quran, valid as it is for all times, was after all conveyed through a particular people in a particular context. It therefore has a socio-historical dimension to it. This is why the Quran abounds with metaphors and symbols, laws and lores, ideas and practices drawn from that sociological setting. It had to be that way. For if God's eternal message to the world did not have a context, a setting, it would have been nothing more than a lifeless litany of abstract principles. It would have been detached from reality, devoid of power, of emotion, like some declaration on civil liberties. In a nutshell then the universal truth could become a living truth only because it was embodied in the flesh and blood of a living community. If it had not touched the heart of that seventh century community, the message could not have reached the hearts of later generations.

But it would be the height of folly for later generations to be perpetually trapped in the rules and regulations, the penalties and punishments of a particular historical context. It would amount to a betrayal of the real meaning and purpose of the Quran, of the evolutionary, dynamic character of Islam. Muslims have the outstanding example of the second Caliph of Islam himself, Saiyyidina Omar Ibn Khatab, to convince them that they should not be fettered by the past if it means sacrificing justice in the present.

Omar had, on a number of occasions, reinterpreted Quranic legal prescriptions in order to achieve their real purpose: fairness and justice. He decreed that those who had recently embraced Islam should not receive assistance from the *zakat* funds even though this is one of the categories specified in the Quran. His argument was that in the Prophet's time, the converts underwent a great deal of persecution and were therefore entitled to some help. But Islam was now firmly established and had grown into an Empire. If the converts continued to be given assistance in the same way, it would appear that Islam was buying new adherents.

Similarly, he adopted a different approach to the proprietary rights of the inhabitants of new lands which had come under Islamic jurisdiction, from what the Quran advocates in Sura Anfal: 41. Instead of setting aside a portion of the spoils of war for the conquerors, their relatives, orphans and the needy, Omar allowed the original inhabitants to retain their lands on condition they paid certain taxes. Again, the overwhelming consideration was justice.

Among those who realised that if this spirit of reform was lost, Islam would ossify were the mystics and philosophers. The greatest of them all, Jallaluddin Rumi, lamented the obsession with forms and symbols, rules and prescriptions conditioned by a particular historical epoch. He stressed the importance of the underlying spirit of Islam which gave the religion its universal, humanitarian character.

Ibn Taimmiyah was yet another thinker who espoused the re-interpretation of some of the Quranic laws which deal with societal relations, through the practice of *ijtihad*. A more courageous and committed advocate of reform was the 18th century theologian and mystic, Shah Waliullah. He "realised that a changing society could not forever be bound to old rules and values." He "preached that every age must seek its own interpretation of the Quran and the traditions. Indeed, one of the major causes of Muslim decay, he believed, was rigid conformity to interpretation made in other ages."

That rules including modes of punishment, will have to change and evolve with the passage of time was also the position of the famous reformer, Sayyid Jamaluddin Al Afghani. His disciple Muhammad Abduh, went even further and suggested that specific practices sanctioned by the Quran like polygamy should be subjected to fresh examination in the light of contemporary consciousness. He was convinced that the spirit of the Quran was in harmony with monogamy.

Like his famous predecessors, Muhammad Iqbal, the spiritual founder of Pakistan, was also dedicated to the progressive reinterpretation of Islam. According to one writer, Iqbal held "that the law revealed by a Prophet takes special notice of the habits, ways and peculiarities of the people to whom he is specially sent. For building up a universal Syariah, the Prophet accentuates the principles underlying

the social life of all mankind and applies them to concrete cases in the light of the specific habit of the people immediately before him. The Syariah values (*ahkam*) resulting from this application (e.g. rules relating to penalties for crimes) are in a sense specific to that people and 'since their observance is not an end in itself, they cannot be enforced in the case of future generations'."

Kalam Azad, one of the most distinguished Islamic scholars that this century has known, made the same point with greater intellectual clarity. He differentiated the spirit of Islam from its outward manifestations. The spirit is of primary importance; the outward manifestations of secondary significance. Differing rules and regulations belong to the latter category.

Applied to some of the legal prescriptions in the Quran, this would mean that while adultery or illicit sex would always be wrong, the penalty of a 100 lashes could be subjected to re-appraisal since it is a mere mode of punishment. Likewise, theft would always be wrong from an Islamic point of view; the punishment for it, however, the cutting of the thief's hand, is that sort of rule which is clearly conditioned by a specific socio-historical situation.

Indeed, the Iranian intellectual, Ali Shariati regarded fundamental questions of right and wrong whether in relation to sex or alcohol, or theft or corruption, or exploitation or oppression as the essence of God's laws. These — and not mere modes of punishment — were the eternal, unchanging laws of God, the real, universal Syariah. That corruption or greed or oppression when it becomes widespread, must lead eventually to the destruction of society is, in the eyes of Shariati and the other progressive thinkers discussed in this article, a divine law. Similarly, it is part of God's law that environmental degradation over a long period of time must generate adverse consequences for the human family. That promiscuity or alcoholism will, in the end, erode the moral basis of the social order would also rank among God's laws.

Instead of seeing God's laws in terms of such fundamentals, the *ulama* and a segment of our Muslim youths have reduced them to modes of punishment, penalties and prohibitions. In a sense, this is not surprising at all. Their attitude is symptomatic of the current emphasis

upon rituals, symbols, forms and practices in Islamic resurgence. Since penalties and prohibitions tend to be particularistic unlike values and principles which are universal, this approach to the religion helps to project an exclusive Muslim identity, consonant with the overall thrust of Islamic resurgence in many parts of the world.

It is because of their narrow, superficial view of Islam that these *ulama* and youths display so much fury when a certain mode of punishment is criticised but hardly react when a basic freedom is curbed. This is what happened in the recent amendments to the Official Secrets Act. The *ulama* in particular were deafeningly silent. Neither have the *ulama* – through their association – shown any concern for financial scandals like BMF or the Cooperatives or EPF-Makuwasa. The *ulama* as a group have not spoken up on behalf of the poor either. The pain of poverty does not move them as easily as the sin of *khalwat*. Even the moral decadence that they often arraign against has not engaged their intellectual energies for they have yet to produce a serious analysis of the problem.

If the *ulama*, and what is more worrying, a segment of the Muslim youth population which shares their world-view, continue in this manner, there is no hope of Islam emerging as a dynamic, creative force for the well-being of our multi-religious nation as a whole. For the fossilised dogmatism that they represent will only foster a static, stultifying atmosphere which will kill every new blossom of thought.

Explanatory note

This essay appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (February/March 1987).

THE SYARIAH AND ITS APPLICABILITY IN MODERN SOCIETY

It would not be in the interest of the Muslim community to enforce the Syariah in its entirety without subjecting various aspects of the Syariah to a comprehensive, systematic evaluation guided by the values and principles of the Quran. For the Syariah today includes not just the values, principles and laws in the Quran and those aspects of the Sunnah which conform to the Quran but also a whole variety of other laws, rules and regulations. The Syariah (or Islamic law) embraces Ijma (consensus of opinion within the Muslim community), Qiyas (judgement upon juristic analogy) and even supplementary sources of law such as Al-Istihsan (rules that require deviation), Al-Istislah (judgment motivated by public interest) and Al-Urf (rules linked to custom and usage of a particular society).

While there is a great deal in this corpus of laws which would be in harmony with eternal notions of justice embodied in the Quran and the needs of modern society, there are also a number of injunctions which would undoubtedly violate the well-being of humankind.

One, the Syariah provides legitimacy for the centralization of power and authority with the Ruler. This goes against the spirit of the Quran which is more inclined towards the freedom of the individual and his right to determine his own destiny.

Two, in international relations, the Syariah divides nations on the basis of Dar-ul-Islam and Dar-ul-Harb. In the Quran, there is a more universal concept of nations and peoples as indicated in Sura al-hujurat: 13.

Three, the Syariah allows for a strict classification of non-Muslim minorities in an Islamic State. The Quran views the rights and responsibilities of the human being in a much more universal manner.

Four, the Syariah in its interpretation of how Zakat should be implemented has, in a sense, justified economic and social inequities. The Quranic conception of Zakat which is linked to needs and surplus wealth is much more egalitarian.

Five, the Syariah has also legitimized restricting the public and political roles of women. The Quran, however, does not prohibit women from participating actively in the political and social affairs of a community.

Six, the Syariah has, through the centuries, developed a conservative, punitive attitude towards sexual improprieties which has no basis in the Quran. For instance, it prescribes the death penalty for adultery while the Quran does not regard it as a crime that deserves capital punishment.

Seven, similarly the Syariah has formulated penalties for Khalwat. There is no conception of Khalwat as a sexual crime in the Quran.

Eight, in the same vein, the Syariah lays out certain modes of punishment for consuming liquor in public or eating in public during the fasting month. The Quran, on the other hand, while regarding consumption of liquor as wrong, does not prescribe any punishment for it. Neither does the Quran – which exhorts Muslims to observe the fast – suggest any punishment for those who fail to do so.

Finally, the Syariah is known to condone the imposition of the death penalty upon the apostate. In the Quran, it is crystal clear that there is no form of temporal punishment for apostasy.

From the examples cited, it is obvious that the Syariah has developed in such a manner that it has become a body of conservative, orthodox, dogmatic laws and regulations. The Syariah as it is today tends to exaggerate the 'penal code' dimension of Islamic law.

There are various reasons why the Syariah contradicts the more humane, universal spirit of the Quran.

- a) The limitations inherent in the corpus of knowledge available to the ancient and medieval ulama who developed Islamic law.
- b) The social structures that prevailed in the earlier periods which conditioned the thinking of the great ulama of the past.
- c) The ideology of the ruling elites and the tendency of the ulama to adjust their fatwas (rulings) to the ruling ideology.

- d) The vested interests of both rulers and the ulama.
- e) The stagnation and decline of Islamic civilization itself from the 13th century onwards as a result of the corruption and decadence of the elites and external aggression. This gave rise to Islamic conservatism reflected most vividly in the approach to the Syariah.

To liberate the Syariah from its conservative inertia, there is an urgent need to emphasise the universal, eternal values and principles of the Quran. The universal, eternal values and principles of the Quran, in turn, can only be understood if we refuse to be enslaved to a scriptural interpretation of the Quran. Likewise, the formal legalism which is part of the conservative approach to the Quran should be rejected in toto. It is this approach which has reduced the Quran and Islam to a legalistic doctrine. In truth, the Quran's real aim is to establish the spiritual basis of human civilization and to raise the moral consciousness of the human being. Eternal values and principles are enunciated for this purpose.

The Muslim community must try to evolve new laws in line with these eternal values and principles. In this task, it could adopt a two-fold approach. First, Muslims should evaluate their tradition of laws to determine what should be retained and what should be discarded. Among the worthwhile legal norms from the Syariah which could be retained, for example, would be a rule of evidence related to rape cases. In Islamic law, the rape victim's character and background should not be adduced as evidence to establish either her guilt or her innocence. There are other examples too which point to a greater humaneness in certain aspects of the Syariah compared to Common Law.

Second, Muslims should explore the whole gamut of secular laws and institutions to find out how some of these do in fact harmonize with Quranic values and principles. Indeed, some of the economic and political institutions which have evolved in the West in the last 200 years do greater justice to certain universal values and principles in the Quran than what the medieval Syariah contains. Many of the features of the cooperative movement, for instance, are in line with Quranic economic principles of cooperation, equity, individual rights, etc. Similarly, the concept of the independence of the judiciary, or of the

right of the people to elect and dismiss their leaders – ideas which developed their institutional character in the West – are in complete harmony with Quranic values.

There is nothing wrong in absorbing institutions and practices from the West or any other civilization. After all, the West had absorbed a host of ideas on jurisprudence, government, politics, commerce, science and even on the care of the sick and wounded in wars from Islamic civilization.

It is this open, accommodative attitude towards knowledge, whatever its source, while using the Quran as a framework, that the contemporary champions of Islam seem to lack. Only if there is such an attitude will Islamic law become a creative, dynamic force in society.

The question is: how can we promote a progressive, dynamic, creative approach towards Islam in Malaysia? To start with, there is a need to make Malaysians, especially our Muslim population, more aware of the writings of progressive thinkers in the religion. The media can play a big role in this. At the same time, an effort must be made to translate these progressive writings into Bahasa Malaysia. There is a tremendous paucity of such works in Bahasa. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and the universities can help in this. Most of all, however, individuals and groups must emerge within the Muslim middle-class who are prepared to play the role of a third force within the community – that is, a force that is intellectually and ideologically distinct from the conservative, orthodox group on the one hand, and the unthinking, uncritical devotees of Western culture on the other. This third force must have the courage to speak up and to propagate its views.

Explanatory note

This article was presented as a paper at a forum on the Syariah organised by an inter-faith group in Petaling Jaya in July 1987.

THE SATANIC VERSES

TO KILL OR NOT TO KILL?

Muslims are angry with Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Their anger is justified. The book is blasphemous. It mocks their religion. It insults their faith. It ridicules their sacral personalities.

The Satanic Verses does this through the thinly-veiled guise of fiction and fantasy. But through the veil some of the contours of events and incidents in Islamic history are only too visible. Events however have been distorted and incidents have been concocted to suit the author's vile imagination.

The Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) is alleged to have abandoned his wife and son in the wilderness and is described as 'the bastard'. Salman talks of a Prophet Mahound – an obvious reference to the Prophet Muhammad (May the peace and blessings of God be upon him) – who is presented as an unscrupulous manipulator. Mahound, incidentally, was the name used in certain circles within medieval Christianity to depict a false prophet, a sort of devil-god.

Salman Rushdie then goes on to denigrate some of the Prophet Muhammad's companions. One of them is called a 'bum' while Bilal, the slave that the Prophet freed, one of the noblest characters in early Islam, is described disparagingly as "an enormous black monster". The Prophet's wives are "reincarnated" in the form of the "whores of the curtain" (ka'abah) and their activities are then given an obscene, vulgar twist.

It is not just Muslim theologians, intellectuals, politicians and administrators who have condemned the book. The Catholic Bishop of New York felt that *The Satanic Verses* was insulting and insensitive to Muslims. A Protestant Bishop in England expressed similar sentiments. It is significant that the Chief Rabbi of Britain, who is a Member of the House of Lords was also critical of Salman's diabolical novel. A couple of Hindu scholars in India thought that the book was sacrilegious from a Muslim point of view.

In fact, *The Satanic Verses* should not have been published at all. This was the advice given by the Indian editorial adviser to Penguin, the publisher of the book. Khushwant Singh, a Sikh by faith, and one of India's most highly respected journalists, told Penguin "that the Prophet had been made to be a small-time imposter in the novel and that if the author could not see that the work would cause trouble he was out of touch with the Indian reality." It is a pity that his advice was ignored.

The views of Khushwant and a number of other non-Muslims in both the East and the West go to show that it is wrong to see *The Satanic Verses* controversy as a battle between Islam, on the one hand, and the West and the non-Muslims on the other. This is how certain elements in the Muslim world have tried to depict the controversy.

There are a lot of non-Muslims who are unhappy with a book like *The Satanic Verses* because they know that freedom of expression does not mean the freedom to blaspheme, the freedom to spread calumny. The right to free speech should not be used – or rather abused – to propagate malicious lies, to pour filth upon the faith of a people. This is one instance that underscores the importance of exercising freedom with responsibility. Freedom, like other rights, should be guided by eternal spiritual values such as truth and honesty. A writer who is inclined to fantasize, however talented he may be, does not have the right to be irresponsible! This is something that certain sections of the Western media have failed to understand.

The way Salman Rushdie has abused his freedom and his talent is, in a sense, a reflection of that trend towards rendering everything in life profane which has gained strength within certain circles in the West. There is no notion of sacredness anymore. Irreverence has crept into family ties to such an extent that any call to respect parents or elders is treated with contempt. The defilement of nature, the abuse of man's physical environment, is part of the same profaneness. At the root of this profaneness within the family and towards nature is the desecration of God. When we are no longer capable of showing reverence towards the Divine, we begin to heap scorn upon prophets and saints, upon sacred texts and holy scriptures. We have no qualms about using that four-letter word when talking of Christ. We have no compunctions about posing in a bikini beside a statue of the Buddha.

Seen from this larger perspective – a perspective which emphasises the sacred core of human existence – *The Satanic Verses* is a pathetic attempt to dirty life itself. Because it is an act of sacrilege, Muslims in Britain did the right thing in trying to take Salman, the publisher and the distributor of the book to Court. Though the law on blasphemy in Britain is confined to the Anglican faith, a magistrate's court will now hear the petition against *The Satanic Verses*. As Britain becomes more and more of a multi-religious society, its laws should encompass the interests of its diverse populace.

Apart from court action, Muslim groups should have also prepared a rational critique of the book and compelled Penguin to publish it. All the mischievous distortions and the invidious insinuations could have been exposed. Even the ulterior motives of the author which are not difficult to fathom could have been laid bare.

This would have been a better approach to adopt than burning the book or agitating for its banning. Burning a book, as someone once said, is the best form of review. Similarly, everytime a book is banned its popularity soars to the skies.

What is really despicable, however, is threatening to kill the author! Killing Salman Rushdie will not eliminate the desire among others to achieve fame and fortune by committing sacrilege against this or that religion. The murder of Salman will not restore respect for the sacred among those who defile God and man. It will not promote a truthful, sincere attitude towards Islam amongst those in the West or the East who have not ceased to malign the religion.

On the contrary, killing Salman will only increase the hatred and antagonism towards Islam. It will lend credence to the fallacious view that Islam advocates violence, that it will not hesitate to exterminate its critics. Worse, those who are spiteful of Islam will conclude – wrongly – that the religion lacks the ballast of withstand the assault of a single blasphemous work.

If anything, the threat to kill Salman has served to enhance his standing, strengthen his image, in certain circles. Salman does not deserve to become a hero. It is indeed ironical that the man who is

making Salman a hero of sorts is Ayatollah Khomeini himself. For it was he who first ordered that the author of *The Satanic Verses* should be killed and offered a cash reward to anyone who would carry out his command.

Besides, how can one order the killing of an individual who has blasphemed Islam when we are advised in the Quran to conduct discourse, in a rational manner, even with those who repudiate God or associate God with other partners? Associating God with other partners – *Shirik* – is, in a sense, the ultimate sin in Islam.

It has, of course, been argued that Salman is an apostate and should therefore be put to death. This again is wrong from a Quranic standpoint. The Quran does not prescribe capital punishment for the apostate. It is said for instance in the Holy Book, "O mankind, the Truth has indeed come to you from your Lord. Then whoso follows the guidance, follows it only for the good of his self, and whoso errs does so only to his own detriment. I am not appointed a keeper over you." (10:109)

What this means is that Salman Rushdie has erred to his own detriment. We have every right to criticise and condemn him. More than that, we have a duty to show him how he has erred and if possible, bring him back to the straight path. But no one – and certainly not Khomeini – has the right to put him to death.

On this issue, it is not Khomeini that represents the genuine spirit of Islam. The pronouncements of Professor Seyyed Hussein Nasr of Georgetown University in Washington D.C. and Dr Zaki Badawi, Chairman of the Mosques Committee of Britain reflect the compassion and justice which is the essence of Islam. Both of them have condemned *The Satanic Verses* in unequivocal terms but they have also criticised vehemently the order to kill the author.

The future of Islam – and the future of the other great religions too – depends on whether such rational, balanced thinking can retain the allegiance of the faithful, in the midst of all the pressures from different types of fanaticism. For in the ultimate analysis, Salman Rushdie represents a certain form of fanaticism against Islam just as

Ayatollah Khomeini represents fanaticism of a certain kind within Islam.

Explanatory note

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AN ISLAMIC STATE – THE SOLUTION?

Since the advent of colonialism and the imposition of western state-systems upon non-western societies, Muslims in many parts of the world have been aspiring to create 'Islamic states'. The idea of an Islamic state is strong in the Muslim mind because values related to politics and administration are part of the Quranic revelation. Besides, the Prophet Muhammad is perhaps the only one of the great prophets in history who succeeded in establishing a state in his own life-time. Also, over the centuries, Islamic civilisation developed laws, rules and administrative edicts apart from public policies and programmes, which lent further credence to the idea of an Islamic state as an integral aspect of Islamic theology.

In Malaysia, demands for an Islamic state are about 40 years old. However, in the last 10 years or so, this demand has become much stronger. The failure of existing government policies to meet the aspirations of the majority of the people, rapid urbanisation, new class dichotomies, the dedication and commitment of a segment of the Malay middle-class to the Islamic cause, deep disillusionment with modernisation and development within this class, disenchantment with western ideologies, the rise of Islam in international politics and the impact of Iran, among a whole host of other factors are mainly responsible for the vehemence of the demand. One should also give due weight to the desire to express and enhance one's exclusive identity, in an ethnically-divided society like ours, as one of the reasons.

Right from the beginning PAS has been the principal vehicle in this struggle for an Islamic state. By an Islamic state, PAS means a state based upon the Quran and Sunnah. It will be a state distinguished by Islamic laws, Islamic politics, Islamic economics, Islamic culture, Islamic education and indeed Islamic institutions and ideals in every sphere of society.

The Islamic state that PAS envisages will be a traditionalist, conservative state. For it is a state that will stick closely to forms, practices and ideas which have evolved through time. It will be governed by precepts and rules sanctioned by traditional religious

authority. It will provide literal interpretation to the ideas and laws contained in the Quran. It will be a state that is dominated by formal-legalism. It will therefore be suspicious of reason and innovation.

While PAS's Islamic state may result in a Muslim leadership that is more sincerely committed to certain moral values, it is quite likely that, on the whole, it will be detrimental to the well-being of the Muslim community as a whole.

Given PAS's dogmatic interpretation of the scriptures, Muslims with other viewpoints of what a good Islamic society means could be excluded from the political process. This could lead to the concentration of power in the hands of the Ulama. Authoritarianism would then become the order of the day.

In the economic sphere too, PAS's approach may not be conducive to solving the fundamental challenges of rural poverty, widening income gaps and the paucity of industrial and commercial skills facing the vast majority of Muslims. For the remedies that PAS has often proposed like adhering to zakat regulations and banning riba do not deal with the basic question of the structure of economic power. Unless there is equitable redistribution of economic power in the interest of the ordinary human being, the fundamental challenges will remain.

Similarly, by dividing knowledge and science into Islamic and non-Islamic categories, PAS may be retarding the intellectual growth and development of the Muslim community. For it is important to imbibe knowledge from whatever source as long as it is for the good of humanity, if progress is to be achieved.

Likewise, by excluding women from active participation in public affairs, PAS has committed a great injustice against women. For women cannot mould harmonious families if they cannot help shape happy communities.

As far as non-Muslim communities are concerned, PAS's Islam will perhaps provide firmer guarantees to the practice of their languages and certain aspects of their cultures. This is because the concept of

protecting languages and cultures is, in a sense, embodied in the Quran itself. But the scope for non-Muslim participation in politics will be severely limited. Neither will they have any role of significance in the administrative set-up of the country, or in its judicial processes or in its armed forces. What this means is that non-Muslims will have very little control over their own political destinies in PAS's Islamic state.

Even when it comes to meeting other major contemporary challenges, PAS's Islamic state will be quite inadequate. It will not be able to deal with the problem of the dominance of the economic, technological, cultural and intellectual resources of the world by a few. And yet this challenge – the challenge of modern-day imperialism – is a crucial issue facing humankind. PAS has not even begun to understand the impact of science and technology upon social and economic relations and cultural patterns in contemporary society. Neither can PAS's Islamic state handle the complex consequences arising from the interaction of diverse cultures which has no parallel in past history. The 'state' of Medina which is often cited as an example of inter-ethnic harmony, was essentially a pact between communities and therefore did not have to address itself to the task of evolving a common basis for unity in the midst of tremendous cultural diversity.

