

Malay Politics and Nation State in Malaysia

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Abstract

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country comprising three main ethnics, namely Malay, Chinese and Indian. As one of the multi-ethnic countries, construction of nation state becomes the government's crucial agenda. After Malaysia achieved independence, the first endeavor towards integrity was uniting political parties, explicitly United Malay National Organization (UMNO), Malaysia Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). However, this latest advancement creates upheavals particularly in Malay political parties which are UMNO, PAS (Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party) and PKR. If Malay political parties are dispersed, then how about the attempt to construct nation state? This research is about the nation state's challenges affected by the upheavals in Malay political parties. This research uses secondary sources and interview with Malaysia's political leaders. In these most recent uproars, media play an important role by worsening the existing crisis. All those scenarios have shown that civil movements also claim for a more democratic ruling system and election which challenges the government on the issues of unity and nation state.

Keywords: Malays, nation state, UMNO, Malay politics

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country that has been successful in managing its racial conflicts. The majority ethnic in Malaysia is the Malays and followed by the Chinese, the Indians and others. Government's aspiration is to unite all the ethnics under one group named *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian nation). From *Bangsa Malaysia*, they hope that every individual will have a feeling of similarity or equality as a nation state (*Bangsa Malaysia*) and not to individually accustom by ethnic. Therefore, *Bangsa Malaysia* is a concept that represents all ethnic in Malaysia under one nation. Yet, politics in Malaysia is facing an aggravated unity challenge, especially in Malay politics. The uproars in Malay politics have been investigated and become worst after 2008 general election. About five states are controlled by Barisan Nasional (BN) [comprising of the three big integrated parties that represents Malay, Chinese and Indian. To be exact UMNO (United Malay National Organization), MCA (Malaysia Chinese Association), MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) and ethnic parties in Sabah and Sarawak are already in the opponent's hand. UMNO, which is the biggest Malay party has lost many Parliament and State Legislative Assembly's seats and yet, some of the Malays who support UMNO also in opponent's side and yet, UMNO's position as Malay strongest party became threatened. Besides, another Malay opponent parties like Pakatan Rakyat (PR) which comprises of PAS (Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party), PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat), do face dispersing and leadership crisis. In PR, there is also multi-ethnic DAP (Democratic Action Party) whereby Chinese become the major members. This research identifies the Malay political unrest after 2008 and the challenges that need to be solved in order to achieve the goal as a nation state. Qualitative sources are used to examine this issue.

2. The Malay and Nation State

Construction of nation state in Malaysia must be observed since Malaysia got its independence (1957). The Malaysian Constitution was intended to provide a viable basis for ethnic understanding. Behind it there was a great deal of bargaining, mainly among ethnic groups and political parties. There are two basic points to keep in mind in order to understand the nature and significance of the political process at this time; first, ethnicity is the key and second, the Malays would control the executive. To operate the system of government after

independence, the main ethnic groups would have to work together, but the parties had been constructed along ethnic lines (Milne & Mauzy, 1999; Suhana, 2012). The original agreement on the constitutional contract was a trade-off between Malays and non-Malays, in particular United Malay National Organization (UMNO) and Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) (In-Won, 2003). As a major concession from the Malays, the constitutional package gave non-Malays liberal citizenship regulations. In return, non Malays had to accept the constitutional status of Malay special rights in various fields, such as language, religion, and the status of Malay Rulers (Suhana, 2012).

The constitution was drawn up with ethnic considerations explicitly in mind, and some of its clauses lay down basic rules on this. The Malay rights and privileges which are mentioned in the constitution, or based on these, are impressive. The privileged position of the Malays and the status of Malay as the national language are both of profound symbolic value. The well-known Article 153 provides a proportion of positions in sections of the public service (including the military and the police) have to be filled by Malays (Milne & Mauzy, 1999). Yang Di-Pertuan Agong is responsible in keeping Malay privileges as stated in the constitution. The question is, in multi-ethnic country, the construction of nation state becomes complicated and many political upheavals often arise.

As said by Kenichi Ohmae, 20th century and early 21st century are the ending of nation state. He explains the importance of region state which acts as connection centre to the global world (Abdul, 2006). Issues on nation state is still been questioning due to some confusions. There are several parties who equalize nation state with the concept of citizenship and racial. The word 'nation state' is always being discovered whenever we discuss the issue regarding country and community.

