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Fifty Years of The New Economic Policy

Revisiting Its Impact on Social Cohesion, National Unity and Creation of *Bangsa Malaysia*

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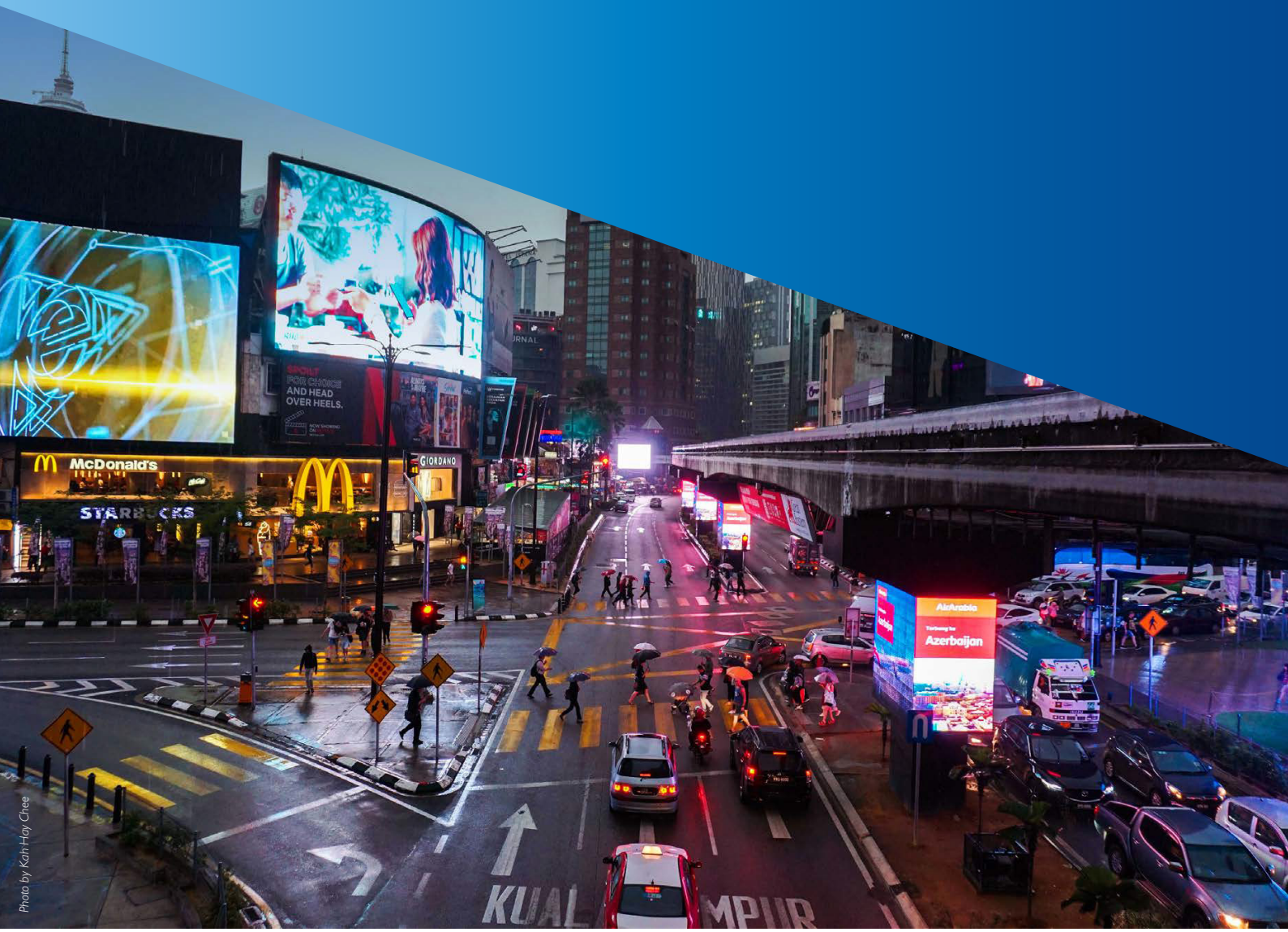

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- ***Malaysian Studies: Looking Back Moving Forward*** (PSSM 2010)
- ***Sains Sosial Malaysia: Mewarisi Tradisi Menanggapi Transformasi Masyarakat*** (IIUMJ Press, 2022)
- ***Globalization and National Autonomy: The Experience of Malaysia***
  (ISEAS Singapore, 2008 co-edited with Joan Nelson & Jacob Meerman);
- ***Connecting Oceans: Malaysia as A Maritime Nation***
  (Penerbit UKM 2019) (co-edited with H-D Evers & Rashila Ramli);
- ***Connecting Oceans: Malaysia as a Nusantara Civilisation***
  (Penerbit UKM 2020) (co-edited with H-D Evers & Rashila Ramli).

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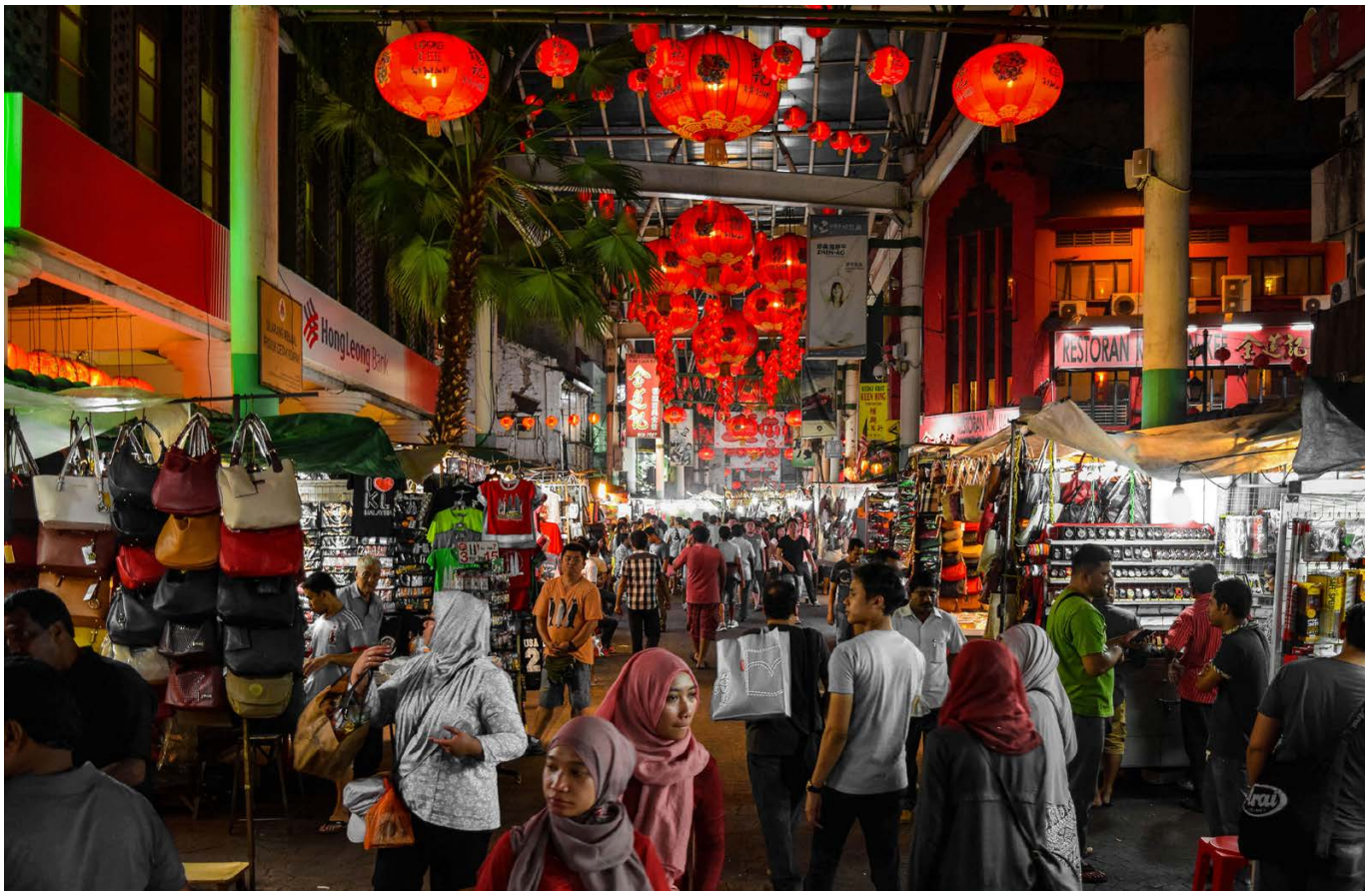

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Introduction

A lot of discussions had taken place over the last six decades since Malaya's (later Malaysia's) independence on August 31st, 1957 on the subject of national unity, interethnic accommodation, and nation building not only in academia but also in public and policy domains. Such discussions including policy debates became more intense and urgent following the May 13th riots in 1969, a reflection of the deep concerns among members of society about how to put the country back on track to ensure rule of law, stability, peace and development prevail. The riots "conscientised (the) people" about the seriousness of such problems, and "most importantly, it redefined the perceptions of [Malaysia's] ethnic relations … and changed their dynamics" (Shamsul (2008: 9). A major outcome of all these was none other than the formulation of the New Economic Policy (1971-1990) to forge national unity through social engineering. This was to be achieved by restructuring society and driving economic development based on affirmative action on behalf of the Bumiputera, and promoting prosperity and progress for all.

Two key challenges related to nation building faced the nation in 1957 as it attained independence. One was the national question – the country had inherited a modern state from the British but without a nation, and thus nation building became a central issue. However, the absence of a nation in the sense of a national political identity at independence did not mean there were no conceptualisations or ideas about the nation that were hotly debated in the course of fighting for independence. Second was the issue of the historical socio-economic imbalances along class and ethnic lines as well as the

sharp uneven development between regions, especially between the West Coast and the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia, all of which were a result of British colonial rule (Puthuchaery, 1960; Jomo, 1986). Such imbalances had to be corrected, and this was done on a massive scale via the New Economic Policy (1971-1990). Both these issues are critically discussed below.

In 2021, the New Economic Policy (NEP) commemorates its 50th birthday. This is an opportune moment to revisit the NEP, especially its philosophical underpinnings, its achievements, impact, challenges and unintended consequences, and the lessons that can be drawn for future development and nation building efforts. The NEP is a strategic plan for nation building with the overriding objective to achieve national unity. However, it is pertinent to note that even after 50 years of the NEP, a National Unity Plan had to be crafted and introduced in early 2021. This implies that issues of inter-ethnic/race relations, unity, social cohesion, national identity and nation building are still very much with us. These issues cannot be taken for granted, and must be addressed seriously in academic and policy discourses, and embedded in policy making and implemented.

Regarding the building of a united and cohesive nation which was an important agenda of post-independence Malaysia and stated in the NEP's objectives, we should note that a nation cannot merely exist in the minds or imagination of just the leaders; it must also be in the minds and imagination of their followers and members of the society. Similarly, the nation as a concept and nation building as a policy imperative cannot simply be appropriated by the political elite as though it belongs solely to them. Rather, it must merge with what is imagined and desired by members of the society, and owned by them too. In this way, the concept can be transformed from being an elitist abstraction of the nation to a concrete and practical one in the lived experiences of the members of society who consist of various classes, ethnic groups and backgrounds; in short, they must share a political identity with which they identify with and give their loyalty to.

This is precisely the issue with *Bangsa Malaysia* or the Malaysian nation. It is defined by leaders, i.e., those with the authority and the agenda to turn it into a big narrative, a perfect example is Prime Minister Mahathir's Vision 2020 speech in February 1991. However, the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* is not totally new. It preceded Mahathir by at least 20 years when the second prime minister, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, declared this in Parliament in July 1971 during his tabling of the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-1975) and the New Economic Policy (1971-1990) (see Section III below). Additionally, *Bangsa Malaysia* is also imagined and 'defined' by the people of various ethnic groups as well as their social organisations in their daily activities through their cooperation and collective endeavour.

The concept of a nation is linked to political identity; it is about the psychological sense of belonging, having a sense of common destiny and a shared future. At the same time, the intricacies of the idea of the nation from below are important. This concerns especially how people interpret their histories, their experiences and social memories of being together, their interpretation of the treatment meted out by the state and its apparatus (perceived or real), and how the people of various ethnic groups rally in solidarity in support of each other, especially in times of adversity, or conversely ignore those in need of empathy and solace.