This is why instead of pursuing its conservative, traditionalist version of an Islamic state, PAS should try to develop a progressive approach to Islam. Progressive Islam will be more concerned with the underlying spirit of the religion, rather than its outward forms and labels. It will emphasise the essence, the fundamentals of Islam.

Thus, it will develop faith in God and consciousness of God into a total outlook that influences the human being's relationship with everything in the universe. Consciousness of the oneness of God (Tauhid) for instance, will be transformed into a continuous struggle to accomplish the unity of humankind. The unity of humankind, in turn, will mean fighting against ethnic and religious, class and caste, gender and state dichotomies.

Similarly, progressive Islam will give a great deal of attention to the position of the human being as the Vicegerent of God (Khalifah Allah). It is his rights and responsibilities that will be stressed. His identity will be defined not by what he professes but by what he does.

And of his deeds nothing would be more sacred than his willingness to uphold justice and to oppose injustice.

In order to give concrete meaning to this role of the human being there must be total allegiance to all the universal, ethical values and principles embodied in the Quran. These would encompass not just freedom and equality and fraternity but also love and compassion and moderation and restraint. These eternal values in turn, would be reflected in certain unchanging principles of social living. That concentration of wealth is unjust and oppression and corruption must lead inevitably to the downfall of their perpetrators are two such principles. That individual ownership can never be abolished totally and that differences in attainment and accomplishment will always persist are two other such principles.

If PAS approached Islam in terms of these eternal values and principles, guided by other fundamental ideas like God-consciousness and man's vicegerency, then it would be able to provide solutions to the problems confronting both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It will be able to relate more easily to the non-Muslims since some of these concepts like God-consciousness and eternal values have parallels in most of their spiritual traditions. For these concepts are, in fact, part of humankind's common heritage. They are part of our perennial philosophy.

Indeed, once PAS views Islam in this genuinely universal fashion, it will be eager to absorb knowledge from other traditions, both spiritual and non-spiritual. For progressive Islam believes in active interaction with other religions and philosophies.

As we encourage progressive thinking within Islam, so we develop progressive approaches in all the other great cultures and religions in Malaysia. Among the Buddhists, Taoists, Confucianists, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs and others, there must be a concerted, determined endeavour to establish the essence, the fundamentals of their respective social philosophies. If all the religions in our country become more committed to justice and freedom and compassion and are less obsessed with rites and rituals then they will discover their commonalities. For it is true that it is only when basic spiritual values become real, living values that God reveals its oneness to humankind. Only then will the

various religions realize that at the level of fundamental values and principles and in their conception of the meaning and purpose of life and the role of the human being in it, there are so many striking similarities – similarities that are far more enduring than all the superficial differences that keep them apart.

It is obvious from our analysis that what we need is not an Islamic state of the type that PAS envisages. Nor do we need a state founded upon a particular religion – or a variety of religions for that matter.

The alternative to such a state however is not a social order that is divorced from eternal values and principles, that is divorced from any spiritual conception of the human being, that is divorced from a conception of God as a living, moving force in history. When the collective consciousness of a society negates God and the spiritual basis of human existence it gets into an unending, ever-widening moral crisis – a crisis that eventually expresses itself in chaos and confusion in almost every sphere of life. Western society is slowly beginning to discover this truth. It is a discovery that began with the ecological crisis which showed the intellectual sceptics of the West that repudiation of the sacred in life must lead to a loss of reverence for all relationships, including man's relationship with nature.

This is why at the heart of our ideal society will be a profound consciousness of God which will express itself in progressive values and principles that will guide us in our sojourn on earth.

Explanatory note

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RELIGION: UNITY OR DISUNITY?

If all of us realize that it is not the faith that we profess but the deed that we perform that determines the depth of our goodness then religion has a role in nation-building. For if one's deed becomes the criterion of one's devotion to God the label on one's brow will lose its primary significance. When that happens, the superficial differences between religions will cease to divide people.

After all, every religion equates real piety with service to human-kind. In the Quran for instance it is expressed in this way: "And show him the two highways? But he maketh no haste on the path that is steep And what will explain to thee the path that is steep? – it is freeing the bondman; Or the giving of food in a day of privation, To the orphan with claims of relationship, Or to the indigent in the dust. Then will he be of those who believe and enjoin patience (constancy and self-restraint) and enjoins Deeds of kindness and compassion. Such are the companions of the Right Hand." (Sura Balad 10-18) The Buddha too once noted, "No man is noble by birth, No man is ignoble by birth, Man is ignoble by his own deeds". Needless to say, the same is true of Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism and other religions.

However, before good deeds can unite the adherents of different religions, there must be some common understanding of what constitutes good deeds. For such understanding to emerge there will have to be certain guiding values and ideals which all religions are prepared to uphold.

It is indeed remarkable that as far as the eternal, spiritual values are concerned, all the great religions have a lot in common. It is not just a question of each religion believing in truth, justice, freedom, equality, dignity, love, restraint and other such values. Even in more specific areas like the concept of unity in the Universe, the idea that man has a spiritual origin and a spiritual destiny, the view that the human being is a single, integrated entity, the attitude towards nature, the repugnance towards unbridled materialism, the emphasis upon moderate living, the importance given to the development of moral values in the individual, and the significance attached to the family, there are many outstanding

similarities among the various religions. Equally important, all religions perceive ethical principles as transcendental.

To reinforce faith in these shared values, it is crucial that religions establish constant dialogue. Sincere dialogue between the different religions is one of the most urgent challenges of the day. The time has come for the Muslim community as the major religious community in the country to open up the avenues for serious inter-religious communication. This is in line with Islamic teachings since Islam is opposed to sectarianism and encourages the quest for common principles inspired by a love for God and humanity.

As different religions discover their common values it is only logical that they examine their social environment to find out why these ideals have not been translated into realities. If all religions uphold the dignity of man shouldn't they act against poverty, hunger, ignorance and exploitation which violate man's dignity? If all religions believe in freedom, shouldn't they resist oppression and the suppression of the rights of the human being? If all religions cherish honesty and integrity, shouldn't they try to expose and eliminate corruption and greed? If all religions espouse the unity of humankind shouldn't they oppose chauvinism and communalism?

In fact, it is only through social action directed against the grave injustices that confront us, that the different religions will discover common goals and common objectives. It is only by saying "No" to the inhumanity around us that we will learn to say "Yes" to the humanity within us.

This is why the different religions should formulate common programmes for social action which will bring them face to face with the sufferings of neglected fishermen in the rural areas and the miseries of harrassed squatters in the urban areas. Working with the poor and downtrodden is after all the essence of religion. The life and mission of every great Prophet testifies to this. For every religion advocates the liberation of the human being not just from his inner bondages of lust and greed and hatred but also from the outer shackles of poverty, exploitation and oppression.

Once religion begins to focus upon common values and social action our perception of what God is, and what his message to humankind really means, will also undergo a significant transformation. God will be seen as the one, same God, the God that unites, not the God that divides, humankind. His message will be understood as the one same eternal message, a message that seeks to guide each and everyone of us as we try to realize the humanity within us – which is, in fact, the essence of our being.

What this means is that God will no longer be the God of this or that tribe. The Divine Message will no longer be an exclusive truth owned and controlled by this or that community.

This will lead inevitably to a situation where the external trappings of religion – the rituals, the symbols and ceremonies – will cease to be as important as they are today. For it is when religion is perceived in exclusive perspectives that it becomes very dependent upon distinctive symbols and ceremonies.

Indeed, if religion becomes truly universal, it will be regarded as a spiritual consciousness which pervades and permeates all spheres of society. It will become a consciousness that influences thought and action, that conditions all our relationships. Every word and every deed of ours will manifest this spiritual dimension. And yet it will not be visible in the sense that there will be no symbols, no institutions, no rules, no ceremonies derived from a particular tradition presented as the characteristics of a national religion.

In other words, religion in society should be like sugar in water. It reveals itself through its taste but cannot be seen as such. When religion becomes a separate institution defined in conventional religious terms, it loses its vitality and dynamism. It is more susceptible to manipulation for political ends. It breeds unnecessary antagonism among those who cannot identify with that religion. This is why an underlying spiritual consciousness which guides human affairs is preferable to outward religious institutions.

An underlying spiritual consciousness implies that there is an alternative to both the secular state spawned in the West and the state

based upon a particular religion that some in the East yearn for. The weakness of the secular state is that it is not guided by a set of perennial values that transcends man's immediate existence. As a result, there is a crisis in values in the West which is reflected in various spheres of society. The crisis in the family — in the rights of its different members, in the relationships among them — is an outstanding example of this. It can be argued that this has come about partly because of a decline in the sense of sacredness in the relationship between man and woman, between children and parents. Indeed, even the desire to dominate and conquer nature is also the result, to some extent, of this loss of faith in the sacred. And yet sacredness as a value can be sustained only if one believes in a transcendental reality, in an eternal spiritual existence. Once this notion of transcendence is removed from one's world-view, one's sole preoccupation becomes the immediate, the here and now. It is one of the factors that has led to the growth of a system of production and consumption that is geared towards fulfilling insatiable materialistic desires. For if this material world is all there is to life then there is no need to limit one's desires, to exercise control and restraint in the quest of wealth and power. This is why the idea of transcendence — of an eternal spiritual existence — is so crucial in cultivating those moral values which can serve as signposts in a nation's political, economic and cultural development.

The problem with the religious state is that it is often trapped by a particular dogma that is sometimes impervious to reason. Why this is so, it is not difficult to understand. For a creative interchange between religion and modern knowledge, including ideas from the social sciences, has yet to take place. Only if this happens will the advocates of religion appreciate the importance of distinguishing timebound laws from timeless values. In the absence of such a distinction, a religious state will be a highly legalistic state wrapped in injunctions and prohibitions prompted by notions of human behaviour which have no validity today. Besides, a state based upon a particular religion will create a certain degree of alienation among those who do not belong to that religion. This is a highly relevant point since most societies today are multi-religious. However universal the ideals of a religion, the very act of creating a state in the name of that religion is bound to divide the nation into an 'in-community' and an 'out-community'. This will become all the more obvious when certain functions and roles are

reserved for followers of the national religion – as it will be in any religious state.

The alternative then is a society where reason is inspired by a universal spiritual consciousness, where laws and policies are founded upon universal ethical values. There is nothing unusual about reason guided by a spiritual consciousness. For the exercise of reason in a human being does not take place in a vacuum. It is invariably influenced by beliefs, attitudes and ideals which are part of our intellectual and ethical make-up. For instance, a government leader with a spiritual consciousness would be averse to separating means from ends in formulating public policies. He would not allow either the desire for profits (as in capitalist societies) or the dictates of production (as in communist states) to subvert the dignity of the human being.

We could have worked towards such a society if we had developed the first principle of the Rukunegara – the belief in God – into an all-embracing philosophy of spiritual consciousness. It would have been acceptable to all communities since the concept of God in the Rukunegara is not linked in an exclusive sense to any particular community. We failed to do that.

Instead, over the last decade or so, religious polarization has developed. It is a serious threat to unity and harmony in our multi-religious society. Each religious community is obsessed with the unique characteristics of its own exclusive identity. The government's Islamization policy is a manifestation of this obsession. For through Islamization, universal ethical values like diligence and discipline which are pertinent to human beings everywhere have been given a particularistic religious colouring.

Religious polarization will, in the long run, turn out to be far more dangerous than either ethnic or class polarization for three reasons. First, it has an ideological basis, albeit a superficial one. What is worse, it is an ideological attachment that arises from blind, unquestioning faith. It is not faith that has developed from deep reflection.

Second, since religion, it is obvious, is being used as a channel for reinforcing ethnic identity, it is quite possible that it will affect social intercourse in a way in which ordinary communalism cannot. A person may feel for instance that he is religiously pure if he tries to minimise social contact with those who do not belong to his religion. He ceases to socialize with them. The more ardent he becomes in his perverted idea of purity, the more negative his attitude towards those who do not share his faith.

Third, since some of the most enthusiastic adherents of this narrow interpretation of religion seem to be from the younger generation, it is quite conceivable that this trend will become more pronounced in the future.

Given all these reasons, there should be a more determined effort to check religious polarization. Of course, religious polarization itself is, to a great extent, the consequence of other developments.

Nonetheless, we would be making some contribution towards the resolution of the problem if we began by communicating with one another. For very soon, it will be too late.

Explanatory note

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**EDUCATION,
YOUTH &
COMMUNITY
SERVICE**

VALUES IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Our school system has certain achievements to its credit. There has been tremendous expansion of primary and secondary education.¹ Educational facilities are now available to a wider segment of the population. Malay has begun to replace English as the main medium of education. Both accomplishments, however, are not uncommon in the developing world. By the same token, the absence of emphasis upon values in the school system is not an uncommon lag in Malaysia and other developing countries.

The crucial question for Malaysians is whether the school system is capable of cultivating those values which would prepare our youths for

- i) The complexities of a multi-ethnic society,
- ii) The challenges of a developing society.

The Complexities of a Multi-ethnic Society

What the complexities of a multi-ethnic society in Malaysia are need not be adumbrated. Linguistic, religious and cultural differences; rural-urban dichotomies which sometimes coincide with ethnic disparities in incomes and opportunities; and indigenous political pre-eminence juxtaposed with non-indigenous economic ubiquity, would be the most obvious of these complexities. One would assume that the school as one of the most potent institutions of socialization would help unravel these complexities and in the process create trust and understanding among the young in our society. This it has failed to do if one is to judge its performance on the basis of its products.² The school has failed to demolish ethnic stereotypes and communal generalisations which militate against mutual respect and harmonious relations between communities. It has failed to foster understanding about the political and economic situation of the various communities. It has failed to identify and disseminate values and ideals held in common by the major communities in Malaysia.

Ethnic Stereotypes

Ethnic stereotypes like 'Malays are lazy and fun-loving', 'Chinese are greedy and selfish', 'Indians are dirty and servile' have achieved a

certain degree of currency in our society. These stereotypes were created during the colonial period to justify exploitation and the neglect of indigenous and non-indigenous interests.³ They have been perpetuated and propagated by present-day power-holders who have even suggested that these 'ethnic traits' are the causes of backwardness and poverty among the indigenous population.⁴

The school with its multi-ethnic clientele and with its obvious responsibility towards knowledge, education and attitudinal change has a sacred duty to counter and combat these pernicious ideas. In this connection, it is a sad commentary on our present state of affairs that our schools and our educators have given scant attention to Syed Hussein Alatas's *Siapa Yang Salah* (Singapore 1972)⁵ which has demolished these attempts to explain backwardness in terms of genetic and ethnic factors.

Indeed, exposure to multi-communal literature of this type should form an important aspect of the education of our young. Even primary school children can be introduced to this type of literature after it has been simplified. May I suggest that a conscious attempt to fight communal thinking be made an integral part of a new subject to be taught in the higher levels of primary school? It can be called Malaysian society (or some other name) and should include two other elements, one, a basic introduction to customs and cultures in Malaysia which does not seek the revival of ancient, decadent rituals and practices inimical to the emergence of a modern, progressive society and two, a planned programme of tours and trips which will bring young Malaysians to rural and urban settings and give them some contact with the land and its people. In this way young Malaysians might develop, at a very early stage of their lives, some empathy for the problems faced by other communities.

Political and Economic Situation

I had said that the school had also failed to foster understanding about the political and economic situation of the various communities. It is popularly believed for instance that all the political power in the country is in the hands of the Malays who also enjoy all the privileges while the Chinese have complete control over the economy. These are dangerous myths which have to be rectified. Proper perspectives on these issues will only emerge through careful study of our political and

economic history.⁶ The Political History of Malaysia and the Economic History of Malaysia should be introduced into our history syllabus for secondary schools as two new areas of inquiry.

A political History Course could address itself to some very important questions – the answers to which would conduce towards better understanding among the communities. One could try to understand for instance why the Malay community is regarded as indigenous, what the political system of the indigenous community was like, the nature of the relationship between the indigenous and immigrant communities, at what point the Malay polity became a Malayan polity, and finally Malay political pre-eminence within the context of multi-ethnic political participation.

Similarly, an Economic History Course could focus upon the state of the indigenous economy before colonialism and immigration, the role of indigenous elites in the transfer of economic resources to alien elements, the dominant position of colonial ownership in the Malayan economy, the intermediary status of Chinese capital and skills and finally, the existing situation in the Malaysian economy. The usefulness of such an approach, given our multi-ethnic milieu, cannot be over-emphasised.

Values and Ideals

All said and done, however, the school system's most significant shortcoming vis-a-vis our multi-ethnic society lies in its inability to identify and disseminate values and ideals held in common by the major communities in Malaysia. Indeed, no public institution in Malaysia – not even the universities – has ever attempted to perform this task. Yet, it is known that a common value system and a shared social philosophy is fundamental for the survival and development of any polity. In a multi-ethnic society, the need for such a philosophy is singularly crucial since there are few other sound bases for national unity.

Here in Malaysia the task of identifying values and ideals which are readily acceptable to all our major communities is made all the easier by the presence of an official religion with a strong universalistic orientation. There is perhaps no greater manifestation of Islam's

universalism than its lofty regard for human and social diversity. As the Holy Quran says "O mankind, we created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other)."⁷ Respect for diversity, tolerance, social justice, moderation and moral leadership are among a whole gamut of values deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition. It is important to realise that these values are cherished with equal fervour by the other cultural and philosophical traditions in the country. This commonness in our diverse traditions, this affinity of thought and sentiment, has never been transmitted to our school children. A concrete illustration of this affinity would be in the attitude of the three communities towards leadership. A good leader in Islam is sincere and knowledgeable.⁸ Sincerity and knowledge are also emphasised in Confucius⁹ and the writings of Vasya the author of the Mahabharata.¹⁰ Selflessness and dedication are noble qualities of leadership according to Muslim thinkers like Al-Farabi, Al-Mawardi and Ibn Khaldun.¹¹ Mencius, the great Chinese philosopher, holds the same view.¹² The Karmayogin – the Prince who does his duty – in Hinduism also performs good deeds for their own sake.¹³ Similarly, thinkers in all three traditions have argued that the reform of men must precede the reform of institutions – Muhammad Abduh in Islam;¹⁴ Chu Cheng Po in 19th century China¹⁵ and M.N. Roy in 20th century India.¹⁶

To my mind, education about common values and ideals will require the introduction of a completely new subject into the secondary school programme. For want of a better name, I shall call the proposed course, Cultural Studies. I have no doubt at all that it is the sort of study which has tremendous potential for growth in a multi-ethnic society.

The Challenges of a Developing Society

If our school system has not prepared the young for a multi-ethnic community, neither has it equipped them for the challenges of a developing society. What are the challenges of development?

They are often determined by the political beliefs of the ruling elite and the structure of the society in question. This has produced a

variety of ideas about what constitutes the challenges of development. In spite of all this, it is still possible to discern a consensus of sorts about the 'core challenges' in the Third World. It is a consensus that has become more visible in the last few years or so.¹⁷ I am able to demarcate three types of challenges

- i) The challenge of a just social order. The formulas adopted vary from place to place,
- ii) The challenge of involving the masses in the developmental process. Again, approaches differ and
- iii) The challenge of self-reliance. This has become an increasingly important consideration among a majority of developing countries, irrespective of ideological persuasions.

The resolution of these challenges requires certain mental characteristics, certain values, certain orientations among the better educated sections of society. Ideally, the school system should nurture those qualities of mind best suited for grappling with these challenges. But the school as it exists is obviously incapable of fulfilling this role. By and large, schools in Malaysia and most other parts of the Third World have merely succeeded in producing individuals who are basically motivated by self-interest and who are not really committed to public welfare. Besides, these individuals are quick to imitate and have very limited capacities for creative action.

To a great extent, the content of their education is responsible for this situation. This has to be explained. Whatever one's conception of a just social order there is no denying that there are certain fundamental conditions which must be fulfilled. A strong sense of moral antagonism against corruption and greed is one such basic prerequisite for the establishment of a just social order. It is the duty of the school to inculcate this sense of moral antagonism against social vices. Similarly, the school should help nourish a passion for justice. Without this sentiment among a sufficiently large number of persons in the vital segments of society, a just social order is simply unattainable.

There is a strong case, then, for the introduction of literature directed against various types of social vices.¹² Apart from discussing the nature of these vices and their pernicious effects upon society one should also create awareness among students about the attitudes of the

various religious and cultural traditions towards corruption, greed, exploitation and tyranny. Needless to say, all the great civilizations condemn these vices.¹⁹

By the same token, our young should be educated to appreciate and understand the importance of justice in society. Justice here means not merely economic justice but also political justice. While economic justice focuses upon the distribution of income and opportunities, among other issues, political justice would be concerned with the rights of the individual and the freedom enjoyed within the collectivity. Of course, the most effective way of accomplishing this is through concrete examples of how individuals in history attempted to achieve justice for their fellow-men. Again one should use as examples the great religious founders and sages throughout the ages since these personalities are held in highest regard and esteem especially in Asian societies like ours. The Buddha's compassion for the poor and their suffering is one such example. In Islam, freedom of speech and expression is protected and those who do not practise it are considered weak in their faith.²⁰

At the same time, great episodes in history which have been hitherto studied as dates, places and persons to be memorized, should be reinterpreted with the aim of highlighting the quest for justice in these events. As an illustration, the Philippine Revolution should not be seen merely in terms of Rizal, or Bonafacio or 1898, but more importantly, as a movement against oppression and exploitation. It will then be the task of the teacher to provide the defining characteristics of disvalues like 'oppression' or 'exploitation' and contrast them with values like 'freedom' and 'justice'.

Again, in order to provide education about justice and society one has to think in terms of a new subject. Even a re-vamped History course will not be able to meet the requirements since the methodological approach that is suggested here is essentially sociological. What I have in mind is, therefore, more appropriately described as Social Studies. Given the level of thinking expected of the recipients, this subject should be introduced at sixth-form level.

However, academic work of the type described, should form only one aspect of the Social Studies programme. The other aspect should be devoted to field-work. Students, and ideally, their teachers should be

required to spend a period of time in poor rural and urban communities where they would involve themselves in various types of development projects. At the end of the period they would prepare sociological reports on their fieldwork. This exercise serves three purposes – all of which are related to the problems of a developing society.

Firstly, it meets the second challenge of development: getting people involved in the developmental process. In this connection, it also helps to create a sense of commitment to public welfare and for that reason, acts against selfishness and excessive individualism.

Second, it is an efficient way of gathering data about society at the micro-level – data which would be very useful for government planning. This is specially important because governments in most developing societies have so little information about the economy and sociology of their own little rural and urban communities.

Thirdly – and finally – fieldwork of the type suggested would be a positive contribution towards the emergence of a self-reliant society, the third challenge of development. With the knowledge and experience gathered through involvement in actual situations and with proper intellectual guidance, students should mature into sound individuals committed to independent thinking about their own problems rather than slavish imitation of alien experiences and alien solutions. Independent thinking, in turn, will facilitate the birth of a self-reliant society. As an illustration of the relationship between the two, let us assume that there are two individuals – A, inclined towards independent thinking and B, inclined towards imitative thinking. If both men are involved in agricultural development, it is more likely that A will attempt to innovate and invent indigenous technology while B will be satisfied with improving imported technology.²¹ Obviously, the development of indigenous technology will reduce dependence on foreign sources and increase self-reliance.

Of course, independent thinking is merely one of the prerequisites for self-reliance. In order to achieve a self-reliant society it is also necessary to instil a sense of confidence in our people. It might be noted at this point that Confucius and Jamaludin Al-Afghani – thinkers from two different cultures in two different epochs – believed that a

sense of confidence was a vital ingredient for the well-being of any nation.²²

In developing societies like Malaysia, this lack of confidence is most apparent in the field of science and technology. The historical reasons behind this need not concern us here. Nor are we concerned with the economic and political conditions which must prevail before developing societies can wield any significant influence in science and technology. We are concerned merely with the contribution that our schools can make – however infinitesimal – towards the growth of a sense of confidence in this important sphere of human endeavour.

