

*Hidup Melayu: Malaysia's New Economic Policy as a Response to*  
Popular Discourse on Malay Identity

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### Abstract:

The New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1971 in Malaysia represented an affirmative action tool to redress economic grievances set in motion by British colonial policy as well as address a nation fractured by bloody interethnic riots between the Malay and Chinese communities. This paper explores the construction of Malay group identity through an Orientalist framework pre- and post-independence and how the NEP attempted to heal the deep identity-based wounds embedded in Malay race loyalty. No longer was economics simply correcting for history, but also for what it meant to be "native" in a postcolonial Malaysia.

## Introduction

May 13, 1969 marked a traumatic turning point in Malaysia's early years as an independent, postcolonial country. The violent riots between the Malay and Chinese communities in and around the nation's capital of Kuala Lumpur were sparked by recent election results, severe provocation and inflammatory speech on both sides, and a long history of communal tensions and economic inequality directly traceable to British colonial policy. The tragedy prompted the ruling authorities to integrate a twenty-year affirmative action program known as the New Economic Policy (NEP) into the national economic development plan, signed into law on 21 June 1970 by Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak. As an affirmative action tool, the NEP's stated primary objective was to attain national unity through eliminating poverty irrespective of race as well as correcting for the economic imbalance across racial lines to eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic function (Malaysia, Ministry of Economic Affairs). The wide-reaching government apparatus specifically targeted the stagnating and uneven economic development of the Malays and other indigenous groups, which the policy cites as a major reason for worsening racial tensions.

In a collection of essays evaluating the NEP entitled *The New Economic Policy in Malaysia: Affirmative Action, Ethnic Inequalities, and Social Justice* (2013), Ragayah Haji Mat Zin determines that rapid, sustained economic growth as a result of industrialization and affirmative action have reduced the incidence of absolute poverty across all races in Malaysia, with the rate among Malays and other indigenous communities dropping from 64.8% in 1970 to 23.0% in 1989, and later to 5.3% in 2009 with the national average hovering under 4% (39, 56). However, in the decades after the NEP's official run, observers have also noted that in reality, its implementation has led to weakened interracial unity, increased intraracial inequality, and Malay

political hegemony. This development raises serious questions about the wisdom and feasibility of reproducing the Malaysian model of affirmative action in nations such as Fiji, South Africa, and Zimbabwe who themselves are navigating the consequences of colonial and postcolonial regimes (Mauzy, 2006; Gomez and Saravanamuttu, 2013). Furthermore, the economic growth and rise in living standards experienced by the country during the twenty years the NEP was in effect should also be reevaluated given that the policy's unintended social, political, and economic outcomes may be undermining its own actual goal of national unity.

While the NEP formally ended in 1990, the policy continues to reign supreme in Malaysia's narrative of economic identity. The historic 2018 general election saw the ruling government coalition, dominated by the Malay-centric United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) since independence in 1957, brought down by a robust opposition coalition broadly composed of multiracial political parties and uniting voters across the racial and religious spectrum ready for a disruption in racial politicking. Even so, when pressed about repealing or modifying affirmative action policies favoring the Malays, key figures in the present government have cautioned against pushing the conversation "too hard," suggesting that such a move might alienate Malay voters who could easily turn back to the Malay nationalist rhetoric of UMNO or PAS, the other dominant Malay party in the country (Economist, 2018).

On May 13, 2019, the Malaysian news platform *Malaysiakini* published a groundbreaking online portal to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1969 riots, specifically with the intent of providing high-quality coverage for Malaysians born after the riots—a demographic whose knowledge they deemed to be "scarce, but who has to bear its stigma all the same" (Malaysiakini, 2019). In revisiting this "old but persistent wound," the team of journalists referenced the official government account of events, news articles published at the time, and

academic publications examining the riots, and sifted through the interviews they conducted with eyewitnesses to find what could be corroborated and published. All the same, other media outlets quickly picked up on the ensuing uproar surrounding this portal, with Malay leaders from across the political divide reacting negatively in general. Some accused *Malaysiakini* of twisting historical facts and stoking interracial hatred for its own sake, calling for immediate government censure of the platform; others urged the team and the Malaysian population at large to place the incident behind them and move toward the future (Nuar, 2019; Tan, 2019).

The New Economic Policy has survived this long in the national consciousness for as long as the population has navigated (or, more importantly, avoided navigating) the waters of collective trauma of May 13, 1969. In this paper, I aim to examine the political conditions and conversations that make possible the enduring bond between bloody violence, economic policy, and racial identity that still exists today. I investigate the discourse on Malay and non-Malay identity as revealed in the popular Malay-language press in the years leading up to 1969 and the implementation of the New Economic Policy in 1971. I argue that the prevailing discourse on Malay identity, shaped by colonialism and its hegemonic ideologies, enabled a politically significant segment of the Malay population to transform their racial anxieties into a wound and integrate the NEP into their conception of a fixed Malay identity.

By examining the development of Malay ethnocentrism in relation to a landmark affirmative action policy, I hope to underscore the intricate relationship between redressing genuine colonial grievances and the challenging process of postcolonial identity formation. While this project focuses primarily on the specific history of Malay identity and race-based claims, I believe this case study holds significant value for future investigations of ethnocentrism

by demonstrating the unique ways in which historical inequality, policy, and cultural discourse interact to yield politically significant consequences.

My methodology first focuses on examining the language of racial commentary in the popular media, covering articles published by the Malay-language daily newspaper *Berita Harian* during the 1960s as well as *The Malay Dilemma*, a controversial and influential book written by politician Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in 1970. I then analyze the various manifestations of racial and economic anxiety as revealed through this discourse and contrast them with the language of the New Economic Policy. Using the policy document itself, I examine the ways in which the rationale for the policy, contained in its first three chapters, intentionally employ the language necessary to manage Malay unease around their position relative to other races.