In the case of Malaysia, nation building is seen as the process by which a stable and integrated society emerges. This will be achieved through the following means; the creation of a strong economy which will act as the stimulus on which other programs can be built; the stabilization of internal factions and the promotion of domestic tranquility and, the consolidation of cultural competencies, and the improvement of the quality of people's lives, and hence the vitality of the nation. This clearly shows that unity in a nation plays a significant role before the construction of nation and nation state involving integration process could be structured (Sharom, 1980).

3. Malay Political Upheaval after 2008

The 2008 Post-General Election witnessed changes in the country's political climate. This 2008 post election reveals the Malays are still unable to collaborate in politics and yet unable to achieve goal together. However, the dispersal did not only arise due to political differences, but also attributable to the struggle in getting influence and position.

This 2008 post election also saw five states falling into the hands of the opposition and ruling political parties are denied two third majority in parliament. The circumstances became worst when they blamed each other and asked the Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi to step down. Abdullah's administration was censured due to a clear defeat in the election (Utusan Malaysia, 2011).

Malay politics had previously dispersed as in 1987 UMNO crisis and also the time when PAS set free from BN in the early 70s. This occasion evidently becomes a meaningful lesson and guide for Malays, owing to weak integrity will cause fall and diffusion. In an interview with Syed Husin Ali (2012), he stated that "almost 60 years since independence, UMNO-BN has not set the construction of nation state as main agenda. The construction of a nation state in a multi-ethnic country like in Switzerland can be achieved by encouraging a fair and reasonable system of politics, economics and social, and also moving towards the goal of nation state integrity. It can never be accomplished with the narrow ethnic politics."

Dispersal phenomenon indeed exists in a country which practices democratic leadership. If the dispersal and upheaval among the Malays cannot be solved, how can the construction of a nation state pioneered by the former leaders can be accomplished? Furthermore, this research will discuss on the Malay political upheaval after 2008 such as political conflict in Perak, government's unity, BERSIH demonstration and internal crisis among Malay political parties.

3.1 Perak Crisis

The 2008 post election apparently witnessed dispersal among Malays. The Malay political upheaval can be seen in Perak legitimacy's crisis. It brought to the leaders' opposition among themselves. Perak crisis is a denial of government's legitimacy that constructed by Pakatan Rakyat in Perak. This crisis began when these three State Legislative Assembly of Perak (from Pakatan Rakyat) jumped from the party and declared that they vote for BN.

This circumstance sided to BN and had determined Sultan of Perak to dissolve the government led by Pakatan Rakyat and replaced with BN.

In 2008 PRU, PR won 32 of Perak's State Legislative Assembly, while BN, won only 27 seats. Before the crisis arose, Bota's ADUN (State Legislative Assembly Member) from BN, namely Nasharudin Halim has changed party from BN to PKR. After that, three persons from ADUN Pakatan Rakyat discharged from the presence party and declared that they are free and vote for BN. The action of jumping party caused Pakatan Rakyat and BN sharing the same seats which is 28 seats and three complimentary representatives. On 4th February 2009, Minister of Perak has met Sultan Perak in order to get permission on dissolving DUN and held again election. Sultan Perak met Prime Minister and Pakatan Rakyat's members who are discharged. While Prime Minister asking permission to form a new government. Then, Sultan Perak declared that Perak State Assembly will not be dissolved but Minister will be ordered to discharge. This is due to all BN's assemblymen and three independent assemblymen have lost trust to Chief Minister (<http://kamparinn.blogspot.com> online 4 September 2011). Sultan Perak approved new government ruled by BN and Dr. Zambry Abdul Kadir was appointed as Perak new Chief Minister on 6th February 2009.

Perak crisis had caused a continual controversy due to party who claim that BN has bought the three representatives from Pakatan Rakyat to jump the party to form a new government in Perak. Election Commission Malaysia (EC) also affected from the crisis and declines the application letter to reelect. This crisis was also getting general attention when the Zambry Abdul Kadir was elected, yet the present Chief Minister's position was still being questioned (Muhamad, 2009: 67).