A 'History of Science' course which would discuss Chinese, Indian and Islamic contributions towards the development of science, without of course neglecting the role of the West, should be introduced into the secondary school science syllabus. Indeed such a course could help convince our young that science owes as much to Asia as it does to the West. It is the sort of conviction which breeds confidence in one's own abilities.

To summarise it should be apparent from our discussion that the school system can be geared towards understanding the complexities of a multi-ethnic society. It can help overcome the challenges of a developing society. 'Malaysian Society' as a primary school subject; Political History, Economic History, History of Science and Cultural Studies at Secondary School level and Social Studies in the post-secondary school programme are some of the approaches that have been suggested. However, it is not the course titles which are important. It is the content of courses, the values which constitute the crux and the core of these subjects which are crucial.

Even introducing new subjects with a value orientation is not enough, if other aspects of the school system remain unchanged. I shall, therefore, discuss various other areas within the system which to my mind require reform. The structure and content of these reforms are best determined by school-teachers, students and other direct participants in the system. My task is merely to raise certain questions.

Curriculum

The sort of new subjects which I have recommended makes it necessary to review the syllabi in some of the other courses taught at school. For instance, convincing students about the destructive nature of corruption and greed in the Social Studies course will have no impact at all, if in the History Course, corrupt, greedy men are presented as heroes! Similarly, one cannot encourage independent thinking through the History of Science course if the existing syllabi in Mathematics and Science are perfect embodiments of slavish imitation of foreign experiments! To put it differently, the moment the proposed courses are introduced it becomes imperative to re-shape the entire curriculum on the basis of certain fundamental values.

Evaluation

It has been said very often that our school system is too 'examination oriented'. By this is meant that there is too much emphasis upon examinations. An examination oriented system cannot co-exist with the sort of value-based school system proposed in this discussion. For in a value-based school system the stress is upon the acquisition of certain attitudes of mind which unlike certain skills are not easily examinable! Yet, even in a value-based school system there is some need for systematic evaluation of the student's performance — including his response to the values which are being promoted. What then is the solution?

Teacher-Training

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, I cannot see how one can successfully implement changes in the content of school education unless one reforms the content of teacher-training programmes. Would it not be necessary therefore to expose potential teachers to a) Ethnic Studies, b) Development Economics, c) Sociology, d) Cultural Anthropology and e) Political Philosophy among other new courses? If more sophisticated courses are introduced, would we have to raise qualifying standards for training Colleges — and eventually, teachers' salaries too?

Conclusion

All said and done, any reform of the school system however comprehensive in its conception, however thorough in its execution

will not be able to produce individuals with the right orientation towards development and this multi-ethnic milieu of ours, if society fails to create the atmosphere that can sustain the values and ideals that I have advocated.

What sort of atmosphere can maintain and reinforce the values which have been proposed for the school system in Malaysia? An atmosphere which convinces students, teachers, parents and society at large that i) there is a sincere endeavour to achieve social justice for all, ii) there is a sincere desire to preserve basic human rights and dignities and iii) there is a sincere interest in improving inter-ethnic relations and creating harmony.

While it is true that we can all help create the right atmosphere, there is no denying that the responsibility of the ruling elite is specially crucial.

In very simple terms, all this means that there is still some wisdom in the view of that ancient sage of China that first, one must reform the Rulers themselves!

Explanatory Note

The above article was first presented as a paper at a Teachers Union seminar on education in April 1975.

Notes

1. See *Educational Statistics of Malaysia 1938 to 1967* Ministry of Education, Malaysia (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka 1968). Also Bulletin of the Unesco Regional Office for Education in Asia (Number 14, June 1973).
2. The 'products' referred to here are mainly 'graduates' of the school system whom I have been meeting in the University in the last five years. My judgement is supported by the views of a number of my friends and colleagues who have had similar opportunities of interacting with these young people.
3. This is comprehensively discussed in a forthcoming publication. Alatas, Syed Hussein *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (Frank Cass, London).

4. See *Revolusi Mental* (ed.) Senu Abdul Rahman (Utusan Melayu, Kuala Lumpur, 1971) and also Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma* (Donald Moore, Singapore, 1970).
5. The book however, has circulated widely among young Malay and non-Malay groups though it has not received any official support.
6. I have suggested this in 'Protection of the Malay Community: A Study of UMNO's Position and Opposition Attitudes' (Unpublished M.S.Se thesis, Penang, 1974). Also in my "Trends in Ethnic Relations" in *Trends in Malaysia II* (ed.) M.C. Yong (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1974).
7. See *The Holy Quran* Text, Translation and Commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (Muhummed Ashraf, Pakistan, 1972) XIIX: 13.
8. See Shalaby, Ahmad, *Dasar dasar Pemerintah Islam*, (Jakarta, 1960).
9. See *The Humanist Way in Ancient China: Essential Works of Confucianism* (ed.) Ch'u Chai and Winberg Chai, (Bantam Books India, 1964).
10. *The White Umbrella* (ed.) MacKenzie Brown (Jaico Books India, 1964.)
11. *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (ed.) M.M. Shariff Vol I and Vol II (Otto Marrassowitz Wiesbaden, 1963).
12. See *The Humanist Way op. cit.*
13. See "M.N. Roy and Radical Humanism" in *Elites in South Asia* (ed.) Leach and Mukherjee (Cambridge University Press, 1970).
14. See *Arab Socialism* (ed.) Gardner and Hanna (Leiden, 1969).
15. See *Sources of Chinese Tradition Vol. II* (compiled) De Baru, Chan Tan (Columbia University Press, 1960).

16. See *Elites op. cit.*
17. The recent Algiers Conference of non-aligned nations (1974) and the views of Third World countries in the 1974 session of the *United Nations General Assembly* bear testimony to the statement.
18. That the sociology of corruption should be introduced to schools was first suggested by Professor Syed Hussein Alatas in 1969. See his critique of the Higher Education Policy Report entitled 'Planning for Chaos' Kuala Lumpur, 1969 (a pamphlet).
19. The condemnation of corruption, for instance, from the point of view of Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Chinese philosophy is eloquently discussed in Alatas, Syed Hussein *The Sociology of Corruption* (Donald Moore, Singapore 1968).
20. See Ahmad Zaki Yamani *Islamic Law and Contemporary Issues* (The Saudi Publishing House, 1970.)
21. The problem of independent or autonomous thinking is discussed in Alatas, Syed Hussein "The Captive Mind in Development Studies" *International Social Science Journal* (Paris, March 1972) and also in his *Modernization and Social Change* (Angus and Robertson 1972).
22. See *The Humanist Way op. cit.* and *The Islamic Response to Imperialism* (ed.) N.R. Keddie (University of California Press, 1968).

TEACHING MORAL VALUES

Introduction

Instilling moral values has always been a concern of the ASEAN school system. Religious education which was sometimes part of, and sometimes outside, state schools was often the channel for moral instruction.

In recent years, however, the secular curriculum itself has sought to incorporate moral values. Thus, in Malaysia, the 1979 Cabinet Report on Education stresses the importance of moral education in schools. Through the 3R programme to be implemented in all standard one classes in the country next year, moral studies will be made compulsory for all non-muslim pupils. Muslim pupils have had compulsory religious instruction for a long while now. In Singapore there is an earnest, organised endeavour by the government to integrate moral education into the regular secondary school syllabus by requiring all students to study any one of the world religions or Confucianism. Undoubtedly, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia will be able to furnish other examples of the ASEAN commitment to moral values in the education system.

On the whole, moral education initiated and implemented by the state seems to be concerned with perennial, universal, ethical values. This is the right approach to adopt. The moral education programme under the 3R programme for instance emphasises the importance of mental and physical cleanliness, compassion, moderation, industry, gratitude, integrity, justice, love, respect, community spirit, modesty and freedom. These values are taught through short stories selected from the traditions of the various communities.

Government leaders in Singapore and Malaysia have, at various times, tried to explain why it is necessary to include the study of morals in the school syllabus. It has been suggested that ethical standards are declining among the younger generation. Some among the young are prepared to compromise their integrity. Other leaders complain that there is an incapacity to work hard, an unwillingness to show gratitude, within sections of society. Apart from the problem of moral

values in their own country, the political leaders also regard moral education as a sort of bulwark against what is perceived as permissive, decadent Western cultural influence. Unrestrained freedom and bad work habits are among the so-called cultural traits from the West that are often singled out for mention.

Without necessarily agreeing with their diagnosis of moral standards in their own societies or in the West, one can nonetheless endorse their concern with moral values. All societies should endeavour to strengthen their moral foundations. For without a strong moral foundation, there is no hope for progress and achievement in any sphere of life.

A noble aim however has to be translated into action. How does one teach moral values in school? What are some of the obstacles involved?

I shall try to provide a general evaluation of the problem of teaching moral values from the standpoint of a non-educationist who is nonetheless involved in education both as a profession and as a vocation. This evaluation does not draw upon any particular ASEAN experience; neither are the issues raised unique to the region.

My analysis is divided into two parts. First, I shall deal with the 'school' dimension and then, the 'social environment' dimension.

The School Curriculum

The school dimension has four elements to it. To start with, there is the curriculum. While the values chosen may be universal, one cannot deny that there is almost always a tendency on the part of the state to ignore or downplay certain moral principles which may be very important. One wonders for instance why 'equality', a universal value of tremendous significance does not appear in the 3R programme. Or, one may ask why 'unity' isn't mentioned at all when its relevance to a multi-ethnic society like Malaysia is only too obvious.

Sometimes a certain value may be included but the interpretation given to it is so narrow that it does not do justice to the value itself. The concept of loyalty for instance may be interpreted in certain

circles to mean unquestioning loyalty to the good ruler. It has been argued that such an interpretation which conforms to Confucian ethics would be to the liking of the ruling elites in Singapore.

Similarly, freedom may be taught as a value. But it could be given a meaning which equates it merely with political and constitutional independence for the nation. Other aspects of freedom are not considered. What is worse, freedom is not linked to human rights and liberties. The right of dissent, fundamental to freedom, is ignored altogether.

What all this shows is that the moral education curriculum can be made to serve the interests of the ruling elites, even if the values selected are universal. The values that are left out and how other values are emphasized provide us with some understanding of the orientation of the ruling elites. This is something that the ASEAN teacher should be aware of.

Since only certain values are chosen it can lead to yet another distortion in the curriculum. Values as embodied in religious philosophy exist in an integrated totality. And religious philosophy has remained man's most comprehensive, reliable source of values. From the point of view of religious philosophy, it is wrong to emphasise one universal value and ignore its corollary. To talk of freedom without discipline is to distort both. Likewise equality in opportunities goes hand in hand with inequality in attainment. Values have to be seen in a wholistic manner for the simple reason that man is a total being. If only certain aspects of those values that are vital for meaningful living are emphasized, man will never discover or develop his true humanity.

More than presenting values as an integrated totality, moral education should not be divorced from questions such as man's origin, his purpose, his role, his destiny, his relationship with society, nature, the universe. It is only when man realises that he has been created to fulfil a great spiritual ideal, that he is sacred, that his life is sublime, will he endeavour to adhere to the loftiest moral standards.¹ When he ceases to believe that he is a sacred, spiritual being, when he begins to think of himself as a biological accident, a mere collection of atoms,

he will slowly sink into an abyss of amoral materialism. This is why moral education must constantly remind our young of their inherent spirituality.

Moral studies curricula in most places have failed to do this. They have also failed to link moral values to actual social realities. What is the point of talking about compassion if we cannot show how the absence of compassion expresses itself in real life situations? To be more precise, in moral studies courses, we should take up actual cases of exploitation in say, a factory or firm and show how they affect certain values like compassion, justice, equality, autonomy, indeed the very integrity of the human being. In the process, we must find out why exploitation occurs and how it can be overcome. As another example, we must look at concrete instances of repression and explain how freedom can be protected in society. By linking values to real situations, we will be able to show the young how and why values are vital to life and living. Otherwise they would be perceived as esoteric ideals which have nothing to do with man's actual existence.

So far we have examined inadequacies in the moral studies curriculum as such. But a moral studies curriculum, which shows no bias towards the state, is truly wholistic, embodies a spiritual concept of man and is rooted in real situations, will not achieve very much as long as other subjects of study are such that they contradict the universal values contained in moral studies. In other words, we must ensure that the entire educational programme reflects integrated, universal values. If peace, for instance, is one of our values in the moral studies course, it would be self-defeating to glorify a war-monger or wars in our history syllabus. By the same token, if a harmonious partnership with nature is advocated in our moral studies course, it would be incongruous to espouse the conquest of nature in our geography syllabus. It is only logical that our concern with ethics and ethical human beings must be consistently reflected in all subjects of study.

Teaching Techniques

Perhaps it is not just a question of developing an ethical basis to all school subjects. The teaching technique itself may be a problem. In moral education – as in most other subjects – the teacher usually narrates. The students listen meekly. The teacher's task is to "fill" the

students with contents. The great educationist, Paulo Freire, has argued that it is a method that "leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content."² Worse, it turns them into "containers, into receptacles to be filled" by the teacher. The more completely he fills the receptacles, the better a teacher he is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are.

"Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits"³.

If the banking concept of education is bad for the learning process as a whole, it is particularly disastrous for moral studies. For if values are merely received, stored and repeated in a mechanical manner, then it means they are incapable of transforming the personality of the individual. 'Stored' values are values that have not been absorbed and assimilated. They are external to the person; they are not integral to the individual's character. It is inevitable in such a situation that values studied in school and the actual business of living would be perceived as two different experiences which have nothing to do with each other. Indeed taught values may even be seen as 'unreal', 'utopian' and utterly irrelevant to life.

The only solution is to get rid of the narrative approach in moral education. Instead of the teacher telling stories of justice or moderation, students themselves could be asked to pose problems involving certain disvalues. An episode that revolves around greed or corruption could be presented to the class by a student. Through dialogue between students and teacher, and students and students, the causes and consequences of the disvalue could be established. In this way, the student becomes conscious gradually of the significance of moderation or integrity in the life of a society.

Freire calls this "problem-posing" education. It is based upon dialogue between student and teacher. The essence of this approach is

critical thinking and reflection on actual social relations in which everyone participates. Since the student can identify with the problem and helps to resolve it through his participation, he sees the related values and moral ideals as crucial to his life. This is how lofty values are integrated into the actual process of living.

The Teachers

It is apparent that such a teaching technique must lead eventually to a reconsideration of the very relationship between student and teacher. The teacher will no longer be the master, the lord, the all-knowing authority who dominates and controls his students. The relationship between the two will become more democratic, more egalitarian.

For the absorption of moral values by the student, a democratic relationship is much more effective than an authoritarian one. When the person who propagates certain moral values is regarded as an authoritarian character who imposes his will upon his captive subjects, there is bound to be a rejection of his dominance. This rejection need not manifest itself through non-compliance. Indeed, the student has no choice but to comply. Instead rejection assumes a psychological form. The teacher's ideas — in this instance the values he teaches — and his personality have very little impact upon the student's inner being, his soul. In this connection, one should perhaps observe that skills like arithmetic or even reading which are not at the core of one's character are easier to absorb even if the dispenser is an authoritarian personality.

If this were so, it might be argued, how does one explain the transmission of moral values through authoritarian parents? While a whole variety of factors must be taken into account, one can say very quickly that authoritarianism is mitigated by that indissoluble link of love and affection between parent and child which has no equivalent in the teacher-student tie. It is that love that facilitates the transmission of values.

The teacher's relationship with his student in the ASEAN region as elsewhere is largely functional, perfunctory and therefore mechanical. For the teacher it is a role he has to perform, a job to be done. For the student it is a responsibility he has to fulfil to himself and his family. There is no deep bond of affection. Besides, in most of the

ASEAN states, teachers are burdened with huge classes of 50 to 60 students. They are often overworked and underpaid. There is simply neither the time nor the motivation to develop total relationships with their students. This perhaps explains why 'gurus' of the past with small coteries of students under their charge could, in spite of their authoritarian relationship with their students, pass on high moral values to them. Also, it has to be remembered that those 'gurus', because of their command of knowledge which was restricted to an elite were given much more respect and honour than the teacher of today.

More important, however, they tried to live up to the moral principles which they taught. This is what the contemporary teacher should do. He should set the example. If he wants his students to appreciate the significance of restraint in consumption, he should be the first to eschew a consumer culture. Similarly, if he wants his students to respect the concept of the family, he should first ensure that his own family ties are sacrosanct. Though learning through emulation may not be the most effective channel for the assimilation of social values, it has undoubtedly some bearing upon the cultivation of personal virtues.

Needless to say, the teacher qua teacher has a big role in the development of moral values. He must not only restructure his relationship with his students in a more democratic direction but must also try to embody the very values he teaches in his personal conduct.

The School Structure

This may not be easy given the structure of the school. The ASEAN school like most schools in the Second and Third Worlds tends to be bureaucratized and hierarchical. It is organised and managed very much like a government department. The rules and regulations that govern it are far more important than the students who study in it.

Such an institution cannot be expected to transmit moral values effectively. For there is a basic prerequisite it does not fulfil: to be able to instil values, the human being, rather than rules, should be the main preoccupation. The inculcation of values is, after all, a process of humanization, of becoming a truly human human being. How is this

possible when the rigid bureaucratic structures that signify schooling today dominate, and in the end, destroy the student?

This is why there may be a need to de-school society in order to make learning more humane and value-assimilation more feasible.⁴ After all over-institutionalization, it is true, weakens values. It follows therefore that if the formal bureaucracy that is the school is reduced in significance and instead the home is merged with the school and the school with the community there is a possibility that students will discover ethical values through human relationships without being impeded by the power of the institution.

Social Environment

Deschooling like all the other reforms that have been proposed so far, will no doubt help to promote the growth of moral values among the young but it would be naive of us to believe that through these changes alone we will be able to usher in a more ethical society. For in the ultimate analysis it is the total environment that determines the moral tone and tenor of a society.⁵ The school is only a part of that environment. It is this social environment that has the greatest impact upon the thinking and behaviour of the people. The question we have to ask now is whether the environment in ASEAN is conducive to the development of moral values acquired in school.

A brief examination of three aspects of this environment – the economic, political and cultural – will reveal that while there are positive features, the negative elements seem to be dominant. In the economic sphere for instance, there are some attempts to achieve justice but in various ASEAN states poverty is so widespread that human dignity and honour, cherished values in any tradition, are under tremendous pressures. At the same time, exploitation and lop-sided development make a sham of ideals such as equality and justice. There is also the glaring affluence, the consumer-oriented life-styles of elites in most ASEAN states which seem to legitimize disvalues such as greed and corruption. One wonders how honesty and integrity can be sustained in such an atmosphere. One wonders – given the dependence of ASEAN upon the international economic system – whether it will ever be possible to create societies which genuinely uphold autonomy and self-reliance as living values.

In the political arena, there is a margin of freedom of one type or another in all the ASEAN states. In some countries elections are cleaner and political parties are more active than in other places, while the press is controlled and social protest is curbed; in other states the press is freer and social protest is more keenly felt while elections are farcical and party competition is virtually non-existent. But whatever the pattern, the overall thrust is clear: it is control and dominance by the elites rather than freedom and participation for the people that is the order of the day. Severe curbs upon the articulation of ideas which differ from those of the state and the emasculation of social groups that could strengthen the democratic process are some of the evidences. Besides, vital institutions like the press and the judiciary are beholden to the state.

This is why freedom and participation have yet to emerge as important values. It is a measure of the weakness of these values that a significant segment of the people fear to speak up even if they know that things are wrong. If anything, the way ASEAN governments have treated their critics must have convinced them that silence is better than speech. When the culture of fear is so pervasive in society, attempts to sow the seeds of freedom in school will only come to grief.

As far as culture is concerned, the situation is no better. On the one hand, ASEAN manifests considerable cultural tolerance. In some countries more than others, diverse cultures are allowed to flourish. On the other hand, there is also a great deal of ethnic tension in the region. Ethnic stereotypes and cultural prejudices are quite rife. In some states, ethnic dichotomies in public policies are deeply entrenched to a point where they have come to be accepted as a way of life. These dichotomies serve to strengthen communal attitudes among both the beneficiaries and the victims of ethnic policies. It does not require a survey to tell us that communalism has had a negative impact upon teachers and students alike. In a country like Malaysia the school has become a major sustainer and propagator of communalism – primarily as a response to the larger environment.

It is not difficult to understand why the social environment has so much influence upon the school and in particular the student who is the object of all our moral education programmes. First, there are those

various points of contact and communication which serve as channels of transmission for values or disvalues from the larger society. The student's peer group, his family, his neighbourhood, his teacher would come within this category. Second, and perhaps more important, the prestige and power of the elites who benefit from those disvalues help to convince the student that he is right in aspiring to be like them. It is because of elite power and prestige that disvalues are transformed into values in the eyes of society. Greed and selfishness of the economic elites become enterprise and industry that should be emulated. The control and dominance of the political elites are defended in the name of stability and security. The prejudice and bigotry of the cultural elites are revered as patriotism and nationalism. Of course all this is facilitated by the media whose elites, being part of the same stratum as the other elites, do not want disvalues to be exposed for what they are or values to be presented as they are.

Conclusion

The teacher cannot prevent the social environment from exerting negative influences upon the school system. To do that he has to try to change the environment itself. This is a formidable task which calls for a wholistic transformation of society. As a citizen, the teacher can – and should – contribute towards that eventual goal which lies beyond the range of vision of this generation.

For the time being, however, he can, together with his colleagues, undertake those reforms which are not altogether outside his scope. Though he cannot change the curriculum, he can introduce new ideas, new values into it. He can try the problem-posing approach to education. He can establish more egalitarian relationships with his students. He can, through his own exertion, embody lofty moral principles in his private and public behaviour.

In spite of everything then there is still a great deal that a teacher can do. The choice is his. He can approach his class either with a feeling of apathy or with a sense of mission. That sense of mission is the energy that sometimes transforms human character.

Explanatory note

The above article was originally presented as a paper at a Convention of the ASEAN Council of Teachers in Kuala Lumpur in 1982.

Notes

1. For a profound discussion, see Nicolas Berdyaev *THE DESTINY OF MAN* (Harper and Row, New York, 1960).
2. See Paulo Friere *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* (Continuum New York, 1981) p. 58.
3. *IBID.* p. 58.
4. Various dimensions of deschooling are discussed in Ivan Illich *DESCHOOLING SOCIETY* (Perennial Library London, 1970).
5. For further details see Reinhold Niebuhr *MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1960).

SAINTS AND SINNERS

Whatever the social environment, there are certain aspects of formal education that will remain unchanged. In the school curriculum for instance Algebra will remain Algebra. The content of a Chemistry or Physical Geography or Language course will not be affected in any serious way, by changes wrought in the larger milieu.

Certain other aspects of the curriculum, however, will be influenced by the social environment. The present emphasis upon Management, Business Administration and Computer Studies at the tertiary level, for instance, is a reflection of the direction in which the economy is moving. In Civics courses in secondary schools, the middle and upper classes will continue to be eulogised as long as the present social structure remains.

Similarly, it is doubtful if History will be taught in such a way in secondary schools that the underlying causes of events – rather than the events themselves – will be highlighted. Neither will the General Paper in Form Six, even after it is revamped, promote serious reasoning and reflection at the level of fundamentals. This is because deep thinking on social reality which seeks to expose the truth about the human condition will not be in the interest of the existing social system. For it is a system that ensures its survival by camouflaging the grave injustices perpetrated upon the poor and powerless.

Even other types of changes to the school system, outside the curriculum proper, do not appear likely as long as the present order continues to perpetuate itself. For instance, we cannot expect teaching methods to be transformed in such a way that the student participates actively in the learning process – as the well-known educator Paulo Friere envisaged.