Having been born decades after the riots, I grew up with a vague conception of the May 13 tragedy – outside the fact that it was, indeed, a tragedy. I received limited formal education about the actual events surrounding the incident, let alone the larger context that framed Sino-Malay tensions at the time. Why was there historical animosity between the two races? How much did the oft-cited explanation of economic inequality truly account for the sheer violence that both communities inflicted upon each other? Was the government prepared to take on the challenge of re/constructing racial harmony in an authentic and visibly effective way? Such questions did not emerge on the plane of my political consciousness until I entered young adulthood. I began having conversations about race with non-Malay friends who shared their disaffection with economic policies that accord special privileges to Malays in education, land ownership, commerce and industry, and other domains.

As someone of Malay and Malaysian Chinese descent who benefits from the aforementioned privileges, I have found that I occupy a liminal position that tends to facilitate such conversations; people from various racial backgrounds have spoken openly with me about the ways in which race has shaped their lives unfavorably as a direct result of these legal realities. In this way, my mixed-race parentage has influenced the extent to which individuals in my social circles have performed political correctness when discussing race and policy. For my undergraduate senior thesis, I chose to trace the source of Malaysia's major affirmative action policy and aim to make sense of why it continues to be a hypersensitive topic of discussion today, nearly thirty years after its official implementation period ended. This pursuit required me to investigate the earlier questions that lie at the heart of the project to the best of my abilities, and to begin considering what it might take for the nation to implement a post-NEP development strategy and sustain a national discourse on race that dares to interrogate and be honest with itself.

### **The Architecture of Postcolonial Racial Identity**

In *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, Syed Hussein Alatas examines colonial capitalism as an instrument used to produce images intended to dominate colonial subjects politically, economically, and importantly, psychologically. Alatas studies native populations in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines and scrutinizes the insidious ways in which European travel writers and colonial administrators spoke and wrote about them in the name of cultural anthropology or sociological analysis. Such writings existed within a vast body of work by European travelers who journeyed to Southeast Asia since the 1500s—notably, *after* European domination of certain major cities, and after the populations of interest had been forced to submit

to foreign rule (1977: 37). Published pieces on the Malays residing in Malaya tended to be authored by writers or officials affiliated with the ruling colonial power at the time, i.e. the Portuguese, the Dutch, and eventually the British. As a result, these works were in conversation with one another and never depicted their subject communities as they were before European domination, all the while claiming historical veracity.

Alatas argues that the principal image created by European observers during the colonial period in Southeast Asia is that of the lazy native, an image perpetuated during a time when colonial governments required robust guidance in order to generate the vigorous economic growth expected of the colonies from their patrons at home (70). In Malaya alone, numerous colonial officials shared a narrow range of opinions in their writings. British Resident Frank Swettenham wrote, “The leading characteristic of the Malay of every class is a disinclination to work” (44); Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, founder of Singapore, thought it was “tolerably correct to see the Malay as being so indolent that when he has rice nothing will induce him to work (39);” while education official L. R. Wheeler chalked this indolence up to “...a certain lassitude and passivity, partly climatic, partly born of Islam,” which was “favourable to a state of stagnation which, if not vitalized by new currents, can only end in decay” (49).

However, Alatas contends that the nature of daily life prohibited native populations from being idle if they had any desire to survive. Individuals and families needed to perform the hard labor of tending to their paddy fields, catching fish in the rivers and seas, and foraging for food in the deep rainforests—or risk starvation. According to Alatas, their “unwillingness to become a tool in the production of colonial capitalism” acted as the primary driver of their newfound reputation of being lazy (72). Observations carried out by members of the European colonial



class of native inactivity and relaxation did not translate into indolence and slothfulness in reality—it simply did not fit into their Western, late modern conception of labor.

When the colonial class perceived native communities pursuing subsistence economic activities as a waste of resources and manpower, particularly within the context of their refusal to work in European-owned mines and estates, the dominant image generated within the bounds of their frustration produced a dominant colonial ideology. The image of the lazy native leaving productive land uncultivated warranted colonization in the name of economic development – and in Malaya, the image and ideology provided grounds for the British to bring in indentured laborers from other countries – specifically China and India – to drive the new rubber and tin economies of the colony. As Alatas notes, “The Malays, despite their positive contribution to (different types of labor), were considered indolent, not because they were really indolent, according to definition, but because they avoided the type of slave labour which the Chinese and the Indians were compelled to do owing to their immigrant status” (75). In order to avoid being branded as lazy, one had to suffer through monotony and dehumanizing conditions in tin mines and on rubber estates to eke out a living—a life the Malays evidently steered clear of whenever possible, which subsequently condemned them to become an object of colonial othering.

Edward Said’s classic Orientalism framework can be utilized to further frame the harmful othering that happened across the world during the colonial period. When “recurrent, systematic tropes and asymmetries in representation” surface in colonial texts, such characterizations render colonial subjects or ‘Orientals’ as “culturally and, ultimately, biologically inferior” (Sioh, 2007: 119-120). While Alatas explores the myth of the lazy native within circumstances that were specific to Southeast Asia, Said argues that colonial mythologizing acts as a fundamental component of legitimizing colonial rule. Administrators benefitted from enforcing categories like

race as bywords not only for their subjects' inherent nature but also for their propensities (or lack thereof) for certain types of work (120). The question can then turn psychological: to what extent can the subject bear the consequences of being defined by the imperialist gaze before assuming such categorizations as their own self-conception? Said implies that the subject's potential to accept "evaluative judgments about himself or herself...depends on the extent to which a subject population acquiesces with the external judgment" (120). In other words, the structural nature of colonial strategy can make it all the more challenging for an individual subject to escape the gravitational pull of resorting to an externally imposed group identity, during *and* after a protracted period of subordination.

