MANAGING ETHNIC DIVERSITIES: MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Malaysia, at present, is a politically stable, peaceful and working democracy in which all races and religious groups equally participate. Malaysia has succeeded in managing national integrity very well despite its multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious contradictions. The New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced by Malaysia after its May 13, 1969 race riots worked well to achieve inter-ethnic economic parity, and to eradicate poverty, and has succeeded in avoiding inter-ethnic discrimination. Equal sharing of economy among all the communities, right to education to all, equal power sharing in political sector, and proper security system to ensure orderly functioning are some of the ways by which the multicultural societies vulnerable to ethnic and religious stresses can survive in this globalized world.

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Introduction

Nation states in a modern world are formed of various sociological cultural identities. Mono-ethnic societies are rarely found in world today. Any state necessarily possesses a great majority and one or more ethnic minorities or ethnic groups. Ethnic group can be defined as a group of people with a distinctive collective consciousness based on a common language or culture.[1] The states because of having different ethnic, cultural and religious minorities are characterized by inter-ethnic conflicts over power, wealth and recognition. Few of the examples of violent internal conflicts are the continuing throes in Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, Azerbaijan, Sri Lanka and many more.[2]

Malaysia is one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse nations in the world today, having all the world's major religions, as well as major Asian ethnic groups. In Malaysia, peace prevails as the various groups co-exist in harmony and tolerance. Malaysia possesses many ethnic groups, large and small. But there are three major groups; first is Malays that make up 54 per cent of the population. Then there is Chinese minority that is large one, make up near 35 per cent while Indians constitute 11 per cent of the population. Remaining 12 per cent is made by other indigenous groups.

Malaysia has many major religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism.[3] Even though being multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, Malaysia successfully managed to prove itself politically stable, peaceful, working democracy in which all races and religious groups participate.

British East India Company brought Chinese immigrants in Malaysia in the late eighteenth century for the purpose of trade and military bases to carry out their valuable China trade. Chinese and Indians were allowed free immigration to Malaysia as the Malays refused to work outside their villages for inadequate salaries. As a result income disparities between the various communities became the primary cause of serious race riots of May 1969. Therefore, there was a sheer need of policies to eradicate the poverty and differences among the various ethnic divisions in the country. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was thus introduced to improve the economic status of Malays. [4]

The NEP was an ambitious twenty-year plan (1971-90), with the following main objectives:

- *To restructure Malaysian society to correct economic imbalance so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic function; and*

- *To eradicate poverty by raising income levels and increasing employment opportunities for all Malaysian, irrespective of race.* [5]

The plan was very significant in a sense that it allowed the economic growth and more importantly the equitable sharing of such economic growth. It had a very positive impact on the stability of multi-ethnic society of Malaysia, as it was launched with the declared objective of eliminating the identification of race with economic function. In practice, this meant special assistance and affirmative action to raise the levels of education, employment and income of the indigenous people. This study traces the policies by which Malaysia manages its diverse multi-ethnic society.

The Brief History of Malaysia

Malaysia as a federation of 13 states in South East Asia was formed in 1963. The country is geographically divided into two regions: Peninsular Malaysia (or West Malaysia) and Malaysian Borneo (or East Malaysia). Previously agrarian Malaysia has now turned into industrial one, mainly focusing on manufacturing and tourism as its major sources of income.

From 7th to 14th century, Malaysia was dominated by Hindu Culture imported from India. In 10th century Islam began to arrive in Malaysia, which turned many Malay-Indonesian people into Muslims. Then in 16th century, Malaysia fell under European colonial power, first the Portuguese, then the Dutch and finally the British. The European domination brought with itself the immigrant workers from China and India to work for the colonial economy created by them.