Such an approach would be a threat to elites who want to keep their people passive and obedient. Reorganising school life along democratic lines like having schoolwide elections to the Prefects Board or getting schoolchildren to manage the canteen or to keep the toilets clean or to maintain the playground, would also be impossible. For it

would be seen as empowering the young, giving them a say in the decision-making process.

It would be even more difficult to reduce formal schooling and incorporate some of the more feasible ideas of someone like Ivan Illich, who had argued for greater involvement of the home, the neighbourhood and the community in the learning process. Deinstitutionalisation of this sort which seeks to enhance individual autonomy will never be acceptable to governments that attempt to dominate the people through their bureaucratic power.

However, the curriculum, teaching methods and the school system which are all part of formal schooling, are not the best examples of the impact of the social environment. It is in the informal aspect of the learning ethos that the influence of the economic, political and cultural milieu is most acutely felt. This influence is transmitted via the student and the teacher as human beings who are part of the school, and are yet, 'subjects' and 'objects' in the larger society.

As a starting point, the continuing economic decline which will become even more serious in a decade or so, will have a profound impact upon both student and teacher. Since jobs are going to become scarce, there will be more intense competition among students. This, plus the fear of unemployment could make them more selfish, less caring, less concerned and more inward-looking.

Paradoxically, at the same time, a smaller segment of the student population, knowing that employment prospects are dim, and wealth and prestige are distant, may be prepared to turn to other concerns which are less materialistic. They may begin to examine their own social situation. They may try to find out why their society is in such a mess. In the process, they may choose to commit themselves to certain causes. This has happened in other countries like Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia.

A similar pattern may unfold within the teaching fraternity too. As incomes stagnate and prices spiral, a large number of teachers are bound to become even more self-centred. But there will be a few who, realising that there is no hope in the present situation, will be impelled

to act in pursuit of certain socially-oriented goals.

Since economic stagnation often leads to political authoritarianism, it is quite conceivable that the government will become even more intolerant of dissent. Its intolerance could seep down to lower levels. Eventually, it will express itself as arrogance and haughtiness and may be reflected in the behaviour of officials in the education department and head-teachers. Among students, these negative attributes could take the form of bullying and violence. As these character-traits develop, some of their counter qualities, like servility, subservience and submissiveness will also spread rapidly.

However, as is to be expected, there will be a reaction to this. There will be a few teachers and students who will emphasise dignity and justice. They will try to defend freedom and equality. They will, in short, stand up against authoritarianism and the arrogance of might. The greater the challenge posed by governmental power, the more intense the response.

As with the economic and political spheres, so with the cultural arena. There is every indication that schools in particular will be adversely affected by religious polarisation in the wider setting. This could result in the emergence of students and teachers who are narrow and bigotted. They will surface in all the religious communities and will argue for the maintenance of rigid religious boundaries so that the 'unique purity' and the 'distinctive identity' of each group can be preserved. This is the bane of religious polarisation as far as we are concerned. It will widen the chasm between the Muslim and non-Muslim segments of the school community.

Be that as it may, increased religious polarisation will also produce a reaction. Here again, we will witness some Muslim and non-Muslim students and teachers reaching out to one another. They will endeavour to establish common bonds; they will try to uphold common values and common ideals.

This division separating those who promote vices from those who support virtues will express itself in all walks of life. It will encompass all the dominant institutions in our society. Thus, we will have those

who are committed to freedom and those who endorse oppression, those who are opposed to corruption and those who indulge their greed, those who are selfless and those who are selfish, in all the communities and within all the religions. The histories of a number of countries, notably the Philippines in recent times, show us clearly that as the situation becomes more and more challenging, this division will also become clearer.

It must be stressed at this point, that this is no simple right-wrong, moral-immoral dichotomy presented in black and white terms. All sorts of vested interests are involved. These interests – rather than the character or attitude of a particular leader – are crucial in the perpetuation of this dichotomy. The illustrious social thinker, Pitirim Sorokin, described it as the dichotomy between 'saints' and 'sinners'. It is a dichotomy that develops, he argued, in all societies in turmoil.

The role of educators in Malaysia is to strengthen the saints and weaken the sinners. There isn't much scope for this through the formal curriculum or the formal school system. Nonetheless dedicated educators, conscious of the future, should try to do their best. For instance, if one is in charge of a school one should make an attempt to democratise decision-making. One should delegate more responsibilities to students, especially those in the upper forms.

More important, however, the channels of informal education should be fully utilised to inculcate the sacred values of justice, truth, freedom, compassion and love. This can be done in a number of ways. Students can be encouraged to hold forums or organise workshops or stage plays with these values in mind. They can even be encouraged to compose music and to sing songs which embody values such as freedom and justice. For students in upper secondary classes, there could be weekend courses on social challenges conducted by socially-conscious educators. Teachers should also be given the opportunity to participate in such courses.

Whatever the programmes formulated, educators should always remember that saints and sinners are found in every religious community. It would be wrong therefore to adopt an ethnic approach. This is why educators should always reflect on actual social realities and try to understand the ideals enshrined in their spiritual traditions in rela-

tion to the human condition. For, in the ultimate analysis, it is not what we profess in search of heaven but what we practise in our journey on earth, that God cherishes most.

Explanatory note

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MEDICAL EDUCATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES

There is an urgent need for fundamental changes in the content, structure, orientation and goals of medical education — if medicine is to ensure the health of every human being.

To start with, the very concept of disease and treatment will have to change. Disease should not be seen as an external entity that attacks a particular part of the body. Neither should treatment be seen as curing an illness associated with a particular part of the body.

This mechanistic notion of the human body as if it were a machine that can be taken apart and dealt with in terms of its individual components is a product of the influence of Newtonian Physics upon the life sciences like biology and medicine. It is an inaccurate notion of the human body and the human being. It is one of the factors that has given rise to overspecialization in medicine.

We now realize that it would be more logical to regard disease as a disturbance of the whole organism. The purpose of medicine would be to restore order and balance in the human body. To do this, doctors must learn to treat the entire human being, and not a particular disease as such.

It follows from this that in our concept of medical education there will be no over-specialization. This does not mean however that specialists are not vital to the profession. They are, but medical education must henceforth give a lot of emphasis to generalized medicine which also takes into account the psychological and social aspects of a patient's illness.

This makes explicit the need for a medical education curriculum that incorporates elements from psychology, sociology, economics, political science and other such disciplines. In this way, doctors will develop a better understanding of the patient as a whole being responding to various pulls and pressures within himself and his social environment. Once doctors see illnesses from a wholistic perspective,

their attitude towards healing itself will change. Since the patient is a total human personality operating in a certain milieu, the doctor will have to approach him with a deeper understanding, with more love, with greater tenderness. Indeed, healing itself will, in such circumstances, become a divine art.

However, healing is only one aspect of medicine. Curative medicine is not the be-all and end-all of medicine. Indeed, in our situation it is preventive medicine that should be accorded priority. In this connection, it is regrettable that in 1973 nearly three quarters of the total health expenditure in the public sector went into curative medicine. And yet, it is preventive medicine that has the greatest potential for improving the health of the populace concerned. It is through prevention that many infectious diseases have been brought under control. Prevention is the most effective way of reducing cardiovascular diseases. Prevention through better housing, cleaner water, healthier diet, regular exercise and moderate life-style has done a great deal to curb some of the more chronic ailments known to man. This is why preventive medicine which stresses upon making the human environment suitable for healthy living should receive much more attention in medical education in the future.

This approach to medicine automatically enhances the importance of the individual's role in looking after his own health. How the individual can be provided with more knowledge and information to enable him to maintain a high standard of health should be the major concern of medical education. The goal is to increase his own autonomy in regard to his health. This of course requires much more than knowledge and information. The individual must have sufficient command and control over his own economic resources. At the same time, he must be part of a political and administrative structure that allows him to play a decisive role in shaping his own affairs. This is perhaps possible only in a small or medium-sized community. In other words, to enable the individual to look after his own health there has to be a transformation of the social system itself.

There is another reason why the individual's role in managing his own health should be accorded priority in medical education. This is to counter the present trend in most places which sees increased institutionalization and bureaucratization of medicine as essential to an

effective health-care system. It is seldom realized that this over-dependence upon the institution not only affects adversely the individual's autonomy but also centralizes power with the medical elites and contributes towards the spiralling cost of health care. For very often it is maintaining the medical establishment and its administrative supports which takes up a huge slice of the health budget.

Emphasizing individual responsibility for health is not enough if medical education does not also give due weight to ethical values. By ethical values we mean the entire gamut of norms and principles essential for bringing out the humanity in every human being. The medical course in the university should at every level and through every subject of study expose the student to these values of truth, justice equality and freedom. Most of all, it should instil in him an awareness of medicine as a noble profession whose hallmark is compassion. At a time when the sublime sentiment of caring for the sick has given way to the vulgar vice of grabbing from the ill, it is important to remind young doctors of the cherished ideals of the profession.

This is particularly so in a country like ours where a lot of poor people are still exposed to the type of diseases which have disappeared in some of the more affluent societies. When so many of our fellow human beings live below the 'health-line', it is the responsibility of medical faculties to inculcate in their students that sense of service and sacrifice which will inspire them to work in deprived rural localities and crowded urban slums. The situation that confronts us should compel our curriculum planners to re-design our curricula in such a way that the health needs of the deprived and dispossessed majority take precedence over everything else. Only then will we be able to say that medical education is guided by ethical values.

Ethical values in medical education should go hand in hand with a commitment to maintaining high professional standards. More specifically, a trainee doctor should be made to realize that examining a patient thoroughly, preparing comprehensive notes on him, advising how he can take care of his health and so on are essential aspects of professionalism. Similarly, a doctor who is concerned

about professional standards will not overcharge his patients or prescribe unnecessary drugs simply because he can make more money. Perhaps, one way by which medical students can be convinced of the need for professionalism is if Medical Faculties in the country themselves consciously endeavour to uphold professional standards.

Apart from all this, medical education must also be able to alert the student against certain myths and falsehoods which have gained currency over the last few decades. There is, for instance, the belief that the doctor is a 'know-all', a miracle worker who deserves absolute trust. Like every other profession, medicine too suffers from many limitations. In certain areas of medicine, more than perhaps other fields of knowledge, there is still a great deal of doubt and uncertainty. Medical Faculties can help to change wrong perceptions of the profession by showing the public how and why the role of the doctor is a very modest one. One way of doing this is by making medical terms understandable to ordinary people. Medicine, of all professions, has to be de-mystified. Its meanings, its procedures — apart from its vocabulary — have to be brought within the range of the ordinary citizen's understanding.

At the same time, medical students should not be allowed to develop an irrational fascination for the latest and the fanciest technologies. The usefulness of every new piece of technology in the medical field has to be carefully appraised on the basis of a variety of criteria. Unfortunately, this is not happening. New technologies are invented and marketed at such a rapid rate that there is no time to evaluate their impact. This rapid turn-over in technology is one of the main causes of the escalating cost of health care.

Apart from the fact that countries like ours cannot afford to get hooked to this technological craze, we must also remember that a lot of what is being invented may not suit our needs. It is better for us to improvise, to invent if possible, our own technics. It is in our interest to do so for there may be situations where the lack of facilities could well compel us to work out alternative technologies. This is why it is crucial that medical education nurtures a spirit of discovery, fosters creativity among our students.

In this connection, medical education should include some exposure to the various systems of medicine associated with the three main communities in the country. Making medicine relevant to the local situation must also mean investigating scientifically local modes of treatment, concepts of medicine and approaches to health care.

Having looked at the type of changes medical education should undergo, we are now in a position to summarize our main arguments. Medical education should, on the one hand, check over-specialization, over-institutionalization, over-bureaucratization and over-technologization. At the same time, it should de-mystify medicine. More important, medical education should develop an awareness of the significance of:-

- (a) a wholistic concept of disease and treatment
- (b) approaching the patient in his totality
- (c) elevating healing into a sacred art
- (d) emphasising preventive rather than curative medicine
- (e) creating a social environment that is conducive to healthy living
- (f) enhancing the power of the individual over his health
- (g) reinforcing professional standards
- (h) inculcating the ethical values of service and sacrifice and
- (i) reorientating priorities in the interest of the majority

It is of course naive to believe that merely by changing the character of medical education, however fundamental it may be, the health situation in the country as a whole will also improve. It does not require much reflection to realize that however wholistic our concept of disease and however comprehensive our approach to the patient, as long as the practice of medicine is conditioned by profits, very few doctors will have any time for their patients. By the same token, there will be no emphasis upon preventive medicine for the money. Even with the State this is the case, as we have seen. The State's health policy is also determined by the market in an uncontrolled market where the market lords over everything. Besides, the State's health command is not going to allow the individual to sacrifice his health. Neither will the State re-arrange

its health priorities because the Medical Faculties are giving emphasis to different values and goals for the simple reason that it is he who has effective power in the social structure that decides who gets what, when and how in the health budget.

What all this shows is that a new medical education programme will not achieve very much unless the entire social system is changed — as we observed in an earlier context. But that is going to be a much more difficult process. As citizens, medical students and doctors have a role to play in that transformation too.

However, what is important for now is to effect some of these proposed changes in medical education. For even if one cannot alter the existing order, at least producing a handful of doctors every year who will remain faithful to some of the ideas and ideals imbibed from their medical studies is going to be a crucial beginning, a worthwhile start. After all, every journey begins with a small step.

Explanatory note

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THE YOUTH MOVEMENT TODAY: AN EVALUATION

There is no youth "movement" in Malaysia as such. A movement must have a certain character, some definable features. It must have certain overall goals that all its components share even if there are differences among them in terms of the emphasis they give to one objective as against another.

What we have in our country are youth groups with varying goals and differing characteristics. In this analysis we shall look at a certain type of youth group – the type that is involved to an extent in matters of public interest and is part of the public arena. Let us call the youth clubs, societies and associations that come within this category the *socially-concerned*.

Many of the organisations in this category are in fact community-based. There is, thus, the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), the Gerakan 4B, the Malaysian Association of Youth Clubs (MAYC) etc. which are solely or largely Malay and Muslim. Within the Chinese community, there are associations like the Young Malaysian Movement (YMM) and the Gerakan Belia Bersatu (GBB). And among Indian youths, the best known outfits are the Hindu Youth Organisation (HYO) and the Tamil Bell Youth Club. The Young Christian Workers group is also largely Indian.

By giving attention to youths in such societies, we are excluding other types of organisations from our analysis. The youth wings of the various political parties, both in government and the opposition, will not be included. Their status, role and aspirations are not bodies. University and college student groups are in a different category. Their history and development are different. The growth and character of youth groups in that reason, they should be evaluated separately. They are in uniformed societies like the Boys' and Girls' Clubs and in associations with a marked welfare character. They are, in a sense, divorced

Socially-concerned Youth Organisations: Their Character

Our analysis of socially-concerned, community-based youth organisations will not encompass the detailed policies, programmes and activities of each and everyone of them. That will not serve any purpose. It would be much more useful to examine their general features and to reflect upon the overall directions in which they appear to be moving.

There are perhaps 3 distinguishable strains within our category of youth organisations. First there are youth groups that define their social concerns guided by the interests and inclinations of the government. They get actively involved in drug abuse work because the government is committed to the eradication of that social scourge. They protest against the visit of a delegation of foreign lawyers investigating the human rights situation in the country because the government – or elements within it – are opposed to the visit. They endorse the government position on any public controversy whether it is on what constitutes the national culture, or on the perpetuation of the Internal Security Act (ISA) or on the implementation of a new national population policy.

Sometimes, some of these youth organisations adopt stances which are more extreme than the official government stand. What is not often realized is that this may have been done with the tacit consent of some of the government leaders themselves! They may want a particular youth body to say something which they cannot articulate openly given the constraints of being in government. This has happened, now and then, with ethnic issues in particular. In the mid-sixties some Malay youth societies pushed hard for the immediate, effective implementation of Malay as the sole official and national language. The top Malay leadership in government partly because it was more conscious of the complexities of a multi ethnic society, adopted a somewhat moderate attitude. However, there were others in the upper echelons of government and UMNO who were instrumental in getting groups outside the centre of power to agitate for a more vigorous approach to Malay. Today, there are non-Malay youth associations, both Chinese and Indian, directly or indirectly aligned to non-Malay component parties of the Barisan Nasional, who sometimes advocate an extreme, unreasonable position on the use and practice of their languages and cultures. Once again, the chances are that they may have the blessings

of certain leaders in the MCA or Gerakan or MIC who, for obvious reasons, wouldn't dare to espouse such untenable ethnic causes.

It is clear from what has been said so far that there are a large number of youth groups which are overwhelmingly, unquestioningly supportive of the government. Sometimes, they are even aligned to a leader, or a clique or a faction within one of the component parties of the Barisan. The link with the Barisan government goes beyond this. There are government leaders and Barisan members of Parliament who lead youth groups. Some others serve as advisers. Officials of youth organisations hob-nob with Barisan leaders. They travel abroad on youth delegations headed by politicians and bureaucrats. Indeed, youth leaders from organisations which are closely identified with the government are given a lot of opportunities to attend courses and seminars overseas. These foreign trips sometimes serve as a form of 'reward' for blind loyalty on the part of officials of youth bodies.

The activities of these youth organisations are symptomatic of their unthinking support for the State. If seminars and workshops are held, their real purpose, more often than not, is to provide unstinted endorsement to government policies and programmes. Interestingly enough, it is the opening and closing ceremonies of seminars and conferences — usually performed by some state dignitary — that is accorded emphasis and importance. Indeed, the criterion for determining the success or failure of a seminar or conference is not so much the content of the papers but how well organised the ceremonies are. This shallow, superficial attitude is also reflected in the fascination for walkathons, fun fairs, picnics and other such activities which hardly stimulate thinking or help to foster lofty ethical values in the individual.

The second strain in our category also indulges in some of the same activities. In fact there is quite a bit of overlap in the characteristics of the first and second strains. However, the second strain may or may not be aligned to the government. It is more explicitly devoted to cultural and religious concerns. It is the outward forms, the practices, the symbols of culture and religion that evoke the deepest passions in youth organisations of this type. Whenever there is some pronouncement or policy that touches upon the cultural 'nerve' of a

particular community, there is an immediate reaction. Youth groups from all the communities respond to the State in this manner. Malay youth organisations in Penang, for instance, get very upset when Malay cultural items are not given due significance in State functions. Similarly, Chinese youths are up in arms if the licence to perform the lion dance is turned down by the authorities. An Indian youth club would be extraordinarily vocal in protesting against the non-inclusion of Tamil films over a particular television channel. Among these ethnic-oriented youth societies there is very little interaction. If Malay, Chinese and Indian youth officials meet and exchange ideas it would be mainly at functions organised by some umbrella body. These are not that frequent. There is hardly any evidence of an ethnic youth organisation initiating on its own volition, a gathering or activity aimed explicitly at breaking down ethnic barriers. This is why it would be true to say that ethnic distrust, ethnic apprehension and ethnic prejudice separate one community – based youth club from another. Ethnic polarization is indeed very real within the socially-active segment of our youth population.

The third strain is slightly different from the other two in certain respects. It maintains some distance from the State. Consequently, it exercises some independence in thought and action. It is known to evaluate critically government policies and programmes pertaining to the economy, administration, education and culture. Within this type of youth involvement, a couple of Muslim bodies appear to have achieved some prominence. These bodies view the problems of state and society from what they regard as an Islamic-perspective. Using that perspective, they inveigh against political repression, corruption, lop-sided development, cultural pollution from the West and most of all, the decline of morality and the loss of faith in God so obvious in contemporary society. In the case of one particular Muslim youth association, it was an eloquent critic of the alleged failings of the government right through the seventies up to early 1982. It even sought to promote inter-ethnic cooperation among youth groups through a common commitment to the common ideal of freedom. That youth group continues to articulate a different vision of society embodied in its concept of an Islamic state or an Islamic social order. It is a concept, however, that remains vague and amorphous.

The third strain – like the first two – also organises seminars and conferences, apart from publishing books and journals. There is, however, a certain degree of seriousness of outlook, a notion of purpose, within this strain which is missing in the earlier cases. It must be emphasised, at this point, that these strains are by no means exclusive of one another. As has been mentioned elsewhere, there is some overlap. The three strains represent trends and tendencies rather than particular youth organisations – though of course one could always identify the MAYC with the first type, the HYO with the second type and ABIM with the third.

Youth Organisations: Consequences and Causes

The character of our youth organisations generates certain consequences. These consequences are, in turn, connected to underlying causes which often go beyond youths and youth groups *per se*. Through close identification with the State, many youth organisations have been reduced to mere appendages of the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports. Their lack of autonomy and independence has rendered them servile and subservient. These organisations do not command any respect. They cannot inspire youths to great heights.

Youth groups may have chosen to align with the State in this manner partly because of increasing authoritarianism on the part of the government. Their fear is that if they seek to be independent they would have to face punitive action by the powers-that-be. They would not get any financial or moral support from the authorities – especially since youth societies are largely dependent upon the State for their budget. There is also the feeling among youth groups – whether justified or not – that youth leaders who oppose government control would be victimized in various ways.

Authoritarianism, in turn, is the product of numerous social forces including the type of development and modernisation that is being pursued and the sort of social structure that prevails. It is interesting to observe, in this connection, that when authoritarianism was at a lower level before the mid-seventies, youth organisations enjoyed much more freedom and autonomy. They expressed views on social issues which were sometimes quite contrary to the government's position.

However, authoritarianism is not the only reason for the decline in the independence of youth groups in the country. The persistence of neo-feudal attitudes within Malay political culture which is reflected in the thinking of Malay youth organisations in particular is also a problem. An almost uncritical, unquestioning acceptance of the authority and power of the government is how neo-feudalism manifests itself. Of course this psychology is breaking down because of a variety of sociological changes taking place within the Malay community. Nonetheless, as of now, it continues to exert some influence. Similarly, the materialistic economic environment, the relative affluence of the middle-class (from which a number of youth leaders come) and the scope for a certain degree of mobility within the lower middle-class have all conspired to lull youth groups into a state of complacency. It is this complacency that is partly responsible for creating the feeling among youth officials that there is nothing wrong in aligning with the government.

All these reasons — affluence and complacency, neo-feudalism and an unquestioning attitude towards authority, authoritarianism and control — are among the causes of yet another consequence of the present state of our youth organisations. This is the lack of depth in thinking, the absence of vision, the paucity of ideals, the shallowness of commitment, the superficiality of concern among youth leaders and their followers. Of course, the almost total lack of a vigorous intellectual tradition directed towards serious reflection on social reality and social ideals is also to blame. The nature of our education system which makes no earnest effort to inculcate profound spiritual values or to encourage critical, analytical thinking among our young is another guilty party.

The absence of thinking is evident even among those who care to evaluate state policies. Muslim youths who are critical of the existing order, for instance, seldom attempt to analyse the underlying causes of the ills that confront society. Likewise, their idea of an Islamic State does not reveal any understanding of what is perennial as against what is ephemeral, what is fundamental as against what is superficial, what is central as against what is peripheral, in religion. Nor is there any endeavour to provide substance to their cherished concept of an Islamic State by working out the details of its political structure, its economic

system, its cultural relations. The inability of Muslim youths to crystallize ideas both at the philosophical and concrete levels has contributed in no small measure to the intellectual under-development of our society.

Non-Muslim youths who present themselves as champions of their respective religions and cultures are no better. Because they too do not probe the essence of their religion, because they do not try to penetrate the core of their cultures, the potential for the intellectual development of their communities has never been realized. Worse, bereft of a vision, devoid of a dream of what an ideal society should be, as seen from a truly universal and humanitarian perspective, non-Muslim youth organisations as a whole have failed to elevate the ethical and spiritual consciousness of their communities.

Consequently, both Muslim and non-Muslim youth groups are in a morass: there is neither intellectual nor spiritual vigour and vitality in them.