It is also important to note there are various notions of *Bangsa Malaysia* among Malaysians. While some of these notions may converge, others are not only competing but, in effect, disassociating. In recent years, leaders of constituent states of Malaysia came up with their own notions of political identity such as "*Bangsa Johor*", "Sarawak for Sarawakians", while the term "Orang Malaya" has often been used by the people of Sabah and Sarawak to refer to those in and from the Peninsula, in a disapproving way, implying

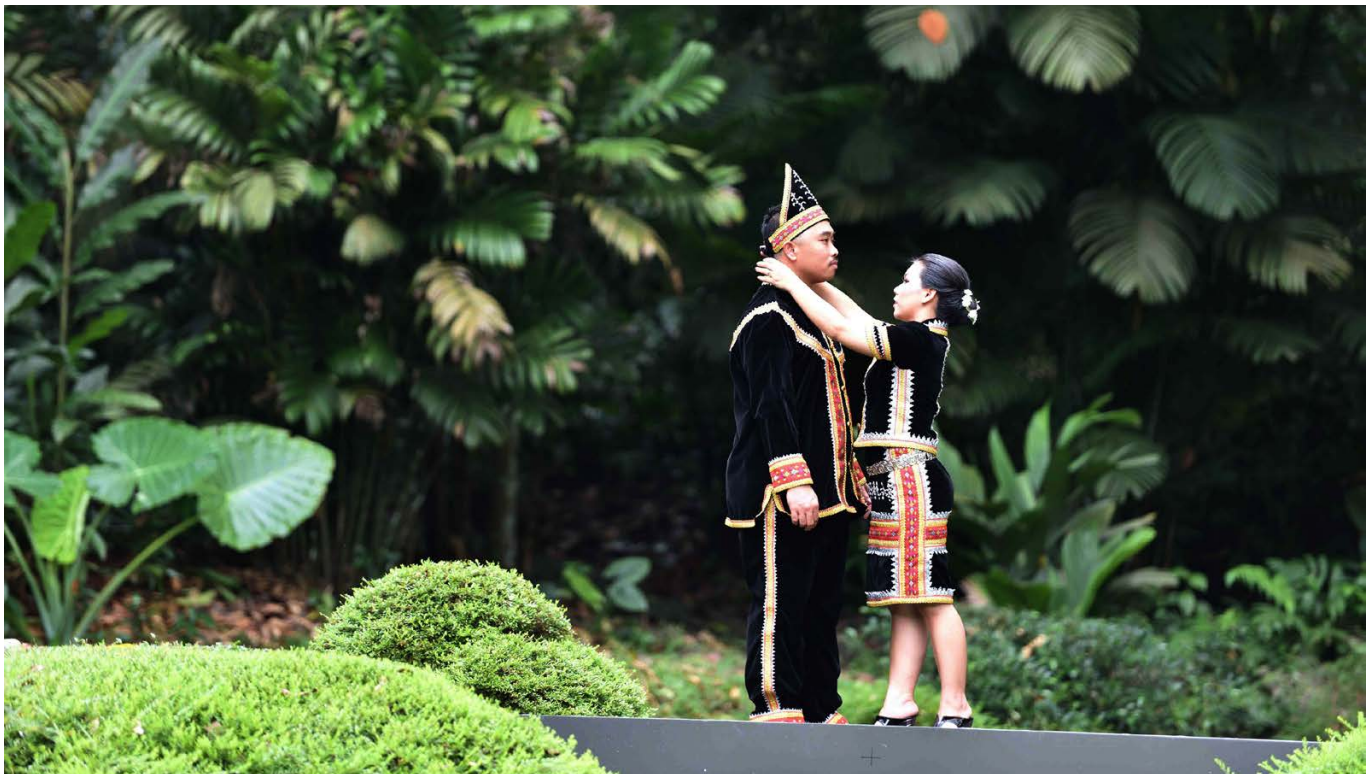

Photo by Jedikanie Jasnie

they are ruled and dominated by the latter. In fact, of late, there have been calls that Sabah and Sarawak should separate from Malaysia and the voices are growing louder, not only from below, but also from the elite, leading to some analysts to raise the question "Is Malaysia heading for a BorneoExit?" (Chin, 2020). All these have made the challenge of moulding a united *Bangsa Malaysia* even more complicated.

In light of the above, this paper will first, examine the context in which the New Economic Policy (1971-1990) emerged and the 'package' that came together with it, and show that the NEP's over-riding objective was very much linked to the national question, namely the building of a united and cohesive *Bangsa Malaysia.* The paper will also assess the NEP's impact, and 'measure' the extent of social cohesion among various ethnic groups. This will be followed with an analysis of the challenges in building *Bangsa Malaysia* since the end of the 20th century and the first few decades of the 21st century, while the conclusion will present some ideas in moving forward.

In line with the intent to revisit the NEP and its impacts, the paper is divided into four parts as follows:

I. The New Economic Policy and Its Context

II. Development Plans over Five Decades, Social Cohesion and National Unity

III. Nation-Building and the Narrative of *Bangsa Malaysia*

IV. Conclusion

I: The New Economic Policy and its Context

The New Economic Policy (NEP) was officially launched by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein in 1971 as the guiding policy framework with a time frame of 20 years.

Prior to the NEP and state intervention in the economy, during the laissez faire period of the 1950s and 1960s, there were two important strategic programmes associated with Tun Abdul Razak, namely the setting up of the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) in July 1956 to resettle the landless poor, the overwhelming majority being Malays, into new land settlement schemes, a move that subsequently became a major rural development programme after the 1970s. And secondly, the setting up of MARA (Majlis Amanah Rakyat or the People's Trust Council) in 1966, a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Rural Development to promote entrepreneurship, education and training for the Bumiputera. MARA actually replaced the Rural Industrial Development Authority (RIDA) set up by the British in 1951 to provide economic assistance to rural Malay farmers.

The New Economic Policy adopted by the government under Tun Razak was based on the recommendations made in a paper entitled "Policies for Growth With Racial Balance" submitted several weeks after the May 13th riots in 1969 by Professor Just Faaland, the head of the Harvard Advisory Service Group at the Prime Minister's Department. The NEP was historic, visionary, brave and novel, driven by the spirit and context of the era, viz. the 1970s, both nationally and internationally. The NEP had far-reaching impacts in bringing about structural transformation and change during the two decades from the 1970s, many of which were unprecedented in the history of Malaysia. During those two decades, the NEP succeeded in reducing poverty and transforming the Malaysian society, especially the Malays, from a rural-agricultural traditional community to an urbanised, modern society. It had also enabled the emergence and expansion of the new middle class among Malays, many through affirmative action, and also producing some members of the corporate class, thus, making both the middle and corporate classes more multi-ethnic than ever before. The NEP's success had attracted interests beyond Malaysian shores, especially in South Africa, regarding the lessons of its affirmative action measures for the Black population there.

Nevertheless, for this 50-year review, it is pertinent to point out that the idea of the NEP, which involves state intervention in the economy – the key approach to drive the NEP to correct the imbalances – was not really something new. In 1960, ten years before Just Faaland's paper and the NEP's launching, political economist James Puthucheary, in his classic book, *Ownership and Control in the Malayan Economy,* argued that poverty and wealth were not ethnic but class issues, and advocated state intervention to restructure equity ownership of the economy which was dominated by foreign capital. This book, which was regarded as a "forerunner" of the NEP by economist Ozay Mehmet (1998: 85), was already quite well-known among several leading intellectuals who were close to the then Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, and, in fact, were his 'closet advisors'.

It is important to place the introduction of the NEP in the context of the developments in the late 1960s, namely the May 13th, 1969 riots and developments in the early 1970s. Following the riots, the critical question that emerged was regarding the country's governance: Should parliamentary rule continue as usual despite the failure of the laissez faire system in the period between 1957-1969, or a new form of governance be instituted? This question was answered swiftly with the imposition of a set of tough measures which were draconian, to say the least. In a rapid succession of measures, the King promulgated the declaration of the nation-wide Emergency on May 15th and the suspension of

Parliament followed by the setting up of the National Operations Council (NOC) on May 17th. The NOC which effectively ruled the country under the Emergency for about one year and nine months was chaired by the then Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein who also served as the Director of Operations to restore order and peace and govern the country for a period until the Parliament was eventually reconvened in February 1971.

Related to this was the serious rupture of social peace and inter-ethnic understanding and accommodation caused by the riots. It was obvious there was a need to forge a new national consensus which could guide the people of various ethnic groups, and bond them together again as citizens. For this purpose, the National Consultative Council (NCC) was established in January 1970. The NCC was a deliberative council comprising 67 distinguished personalities who were public figures drawn from representatives of all political parties (except one who did not accept the invitation), media, academia and other walks of life representing the various ethnic groups and regions. Chaired also by Tun Razak, the deliberations of the NCC resulted in the formulation of the Rukun Negara, launched by the King on August 31st, 1970 to forge unity and bring about a new national consensus. The preamble of Rukun Negara containing its five objectives which have often been overlooked or under emphasised, should be reiterated again, viz., build unity among the people; practise a democratic way of life; build a just society in which prosperity is shared in a fair and equitable manner; adopt a liberal approach towards the rich and diverse cultures and heritage; and build a progressive society based on science and technology. These five objectives were merged with the Five Pillars, namely: Belief in God; Loyalty to the King and Country; Supremacy of the Constitution; Rule of Law; and Courtesy and Morality.

Together with the task of defining the framework and principles of the new national consensus through the Rukun Negara, the critical question was: What system was to replace the laissez system which had failed to ensure a fair distribution of resources among the different social classes and ethnic groups? This boils down to what kind of economic model that should be introduced to address poverty which was very widespread at that time among all ethnic groups; with the poverty level at 52.4% of all households for Malaysia. For Peninsula Malaysia, the poverty level was 49.3%, with rural poverty very much higher at 58.7% compared with urban poverty at 21.3%. In terms of ethnic groups, poverty among the Malays (who were mostly in the rural areas) was the highest at 70.5% in 1957/58 and 64.8% in 1970 compared with the Chinese and the Indians at 26.0% and 39.2% respectively in 1970 (Ragayah, 2008: page 120 Table 5.1a; page 125 Table 5.3a; data for Sabah and Sarawak in 1970 is not available; see also Rajah Rasiah and Kamal Salih, 2019 on poverty reduction). There was also an urgent need to overcome ethnic identification of economic activities. This is necessary so that there would be better representations of different ethnic groups, especially the Malays, in the modern economic sectors and occupations to overcome the old Furnivallian "plural society" model which saw the different ethnic groups living in separate enclaves and meeting only in the marketplace. Thus, the idea of state intervention that was earlier advocated by Puthucheary, and later recommended by Just Faaland to address the socio-economic imbalances which were the products of the colonial legacy became very attractive.

However, to put that idea into policy imperative was not plain sailing. Intense debates and deliberations took place between the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) of the Prime Minister's Department and the Department of National Unity (DNU), which was set up at that time to implement the proposed New Economic Policy. Should the policy emphasise "growth first, distribution later" which was the EPU position and supported by the Treasury, Bank Negara, and the foreign advisors? Or should it be "growth with distribution" which was the DNU's position, at that time headed by Ghazali Shafie, supported by members of the National Consultative Council? Eventually, with the backing of Tun

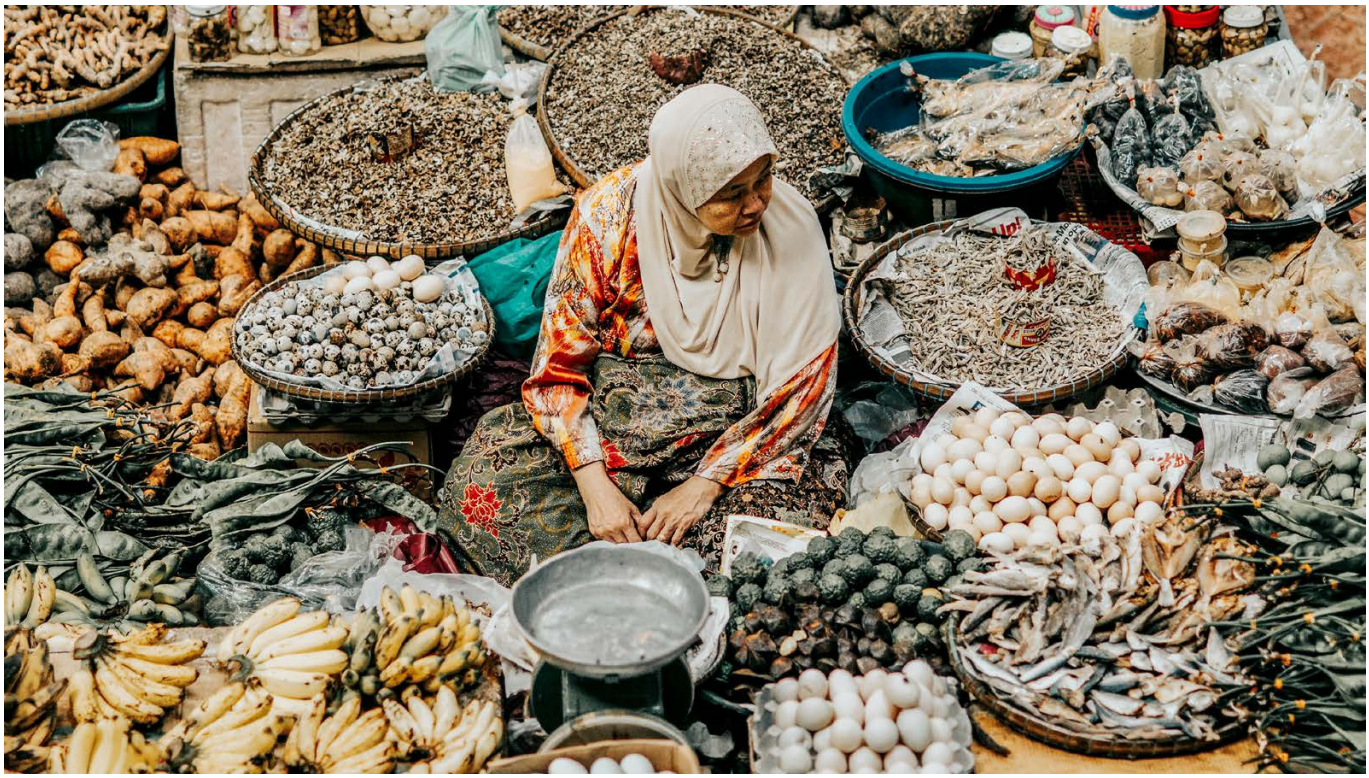

Photo by Firdaus Roslan

Razak, it was decided that the laissez faire system had to be replaced by state intervention in the economy, to implement growth with distribution. This marked the beginning of the developmentalist state in Malaysia manifested in the form of active state intervention in the economy, and which undertook massive social engineering to ensure rapid economic growth and distribution while simultaneously correcting the historical imbalances along both class (eradication of poverty) and ethnic lines (restructuring of society). As Malaysia was no stranger to national planning in the form of five-year plans which had been adopted since the early 1950s, the government continued with this approach by introducing the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-1975) as the planning document to launch the first phase of the New Economic Policy (1971-1990) (Faaland et al. 2003; Abdul Rahman Embong 2008 and 2019).