The power acquisition in Perak is observed as less democratic and BN in Perak is facing a serious legitimacy. This is on account of, in order to form a new government, we apparently need another election. This crisis also showed political Malay's biasness which is, the Malays cannot unite and collaborate in political issues, especially in terms of power. PAS still hesitated and do not believe UMNO due to former dispersal. This incident hindered the unity process between two political parties which Malay is the majority members.

3.2 Unity Government

Suggestion to construct a unity government was pioneered by PAS President, Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang. This suggestion has been proposed due to tough political situation and economic crisis. PAS President worried if the presence political dispute will result to an uncontrolled country. Racial politics and authority approaches in solving the crisis will only make it worse. This will cause a huge lost for all parties including political parties and masses. This concept of 'unity government' claims with the intention that BN will share power with Pakatan Rakyat in the federal government. Each ministry will be dominated together and policies need to be determined in term of consensus. It is not to say that Pakatan Rakyat is under BN's mastery, but as a share partner. Pakatan Rakyat components' parties do not join BN, but remain in Pakatan Rakyat (<http://www.khalidsamad.com>).

Despite the fact that DAP and PKR do not agree with PAS suggestion to have a unity government, there are some UMNO leaders who support the unity government. According to Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, the construction of unity government does not deny the non-Malay importance, but they still have position in government and their significance will be protected. He denies the opponent's claim saying that the issue of unity government is UMNO's conspiracy to generate dispersal in PAS and UMNO's readiness to discuss the issue based on Islam's requisition to cooperate. However, the opposition finally agreed to rebuff the idea of forming unity government.

The result has disappointed the political leaders and Malay non-government organization (NGO) who perceived the idea of unity government as a beginning to enhance local integrity. In comparison, UMNO is more interested in paying attention to the Prime Minister's 1 Malaysia's slogan. They think that this agenda is more important in achieving national integrity through "unity in diversity". The fact that Malaysia comprises of variety of ethnics who practices culture, religion and different way of living are not the present leader's mistake. It is a reality of a history. At the time Malaysia is struggling for independence, the leaders chose unity concept as a precondition in forming a nation state and not assimilation as practiced by Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines.

What need to be completed nowadays is to improve the existing system. This is the rational why our Prime Minister and UMNO leaders welcome the suggestion on developing unity government. If this suggestion were accomplished, it will be able to strengthen the existing ruling system for the benefit of the people and the country. The government perceived the opposition's refusal towards accepting this concept will not become a problem for BN. According to them, their present position still strong to perform any plan and policy which have been arranged under national transformation program (<http://pmr.penerang.gov.my>). Referring to Datuk Seri Najib Razak, "we still keep our principles, something good for country must be performed together even though they

come from the opposition party,” (<http://www.malaysiakini.com>).

3.3 Bersih 2.0

Next political crisis is BERSIH (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections). This demonstration intends to present a memorandum to Yang Di-Pertuan Agong regarding Malaysia's election which is not apparent and fair. People who participate in BERSIH are in the attempt to down the government as occur in Eastern Asia like Mesir. Therefore, this assembly was getting opposition from Pemuda UMNO and PERKASA (Pribumi Perkasa Negara), which is an NGO organization that fights for Malay's significance but is being perceived as racist by some parties. These two parties also participated in the assembly but as the group who opposed BERSIH. It is an assembly to respond towards BERSIH. There are claims that Pemuda UMNO and PERKASA were getting permission from UMNO leaders. Thus, a phenomenon of Malay fights among each other become apparent. This is due to the fact that almost all participants in the assembly were Malays.

BERSIH was held on July 2011 and also being celebrated by our people in overseas (<http://bersih.org> online 3 September 2011). Started with patriotism that existed in Malaysian in all over the world, they also want to see and feel the flow of their country's fair election system. BERSIH wave was claimed started in New Zealand, Australia, Europe and North America's main cities like Los Angeles, Portland and San Francisco. They gather peacefully in their own region as a symbol of supporting BERSIH in Malaysia (<http://bersih.org> online 3 September 2011).

