

**FROM PLURAL SOCIETY TO *BANGSA MALAYSIA*:
ETHNICITY AND NATIONALISM IN THE POLITICS OF
NATION-BUILDING IN MALAYSIA**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit
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ABSTRACT

The question of nation-building has always been a central issue in Malaysian politics. Whilst the country has been able to sustain a relatively stable politics since the 1969 tragedy, and hence spawn a rapid economic development (at least until the 1997 Asian economic crisis), the project of nation-building remained a basic national agenda yet to be fully resolved. This study investigates the delicate process of nation-building in Malaysia in the post 1970s, especially in the context of the vision of constructing the *Bangsa Malaysia* or 'a united Malaysian nation' enshrined in Mahathir's Vision 2020 project which was introduced in 1991. The aim of the study is firstly, to examine the underlying socio-political parameters that shaped and influenced the politics of nation-building in the country, and secondly, to explore the viability of the project of *Bangsa Malaysia* in the context of the daunting challenges involved in the process of nation-building. Drawing from a range of theoretical frameworks as well as from both primary and secondary data, the study contends that, based on the Malaysian experience, the potent interplay between the forces of ethnicity and nationalism constitute the crux of the problems in the politics of nation-building in Malaysia. This dialectic it is argued, stems from the prevalence of the varying perceptions of 'nation-of-intent' within and across ethnic groups. These phenomena have not only shaped the pattern of ethnic political mobilisation in the country, but above all, laid the most complex set of obstacles in the path of the project of nation-building. This study argues that the project of constructing the *Bangsa Malaysia* therefore, can be seen as a significant attempt by the state to reconcile the varying ethnic ideologies of nation-of-intent. It can also be considered as an attempt to consolidate Malay nationalism and cultural pluralism, thus, depicting 'the nation' as a 'mosaic of cultures', or reflecting a creation of 'a supra-ethnic' national identity. However, the viability of the envisaged project is yet to be tested. The concept itself is still vague to many people and the challenges ahead are enormous, involving political, economic, socio-cultural and religious issues. Indeed, the project risks becoming the 'latest' in the series of competing notions of nation-of-intent circulating in Malaysia. This study contends that whilst, to some extent, the socio-political landscape of Malaysian society has been rapidly changing, especially under the eighteen years of Mahathir's reign, ethnicity still pervades Malaysian political life. This study differs from many previous studies on nation-building in Malaysia which have mainly focused on either the historical dimensions or those which have examined the impact of key national policies. As such, it is hoped that this study would be able to provide an alternative perspective in the analysis of ethnic relations and nation-building in Malaysia, thus broadening the understanding of Malaysian politics and society.

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For
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ABBREVIATIONS

ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement)
AMCJA	All-Malaya Council for Joint Action
API	Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (Youth Awareness Movement)
APU	Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (Umma United Movement)
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AWAS	Angkatan Wanita Sedar (Women Awareness Movement)
Berjaya	Parti Berjaya Sabah (Sabah Success Party)
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
DAP	Democratic Action Party
EPF	Employee Provident Fund
FELDA	Federal Land Development Authority
Gerakan	Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Movement Party)
HICOM	Heavy Industry Corporation of Malaysia
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMP	Independence of Malaya Party
ISA	Internal Security Act
ISIS	Institute of Strategic and International Studies.
KeAdilan	Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party)
KMM	Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malays' Association)
MARA	Majlis Amanah Rakyat (Peoples' Trust Council)
MAPEN	Majlis Perundingan Ekonomi Negara (see: NECC)
MCA	Malayan/Malaysian Chinese Association
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MIC	Malayan/Malaysian Indian Congress
MNP	Malay Nationalist Party (see PKMM)
MPAJA	Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army
NCC	National Consultative Council
NDP	National Development Policy
NEAC	National Economic Action Council
NECC	National Economic Consultative Council (see MAPEN)
NEP	New Economic Policy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NOC	National Operation Council
PAP	Peoples' Action Party
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan Malaysian Islamic Party)
PBB	Parti Pesaka-Bumiputera Bersatu (Bumiputera's Party)
PBDS	Parti Bangsa Dayak Sarawak (Party of the Dayak People of Sarawak)
PBS	Parti Bersatu Sabah
Petronas	Petroleum Nasional (National Petroleum)
PPP	People's Progressive Party
PRM	Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysia's People Party)
PUTERA	Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (Centre of Peoples' Power)

S46	Parti Melayu Semangat 46 (Malay Party of the Spirit of 46)
SNAP	Sarawak National Party
SUPP	Sarawak United People's Party
UMNO	United Malays National Party .
UN	United Nations
USNO	United Sabah National Organization

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PART I

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Prologue

The paradox of nation-building in many deeply divided societies is one of reconciling ethnic allegiance with overarching loyalty to the state. This is because the forces of ethnicity and nationalism that emerged in these societies tend to be social and politically salient, thus, making the process of nation-building not only difficult but a complex task. Broadly speaking, nation-building refers to a process of constructing national identity that could accommodate ethnic pluralism while simultaneously inculcating an overarching sense of nationhood. It is usually a process associated with plural societies. As a plural society, nation-building has always been a great challenge for Malaysia. Ethnicity characterised the very basis of Malaysian politics. This is reflected by the fact that political struggles are often fought on an ethnic basis, and the tendency of most political issues to be perceived in ethnic terms (see: Zakaria Ahmad, 1989; Crouch, 1996). This is a prevailing phenomenon in Malaysian polity since its independence in 1957. Amid its relative stability and rapid economic development especially over the past two decades, Malaysia's nation-building project has not been fully accomplished, and constantly dominates political agendas.