It could also be valuable to examine which existing aspects of identity a subject chooses to neutralize in favor of these new forms of identification. Wendy Brown's analysis of politicized identities as wounded attachments bears examining here, particularly within the context of how Malay collective identity manifested in cultural discourse and policy pre- and post-independence. Brown observes how politicized identities articulate themselves on the basis of their "*exclusion* from an ostensible universal...a protest premised on the fiction of an inclusive/universal community...insofar as it premises itself upon exclusion from it" (1995: 211). As long as identity-based claims seek political recognition through categories such as race, Brown argues, that class resentment remains unpoliticized. However, she notes that when "economic stratification" and "other injuries to the human body and psyche enacted by capitalism (alienation, commodification, exploitation, displacement)...are discursively normalized, other markers of social difference may come to bear an inordinate weight, indeed, all the weight of the sufferings produced by capitalism" (207). Brown reasons that if the identity formation process is so tightly bound to the subject's reaction to power and historical exclusion

from the mainstream and acceptable, then the anger born of such deep wounds fuels the desire to inflict harm and aspire to power rather than to reproach it and aspire to resistance instead. In the context of colonial and postcolonial Malaysia, coding race as class shifted Malay class disgruntlements into a larger sphere of non-class related injustices. Remnants of the colonial past burned bright as postcolonial subjects insisted on binding race to economics.

If the Malays held up the comparatively well-to-do Chinese as the standard against which to pitch their claims, then such a standard “not only preserves capitalism from critique but sustains the invisibility and inarticulateness of class” (208). While Malay political and racial discourse acknowledged (to varying degrees) that the root of Malay economic suffering lies in how the British systematized production along racial lines, I will show that the conversation around race kept coming back to the visible reminders that some benefitted more than others. In other words, what was important about the radical demographic flows and subsequent racial differentiation sparked by colonial capitalism was not so much the need for a rigorous critique and dismantling of colonial patterns of economic and psychological domination, as it was the ascendancy of the narrative of Malays being left behind.

By converting the class differential into a racial otherness that must be politicized *and* achieved for itself, Malay identity exercised a reactionary will to power “that makes not only a psychological but a political practice of revenge, a practice which reiterates the existence of an identity whose present past is one of insistently unredeemable injury” (220). In an attempt to expel the distress still raw from the humiliation and suffering engendered by the British, participants in the mainstream Malay racial discourse during the period examined “produc(ed) a culprit” and located in the Chinese a site to displace blame, hence mutating their hurt into an “ethicizing politics, a politics of recrimination that seeks to avenge the hurt even while it

reaffirms it” (214, 220). With the full force of Malay anger and resentment directed outwards, Malay racial discourse reinforces identity as a wound—with significant political consequences.

### **Smoke and Mirrors: Setting the Scene for Racial Tensions**

Colonial capitalism drove the executive decisions made by the British in Malaya during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The patterns and precedents they set for social, economic, and political activity carried over even after Malaya achieved independence. The colony represented one of the most profitable ones of the British Empire, primarily due to the colonial administration’s introduction of rubber and tin production on a large scale meant for export. In 1914, rubber production in Malaya met 50 percent of the global supply, and several decades later, the Empire grew to depend on the colony “to balance its trade and international payments” (Munro-Kua, 1996: 27). The radical and accelerated transformation in the Malayan economy was made possible through the mass importation of laborers from China and India by the British as well as Chinese and Indian coolie brokers or middlemen. Chinese immigrants made up the majority of workers in the tin mines and urban areas, while the Indians were brought in to toil on rubber estates and the construction of roads and railways (Verma, 2002).

This pattern of geographic settlement and sectoral segmentation served as both an economic and a political instrument for the British. In 1913, for example, the British introduced land reservation schemes to protect Malay plots of land from encroachments by the rubber industry, fostering Malay self-awareness vis-à-vis other racial groups that located the threat of appropriation in alien immigrant communities instead of British colonial policy (Munro-Kua, 1996). Although both hostile and civil relations between local populations existed before the arrival of European imperialism on the shores of Malaya, natural migration flows in the region

had aided processes of socialization and acculturation. However, the enormous surge in immigration inflows under colonial command compressed the decades and perhaps centuries required of such processes into a handful of years, preventing the mutual adjustment that could have otherwise happened in the absence of European intervention (Hirschman, 1986). By accelerating immigration and assigning each race to different economic functions, the administration laid the foundation for interracial socioeconomic inequality, group isolation, and communalism.

When the Japanese occupation of Malaya began in 1941-1942, racial classification remained the axis on which colonial decision-making revolved. The ongoing Sino-Japanese War between the Empire of Japan and the Republic of China determined the politics between the occupying Japanese forces and the local Chinese population in Malaya; the latter became the target of vicious brutality since they were collectively seen as anti-Japanese and providing support to nationalist forces in China (Munro-Kua, 1996). The Japanese weaponized racial discord by organizing Malay paramilitary units to fight the Chinese resistance groups that formed in defiance of the Japanese (Verma, 2002). As a consequence, the mainly Chinese underground Communists represented “the group most associated with resistance to the Japanese” (Sioh, 2004: 731), and when the Japanese kindled anti-Chinese sentiments within this context, Malay sociopolitical consciousness began to equate Communist activity with the Chinese locals. Conversely, numerous Chinese guerrillas specifically pursued Malay residents who they deemed to be collaborating with the Japanese in their unceasing terrorizing of the Chinese community. Such racially charged associations were then passed down through generations of residents still troubled by the fighting, persisting for a long time after the Japanese surrendered in 1945.

In 1948, three years after the British reoccupation of Malaya, the colonial government declared a national crisis that saw continuous fighting between Malayan Communist and British-led forces. The Malayan Emergency, a twelve-year-long crisis, was sparked by an increasing number of union strikes by workers protesting for improved wages and working conditions in an increasingly unfriendly environment toward such labor movements. When the colonial government deemed the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) responsible for a spate of attacks on European plantation managers, colonial officials banned the CPM and granted the police wider powers to arrest and detain individuals suspected of threatening national security.

In that same year, the British introduced the Resettlement Policy, focusing on the large swaths of the Chinese community who had moved to the fringes of the jungle in order to avoid persecution by the Japanese. Since the Communist guerrillas established their base, travel paths, and communication channels in the jungle, the British viewed these rural, fringe communities as potential or actual Communist sympathizers. As a result, they relocated these families into 'New Villages,' where residents were confined and subjected to curfews and repeated interrogations (Sioh, 2004). Meanwhile, the British deployed Commonwealth armed forces in the region as well as Malay security forces to attack the predominantly Chinese "“communist terrorists,”" exacerbating interracial ill will between the latter two communities (Munro-Kua, 1996).