Malaya (as Malaysia was previously called) like other East Asian states was occupied by Japan from 1942 to 1945. It brought an end to the colonial system in Malaysia. But Malays had to face opposition from communist group which was later on suppressed by British military and Malay and Chinese political leadership. This insurgency resulted in the establishment of Malaya Federation (North Borneo and Singapore) in 1957. Malaya turned into Malaysia in 1963 after achieving full control of British territories of North Borneo and Singapore. But soon in 1965 Chinese-majority Singapore and the Federation seceded from Malaysia and secured independence. After all these settlements, Malaysia faced Chinese-Malay race riots on May 13, 1969 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The riots continued for a substantial period of time, and the government declared a state of national emergency.[6] The creation of a successful capitalist economy in Malaysia and the avoidance of major ethnic

conflicts was a clear aim of the Malaysian state after May 1969 riots. Because Malaysia has realized that the social unrest and political instability is always hindrance to the economic prosperity of the country.[7]

Malaysia, since 1970's has been ruled by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) against the Chinese and Indian leadership through their National Front Coalition. Malaysia under UMNO has prospered tremendously. It is now a strong middle income country with its citizens enjoying a per capita income of $12,100. Although historically dominated by the Malays, modern Malaysian society is heterogeneous, with substantial Chinese and Indian minorities. It is now a genuinely integrated and multi-cultural society. [8]

Ethnic Composition /Demographies

The ethnic composition of Malaysia was one of the basic components that were responsible for the ethnic conflicts or ethnic differences in the country. Almost half of the Malaysian population is ethnically Malay; about 35 per cent is ethnic Chinese, with remaining portions being Indians and other South Asian migrants.

This ethnic mix has caused problems for the country. The Malays—known as Bumiputras (sons of the soil) were deprived of process of economic growth in the country. The Malays were kept confined to the agricultural sector by British so as to prevent them from rapidly expanding rubber industry.

The Chinese, the largest minority of the country was industrious in nature. Due to this nature, they focused on mining and commerce and this industrious habit made most of the Chinese rich. Mostly the Malaysia's banking and

insurance industry run by the Chinese gave them more and more stronghold on economy of the state.

The Indians were brought in Malaysia by British government to work on rubber plantation. Initially they were less successful as compared to Chinese. But due to British colonial policy of educating ethnic South Asians to work in the bureaucracy, gave upper hand to these South Asian people mostly Indians to become intellectual elite. This education policy created the enlightenment and guidance for Indians and also intermarriages between Indians and Malays gave them more sense of nationalism that drove them towards national development.

Traditional Malay society had almost lost their political sovereignty to the Chinese. In early 20th century, the non-Malays had almost outnumbered Malays; it appeared as possibly the Malays would become a minority in their own country. Differences between Chinese and Malays were mainly based on language and religion, as the Chinese were mostly Confucian or Buddhist and Malays were largely Muslims. The Malays were afraid of importing religions particularly Christianity. In response, a small class of Malay nationalist intellectuals began to arrive in the early 20th century in order to revive Islam in the country. [9]

Islam is now country's official religion that approximately comprises 60% population. The other main religions are: Buddhism 20%, Christianity 9% and Hinduism 6%. The Malays, the largest community, peak their native language that is Behasa Melayu, whereas Chinese in Malaysia speak a variety of Chinese dialects including Hokkien/Fujian, Cantonese, Hakka, and Teochew. The Indians are mainly Hindu Tamils that's why they mostly speak Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Hindi. Most of the middle to upper-middle class Indians and Chinese in Malaysia also speak English as

a first language.[10]

Ethnic Diversities and Political Differences in Malaysia

The creation of multi-ethnic society in Malaysia and the Malaysian nexus between ethnic problems and economic and political issues is largely the outcome of the British policies from the late 18th century to 1957, when independence was granted. It created the ethnic conflicts and antagonism among the various ethnic groups as they tried to preserve their distinct cultural identities, particularly their language and culture. Malays were reluctant to use of Tamil and Chinese languages in the education system as they saw it as a hindrance in the formation of a truly national community, whereas the Chinese and Indian feared the loss of their cultural identity.