In order to have the NEP instituted as a policy which was contrary to the dominant laissez faire economic paradigm, the thinking at the top was crucial. It is worth recalling Prime Minister Razak's speech at the UMNO Youth Seminar on Development held in Morib, Selangor on July 25th, 1971 which reflected the thinking behind the NEP. Acknowledging that the private sector played an important role during the laissez faire period in the 1950s and 1960s, Tun Razak said that state participation was vital to distribute the wealth of the country in a just and equitable manner, and to provide everyone, irrespective of ethnicity, equal opportunities to enjoy the fruit of their work together and on a united basis to make Malaysia strong. He named the concept as "nationalist socialism" which was "in keeping with Paul Sigmund's concept of Socialism in new and developing nations… (a concept) fed by a passion for social equality, and by a desire for rapid economic development" (quoted in Abdul Rahman 2019: 45. The full text of the speech can be found in the collection of Razak's speeches in 1971 kept by Arkib Negara Malaysia (National Archives of Malaysia)). As stated by Jomo (2019: 65), "Tun Razak's economic nationalism also extended to other areas. First, he was committed to significantly reducing foreign ownership and control of the Malaysian economy, including the expansion of public or state-

owned enterprises. Second, he was also committed to having greater national control of the Malaysian economy expressed principally in terms of Keynesian-type counter-cyclical state intervention, which remains especially challenging in Malaysia's open economy inherited from the British colonial times and consolidated since by economic policies privileging foreign investment and production for exports." … ,

In order to ensure NEP's success, a comprehensive long term policy alone was not enough. In ensuring its effectiveness and the sustainability of implementation, a sufficiently large reservoir of qualified and well-trained workforce with the knowledge and skills was badly needed. Such expertise was also required to address interethnic relations and build unity. In order to achieve this, more places had to be created in the universities for children of the poor and those from the low-income families, especially among the Malays, and an emphasis on science and engineering courses was consciously undertaken. However, an important and far-sighted decision was made to introduce social science courses, such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, political science, among others in the universities. This was based on the recommendation of another team from the Harvard Advisory Service Group comprising professors Samuel Huntington, Myron Weiner, Nathan Glazier, and Manning Nash who proposed that new departments and faculties in the universities in Malaysia be set up to introduce the various subjects in the social sciences for nation building and national unity. This led to the rapid growth and expansion of the social sciences in Malaysia from the 1970s onwards in the existing public universities (Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Mal;aysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia), and proceeded apace with the setting up of new universities in the 1980s and 1990s. (For details on the four issues, please refer to Faaland et al. 2003; Abdul Rahman Embong 2008 and 2019).

However, there was another big challenge. Malaysia had experienced the open competitive multiparty political system since independence that was characterised by intense political battles either in parliament or among the masses, especially during elections. This was especially so when canvassing for votes, which had often been pursued along racial and religious lines, given the ethnic-based nature of most major political parties on both sides of the political divide. This kind of political culture – at times, highly inflammatory in nature — was very divisive and unproductive, and was one of the factors that contributed to the May 13 riots. However, the *real politics* in Malaysia is that no one party could rule the country on its own, thus inter-party collaboration was vital and this was achieved by forming a coalition. The question was: How would this kind of politics that was racially divisive and destructive be handled? Should there be some control in place?

This was managed by instituting the Constitution (Amendment) Act 1971, and based on that, the Parliament then amended the Sedition Act 1948 accordingly, placing new restrictions even including members of Parliament (thus over-ruling Parliamentary immunity) not to touch what were deemed as "sensitive issues". The "sensitive issues" as per the Constitutional amendments involved "criminalizing any questioning on citizenship (Part III), on national language (Art 152), on the special position of the Malays and the rights of other races (Art 153) and on Rulers' sovereignty (Art 181)" (Roos Niza 2015).

At the same time, a new kind of political alignment was put in place. Based on the spirit of Rukun Negara, especially the new consensus it sought to achieve, a new concept of political party coalition was considered. Initiated by Tun Razak, it started with the coalition government being formed between UMNO and PAS in 1973, implemented in Kelantan and also at the Federal level. At the same time, PAS joined the Barisan Nasional established in January 1973 (but registered in June 1974), which was an expansion of the original Alliance Party of UMNO-MCA-MIC formed in 1955, to become a new grand coalition of 14 parties to rule the country. However, while Barisan Nasional was new, the concept of

the grand alliance or coalition was not because the first of such coalition, the multi-ethnic PUTERA-AMCJA, was already established in 1946-1948 to fight British colonialism for independence, but which was banned by the British in 1948. The UMNO-led BN which succeeded the Alliance Party was able to rule the country for many decades, until it was eventually ousted by the Pakatan Harapan in the 14th General Election on May 9th, 2018.

The provision in the Federal Constitution most referred to in any discussion on the NEP, namely the issue of unity, the rights of citizens of various ethnic groups and on nation building in Malaysia, is Article 153. Article 153 indicates how the "historical imbalances" between ethnic groups need to be resolved. Specifically, Article 153(1) enjoins the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to "safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article." It is important to note that the term in the Constitution is "Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak," not "Bumiputera" as is often used in public discourse (Khoo 2018). Surprisingly, the Orang Asli are not included in the "natives" provision, thus they fall under "the legitimate interests of other communities". Article 153(2) addresses the specific areas the Yang di-Pertuan Agong is to safeguard these interests ("Bumiputera"), viz.,(a) A reasonable proportion of position or quota in the Federal public service; (b) quota for education scholarship and university enrolment; (c) Federal trade or business licence, which in practice, include APs.[1] The impact of this provision will be analysed later in the discussion on *Bangsa Malaysia* (see Section IV of this paper).

In summary, it can be said that the NEP came with a package. Thought through in the decade of the 1960s and crafted in the post-riot situation during the Emergency, it is state-driven and had Rukun Negara as its guiding framework, with its over-riding objective to achieve national unity. It also came with the idea of a new coalition to ensure more acquiescent political parties so that there would be less intense political competition to ensure stability and inter-ethnic cooperation, being cognisant of the fact that no one political party could effectively rule the country. It also came with the realisation that for the country to develop, it required a highly educated workforce, not only in the sciences, but also very importantly, in the social sciences and humanities.

Over and above all these, it required the vision, wisdom, and strong political will of the top national leadership to undertake nation building effectively.

1 Article 153(2) contains the provisions which enjoins the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to " safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and to ensure the reservation for Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak of such proportion as he may deem reasonable of positions in the public service (other than the public service of a State) and of scholarships, exhibitions and other similar educational or training privileges or special facilities given or accorded by the Federal Government and, when any permit or licence for the operation of any trade or business is required by federal law, then, subject to the provisions of that law and this Article, of such permits and licences." (See Khoo 2018).

II: Development Plans over Five Decades, and the Challenge of Interethnic Relations and National Unity

Looking at the development policies and plans over the last 50 years, the New Economic Policy (1971-1990) was implemented through a 20-year perspective plan, while the Shared Prosperity Vision launched in 2019 is being implemented through a ten year perspective plan (2021-2030) with two five-year development plans (Twelfth Malaysia Plan 2021-2025, and Thirteenth Malaysia Plan 2026-2030). In between, Vision 2020 was launched by Prime Minister Mahathir, a 30-year long term envisioning, which was divided into three development policy periods – the National Development Policy (1991-2000), (National Vision Policy (2001-2010), and the National Transformation Policy (2011-2020).

The NEP's two-pronged objectives – the eradication of poverty irrespective of race, and the restructuring of society to overcome the identification of race with economic function – to be achieved in two decades by 1990 were articulated clearly in the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-1975) (2MP), which was the first phase of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Prime Minister Tun Razak in his speech in Parliament when tabling the Second Malaysia Plan on July 12th, 1971, emphasised that the 2MP was different – it was "not a continuation of past plans", but something new based on the New Economic Policy and Rukun Negara. In the context of the time, the 2MP was "most ambitious" being given the "biggest allocation", amounting to RM14.350 billion, of which the economic sector was allotted 67.2%, social services 14.7%, while defence and security 15.2%. Tun Razak was very hopeful – in fact he was rather over-optimistic "to achieve economic balance within five years" via the Second Malaysia Plan.[2]

Tun Razak died suddenly in January 1976 and hence, was not there to witness the NEP's achievements, challenges and unintended consequences. The economic achievements together with social transformation during the twenty-year NEP period were indeed impressive. Donald Snodgrass (1995) stated that the NEP was "probably the most ambitious affirmative action program ever undertaken in a developing country," and that Malaysia grew rapidly during the 1970-1990 period at an average of eight percent, becoming one of the ten fastest-growing economies in the world, despite the country's ethnic heterogeneity. Besides economic growth, poverty alleviation, and ethnic restructuring, there was a dramatic change in the structure of the economy, and accompanying social development with significantly improved quality of life. Snodgrass (1995) stressed that one single important indicator of improved quality of life was the increased life expectancy at birth which rose from 64.6 years in 1970 to 71 years in 1992 (and by extension 76.2 years in 2019). He further suggested that the Malaysian experience through the NEP shows that ethnic heterogeneity is not necessarily a liability but can be an asset in economic development. According to him, Malaysia had three crucial elements: good policy, good luck, and pragmatism that enabled it to achieve its objectives.

However, when Mahathir Mohamad became the fourth prime minister in 1981, he introduced several changes to the NEP's strategies, namely from state-led growth to private sector-led growth. This

2 For comparison purposes, with a population of 11.06 million in 1971, the allocation for the Second Malaysia Plan was approximately RM1,304 per capita, while for the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2001-2025) launched in September 2021 by the ninth Prime Minister, the allocation was RM400 billion, which is RM12,232 per capita (based on the population size of 32.7 million) or 9.4 times more per capita compared with the 2MP. While the total amount is important, how the allocation is spent with efficiency and without leakages is crucial.

Photo by Patrick Langwallner

was pioneered with the introduction of the "Malaysia Incorporated Policy" (Malaysia Inc.) in 1981 to encourage cooperation between the public and private sectors, as though they both belong to a Malaysian Corporation. Adopting the "Look East Policy" in 1982, whose essence was to learn the work ethics of Japan and South Korea, he began privatisation plans from 1983 onwards to support Malaysia Inc., and increase the role of the private sector in economic development. Mahathir's strategy was not only one of "changing gear" but also a major shift in strategic directions. It was a change from state-driven growth to that of private sector-led growth, in keeping with the neoliberal agenda which was the mainstream since the 1980s propelled by Reaganomics and Thatcherism in the neoliberal capitalist world under the so-called Washington Consensus. Mahathir's emphasis was on heavy industrialisation and the creation of a Bumiputera corporate class.

While there was a brief recession in the mid-1980s with the Malaysian economy contracting during the 1986-87, it bounced back later, averaging eight to nine percent growth during the 1988 to 1995, contributing to "Malaysia's emergence as a second-generation newly industrialised country" (Loh Kok Wah, 2014: 121). It was in the context of such rapid growth that in 1992, the slogan "Malaysia Boleh" (Malaysia Can Do) was adopted, at first for the international sports tournaments, namely when Malaysia hosted the Thomas Cup and Uber Cup, but later used in almost every field of endeavour, especially in economic development, to signify the confidence to scale and achieve new heights based on the new-found success of the previous two decades.