The Communist Party of Malaya was moved to take up arms as a result of the sustained, labor-related injustices they had experienced under colonial rule, and the British reacted swiftly with military force to quell the violence that erupted. However, the added dimension of racial tension transformed the Emergency beyond economics to become a conflict that was marked by racial hostility as well. When local political leadership concluded negotiations with the British government in London to secure independence for Malaya, the Emergency was still ongoing; in

fact, the British “retained the right to maintain a military presence” in the Independence Agreement of 1956 (Munro-Kua, 1996). On August 31, 1957, the former colony declared independence from the British amid the simmering racial tensions and socioeconomic divisions experienced along racial lines that had yet to be addressed systemically.

Years later, the 1969 general elections held on May 10 saw the ruling coalition fail to obtain a two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives (*Dewan Rakyat*) for the first time since independence. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Chinese political component of the coalition, lost twenty of its thirty-three seats, mostly winning only in majority-Malay constituencies and “indicating a serious loss of non-Malay votes, the very people the party claimed to represent” (Munro-Kua, 1996: 55). Although the opposition parties did not form a rival coalition, they had established a working relationship with one another and on the whole made significant political advances in territories previously regarded as safe seats for the ruling coalition, banding together on issues that included challenging the special position of Malays enshrined in the constitution.

The unprecedented results prompted the majority-Chinese opposition parties to announce victory rallies in the nation’s capital on May 11 and 12, and in response, politicians on the ruling side called for a protest rally and a pro-government demonstration on May 13. Gatherings on both sides were easily distinguishable by race, with the Chinese in the celebratory camp and the Malays in the other. Scholars have suggested that economic factors likely contributed to the racial discontent underpinning the riots, namely growing Malay unemployment and rising economic inequality in relation to the racial other in spite of the country’s overall narrative of steady economic growth and progress (Gomez & Jomo, 1999; Verma 2002; Chin & Teh, 2017). The directly inciting events, however, are murkier: journalists covering the event in 2019 cite

Chinese onlookers jeering at the passing Malay crowd during the May 13 counter-rally as the source of the first clash on that day (Malaysiakini, 2019). Reporters writing for the *New Straits Times* in May 1969 were much vaguer in their descriptions of rioters; journalists repeatedly used the phrase “armed youths” as their choice descriptor instead of identifying individuals by race (Abisheganadan, 1969).

According to these news reports in the days following the riots, large groups of youths had marched in procession, setting scores of vehicles and houses on fire, demanding guns from nearby police stations, and attacking passing vehicles with machetes and makeshift weapons (Abisheganadan, 1969). The police and the army were called in to quell the riots and confront the crowds with a shoot-to-kill policy if necessary (Abisheganadan, 1969). The next day, the current Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman declared a state of emergency and placed several states under curfew, stressing that the administration needed to “take effective and strong measures to deal with terrorist elements” (Abisheganadan, 1969).

Two days later, the king announced the establishment of the National Operations Council (NOC) headed by Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak, who was placed in charge of all government administration under the Emergency Ordinance of 1969. The NOC then embarked on a large-scale endeavor to assess the reasons behind the race riots, eventually attributing them to British colonial policy and the subsequent uneven economic development among the different races, eventually fostering mass discontent that ended up being ignited in full force in the wake of the elections (Verma, 2002). The council’s analysis eventually led to the development of a long-term strategy intended to tackle economic inequality, the perceived root of racial discord and hence the cause of the riots. The New Economic Policy of 1971 was signed into law by Tun



Abdul Razak on 21 June 1970 as a twenty-year program integrated into the five-year economic development plan at the national level, the Second Malaysia Plan of 1971-1975.

### **Race in Popular Media**

To locate the pulse of the Malay population vis-à-vis the rights and privileges to which they perceived they were entitled, I examined the discourse surrounding Malay identity in the popular press, specifically in the daily paper *Berita Harian*. I reviewed numerous instances where contributors used the phrase “*bangsa Melayu*” (the Malay race or the Malay nation) in articles throughout the 1960s; I chose this particular expression to capture the distinct current of solidarity centered on racial identity standing against colonial powers and non-Malay immigrants alike. Pairing my analysis of Mahathir’s *The Malay Dilemma* with the analysis of news articles aided me in discerning the broad themes of alienation and anxiety that I later tie to the NEP. At the time of the book’s publication, Mahathir had just been politically exiled from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO, the major, Malay-centric party of the ruling government coalition) for pro-Malay remarks that were considered racially inflammatory in the aftermath of the riots, positioning him as a champion of Malay interests (Verma, 2002). Mahathir gained a wide Malay audience with the subsequent release of *The Malay Dilemma*, a text in which he seeks to provide a comprehensive historical, sociological, and political analysis of the Malay population in Peninsular Malaysia over five centuries, with the ultimate goal of diagnosing the key racial problems afflicting the Malays in the present day and formulating the policy imperatives that would solve them.

It should be noted that while the book was published in Singapore in 1970, the Malaysian government officially banned the book upon its release due to its sensitive content, only lifting

the edict eleven years later. However, the ban failed to stop the book from achieving wide circulation among the Malay and non-Malay communities in Malaysia, sparking hopes and fears that visible advocacy of Malay rights would reach new heights (Kamm, 1981). Scholars have observed how the racial and political ideologies laid out in the book have served as a justification – or at the very least, inspiration – for the NEP (Verma, 2002; Ibrahim, 2013). In 1972, UMNO party officials readmitted Mahathir to their ranks; in 1976, he became the Deputy Prime Minister; in 1981, he was sworn in as Prime Minister, a position he would hold for the next twenty-two years; and in 2018, Mahathir was yet again sworn in as Prime Minister, this time leading the opposition coalition—joining forces with the very groups he had spent years fighting against. Needless to say, the significance of *The Malay Dilemma* and its impact on policy and public discourse cannot be overstated. Between this book and *Berita Harian*, several themes emerged to reveal pronounced ideas about the inherent features of the Malay race as well as the non-Malays, the criteria for citizenship and demonstrating true loyalty to the country, the imminent threat of Malay revolt if the authorities fail to address existing discontent and inequalities, and the justification for affirmative action in righting historical wrongs.