The government made the Malay language as a national and official language. All schools were required to adopt Malay as a medium of instruction but Chinese and Indian schools were allowed to function with their languages as the main medium of instruction. Hence, the Malay was more adopted as an official language than as a national language. Another policy by the government-National Culture Policy was opposed by ethnic communities other than the Malay community as it was considered as having Malay-Muslim nature. The policy was based on three basic principles: first it was based on the culture of indigenous people, second, other cultures were to be incorporated in a common national culture, and third that Islam was to be an important element in the national culture. Most of the Malays supported it but other ethnic groups did not support it at all. Thus the various ethnic groups remained culturally alienated from one another being discontent over such government policies.[11]

The political development of the Malaysia began with the foundation of United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in 1946 against the Malayan Union proposed by British in the same year with a common Malayan citizenship regardless of race, which created fear in Malays that due to this union the Chinese and Indians would be permanent and equal part of Malayan future. The UMNO favored the independence of Malaya (including Federated and Unfederated Malay states, plus Penang and Malacca-but not Singapore), but if it was run only by the Malays. As the British found themselves uncomfortable with UMNO, they sought to encourage Chinese to form a Chinese-based political party that eventually resulted in the formation of Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) in 1949. The MCA comprised of the anti-communist Guomindag (KMT) leaders and wealthy Chinese businessmen with a purpose of protecting their economic interests. The party could not gain much support of working-class Chinese.

On the other hand the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) led by middle-class leftists, was formed in 1946 to protect the interests of the Indian community. Later on, both the MCA and MIC joined UMNO to win Malayan independence on a policy of equal citizenship. The MCA and MIC along with UMNO were determined to forge an agreement that suit all the communities and hoped that they could live equally in a stable independent state.[12] The UMNO-MCA-MIC Alliance won victories in local and state elections in both Malay and Chinese areas between 1952 and 1955. By participating in the Alliance, MCA and MIC were able to maintain their communal and cultural identities, but both parties were given less independent positions as UMNO was dominant party among them. The MIC president, V.T. Sambantham, was criticized by the members of the MIC for not pursuing greater citizenship and educational rights for Indian community. Similarly MCA leaders though being influential

financially could not gain much Chinese rights within the association, but anyhow remained attached to the Alliance.[13]

At the May 1969 federal elections, the UMNO-MCA-MIC Alliance gained only 48.5% of the vote, although it was still in majority in the legislature. The Alliance gained the support of only half of the Malay population and one-third of the non-Malay vote. As the Alliance was ethnically divided, it only retained control of the federal government, which caused the communal tensions as the result was considered as the Malay-political hegemony. The MCA had lost most of the Chinese-majority seats to Gerakan or Democratic Action Party (DAP) formed by the Chinese socialist against the government policies of 1950's and 1960's. The Chinese defeat gave birth to the anti-government demonstrations by the Chinese community which turned into riots and inter-communal violence in the capital on May 13, 1969. It spread out quickly to other major cities. In this violence about 6,000 Chinese homes and businesses were burnt and at least 184 people were killed. [14] The state of emergency was declared by the government and the power was vested in National Operations Council (NOC) which was established to restore order. National Operations Council was headed by the Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak. The Malay senior bureaucrats and leaders from the Alliance were the members of the Council. The government suspended parliament and political parties, imposed press censorship and placed severe restrictions on any political activity.

Tun Abdul Razak after discussing with all major parties regrouped the Alliance into an enlarged coalition, the Barisan Nasional (National Front). This included UMNO, the MCA, the MIC, the main Malay opposition party, Part Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, or the Malaysian Islamic Party), the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (People's Movement Party) and

the People's Progressive Party (PPP). The Democratic Action Party (DAP) was only opposition party left outside the coalition. Abdul Razak held office until his death by 1976. In order to maintain national unity, he preferred to share power even being confident that UMNO could rule alone. This sentiment was repeated by his successor Mahathir Mohamad, who held power for 22 years. During his years many policies were introduced that led to the transformation of Malaysia's economy and society.

