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Ketuanan Rakyat, not Ketuanan Melayu, for Malaysia's Future

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It is indeed my distinct honour to be invited by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies to speak at this very prestigious annual Regional Economic Outlook Forum, the first in the second decade of the 21st century. I thank Ambassador K. Kesavapany, its dynamic Executive Director, and his staff for their kind hospitality and consideration. I can now add this to enhance my personal resume! It is always a pleasure to be in Singapore.

I stand before you as a perplexed, embarrassed and frustrated Malaysian. I cannot bring good tidings for 2010 to you all today when I know all is not well in my beloved country, just across the Causeway from where we are now.

The Teoh Beng Hock Inquest is stalled and the Thai Forensic specialist has been harassed and her personal safety could be compromised because of her dissenting views on Beng Hock's death. Two people (a RMAF sergeant and a young businessman, both of Indian decent,) were charged for stealing two fighter jet engines (at rm50 million a piece) of the Royal Malaysian Air Force, and I would have thought that responsibility remains at the top. Apparently, not so in this case. Even God's name has become an emotional political issue, which is being exploited some reckless politicians and supremacists in UMNO and their supporters.

Later this month, Anwar Ibrahim goes to trial for Sodomy 2 and its aftermath is now a matter of conjecture. Would he be treated in the same way as he was in 1998? In the mean time, racial and religious tensions are on the rise and I hope the authorities can manage the situation well. I fear the return of emergency rule when all else fails. But I pray that I am wrong in taking such an alarmist stance.

I have chosen to speak on Ketuanan Melayu (Malay Supremacy) that best describes the politics of UMNO at the present time and also to provide some comments on an alternative concept, Ketuanan Rakyat. Allow me from the outset to say that Ketuanan Rakyat is the way forward and offers exciting opportunities for Malaysia to redefine and reassert itself as a partner in ASEAN and a member of the world community.

It was in Singapore many years ago that the idea of Malay supremacy was first mooted by a former NST Group Editor, Abdullah Ahmad, better known to us in Malaysia as Dollah Kok Lanas. It was quickly adopted by our 4th Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, aka "The Malaysian Maverick", to borrow this label from Mr. Barry Wain's book, in his then political struggle with Tengku Razaleigh for the leadership of UMNO. It was the same Dollah who created the concept of "social contract". None exists except perhaps what is embodied in the Malaysian constitution.

Ketuanan Melayu: Feudal and Elitist

What is Ketuanan Melayu? It is feudal in conception, and elitist in its execution. It gives us the impression that the Malays collectively are the Tuans of Malaysia while the rest of the population (about 40%) are either pendatangs (immigrants), or aliens who should be grateful to the Malays that they are allowed to live and work in bountiful Malaysia.

Hence, it is important that political power remains in the hands of the Malays with UMNO acting as custodian and protector of Malay sectarian interests.

In truth, the Malays are not the real rulers or tuans; they are being led by an UMNO elite class of politicians working hand in hand with favoured businessmen and bureaucrats. But admittedly, it does make the Malays in general feel good about themselves, that they are actually in charge, and everything revolves around them including the fate of a pluralist Malaysia. It has also enabled UMNO to retain the support of the rural Malay heartland and to justify their policies and actions over the last 3 decades to maintain its hegemony of national politics and the economy.

We are familiar with the consequences of these policies and programme that have come to characterise the Malaysian political and socio-economic landscape. The NEP based affirmative action programmes that were implemented in the 1970s, initially designed to eradicate poverty and unify the country, were intensified under the Mahathir Administration (1981-2003).

While these policies, especially those in connection with the restructuring of the economy via the creation of a bumiputra commercial and industrial community, were successful in accelerating the pace of economic development (Malaysia achieved high rates of economic growth at an average of 8 per cent per annum in real terms), the NEP and its successor the National Development Policy (NDP) after 1990 failed to enhance national competitiveness.

Today, Ketuanan Melayu is UMNO's key to winning the hearts and minds of the Malays. The NEP was (and still is) pursued with such intensity that ethnicity combined with religious obscurantism has become deeply entrenched in Malaysian political culture. In fact, these policies created a new class of state sponsored Malay business community and widened the income gap between the rich and the poor, bringing with it new social tensions that now threaten to social stability and has undermined national unity. Malaysians are today increasingly identified by their ethnicity and religious orientation.

Corruption is systemic and deeply entrenched and despite claims that the NEP/NDP was a success, the Malay commercial class, consisting of those favoured by the dominant UMNO, has become increasingly dependent on a paternalistic, and all knowing and powerful state. Crony capitalism is today the foundation of the post Mahathir era, be it under Badawi and now Najib. This model is based on a strong state with the capacity to dish out projects at inflated cost.

Despite all the talk of a new Malaysian Economic Model based on high value services, research and innovation, I personally do not see any change in the way the UMNO-dominated government operates. It is a prisoner of its own system, or to be more generous of its success, and any attempt to change it will threaten the viability of UMNO itself.