According to the narrative of Malay identity as spelled out or implied in these writings, the Malays had lost out in the historical race to obtain economic and social power due to some or all of the following reasons, depending on the thinker: their hereditary and environmental factors, their ignorance of what achieving economic success required of them, and their “overwhelming desire to be polite, courteous, and thoughtful of the rights and demands of others” (Mahathir, 1970: 11). “The Malays Will Not Disappear From the Earth” (Berita Harian, 1962) proposes that if the Malays do not wake up to the reality that they are engaged in serious competition with the foreign races, they may very well disappear as a people one day. Mahathir

argues that a major reason as to why the Malays were in this position to begin with lay in the geography of the country that had allowed even the earliest Malay settlers to live in relative ease, without needing to demonstrate any “great exertion or ingenuity” to obtain food (1970: 34). He suggests that the evolutionary principle of the survival of the fittest failed to apply fully to the Malays since “everyone survived” within the favorable conditions of Malaya, supporting “the existence of even the weakest” (1970: 35). In contrast, he contends that natural selection worked superbly in China, where “life was one continuous struggle for survival” over four thousand years, with evolution successfully “weeding out the unfit” and reproducing “the best strains and characteristics which facilitated survival and accentuated the influence of the environment on the Chinese”—therefore raising the ‘quality’ of the Chinese immigrants who eventually made their way to Malaya (1970: 38).

The discussion of the role of genetics also featured occasionally in the news, with “Special Privileges are Necessary for the Malays” (Berita Harian, 1962) submitting that the Chinese possess certain qualities that are lacking in Malays: they live in clans and generally think or take care of their entire race, while the Malays who live as discrete units think only of themselves; the Chinese can carry out every form of work whereas the Malays cannot. Other articles seemed less disposed to engage with pseudoscientific reasoning but still operated somewhat within a sociological framework. “Our Weak Economy” (Berita Harian, 1965) attributes the relatively weak Malay economy to a long-standing cultural attitude around wealth accumulation, namely that while visitors and other races had historically needed to find means of support while living in Malaysia, the Malays had felt and continue to feel as though they did not have to try as hard because, after all, the entire land was theirs.

In addition to demonstrating a vigorous inclination toward racial essentialism, such views tap into the vein of Malay unease about the unrelenting economic prosperity of the Chinese as well as frustration about an apparent inertia within the Malay community to work toward this success. The emphasis on inherent racial characteristics recalls Alatas's exploration of postcolonial subjects internalizing the colonial myths perpetuated about them and their newfound compatriots far beyond the actual period of foreign rule, and later weaponizing these beliefs in pursuit of communal protection. Furthermore, British colonial policy determined postcolonial economic outcomes in Malaysia to a great degree and therefore also influenced the ways in which many Malays articulated their struggle for economic and political success through the lens of race and communalism. As Brown argues, a wounded political identity tends to espouse a zero-sum mindset, falling into a cycle of believing that gains can only be made at the expense of others. In this case, social othering and economic conflict often occurred along racial lines.

The nativist thread running through the discourse on Malay identity manifests in other forms, one of them being the strongly-held belief that only the Malays genuinely care about and are willing to safeguard the well-being of all other Malays. "Malays Will Suffer If UMNO Weakens" (Berita Harian, 1965) expresses this sentiment in an elegiac fashion, declaring that no other race would come to the rescue of Malays if the Malay race were to fall into decay. "Ghaffar Baba Calls for Malays to Unite Within UMNO" (Berita Harian, 1968) reports on politician and future Deputy Prime Minister Ghaffar Baba's strongly-worded plea for Malay solidarity, in which he argues that no one would despair if the Malays refused to stand up for and protect their own people. Each instance of racialized discourse serves to structure racial membership rigorously so as to reinforce wounded Malay identity and its isolation from other racial groups.

This self-imposed seclusion of Malays can be traced to the distinctive anxiety felt around being dispossessed of opportunities and displaced by non-Malays in their own land. Throughout his book, Mahathir uses terms such as influx, flood, and onslaught to describe British-supported immigration and the subsequent displacement and retreat of the Malays (1970: 39, 52-53). (The indentured labor system as described by Syed Hussein Alatas barely appears in *The Malay Dilemma* and *Berita Harian*; the prevailing narrative around population inflows instead centers on what they perceived happened in the country *after* these ‘outsiders’ arrived: nonnative economic domination.) Mahathir once more resorts to comfortable essentialist descriptions of the non-Malays, specifically the Chinese. According to his analysis, the preoccupation of the Chinese with “making as much money as they could in as short a time as possible” altered the landscape and “character” of towns all over the country as “the small Malay shops gave way to rows of Chinese shops;” and that “whatever the Malays could do, the Chinese could do better and more cheaply...destroy(ing) the self-reliance of the Malays in craftsmanship, skilled work, and business” (1970: 39-41). Due to the powerful combination of heredity and history, Mahathir argues that the Malays “have become the have-nots in their own land” (1970: 194). While he acknowledges that the country’s present prosperity as a young nation relied to some degree on the Chinese “stranglehold” on the economy, he asks whether this growth should come at the expense of the Malays (1970: 57). Instead, Mahathir proposes that the Malays “should try to get at some of the riches that this country boasts of, even if blurs the economic picture of Malaysia a little” (1970: 83). Once again, the idea that only some can gain while others must sacrifice crops up within an arguably simplified picture of the Malaysian political economy up to that point.