It was the success of the NEP which enabled Mahathir to confidently announce Vision 2020 in January 1991, with the objective of becoming a developed nation by 2020. In Vision 2020, the building of a united *Bangsa Malaysia* was stipulated as the first and the most fundamental challenge. The next three decades following the end of the NEP and the beginning of Vision 2020 saw three development policies,

all of which, in one way or another, referred to national unity. The National Development Policy (1991-2000), which officially replaced the NEP, was introduced by Mahathir, with the objective of achieving economic growth, while ensuring that accrued benefits reach all sections of society. Though the NDP was supposed to succeed the NEP, it still pursued most of the NEP policies of affirmative action for the Bumiputera. The National Vision Policy (2001-2010) which succeeded the NDP aims to establish a united, progressive and prosperous *Bangsa Malaysia*. It endeavours to build a resilient and competitive nation, and an equitable society with the overriding objective of national unity. It has seven critical thrusts, namely building a resilient nation, promoting an equitable society, sustaining high economic growth; enhancing competitiveness; developing a knowledge-based economy; strengthening human resource development; and pursuing environmentally sustainable development.

The National Transformation Policy, 2011-2020, claims to maintain the people-centric focus through the New Economic Model, which sets the goal of becoming a high-income economy that is both inclusive and sustainable. It was to cover the last decade of Vision 2020. The notable change in the National Transformation Policy is the shift from the concept of a "developed nation" in Vision 2020 to that of a "high income nation".

What happened to inter-ethnic relations, social cohesion, and national unity during these five decades? Has the country become more cohesive and united, or have the fault lines become sharper and more pronounced, especially in the last two or three decades?

Much water has flowed under the bridge since then, with the May 13th conflicts already a distant memory. However, one of the major challenges of the NEP and its unintended consequence was the proliferation and hardening of identity politics in Malaysia which affected the NEP's goal of attaining national unity. While the Malay *special position* (kedudukan istimewa) is in Article 153 of the Federal Constitution as stated above, in popular usage, it is used as "*special rights*" (hak istimewa). The dichotomising of Bumiputera-non-Bumiputera (a dichotomy which does not exist in the Constitution) has the consequence of "othering" and "splitting", while the politics of "Malay dominance" – a term used by Abdullah Ahmad, a former advisor of Tun Abdul Razak, in his 1986 speech at the Institute of International Affairs, Singapore – has triggered strong reactions for or against it.

As a result, the Rukun Negara's five objectives, namely unity, democracy and justice, liberal approach towards the rich cultural diversity, and developing a progressive society based on science and technology, could not be fully adhered to. Though stable, inter-ethnic relations have sometimes been tense, and even polarised. Scholars such as Shamsul (2008: 10-12) describe such relations as "a state of stable tension"; nevertheless, he stresses that Malaysians prefer "tongue wagging not *parang* (machete) wielding." This means that the situation generally has been stable, but such stability is not without inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts.

In fact, surveying the last five decades since the launching of the NEP and reviewing its impacts, we can roughly demarcate three periods. The first period was from 1971 to 2008 where there were episodes of conflict and tense relations, but a general atmosphere of peace and social cohesion prevailed amidst rapid development and rising prosperity. However, the succeeding period from 2008 until February 2020 can be described as a period of rising ethnic and religious polarisation and tension, while from February 2020 onwards until today with the onslaught of COVID-19 pandemic and the setting up of a Malay-Muslim government under Perikatan Nasional, ethnic relations seem to have stabilised again.

Let us focus on the first period since the launching of the NEP. While the biggest systemic rupture was the ethnic riots in May 1969, there were some minor incidents, such as the Kampung Medan riots in March 2001, and the prevalence of the so-called 'hot spots' identified by the authorities in certain parts of the country. Further, there has been incessant sabre-rattling between politicians across the political divide that contributed to ethnic misunderstanding and tension, and this has been used by the ruling regime as a justification for mass arrests. This was the case of the Operation Lalang launched by the Mahathir regime in October 1987 when 100 over opposition politicians, NGO activists, intellectuals, and others were arrested and detained without trial under the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA). These developments including the controversies surrounding the articulation of "Malay dominance" in 1986 mentioned earlier show that the late 1980s and early 1990s were rather divisive.

However, with the various affirmative action policies in the economy, employment, education, among others on behalf of the Bumiputera, there was a dramatic reduction of poverty, and an expansion of the Malay middle and corporate classes, making the latter more multi-ethnic (Abdul Rahman, 2002). Despite the unhappiness among sections of the non-Malays over the NEP, in the main, there were stability, cohesion and acquiescence during that period.

Why? The policy of state-led growth and distribution was implemented between 1971-1985, and subsequently it was replaced with a pro-market policy. As noted by Loh (2014: 122), "It was this ability to switch from the public sector as the engine of growth from 1971 to 1985, to the private sector beginning in the late 1980s, that sustained Malaysia's economic growth over three decades. No doubt it facilitated the successful implementation of the NEP; however, the switch to neo-liberal policies also catered to the economic interests of non-Malay business interests."

It is true, as noted by Loh (2014), that ethnicity has become less politicised than was previously the case, due in part, to the "growing non-Malay acquiescence to the post-1969 terms of governance predicated on improving Malay involvement in the economy and increasing Malay political and cultural pre-eminence." In more specific terms, Loh (2014: 120) explained this acquiescence as being due to three factors, namely "rapid economic growth, which facilitated not only the realization of NEP goals but also improved the livelihoods of the non-Bumiputera; the emergence of a new political culture of developmentalism especially evident among the middle-class, which deflected attention away from ethnicism, but also set limits on participatory democracy; and consolidation of the strong BN state which, apart from development and developmentalism, resorted to coercive laws to maintain its rule."

Empirical studies conducted towards the end of the 20th century and after, seem to concur with the view of the prevalence of silent acquiescence on the part of the non-Malays, especially the Chinese, which can be attributed to developmentalism. However, besides acquiescence, there was also pragmatic accommodation, as well as "open resentment expressed most vividly in the out-migration of Chinese capital and professionals" (Abdul Rahman 2001: 61), and very importantly, genuine inter-ethnic cooperation, peace and solidarity also prevailed. Abdul Rahman's study entitled "The Culture and Practice of Pluralism in Postcolonial Malaysia" (2001) suggested that while there were conflicts and tensions, in the main, there were attempts at cross-ethnic solidarity. This is evident in the work of many civil society organisations, and also the cooperation witnessed among various business groups which had partners from other ethnic groups. Nevertheless, this developmentalist ideology had not transcended ethnicity so much as it had succeeded in (partially) privatising it. At the same time, new forms of civility and participation among various ethnic groups emerged.

The following quote sums up the situation of new cooperation and cross-ethnic solidarities:

> *"The presence of new, multi-ethnic organizations and interactions is … significant. … (W)hatever the influence of this developmentalist ideology, articulate members of the new middle class have come forward not only with new forms of association, self-expression, and initiative, but also with new ideas regarding the proper balance among state, market, and civil society… creating the possibility for a new kind of political culture in Malaysia. ….. (T)he expansion of a multi-ethnic middle class has been accompanied by a proliferation of civil society or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as new types of mass media, including, not insignificantly, the Internet….. The struggles they have witnessed include demands for human rights, rights for women and children, programs for the elderly and minorities, consumer rights, environmental protection, and so on. The emergence of these civic organizations together with democratic political parties and public intellectuals have contributed toward the opening up of a more democratic public sphere and the growth of an incipient civil society, giving rise to new solidarities that cross ethnic and religious lines"* (Abdul Rahman 2001: 62-63). [3]

The results of five public opinion and attitude surveys on ethnic relations in Malaysia conducted between 2010 and 2017[4] also confirmed these findings, highlighting both points of tension and divide as well as points of agreement and cohesion (Lee Hwok Aun 2017). For the purpose of this paper, we will highlight two important findings from Hwok Aun's summary of the five surveys:

First, while "Malaysians generally relate well across ethnic lines, show goodwill towards each other; broad multi-ethnic support for a shift away from ethnicity-based politics and political parties; and that increasing interaction and friendship fosters better understanding, yet, Malaysians' circles of friends tend to be ethnically homogenous; attitudes towards race and religion constrain inter-group relations and can widen divisions; and ethnic groups gravitate towards opposing positions on the issue of ethnic affirmative action."

Second, on the question of Bumiputera preferential treatment, a question directly related to the NEP's affirmative action, it was found "Malaysians are distinctly divided on [such] preferential policies and the fairness of the economic system, with the majority firmly in favour of its continuity and deeming the system as fair, and minority groups showing widespread misgivings and perceiving unfairness." To the question, "Are race-based policies still relevant today?", 38% replied in the positive, while 48% felt they are no longer relevant. What is interesting is that Malay respondents are evenly split (42% each agreeing and disagreeing), while among Chinese, 60% are against and only 28% are supportive. Indian responses are in between, with 52% disagreeing with the question, and 34% agreeing"[5] (Lee Hwok Aun 2017).

Besides these findings in the micro-level studies and in the five surveys mentioned above, what took place at the macro-national level was also indicative of the trend of cooperation and solidarity. We can point to the fact that from the end of the 20th century, following the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim from the

3 Loh's edited work (2010), which focuses on everyday forms of inter-ethnic peace building in Malaysia especially among various NGOs in the country, and the importance of social capital also comes to a similar conclusion. This is clear when it examines the extent in which the civic associations are multi-ethnic in composition and orientation and promote social justice and democratisation.

4 The five surveys analysed by Lee Hwok Aun (2017) are: (a) The Merdeka Center for Opinion Research conducted two surveys — National Unity Survey (2015), and Political Values Survey 2010; (b) The Centre for a Better Tomorrow (CENBET) (2016);(c) Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wölfer survey for CIMB Foundation (2016); and (d) Kajidata (a market research company) public perceptions survey unity and harmony (2017).

5 These are findings of the survey on racism conducted by The Centre for a Better Tomorrow (CENBET) who published the findings in April 2016.

government and UMNO on September 2nd, 1998, and subsequently his imprisonment by the Mahathir government, we witnessed the birth of a powerful Reformasi movement which was multi-ethnic in nature, with members of the Malay middle class being prominently present, and in fact, in the leadership position (Abdul Rahman 2002, Chapter 10). A corollary of the Reformasi movement was the birth of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (in Malay: Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil — BERSIH) in November 2006, which was a huge democratic movement in which people of various ethnic groups gathered together and took to the streets in popular protest, demanding for reforms of the electoral system to realise clean and fair elections. Some of the participants in the various rallies organised by BERSIH claimed that they could feel "Bangsa Malaysia was born on the streets of Kuala Lumpur".

All these facts indicate the presence of social cohesion among members of the society, partly born out of the Reformasi struggle and that of BERSIH. At the same time, social cohesion also prevailed in the everyday lives of people of various ethnic groups.

Rapid economic growth and developmentalism, however, may not serve as a strong and sustainable glue to hold them together for long. What is needed is the value system or a culture of mutual respect and acceptance of the other, of respecting and celebrating diversity, all of which together that can serve as a glue to bond people of various ethnic groups as citizens.

Economic growth and developmentalism have brought prosperity and wealth especially for the elite, while the lower sections of the society experienced some of the spill-over effects. Economic wealth and political power often go hand in hand where the latter has been used as a conduit for the acquisition of more wealth. As experience has shown, when the political power of the ruling UMNO was at stake, various UMNO politicians and their NGOs would up the ante, and come with the slogan that "the Malays are under threat", with "the threat supposedly coming from the non-Malays, namely the Chinese". This happened about five years after Mahathir stepped down in October 2003, and after the waning of "the feel good factor" of the BN victory in the 2004 general election under Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. It is obvious that whenever the ruling UMNO-led BN government come under serious threat, being challenged by the Opposition coalition – first by Pakatan Rakyat which later became Pakatan Harapan – under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, the ugly face of ethnic tension would come to the fore with politicians and the right wing media stoking up ethnic sentiments, thus causing splits and polarisation in the community. This became especially sharp after the BN electoral reversals under Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in the March 2008 general election in which they lost their traditional two-thirds parliamentary majority to the Opposition, with the UMNO ethno-populists claiming that it was due to what they termed as the "Chinese tsunami".

Even several years before BN's electoral setbacks in 2008, there were reports about ethnic polarisation among students in the universities, and that something should be done. This development pushed the government to adopt the proposal regarding the Ethnic Studies Module in 2007 to be taught in all the 20 public universities in the country (Shamsul 2008). The important thing is the impact of this programme. A study conducted in 2010 among 320 first year students of various ethnic groups in one public university shows a positive impact in terms of increasing the students' knowledge and tolerance of other ethnic groups (Khalim Zainal et al. 2010). However, since this study only focused on the impact of the teaching of the module on the students in terms of their knowledge and attitude, we do not know if such knowledge and attitude were translated into their lived experience and pluralist acceptance of the other and appreciation of diversity.

