Malaysia, Capitalist Modernity and Post-Ethnicity

Steve Fenton
Steve Fenton is Professor at the University of Bristol

ABSTRACT

This article makes the case against a clear link between ethnicity and culture; in some parts of the world, multiculturalism does not figure prominently in public discourse. Where Malaysia is concerned, politics is more about issues of economic difference than cultural difference. Current problems arise not from a multi-ethnic society, but rather from class divisions and the development of capitalist modernity. The author examines the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the creation of a Malay middle class.

Although the term 'multiculturalism' carries no reference to ethnicity there is a tacit expectation that the plural cultures of a 'multicultural' society are tied to multi-ethnicity. True, in some versions of the multicultural doctrine, the cultures in search of recognition may be non-ethnic, citing identities of sex and gender. But in most of the well known applications of multiculturalism there is an equation: ethnic diversity equals cultural diversity. Two further assumptions are linked to this primary one: the first is that 'culture' is and should be a leading, if not *the* leading, focus of political debate and analysis. Thus the central question becomes "how can a socio-political system cope with cultural diversity?" (and revise an extant ethnocultural unity). In terms of social analysis the (assumed) starting point is that we should look to cultural difference as the source of *explanation* of political events and social outcomes. The second assumption is that, for under-recognized cultures (ethnic groups), some form of cultural recognition will be the cornerstone of social inclusion and greater social justice.

In the case of Malaysia however, for which I attempt to give an overview here, it is plausible to argue that western multiculturalism does not travel well. The word 'multiculturalism' can be found in (English language) Malaysian debates but it is not a central term of public discourse, nor does it offer a promising guide to either analysis or political prescription. Of course, this here is a point about Malaysia; but it is also true that multiculturalism has come to be increasingly seriously questioned in general, and not just in this particular case[1]. It may turn out to be a term which betrays its particular origins[2], and lacks depth and cutting edge in its application to social, political and economic change. Some of the reasons for doubting multiculturalist arguments in the Malaysian case relate to the points I have just introduced. We cannot assume in the Malaysian case, nor in many other sites, that there is an equation between 'ethnicity' and 'culture'. Some of the most troublesome cultural divides are now between Malays[3]. Similarly we should not assume that Malaysian politics are primarily about 'culture' even though 'cultural debates' have played a significant role in post-independence Malaysian politics. And it is certainly unlikely that a kind of 'equal recognition of cultures' will offer Malaysia a solution to its most pressing problems. This is so not least because a real and symbolic primacy of 'Malayness' is a foundation of political stability in the country.

Malaysia from independence

Malaysia (Malaya) became independent from Britain in 1957 and in 1963 formed an expanded Malaysian federation by adding Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo (now Sabah) to peninsular Malaya; it is also at this point that the Brunei sultanate, squeezed between Sarawak and North Borneo, declined to join Malaysia. By 1965 Singapore had left the federation, and Malaysia then had what have remained its borders up to the present day. Relations with predominantly Chinese Singapore have been peaceful if periodically uneasy; for two years, however, relations with its ethnically Malay and Muslim neighbour, Indonesia, were distinctly unstable. In the island of Borneo, the southern (Indonesian) segment, the province of Kalimantan, has a long and largely rainforest border with the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah. At the time of independence the Malaysian population counted as Malay was less than 50% and the independence negotiations had seemed too many of them to point to a threatened future. If the large Chinese community, approaching 30%, was to be given citizenship in a 'universalist' democracy the Malays feared that they would fall yet further behind their Chinese competitors in education, economy and social mobility.

In some considerable part a Malay nationalism was inspired by this fear of losing ground in 'their own' country. The result was a classic compromise: the non-Malays were to be granted citizenship but the constitution would guarantee a Malay primacy. This primacy was chiefly defined by Islam being the official religion (though other religions were to be

tolerated), Malay being the official language (though other languages were to be used), and broad constitutional commitments to furthering and conserving the Malays in education, land and economic security. Since the 1960s the Malay population has grown as a proportion of the total and even in simple population calculations the Malay dominance looks more secure. In the 2000 Census Malaysia reported a population of 23.27 million of whom 65% were classed as *Bumiputera,* 26% Chinese and 8% Indians. Bumputera is a term, meanings 'sons of the soil' which has taken on real significance in Malaysian public discourse. Discursively it portrays non-Malays as 'not people of this land' despite the presence of Chinese and Indians in the country since at least the nineteenth century. Most Bumiputera could also be called 'Malays' although the term also includes a small percentage of non-Malay indigenous peoples, principally in Sarawak and Sabah.