The politics of citizenship in response to continuous demographic shifts, along with the enduring perception that the Malays were losing out, revealed itself in numerous pieces over the

years. “UMNO Frets About Dwindling Malay Voters” (*Berita Harian*, 1964) and “Malay Ministers Aren’t Defending Their People, PAS leader claims” (*Berita Harian*, 1969) both spotlight the discontent with the increasing number of non-Malay voters in voter registries at the state and national level. With the number of non-Malay voters supposedly beginning to exceed the number of Malay voters, the latter article claims that the Malays would be even more threatened and live in worse conditions than the Native Americans in the United States if current Malay leaders continue to loosen the criteria for citizenship so carelessly. “Malays Will Suffer” (*Berita Harian*, 1965) goes so far as to credit the UMNO party with allowing foreign races to live in the country, and to demand more gratitude and appreciation from them since the Malays were the ones who had allowed and were allowing them to make a living in Malaysia. Important non-Malay figures also take up this viewpoint, as reported in *Berita Harian*. “MIC Chief: Chinese and Indians Should Be Grateful” (*Berita Harian*, 1965) details the remarks made by V.T. Sambanthan, independence leader and the president of the Malaysian Indian Congress (also part of the ruling government coalition). In a speech to his constituents, Sambanthan supports the Malay claim to native status in the country as legitimized by world history and affirms the need for gratitude from the Indian and Chinese populations from the Malays.

Mahathir expands on this particular philosophy in *The Malay Dilemma*, arguing that UMNO or no UMNO, the Malays represent the exclusive guardian of citizenship in the country, and that their consent to the conferral of citizenship is conditional (1970: 161). He grounds the Malay community’s right to and ownership of the land in political history and the notion of true belonging to a nation-state. As long as an individual’s “racial origin is identifiable” or if they belong to any other race other than that which is “truly identified with a given country,” Mahathir argues, they cannot be considered indigenous and no “mere claim of loyalty or

belonging” can justify citizenship (1970: 169–170). If an Indian were to be expelled from the country, for example, “the Indian can settle down in India and be an Indian whilst the Malay cannot” (1970: 169). (Observe how the conversation around race blends seamlessly into what could otherwise be recognized as ethnicity, and how Mahathir specifically fixes ethnicity – and hence, race – into a rigid identity instead of one that can be renegotiated.) Furthermore, he explains that citizenship “can only be conferred when the original people feel that an immigrant has demonstrated loyalty and has truly identified himself with the definitive people” (1970: 187). The ease with which any marker of one’s outsider status (race, ethnicity, or both) could agitate Malay leaders as well as the popular press reveals yet another strain of Malay anxiety – this time around feeling alienated in one’s own homeland – and the desire to act as the ultimate enforcer of legal, political, and social acceptance. It is also noteworthy that Mahathir, whose father was of Malay and Indian descent, opted for such strict criteria for determining who had the unalienable right to call the country their own.

The gatekeeping present in this discourse denies any prospect of cultural pluralism, and Mahathir implies that it might even be best for immigrants to “forget their ancestry” and adopt “the characteristics and distinctive language and culture of the larger definitive race of the country concerned” (1970: 170). Such stringent checks on practices of culture and belonging also appear in the press. “Mix with the Malays” (Berita Harian, 1963) covers a Chinese state leader addressing a group of Chinese students and teachers encouraging them and other non-Malays to not only mingle and socialize with Malays but also speak Malay daily in order to improve racial relations. “Forget Your Native Country” (Berita Harian, 1968) adopts a brusquer tone, reporting that the sultan of the state of Perak had urged residents not to be preoccupied with the country they came from or their race/people (*bangsa*) in order that everyone can work with one another

as part of a single collective. One can safely assume the sultan was addressing the non-Malay population, given his choice of language that not-so-subtly calls attention to and reinforces the outside status of non-Malays, even as he enjoins them to relinquish the facets of their identity that situates them on the outside in the first place. Mahathir provides a historical explanation for weak racial ties: seeing that British policy had facilitated mass immigration and racial segregation, the Chinese and Indians had not been able to undertake any meaningful process of assimilation, which prevented them from understanding much about “Malay behaviour and characteristics, and nothing at all about how to handle them” (1970: 154). The burden of racial integration, the popular media maintains, lies with the non-Malay immigrants, even if it means inconvenience, discomfort, or even an erasure of identity.

While language and cultural practices make up a meaningful element of this burden, the key demand of the Malay community as related through mass media lay in economics – specifically a fairer chance at making a comfortable living in their own land compared to their seemingly well-to-do neighbors. After all, the Malay dilemma Mahathir devotes himself to describing in his book is “whether (the Malays) should stop trying to help themselves in order that they should be proud to be the poor citizens of a prosperous country or whether they should try to get at some of the riches that this country boasts of, even if it blurs the economic picture of Malaysia a little” (1970: 83). Malay collective awareness of economic inequality as structured by race also materialized regularly in the press. “If We Remain Ignorant, We Will Fall Behind” (Berita Harian, 1964) suggests that if the Malays do not realize how far they have been eclipsed by the other races in the economic arena, they will soon become the ‘tail’ of the country’s economic machine while the other races will act as its ‘head.’ “No Malay Millionaire Yet” (Berita Harian, 1964) suggests that the fact that a Malay individual had yet to achieve millionaire



status reveals the extent to which the Malays are behind. These articles and others of that ilk formulate an understanding of economic strength that exists relative to the position of others, underscoring the Malay angst over being able to secure the benefits they see accruing to non-Malays.

Having accepted non-Malay economic domination as status quo (due to heredity, history, or both), writers and leaders represented in Malay media developed a communal ethos for reclaiming economic control. “The Malays Will Not Disappear From the Earth” (Berita Harian, 1962) asserts that a people can only be proud as a people when they occupy a position of economic strength, which acts as the foundation of their power. “A People’s Strength is in Their Wealth” (Berita Harian, 1962) covers a well-known Malay political and religious figure calling on Malays not to simply boast about how the land is theirs and how their rights are inviolable when they are still an impoverished people. The leader then echoes the previous article, warning his audience that if a population does not own property or have their own wealth, then the people have no effective means of protection. Postcolonial Malay identity still appears to have all the trappings of the country’s colonial past in that the racial discourse places the self-worth of the entire racial community in its economic valuation.

