

Some Aspects of Political Ideology in Malaysia

FRED R. VON DER MEHDEN

University of Wisconsin

The former Federation of Malaya was once described by an Indonesian observer as "ideologically backward." Compared to Indonesia with its welter of ideological slogans such as USDEK, MANIPOL, NASAKOM, *et al.*, present-day Malaysia appears to be at least quantitatively lacking. Yet the ideological pattern of Malaysian politics presents two comparatively rare attributes, its plural nature and the pragmatic content of the statements made by the country's leaders. Few Afro-Asian governments have tolerated rival organizations to proclaim and spread their ideologies, preferring to indoctrinate the people with the dogma of the party or leader. This single program has also normally been presented in ideological terms in an effort to emotionalize goals and focus mass attention. Malaysia's pattern of ideology contradict both of these norms.

Six major political parties currently dominate the scene and present political programs: the Alliance, the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, the People's Progressive Party, the Socialist Front, the People's Action Party and the Barisan Socialis, the last two based in Singapore. The ruling Alliance, formed in 1951 and led by Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman, is Malay dominated but composed of three communal sections; the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). The party's leadership is drawn from all three communities, although in the last elections in 1959 UMNO members led the

Alliance electoral list with 69 candidates while the MCA received 32 and the MIC 3. Other political parties in the pre-Malaysian Federation have been numerically smaller and geographically limited. The almost entirely Malay-Moslem Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP) has drawn its strength primarily from the Malay-populated states of Kelantan and Trengganu; the Indian-Chinese led people's Progressive Party gains its support mainly from the Chinese of the state of Perak; while the Socialist Front is concentrated in urban centers on the west coast, i.e., Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang. After the 1959 elections, seats in Parliament were divided among the Alliance, 73; PMIP, 14; Socialist Front and PPP, 13; and independents, 3. In Singapore the dominant party has been the People's Action Party (PAP) which has participated in that city's politics since 1955 and, since 1959, has controlled its administration under Lee Kuan Yew. A break-away group of legislative members of the PAP left the party in 1961 and formed the radical left-wing Barisan Socialist party, an organization accused of Communist leanings. In 1963 elections the PAP solidified its hold on Singapore politics.

Probably all of these Malaysian political organizations would like to dominate the scene, sans opposition, but at present that nation houses a pluralistic pattern of parties and programs. In analyzing these party programs it is possible to delineate at least three separate areas of difference with respect to ideology: (1) acceptance of ideology as an article of faith; (2) the economic system best suited for Malaysia; and (3) the defense of communal interests. These issues cause tensions and divisions both within the parties and between them, but in a paper of this length it is not possible to delve too deeply into internecine strife.

1. The place of ideology: Political parties in Malaysia differ among themselves initially in the extent to which they are willing to term themselves ideologically oriented. Four organizations, three socialist and one Moslem, publicly proclaim themselves parties of ideology. The Socialist Front, Barisan Socialist and People's Action Party may differ in their interpretations of socialism, but they would each accept for their own party the statement of the Socialist Front that it is "bound together by an ideology, a Socialist ideology." They may not, however, agree

with the Front that "the people will vote for ideology rather than personality."¹ Nor has there been a well-considered systemization of Marxist dogma among all sections of the socialists, although this would be almost universally denied.

The Pan-Malayan Islamic Party on its part states that it combines a material and spiritual "ideology" under the banner of Islam, steering a course free from "conflicting ideologies of Western Democracy and Communism."² The PMIP has often been rather vague in defining the relation of Islamic principles to state programs, but it has normally upheld traditional Moslem books and laws as its precepts. Political opponents have accused party leaders of an unwillingness to enter into the twentieth century or to make the compromises necessary to synthesize Islam with modern life. In the past the PMIP has been willing to sacrifice material benefits for Islamic principles such as its refusal in Kelantan to collect revenue from liquor and pawn shops on religious grounds, in spite of heavy state deficits.