Ketuanan Melayu is basically about the perpetuation of an economic system that is corrupt, divisive and discriminatory, and, in the final analysis, unsustainable and unstable. Even the Najib Government recognises the need to reconnect with all Malaysians under his 1Malaysia concept. But so far, Malaysians are not sure that the Prime Minister can convince his own party to abandon the addictive policies of his predecessors, and opt for an open, transparent and accountable government and fight corruption and abuses of power.

As you all know, March 8, 2008 was a tipping point in Malaysian politics which saw the emergence of a new political force committed to reform and change. Anwar Ibrahim-led Pakatan Rakyat coalition of Parti KeADILan Rakyat, DAP and PAS denied the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional its almost customary 2/3rd majority in the Malaysian Parliament and gained control of Kedah, Penang, Perak (now back under Barisan Nasional), Selangor and Kelantan. The people centred coalition has become the alternative for Malaysians to UMNO-Barisan Nasional.

But will the March 8 political tsunami lead to the emergence of a two party system which offers Malaysian voters for the first time in 50 odd years a choice between the UMNO-Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat? It is too early to say now, maybe it may happen in the latter part of 2010.

Pakatan Rakyat was a loose coalition of Parti KeADILan Rakyat, Democratic Action Party and PAS which was hurriedly put together before the 12th General Election. Now that some 18 months have gone, it has been shown that the coalition can be formalised and function as a true coalition of equal partners with a people-centred (Ketuanan Rakyat) political and socio-economic agenda.

Ketuanan Rakyat: Call for Freedom, Democracy, and Justice

Ketuanan Rakyat (People's Sovereignty) is a rallying cry for freedom, democracy and justice. Built into this concept is the idea of service to the people by a government that is democratic, competent, open, transparent and accountable. It is a return to the foundations of our federalism as embodied in our constitution, and observance of the principles of good governance and the Rule of Law.

The whole idea is to restore public trust in government. I am, of course, not saying that this is can be done easily as it involves a thorough overhaul of the status quo. It is also threatens entrenched interests. In addition, it requires transformational leaders.

The Merdeka Constitution

It may worth remembering that the 1957 Merdeka Constitution which was retained in its essence when the federation was enlarged to include the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak and also Singapore in 1963, was a delicate piece of craftsmanship. It sought to fuse the disparate and seemingly conflictual strands of Malayan society into a coherent and viable whole.

Essentially, the Merdeka Constitution sought to work this fusion of the diverse elements of Malaysian polity, with the constitutional trappings of governance that would in essence be secular. Also, it sought to position the Malay people as *primus inter pares*, first-among-equals, in a multi-racial, multi-religious, polyglot population.

The glue binding these seemingly conflictual strands into a single garment of political destiny was democracy under a constitutional monarchy with its underlying concept of countervailing powers, otherwise known as separation of powers. Skeptics said this fusion was inherently unworkable, and not just for reason of the oxymoron reflected in the secularity of the constitutional framework; they feel that the first-among-equals status for the Malays would cause problems.

Thus they viewed the Merdeka Constitution's fusion of inherently contradictory ideological positions – Malays as first-among-equals in an otherwise egalitarian polity, and Islam as the official religion with secularism as the governing ethos — as unworkable. Yes, it was a lack of faith in the Malayan and then Malaysian people's capacity for democracy that was the unspoken basis for the skepticism about the Malayan and then Malaysian fusion of inherently conflicting constitutional presumptions.

Democracy floundered under UMNO-BN Rule Under UMNO-BN rule, Malaysia's experiment with democracy floundered. We have had decades of strong and paternalistic government committed to redressing the inequities of a colonial economic system where the Malays have been left out so to speak. But the colonial system took another form, when UMNO elites came to power, especially after 1969.

Our challenge today is building a more just and equitable system that can reconcile divergent interests and unite Malaysians as Malaysians, not as communities of Malays, Chinese, Indians, Dyaks and Kadazans living in enclaves of their own.

Malaysia today faces a different set of problems characterized by a breakdown in the Rule of Law, the emasculation of the judiciary and civil service, rampant corruption and abuse of power, a breakdown in the system of public governance and accountability and an economy that seems to be stalled by its over-dependence on cheap labour and commodities like palm oil, timber and oil and gas. It is generally accepted across the political divide that it can no longer be business as usual.

The approach taken by the Pakatan Rakyat is different; it is more inclusive and participatory. The ideas on its future policies and programmes are driven ground up, gained from connecting with ordinary Malaysians and listening to the real life problems.

Let us take the example of Pakatan Rakyat's Common Policy Framework. It is the outcome of much discussion with people from all walks of life through out the length and breadth of the country, from Perlis to Sabah. It is drafted by a young team of leaders and thinkers from PKR, DAP and PAS. These policies are reality based and represent a total rejection or repudiation of communal based politics and race based affirmative action

programmes which are at the root of the current serious ethnic, social and religious tensions in Malaysia.