Malaysian society comprises three major ethnic communities, namely the Malays, who made up about 50 percent of the population, and two sizeable immigrant communities, one Chinese (37 per cent) and the other Indian (11 per cent). In the context of Malaysian politics, the Malays together with other indigenous peoples are classified as *Bumiputera* (lit. sons of the soil) - who enjoy certain privileges as stipulated under the Malaysian constitution.¹ On the other hand, the Chinese and the

¹ The terms Malay and *Bumiputera* which are used in Malaysia often in the context of affirmative action programmes may at times cause confusion. Legally speaking, the term *Bumiputera* is referred to the indigenous communities in Sabah and Sarawak, the majority of which are non-Muslim. The term Malay is used to refer to ethnic Malays in the Peninsular who are Muslim. The small minority of indigenous (aborigine) communities in the Peninsular are classified as the *Orang Asli*. However, during the NEP period (1971-1990), the term *Bumiputera* has

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I. Leading politicians and bureaucrats

1. Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, The Minister of Youth and Sports.
Formal interview at his office in Kuala Lumpur, 29 March 1997.
2. Tan Sri Koh Tsu Khoo, The Chief Minister of Penang.
Formal interview at the Penang State's Guest House, 21 May 1997.
3. Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, Malaysia's former Foreign Minister.
Formal interview at his house in Kuala Lumpur, 29 March 1997.

4. Dr. Goh Cheng Teik, Deputy Minister of Land and Regional Development.
Formal interview at his office in Kuala Lumpur, 15 April 1997.
5. Mr. Lim Kit Siang, Opposition Leader and the DAP Secretary General.
Formal interview at his office in Federal Parliament, Kuala Lumpur, 1 April 1997.
6. Datuk Haji Fadhil Noor, President of PAS.
Formal interview at his office in Alor Star, Kedah, 7 May 1997.
7. Dr. Tan Seng Giaw, DAP Vice-Chairman, and MP for Kepong.
Formal interview at his clinic in Petaling Jaya, 14 March 1997.
8. Mr. Wan Yaacob Hassan, Director General of the Department of National Unity.
Formal interview at his office in Kuala Lumpur, 8 April 1997.
9. Haji Subky Latiff, Member of PAS Central Committee .
Formal interview at PAS Headquarters, Kuala Lumpur, 13 March 1997.

II. *Leading intellectuals*

10. Professor Khoo Kay Kim, Professor of History, University of Malaya.
Formal interview at University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 30 April 1997.
11. Professor Lee Kam Hing, Professor of History, University Malaya.
Formal interview at University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 10 April 1997.
12. Professor Shamsul A.B., the Dean Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanity, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM- National University of Malaysia).
Informal discussion, at his office in UKM, Bangi, 11 April 1993.
13. Professor Datuk Zainal Abidin Wahid, Retired Professor of History.
Formal interview at his house in Petaling Jaya, 11 March 1997.
14. Professor H.M. Dahlan, the Dean Faculty of Development Science, UKM.
Formal interview at his office in UKM, 31 March 1997, two months before his untimely demise.
15. Dr. Ranjit Singh, Associate Professor of History, University of Malaya.
Formal interview at University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 30 April 1997.
16. Dr. P. Ramasamy, Associate Professor of Political Science, UKM.
Formal interview at UKM, Bangi, 31 March 1997.
17. Dr. Jayum A. Jawan, Dean, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).
Formal interview, at UPM, Serdang, 7 April 1997.
18. Dr. Ahmad Fawzi Basri, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM- The Northern University of Malaysia).
Series of informal discussions, at his office in UUM, Sintok, between March-April 1997.
19. Dr. Kua Kia Soong, Director of the Dong Jiao Zhong (Chinese Education Association), at his office in Kajang, 2 April 1997.
20. Mr. Rustam A. Sani, Freelance Writer.
Formal Interview at his house in Kuala Lumpur, 7 April 1997.

III. *Key Opinion Formers*

21. Datuk Mohamad Salleh Majid, Managing Director Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange.
Formal interview at his office in Kuala Lumpur, 28 March 1997.
22. Datuk Johan Jaafar, Editor-in-Chief, the Utusan Melayu Group.
Formal interview at his office in Kuala Lumpur, 7 May 1997.
23. Datuk Ahmad Nazri Abdullah, Editor-in-Chief, Berita Harian Press.

- Formal interview at his office in Kuala Lumpur, 12 May 1997.
24. Mr. Chamil Wariya, Editor, Magazine Division, Utusan Melayu Group.
Formal interview, at his office in Kuala Lumpur, 10 April 1997.
25. Tan Sri A. Samad Ismail, Veteran Journalist.
Formal interview at his house in Petaling Jaya, 27 March 1997.
26. Mr. Wong Chun Wai, Senior Journalist, The Star Newspaper.
Informal Discussion, 2 May 1997.

IV. *The Community*

27. Series of informal interviews with 13 University Utara Malaysia (UUM) students of various ethnic background and gender from 1 March 1997-21 May 1997, at UUM campus in Sintok.
28. Series of informal discussion with Malaysian students in Leeds from June 1997-July 1997.
29. Series of informal interviews with 7 public sector respondents of different ethnic background, gender, and age, from 1 March 1997-21 May 1997 in Malaysia.
30. Series of informal interviews with 6 private sector respondents of different ethnic background, gender, and age, from 1 March 1997-21 May 1997 in Malaysia.

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