This brings us to the third and final consequence of the character of youth groups. The ethnic polarization among youths involved in youth work has, in a sense, aggravated the scourge in the larger society as a whole. All the grievances, whether real or imagined, about ethnic discrimination, ethnic neglect and ethnic dominance find expression within youth organisations. Sometimes they are multiplied many times over given the greater tendency among youths to react angrily and harshly.

While ethnic frustrations among youths may have worsened the situation, it remains true that it is the social system that is the principal culprit. The concept and practice of development is such that on the one hand it magnifies fears about the erosion of one's ethnic and religious identity; on the other, it increases inter-ethnic competition at certain levels which in turn breeds communal attitudes among the people. On top of this, there are the dichotomies between Bumiputras and non-Bumiputras, Malays and non-Malays, Muslims and non-Muslims which have began to shape the total outlook of the nation. Youths and youth groups as the victims of the system cannot help but imbibe the

negative values and attitudes that dominate an ethnically-divided society like ours.

Some Remedies

It is obvious from our analysis that unthinking acceptance of the dominance of the State, superficial understanding of social processes and the prevalence of communal attitudes – the three major maladies confronting youths groups – cannot be remedied through ad-hoc, stop-gap measures. Solutions have to be thought out. Youths are among those few people in society who can afford to reflect deeply on long-term, enduring solutions. Time is on their side.

There are perhaps certain remedies that are possible which the present generation of youth leaders should commit themselves to even if they may take a long while to accomplish. To start with, all youth organisations should free themselves from the 'apron-strings' of the government and indeed other powerful interests in society. Youth groups should become autonomous and independent in every sense of the word. For this to happen, they must become financially independent. A national youth trust fund should therefore be established which will provide financial assistance to all youth groups in the country. The government and the general public will finance the fund. The fund would be administered by a national youth commission which should be an independent body. The Commission comprising respected public personalities would have to be created by an Act of Parliament and would be directly answerable to that august body. It would thus be free of Executive control. Apart from disbursing funds and supervising the financial management of various youth organisations, the Commission would have no other function.

With this sort of arrangement, youth societies would have much greater freedom to carry out their activities. They would not have to get direct or indirect approval from the government or its agencies each time they organise an activity especially if it involves some issue of public importance. If the activity concerned is prejudicial to public interest, then the authorities can always take action guided by laws that are just and democratic.

Indeed, in a situation like this there would be no need for a specific Ministry dealing with youths or for youth departments in the bureaucracy. Co-ordination of youth programmes can be done through a co-ordinating council. Such a council could exist at various levels — from the national level to the district level. The important thing is that the council should be a natural, logical outcome of the need to coordinate activities among youth groups. It should not be a body imposed from the top by the government.

If coordination can be carried out in this manner, youth activities need not be controlled by politicians and bureaucrats in the name of efficiency. But then since control is power and power is authority, it is very unlikely that the sort of change that is envisaged here will take place easily. This is why youth groups must be prepared to wage a long battle for freedom and autonomy.

Once freedom and autonomy are accomplished, youth groups would be better positioned to recast their policies and programmes with the aim of emphasising the development of the heart and mind of their members. Of course, this is something that should be done, irrespective of whether youth organisations succeed in liberating themselves from the stranglehold of the State. What this means is that there should be more activities that seek to raise the ethical and intellectual consciousness of members. Discussions should be held where the ethical dimensions of a particular social policy or even a specific individual deed are examined. Youths should be encouraged to reflect on the motives of their actions especially when they impinge upon the well-being of the group. Self-criticism should be an accepted principle of conduct within the organisation. At the same time youths should be made to understand that in religion the transformation of the individual is a prerequisite for the transformation of society.

The inculcation of spiritual values should go hand in hand with a concerted endeavour to encourage youths to read widely on history, philosophy, sociology, development and the physical sciences. It would be a good idea if youth groups pooled resources to organise a sort of library lending service. Study-circles should also be initiated for the purpose of analysing what one has read. Talks, fora and seminars should be held not on the usual mundane topics like 'Youth and the

future' or 'Youth and development' but on themes such as 'The Economic decline facing the nation' or 'The problems generated by urbanisation' or 'The curbs upon freedom' etc. The knowledge gathered from one's readings should be brought to bear in discussions on those themes. As their intellectual power grows, our youth groups should attempt to produce pamphlets, journals and books on the great challenges confronting Malaysian society and perhaps, humankind as a whole at this juncture in history. It is worth observing that very few youth organisations have managed to produce writings of intellectual calibre.

Finally, in order to overcome the problem of ethnic polarization youths must try to evolve viable, workable remedies. There is no point in formulating 'national unity' policies for youth which deny the power and impact of ethnic and religious consciousness among the young. Such policies are bound to fail since they do not take into account the significance attached to 'identity' in multi-ethnic societies. In our approach to the problem, the first stage would require youth groups to study thoroughly their respective cultural and religious traditions. Such a study would enable youths to understand what constitutes the essence, the substance, of their cultures and religions. Cultural and religious identity would be defined in terms of this essence. In other words, a Muslim would be a Muslim because he upholds the Unity of God (Tauhid), fulfils his role as the Vicegerent of God (Khalifah Allah) and adheres to universal values and eternal principles of living. The moment identity is seen in this light – and not defined merely in terms of one's faithful observance of certain rituals and practices – it would be easier for a Muslim youth to communicate with his non-Muslim counterpart in some other cultural or religious organisation. Similarly, if a Buddhist or Hindu or Christian youth regards the commitment within his religion to the oneness of humankind and to universal spiritual values as the defining characteristics of his identity, then he would not have much difficulty working together with his Muslim brother.

That in fact is the second stage. Once the real meaning of identity is clearly understood, the various religious and cultural youth organisations in the country should explore their commonalities by examining specific concepts in their respective traditions. They could, for instance, look at how Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity view land,

natural resources, nature, technology, the family, the community, leadership etc. As they discover many similar ideas in their different religions and cultures, our youths will begin to realize that the forces that unite them are far more significant than the factors that separate them. Whether it is in relation to a virtue like freedom or in regard to a vice like corruption, there are undoubtedly striking affinities among the various religions.

Recognition of these affinities must lead logically to a comprehensive analysis of the structures and attitudes that keep the communities apart. Such an analysis is important for yet another reason. It is quite conceivable that when youths come to know that these are the real barriers to integration, they will get closer to one another for they will then realize that the problem is not 'the other community' or 'the other religion'. As they begin to see the flaws in the existing system, our youths should also try to visualize an alternative social order that will promote genuine understanding and love among the communities.

The three remedies we have suggested in this essay as a way of curing the three serious ills analysed earlier on, all deal with the question of consciousness. We do not apologise for this. For we are convinced that it is in the realm of consciousness that the real struggle lies.

Explanatory note

The above article was presented as a paper at a youth convention organised by the Malaysian Youth Council in Kuala Lumpur in December 1985.

SERVICE-CLUBS: SERVING HUMANITY?

Many Malaysians in the middle and upper classes feel that by participating in service-clubs they are serving humanity. Indeed, compared to other Third World countries Malaysia has a lot of service-clubs like the Jaycees, Rotary, Apex, Lions, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and so on. These clubs engage the energies of a fairly significant segment of the middle and upper echelons of Malaysian society.

Why are there so many service-clubs? It is partly because we have, in proportional terms, a sizeable middle-class which also enjoys a certain degree of prosperity. This middle-class is largely urban and is exposed constantly to Western influences. The 'service-club' is after all a Western institution associated with the urban, middle-class of North America and Western Europe.

It goes without saying that there are all sorts of considerations that motivate middle and upper class people to join service-clubs. For some it is a question of doing some charity. For others, it is an opportunity to socialize with one's own kind or to establish business contacts or to get to know important personalities. Yet others hope that through their contributions to service-clubs they would be rewarded with titles and medals.

Whatever the motives, we cannot deny that service-clubs have done some good. They have helped less fortunate individuals in specific ways like providing scholarships to poor students or sending a hole-in-the-heart child for surgery overseas or buying a wheelchair for some old folks' home.

However, service-clubs must be honest enough to recognise that what they are doing is very little measured against the magnitude of each and every one of the challenges confronting a Third World country like ours. By providing a little bit of milk and medicine and music here and there you are not even scratching the surface of the immense tragedy caused by poverty, disease and ignorance. Of course, the

situation in our country is not as bad as in certain other Third World countries. Nonetheless, there is still a great deal of poverty and exploitation in Malaysia; there are millions of people who continue to be deprived of the basic amenities of life.

No one expects service-clubs to help overcome the problems of poverty and deprivation among the masses. Service clubs, by the very nature of their goals and roles and because of the middle and upper class orientation of their members, cannot be expected to deal directly with these challenges. However, they should address themselves to certain specific aspects of these challenges if they are concerned about serving humanity. In order to do this, they must re-organise their activities.

Service-clubs must first pool their resources. They must learn to work together. While we can continue to have separate service-clubs, there must be a coordinating body at State level. This coordinating body will draw up four or five major State-wide projects every year and supervise their implementation. The sources of individual service-clubs will be mobilised for this purpose. A particular club may be put in charge of a certain project but all the others will help. Fund-raising will also be coordinated at State level. This will minimise competition among clubs for funds from the same sources. Different clubs will cooperate with one another in collecting money from the public. This money will then be put into a State-level consolidated fund which will be used to finance various service projects.

In order to help those poorer States which do not have the same financial reservoir as Kuala Lumpur or Penang with their numerous, established commercial enterprises and industries, it may be a good idea to create a Federal-level fund too. This fund can be used to channel assistance to financially-weaker areas in the country which have undertaken worthwhile service projects.

If there is state-wide and nation-wide coordination of service-club programmes in this manner, it is quite conceivable that ordinary people will derive tangible benefits from their activities. For instance, by pooling resources it should be possible to provide free shoes, bags and other such materials to poor school children on a State-wide basis to

supplement the government's free meal scheme. More important, service-clubs working together should have no problem in managing a State-wide mobile library service. In states like Kedah and Perlis there is a great need for an effective public health information programme. Service-clubs can combine their energies to bring this into being. Similarly, service-clubs should help organise a mobile eye-clinic in each State which is much more useful than a single national eye-hospital in Kuala Lumpur. The Society of the Blind, West Malaysia, has been asking for such facilities for a long while. Even with drug rehabilitation, the work of service-clubs would become much more meaningful, if there is State-level cooperation.

Apart from all these socio-economic challenges, service-clubs should also give serious attention to the ethnic problem in the country. Most people now realize that there is growing ethnic polarization especially among the young. Service-clubs working together should start a foster-home programme which will enable a youth from a certain community to stay for a few weeks in the home of someone from another community. This was done in Selangor in the mid-sixties. It is high time that service-clubs jointly undertook to organise an 'inter-ethnic foster home programme' in each of the States in the Federation.

It would be appreciated that none of the programmes suggested here can be effectively implemented by individual service-clubs working on their own. This is why cooperation and coordination is imperative. Only then will service-clubs move one step closer towards serving humanity.

Explanatory note

This short article first appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (September 1984).

**REFLECTIONS
ON
STATE & SOCIETY**

THE STATE AND TRANSNATIONALIZATION IN MALAYSIA

In this study of state and transnationalization in Malaysia, one has to begin by asking why the elites who inherited power from the British in 1957, were quite content to allow Malaysia (then Malaya) to remain on the periphery of an international system which ensured that the nation continued to be a "hewer of wood and drawer of water"? To put it differently, why were the elites so conservative in outlook that for at least a decade they did not want to evaluate even the most minor aspects of the country's unequal relationship with the western metropolitan centers that controlled and dominated the lives of ordinary people?

It was surely not just a question of certain attitudes and values which made the elites conservative. For while attitudes and values do condition economic and political behaviour, they do not explain the orientation of an entire group in power. The 1957 elites were conservative mainly because the social situation allowed them to be.

The Emergence of a Conservative State

To start with, there was no strong geopolitical base for the development of a powerful Malay nationalist movement (Malay because it was – and is – the politically pre-eminent community). There was no unified Malay state system; loyalty to individual Sultanates took precedence over loyalty to the larger Malay community. In the pre-colonial period, most of these individual Sultanates could hardly boast of any of the attributes of a state.

The nature of British colonial rule was a further impediment. By retaining the Malay rulers as symbols and by preserving the myth of Malay rule, the British thwarted the potential for the growth of radical nationalism. For though the substance of sovereignty was gone, the symbol of sovereignty was persuasive enough to deter the community from mounting a strong challenge against the colonial order. It was obvious that the colonialists have learned well their lessons from Burma and parts of India where direct rule was attempted through the annihilation of indigenous systems of governance.

By keeping the Sultanates, the British gained and Malay nationalism lost in yet another way. The unquestioning loyalty of Malay subjects to their Rulers – a trait of feudal societies everywhere – helped colonial rule to legitimize its rule. Since the loyalty factor ensured that the Malays would not challenge royal authority, there was no question of a direct, popular onslaught against colonialism. Indirect British rule also meant that the economic conditions for the emergence of an indigenous Malay proletariat were not present. If there was such a proletariat, Malay nationalism may well have been different. Greater consciousness of deprivation may have generated greater antipathy towards colonial rule. This happened in Java, where Dutch economic policies forced the birth of a Javanese working class of sorts. In Malaysia, on the other hand, it was immigrant, not indigenous, labour that was used in the plantations and tin mines, and in the construction of roads and buildings in the urban areas.

Equally important, British colonialism delayed the birth of a Malay middle-class, a Malay bourgeoisie which would have given a much more nationalist flavour – and fervour – to the independence movement. In both Indonesia and India, the struggle for independence was led by the middle-class which tended to be much more critical of alien rule compared to the traditional elites with their close relationship of privilege to the colonialists. Besides, the middle-class as a product of achievement rather than ascription, evinced by its education, was understandably resentful of the obstacles to its mobility imposed by the traditional and colonial elites. This frustration sharpened its anti-colonial perceptions. There was no such frustration within the Malay community since there was no definable middle-class as such. This was also why the traditional elites managed to lead the nationalist movement.

If anything, the presence of a huge immigrant population – a consequence of colonial rule – made it even more difficult to develop a powerful anti-colonial movement. Immigrant nonchalance towards the land apart, the British deliberately and effectively kept the Malays, Chinese and Indians compartmentalized through economic, administrative and educational measures which reflected in their essence the classic colonial doctrine of divide – and – rule. Without a common anti-colonial ideology which would keep together the different communities, nationalism was bound to develop into an inter-

ethnic arrangement seeking independence through negotiations rather than struggle.

There was, of course, a subordinate trend in the independence movement which was comparatively more radical and was made up of school teachers, journalists, minor civil servants and some business elements who even succeeded for a while in forging an inter-ethnic nationalist programme. Partly because of pressure emanating from a communally-divided society but mainly because of overt and covert colonial suppression, their movement fizzled out.

Nationalist radicalism however developed a somewhat unfavourable odour for another reason. The banned communist party which was part of the anti-colonial struggle decided on revolution through violence as its political strategy. The disruptive, sometimes bloody, activities of the party illegitimized radicalism in the eyes of a significant segment of society and, by implication, enhanced the credibility of the so-called moderate negotiators for independence.

Finally, the general economic prosperity of the country whose main beneficiaries were at the upper echelons of society lulled the people as a whole into a state of complacency. This was partly because a portion of the ordinary people themselves also gained a little bit from the favourable economic climate created by the rubber boom of the early fifties and the like. In such a situation, nationalist radicalism remained restricted to an infinitesimal group within the intelligentsia.

Characteristics of the Conservative State

It is apparent from what has been said that conservative nationalism gave birth to a conservative state. Nowhere was this conservatism more evident than in the economy. The Independence elites operated an economic system which was fundamentally similar to the colonial set-up. It was a system which continued to link a peripheral capitalist state to its metropolitan centre. This was clear from the way in which the economy relied upon the export of basic raw materials – such as rubber and tin – to the industrialized North. Indeed, even ownership, let alone control, of these commodities was very much in the hands of Britain and other western capitalist economies.

Politics in the first twelve years of Independence were also shaped to a great extent by the country's colonial background. There was a parliamentary democracy of sorts – with certain rights and liberties for the people, with political parties, trade unions and various social groups. At the same time, there were some obvious curbs and controls on the freedom of speech and assembly, developed from the colonial era. While some of these were directed against the use of violence for achieving political change, yet others sought to protect the existing capitalist order from meaningful challenge.

Certain arrangements at the level of international relations provided further protection to the status quo. Malaysia was linked, through a defence pact, to Britain and other commonwealth countries. The country's foreign policy, as a whole, was strongly oriented towards Britain and the western powers, though there were no special ties with the United States as such. Nonetheless, the anti-communist character of the nation was crystal-clear to friend and foe alike.

Like politics and foreign policy, the administrative system of the country was also very much influenced by the colonial tradition. Norms and values, procedures and practices aside, which were very British, the structure of power was decidedly elitistic. It was a top-down administrative hierarchy concerned largely with preserving the status quo with a degree of efficiency and competence.

Education was directed towards the same purpose. The main aim was to fulfill the needs of a market created by an economy which located society within the international capitalist system. The types of skills that were emphasized, the sort of knowledge that was stressed, indeed the very nature of the underlying ideology of the school system all ensured that the existing order perpetuated itself.

Even when it came to ethnic relations, the colonial imprint was unmistakable. There was no attempt to forge a genuine multi-ethnic basis to the nation. It was an inter-ethnic relationship which was encouraged as reflected in the structure of the ruling coalition, the Alliance itself. As in the colonial period there was a correlation between economic function and ethnic identity – though in certain spheres there were some changes. Education, language, religion and culture also mirrored some of the dichotomies of an ethnically-divided society.

However, unlike the colonialists, the Independence elites realized the importance of creating a united nation. This is why they tried to encourage the growth of a common language by making Malay the sole official and national language of the country. At the same time, they provided opportunities for the use and study of other local languages notably Chinese and Tamil. The same balance of ethnic interests was observed in the question of religion, with Islam as the official religion and freedom of worship for the followers of other religions. Developing a national culture with the indigenous Malay culture as the basis and the selective incorporation of elements from other cultures was also seen as essential to the process of uniting the different communities.

What was the impact of this state and its policies upon the people? How did this state fare in the first twelve years of Independence?

On the positive side, there was economic growth, political stability, administrative efficiency, a certain degree of public welfare, some ethnic harmony.

This was due to two main factors. First, since the international capitalist system had enjoyed tremendous growth and expansion from the early fifties onwards, well-managed economies on the periphery – like Malaysia – also gained considerably. That Malaysia was producing the very commodities which were in great demand in the industrialized capitalist world – like rubber and tin – was a factor of significance. Equally important, it chose to diversify its rich resource base by growing those crops which the international capitalist market needed most. The large-scale introduction of oil-palm was a case in point. Besides, the country had the infrastructure to respond effectively to new demands from the international capitalist system of which it was a part.

This brings us to the second factor. The national political leadership had certain attributes which also contributed towards economic development and stability. First, it undoubtedly had a sense of justice of sorts. It was a sense of justice which had no notion of unequal social structures, of unequal international economic relationships. Nonetheless there was a sense of justice which expressed itself in a desire to “look after” the poor and disadvantaged, to “care” for the less fortunate. It was, in other words, a sense of justice

influenced by feelings of charity, of benevolence. Perhaps, the background of a section of the ruling elites – especially the Prime Minister, the founding father of the state – was partly responsible for this. For being traditional elites with feudal backgrounds, whatever ideas of justice they possessed, were heavily influenced by a sense of paternalistic benevolence.

Second, the national leadership also manifested a sense of restraint in its attitude towards power and wealth. Compared to a number of other Third World elites in a similar phase of history, the leadership was less wanton, less rapacious. Its willingness to allow for open contest for power within the political system and its acceptance of social institutions like the judiciary and social groups like the trade union movement which operated with a certain degree of autonomy, were proof of this. Similarly, though the leadership was by no means free of venality, there is enough circumstantial evidence to suggest that it did not indulge in massive, organized corruption. On the other hand, it can be argued that the opportunities did not avail themselves since the role of the state in development and the nature of economic ventures were different at that time.

In any case, since restraint was undeniably an attribute, the social background of the ruling elites may have played some part. Given their aristocratic and administrative backgrounds, these elites had, in the past, enjoyed some deference, some power, some wealth, however symbolic, however superficial, and for that reason, did not lose all bearings when confronted with overwhelming authority and abundant wealth.

Third, there was also a sense of tolerance. The accommodative attitude of the Malay ruling elites towards the aspirations of the non-Malays especially with regard to citizenship and cultural rights revealed a readiness to give-and-take, to concede, not always evident in groups that are secure in their political dominance. Of course, there are many other reasons that explain the Malay/non-Malay compromise in the fifties. Nonetheless, leadership attitude was also a factor. And tolerance, like restraint and justice, can be attributed to the social location of an elite group which felt less threatened by the other ethnic communities since its own position in society was safe and secure, given its administrative (administrative and aristocratic)

antecedents. It was not just the aristocrats whose status was, of course, inherited; even the leading administrators were either appointed by the hereditary Rulers as in the case of Chief Ministers in the Malay states or protected from competition by ethnic quotas, as in the case of the civil service. It was their status roles or occupational situations then which were partly responsible for their tolerance.

Though the international capitalist system and Malaysia's position in it, and the national leadership, helped to ensure a certain degree of economic development and political stability in the first twelve years of independence, there were very clear indications that the real challenges confronting the vast majority of the people were not receiving the attention they deserved. Poverty, the bane of the Third World, remained a serious scourge. While economic growth resulted in some social mobility, whole segments of society continue to be trapped in perpetual stagnation. Most of all, the economy as a whole was totally dependent upon the metropolitan centres of the West which determined the pace and character of local development. It was a shame that the years of prosperity were not used to create a strong scientific base and to lay the foundations for autonomous industrial development or even to initiate meaningful agrarian reform.

In the political arena, the various curbs and controls which have been mentioned hampered and hindered the growth of a full-fledged participatory democracy. The Internal Security Act, in particular, which allowed for detention without trial was a major psychological deterrent to popular involvement in the democratic process.

Likewise, while there was a degree of ethnic interaction and apparent ethnic harmony, the potential for ethnic conflict was real. A number of social indicators portended this danger. For example, the nature of development was such that there was an obvious paucity of Malays in the professions, commerce and industry. In a situation where some social mobility was taking place, especially at the middle and upper levels, this was certainly unhealthy. Similarly, among a new generation of non-Malays there was a desire for more equal participation in the political process which was not possible within the existing order of

with corruption, though not as rampant as in some other
were already clear signs, in the first twelve years of

Independence, that the scourge was getting worse especially among the political elites. This was one of the reasons why those in power sought to reduce the effectiveness of the nation's Anti-Corruption Agency by gagging its chief in the late sixties.

These and other major challenges – some of which have been analysed in this essay – were, however, not the most important causes for the changes that took place in the complexion of the state in the post-1969 period. Of course, Malay and non-Malay aspirations – in the economic sphere, on the one hand, and in the political sphere, on the other – had something to do with the ethnic riot of May 13, 1969. Nonetheless there were other trends at work which were significant in influencing the pattern of the state after 1969 and which we shall examine later. In the meantime, let us reflect upon the character of the state in the first twelve years of Independence especially in relation to one crucial question. To what extent was the external environment as against internal factors responsible for the type of state that existed during that period?

Reflections

(1) In the evolution of a conservative brand of nationalism which spawned a conservative state, colonialism played an important role. Some of its policies and the structural changes it effected helped breed conservatism. At the same time, a number of domestic factors – geopolitics, feudalism, ethnicity – also contributed towards the same end. However, on balance, colonialism appears to have had a greater impact.

(2) In the early post-independence period, the colonial background of the country exerted a decisive influence upon the nascent state. It was undoubtedly more significant than the international capitalist system. Internal social forces including the ethnic environment, elite interests and the nature of political leadership, were also crucial.

(3) In the short run, international capitalist dominance as such did not prove to be an insurmountable obstacle to social justice in certain spheres. Indeed, the qualities and orientation of the political leadership appear to be able to mitigate some of the adverse effects of international capitalist dominance and control.