Several pieces draw attention to how sustained control of the economy by non-Malays has led to discriminatory practices in business, necessitating external help from both the public and private sectors. “UMNO Branch Implores Government to Intervene” (Berita Harian 1965) reports that certain employers are treating Malay workers unfairly, discriminating them in favor of non-Malay workers. Mahathir contends that without government protection, Malay entrepreneurial spirit cannot manifest itself in the face of the strong “racialist feelings in the business community...that employ(s) people of their own race anyhow” (1970: 65). “Special

Privileges” (Berita Harian, 1962) argue that if certain rights and privileges are not accorded to the Malays, they will forever be playing economic catch-up with the non-Malays. “Chief Minister Calls on Factories to Hire Malays” (Berita Harian, 1969) addresses unemployment figures within the Malay community and points out that if the Malays do not own the factories, and if the factories owned by the foreign races do not hire any Malays, then the Malays will continue to find job-seeking a challenging task. The Chief Minister also suggests that deliberate action within the private sector would be considered a move towards fostering interracial harmony. Other articles choose to highlight this relationship between economic equality between the races and national unity; “God Will Not Help The Malay Race” (Berita Harian, 1965) insists that the Malaysian people cannot stand united until the Malays are on an equal economic footing with the other races.

Due to the supposedly zero-sum nature of the political economy established within Malay racial discourse, Malay writers and political leaders also discuss the obligation of non-Malays in achieving economic parity between the races. “Our Weak Economy” (Berita Harian, 1965) describes any non-Malay who resists Malay economic growth as inconsiderate and applying a double standard, seeing as they oppose the Malays becoming as wealthy as they are. Mahathir argues that “helping the Malays is not racialism but is actually essential for the stability of the country” and that “[t]he cup of Malay bitterness must be diluted” (1970: 57, 155). The object against which the Malays require protection is rarely defined beyond an acute sense of confiscation and loss brought on by non-Malays, and the nebulous danger of Malay anger rising once more.

A number of assumptions come into play when justifying economic assistance and protection from the government: Malay economic growth represents a cornerstone of national

unity and stability; Malay participation in the economy has long been hindered by limited resources and know-how and by the prejudiced majority-Chinese business community; and Malay economic gains can only be made in tandem with corresponding non-Malay economic losses. Accordingly, anyone who stands against Malay development may be considered racist, unpatriotic, or an inciter of communal hatred—labels that not only became a searing indictment of one's character but could also trigger national security proceedings against oneself in the wake of the traumatic race riots. The reality of Chinese economic control in the country placed this population in a unique position relative to broad Malay political demands: on the one hand, the Chinese economic elite were expected to comply and take a loss if deemed necessary; on the other – recalling Mahathir's argument about the conditionality of citizenship – if key players refused to cooperate, their continued enfranchisement could be called into question. In the Malay racial and political discourse that took place in the years leading up to the riots and the eventual passing of the 1971 affirmative action policy, Malay economic advancement was seen as an urgent matter of national interest demanding non-Malay acquiescence and extensive state intervention. If the status quo prevailed, then the underlying threat of Malay revolt could manifest itself once more in a bloody repeat of 1969.

### **The NEP: A Rational Policy Response?**

The National Operations Council (NOC) – the interim governing agency formed by the king in the period after the riots – understood that the New Economic Policy needed to fulfill both a long-term, practical need for economic restructuring as well as a short-term, symbolic need for placating Malay anxieties. As a result, the NEP functioned as a top-down, government response to and validation of the various anxieties within Malay racial discourse. This section

focuses on analyzing the foreword and the first three chapters of the Second Malaysia Plan entitled The New Development Strategy, Review of Past Progress, and Economic Balance respectively (Malaysia, 1971: xi). I found these chapters relevant due to their discussion of the government's rationale in crafting this wide-reaching economic plan. An analysis of the remaining fourteen chapters and its policy contents lies beyond the scope of this paper.

The government took pains to express its clear understanding of the racial and economic tensions felt on the part of the Malay population made evident by years of clamorous media coverage and the recent race riots. In other words, the ruling administration recognized the Malay grievances that were aired in the press and expressed in the violence of May 13. Accordingly, the policy document itself holds the governing authorities visibly accountable for the business of achieving economic balance and racial harmony. The government first frames the policy by stating that it would now focus on considering economic development in relation to social development and “the overriding need for national unity” – an otherwise unattainable goal “without greater equity and balance among Malaysia’s social and ethnic groups...in the sharing of the benefits from modernisation and economic growth” (1971: 2-3). The plan describes its role in a blanket nationalist fashion: “Our people of all races and all social groups should therefore regard the Second Malaysia Plan as a great opportunity to participate in the whole process of social change and nation-building” (1971: vi).

While the policymakers admit that unity cannot be attained by economics alone, they insist that “the eradication of poverty and the restructuring of the society and economy are *necessary conditions* for national unity” (1971: 4, emphasis added). All related efforts would be channeled toward building a future where “within one generation Malays and other indigenous people can be full partners in the economic life of the nation” (1971: 6). In a review of the

progress made during the previous decade, the policy admits that “[d]espite the significant progress made in improving the economic well-being of the have-nots, the problem of economic imbalance remained” (1971: 18). The Malays might have been getting a raw deal first from the British and then the Chinese, but the policy assures them that they would now be positioned at the center of government efforts.

The document also drives home the necessity of significant and sustained state intervention – a “significant departure from past practice” – in commerce, industry, and other domains in order to fulfill the policy’s goals of establishing a vibrant Malay commercial and industrial community (1971: 7). Such an explicit demonstration of deliberate government efforts in the service of the Malays responds to the amorphous yet widespread demands for state assistance and protection on behalf of the Malays. Whether the reader believes in a version of the lazy native myth or that the Malay is too accommodating by nature and keeps making too many concessions to others, or that the issue truly lies with hegemonic non-Malay interests, the NEP can only be accused of coming down on the side of the common good—in this case, national unity. As Tun Abdul Razak writes in the foreword, “The Plan must succeed as it is vital to our survival as a progressive, happy, and united nation” (1971: vi). In essence, the NEP is set forth as a solution of paramount importance for everyone to help the government in seeing through, lest the populace itself desires regression, strife, and discord born of unappeased Malay wrath.