Photo by Job Savelsberg

At the same time, the protests by the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) had also been in the news, the most significant being a massive street demonstration organised in Kuala Lumpur on November 25th, 2007, over discriminatory measures against the Indian community. HINDRAF put forward a range of issues from economic to education, religion, and others, demanding the government resolve them (*Malaysiakini* Special Report November 26th, 2007; updated November 24th, 2010).

Together with all these were the religious tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims that arose from the controversy over the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims which a lower court allowed but subsequently overturned by an appeals court. The latter on October 14th, 2013 ruled that the term Allah must be exclusive to Islam as it could cause public disorder. Christians argued they have used the word, Allah, to refer to their God for centuries and that the ruling violates their rights. Muslim groups opposed that, and came out strongly with such banners as "Allah just for Muslims, Fight, No Fear", thus pushing further the tensions among Muslims and non-Muslims (BBC October 14th, 2013).

It was in this context that the BN government under Prime Minister Najib Razak who replaced Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in April 2009 set up the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) in September 2013 to address the ethnic issues and tensions. According to the official portal of the then Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN), the NUCC was "an effort of national reconciliation to reduce racial polarisation and building a united Malaysian nation".

To all intent and purposes, the NUCC was inspired by its precursor, the National Consultative Council (NCC), set up in 1970 by Tun Abdul Razak. In fact, it tried to replicate the NCC under the new conditions of the 21st century. However, there are a few significant differences. As mentioned earlier, the outcome of the NCC was the Rukun Negara, which served as the philosophy and guiding framework of the NEP, that has shaped the development trajectory of the nation for many decades until today.

However, the same cannot be said of the NUCC. Its mandate was to prepare a blueprint for national unity and social cohesion to replace the out-dated colonial law, the Sedition Act 1948. The NUCC made a recommendation to legislate a set of three Harmony Bills in Parliament which were meant to tackle discrimination, to criminalise hate speech, and to set up a national harmony commission to deal with ethnic and religious tensions. However, despite the extensive consultations by the NUCC, all of these did not come to fruition during Prime Minister Najib Razak's administration.

When the BN government under Najib collapsed and it was replaced by the Pakatan Harapan government after the 14th general election held on May 9th , 2018, the three draft bills in question – Racial and Religious Hate Crimes Bill, National Harmony and Reconciliation Bill, and National Harmony and Reconciliation Commission Bill – were brought to the fore again, but they also could not be tabled in Parliament. Pakatan Harapan's tenure of 22 months was too short and unstable, made worse by its inability to manage racial and religious grievances in Malaysian society, and, especially, to manage racially provocative political campaigning in the series of by-elections during that period (Malhi 2020). When the Pakatan Harapan government collapsed in February 2020 due to the Sheraton coup plotters, the Perikatan Nasional government consisting of all Malay-based parties (BERSATU, UMNO and PAS) that replaced it did not pursue the bills. Instead, what materialised, though not necessarily under the NUCC, was the launching in January 2021 of the National Unity Policy (NUP) under the helm of the Ministry of National Unity (Note: The Department of National Unity and Integration under Prime Minister's Department was upgraded again to be a full ministry in March 2020). The NUP is a guide for strategies and programmes to achieve unity, and it is not the same as the draft bill to turn it into law by Parliament.

The National Unity Policy, and its Action Plan, is considered to be guided by Rukun Negara and in line with the aspirations of the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 launched in November 2019 to replace Vision 2020. This is unlike the Rukun Negara which not only preceded the NEP but it also provided the philosophical underpinnings of the NEP's long-term social engineering measures. Nevertheless, the National Unity Policy reaffirms its commitment to "Unity in Diversity", and maintains that what Malaysia has achieved thus far is not "national unity" but "social cohesion", and "national unity" remains the ultimate goal to be achieved. With a Malay-based government and the serious public health crisis caused by the onslaught of COVID-19 pandemic that occurred simultaneously with the economic crisis, ethnic and religious tensions seem to have taken a back seat again, since the focus is on the health crisis and economic recovery. Besides, the quiet is also due to the fact that many of those who have before been involved in sabre-rattling and stoking up ethnic tensions support the present Malay-based government.

In sum, it is pertinent to note Donald Horowitz's view that in dealing with complex problems like inter-ethnic relations and accommodation, two things must be seriously considered: first, the choice of institutions and methods for achieving inter-ethnic accommodation; and second, the question of timing, which to him "is a terrifically important factor when explaining one outcome against others" (2007: 20). In the recent case mentioned above, the choice of institutions, such as the NUCC and the method of extensive deliberations and town-hall discussions are suitable; but what about their timing? The choice of timing is a complex issue. In the above case, it was timely that the issues be addressed seriously given the fact that they could affect stability and peace. But why were the proposals, which were all evidence-based and the due process being followed, could not be brought to Parliament and realised as intended? There were complex contending forces at work, and the political leadership were too engrossed with their political constituency and survival. Thus, besides the two propositions put forward by Horowitz, two more propositions should be factored in, that is, the champion(s) with sufficient power and clout, and very importantly, the political will to push all those recommendations or reforms through. And second, the vested interests including the opposing forces that one had to contend with, and how to handle them.

III: Nation-Building and the Narrative of *Bangsa Malaysia*

As stated in the introduction, the issues of inter-ethnic relations, unity, social cohesion, national identity and nation building are still very much with us, and that a revisit of the NEP will inevitably have to address these issues, all of which relate directly or indirectly to the national question, the question of national political identity, i.e., *Bangsa Malaysia*. It has also been emphasised that a nation cannot merely exist in the minds or imagination of the leaders but also in the minds and imagination of their followers and members of the society, and that the conception and imagination from below is very important because it reflects the people's lived experience with each other. This section will address these issues as part of an academic and policy discourse to focus again on the difficult and complex problem of building a united Malaysian nation.

Malaysia has its own special characteristics in terms of its socio-economic and political systems, and that of nation building. Running through its history since the end of the Second World War is the unfinished agenda of the national question or the nation, which the New Economic Policy in its original formulation in 1970 and 1971 tried to grapple with, but it did not really succeed in moulding it. The NEP's discourse on the nation revolved around the question of national unity, and of "*Bersatu Bertambah Mutu*" (which roughly means unity makes our quality better), and did not address the issue of the nation directly or fully.

As indicated in the introduction, when Malaya became independent on August 31st, 1957, it inherited a state from the British but without a nation. This is unlike the Republic of Indonesia which had a nation – *bangsa Indonesia* – which was declared in 1928 in the *Sumpah Pemuda*, and adopted officially on it attaining independence on August 17th, 1945. In the then Malaya, the Federation of Malaya Constitution drafted by the Reid Commission for the newly independent Federation of Malaya defined, among others, the state system and its citizenry, with the rights and obligations of each, but there was no mention of the question of the nation and national identity. In other words, what we have is a community of citizens defined by the state with their rights and responsibilities defined and protected by the Constitution, but not a political community with a common political identity, a shared narrative and a shared destiny. In the Declaration of Independence read by the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, at the Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur on Independence Day, August 31st, 1957, there was no mention of a political identity of the nation, nor was there a mention of "Malaya" but "Persekutuan Tanah Melayu" as the state, and no mention of the "Malayan nation", but "a free independent and sovereign nation among nations of the World". [6]

6 The opening of the Merdeka declaration reads in Malay: *"Bahawasanya kerana telah tibalah masanya bagi umat Persekutuan Tanah Melayu ini mencapai taraf suatu bangsa yang merdeka lagi berdaulat sama setimpal kedudukannya dengan segala bangsa seluruh dunia."* [In English – "Whereas the time has now arrived when the people of the Persekutuan Tanah Melayu will assume the status of a free independent and sovereign nation among nations of the World"].

The last paragraph of the Declaration reads: *"[Persekutuan Tanah Melayu] akan kekal menjadi sebuah negara yang merdeka dan berdaulat serta berdasarkan kebebasan dan keadilan dan sentiasa menjaga dan mengutamakan kesejahteraan dan kesentosaan rakyatnya dan mengekalkan keamanan antara segala bangsa."*

In English, it reads: "[The Federation of Malaya] shall be for ever a sovereign democratic and independent State founded upon the principles of liberty and justice and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of its people and the maintenance of a just peace among all nations."

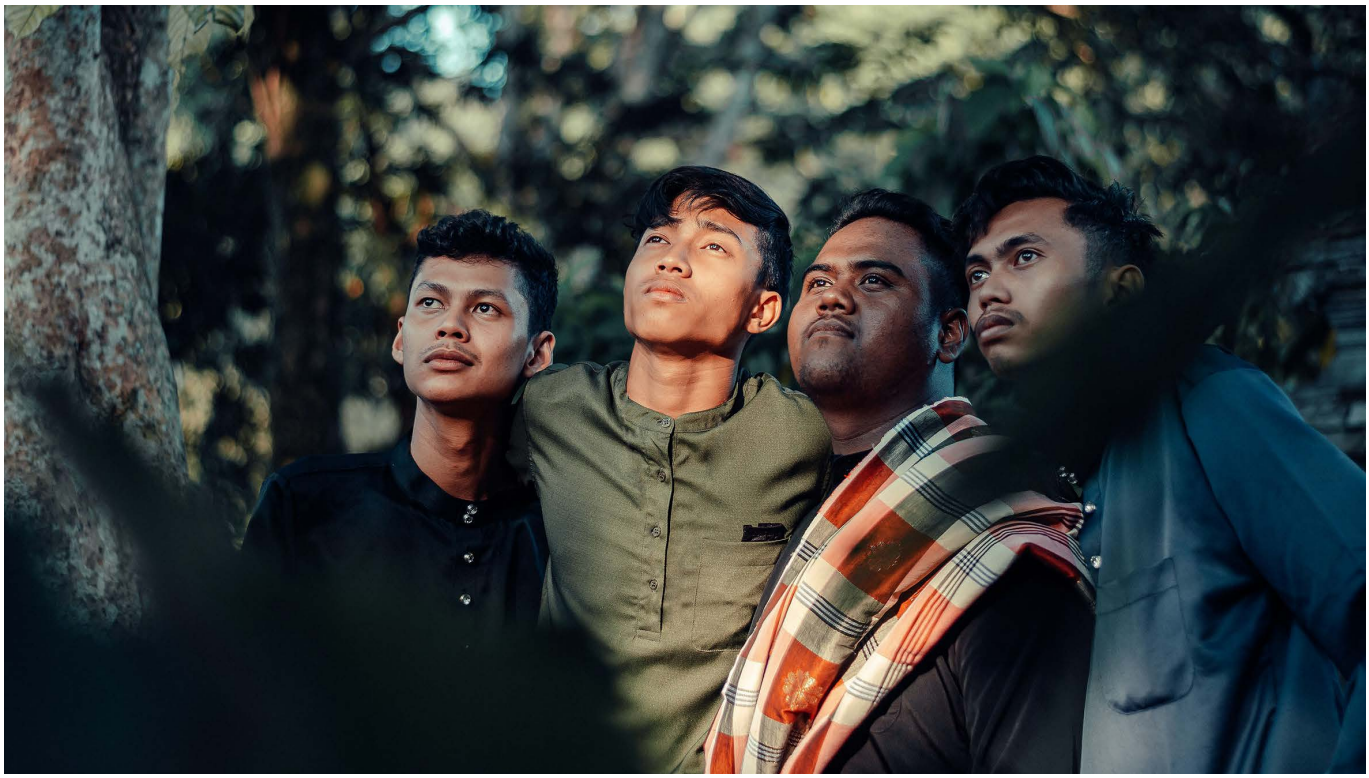

Photo by Ahmad Qime

This did not mean there were no attempts at crafting the nation during Malaya's independence struggle. The formulation of the nation – which was actually a nation-of-intent – was present in the struggle of Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Union of Malay Youth), the first Malay-based anti-colonial political party, a conception called 'Melayu Raya' (Rustam Sani [1975] 2008a: 53-66). After the Second World War, it was called '*Melayu*' which was based not on ethnic origin but on patriotism; and made a central part in the People's Constitutional Proposals advocated by the first multi-ethnic coalition in the country – the PUTERA-AMCJA – which was the principal anti-colonial force in the post-war period to fight the British for independence.

The concept of '*Melayu*' as the new nation with such an identity was a bold and innovative conceptualisation in keeping with the history of the Malay peninsula as a significant component of the region of Nusantara. The concept has its roots in the history of the region. This concept of *Melayu* was not merely "imagined" as in Anderson's formulation of *Imagined Communities* ([1983] 1991), or "conceptualised" as argued by Milner (1995), but "envisioned" (Abdul Rahman 2015), and executed or put into practice by its champions or propagators in the people's movement for independence. However, we should note an important point made by Milner in his critique of Anderson that "*bangsa* was certainly an intellectual rather than a natural construction" – an argument in keeping with his proposition that the nation is conceptualised.