The post "May 13th" State: its genesis

That there were changes in the role, function and character of the state after "May 13th" is undeniable. The ethnic riot itself was not the cause of these changes. It merely served to separate a certain phase in post-independence political history from its succeeding period.

The significant expansion of Chinese capital at the middle and higher levels in the wake of a certain degree of transference of ownership of British mining, plantation and commercial interests to local hands created the impression that non-Malays as a whole were becoming prosperous at the expense of the Malays. In an ethnically-oriented society, such a perception was potentially dangerous.

This was especially so since the structure of Malay society was also undergoing a transformation of sorts. With the universalization of education – rural education in particular – more and more Malays were beginning to move into higher-paying, urban occupations. A concomitant development was a rise in the consciousness of the importance of economic strength among a new generation of young Malays. In a sense, the more widespread application of ethnic quotas and ethnic preferences on behalf of the Malays towards the late sixties reinforced this consciousness.

While the nucleus of a Malay middle-class seeking economic power was developing, a second echelon leadership was also coming into being within the United Malays' National Organization (UMNO), the mainstay of the ruling coalition. These second echelon leaders felt – and perhaps rightly – that they were not moving fast enough up the party ladder. Some of them perceived the President of the party, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who as we have noted was also the Prime Minister, as the major impediment.

The decline of the ruling coalition (the Alliance) in the 1969 general election, the riot that followed and the state of Emergency which was declared for 21 months, provided the opportunity for the second-echelon clique to mount a successful challenge against Tunku Abdul Rahman. As in similar situations elsewhere, the new aspirants gathered around an established leader associated with the Tunku who had long been designated his "heir-apparent". With Tun Abdul Razak firmly ensconced as the new party President and Prime Minister, the

path was now paved for the rapid rise of a new generation of UMNO leaders.

If this change in leadership is just a question of one man taking over from another following a veiled clique conflict, its significance to our analysis would be very limited. Tun Razak's assumption of office — as we have already hinted — heralded the rise of a state that would come to represent more and more the interests and aspirations of a Malay middle-class which was then still in an embryonic stage. It is the character and ideology of this state that we shall now examine.

Towards a Malay Capitalist State

In a certain sense, it was clear from the outset that establishing and developing Malay capitalism was going to be a cherished goal of this class. Two publications associated with this new phase in Malay politics provided indications of this. The first was *The Malay Dilemma* of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the present Prime Minister which in a nutshell argued for a protective ethnic policy biased towards the Malay community that would ensure the emergence of a Malay capitalist class. The second was the *Revolusi Mental* (Mental Revolution) authored by a group of individuals (among them Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the present Education Minister) which attempted to enumerate the attitudinal obstacles in the way of the growth of an acquisitive capitalist spirit among the Malays. It even spelled out visually the sort of affluent, stylish capitalist the Malay should aspire to become.

Various policies of the state in the post-1970 period embody this capitalist ideal. There is, to start with, the New Economic Policy (NEP). Its implementation in the last 14 years has established beyond any doubt that its main purpose is the creation of Malay professional, commercial and industrial elites. The emergence of this elite stratum is part of the general capitalist orientation of the NEP borne out by all sorts of privileges and quotas aimed at promoting Malay wealth. Non-Malay capitalists, it must be added, especially those who are linked to Malay officialdom have on the whole also benefitted from the NEP's lop-sided emphasis.

The ethnic underpinnings of the policy are most apparent in the

way in which public institutions are geared towards the goal of incubating a Malay capitalist class. Non-Malay elites are reacting to this with as much chauvinism by setting up their own ethnic outfits aimed at strengthening their capitalist interests. It is this process of communalizing every economic institution and endeavour that has given rise to a total ethnic culture. So strong is this culture that it has now become the overwhelming reality in Malaysian society.

If anything, the ethnic character of economic life is further reinforced by religious dichotomies. These dichotomies have become more pronounced with the exclusive, doctrinaire revivalism that is developing within Islam. It could of course be argued that this sort of revivalist Islam is not really associated with the state — since it is more closely linked to the ideology of the major Malay opposition party. This is true except that the state is also responding to Islamic revivalism.

More important, the state has on its own accord sought to legitimize its authority through Islam. Its Islamization programme is part of this and manifests characteristics which obviously attempt to justify capitalist ideas and institutions. Thus, religion becomes yet another hand-maiden of a whole system directed towards capital and the maximization of profits.

The political and administrative system also serves the same purpose. The hierarchical structure of authority and the centralization of power at the apex are, to some extent, features of an unequal economic order. Capitalist interests are protected and perpetuated in yet another, more blatant way. The constant emphasis upon communal unity and ethnic solidarity has a definite aim: it is to prevent the masses from realizing that there are divergent, often conflicting, group and class interests within the same community. Such a realization especially when it begins to transcend ethnic boundaries can become a serious threat to the entire capitalist edifice.

As the drive towards wealth accumulation within the Malay capitalist class becomes more intense, the desire to acquire more and more political power becomes even greater. For it is control over the state by a political elite committed to Malay capitalism that facilitates the process. The more total the control, the easier the consolidation of the power of a capitalist class. It is worth noting that once everything

is subordinated to this goal, other aspects of the political system like parliamentary elections and parliamentary debates become less important. Indeed, anything that is capable of checking the power of the elites — whether it is an opposition political party or an autonomous public interest society or an independent labour movement — is shoved aside with contempt. This is one of the reasons why there has been a decline of parliamentary democracy in the last few years. Severe curbs and controls are, however, rationalized as endeavours to break away from the Westminster-type democracy and to evolve a more indigenous political system.

In international relations too a shift away from Britain and the colonial past is only too obvious. This is, in a sense, not too difficult to understand since a second generation leadership without any intellectual or cultural contact with Britain is bound to feel less sentimental about “traditional” ties — unlike the traditional elites. Seen in this light, the “Look East” policy of the present leadership is a measure of the distance the country has travelled since the first generation leaders faded into the background. Similarly, it must be recognized that it was only when the attachment to Britain began to wane that Malaysia became more non-aligned.

The Capitalist State: An Evaluation

If one weighs the positive as against the negative attributes of the post-'69 capitalist state, its greater sense of political independence and its non-aligned status would be among the plus points. One should also perhaps add that the state today has a much better appreciation of its own nationalistic aspirations.

However, there is a need for some caution here. The nationalism the state pursues and the sovereignty it upholds are defined within the perspective of capitalist relations. This explains why the state remains dependent upon the international capitalist system — in spite of dwindling ties with Britain. Malaysia's growing dependence upon Japan is proof of this. Indeed, as far as loans, investments, technology, consultancies and markets go, the nation shows no signs of reducing its dependence. If anything, the way in which the present leadership is going about developing heavy industries is bound to increase further its dependence upon the centres of international capitalism.

Dependence exacts a heavy toll upon the nation and its people. Apart from the massive outflow of capital and profits which impoverishes the local society, dependence stunts the development of an autonomous scientific and technological base. There is no need to emphasize that such a base is a vital pre-condition for the emancipation of a post-colonial state. Besides, economic and technological dependence generate other types of dependence which have an equally devastating impact upon society.

There is information dependence, intellectual dependence, cultural dependence. All these "dependences" reinforce development in a direction that is inimical to the interests of the vast majority of the people. For instance, as long as there is intellectual dependence upon the dominant centres of knowledge in the international system, ideas on social change, the models of development that one seeks to emulate, will continue to be conditioned by alien experiences which may be detrimental to the well-being of one's own society. Finally, dependence helps to perpetuate unequal structures in almost every sphere of society within the domestic setting. For it continually strengthens (as long as the international capitalist system is prospering) local economic, cultural and political elites who serve as the conduits, the channels, for the maintenance and perpetuation of the system of dependence.

What this means is that dependence is partly responsible for the persistence of poverty and the aggravation of economic disparities within the country. The failure of successive post-'69 political leaderships to tackle both these related problems is yet another example of their negative performance. Various vested interests in both the rural and urban sectors and within all communities impede the resolution of these problems. It is a fact that over the years, with the emphasis on capitalist economic policies of growth and productivity, poverty has become worse and income disparities have widened considerably.

The situation is exacerbated by the increasing pervasiveness of ethnic policies which we have already observed. The consequence of this is the polarization of the various communities — especially the widening chasm between Malays and non-Malays. As social interaction between communities declines partly because of ethnic policies, the possibility of creating a genuinely united society forged by shared values and interests becomes dimmer and dimmer.

Just as the communal situation has worsened, so has corruption become more serious. Once again, it is the total system — profit-maximization, the consumerist culture, the acquisitive psychology, the centralization of power, the absence of sufficient public scrutiny — that is responsible for the deterioration. It is perhaps also true that present-day leadership is, in a sense, less restrained in its attitude to wealth partly because actual circumstances have changed.

An environment fraught with all sorts of grave challenges has also tempted a leadership which has neither the will nor the ability to overcome them, to resort to various authoritarian measures to keep itself in power. Increasing authoritarianism, however, is not just a reaction to dissent and social unrest. The type of development that is being pursued also tends to concentrate power within the elites. This process is assisted by a culture of acquiescence, which in turn is a product of both state control and various historical factors.

All the negative characteristics of the post-'69 capitalist state — repression, corruption, ethnic polarization, lopsided development — are to a great extent typical of other Third World societies. Inherited from the past, these characteristics have tended to persist mainly because there has been no thorough, holistic social transformation. In the case of Malaysia, what happened in 1969, as we saw, was a change in leadership accompanied by the rise of a Malay middle-class. Since the change took place within the same structure of relations, within the same hierarchy of power, it did not lead to any major transformation. Besides, there was no massive dislocation in the social structure which would have released forces that could generate meaningful change. The type of transference of power that transpired in 1969 — and all the subsequent instances of political succession — belongs to a pattern that holds true for much of the Third World. Sometimes, as in the case of Malaysia, political succession is orderly and peaceful and achieved through established procedures.

In some countries there have even been alterations of power accomplished with minimum violence — as in the case of India. Oftentimes, however, leadership change occurs after a bloody coup. But whatever the mode of change the underlying pattern of economic and political power remains the same.

The Capitalist State: Why It Has Endured

This evaluation of the post-'69 capitalist state prompts us to ask: Why, in spite of all the problems it is responsible for, has the capitalist state endured? Three sets of reasons can be advanced.

First, by continuing to remain within the international capitalist system, Malaysia benefited by its growth and expansion which was remarkable up to the mid-seventies at least. Of course the system is now facing what threatens to be the beginning of a severe crisis. Nonetheless, while the going was good, Malaysia which produced those commodities that the system demanded – as noted earlier – was able to reap some prosperity.

Alignment to international capitalism helped to maintain the system in yet another way. It meant easy access to all those luxury goods which an expanding middle-class that enjoyed considerable mobility took for granted. Securing the loyalty of this class was – and is – an important factor in ensuring the perpetuation of the state.

Second, as in the case of the independence elites, the various leaders of the post-'69 state also possess certain attributes which have helped to keep them in power. In spite of what has been said about poverty and disparities, there is no denying there is still some concern about social justice. Similarly, whatever the communal tendencies, there is still a sense of ethnic tolerance, a recognition of the need for balance and accommodation. Likewise, post-'69 leaders continue to allow for some dissent. By providing limited scope for articulation and action to contending elites in this way, they have succeeded to some extent to retain the confidence of the people as a whole in their administration. At the same time, within their own rank-and-file, the post-'69 leaders have done well to provide mobility to emerging elites which in turn has contributed substantially to the stability of UMNO in particular. And UMNO's stability – given its dominance – is vital to the system's stability.

All this should not give the impression that the state has not used the other method to maintain its power: repression. In fact repression – as has already been observed – is on the increase. It is the shrewd manipulation of the instruments of coercion and repression

which has helped the post-'69 leaders to reinforce their overwhelming strength in almost every sphere of society.

Finally, the socio-historical setting as it exists at this point in time also tends to favour the state. Within the Malay community, for instance, the attitude of unquestioning loyalty to the principal leader — an attitude alluded to earlier on — works to the advantage of the powers-that-be. Among the non-Malays, their immigrant past continues to condition political thinking to some extent, insofar as ethnic security is preferred to social change. This again benefits an inter-ethnic coalition which promises ethnic security after generating ethnic fears. Equally important, the political culture of Malaysian society as a whole has developed in such a way that fear of total change has become a significant trait. This is to be expected in a society where ethnic apprehensions have become pervasive partly because of state indoctrination. An over-cautious attitude to change, to say the least, develops easily in such a situation.

Though the capitalist state has perpetuated itself as a result of these and other factors, there are clear signs even now to indicate that its continued viability is no longer assured. The crisis in international capitalism — a crisis which in the end will expose the fundamental weaknesses of the entire system — has had a severe impact upon the Malaysian economy. Given poor market conditions in the West, prices of our export commodities have been plummeting. Industrial investments from the West are not forthcoming because of certain fiscal policies in the United States in particular. At the same time, the protectionism of the industrialized economies is making it difficult for Malaysian manufactures to penetrate their markets. The outcome of all this is an economy which is now faced with the greatest challenge it has known since Independence in 1957.

However, more significant than the international system are various changes that have been taking place within Malaysian society itself. Segments of the Malay rural population are becoming more conscious of relative poverty, corruption and discrimination based upon party affiliation. They are reacting to these injustices in various ways. At the same time, sections of the non-Malay communities are beginning to protest against what they perceive as neglect and unfair treatment by

expressing their grievances on specific socio-economic issues. In both cases, ethnic sentiments are providing a sharper edge to social protest.

These processes are in turn supported by a growing working class which is beginning to show signs of restlessness. The middle-class is also expanding rapidly and is becoming more and more divided into competing political ideologies and economic cliques. As this happens, the ruling elites will discover that they can no longer be sure of the total allegiance of the middle-class. This will be a crucial factor in the decline of the influence of the ruling elites. If, in the midst of all this, the economic situation becomes worse and mobility for a significant segment of the middle-class slows down considerably, the capitalist state itself will be in peril.

However, before the state can be challenged effectively, there will have to be massive social dislocation and a powerful desire for change among all sectors of society. Malaysia does not seem to be anywhere near such a scenario.

Reflections

- (1) The ascendancy of a middle-class leadership in a situation where structural relationships have not changed merely helps to perpetuate the existing system with some modifications.
- (2) The strengthening of the capitalist state has been accompanied by further aggravation of the various challenges confronting the polity.
- (3) The development of capitalism in a periphery state brings about all sorts of structural changes which, in the long run, threaten to undermine the system itself.
- (4) The effect of the international capitalist system upon the local milieu, though significant, is just one of the causes of the decline of the Malaysian economy in particular and Malaysian society in general.
- (5) Similarly, if the capitalist state has managed to endure, it is because of a variety of reasons including the strength of the international capitalist system which was evident until recently.
- (6) In the post-'69 capitalist state the role of political leadership in

ensuring the survival of the system is crucial.

Explanatory note

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25 YEARS OF MERDEKA

Merdeka is an occasion for celebration. It is also a moment for reflection.

In the history of a nation, in the evolution of a society, 25 years is a mere twinkling of the eye, a small footstep in the timeless march of eternity. For the individual, however, 25 years is a long while. The vast majority of Malaysians born in 1957, for instance, would have been working for a number of years now. A sizeable portion of them would have started families of their own. Their work and family situations would have developed into a pattern of sorts — a pattern which will, in all likelihood, remain with them for the rest of their lives.

Looking back over the last 25 years of Merdeka, an ordinary Malaysian will conclude that, on the whole, things have been neither too good nor too bad. It is the kind of picture that emerges when certain positive trends have been outweighed by certain negative tendencies. We shall examine both the positive and negative aspects in relation to 4 main areas (a) economic and social change (b) administration (c) politics and (d) ethnic relations and culture. Needless to say, there are other crucial dimensions of national life which we will not be able to evaluate in this essay.

POSITIVE TRENDS:

Economic and social change

To start with, the government has succeeded in extending health and educational facilities to a huge segment of the population. This is quite significant considering that even when the British colonial overlord was about to relinquish power these amenities were available to only a few. Better health facilities are partly responsible for the decrease in infant mortality, the increase in life expectancy and the general decline in the incidence of certain diseases like malaria, cholera and small-pox. More extensive educational facilities have at the same time helped to reduce illiteracy.

Education has also played a crucial role in improving incomes and enhancing mobility for certain categories. Via the educational

ladder, the children of farmers, fishermen and hawkers have become doctors, lawyers and engineers. Other economic changes have also accelerated this process. New opportunities in commerce and industry, the expansion of all sorts of services, the growth of the professions, have contributed significantly towards the same goal. Similarly, new land schemes and innovations in agricultural production, apart from government subsidies and good international prices for our crops, have generated better incomes for certain groups within the rural economy.

At the same time there has been some agricultural diversification partly in response to international market demands but also because of domestic policy. Diversification has endowed the economy with some advantages compared to countries which are wholly dependent upon a single crop. To this, one should add the government's industrialization programme which — whatever its weaknesses — helped overcome the chronic unemployment problem of the sixties.

More important in the long run is the endeavour to assume ownership of our major resources like rubber and tin. Though local ownership does not mean local control over market or technology, it nonetheless affords an opportunity to direct the development of these sectors of the economy in the interest of the nation.

Administration

Economic planning and performance would not have achieved any success if the administrative system had been totally inefficient. There is, without any doubt at all, a certain degree of competence within our public services. Besides, for all its short-comings the bureaucracy, on the whole, remains fairly responsive to public grievances — as proven by various episodes in the last 25 years.

Politics

Like the economy and administration, the political kaleidoscope also manifests certain redeeming features. There have been periodic elections at both federal and state levels with some democratic choice. There is political participation and views which are different from the government's are heard now and then. Most of all, perhaps, we have acquired considerable maturity in the intricate art of political succession. Prime Minister has succeeded Prime Minister on no less than

three occasions in a peaceful, orderly manner – a rare accomplishment in the Third World. Even at other levels of government and in various political parties, office-holders have changed with very little disruption.

Ethnic relations and culture

The other area of Malaysian life where a major transformation has occurred without creating a serious convulsion is in the use of the national language. Malay is today a language of effective inter-ethnic communication among a new generation of young Malaysians. Its growth does not, however, mean that Malaysia has ceased to be a linguistically diverse nation. Indeed cultural diversity expressed through the different religions and cultures of the land is still very much in vogue.

If anything, there is a greater awareness now of one's religious and cultural roots. What is positive about this awareness – especially of Islam among Muslim youths – is the desire to forge a new social order which is not a caricature of some Western experiment.

Apart from new practices and new perceptions vis-a-vis language and religion, the last decade in particular has witnessed another significant change that involves ethnic relations. With the assistance of various state policies and programmes, Malays and other indigenous peoples have been incorporated into commerce, industry and the professions, on a massive scale. Considering that these spheres of activity were non-Malay dominated for a long while – a consequence of colonial economic and educational policies – it is commendable that a transformation in ethnic composition has been achieved without straining the social fabric beyond a certain point.

All this in fact leads us to a final comment about the positive trends since Merdeka. On the whole we have enjoyed a great deal of security and stability compared to most Third World societies and a few First and Second World countries. Security and stability are important to people everywhere. Our achievement is all the more remarkable when it is remembered that we live in a politically unstable region which has experienced so much upheaval in recent times. More than that, ours is the most violent century in man's history: every page of it drips with blood. And yet we have remained quite free of mayhem and massacre.

The Reasons

What is the explanation for our limited success in the first 25 years of independence? Our prosperity has had a great deal to do with it. We are part of an international capitalist system which experienced tremendous growth from the early fifties to the middle of the seventies. Our export commodities like rubber, tin, timber, palm-oil and petroleum were in great demand and fetched good prices. Apart from purchasing our raw materials, the industrialised countries also saw Malaysia as a lucrative outlet for their investments. While they reaped huge profits from their commercial and industrial ventures, we too derived some income from their economic activities which in turn helped to augment the nation's wealth.

As we grew and expanded within this international system we were able to provide services and subsidies to the lower classes while ensuring that the middle and upper classes continued to enjoy handsome profits and attractive salaries. Because a portion of our revenue was channelled to meet some of the needs of the weak, though the state as a whole was inclined towards the strong, we managed to maintain social stability.

However, the ride we hitched with a buoyant capitalist system does not explain everything. If the national leadership did not embody certain qualities, all our good fortune would have come to nought. It is undeniable that since Merdeka we have had leaders who do care in their own way for the poor and needy. They do not lack a sense of social justice. Likewise, in spite of individual excesses the leadership as a collectivity has all along exercised a certain amount of restraint towards both wealth and power. It is equally true that it has manifested a certain degree of tolerance and has, at times, displayed a greater willingness to accommodate than some other leaderships in the region.

Be that as it may, there are serious shortcomings which we should not gloss over. It is these negative aspects of Malaysian society that we should now analyse.

NEGATIVE TRENDS:

Economic and Social change

For a land flowing with milk and honey, it is a pity that a sizeable segment of the population is still without some of the basic necessities

of life. 52.8 per cent of the rural population in Peninsular Malaysia for instance does not have piped water. The vast majority of the working class cannot even hope to own their own homes. In fact 37 per cent of total housing units in Kuala Lumpur can be classified as squatter huts. Slums exist in all our major cities and towns.

It is obvious then that certain fundamental needs like housing have yet to be fulfilled. This is compounded by the fact that poverty is still a serious problem. The Fourth Malaysia Plan (1981-1985) estimates that 29.2% of our people live below the poverty-line. It is quite likely that poverty in reality is much worse than what statistics indicate. For one thing, the official poverty-line income which was estimated in 1977 to be \$246.05 for rural households and \$272.59 for urban households seems quite unrealistic. Even in 1977, the monthly incomes stated above would not have been sufficient to meet the basic needs of an average family. Today, the situation would have deteriorated further, with a 10 per cent inflation rate. Many thousands of families living just above the official poverty-line would have been impoverished in the last two years or so. Also, it should be borne in mind that even when poverty was reduced in certain sectors in the past, it was due largely to state subsidies as in the case of padi and favourable international prices as in the case of rubber. With the decline in national revenue and the lack of international demand for rubber, we cannot depend upon subsidies or export prices any more.

Further impoverishment of the poor will only exacerbate growing disparities between the upper and lower classes. These disparities have become more marked since Merdeka. They are reflected in various spheres of the economy. In the padi economy, for instance, there is much more concentration of land ownership in the hands of rich landlords now than at the time of Independence. In the timber business the dominance of a wealthy, well-connected minority is even more obvious today than in the past. Likewise the private housing market is controlled by a few powerful developers. This explains to some extent why 80-90 per cent of housing in Malaysia is priced within the income range of only 10-15 per cent of the population.

Similarly, in the cement, flour and sugar industries there are deeply entrenched interests whose manipulations have increased

manifold the miseries of the poor. Indeed, in the wholesaling trade as a whole and in related activities like transportation the role of private monopolies is quite apparent. All this is facilitated by a financial network which also favours the rich and the strong. Generally, the poor have very little access to commercial capital of the sort that banks and finance companies represent. Even when it is available to them, the rules that govern loans and credit facilities defeat them from the outset.

All in all then, the Malaysian economy, after 25 years of Merdeka, is a very lop-sided economy serving the interests of those in the higher income echelons rather than meeting the basic needs of those in the lower-income categories. In this connection, it has been estimated that those in the \$1000 plus income bracket benefit 3½ times as much from public investment compared to those in the \$300 minus income group. To be convinced of this one has merely to take into account the proportion of public money that goes into the building of airports, superhighways, skyscrapers and the like.