The Common Policy Framework (CPF) is a major step in the right direction and that is why I said from the very outset that Ketuanan Rakyat is the future for a prosperous and competitive Malaysia. It was endorsed by delegates to the Pakatan Rakyat convention last December 19, and will be the basis of policies, plans and programmes for the next government, if Malaysians overwhelmingly vote the Pakatan Rakyat in the 13th General Elections.

The CPF deals with 4 pillars of Ketuanan Rakyat, namely, democracy with a constitutional monarchy, and good governance based on the Rule of Law, as a Malaysian way of life, high performance green economy that is strong, competitive, and just, social justice and human capital development, and a return of genuine federalism for better relations between the Federal and state governments with emphasis on the much neglected states of Sabah and Sarawak and a foreign policy that will enhance Malaysia's relations with its neighbours and the world at large.

Old style politics, a nanny government, and corrupt leaders must be replaced by a new generation of leaders who subscribe to the proposition that people first in words and deeds. It is Ketuanan Rakyat, not Ketuanan Melayu. It takes good people and good systems to make a better Malaysia.

Likely Developments in 2010

Since the forum is also about likely developments in 2010, allow me to share with you my thoughts on the state of Malaysian politics. The political tsunami of March, 2008 brought swift changes in all the main political parties in the Barisan Nasional. At the same time, Pakatan Rakyat of Parti KeADILan Rakyat, DAP and PAS emerged as a new political force with clear shot at Putrajaya.

Some momentum has been lost due to internal squabbles and inter-party bickerings, but with a Common Policy Framework in place, Pakatan Rakyat will now be able to work in a more unified and coordinated manner in 2010 and is gearing itself for the next general elections which could be held as early as 2011, if the economy recovers and if there is no emergency rule.

The MCA which suffered severe rejection by voters has yet to emerge from an internal power struggle between rival factions, one led by its President Ong Tee Keat and the other by the Minister of Health, Liow Tiong Lai. Behind the scene bargaining is ongoing to seek a practical solution to MCA's dilemma. It is likely that with the intervention of Prime Minister Najib, all MCA factions will unite under its incumbent President. It is difficult to assess the damage to its body politic at this stage, but I think MCA's loss is DAP's gain.

Gerakan too saw the retirement of (now Tun) Lim Keng Yaik, but under the weak leadership of former Chief Minister of Penang and Senator Koh Tsu Khoo, the party is drifting and will likely play second fiddle to MCA and remain a junior partner in Barisan Nasional.

MIC's President Samy Velu continues to survive. He has been able to introduce a young team of leaders who are loyal to him. His main agenda is to consolidate the party and given the leadership change already in place, MIC stands well poised to regain the confidence of the Indian community in the current year, given the fact the new Makkal Sakti Party is ravaged by dissensions within its ranks. But we cannot expect Samy Velu to relinquish his post any time in 2010.

On the surface, UMNO is united behind its new President. Thanks to Abdullah Badawi, the leadership change was smooth and orderly. Unlike Mahathir, Badawi has refrained from making unsolicited comments which could undermine Najib. The challenge for Najib will come from the ultra nationalist faction led by Muhyiddin Yassin. Najib will face serious challenges internally and from opposing forces in the form of Pakatan Rakyat and civil society.

The true test of Najib's leadership and strength in UMNO will come from the way he tackles rampant money politics and corruption in government and the economy, and how he copes with the Anwar Sodomy 2 trial which commences on January 25, 2010 for a month and how he deals with its aftermath. But the Prime Minister should not be underestimated because of his power of incumbency and political savvy. I expect Najib to further consolidate his position in his own party and as the 6th Prime Minister of Malaysia. Right now, I cannot see that he will be able to rein into money politics and infighting for power and influence in UMNO. So there is a leadership crisis of sorts in UMNO.

My comments on Pakatan Rakyat may be a little coloured, but I think I can be candid enough to say with some degree of confidence that leaders and coalition officials are working hard at building a solid coalition as the alternative to UMNO-led Barisan Nasional. I expect to see the establishment of a formal coalition under one banner for the next elections, if the Registrar of Society can give its approval in 2010.

The overwhelming approval of the Common Policy Framework at the First Pakatan Rakyat Convention last December is a clear sign that this Anwar Ibrahim-led coalition will consolidate its position in 2010. Any prediction of its early demise is, therefore, grossly exaggerated. There may be differences among them ,but mechanisms are in place to deal with disagreements and conflicts. On discipline, errant members will be dealt with by the respective coalition partners.

Overall, I think 2010 will be a year of hope and progress amid tensions. Malaysia will be able to ride the oncoming economic tempest, despite our politics.