The significance of the term Bumiputera is that since 1970 people classed as Bumiputera (i.e. mostly Malays) have been favoured by the New Economic Policy (NEP) which had the twin aims of reducing poverty and eliminating the link between ethnicity and socio-economic position. Thus Malays benefitted from, *inter alia,* privileged entry to universities, reduced housing costs, and support for business and financial development. This was ethnically based affirmative action on a grand scale that persisted for two decades and is only now being dismantled. In particular it has been announced that university entrance will henceforth be based on 'meritocratic' principles. The original introduction of the policy followed national alarm subsequent upon the violent ethnic riots in Kuala Lumpur in 1969. The riots had followed Chinese celebration of election results which appeared to benefit ethnic Chinese interests. The NEP offered an economic solution to a political problem. The cause of political unrest was deemed to be Malays' relatively poor position in education and the economy, having been under-represented in what was called the 'modern sector'. The political fears allied to this economic disadvantage were to be assuaged by redressing the imbalances – in short by creating a new Malay middle class, much dependent on a Malay-dominated state.

In many respects the policy can be deemed to have been a success. To be sure a new Malay middle class was created, and some Malay footholds were established in business and financial sectors from which all but a Malay elite had been excluded. The sense of economic exclusion, which prompted fears of Chinese dominance, was largely allayed, and the violence of 1969 was not repeated. Malaysia has seen nothing to compare with the pogroms against Indonesian Chinese in the wake of the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998. There have been costs: affirmative action perpetuated the politics of ethnicity, with Malays defending their privileges whilst Chinese and Indians had to suffer exclusions and ineligibilities which left their efforts either unrewarded – or costing more. State management of Malay benefits facilitated cronyism and what Malaysians call 'money politics'.[4] The fact that Malaysians can take some steps beyond affirmative action and ethnic politics is in part, however, a consequence of Malay confidence. Malay (ethnic) nationalism in that sense has achieved many of its aims and for the time being at least is much less sharply articulated.

The split with Singapore was partly driven by the difference in the ethnic composition of Malaysia and Singapore, the latter being predominantly Chinese. The 1969 riots were inter-ethnic, and the New Economic Policy which followed was designed to improve the economic position of Malays. But throughout this period, 1970 to the present, there have been important voices arguing that the analysis of Malaysian affairs has been over-ethnicized.

In all of these developments ethnic politics has played a significant part. The split with Singapore was partly driven by the difference in the ethnic composition of Malaysia and Singapore, the latter being predominantly Chinese. The 1969 riots were inter-ethnic, and the New Economic Policy which followed was designed to improve the economic position of Malays. But throughout this period, 1970 to the present, there have been important voices arguing that the analysis of Malaysian affairs has been over-ethnicized, the leading figure being K.S. Jomo, the distinguished political economist[5]. In addition, there has been a significantly reduced emphasis on ethnic divisions in the last decade. Even at the outset, the formation of the ruling party, an Alliance of three main ethnic parties, provided Malaysia with a multi-ethnic elite. This was the politics of ethnic compromise under Malay hegemony, persisting today in what is now the *Barisan Nasional* (The National Front).