The lop-sided nature of our economic development is borne out by other features of our planning too. We have not given enough emphasis to food, both in terms of production and its equitable distribution. Agriculture in our country is almost synonymous with cash-crops. This is a hangover from colonial thinking. Food production, in fact, should be at the core of the economy. The development of industries should be linked to food and other aspects of agriculture. Unfortunately, industrialization in Malaysia has followed a pattern that is common to many Third World societies. Our industrial sites are mere enclaves within the Western and Japanese industrial empires. The bulk of Malaysian industries have not developed endogenously with firm roots in our own resources, skills and crafts. The danger of depending too much on others for our industrialization was underscored recently by the sharp decline in our export earnings from textiles and electronic products.

The failure to create endogenous industries is, in a sense, an outcome of yet another flaw in our economy. After 25 years we have yet to develop a strong scientific base. Such a base geared towards fundamental research in the various sciences is vital for the growth of both our agricultural and industrial sectors and indeed of our society as a

whole. Only with a solid scientific foundation can we become genuinely self-reliant. Otherwise, we will go on importing technology and imitating technics and remain dependent on those who have developed their own autonomous scientific tradition.

This is one of the main reasons why Malaysia is still so dependent on the West and Japan. But dependency is also the product of an entire structure and outlook which does not generate the prerequisites for self-reliance. Consequently, we have become dependent upon foreign technology, foreign markets, foreign goods, foreign investments, foreign consultants and now foreign loans. No country has developed through dependency. On the contrary, dependency guarantees continued underdevelopment.

Administration

Just as our economic system exhibits many negative characteristics, so does our administrative set-up evince some unhealthy tendencies. Over the last decade, the bureaucracy has grown by leaps and bounds. While some of this growth was necessary in view of the expanded role of government, a lot of it could have been avoided in the interest of rational, orderly development. As it is, many agencies and statutory bodies exist mainly to provide jobs especially for our university graduates. A huge, sprawling bureaucracy is not only a burden to the nation's finances but also gives rise to the centralization of power and the consolidation of a rigid hierarchy of authority. It regulates and conditions the lives of ordinary people to such an extent that initiative and independence are often lost. The Malaysian bureaucracy has become so penetrative that the autonomy of various groups and institutions has been adversely affected.

What is equally bad, a bureaucratized society tends to conceal corruption more effectively than a non-bureaucratized society. It is commonly believed that over the last 25 years corruption has become much more prevalent and pronounced. The inexplicable delay in completing public projects and the illogical increase in their costs, apart from the ostentatious life-styles of public servants, are some of the circumstantial evidence. Undoubtedly, graft is not confined to the public sector. Private sector corruption in Malaysia is perhaps equally serious. However, both in the public and private sectors, corruption at the level of the elites is harder to detect.

Increased public sector expenditure with wider interaction between the public sector and the domestic private sector, on the one hand, and Trans-National Corporations (TNCs), on the other, have also contributed towards the aggravation of corruption. At the same time, the pervasive impact of a consumer culture, so evident these days, must have tempted many an individual to give and to receive bribes.

Politics

While successive leaderships since Merdeka have failed to curb corruption, they have succeeded in controlling freedom. There is, to start with, the Internal Security Act (ISA) of 1960 which provides for prolonged detention without trial. Though the government has always maintained that it is directed solely against communists and "anti-nationals", the ISA has had the effect of dissuading even non-communist patriots from criticising or challenging the powers-that-be. It is quite conceivable that the way in which the ISA had been implemented in the past is partly responsible for this fear. Besides, as long as there is no open trial, people will continue to harbour doubts about the real motive behind the law.

Over the last 2 decades the ISA has assumed an even harsher character brought about mainly by amendments which interpret national security so widely as to include everything. Equally important, since 1969, new laws have been formulated to restrict trade unions, interest groups, professional bodies, student associations and academic organisations from participating directly and actively in the political process. Even opposition political parties – which promise to be the last vestiges of democratic participation – face insurmountable obstacles in their attempts to communicate with the public.

The decline of all other actors in the political process has been concomitant with the consolidation of the position of an overwhelmingly strong Barisan Nasional led by an even more powerful UMNO. Since UMNO constitutes the core of Executive power, this has meant in reality greater Executive dominance. Indeed, in the last few years, the strength of the Executive has grown tremendously in relation to the Legislature to a point where the former even exercises some of the functions of the latter. Similarly, the Executive has taken over roles which strictly belong to the Judiciary.

As the Executive extends its tentacles of power, dissent becomes weaker and weaker. Dissent has never really enjoyed any legitimacy in the land. It is tolerated as long as it does not inconvenience the power-holders. And yet dissent is the mark of a genuine democracy; it signifies the existence of real freedom. What the government allows and sometimes encourages is discussion over issues of administrative implementation. Thus the press highlights specific episodes of poverty. But there is no debate on the underlying causes of poverty or how and why the existing social system breeds poverty. By the same token, newspapers may write copiously on how we are 'going East' but there is a reluctance to evaluate the Look East policy itself, its underlying assumptions, its goals, its relationship to social change.

From the newspapers' point of view this is perhaps understandable since they are also controlled by various laws – the most insidious of which is, of course, the Printing Presses Act that allows the government to revoke their licences at any time. But the important thing is this: the public should not mistake the airing of administrative grievances for dissent. After all, even in communist societies the newspapers carry columns and columns of complaints against the administrative machinery of the State. On fundamentals – the basis of the nation, its philosophy, its direction – a communist regime does not tolerate differences of opinion. When it does, we can conclude that it upholds the right of dissent and practises genuine democracy!

Since an administrative state – or a state that allows only administrative criticisms – does not debate matters of principle or policy, it becomes obsessed with position and power. This is in fact one of the negative trends in Malaysian politics which is becoming more and more obvious with the years. Politics revolves around contests for posts. They are an activity that absorbs so much of the nation's time and energy. After the national and state elections one's attention is rivetted to the UMNO Youth and Wanita elections and then to the MCA elections and then the MIC elections and the Gerakan elections and so on and so forth. It is significant that in all these elections most of the candidates do not bother to discuss basic issues pertaining to economic development or public integrity or culture. All that matters is who wins and who occupies which seat.

Ethnic Relations and Culture

Perhaps the only issues of social import that receive a little bit of attention in a somewhat superficial and emotional manner are those that pertain to ethnicity. This is yet another characteristic of the nation 25 years after Merdeka. Ethnicity pervades the entire social fabric. Institutions, issues and personalities are perceived in ethnic perspectives. Indeed, most political parties, trade unions, and interest groups represent or reflect either Malay or non-Malay ethnic interests or inclinations.

It is not difficult to understand why ethnic consciousness has become so rampant. Part of the problem is psychological. Among a large number of non-Malays there is still a lack of appreciation of the Malay cultural background of the country, the link between the Malay community and the political evolution of Malaysian society, and finally the disadvantaged economic position of the majority of Malays.

Similarly, within a substantial section of the Malay community, there is hardly any willingness to admit that there must be acceptance of the non-Malays as equal citizens of what has evolved into a multi-ethnic society or that it would not be fair to expect a new generation of non-Malays to continue to pay the price for injustices committed by colonial rule.

More than the psychological relationship between Malays and non-Malays, it is actual public policies which have led to deterioration in ethnic ties. When policies in education, employment, housing, business, industry and other areas of activity which affect the lives of many thousands of people are based upon ethnic considerations, one should not be surprised that ethnic consciousness becomes all pervasive. Today, after a decade of pronounced ethnic policies, a lot of vested interests have emerged which would want to ensure that ethnic divisions remain since they benefit directly and indirectly from them. These interests can be found among both Malays and non-Malays, especially in the upper strata of society.

If anything, Islamic resurgence – its positive points notwithstanding – has also, ironically enough, strengthened ethnic consciousness. It would be a sad mistake to view Islamic resurgence in

the Malaysian context as a flowering of universal values, as a quest for justice and equality that transcends ethnic boundaries. On the contrary, Islamic resurgence has a great deal to do with the question of Malay identity, with the desire to advance Malay economic rights, with the problem of preserving Malay political power. As a reaction to this resurgence, non-muslim youths are also beginning to assert their ethnic identities through Buddhist, Hindu and Christian movements.

With the reinforcement of ethnicity through religion, it has become more difficult for many groups and individuals to emphasize with others outside their own ethnic or religious community. This is why every time there is an accident the first question that most Malaysians ask is what is the ethnic origin of the victim. It shows that we are no longer capable of spontaneous compassion when it comes to another human being who is not of our own ethnic kind. How can we expect such Malaysians to understand that human tragedy like human triumph is the same whatever one's ethnic origin? How can we make such people realize that as human beings we share many common values and common goals — in spite of all our ethnic differences and religious diversities? How can we convince them that as Malaysians we are bound by a common destiny even if we are not born of a common history?

Having analysed the negative trends in four main spheres namely economic and social change, administration, politics and ethnic relations, and culture, it is time to find out why the situation has developed along these lines. Some of the specific reasons that apply to specific spheres we already know. What we must now try to establish are the general causes.

Causes

One of the general causes of the miseries facing any post-colonial society is, of course, its colonial past. In our case, a number of the shortcomings we observed are linked to colonial policies. Rural poverty, the cash-crop thrust of the economy, the ethnic situation among other aspects of society, are all connected in one way or another to British colonialism.

However, it can be argued that the vices of colonial rule have been compounded by the sins of the post-Merdeka elites. Indeed, elites — or those who command more power, more wealth and more

knowledge than the rest of society — here as elsewhere in the Third World are largely responsible for the chaos that prevail in their countries.

Elite responsibility is linked to three elements — the formulation of policies, the vested interests that affect the formulation and implementation of policies and the actual implementation of policies. These three elements are closely related and in reality cannot be easily separated.

To start with, the general orientation of the economy with its emphasis upon the rich and strong, is a product of policy. Similarly, the neglect of food production or science are the consequences of wrong policy priorities. Maintaining ethnic dichotomies in various spheres of society is also a question of policy. In other words, the adoption of wrong policies is a major cause of the deterioration of the situation in the country.

Wrong policies in turn are brought about by a number of factors. The sort of social structure that one inherits from the colonial power is one of them. Like some other colonies we were left with an ethnically divided structure, orientated towards capitalism. To make it worse our elites decided to perpetuate that sort of society since it served their political and economic interests. Besides, they were generally conservative in outlook and not inclined towards reform. Their policies reflected this attitude.

Once a certain type of social structure gains strength and policies are pursued which mirror the operation of this structure, it is difficult for succeeding elites to change the direction. This is all the more so if the new elites assume power through the normal process of succession — as in the case of Malaysia.

Also, our present elites may after all be inclined towards many of the same policies. It is obvious that they too adhere to an elitistic approach in development. This is why they too concieve of helping the poor merely in terms of making land, capital, skills and certain other resources available to that category of people. They do not seem to realise that poverty cannot be eliminated and disparities cannot be reduced unless the majority own and control basic resources.

Quite apart from the same general orientation, wrong policies may also be due to vested interests. Over the years, certain vested interests may have developed to which the elites are linked. These interests may want present policies to be pursued, however inimical they may be to the national good.

So important are vested interests that we must distinguish them from wrong policies. In the economy it may be because of vested interests that industrial enclaves are maintained. Likewise the expansion of bureaucratic power serves vested interests. Corruption, needless to say, often occurs because of vested interests. The curbing of dissent has a great deal to do with vested interests in politics, administration and the economy. And finally, as we have shown, the ethnic approach to social issues is connected with vested interests.

While wrong policies and vested interests have been far more detrimental to our well-being as a nation in the last 25 years than anything else, we cannot however ignore the adverse effect of the third element — bad implementation. Certain socio-economic grievances are caused by bad implementation. Bureaucratic actions sometimes affect freedom even if the intention of the law or policy is something else. Similarly, ethnic tensions can be brought about by sheer insensitivity on the part of the implementators.

It is apparent, then, from our analysis that if we want the nation to overcome its negative characteristics, wrong policies have to be corrected, vested interests have to be demolished and faulty implementation has to be checked.

The Future

It is crucial that we attend to these challenges now. For the economic prosperity that helped conceal many of our ills has come to an end. Instead of pursuing ad-hoc, short-term solutions in the hope that the world economy will recover next year or the year after, we should be giving serious attention to the type of transformation that is needed for the entire economic and social system so that the failings of the last 25 years will not destroy us in the next 25 years. This is why we should regard the impending economic crisis as a great opportunity to free ourselves from the burdens of the past and the present.

It is fortunate therefore that at this stage of our history we have a national leadership which appears to be interested in reforms, in seeking new routes to the future. It is our hope that in looking for solutions it will try to avoid some of the pitfalls of policy planning.

There is a tendency for policy makers everywhere to seek the symbols rather than the substance of change. Even our present leadership manifests this trait. Productivity, for instance, is not a question of punch-cards or name-tags or blue-collar uniforms. What is far more important is the ability and orientation of those at the managerial and supervisory levels in both the public and private sectors. Are they honest, dedicated and intelligent? Are they happy in their work situations? Are we rewarding those who should be rewarded and are we punishing those who should be punished? Is our system of recruitment geared towards merit and excellence so that efficiency and competence will be prevailing norms? Besides all these conventional concerns, shouldn't we also ask ourselves whether a centralized bureaucracy or, for that matter, a bureaucratic society can really serve the people?

Just as the attachment to symbols is an obstacle to social change, so is the inability to view issues from a comprehensive perspective a danger to genuine development. Our leaders seem to believe that a sincere commitment to the eradication of corruption alone is enough to combat crime. We have often argued that the problem of corruption can never really be tackled unless the Anti-Corruption Agency is made an autonomous body free of executive control and the elites are required to declare their financial assets in a register available for public scrutiny. But this is only the legal dimension of the fight against corruption. There is also an economic dimension which we had mentioned in another context a while ago. To control corruption, the economy has to be reorganised in such a manner that production and consumption will not lead to greed and acquisitiveness which in turn help sustain a materialistic, consumer culture. By the same token, the psychological underpinnings of graft must also be eliminated. A society that does not distinguish between the private and public domains of authority or a society which tolerates double standards in public life cannot be expected to develop the mentality that is necessary to curb corruption. There are the political and cultural dimensions of corruption too which we have not touched upon. Suffice it to say that

corruption cannot be fought effectively unless there is a holistic approach to the problem.

Profound, holistic thinking and action – this is what we need from our national leadership. Such thinking and action is particularly important when we realize that there are no easy answers to our problems. There are no models to follow. We are painfully aware now that the capitalist development of Western Europe, the United States and Japan belongs to a unique phase in history and cannot be replicated elsewhere. Besides the entire capitalist system is in grave crisis. Each and everyone of the communist states is also confronted by a whole host of challenges ranging from the quest for political freedom to the failure to achieve economic productivity. No thinking person in our generation would regard the communist state as worthy of emulation. Similarly, it is dangerous to expect the 'Islamic state' of the future to act as a panacea for all our ills when its proponents in Malaysia have such a superficial understanding of economic and technological relationships in the twentieth century, to say nothing of the perceptions and aspirations of the huge non-muslim population in the country.

What all this means is that there is no substitute for reasoned analysis and critical reflection. It is not just the government that must do this though their responsibility is greater than ours. All of us should reflect critically upon our situation. Every individual should try to become a thinking person. After all, it is man's capacity to think that makes him a human being.

But it is more than a mere thinking person that we need at this juncture in our history. The thinking human being must also be prepared to act. He must be prepared to write and speak and persuade and organise. He must endeavour to change the consciousness of his fellow human-beings just as he has changed his own consciousness.

If there are enough Malaysians who are prepared to think and act, there is hope for the future. It is possible that by the year 2007 – when we celebrate our fiftieth anniversary of Merdeka – there will be a freer, a more just, a more equal, a more compassionate society. If, however, in spite of our consciousness and courage, we fail to achieve our goal we can at least console ourselves with the thought that we tried. We will at least be among those who refused to surrender mildly

to power and privilege. We will be among those who were prepared to search, to seek, to strive and not to yield.

At least at that point in history our children will be able to say perhaps amidst the anguish and agony of a decaying society that their parents were among those who cared to think and dared to act.

Explanatory note

The essay appeared in the *Aliran Quarterly* (Vol. 2 no. 3). It was written in August 1982.

OUR FUTURE

What will be the features of the future? What will be the political, economic, cultural and social characteristics of our country ten years from now? Provided there is no sudden, unexpected domestic upheaval or some totally unpredictable global calamity, it is quite conceivable that some of the present trends in society will lead to certain future scenarios.

On the positive side, one could perhaps presage continued political stability but with more frequent episodes that portend instability. There will also be economic growth but at a slower rate.

In contrast to this, there is every likelihood that serious poverty will persist and economic disparities will become even more pronounced. Corruption, ethnic and religious polarization, executive dominance and suppression of human rights are all expected to become even more serious challenges in the next decade. (See The Nation's Prognosis below).

When we compare the positive with the negative features of our likely future, it is obvious that the situation is dismal. 'Decline' and 'deterioration' threaten to characterise the coming reality. There is no doubt at all that the ruling elites from Merdeka to the present are largely responsible — though other influential groups in all the communities must also share part of the blame.

Though the future is fraught with difficulties, there is no reason for despair. For there is still some freedom. We can still articulate ideas opposed to the beliefs of the ruling elites. We can still disseminate our views and organise to a limited extent.

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— whatever its shortcomings — is capable of reaching public opinion. It is partly because it has a certain degree of dissent that it has managed to reach a significant segment of Malaysian society.

limited space available in our controlled environment. In striving for social change, it is the people's

own growing consciousness of their rights that promises hope for the future. More and more groups in our society are now prepared to demand justice when they are treated unfairly. There is a certain yearning for change among some of these groups.

At the moment, this consciousness is developing separately within the Malay and non-Malay communities. It is a consequence of dividing society along ethnic lines. Within the Malay community for instance there have been, over the last 10 years or so, localised protests against the authorities centering around economic and agrarian issues. There are of course other protest movements comprising more politically-conscious dissidents who believe that the future lies in an Islamic State. Since the idea itself has yet to be transformed from slogan to substance, its usefulness remains limited. In any case, the quest for justice within the Malay community has almost always had a strong religious basis.

Among the non-Malays, the situation is different. Largely secular in their orientation, they have involved themselves in a number of educational, cultural, economic and environmental issues. As a whole, they have been far more vocal and far more organised in their dissent. It is their critical consciousness reflected in both their ideas and actions which is mainly responsible for keeping certain democratic values alive. The Papan protest is an outstanding example. Unfortunately, in some of the other episodes, what began as non-ethnic issues have eventually been coloured by communal considerations.

The development of two separate streams of critical consciousness — one Malay, the other non-Malay — is not good for the country. Although they are not antagonistic to one another, it is quite possible that unscrupulous politicians could turn one against the other. This could happen especially since the streams themselves contain potentially communal tendencies. More important, as long as they remain divergent, it is unlikely that they will be able to challenge successfully the existing order. For it is only a unified, inter-ethnic or multi-ethnic consciousness that can emerge as an alternative.

Aliran's purpose is to create this multi-ethnic consciousness. It seeks to establish points of convergence in the divergent streams of critical consciousness.

To strike root among the people in a society like ours where religion matters so much to a majority of the population, such a vision must have a clear spiritual basis. After all, modern man himself is beginning to see how important it is to have a spiritual view of life. This is why Aliran regards belief in God as its first principle. To believe in God is to realise our humanity. It is to create a social order which will bring forth the humanity in each and everyone of us. This will of course require a determination to liberate the human being from all the structures that dominate him and distort his humanity.

This conception of God, man and society is the essence of every great spiritual tradition. For us in Malaysia, it is perhaps the only basis for genuine change – change that will enable each and every human being to live like a human being.

The Nation's Prognosis

Good

- 1) Continued political stability with UMNO as the dominant partner in an inter-ethnic coalition held together by the glue of power.
- 2) Continued economic growth though at a slower rate in the midst of all sorts of domestic and global uncertainties.
- 3) An expanding industrial sector which may also lead to the development of certain crucial technical skills.
- 4) More significant Malay participation in the professions, commerce and industry.
- 5) The emergence of a non-Malay generation fluent in Bahasa Malaysia.

Bad

- 1) Persistence of serious poverty in both rural and urban areas.
- 2) The adverse impact of recession accompanied by immense balance of payments difficulties and increasing foreign debts.
- 3) Rising prices of goods and services.
- 4) Deterioration in the quality of vital public services.

To do this at the level of ideas, we have to show that issues taken up separately by Malay and non-Malay groups respectively are in fact part of the same whole. They are all related to the philosophy and strategy of development pursued by our government. If rubber prices fall and Malay smallholders suffer it is partly because of the dependent character of our economy which in turn is a reflection of the type of development we are committed to. If Chinese sawi farmers are cheated by middle-men it is because of the present structure of our economy sustained by a capitalist approach to development. Similarly, poor Malays protesting against inadequate housing should realise that the problem itself is due to distorted development just as non-Malays should know that it is also the reason why they have to fight so hard to save the environment from rapacious profiteers. Even those non-Malays who are concerned about their language and culture should try to see the link between assimilative tendencies and the prevailing concept of development. Development that centralises power – including cultural power – is bound to deny autonomy to sub-cultural groups. By the same token, Malay dissidents who bemoan the materialistic threat to Islam should not lose sight of the fact that it is the entire development ethos that promotes acquisitiveness and private accumulation.

Making Malays and non-Malays aware that many of their separate concerns are inter-related and arise from a certain type of distorted development is perhaps one of the most effective ways of promoting the concept and practice of shared values. We will begin to appreciate that we share common values only if we develop empathy for common issues. For instance, if both Malays and non-Malays work together on an issue like political detainees under the ISA or organise a common campaign on the BMF scandal, they can be made to realise that freedom and integrity are sacred values in all our spiritual traditions. When individuals and groups from different communities are conscious that they share certain fundamental values, the bond between them becomes stronger.

It becomes even stronger when they develop a common vision of man and society. Aliran has been trying to do this in its own small way. We are convinced that meaningful social change that transcends ethnic boundaries will be possible only if a sufficient number of Malays and non-Malays are deeply committed to a common vision of a desirable future.

- 5) Depletion of natural resources.
- 6) Further destruction of the physical environment.
- 7) The absence of a sound scientific base to facilitate autonomous industrialisation and self-reliant development.
- 8) The perpetuation of the 'dependent' character of the economy reflected through technology, trade, aid, investments, consultancies and the like.
- 9) The growing power of Japanese, and perhaps Korean, investments, commerce and technology in certain sectors of the economy.
- 10) The dominant control of the economy by small, affluent groups linked directly or indirectly to the ruling elites.
- 11) The rapid expansion and consolidation of a Malay capitalist class created largely by the State to parallel the existing non-Malay capitalist class.
- 12) The widening gap between the rich and powerful and the poor and powerless in all communities.
- 13) Increasing corruption and greed at the level of the rich and powerful.
- 14) A greater struggle among the poor and powerless to make ends meet by taking up multiple jobs.
- 15) Further deterioration in ethnic relations as a result of the perpetuation of ethnic dichotomies in almost all areas of public life.
- 16) Increased emphasis upon Islamization by the government and a growing feeling of alienation among some Muslims and many non-Muslims.
- 17) The rapid spread of a superficial, exclusive approach to Islam among Muslim youths and the rise of narrow, bigoted, revivalist trends among other religions.
- 18) At the opposite end, the growth of a sensate, permissive culture which encourages gambling, alcoholism, pornography and drug-taking.

- 19) As a result of all this, certain polarization of attitudes and sentiments within the Malay, and to some extent, the non-Malay middle-class.
- 20) Divisions within the middle-class reflected in the arena of party politics through the emergence of strong cliques and factions.
- 21) Fierce, furious competition for political power as politics becomes more and more elitistic and politics emerges as the decisive force in society.
- 22) The concentration of more and more power with the government as Parliament and the Judiciary decline even further in importance.
- 23) The rapid decline of open, parliamentary politics as the government becomes less and less accountable to the public.
- 24) The further erosion of the rights of the people as the press, trade unions, public interest societies and political parties are subjected to tighter control.

Explanatory note

This essay appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (October 1984).