While these parties proudly proclaim support of their respective ideologies, the ruling Alliance Party presents a program of noncommunalism and the establishment of a property-owning capitalist system while at the same time denying its close attachment to any "ideology." In the words of one Alliance senator, "The Alliance Party, fortunately, has not tied itself up too much with ideology. To do so would have meant becoming dogmatic. Dogmatism is not good. Often dogmatism sacrifices pragmatism (practicalism)."³ It is difficult to imagine a statement of this sort from leaders of neighboring Indonesia. What the Alliance does not appear to be prepared to admit fully is that the politics of compromise and political pluralism is an ideology in itself. However, conflicts with self-proclaimed ideological parties such as the PMIP and Socialist Front have made the word "ideology" a somewhat subversive term to the Alliance. Between these two publicly expressed extremes is the People's Progressive Party which centers its program on the demands of its urban non-Malay members without reference to any formal ideology and which, in fact, rejects what it calls "foreign ideologies."

2. The economic system: The aforementioned parties also differ in the content of their programs. The economic spectrum

ranges from the socialist parties on the left to the Alliance on the right. The three socialist parties agree on socialism as the foundation of their ideologies, publicly denying affiliation to Marxist-Leninist tenets such as dictatorship of the proletariat and revolution. All tend to use Marxist semantics in one form or another although there are marked differences within the socialist movement on some questions of doctrine as well as on the methods of achieving goals. With relation to socialist theory there are variations such as the support of Marhaenism (a more pragmatic socialism fit to the country and situation)⁴ by a section of the Socialist Front and differences between the Barisan Socialist and most of the rest of the socialist movement on the flexibility of Marxism and the willingness to cooperate with capitalism. As well, the two sections of the Front differ on the roles to be given workers and peasants. The deepest rift has been between the PAP and the more left-wing Barisan Socialist in Singapore. Dogmatic Marxism plays a much larger role in Barisan Socialist ideological pronouncement and the party sounds like the People's Action Party did in its more radical moments before it attained a position of responsibility in Singapore. The party is less moderate than the PAP on a variety of issues connected with decisions necessary for a socialist party to rule an entrepot port. Specific differences have arisen over the continued presence of British troops (described as accommodation to imperialism) and PAP willingness to cooperate with capitalism (more accommodation). Perhaps an analogy can be made between the Barisan and the PMIP, both parties seeing no need to compromise their respective dogmas, while on the other hand the PAP and Alliance have sought a synthesis of dogmas with economic, social and political realities.

The PPP, PMIP and some smaller parties,⁵ while denying scientific socialism, mouth vague slogans supporting social welfare and the elimination of economic oppression in the nation. The PMIP has often spoken in indistinct terms of Islamic socialism, nationalization and the evils of capitalism, but neither the PPP nor the PMIP has set forth a systematic ideological program with regard to the economy. The PMIP has been more articulate in this matter but has not necessarily displayed greater clarity.

In an election statement a spokesman declared that "Nobody can deny that the really effective economic justice is the main basis of Islamic economy. Moreover, Islam preaches the wide extension of economy and brings forth the advancement of all people."⁶ Yet in another statement, while attacking liberal capitalism as against the socialism of the people, the party spokesman quoted a Koranic verse reading, "Islam stands for freedom and humanity and is against compulsion in whatever form."⁷ Given the Chinese businessman composition of the PPP and the Islamic teacher leadership of the PMIP, it is difficult to imagine any wholehearted acceptance of Marxist principles by either party.

On the right, the Alliance Party, composed as it is of the majority of the economic elite of the country, has described itself as a frankly capitalist party which seeks to spread that system through the establishment of a property-owning citizenry. At the same time, its leadership has attempted to present the image of a forward looking, pragmatic, social-development minded capitalism without strong ties to any one foreign ideology. Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman has gone so far as to state that if the Communists had something worth borrowing he would do so and would, in fact, not restrict himself to any system.⁸ The brunt of Alliance statements, however, has centered far more on attacks on nationalization and the evils of communism and socialism. On the positive side, one of the best explanations of Alliance economic policy was made by the Minister of Finance, Tan Siew Sin, in 1963 when he declared:

...our economic objective is to build and to create a property-owning democracy. No, this is not a slogan... we feel we can deliver the goods, not by levelling down as the Socialists always want to do but by levelling up... and we also believe that one of the best ways to reach this goal is to have a liberal financial and economic policy... I have told our American friends, I have told our British friends that our financial and economic policies are more liberal even than that of the United States of America, which is the champion and the great protagonist of free enterprise.⁹

