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# Introduction

## Malaysia's Future is Redeemed

I co-authored a decade ago a book called *March 8: Eclipsing May 13*. What I was trying to do when I chose that title back in 2008 was to draw public attention to the centrality of history in understanding the confounding and exciting events that make up Malaysian politics. The twelfth general election that took place on 8 March 2008 was indeed a milestone that Malaysians will find hard to forget. However, that day simply signalled a shifting to a higher gear in a process that began many years ago, stretching back to 13 May 1969 and beyond. Its significance goes beyond its proximate spatial and tidal context.

That process continued after 2008 in fits and starts and finally came to fulfilment in the fourteenth general election that was held on 9 May 2018. That day, the Barisan Nasional government was toppled as the electorate chose with a resounding majority to end its six-decade-long period in power. As in all cases when a change in government had been waiting for too long, the change left many speechless and astounded. Much of how they had strategised their lives and how they thought in order to survive under that government became irrelevant overnight. Such is what a revolution feels like, even peaceful ones like the one that happened in Malaysia that day.

A spontaneous process of public re-education can now be expected to begin, and it will include much soul-searching and much throwing away of old ideas, old hates, old loves and old orientations.

To realise the full significance of what has come to pass, Malaysians will need to hit their history books. Sadly, not many history books about Malaysia exist which manage to capture at sufficient depth the many underlying dynamics contesting to direct the strange events that the country's political history is infamous for. Some active and

analytical reading and researching is required now by each Malaysian interested in his or her own role in the present process of rebuilding the country.

Success for democracy in Malaysia is practically a prerequisite if countries in the region are to have any faith at all in a system where the people are free to choose and change their government. Born over six decades ago and equipped with much of the requirements for a functioning democracy, Malaya/Malaysia nevertheless quickly fell into the trap of identity politics and into a mindset of making do, getting by, biting the bullet, swallowing personal dignity and not hoping for too much. In the long run, such a path allowed for the abuse of power to grow. Luckily it was not allowed to grow forever and resistance to it became real enough to end it.

### ***Accepting Diversity as an Asset***

The multiculturalism that had always been the basis for Malaysia's economic and cultural strength was officially branded after 1969 as an intrinsic problem standing in the way of national harmony. Diversity was a curse, it was decided, and high psychological and conceptual walls began to be raised between the major ethnic groups. Political power became the prerogative of the majority group, or so it seemed. The truth was, political power stayed with the party that insisted by means fair and foul that it was the only proper representative of the Malays. For all Malaysians, other groups were to be considered an aberration they had to live with, not an asset to employ or enjoy.

A revision of sorts to the ideology of Malay-centric nationalism came with the introduction of Vision 2020 and Bangsa Malaysia by then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in the early 1990s. Fuelled by the prospect of unlimited economic growth, Malaysians were able to imagine that a gradual assimilation in identity and in culture was possible and should be preferred. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–98 put a stop to that.

I returned to the region in 2004, about six months after Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad retired, and Abdullah Badawi had just been given a record-strong mandate in the 2004 general election to reform the country. Based then at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS, now ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute), I was lucky enough to be able to

study what everyone considered 'The Post-Mahathir Period' just when it was starting. Apart from publishing several books on the transitional 2008–18 period, I managed to put together five compilations of my own analyses of Malaysia's new era as it unfolded. These were *Era of Transition: Malaysia after Mahathir* (ISEAS, 2006); *Lost in Transition: Malaysia under Abdullah* (ISEAS & SIRD, 2008); *Arrested Reform: The Undoing of Abdullah Badawi* (REFSA, 2009); *Between UMNO and a Hard Place: The Najib Razak Era Begins* (ISEAS & REFSA, 2010); and *Done Making Do: 1Party Rule Ends in Malaysia* (ISEAS & Genta Media, 2013).

What we scholars and political analysts did not realise then was that we were in fact as much in a 'Pre-Mahathir Period' as we were in a 'Post-Mahathir Period'. My dear friend Barry Wain, who wrote the wonderfully researched biography on Mahathir, titled *Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times* (Palgrave, 2009), never realised when he passed away several years ago that he would be needed to write part two on this incredibly resilient leader, who now returns to lead Malaysia at the age of 92. Quaintly, when Mahathir retired at the age of 78 in 2003, he was already the oldest prime minister Malaysia had ever had.

### **Not a Time for Cynics**

This present compilation is therefore my seventh, and in a personally very satisfactory way, it rounds off the whole period between the first Mahathir period and the second Mahathir period. The transition away from UMNO's draconian rule that was constructed by Mahathir and abused by Najib finally happened. The system was so well developed against dismantlement that only with Mahathir at the helm of the opposition could the change actually be realised.

But it has now happened. And a new Mahathir era however short it may be, due to his advanced age, has begun.

We are all doomed to freedom, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre famously said in clarification of his brand of existentialism. He suggests that freedom being a scary state to be in, we live our lives as if we are fettered even though we are not.

Whatever the case may be with Sartre's rather extreme claim, sensing freedom after a long period of cautious living under a regime

that is racist in character and divisive in purpose heightens anxiety and uncertainty. The danger now lies in Malaysians treasuring their old habits, in their wish to keep old ways of relating to other Malaysians alive; or in them demanding that others change faster than they themselves are willing to change.

But then, nobody said it would be easy to topple a corrupt government. That has now been done and once done it appears like something that was inevitable. Developing new thoughts, strategies and habits to suit the free future that we wish for our children will not be a walk in the park.

A government falling is an event, however dramatic it may be, but building a country and a society that one can be proud of is a process and the work starts immediately in the individual's mind and heart. For example, cynicism has become a definite attitude among many Malaysians. Understandable though this may be, given how much disappointment several generations of Malaysians have had to endure, the future is not for cynics to build. It is built by people who dare to dream and hope, who are bold enough to forgive if not forget.

This collection of articles stretches back five years and I have chosen to include those that I feel have extra relevance now that a new age has begun for Malaysia. The story stretches over the second term of Najib Razak's administration from 2013 to 2018, but what these articles hope to highlight in response to the times are issues of nation-building and human morality relevant to the Malaysian situation today and in the future.