Policies Introduced to Manage Ethnic Diversities and Political Differences

With the UMNO's support in Barisan Nasional, Razak introduced an affirmative action plan in favor of the Malays. This plan led to the implementation of New Economic Policy (NEP), a twenty year restructuring program for greater state intervention to accumulate capital on behalf of the Malays and to create Malays capitalists. The NEP was to achieve inter-ethnic economic parity, and to eradicate poverty.[15]

This policy seems like a decisive shift in economic power from the Chinese to the Malays. This policy indeed succeeded in decreasing the poverty rate from 49.3 per cent in 1970 to only 15.0 per cent in 1990. It also supported government in decreasing the unemployment. In industrial sector including mining, manufacturing, construction, utilities, and transport, 918,000 Malays were working in 1990 as compared to 173,000 in 1970. Similarly, in service sector 1.2 million Malays and other indigenous people were provided employment in 1990 whereas in 1970, the number was 213,000. In case of restructuring of corporate ownership and wealth of Malay people, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was a great success in a sense that it raised the Malay ownership from 2.4 per cent in 1970 to 20.3 per cent in 1990. The NEP also called for the Non-Bumiputera Malaysian's

share, the target was to raise the share from 32.3 percent in 1970 to 40 per cent in 1990. But surprisingly it rose from 46.2 per cent in 1990. It was made possible only by decreasing the foreign ownership share from 63.3 per cent in beginning of policy that is in 1970, to 25.1 per cent in the targeted year of 1990.

The economic growth helped the Malaysian government to improve the quality of life. According to the Human Development Index developed by United Nations Development Program, a widely cited index of social development, Malaysia ranked fourth in the world in terms of improvement in the Human Development Index between 1970 and 1990.

It shows that the modernization of rural life certainly took place, the quality of life has greatly improved, the inequality in distribution of wealth has improved since then, and the ethnic discontent has lessened to a satisfied extent. In short the Malaysian government has been quite successful in managing ethnic differences and prospering the country through introducing various effective and ambitious affirmative action plans.[16]

Malaysia has enjoyed economic progress since 1970. The policies introduced in 1970 still remain in place. It has had regular elections since 1974 and in effect a one-party state, with the UMNO-controlled National Front (Barisan Nasional) usually winning nearly all seats, while the DAP wins some Chinese urban seats and the PAS some rural Malay ones. The result is that every community-Malay, Chinese, Indian, aborigines-is better off now than before. The Chinese are economically the most advanced and prosperous group in Malaysia. Hence they are satisfied with the government having all political powers in government's hands. The Indians are in a very small number thus they have no any

influence on any government policy. All this content in the various ethnic groups is because of government's confidence in all groups; the Malaysian government always involves all communities and its leaders in the decision making process and share power with them.[17]

Conclusion

Malaysia one of the most plural societies due to the ethnic and cultural diversity has been generally free of ethnic tensions after 1970s. The post-crisis Malaysia is successful in avoiding inter-ethnic discrimination after implementing its massive affirmative action program known as New Economic Policy (NEP). This program was successful in altering the structure of society, creating balance of power among various groupings, and establishing the role of state in the economy.[18]

Managing societies with many cultures, ethnic groups and religions is not an easy task. Malaysia is a heterogeneous society with about 60 large and small ethnic groups with different cultures and languages, having various religions; it is definitely a great example for other countries with diverse ethnic, religious and cultural groups. Malaysia has managed national harmony very well despite its multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious contradictions. Even though Malaysian ethnic communities still possess their respective identities, they think themselves as one nation-as Malaysians only. Malaysia is now a politically stable, peaceful and working democracy in which all races and religious groups equally participate. This all happened by giving the citizenship to all the immigrant groups-Chinese and Indian communities. They now share political power with the Malays, and sit in the federal cabinet and state executive councils. They were also granted the right of education in their respective languages with the Malay

language being official and national language. All the Malaysians whether indigenous or immigrants have freedom of worship and all groups are free to practice their respective religions.[19]

Other heterogeneous nations of the world can benefit from the experience of Malaysia by adopting the policies introduced by Malaysia not only at the time of crisis but also in the post-crisis scenario. Equal sharing of economy among all the communities, right to education to all, equal power sharing in political sector, and proper security system to ensure orderly functioning are some of the ways by which the multicultural societies vulnerable to ethnic and religious stresses can survive in this globalised world.

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