3. Communalism: The third facet of ideology publicly debated in Malaysia is the place of religion and race in the political life of the country. The socialist parties vigorously propound

secularist and noncommunal programs. They vary on the extent to which they accept the special position presently held by the Malay Moslems, but their ultimate public goal is racial and religious equality. At the same time, there is a general acceptance of Islam as the religion of the majority of the country, if it does not inhibit other religions or beliefs. For example, the Declaration of the Barisan Socialis in 1961 stated:

The Barisan Socialis is the party of the working people, irrespective of whether they are working by hand or by brain, and irrespective of their skin or their religion. . . . We respect the religions of our people, in particular the teaching and traditions of Islam.

On the other extreme the PMIP proclaims the need for an Islamic state, special Malay rights and the compulsory regulation of Moslems according to the laws of Islam. In the state of Kelantan, which it controls, a variety of sumptuary laws have been passed while at the national level the PMIP has upheld a highly traditional interpretation of Islam. Thus PMIP leaders or public servants have supported stronger laws penalizing Moslems for drinking intoxicating liquors, non-payment of Zakat (the Tithe), close proximity between the sexes (Khalwat) and laxness in Friday religious observances. At the same time they have called for the elimination of Western dancing, the closing of all Government offices and private businesses on Fridays, and an expansion of Malay and religious education. On the racial issue the party has been the most aggressive supporter of Malay nationalism. However, most parties desire to extend their power and at times the PMIP has attempted to tone down the communal nature of its ideology by disclaiming communalism or stating that its support of Islam and the Malay was not to the detriment of other communities. In spite of these retractions, Malay-Moslem communal for we know what we are doing is right and this is leader has equated the Malay to the "red Indians" in America and has predicted a similar fate if the Malays do not act to protect their interests. Another officer of the party several years ago declared, "We are not worried if other parties brand us as being communal for we know what we are doing is right and this is the only way to save the Malay race."¹⁰ It should be noted that

efforts to gain wider support are not a PMIP monopoly and even the Socialist Front once published a document, described by a leader as "forward looking" which proclaimed, "Islam is Socialism and Socialism is Islam."¹¹

The PPP on its part uses the pretext of noncommunalism to foster non-Malay and particularly Chinese rights over the special rights now granted to Malays. By stressing a program of "equality" and attacking "racialists" (read Alliance proponents of Malay rights) the People's Progressive Party can appear ideologically committed to tolerance while at the same time supporting Chinese and Indian communal demands against the Malay-dominated Alliance. Thus, in the words of one of its leaders, D. R. Seenivasagan, "It is manifestly unjust for the majority community to reserve for itself special rights and privileges as against the minority."¹²

The Alliance finds itself in a somewhat delicate ideological position regarding communalism. It must publicly juggle support for Malay special rights, the communal demands of the Chinese, Indian and Malay sections which compose the Alliance Party and a broad anti-communalist program which is necessary to maintain peace and unity within the party and nation. The result of these cross-pressures has been more an accommodation of demands rather than a conscious solution. The central leadership forcefully advocates noncommunalism and the separation of race and religion from national politics, explaining this on both pragmatic and humanistic grounds. For example, in rebuttal to PMIP attacks Rahman once stated that "unless we are prepared to drown every non-Malay, we can never think of an Islamic administration."¹³ Meanwhile, the local communal divisions and particularly Malay backbenchers publicly express communal demands. At times these groups and individuals sound like the PMIP, particularly when faced with political opposition from the Islamic nationalist candidates of the latter. Local demands have called for an end to recognition of Israel, Friday as a national holiday, greater use of the Malay language, etc. Thus, the Alliance actually speaks with many voices, the dominant national one noncommunal while the local ones proclaim less tolerant views.

Malaysia consists then of three ideological cores. The domi-

nant one, the Alliance, is issue oriented, pragmatic, capitalist and communally based but nationally noncommunal in ideology. The socialist core, while disagreeing within itself on Marxist doctrine, upholds the banners of ideology, state regulation of the economy, and noncommunalism. The third core is composed of the PPP, PMIP and to a certain extent minor parties such as Party Negara and the United Democratic Party. Although they differ markedly, they are vague in their ideological programs, communally based and non-Marxist but generally anti-capitalist in outlook. Both the PPP and PMIP have attempted to cloud over their communalism but have always returned to their racial or communal base.