As *bangsa* is an intellectual construction, its identity and scope can be tailored according to the envisioning by its champions or leaders. This is very much the case of the concept of *Melayu*. Overcoming the shackles of narrow Malay nationalism, *Melayu* was conceptualised as an inclusive concept which included not only the Malays who were part of the politico-cultural history of the Nusantara region but also those who migrated to Malaya during the British period. All were regarded as constituting *bangsa Melayu* as long as they give their loyalty to the land. Needless to say, the proposal caught

the imagination of the peoples of Malaya. But given the hostile forces of colonialism, it could not be realised because of the British colonial suppression. Concerned and alarmed with the rising tide of the anti-colonial movement and the multi-ethnic unity achieved under the banner of PUTERA-AMCJA, the British imposed Emergency Rule in June 1948, banned PUTERA-AMCJA, as well as the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), and launched a wholesale arrest of many of their leaders and members. Many of the latter were arrested and placed in detention for many years, while those who escaped arrest retreated into the jungle to wage a guerrilla war against the British for independence.

The vacuum left by the suppression of PUTERA-AMCJA and the CPM was immediately filled with the setting up of an alternative Chinese political party, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) on February 27th, 1949. Thus "there was no doubt that the local government [meaning the British] played an important role in the formation of the MCA" (Qasim Ahmad 2008). At the same time, the Communities Liaison Communities (CLC) was established in January 1949 by the British High Commissioner General for Southeast Asia, Malcolm MacDonald. The CLC was an informal body that operated between 1949 and 1951 with its members comprising the elite political leaders of various ethnic communities, namely Dato' Onn Jaafar, Tan Cheng Lock, E.C. Thuraisingham, and 10 others to discuss sensitive issues, reach compromises on citizenship, education, Malay rights, national identity, etc., and establish multiracial political cooperation. According to Fernando (2012: 280-301), the CLC was not only able to influence government policy but it was also a kind of intercommunal bargaining and conflict resolution platform that later on "entrenched the concept of consociationalism, which was to shape the Malayan political landscape long thereafter." However, what was not highlighted was the fact the CLC also had a conception of the nation. This was contained in the CLC's Communique released in September 1949 after its three-day meeting in Johor Bahru which states that "the aim of the Federation being to attain sovereign status with *Malayan nationality*".

As the CLC was an informal arrangement and dissolved after a while, it paved the way for UMNO, MCA and MIC to play a political role, namely to negotiate with the British for independence. However, the three-party alliance of UMNO-MCA-MIC did not have a conception of the nation or *bangsa*, namely its national political identity crafted out of the diverse ethnic groups for the newly independent Malaya.

As a result of not having the conception of a nation, but only a state and its citizens, Malaya's ethnic diversity had to be moulded on the basis of "unity in diversity". Nation-building became inter-ethnic bargaining and compromises or inter-ethnic accommodation. This became a test on the feasibility of the experiment during the period of 1957-1969 dominated by the laissez faire system. The focus was market-driven growth, with distribution being left to the market forces while the state – playing a restrained role – largely provided the infrastructure and the regulatory framework to ensure its functioning, only intervening in a limited way by setting up FELDA and MARA as mentioned in Section 1 above.

This kind of situation led some scholars to argue that the Malaysian society at the time of independence and the early post-independence years was that of a fractured, or fragmented plural society, with ethnic divides or cleavages while the ethnic groups acted as a block. They lobbied for the interest of ethnic groups, creating friction, conflict and tension with other ethnic groups. Sometimes, the conflict could be latent, at other times, open blatant. Such a situation created instability, which was considered a threat to democracy, and it could lead to an authoritarian rule

The other view suggests that Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society, with ethnic diversity and cross-ethnic solidarity. Adopting a multi-ethnic perspective, it argues that social cohesion and unity across ethnic groups could emerge through the social practice of forging friendship, living together as neighbours,

working together as a group or class, and through the culture of pluralist acceptance of the other. It is the commonality of interest that cuts across ethnic lines. This view holds that while ethnic identity may remain strong, ethnic boundaries are fluid, thus, crossing ethnic divides is common. This view also maintains that democracy, particularly participatory deliberative democracy, can work.

Much of the literature on ethnicity and class in Malaysia and other diverse multi-ethnic societies suggest that the two phenomena of ethnicity and class are very much intertwined, and that what manifestly appears as ethnic conflict may very well have a class content. This view holds that poverty and wealth are a class issue, and that they are not the monopoly of any one ethnic group as they cross ethnic lines. Putting the argument this way does not negate the fact that the pull of identity is often strong, and that ethnic identity is the basis of group formation and solidarity (Syed Husin Ali 2008). However, social cohesion which revolves around commonalities of interest and fate often transcends ethnic identity.

Where does social cohesion come in? Social cohesion is a complex and multi-faceted process involving the cooperation and collaboration of different social groups in their daily lives and struggles to come together around commonalities, while putting aside differences. This can happen within the same ethnic group, or between ethnic groups in order to achieve social outcomes, such as tackling crimes and creating a peaceful and harmonious society, social safety, as well as social progress, such as children's education, elderly welfare, public health, and even common prosperity. It also involves mutual help when members of the community face difficult times, such as during economic crises and the public health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. .

Taken as a whole over a historical period, it is a combination of these elements that have contributed to social cohesion in Malaysia since independence until today. Promoting social cohesion involves many stakeholders, requiring the right tone from the top, to demonstrate the political will and ideological appeal. It requires the right policy making and implementation with sustained programmes for social cohesion, and seamless communication to overcome misunderstanding, prejudices and trust deficits. Multi-ethnic Malaysia only enjoys "moments of unity", but social cohesion forms the basis of social peace and harmony. When problems arise, the ethnic groups try to negotiate and reconcile to ensure social peace and harmony prevail. This assessment of the situation corresponds with the findings of the discussed micro studies and the surveys mentioned in Section II earlier.

The role of civil society in building bridges and crossing divides is critical. Members of civil society or community-based organisations (CBOs) too participate in community building, promote participation in social cohesion programmes, while individual champions also play their role to make a difference (Loh 2008).

What is described above shows the challenge of formulating the concept of the nation and to integrate it with the state to become more of a *state-nation* rather than a *nation-state* as was the case in the history of Western Europe. Acknowledging the apparent absence of the concept of the nation during that period does not mean there were no discussions on the subject among intellectuals and even leaders in the post-independence years. In fact, in his speech on July 12th, 1971, when tabling the Second Malaysia Plan and the NEP, Prime Minister Tun Razak mentioned the building of a united *Bangsa Malaysia*. The relevant passage in the original Malay version reads as follows:

"Bahawa Dewan ini menerima Dasar Ekonomi Baharu Negara yang bertujuan membasmikan kemiskinan di kalangan rakyat dengan tidak mengira asal keturunan mereka di samping menyusun semula masyarakat Malaysia untuk menseimbangkan kedudukan ekonomi antara rakyat berbilang kaum, memberikan persetujuan penuh kepada Rancangan Malaysia Kedua yang telah disusun untuk mencapai matlamat cita-cita Negara dengan melaksanakan langkah-langkah dasar dan rancangan-rancangan pembangunan seperti yang dinyatakan dalam Kertas Perintah No. 28 Tahun 1971, serta menyeru seluruh rakyat menumpukan khidmat bakti mereka dalam semangat Rukun Negara untuk membangunkan masyarakat yang adil, saksama dan bangsa Malaysia yang maju, moden dan bersatu padu. " (emphasis added).

A rendering in English of the passage by Tun Razak underscores three important points:

1. He urged members of Parliament to accept and endorse the New Economic Policy, which has the objective of eradicating poverty among the people irrespective of race, and restructure the Malaysian society to correct the economic imbalance between the races;

2. He called on members of Parliament to approve the Second Malaysia Plan that has been formulated to achieve the national objectives by implementing the development policies and programmes that are contained in the White Paper No. 28 in the Year 1971; and

3. He enjoined all the people to concentrate their effort and service in the spirit of Rukun Negara in order to develop a just and equitable society, and a developed, modern and united *Bangsa Malaysia*.

The speech refers many times to the Rukun Negara as a national consensus and commitment, and that this document should be a guide and aspiration not just for 10 or 20 years but forever (*hasrat cita-cita buat selama-lamanya*) "to build a just and equitable society, and build a Bangsa Malaysia that is progressive, modern and united".

This shows the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* was already envisaged as part of the New Economic Policy. Nevertheless, a careful reading of the entire text of Razak's speech in Parliament, there was only a single reference to *Bangsa Malaysia*.

What were the gaps since the launching of the NEP in terms of national unity and building a united *Bangsa Malaysia* or the Malaysian nation? After Razak's passing in January 1976, the question of unity was more of a lip service than real practice. Over the years, Rukun Negara became more of a ritual at school with the main focus being the reciting of the five objectives, and the five pillars. The concept of the nation – *Bangsa Malaysia* – articulated by Tun Razak in Parliament was not taken up and translated into policy on nation building. It appears that it was both an oversight as well as an ideological-political reluctance to adopt the concept and expound its meaning and significance for nation building in the long term. Rather than focusing the discourse on the concept of the nation, *Bangsa Malaysia*, attention has been very much distracted by various issues and polemic, such as the Bumiputera-non-Bumiputera dichotomy, the endless debate about whether the 30% Bumiputera equity ownership target set by the NEP has been achieved, and the "Malay dominance" argument advanced in 1986 by Abdullah Ahmad, a former advisor of Tun Razak.

However, there were voices from below among public intellectuals, writers and poets who were critical of the Bumiputera-non-Bumiputera dichotomy, and who strongly advocated the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*. One of the most outstanding was that echoed by the National Laureate Usman Awang in a poem entitled "Sahabatku" (My Friend) dedicated to his good friend and comrade, Dr. M.K. Rajakumar, an ethnic Indian Malaysian. Two stanzas from the poem (presented below in its original Malay, followed by this author's translation in English) are very pertinent:

Sahabatku,
Suatu bangsa merdeka yang kita impikan
Terasa masih jauh dari kenyataan
Kemarahanku menjadi kepedihan
Bila kita dipisah-pisahkan
Jarak itu semakin berjauhan
Aku dapat gelaran 'bumiputera' dan kau bukan.

My friend
An independent nation that we all aspire for
is still far from being realised;
My anger now turns to sorrow
Seeing the division separating us
And the gap pulling us further apart
I am called a 'bumiputera' while you are not.

Another stanza that espouses *Bangsa Malaysia* reads thus:

Bilakah semua warganegara mendapat hak
Layanan dan keadilan yang sama
Dikenal dengan satu nama:
Bangsa Malaysia?

When would all citizens enjoy
the same rights and justice
Being recognised with a common name
Bangsa Malaysia?

Photo by Izuddin Helmi

This poem, written in the mid-1980s, reflects the tensions and contestations of nation building, especially the 'othering' practice due to the Bumiputera-non-Bumiputera divide, which is an unintended consequence of the NEP. It is a microcosm of the unresolved national question. It also reflects the aspiration from below for a united *Bangsa Malaysia* of all ethnic groups with a common identity, which transcends the dichotomy and ethnic divisions, based on the same rights and justice.

At the policy level, almost two decades after the launching of the NEP, the then Prime Minister Mahathir in a speech in 1988 entitled "Membina Bangsa Malaysia" (Building the Malaysian Nation") attempted to expound the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*, arguing that *Bangsa Malaysia* is only a political identity that does not erase one's ethnic identity. To quote: "We do not deny the fact that the Malaysian population consists of various ethnic groups. … Each ethnic group is free to preserve their identity – i.e., their language, religion, and culture. … To acknowledge and accept Malaysia, *bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian nation) and *bahasa Malaysia* (Malaysian language), will not make us all as Malays. In ethnic terms, we remain as Chinese or Indians or Iban or Kadazan or Murut and others. We become *bangsa Malaysia* only as a *political identity* that belong to a particular state. …. Without eradicating our original ethnic identity, we still can become a meaningful *bangsa Malaysia*" (1988: 100).[7]

This speech was the prelude to his pronouncement of *Bangsa Malaysia* on February 28th, 1991, as the first and most important challenge to achieve Vision 2020. To quote: "By the year 2020, Malaysia can be a united nation, with a confident Malaysian society, infused by strong moral and ethical values, living in a society that is democratic, liberal and tolerant, caring, economically just and equitable, progressive and prosperous, and in full possession of an economy that is competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient. There can be no fully developed Malaysia until we have finally overcome the nine central strategic challenges that have confronted us from the moment of our birth as an independent nation. The first of these is the challenge of establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny. This must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially, and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one *Bangsa Malaysia* with political loyalty and dedication to the nation."

Although Mahathir stressed that *Bangsa Malaysia* is only a *political identity* indicating one's belonging to the Malaysian state, the ambiguity still remains. As an attempt to clarify it, in a dialogue with the Council of Malaysian Students UK in Kuala Lumpur on September 10th, 1995, he emphasised that "*Bangsa Malaysia* (means) people who are able to identify themselves with the country, speak Malaysian language (Bahasa Melayu) and accept the Constitution" (quoted in Nur Azura Sanusi & Normi Azura Ghazali 2014).