Consequently, the policy presses non-Malays to assent to all measures deemed necessary to realize the aspiration of economic parity between races, applying pressure on them to work together toward the virtuous goal of racial harmony, to avoid the risk of civil strife, and to comply with government regulations. The government drives home this point by declaring that a united people must practice “loyalty and dedication to the nation” (a loyalty that “shall override

all other loyalties”); and that the policy would facilitate “the emergence of a new breed of Malaysians, living and working in unity to serve the nation with unswerving loyalty” (1971: vi, 3). By connecting compliance with the policy with demonstrating loyalty to the nation, the government echoes Mahathir’s discussion on citizenship existing as a right that can only be granted to someone once they have showed loyalty to the ‘native’ people of a land.

The policy acknowledges that non-Malay cooperation represents a significant factor in determining the policy outcomes, admitting that its success in implementing the NEP “will depend on collaboration with and strong support from the private sector” (1971: 10). The government also establishes an expectation for a “socially responsible private sector” to cooperate, especially “as the content and rationale of the goal of economic balance becomes generally appreciated” (1971: 48). Therefore, the government guarantees that it will give considerable attention “to informing the public as to the nature of the balances sought and to the advantages to all communities that flow from the achievement of such balance” (1971: 48).

However, the NEP takes care to manage potential feelings of displeasure from non-Malay communities by reassuring them that this restructuring strategy will work “in an ever-expanding economy in which the growing volume of goods and services is enjoyed by all groups in the Malaysian society in such a manner that *there is no feeling of deprivation by any group*” (1971: 43, emphasis added). In this way, one could argue that the government is refusing to support the narrative of the zero-sum economy in which Malaysians have to resort to racial infighting to gain a bigger slice of the economic pie; instead, the government is guaranteeing that the pie itself will grow bigger and that “no one will experience any loss or feel any sense of deprivation of his rights, privileges, income, job, or opportunity” (1971: vi). Of course, such a promise of sustained and rapid economic growth that would minimize grievances from across the racial spectrum is a

lofty one for any government to make, but the importance of demonstrating this clear commitment is crucial to fostering interracial peace as quickly as possible.

In addition to underscoring the dearth of Malays in commerce and industry, the NEP focuses on rurality and occupational representation as a significant differentiating factor between Malays and non-Malays. The policy reports that “development in rural areas still lags significantly behind that in urban areas (1971: 44),” with ‘rural’ alluding to the Malays as described here:

“The Plan is designed to benefit those Malaysians whose incomes are below the national average, since average incomes in rural areas are substantially below those in the big towns. Also, as the population of the rural areas is predominantly Malay and indigenous, these development programmes are a most strategic part of the objective of balancing the participation of Malaysia’s several races in modern sector activities. Thus the Second Malaysia Plan’s emphasis on rural development contributes to balanced development in all its dimensions.” (1971: 44)

As the government frequently describes the relative deficit in economic prosperity experienced by the Malays to provide a valid basis for affirmative action (1971: 3, 18, 36, 39), it decides against injecting notes of nuance into its descriptions of non-Malays. This lends force to a racial binary in which the Malays are repeatedly contrasted with the vague population of ‘non-Malays,’ categories that eliminate the need for intragroup distinctions along geographic or class lines. Economic imbalances are only considered “especially significant when the Malays and other indigenous people are compared with the non-Malays” (1971: 36). Intentionally or not, the policy and the ideology behind it serve to further lodge the Malaysian subject’s economic position in their identity – i.e. economics *as* identity – a problematic process of association rooted in colonial systems that is only reified when the government acts as the arbiter of racial and economic outcomes. In other words, the present government chose to cement colonial

constructions of racial differences into the nation's legal institution in order to address its Malay constituents and prove its devoted involvement in guaranteeing their success. In this way, the NEP utilizes ambiguous yet symbolic language when it comes to identifying and validating the relational aspect of Malay anxiety. Given these circumstances and the residual distress from the race riots during the period of policy formulation, the sheer power of a governmental unit legitimizing identity-based concerns in the name of correcting economics allowed participants in Malay racial discourse to integrate the New Economic Policy into Malay identity, treating the NEP as the legal articulation of their anxieties.

## **Conclusion**

The Malay racial discourse that permeated the news media and popular political press during the decade leading up to the May 13 riots and the New Economic Policy reveals strong racial undercurrents as well as the various strands of anxiety and alienation embedded in the narrative of Malay identity and its place in Malaysia. The recent slew of journalistic pieces from Malaysian news platforms including *Malaysiakini* and *The Star* marking the fiftieth anniversary of the clashes demonstrates that the suffering experienced by Malaysians of all creeds during the rioting and during the time since has yet to be properly exposed and meaningfully recognized on a national level. However, mainstream Malay-language media outlets have yet to even take up the question of interracial reconciliation in the aftermath of the bloody conflict. In November 2018, president of Malay rights group *Jaringan Melayu Malaysia* declared he would welcome another episode of bloodshed if it meant sending a message to a major political party in the present ruling coalition that he perceived to be infringing on Malay rights (Berita Harian, 2018). The government's authority in grounding the racially-charged underpinnings of an identity claim in economics and national harmony reinforced the intricate, relational construction of Malay



identity to non-Malay identity. The New Economic Policy fit into the existing Malay cultural narrative as an identity statement of who mattered and who belonged, becoming the next instrument of storytelling about Malay identity and rights. As long as participants in Malay racial and political discourse continue to acknowledge the riots' roots exclusively in the income gap and the urban-rural divide without paying attention to the current of racial opinion during the policy's conception, the NEP will remain as an untouchable policy pursued in the name of sensible economics and good governance in Malay political consciousness.

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