STOP THE ROT

An Analysis Of The Political Situation On The Eve Of The August 1986 General Election

This is the most significant election ever. It is significant because the 'Omnipotent' Barisan government seems terribly vulnerable. It is significant because the Opposition seems to be getting stronger and stronger. If there ever was an opportunity for the Opposition to reduce the Barisan's two-third Parliamentary majority, this is the occasion.

However, more important than the electoral contest as such, is the impact of the existing political situation upon the voter. Never before have so many issues, each as crucial as the next, faced the Malaysian electorate. We seem to be facing new problems ever so often, without resolving satisfactorily any of the old ones. We seem to be living from 'crisis' to 'crisis' so much so that we must be one of the most 'crisis-ridden' states in the world.

These 'crises' have generated a feeling of despair and despondency. There is a sense of hopelessness, of aimlessness. It is as if we are beginning to crumble, to disintegrate. The centre no longer holds; things are falling apart.

In a situation like this, the voter faces a grave responsibility. He must use his vote wisely. He must weigh and consider various possibilities. He must examine the strengths and weaknesses of the parties and candidates involved in the election and then decide how his vote can help to check the rot.

Let us then evaluate the situation in our country today. Are there any positive signs left? What are the negative trends?

The Positive Signs

- 1) A dramatic decrease in the number of ISA detainees. A more restrained attitude towards the use of the ISA.
- 2) Greater concern than ever before about developing a self-reliant economy. Consequently, some emphasis upon a heavy industrialization programme.

- 3) Greater commitment to non-alignment and hence a more sincere desire to promote South-South relations, especially in trade and industry.
- 4) Greater determination to defend justice in certain international issues like South Africa, Palestine, Libya, Afghanistan and Kampuchea. At the same time, the Prime Minister's stand on Antarctica which he regards as humankind's common heritage, is commendable.

Negative Trends & Characteristics

Integrity in Question

- 1) The BMF scandal. It is not just the extent of money involved but also the way in which bankers, public officials and politicians tried to 'cover up' which has shocked the nation. There are still some crucial unanswered questions about the role and responsibility of very important people in the scandal.
- 2) The Pan-El affair. Whatever the court verdict may be in the end, there is suggestion of cheating and fraudulence on the part of influential individuals in the country. It is significant that the affair has not prompted the political leadership to conduct a thorough inquiry into stock market operations.
- 3) The UMBC episode. In spite of clear evidence of a conflict of interest between Daim Zainuddin's position as Finance Minister, on the one hand, and business entrepreneur, on the other, there has been no attempt to date by the government to reveal the entire truth about the UMBC episode to the general public. It is significant that two months after achieving dominant control of UMBC, the Finance Minister changed the law in such a way that in future, no other individual or family-based business can own more than 10% of a bank.
- 4) There are allegedly other scandals involving public personalities and public institutions which have been cleverly hidden from the public eye. The mismanagement and corruption which is evident, though in an indirect manner, in various disclosures by the Auditor-General on the running of certain government agencies is indicative of what is happening in the country.

- 5) Serious, widespread allegations of how colossal contracts are awarded especially under the privatisation policy and of who benefits directly or indirectly from them. They seem to suggest that integrity is on the decline. It is said that the tender system in certain areas has broken down completely because of the malpractices of certain powerful individuals who deliberately ignore the rules established to govern the system.
- 6) The dearth of any prosecution of major figures in the public or private sectors, in connection with corruption, in spite of all the rumours and 'flying letters' that are circulating. Even former Mentris Besar and Chief Ministers who are allegedly corrupt are not brought to court. In this connection, it is well worth observing that in the BMF scandal, there has not been a single prosecution in Malaysian courts so far – though there is a legal basis for court action from our end.
- 7) The prevalence of 'money politics' in almost all the Barisan Nasional parties. Money politics is so rampant that it is practised from the Supreme Council level of the party down to the divisional level. Money is also used to buy officials of other political parties and to bribe voters. Indeed, bribery and corruption now play a big part in creating friction and factions within rival parties and in the birth of pseudo political parties.
- 8) The misuse of the Anti-Corruption Agency whereby its awesome power is brought to bear upon certain politicians and businessmen. What happens is that if a powerful clique wants to buy or break a certain politician, the ACA would be let loose upon the person. Similarly, if some people don't want certain businessmen to tender for a certain job, the ACA would be used to intimidate them. This in itself is a loathsome form of corruption.

Increasing Repression & Control

- 1) Increased control through the reformulation of old laws as in the case of the Printing & Publication Act (1984) or through amendments to existing laws like in the Official Secrets Act (1984) or the Employment Ordinance (1983). The end result is greater restrictions upon various fundamental liberties.

- 2) Growing executive dominance seen in the weakening of Parliament's role in the last three or four years. Parliament has become quite ineffective in that it has not played any part in deliberating upon, or resolving, all the major political crises of the eighties. An attempt was made in 1983 to ensure total executive – specifically Prime Ministerial – dominance in an emergency but fortunately it failed. This was in the famous Constitution Crisis of 1983.
- 3) Less and less willingness to observe public accountability. This was clear in all the dilly-dallying on BMF. This is the intention behind the recent amendment to the Official Secrets Act. When the Sabah submarine project came to light, there was no attempt to explain to the public. There are numerous other cases – involving government agencies, government purchases and government contracts – where public accountability has not been practised.
- 4) Reluctance to give due importance to public opinion especially when the issue involves justice. This was seen in the Papan dump site case, the College-General case, the Bukit Cina case and perhaps most significant of all, the Bakun Dam case. The imposition of the death sentence upon Sim Kie Chon was yet another episode that showed that the leadership sometimes pays so little heed to the public's plea for justice and fairness.
- 5) Blatant violation of basic rules of democratic conduct and increasing arbitrariness in the exercise of power. At one end of the continuum, it is manifested in the dismissal and transfer of journalists in newspapers controlled indirectly by the ruling clique. More serious evidences of the trampling of established principles of justice and freedom would be the Lubuk Merbau incident, the Memali episode and the Sabah tragedy. Sabah in particular is a vivid illustration of the rape of democracy.

Political Turmoil

- 1) The prolonged MCA factional fight which has weakened the party considerably is a reflection of the type of tensions and divisions that exist in almost all the BN parties.
- 2) The unprecedented resignation of Datuk Musa Hitam as Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister epitomises this. Its

impact, however, is much more serious than is made out to be. It shows that UMNO which has more often than not maintained a sort of unity through loyalty to the President of the party is no longer a cohesive force. There are various cliques and factions within the party jockeying for power. State loyalties and regional affiliations are quite pronounced. The internal feuds, though camouflaged through open displays of unity, are vicious and full of malice. Flying letters, poison-pen letters, rumours, character-assassination and the like are all part and parcel of the clique and factional struggle within UMNO and some of the other parties that employ 'commandos' whose task it is to 'eliminate' political opponents. Is this an early sign of the growth of gangsterism and hooliganism in politics? Or, have USNO and Berjaya in Sabah already shown the way with their bombs and fires and riots? Will the reluctance of the Prime Minister to condemn the tactics used by the two parties be interpreted as legitimization of violence in politics?

Economic Woes

- 1) Retrenchment of workers and unemployment have become colossal national challenges. It is estimated that 10.1% of the work force would be unemployed by 1990. It is wrong to put all the blame upon global recession. It is because we are so dependent upon the international economic system that we are in such a mess. Though the government says that it has devised various strategies to deal with retrenchment and unemployment, it is obvious that its response to the situation has been disappointing. It is not looking at the underlying causes. Even short-term measures have been far from adequate.
- 2) The economic decline has made it very difficult for the poor and even the lower middle-class to make ends meet. Lower rung civil servants for instance deserve better wages but the government is unable to pay. This has resulted in a lot of frustration. The rural poor, too, are having a tough time partly because of the rapid decline of the prices of primary commodities. Besides, rural development as a whole has not been receiving much impetus from the State.

- 3) Indeed, there is tremendous lethargy in the economy. Many different types of businesses are stagnating. Investments, both local and foreign, are not growing. There is a general decline of confidence in the Malaysian economy, one of the major causes of which is the negative political atmosphere. If anything, the way in which the privatisation policy has been implemented has further sapped the confidence of the business community. It has been suggested that some individuals and companies closely linked to the ruling elite have benefitted most — at the expense of other genuine entrepreneurs.
- 4) At the same time, certain economic programmes with good intentions, have unfortunately produced bad results. Having three steel plants in a country of our size as part of our industrialization drive is certainly a wrong move. Similarly, building our own car — given various market and technological factors — is not going to help develop our industrial foundation. There is also an unhealthy obsession with huge, capital-intensive projects which while bringing some benefits to the people, tend to create a host of new problems. The Bakun dam is a good example of this. Other such ventures would be Dayabumi, Komtar, the Penang bridge, etc.
- 5) The wasteful expenditure involved in all these is compounded by the continuing tendency to go for high class tourist projects. There are at least about half a dozen multi-million ringgit tourist projects spread all over the country — the most famous of which is of course the Langkawi project. These projects reflect a larger characteristic of our development policies, and indeed, our entire social system. It is the interests of the upper classes that are accorded priority. This orientation has become much more pronounced in the last few years under the leadership of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad.
- 6) It is because of this type of development that the national debt has increased by leaps and bounds since 1982. Malaysia's external debt alone was over 50 billion ringgit at the end of 1985. This is one of the 'outstanding achievements' of the present leadership. In this connection, our rate of debt accumulation in the last three years was one of the most rapid in the world!

Deterioration in Ethnic Relations

- 1) The ethnic bias in a number of public policies has become very apparent in the eighties. This has begun to create a lot of unhappiness not only among non-Malays in the Peninsula but also among non-Muslim bumiputras in Sabah and Sarawak. As a reaction, they are also adopting an ethnic approach in those ventures which are under their control. It must be stressed, however, that both among the Malays and the others, those who have really gained from this emphasis upon ethnicity are certain individuals and groups rather than the whole community as such.
- 2) What aggravates ethnic relations is the lack of sensitivity among certain Malay bureaucrats to the cultural rights of the non-Malay communities. This was evident in the Bukit Cina issue. Likewise, there are times when non-Malay groups tend to be unsympathetic to the genuine economic aspirations of the Malays.
- 3) Religious revivalism of the type that is taking place in the country has also had an adverse impact upon ethnic relations. Islamic resurgence and the government's own Islamization programme have led to a decline in social interaction among the different communities. Just as a segment of the Muslim community has become more conscious of a distinct Muslim identity, so have a number of non-Muslims begun to emphasise the distinguishing elements of their respective religions and cultures. Expectedly, both Muslims and non-Muslims feel more alienated from one another today than four or five years ago.

It is obvious from our analysis that in almost every area there has been serious deterioration of values, standards or principles of conduct. This is why there is so much erosion of confidence in the national political leadership. It is the sort of erosion which has brought about a crisis of credibility. And at the centre of this credibility crisis is the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad himself. He is perceived by a number of people as that one individual who is primarily responsible for the crisis-ridden state we are in. This is, of course, not the larger system and state policies some of which the way in which certain public programmes have been carried out are sometimes as decisive as the individual leader

Be that as it may, it is undeniable that there are ideas and actions associated with his leadership which have caused widespread disillusionment and disenchantment. First, given the slogans of a 'clean, efficient and trustworthy government', 'leadership by example' and the like, there appears to be an ever-widening gap between what is professed and what is practised. For a trustworthy government, its handling of the BMF scandal was hardly capable of inspiring trust! For a leadership that has expressed total aversion to money politics, it has been quite happy to encourage and even assist in the buying and selling of Assemblymen in Sabah. For a government that believes in the rule of law, it was prepared to allow the USNO and Berjaya-inspired demonstrators to flout the law with immunity. For a leadership that often chastises critics for not submitting to the will of the majority, it had no qualms about denying the will of the majority expressed in the 1985 Sabah State polls. For a government that claims to be the most 'open and liberal' regime to rule this country, it is quite willing to amend an already oppressive Official Secrets Act in order to perpetuate a cult of secrecy, unparalleled in our history.

Second, just as deeds betray words and this has caused a credibility crisis, so have double standards become so rife that people are now totally cynical about the government's professed integrity. Public rallies are not allowed and yet the Prime Minister acting as the President of UMNO and Chairman of the Barisan, addresses huge gatherings all over the country. He did the same thing during the 1983 Constitution Crisis. Every time he feels that there is some challenge to his position, he goes to the rakyat but he denies everyone else the same opportunity. Similarly, in Memali, against Ibrahim Libya and his followers who were not criminals in any way, the government was prepared to take drastic action because they had defied the authorities. In Kota Kinabalu, on the other hand, individuals who had incited hatred between the communities, inflamed religious passions and organised arson and riots, have not been arrested, though their identities are known to all and sundry. Likewise, the poor factory worker Sim Kie Chon is hanged for the mere possession of a firearm while a Minister found guilty by the highest court of law for murder is granted pardon.

Third, more than double standards, the leadership's sense of right and wrong is all warped. Right has become wrong and wrong has become right because our thoughts and our deeds are not rooted in sound, ethical principles. Thus, Tan Sri Ahmad Noordin, Chairman of the BMF internal Committee of Inquiry who did a magnificent job, given the constraints under which he and his team operated, suddenly finds himself the target of some of the vilest, wickedest attacks. A man who should be eulogised as a hero is reviled as a villain by some Barisan leaders. On the other hand, Tan Koon Swan, the MCA President, charged in a Singapore court for cheating, fraud and CBT returns home to a grand hero's welcome.

In the ultimate analysis it is all these — the gap between word and deed, the hypocrisy, the double-standards, the upside-down morality — which have eroded the people's faith in the government. Within that segment of society that thinks and feels and cares, Dr. Mahathir's leadership no longer enjoys moral legitimacy.

This is why he should not ask the people to give the Barisan an overwhelming two-thirds majority in Parliament. The people have a right to ask: what did he do in the last four years with a massive four-fifths majority? Isn't the mess we are in, due partly to the brute strength of the Barisan? Isn't this why no one has been able to check effectively the Herculean power of the government, or more accurately, a clique in government?

It is with the well-being of society, with the health of democracy in mind, that we appeal to the people to vote in a stronger Opposition in the coming general elections. We need a stronger Opposition both at Parliament and State levels. A stronger Opposition is, in our opinion, the most effective short-term measure to stop the rot. And stop the rot we must for our sake. For the sake of our children.

We believe that there are a number of constituencies where Opposition parties have a good chance of winning. In these constituencies, we hope our people will support Opposition candidates. These would be rural constituencies in Trengganu, Kelantan, Kedah, Perlis and North Perak and urban constituencies in Penang, Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, Melaka, and parts of Johor and Kedah, apart from the

Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. If the PBS does not become part of the Barisan, it is quite conceivable that the Opposition will do well in Sabah. In Sarawak, we expect the Opposition to put up a good show in the urban areas.

Our call to the people to ensure a stronger Opposition should not be misinterpreted as blanket endorsement of Opposition parties or their ideologies and programmes. We are aware of the many shortcomings of the Opposition. We have criticised Opposition parties in the past and will continue to criticise them in the future. We remain non-partisan.

But the issue before us is not one of partisan or non-partisan politics. What is at stake in this election is the very future of Parliamentary Democracy. For if the Barisan is returned with another suffocating majority, democracy in Malaysia would be choked to death. We want to ensure that democracy lives. This is why we have decided to take sides in this election. We have taken the side of democracy. For only if democracy lives, can we continue the peaceful struggle for a just, humane social order.

Explanatory note

The above article* was produced as a pamphlet in connection with the 1986 General Election.

30 YEARS OF MERDEKA

What it means to the rakyat

If a balance-sheet is prepared on our 30 years as an independent nation, the credit side would show a certain degree of economic and social development, some transformation within the Bumiputra community especially in relation to specific groups and classes, continuous political stability, a fettered democracy of sorts, the growth of a common language of communication — Bahasa Malaysia — among the young in particular, growing consciousness of the worth of our own religions and cultures instead of merely using the West as the ultimate standard of civilisation, and a non-aligned foreign policy.

The debit side, however would show persistence of absolute poverty and an ever widening gap between the rich and the poor, massive unemployment and huge external debts in the midst of a serious economic recession, economic and technological dependence upon the international capitalist system, increasing corruption especially at the higher levels of society, the decline of ethics and morality in almost all spheres of society, growing crime rates and acts of violence resulting in a loss of the sense of personal security, increasing Executive dominance and various curbs upon democratic articulation and mobilisation, serious ethnic polarisation, growing religious intolerance and bigotry and decline of hope and faith in the future within a significant segment of the populace.

Seen from the debit side of the balance-sheet, it is obvious that our nation is on the decline. The national leadership is better placed than anyone else to arrest this trend. To do this, it must have both political will and integrity. This does not seem to be present. Instead of committing itself totally to the well-being of the people, the leadership appears to be obsessed with self-preservation at all costs.

Even if another leadership from within the same elite stratum takes over, it is unlikely that there will be any fundamental change. For
ing laws and policies, and the values and beliefs accompanying
all geared towards the creation of an acquisitive, materialistic
at worships wealth and power. Such a social system cannot

eradicate the root causes of either corruption or authoritarianism or ethnic polarisation.

Given this situation, those who desire change have no choice but to turn to the people. Through democratic action preceded by social awareness the people must strive with courage and determination to create a more just and humane society. There are, of course, hundreds of thousands of Malaysians, both Malays and non-Malays, who would like to see change. Unfortunately Malays and non-Malays who are inclined this way, operate from different ethnic platforms. In certain respects, they advocate positions which are irreconcilable.

Many Malays who want change for instance aspire to establish an Islamic State. Many non-Malays, on the other hand, visualise a *'Malaysian Malaysia'* type of society. The essence of the *'Malaysian Malaysia'* idea is political equality among all the communities while in an Islamic State there is bound to be political inequality between Muslims and non-Muslims. The *'Malaysian Malaysia'* advocates believe in a secular state which is, conceptually, the antithesis of an Islamic State. It is obvious that these two groups cannot work together. Neither group can come to power on its own for the vast majority of non-Malays will not support an Islamic State just as the vast majority of Malays will remain opposed to the *'Malaysian Malaysia'* concept.

This is why those who are yearning for change must, as a matter of urgent necessity, work towards the evolution of a third alternative. It must be an alternative that is acceptable to a significant segment of both the Malay and non-Malay communities. This is what Aliran has been trying to do over the last 10 years. Though we have not had as much success as we would like, we have managed nonetheless to bring to the fore a small group of Malays and non-Malays who are genuinely multi-ethnic. The Malays in our group understand the non-Malay desire for justice and fairness. Similarly, the non-Malays in our group understand the Malay historical background of the country, the status of Malay as the primary language of the nation and the position of Islam as the main religion in our society. It is because there is concord on the ethnic fundamentals challenging our nation, that Aliran has been able to sustain its multi-ethnic character in spite of all the pulls and pressures found in a communally-divided society like ours.

In the last one year or so, we have discovered that more and more middle-class Malays are gravitating towards the multi-ethnic philosophy that Aliran espouses. A huge portion of middle-class non-Malays have always supported Aliran. These middle-class Malays, like their non-Malay counterparts, are concerned about the economic situation, corruption, human rights, ethnic polarisation and religious extremism. They are also quite critical of the quality of the nation's leadership.

This nascent multi-ethnic consciousness should be given a chance to grow and develop. It is so vital for the future of this dear land of ours. Aliran hopes that more and more Malaysians will help to strengthen this consciousness. It is not a question of joining Aliran formally. It does not matter whether one joins Aliran or not. What matters is whether this multi-ethnic bud will be allowed to blossom into a full flower. What is really urgent is the creation of social and political conditions which will facilitate the growth of this multi-ethnic consciousness.

It is because of our commitment to this multi-ethnic consciousness that we are now putting forward certain proposals which we hope will have the support of the Malaysian public. The first proposal is similar to what has been suggested recently by His Royal Highness the Sultan of Perak. Like His Royal Highness, Aliran is of the view that the spirit of the Rukunegara should be incorporated into the Constitution. The Rukunegara should, in fact, become the preamble to our Constitution.

As a preamble it would be a constant reminder to the Government and the people of the overriding goal of our nation – the goal of creating a just, democratic, united, liberal and progressive society. Since the pursuit of this goal, according to the Rukunegara, would be based upon certain principles, the most important of which is the belief in God, the Government and the people would again be reminded that there is a spiritual, ethical and moral foundation to the life of our nation

negara is most appropriate as a preamble to the nation's
r it contains ethical values which, while acceptable to
igious community in the country, are also transcen-
bracing. This is why they are capable of serving as
relevant to each group and yet neutral. This is what

is needed in a multi-ethnic society. Besides, the Rukunegara was formulated by leading individuals from all the communities in the true spirit of democratic discussion. It was a product of genuine consensus. At a time when the nation is so badly divided along communal lines, the very act of making the Rukunegara the preamble to the Constitution would help to draw the communities together again through shared values and a shared vision.

Our second proposal echoes an idea that the Tunku is responsible for. Out of his deep concern for the well-being of the ordinary citizen, the Tunku suggested a few weeks ago that a Special Tribunal be established comprising the Rulers which would have the powers to try any one of them for alleged crimes. There is a lot of merit in the Tunku's proposal for it would give real meaning to one of the crucial concepts in a constitutional democracy: that everyone is equal before the law.

Our third proposal is related to the fundamental liberties contained in the Constitution. These liberties should be extended and expanded to include all the political, civil and cultural rights contained in various United Nations' documents. Certain qualifications and restrictions which emasculate some of the existing liberties in the Constitution should be reviewed with the aim of giving greater protection to the rights of the individual.

More than that, the economic and social rights of the citizen should be spelt out in detail. It is a pity that our present Constitution does not even mention the economic and social rights of the individual and his community. It is imperative that these rights are enshrined in our Constitution so that the deprived and the downtrodden would be able to demand what is legitimately theirs. In more specific terms, what this means is that the right to food and shelter, the right to employment and job security and the right to basic amenities would be provided for by the Constitution.

Our fourth proposal is linked to the challenge posed by growing concentration of power in the hands of the Executive. Executive dominance has become deeply entrenched in the Constitution. There are various Articles in the Constitution — like Article 150 for instance — which endow the Executive with total supremacy. This goes against

the concept of checks and balances which is integral to a Parliamentary Democracy. This is why Aliran would like to see a comprehensive review of Executive power in the Constitution and how it can be minimised.

The fifth and final proposal concerns something which has not featured in any human rights document or any State Constitution. It is what we shall call the *right to honest Government*. It is the right of every citizen to expect his Government to be honest and upright.

There is no denying that this right is as, if not more, important than any other human right – except perhaps the right to life. It is a right that must be asserted because the lack of honesty and integrity within the government is perhaps our greatest problem. If the citizen's right to honest Government is transgressed, it is not just one individual but the entire community that pays the price. As our unending series of financial scandals have shown, the future of a whole nation can be in serious jeopardy because individuals in powerful positions are prepared to trade their integrity. Indeed, the consequent loss of billions of ringgit invariably results in the denial or loss of other basic rights particularly in the economic and social spheres. This is why Aliran is convinced that if there is any one right that has to be incorporated into the Malaysian Constitution, it is the right to honest government. Together with this right to honest Government, Aliran proposes an amendment to the Constitution which will enable the establishment of an independent Anti-Corruption Agency. The Agency should have the status and some of the privileges accorded to the Judiciary in the Constitution. The Director-General of the Agency, for instance, would be directly responsible to Parliament and not to the Executive.

All the rights that we have discussed, it must be emphasised, should be enshrined in the Constitution in such a manner that they cannot be amended or abridged, or worse, deleted. These rights should be regarded as inviolable and sacrosanct. No Executive, no Parliament, no Judiciary would be able to tamper with them.

Explanatory note

The article was first presented as a talk on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of our Independence, on 31 August 1987. It has appeared in the *Aliran Monthly* (September/October 1987).