However, the question of whether the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* would be able to reconcile the competing ethnic ideologies of a nation, or would it further complicate the politics of nation-building in Malaysia given the resistance to it from various sections of the ethnic communities is an issue, making the task of nation-building somewhat "very intricate" (see, for example, Mohamed Mustafa Ishak 2006; 2014). Shamsul (1992) refers to this situation as "one state many nations", while in his 1996 paper, calls it as competing "nations-of-intent" comprising the authority-defined Bumiputera-based national identity, which is being challenged by three groups, "namely the non-bumiputera group, led by the Chinese, and two bumiputera ones, the non-Muslim bumiputera group and the radical Islamic bumiputera group,

7 The original text in Malay is as follows: "*Kita tidak menafikan bahawa penduduk Malaysia terdiri daripada berbagai kaum. … Semua kaum bebas mengekalkan identiti mereka – iaitu bahasa, agama dan kebudayaan mereka. … Mengakui dan menerima Malaysia, bangsa Malaysia dan bahasa Malaysia, tidak menjadikan kita semua orang Melayu. Daripada segi etnik, kita kekal sebagai Cina atau India atau Iban atau Kadazan atau Murut dan lain-lain. Kita menjadi bangsa Malaysia hanya sebagai political identity yang mempunyai negara yang tertentu….Tanpa menghapuskan identiti kaum asal kita, kita masih boleh menjadi bangsa Malaysia yang bermakna*" (1988: 100).

each offering its own nation-of-intent, i.e. its own vision of what the national identity should be, based on a particular ideological framework"(Shamsul 1996: 323-324). [8]

The view seems to be quite unanimous that we are still far from having created a *Bangsa Malaysia*. In his article in 2012, Siddiq Fadzil said that it is ironic that after 55 years of independence, we could only talk of national integration and unity, and are still unsure whether *Bangsa Malaysia* has become a reality, In fact, Rustam A. Sani,[9] one of the key proponents of the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*, lamented that "political events in Malaysia during the last few years have convinced me that Malaysia is just a state without a nation – or at least, a state with several competing nations" (Rustam Sani 2008b: 59).

Mahathir himself in an interview in January 2021 soon after the end of Vision 2020, is of the view that "we don't have a *Bangsa Malaysia*" as "we still distinguish ourselves as being Malays, Chinese, Indians" (Mahathir Interview with *The Edge Malaysia*, January 12th, 2021). [10]

Some comments here are pertinent to analyse the above statements. It seems that the commitment by state leaders to the vision of the nation as inscribed in government policies, and declared with much gusto, often falls short of what is required to ensure its implementation, especially if its time span is over a long term. Policies such as those pertaining to national identity and the nation's envisioning are often identified with certain individual leaders, and may not have the continuity once there is leadership change. Each leader wants to project his "own vision", his own "political branding" for it to be part of his legacy which is different from his predecessor(s). When Mahathir stepped down as the fourth prime minister in October 2003, his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi came

8 Another view on the competing notions of the nation has been articulated by Abdul Rahman Embong in a series of discussions on nations and nation building at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in the 1990s and early 2000s. Some of the key ideas have been published in a chapter titled "Language, Nationhood and Globalisation: Malaysia's Experience" in Abdul Rahman Embong (ed.), *Globalisation, Culture and Inequalities: In Honour of the Late Ishak Shari*,(Bangi: Penerbit UKM 2004)). The five competing notions of the nation are : (1) the 'developmentalist doctrine' of a Bumiputera-based nation in which English is given prominence since it is considered the gateway to development and progress — a view held by the ruling elite (Malays and non-Malays) and their supporters. Though the position of Malay is recognised and the language is used in official communication, in practice, English is given the pride of place in daily communication and interaction, and even in official and semi-official meetings. (2) a Bumiputera-based nation but one with Malay as the defining identity – the view being held by the Malay literary and cultural elite and their supporters; (3) the notion of a nation that is grounded in the subjective imaginings of the people shaped by the understanding and recognition of Malay as the language of Malaysia and the Nusantara region, while respecting and promoting other languages and cultures. Very importantly, this view advocates bilingual or better still multilingual proficiency, "so that they (the people) are proficient in Malay, English and at least one other language, such as Mandarin, or any other language of the people of Malaysia"; (4) the notion of a 'civic' nation espousing freedom and equality among different ethnic groups in the name of democracy and universal human rights. Many demand protection and promotion of education in the mother tongue, but some take a rather ambiguous or ambivalent position regarding Malay as the national and official language, and an identity market for the nation. (v) the notion of an Islamic nation espoused by the Islamists who reject ethnicity and propagate a transnationalism based on their interpretation of Islam. Malay language is not seen as the defining identity, but as a tool of communication and for learning. To them, Islam is *the* identity, and the nation including its laws and regulations should be based on the Quran and Hadith. (Abdul Rahman 2004: 346-347). However, in recent years with the hardening of state-based identity especially among the political elite and people of Sabah and Sarawa, which has been triggered in part by their dissatisfaction with how the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63) has been handled by the Federal Government, we can add another notion of the nation, i.e., the notion that demands regional autonomy, which is a manifestation not only of regional sentiments but, in some respects, of separatist tendencies.

9 Rustam was one of the thinkers who was responsible for the conceptualisation of *Bangsa Malaysia* in Vision 2020 when he was a Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS). ISIS served as a think tank for the Malaysian government.

10 Perhaps it should be noted that although Mahathir pronounced *Bangsa Malaysia* as the most important of the nine challenges in Vision 2020, he himself was not an ardent champion of it as he did not do much to promote the Malaysian identity, but rather of Vision 2020, and of Malay identity.

forward with "Islam Hadhari" (civilisational Islam). The sixth prime minister, Mohamad Najib Razak who succeeded Abdullah came forward with "One Malaysia". Even when Mahathir became prime minister the second time after the fall of Barisan Nasional and Najib Razak on May 9th, 2018, he did not show any enthusiasm to pursue *Bangsa Malaysia,* and Malaysian identity, but was rather more interested in Vision 2020, and particularly in Malay rights and identity. A striking example was his presence at and support for the Malay Dignity Congress held at the Melawati Stadium, Selangor on October 6th, 2019 in which the chief organiser, Professor Zainal Kling, declared that "Malaysia belongs to the Malays" and warned that the "social contract" between the Malays and the non-Malays could be broken if the latter did not respect it.[11]

Thus, it comes as no surprise that the current prime minister Ismail Sabri Yaacob in his maiden speech on August 22nd, 2021, soon after being appointed the 9th prime minister put forward his own branding or tagline, "Keluarga Malaysia" (Malaysian Family) and steered clear from *Bangsa Malaysia* which he cannot claim as his idea, and also that "Keluarga Malaysia' is less problematic compared with the political intricacies of building the Malaysian nation. In his soft launch of "Keluarga Malaysia" on October 8th , 2021, he explained why the government wanted to boost the 'spirit of Keluarga Malaysia': "a family will always uphold religious principles, ensure safety, protect the dignity and care for the wellbeing of its members". He argued that "in the context of a nation, we are the Malaysian Family … which comprises people of different faiths, races, ethnicities and age groups, but despite the different religious, racial and cultural backgrounds, we celebrate the inclusivity, upholding the spirit of Malaysia as a nation-state" (BERNAMA report quoted in the *SunDaily*, October 8th, 2021).[12]

The obvious side-lining of *Bangsa Malaysia* is clear. In the Introduction of the Twelfth Malaysia Plan 2021-2025, under the heading "Vision 2020: An Appraisal Background", while there is reference to the first challenge in Vision 2020 of "establishing a united nation with a sense of common and shared destiny," there is no reference to the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia.* This omission could have been an oversight but when read together with two other major policy documents – the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 and the National Unity Plan – the 'silence' on *Bangsa Malaysia* is rather perplexing. In the National Unity Plan, for example, there is no reference to Vision 2020 while a number of sectoral plans that have some bearing on national unity are prominently listed in the NUP. Admittedly, Vision 2020 is not a plan but an envisioning; nevertheless the formation of *Bangsa Malaysia* implies national unity, and that Vision 2020 has been the 'national staple diet' for three decades. Even in the three pillars of unity and strategies outlined in the National Unity Plan, in particular, the second pillar which is on national identity, reference to *Bangsa Malaysia* is also absent.

11 Zainal Kling was quoted by the media as having said that "despite our overtures, there are those who went off track, who wanted to manipulate us, who wanted to undermine our dignity, mock our religion, the Malay rulers and the Malays' special position, and turn their backs on the social contract which is the basis for the Federal Constitution," he told thousands who converged at the Melawati Stadium for the congress, where Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad has agreed to deliver a keynote address. (Robin Augustin, *Free Malaysia Today,* October 6th, 2019). The congress was jointly organised by Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).

12 The Prime Minister said that the concept of 'Keluarga Malaysia' is not difficult to understand as it was based on the existing values of a normal family: "what the government is doing is just harmonising and elevating these values to be a guideline to enhance Malaysia's strength with its unique diversity of race, ethnic and religion" . The Prime Minister emphasised that the values of Keluarga Malaysia were based on the principle of Supremacy of the Constitution enshrined in the Rukun Negara. "Just like a tree, the roots of Keluarga Malaysia are based on the Federal Constitution and the Rukun Negara, while the stem, branches and twigs carry the values of Keluarga Malaysia from which the leaves, flower and fruits will grow and benefit the people." "That's the metaphor of Keluarga Malaysia," he said (Report by BERNAMA October 8th, 2021). .

The same observation can be made when analysing the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 which was launched in 2019 when Mahathir assumed power the second time. One would expect especially in Chapter 3 on "The Nation State", the question of *Bangsa Malaysia* to be made a central point or at least made conspicuous, but it is not so.

This poses the question: Besides trying to strike one's own leadership difference with a different political branding, is this a reflection of policy amnesia, and is such discontinuity good for the country? Discontinuing a bad policy is of course necessary and most welcome, but some policies like national political identity which has a long term perspective, there should be some consistency though some refinements may be necessary. This is evidence that Malaysian leaders are not only short-termist in orientation, they may have also concluded that *Bangsa Malaysia* is no longer a principal agenda in nation building. Due to the side-lining of *Bangsa Malaysia*, are we now destined to live with the situation of "a state without a nation", or "a state with competing nations|" like what we started at the time of independence – more than six decades ago? This is obviously a path we should avoid.

The challenge is that while many sections of the population may espouse a sense of belonging to a common destiny and a shared future, state policies that often prioritise one ethnic group over another would unwittingly undermine that. In a multi-ethnic country like Malaysia, diversity is an asset and we should all celebrate diversity. However, to give meaning to that maxim, policies have to be inclusive and guided by social justice. The 'ethnicising' of policies and the discourse of 'othering' – an unintended consequence of the NEP – have to be effectively addressed if the idea of the nation is to be alive and unifying, and to progress.

But, nations are not merely a product of the envisioning of state leaders. They are a product, or a political construction from below, from among the people. Looking at it historically, *Bangsa Malaysia* is a work in progress, and it is in the making. As stated earlier, participants of the BERSIH rallies used to say that they experienced "*Bangsa Malaysia* being born on the streets of Kuala Lumpur" while the micro studies quoted above point to cross-ethnic solidarity and pluralist acceptance of the other among the various ethnic groups. This is an example of the making of *Bangsa Malaysia* from below through interactions among the people, and through their participation in social movements, in their sustained struggle for a common cause, and a common aspiration. This conception is in line with the notion that "*Bangsa Malaysia* is a political community of all ethnic groups … that has been historically constituted and having the sense of belonging to the same nation, having the same collective name, sharing the same territory, economy, culture with a shared destiny and common national identity" (Abdul Rahman 2006).

While on the one hand, conflicts, misunderstanding and prejudice among ethnic groups do occur, on the other, there is a pool of goodwill and desire to unite and cooperate with each other, and there is also the spirit to build *Bangsa Malaysia* together. We can demonstrate this with some evidence from the latest developments that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is true that adversities, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, tend to bring people irrespective of ethnic and religious backgrounds closer together. This can be seen in the *Gerakan Bendera Putih* (White Flag Movement) and the tagline "KitaJagaKita" (We Look After Each Other) whereby Malaysians – individuals and NGOs around the country – got together to help the poor and others in need, for food and other essentials especially those who had lost their jobs and income due to the pandemic. Such solidarity and support cut across ethnic and religious lines.

This positive development is also demonstrated by the findings of an online survey conducted from July to September 2020 to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social cohesion and inter-ethnic unity in Malaysia, and the respondents' perceptions of the future.[13] In terms of demographic background, out of a total of 731 respondents, Bumiputeras made up 63% (Malays 50.9%; while Bumiputeras from Sabah and Sarawak 12%), followed by 20.4% Chinese, 13.5% Indians, and 2.9% Others. Among the respondents, 67.2% were female, 44% ever married, 64.7% aged 18-40 years old, 61.7% with degrees, and 36.7% still studying. The respondents were asked their perception of the level of social cohesion and ethnic relations during three periods, i.e., pre-pandemic, during pandemic, and their expectations when the pandemic is over. The findings show that the level of social cohesion and ethnic unity is highest during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is 72.8% compared to 62.2% before the pandemic. What is interesting is that in terms of their future expectations post-pandemic, though their confidence about social cohesion and inter-racial relations is still good, the percentage falls slightly to 70.6%. These findings indicate that the level of social cohesion and ethnic relations is strongest during times of adversity.