We can now ask the question, "Why does Malaysia have this plural ideological pattern?" Much of what follows is speculation, but it appears to me worth consideration.

1. Malaysia appears to uphold one of Lipset's hypotheses that "Federalism increases the opportunity for multiple sources of cleavage by adding regional interests and values to others which crosscut the social structure."¹⁴ To this he adds that federalism provides resistance to centralized power. The demography of Malaysia is such that except for the East Coast, federal lines cut across the communal structure, and where they do they may increase cleavages along noncommunal lines. As well, local power bases have been established by the PMIP in Kelantan, the socialists in places such as Singapore and Penang, and the PPP in Perak.

RACIAL BREAKDOWN OF ELECTORATE FOR PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, 1959*

State	Chinese	Malays	Indians	Others	Total
Penang	105,570	62,043	16,511	—	184,124
Malacca	43,471**	50,512	—	—	93,783
Perak	199,765	201,115	50,560	—	451,440
Selangor	133,291	94,353	43,755	—	271,399
Negeri Sembilan	44,300	55,800	13,196	—	113,296
Pahang	32,690	65,445	5,452	—	103,587
Johore	124,003	155,669	11,844	—	291,576
Kedah	56,938	171,492	16,138	2,423	246,991
Kelantan	12,695	224,768	1,491	1,560	240,512
Trengganu	6,197	108,136	511	54	114,898
Perlis	5,307	27,916	—	—	33,223

* Mimeographed paper

** Includes other races

2. The communal composition of Malaysia also works for political pluralism. If the minorities were small, as they are in Ceylon, Burma or Kenya (whites and Indians), then the majority could dominate them and find in communalism a useful aggregative tool. In Malaysia the Chinese are too numerous to oppress or destroy and this has necessitated the politics of compromise which in turn has provided the environment for pluralism. Parties desiring national distribution have found it particularly necessary to follow the politics of compromise. In the words of one Alliance leader, "Political realism demands that any party which aims to be a really national one in the context of today must be able to unite and draw wide support from the three major communities in the country. It is this acid test which will determine the fate of any political party."¹⁵

3. Finally, one-party systems or oligarchic rule are in the majority in Afro-Asia. Where a two- or multiple-party system was initially formed it usually collapsed and the military or a one-party system took its place (Burma, Ghana, Pakistan). In these cases one of two factors were normally present: either the government was unable to provide sufficient economic and social development, or it could not successfully counter internal or external military threats. Malaysia has both the highest standard of living on the mainland and the ability to withstand internal threats, as evidenced by the Communist Emergency.

The key question for the future is "Can this plural ideological pattern in Malaysia withstand a severe economic crisis or continued military measures by its neighbors?"

NOTES

1. *Malay Mail*, July 23, 1959.

2. *Radio Malaya Press Statement*, Director of Information, 7/59/181.

3. *Malay Mail*, August 29, 1960.

4. The Party Rakyat describes Marhaenism as "socialism which is suitable with climatic conditions of this country... it is not Utopian nor scientific socialism but practical socialism" (Typed summary of the Presidential address of Boesteman at Party Rakyat's Sixth Congress at Johore Baru).

5. Dr. Lim of the United Democratic Party has stated, "We are not a

party with a socialist trend. Rather we are a party with a distinct socialist problem" (*Malay Mail*, April 26, 1962).

6. *Radio Malaya Press Statement*, PMIP Party Broadcast, Director of Information, 8/59/75.

7. *Ibid.*, 7/59/181.

8. UMNO, 15th General Assembly UMNO, Kuala Lumpur, August 23, 1962, mimeo.

9. *Siaran Akhbar*, Pen. 3/63/302.

10. *Malay Mail*, December 27, 1955.

11. *Straits Times*, April 8, 1961.

12. *Radio Malaya Press Statement*, Director of Information, 8/59/4.

13. *Straits Times*, May 1, 1959.

14. Seymour Lipset, *Political Man*, 1960.

15. *Straits Times*, April 24, 1962.