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

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From plural society to *Bangsa Malaysia*: Ethnicity and nationalism in the
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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.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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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 | Petrolium 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 |

**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

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[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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## List of Interviews

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 Khoon, The Chief Minister of Penang.
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3. Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, Malaysia's former Foreign Minister.
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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.
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6. Datuk Haji Fadhil Noor, President of PAS.
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7. Dr. Tan Seng Giaw, DAP Vice-Chairman, and MP for Kepong.
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8. Mr. Wan Yaacob Hassan, Director General of the Department of National Unity.
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9. Haji Subky Latiff, Member of PAS Central Committee .
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II. *Leading intellectuals*
10. Professor Khoo Kay Kim, Professor of History, University of Malaya.
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13. Professor Datuk Zainal Abidin Wahid, Retired Professor of History.
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23. Datuk Ahmad Nazri Abdullah, Editor-in-Chief, Berita Harian Press.

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24. Mr. Chamil Wariya, Editor, Magazine Division, Utusan Melayu Group.
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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.

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29. Series of informal interviews with 7 public sector respondents of different ethnic
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30. Series of informal interviews with 6 private sector respondents of different ethnic
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