As Malaysia's economy has become increasingly part of the new Asian capitalist advance, so new questions have been thrust on to the political agenda. Malaysia's development does not carry everyone with it, nor does it eradicate the gap between the urban rich and the rural poor. Fewer and fewer people are engaged in the rural economy, but those who are lag behind the swirl of new money in the urban centres, and modern communications makes people more aware of the economic and social distance. In the cities themselves there are persistent zones of economic failure and social disorganization. These areas erupt onto the national consciousness from time to time, the gang fighting between alienated Malay and Indian young men being one instance.[6]

Class divisions within ethnic groups have become at least as important as solidarities across them. This is perhaps most evident among the Malays where some rural and urban poor are disaffected from the Malay middle classes

and elites who have been the benefactors of economic development and the NEP. Similarly there is a significant Indian business, political and professional, as well as a sizable Indian population of rural and urban poor. Most Indians who came to Malaysia over a hundred years ago were recruited into work on rubber plantations where some of their descendants still live in plantation settlements. Some of the plantation poor have left for the cities where they are among the country's most disadvantaged people.

At the same time migrant workers[7] are increasingly being engaged in Malaysia's rubber and palm olive plantations, as well as in housemaid and service roles for which thousands of Indonesian women are hired. Malaysia's official figures for 2000 showed approximately 1.6 million non-citizens as resident in the country. Present estimates by observer groups suggest that Malaysia has a migrant labour force of three million, of whom one million may be illegals. Human Rights[8] groups have expressed concern about the conditions under which these migrant workers live and work. Taken together, all these changes indicate that Malaysia does not face the problems of a 'multi-ethnic' society, but the multiple problems of capitalist modernity.

Some of these problems we have alluded to in reference to the rural and urban poor left. These inequalities have a moral and political component which is linked to Islamic politics in Malaysia. Among those Malays who have entered higher education are some who have turned to renewed Islamic seriousness, partly born out of a sense of unease with the very material success that Malaysia's economic revolution represents. Poorer Malays (and Muslims) look on with some distaste at the metropolitan Malays who have benefited from capitalist modernization. This growing critique of capitalism and modernization came together in the Barisan Alternatif in the 1999 election when opposition parties made significant gains. Although these gains were reversed in the 2004 elections, when the Barisan Nasional recouped lost ground under a new leader (subsequent on the retirement of Dr. Mahathir), a non-ethnic critical politics is a real presence in Malaysia and likely to remain so.

There are several key political questions facing Malaysia today. One of these is to achieve a balance between 'modernization', economic growth, and a stable social order. The new wealth of urban Malays and the vast gap between them and the poor, the evidence of 'money' politics and the sense that modernization undermines Islamic morality[9], all these are decried by the *Parti SeIslam Malaysia* (PAS) which competes with the United Malay National Organisation for the Malay vote.[10] By and large the aim of securing the position of Malay and 'Malayness'[11] has been consolidated. The last thing Malaysia needs now is a renewed round of ethnocultural politics.

Notes

1 Barry B., 2002, *Culture and Equality: an egalitarian critique of multiculturalism,* Harvard University Press

2 Bourdieu P. and Wacquant L., 1999, On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason, *Theory Culture and Society,* Vol. 16, No. 1, 41-58

3 Compare Fenton S., 2004, Malaysia and Capitalist Modernisation: Plural and multicultural models, *International Journal of Multicultural Studies,* Volume 5.2, on which the current article is based. This article can be viewed at http://www.unesco.org/shs/ijms/vol5/issue2/art3

4 Gomez E.T. and Jomo K.S. 1997, *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, Patronage and Profits,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

5 See for example, Jomo KS, 2001, *Malaysian Eclipse: Economic Crisis and Recovery,* London: Zed Books

6 See Fenton 2004.

7 For commentary on migrant workers in Malaysia see the critical magazine *Aliran Monthly:* view at http://www.aliran.com/monthly/2004a/5.html

8 See *Human Rights Watch* at http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2004/11/19/malays9704.html

9 On ethnicity and religion as bases of Malay identity, see Frith T., 2000, Ethno-religious Identity and Urban Malays in Malaysia, *Asian Ethnicity,* Vol. 1, No. 2 September

10 In the 1999 election anger at the treatment of former Deputy Prime Minister (Anwar Ibrahim) was also a factor in producing a strong result for the opposition.

11 On a shift from Malay to Malysian nationalism see Case W.F. 2000, The New Malaysian Nationalism, *Asian Ethnicity,* Vol. 1 No. 2 September