The respondents were also asked their level of confidence about future relations among the different ethnic groups. The findings show that a very high percentage (92%) are confident that Malaysians of various ethnic groups would cooperate and assist each other; 89.6% are confident that Malaysians are prepared to build a future together, and 86% are confident that Malaysians would work together to build a united *Bangsa Malaysia.* Their main concern is that politicians and political parties would rattle ethnic relations, with 68.2%, saying that they expect these politicians and political parties to focus mainly on the unity of their own ethnic groups at the expense of strengthening national unity.

Given such sentiments among the people pre and during the pandemic, it is important that the government and civil society harness them to strengthen social cohesion. They should feel encouraged that the people are concerned about nation building and many would broadly accept the formation of a united *Bangsa Malaysia.*

Bangsa Malaysia is clearly a multi-ethnic and an inclusive nation in search of a national political identity. However, identities are multiple, often overlapping and intersectional, and fluid. Based on this understanding, having a national identity and keeping one's ethnic identity are not necessarily binary. National identity is politically defined while ethnic identity is culturally defined. In the context of the larger whole (the nation) one adopts the national identity while in the context of the ethnic community which is a component of the whole (the nation), one may uphold and demonstrate the community's identity.

13 This survey, funded by Academy of Professor Malaysia (APM) and conducted by Professor Sarjit S. Gill and assisted by Fang Yi Xue, was completed online due to the Movement Control Order restrictions. The findings were published in the Special Issue of journal *Southeast Asian Social Science Review* on the Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic in Malaysia (Sarjit S. Gill and Fang Yi Xue 2021).

IV: Conclusions: Some Reflections of the NEP, *Bangsa Malaysia* and the Future

This paper concludes by addressing issues, challenges and impacts of the NEP, achievements of national unity and *Bangsa Malaysia* and lessons that can be drawn to forge a new future. Let us deal with each of these issues in turn.

a | Policy Continuity or Policy Change?

When the NEP was introduced 50 years ago heralding the emergence of the developmentalist state with the latter playing a dominant role in the economy, it was a marked departure or a break from the laissez faire policy of the previous era. We may recall what Snodgrass (1995) said about the NEP that it was "probably the most ambitious affirmative action program ever undertaken in a developing country", that has transformed the country's economy into one of the fastest growing economies in the world then, as well as the society and its social class structure. It has been shown that the NEP with the state-driven growth and distribution was a necessary policy break or rupture that made history. Its principles and thrust, namely of poverty eradication irrespective of ethnicity, growth with distribution, social justice, and unity in diversity are relevant beyond its 20-year time frame. The role of the state in development has been very significant. Nevertheless, despite its impressive achievements, the NEP in its implementation led to unintended consequences and downsides, such as the concentration of state power in the hands of the ruling elite, corruption, bureaucratic red tape and waste, the dependency syndrome, as well as ethnic and religious divides — all of which undermined the very goal it hoped to achieve.

It should also be noted that despite its rapid growth in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Malaysia has been stuck in what has been termed as "the middle income trap", partly as an unintended consequence of the NEP.

Therefore, what policy options does Malaysia have in pursuing the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030? Should there be a policy break or continuity here? The poignant lesson from the NEP is that policies are not cast in stone; they must be changed when necessary to suit the new prevailing conditions and expectations of the 21st century. While specific affirmative policies to support and empower the poor and the low income groups must continue, there is an urgent need to address the strategic challenges such as the creation of a talent pool of expertise, recruiting the best and retaining the best irrespective of ethnicity, meritocracy, technology-driven innovation and upgrading, as well as regional and global competitiveness.

b | National Unity and *Bangsa Malaysia* – the Need for Policy Continuity and Rejuvenation

The adoption of *Bangsa Malaysia* as the national identity was also a departure from a "state without a nation" during the early post-independence years. The principles of social justice and unity in diversity implemented in an independent state but "without a nation" at the time of independence would naturally mean the necessity of forging a nation out of the diverse ethnic groups, and *Bangsa Malaysia* was the answer. This was the intent of Tun Razak in his speech when tabling the Second Malaysia Plan and the NEP in Parliament in July 1971 when he called for the formation of "a developed, modern and united *Bangsa Malaysia*." Mahathir's Vision 2020 speech 20 years after Tun Razak in which he took a very emphatic position on *Bangsa Malaysia* was a continuation of that policy at a time when Malaysia was enjoying all-round prosperity. He stressed that the formation of a united *Bangsa Malaysia* comprising all ethnic groups was the first and foremost challenge in achieving the goal of turning Malaysia into a developed nation by 2020. This indicates the historic significance of the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* or the Malaysian nation in keeping with the NEP's goal.

However, the nation building policy of crafting an inclusive and united *Bangsa Malaysia* as part of Vision 2020 has not been continued with vigour, but instead, it began to fade into oblivion among the political elite. While there is a clear continuity with the national unity policy, it is strange that the same has not been done for *Bangsa Malaysia*. As discussed in Section III, each leader after Mahathir seems to be bent on inscribing his own policy conception, his own political tagline, associated with his rule, ignoring or at best paying only lip service to the question of national identity, reflecting some kind of policy amnesia regarding *Bangsa Malaysia*. While some policies need a clear change or rupture, the policy on nation building, i.e., nurturing *Bangsa Malaysia*, should be continued and refined by taking into account the new conditions, changing realities and challenges.

c | National Unity, *Bangsa Malaysia* and Policy Implementation

While positive sentiments towards forging national unity and building a united *Bangsa Malaysia* among sections of the people as discussed in Section III (also see IVd below), there are certain policies that objectively do not contribute in that direction. Malaysians are generally concerned one way or the other with the implementation of the provision of Article 153 especially Article 153(2) as mentioned in Section I above. The affirmative action measures in the NEP take into account this provision to address the "historical imbalances" between ethnic groups. Given such imbalances, there was the need for and the legitimacy of affirmative action. However, while the affirmative action may have been broadly acceptable in the 1970s and even one or two decades after, the manner of the continued implementation of specific affirmative action policies, especially the Bumiputera proportion in the federal civil service, and the award of scholarships for further studies and enrolment in public universities is seen to be disproportionately favouring the Bumiputera, and unfair to the non-Bumiputera. This situation prevails also with regards to awarding of licences and permits.

Based on the NEP affirmative action measures (though not specifically stated in Article 153), the Bumiputera Lot Quota Regulation was implemented for the purpose of increasing the shares of the Bumiputera community in real estate up to at least 30% of all property units (be they commercial or residential). At the same time, the purchase of a Bumiputera Lot by a Bumiputera buyer is subject to

a discount of up to 15% off the initial price, though the percentages differ from state to state. This discount applies also to those who purchase a house or an apartment irrespective of whether they are rich or poor. This provision does not apply to the poor non-Bumiputera in the B40 and those in the middle-income category (M40). There is a feeling of disquiet and even dissatisfaction among the non-Bumiputera with regard to this policy.

The latest issue is the controversy regarding the 2022 Budget allocation of RM11.4 billion for the empowerment of the Bumiputera which is huge compared to only RM345 million for the Chinese and Indian communities put together which is about 3% of Bumiputera allocation. This comparatively "measly sum" raises criticisms about its fairness not only by the non-Bumiputera but also by a number of Bumiputera analysts (see, for example, Mohammed Abdul Khalid 2021) [14]and enlightened politicians. Prior to this was the controversy over the 51% Bumiputera rule for freight forwarders which also caused serious concern among the non-Bumiputera freight forwarding companies, a ruling that is now postponed to December 2022 (FMT Reporters 2021).

It should be noted that in Article 153(1), there is an emphasis on balance as well as reasonableness when it enjoins the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to "safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of the States of Sabah and Sarawak ... and the legitimate interests of other communities". In the same manner, in Article 153(2) regarding the proportion or quota for the Bumiputera, the principle is still "balance" and "reasonableness", which connote "fairness".

After 50 years of the NEP, it is opportune and necessary to review this issue to ensure "balance" and "fairness" to all communities in keeping with Article 153 to strengthen social cohesion, national unity, and the nurturing of a national identity in the form of *Bangsa Malaysia*.

d | Everyday *Bangsa Malaysia*: Its Policy Relevance

In both policy and academic discourse, the focus has primarily been on government or policy perspectives on national unity and identity. Such a discourse often ignores the everyday unity and solidarity of "nation making" at the micro level among various communities, and often led by civil society groups. The perspective that privileges the top or the elite view of things has to change.

Bangsa Malaysia is both defined by leaders, i.e., those with the authority and agenda to turn it into a big narrative like what was done by former Prime Minister Mahathir; and also, by the agency of the people of various ethnic groups as well as their social organisations. In this sense, there are various notions of *Bangsa Malaysia* – by the leaders, and by the people, some of which may be ethnic-based, or based on faith such as Islam, while other conceptions may be multi-ethnic that transcend ethnicity. The real substantive content of *Bangsa Malaysia* which is organic and sustainable is that defined and enacted in everyday lives of the people. The challenge in future nation building is, therefore, how to reconcile these different notions, whether vertical or horizontal, and to benefit from them based on the commonalities, and a shared sense of belonging and destiny.

14 According to a report in *Free Malaysia Today*, (November 5th, 2021), Mohammed Khalid also said that the Budget 2022 allocation for the Bumiputera brings the total allocation over the past three budgets to some RM30 billion. He then pointedly asked: "But what is the outcome? We do not know. Which Bumiputeras have been helped?"

e | Enduring Values, Principles and Methods of the NEP and Rukun Negara

The NEP is already half a century old. While institutions, policies and programmes during the introduction of the NEP in the 1970s may have brought tremendous results in the context of the age, the important legacy of the NEP are the intangibles – the values, principles and methods that are relevant beyond their time (see, for example, Nazir Razak's appraisal of Tun Razak's legacy[15]). Some of its values include the universal principle of justice for all as expressed in the first objective of the NEP, that is, the eradication of poverty irrespective of race; the method of targeted approach; the deliberative consultation; the search for a national consensus as expressed in Rukun Negara, etc. The Rukun Negara which embodies the values to forge the national consensus and the guiding framework of the NEP, enshrines in its Preamble enduring principles of unity, democracy, justice, liberal approach towards diversity, the value of progress based on science and technology, while the Five Pillars of Rukun Negara — Belief in God, Loyalty to the King and Country, Supremacy of the Constitution, Rule of Law, Courtesy and Morality – should continue to guide us today in nurturing patriotism and nationhood. It is these enduring values, principles and methods that we should reaffirm and be guided by in our endeavour to build a future together, while the specific institutions, policies and programmes – if they disunite and divide, causing unhappiness and dissatisfaction among our fellow Malaysians – should be modified, reformed or changed, and new ones that uphold justice and are suited to the context and challenges of the time be put in place.

Malaysia after 2020 is moving ahead beyond the pandemic into the endemic stage of COVID-19, and the government is working on economic recovery and reforms. While the recovery and the growth targets are very important, the country also needs to set its sight clear beyond economic growth, that is, on nation building and the identity of the nation. This is not a short-termist or opportunistic political consideration, but a strategic and long term challenge. It is timely that this policy question is addressed head-on in the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 so that we are clear regarding the path ahead on the national question and creation of *Bangsa Malaysia*.

As a final note, a national tragedy or crisis provides an opportunity for critical reflection and serious soul searching, with important lessons to be learnt. It also provides an opportunity for invention and innovation to build a better future. The national tragedy of the race riots in 1969 and the failure of the laissez faire system led precisely to the innovation and bold vision of the NEP to write a new chapter in the annals of Malaysian history. Similarly, the unprecedented mega crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, together with the challenges inherited from our history, also provide a valuable opportunity for soul searching and critical reflection regarding the journey our nation has traversed in the last 50 years since the NEP. and the way forward. A new consensus for the nation should be worked out. The best brains who are committed to the cause of the nation should be mobilised and engaged in deliberative consultations for the purpose of building a better future. This is the time to rectify or replace any dysfunctional system, undertake reforms, devise new institutions, programmes and policies where necessary, and always be guided by the enduring values, principles and methods we have drawn from the NEP and Rukun Negara, and apply them creatively under the new conditions of the 21st century.

15 Nazir Razak, Tun Razak's youngest son, writing in *TheEdge* (November 7th, 2021) admits that in writing his memoir and understanding his father made him realise that Tun Razak's "most important legacy lies in the more intangible set of values, principles, and methods he applied, whereas the tangible institutions, policies, or programmes he had established may or may not be suited for different times" Nazir Razak 2021).

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