BERSIH participants are multi-ethnic, but Malays are the majority, especially from the range of youth and Malay middle class group. Even though they are seeking for a transparent democratic system through election, but it also contributes to the integrity of Malay political institution due to UMNO and Malay dominate the political region in Malaysia. Malay's opposition, whereby the opponent's political party leader through

3.4 Internal Crisis among Malay Political Parties

The most vital issue in Malay political parties is the presence of section inside the party itself. Section existed in UMNO, Pas and PKR. The worst crisis could be seen in 1987, where in UMNO, two groups headed by Tengku Razaleigh and Tun Mahathir clashed. This crisis leads to the dispersal of UMNO and Tengku Razaleigh discharged from UMNO and formed new party. After 2008, this type of conflict still exists in every political party and it highly depends on worst or not the circumstance is. PKR crisis took place when there is a group who support Anwar Ibrahim (party's president) and Azmin Ali as deputy's president. This crisis had caused one by one main leaders in PKR discharged from the party. Meanwhile, there is also section occurred in PAS between the ulama (Muslim scholar) and professional. Historically, the ulama control the party's leadership. Yet, now non-ulama and professional already hold the position as deputy of party president. There are different views in several issues between these two groups and lead to a crisis inside the party, such as Datuk Hasan Ali case who accused some of the PAS leaders as parasite. Leadership crisis will spread from the highest leader to the right wing party such as Pemuda and women. This group will be used to support certain conflicted parties. Therefore, dispersal becomes a very difficult issue to be solved. Commented on recent political update, Syed Husin Ali (2012) urged, "It could be seen that political racist and political slander become main things for some parties especially those who are close with the party's leaders".

4. Integrity Crisis Solution in Politics

In Malaysia, Malay is Muslim. Islam asserts its advocates to respect each other especially among Muslims. If Islam becomes a fundamental to solve conflicts, dispersal can be avoided. The failure of government's attempt to bring integrity is due to ideology factor and political party advantage. On May 2012, Minister of Kelantan, Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat proposed a muzakarah (dialogue) between PAS and UMNO before the election held. The objective of the muzakarah was towards Muslims' unity and not politically motivated.

"It would be better if the muzakarah is held before the elections....Such talks are warranted in Islam as it is towards the unity of ummah (community). (The Star May 19, 2012).

Asked about the possibility of PAS uniting with Umno, Nik Aziz said UMNO must accept the other two parties in the Pakatan Rakyat coalition as well. This condition is hard to accept for some of UMNO leaders and assume that Nik Aziz's suggestion was not honest. Meanwhile, the Deputy Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin commented, "UMNO was ready to talk to PAS if it benefited the Muslims and the nation (harakahdaily.net 21 May 2012)". Muhyiddin believes that the muzakarah was going to held to discuss about political alliance and PAS denied.

Besides, in every political party, party's wings such as Pemuda and women (UMNO, PKR and PAS) are not supposed to be manipulated to vote and support certain groups in political party. This is by reason of avoiding

dispersal and sections in political parties. Right wing supposedly becomes an elementary strength in a party and held activities that can raise the party's name up. Yet, right wing is apparently not involved in leadership conflict in a political party.

Dispersal crisis will turn out to be worst if it is involved the media (third party). Sometimes, media becomes a provocative agent who will complicate the current situation. A case which involved the dismissal of Datuk Hasan Ali (one of PAS most important leader in early 2012) broadcasted widely in main stream media and also the opponent side. Report from media is also getting feedback from political leaders and the opponent. This issue is due to come to an end when PAS interfere and yet, as a result of intervening by the external and side and media, Datuk Hasan Ali was discharged. Media purportedly becomes an integrative agent for the community and avoid from writing hot issues. Moreover, leader's attitude is also asking for dispersal. For example, a leader from opposition party who claimed that he or she was already discharged from the party, used media thoroughly to beat and worsen party's leadership due to self-dissatisfaction. If unity and people's need become primary, this issue needs to be eluded.

5. Conclusion

Malay political power is gradually weakening as being said by political observers. Malay privileges as stated in the constitution are becoming distracted. The circumstances become complicated with the confrontations towards country's leadership like BERSIH demonstration, jostling for power and internal Malay political conflict. This anxiety of political Malay will hinder the construction of nation state. National integrity is being observed as something which is hard to achieved and yet become a crucial issue in Malaysia. This series of dispersal among Malays has failed the idea of Malaysia's nation state. This is due to the Malays, who as the aborigines and the major ethnic in the country still cannot tolerate each other and fail to unite.

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