

## CHAPTER 9

### THE NEW MALAY MIDDLE CLASS AND *MELAYU BARU*

#### Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I have analysed the phenomenon of the new Malay middle class, mainly by using the quantitative data from my own survey as well as official statistics. I have shown that the new Malay middle class, though relatively affluent, is of recent origin and still in the process of formation. Mostly products of the NEP, members of the new Malay middle class – managers, professional and administrators - have appeared on the historical scene during the last three decades of Malaysia's rapid economic growth. Not a few individuals from this class have 'graduated' to become big Malay capitalists, heading a number of public-listed companies. The presence of the Malay capitalist and new middle classes has significantly impacted on the course of contemporary Malaysian history. Their presence has not only redefined the class structure, but also the agenda of modernization and transformation of Malay society, and by extension, Malaysian society. To complement the quantitative discussion of middle class formation and the character of the new Malay middle class in this study, I propose, in this chapter, to take another route to examine the phenomenon of the new Malay middle class by presenting a qualitative analysis regarding issues of the formation of this class from the viewpoint of the redefined



agenda of modernization and transformation of Malay society expressed in the concept of *Melayu Baru* (the New Malay).<sup>1</sup>

The concept of *Melayu Baru* advanced by Malaysia's Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, in his presidential address at the UMNO general assembly in November 1991 (Mahathir 1991b), has sparked off a debate among scholars, who have offered quite different, though not necessarily unrelated viewpoints. One school of thought dismisses it as a political gimmick rather than a people's movement, that it is a political construct and a phantom which has no basis in reality; another suggests that it is a move by the UMNO leadership to create and expand the Malay capitalist and new middle classes to achieve inter-ethnic parity, while a third regards it as an attempt to work out a redefinition of the Malay personality in line with the imperatives of the new age. While not necessarily disagreeing with the above viewpoints, I am adopting a slightly different position. I am arguing here that though Mahathir's *Melayu Baru* can be seen as an attempt at a typological redefinition of the Malay character and is meant to enhance the growth of the capitalist and new middle classes in order to expand the Bumiputera commercial and industrial community, the whole issue is not *solely* about the creation of these classes. Essentially, the *Melayu Baru* is a project of transformation and modernization of Malay society, currently with emphasis on the creation and expansion of the Malay capitalist and new middle classes, and the development a work culture and ethics in keeping with the demands of the work regime of a rapidly industrialising society. The project, envisioned by

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<sup>1</sup> Over different periods of Malaysian history, the agenda of modernization and transformation of Malay society has been redefined. The debate on *Melayu Baru* that has unfolded since 1991 is the newest attempt at redefinition.



early Malay nationalists and propelled by Malay nationalism, has assumed different forms and emphases during different historical periods. In the Mahathir era today, it has assumed a distinctly pro-business character because of the ideological orientation of its champion, who believes that the future of the Malay community lies in the development of Malay capitalism. In fact, Mahathir's *Melayu Baru* discourse is intended to serve as an ideological mould shaping the world view and work ethics not only of the Malay capitalist class, but also the new Malay middle class, whose emergence and expansion I have discussed in the earlier chapters.

For analytical convenience, this chapter is divided into four parts. First, an explanation of the historical context in which the concept of *Melayu Baru* emerged, especially how Mahathir problematised the Malay dilemma and the need for Malays to undergo reformation by becoming *Melayu Baru*; second, a brief analysis of the perceptions and meanings of *Melayu Baru* as understood and defined by a few Malay middle class informants I have interviewed; third, an overview of the ensuing debate in the academic discourse since Mahathir's espousal of the concept; and fourth my own views and comments on the problem.

### ***Melayu Baru: Statement of the Problem***

The concept of *Melayu Baru* was first advanced by Mahathir at a critical juncture in Malaysian history. It was espoused soon after the official ending of the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1971-1990) and the launching of the National Development Policy (NDP) (1991-2000). It also came soon after Mahathir's Vision 2020 speech made in February 1991 in which he stressed the need for the creation of a united



*Bangsa Malaysia*, or Malaysian nation. In the speech, he envisioned that Malaysia would become 'a fully developed industrial country ... in our own mould' by the year 2020, and to achieve this vision, the first and most fundamental challenge Malaysia must overcome is 'establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny' in which the various ethnic groups are 'integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one *Bangsa Malaysia* with political loyalty and dedication to the nation' (Mahathir 1991a: 2-3).

The official ending of the NEP and its replacement with the NDP and Vision 2020 indicated that the Malaysian government under Mahathir has embarked on a new development strategy. The recent policy changes -- already preceded by such measures as privatisation, deregulation and Malaysia Incorporated implemented since 1983 -- marked a strategic shift from state intervention, characteristic of the NEP era, to more private and free market-based expansion, involving selective economic liberalisation. Such changes would require Malays to transform their culture, value system and work ethics by undergoing 'reformation' to become *Melayu Baru* so that they can enhance their competitiveness in an increasingly market-driven world. It is in this context that Mahathir defines *Melayu Baru* as new Malays who 'possess a culture that is in keeping with the times, who are capable of meeting all challenges, able to compete without assistance, learned and knowledgeable, sophisticated, honest, disciplined, trustworthy and competent' (Mahathir 1991b). He also invokes Islam when he enjoins all UMNO members to regard the struggle for the emergence of twenty first century new Malays and other Bumiputera as a *jihad* (crusade), a glorious struggle to save the faith and the religion of the Malays, thus indirectly saving other Muslims as well.



Mahathir's advocacy of *Melayu Baru* came slightly more than two decades after the May 13, 1969 communal riots and the publication of his controversial book *The Malay Dilemma* in 1970, in which he attempted, among other things, to explain the cause of the May 13 incident. In the book -- considered by some as 'the definitive document of post-Merdeka, pre-NEP Malay nationalism' (Khoo 1995: 25) -- he presented what he considered the essence of the Malay dilemma, that is, though the Malays were the definitive people of Malaysia, they faced dispossession in their own land. Arguing that the Malay dilemma was multifaceted (economic, political, cultural and psychological), Mahathir was singularly pessimistic about the capacity of the Malays to compete with the non-Malays, particularly the Chinese. To quote:

"(A)lthough the Malays managed to enter the economic field, they have never been able to, and can never hope to catch up with the Chinese. Even as Independence brought the Malays increased opportunities, it has brought the Chinese even greater opportunities which have propelled them so far ahead as to make the entry of the Malays into business almost ridiculously insignificant. The Malay economic dilemma is still unsolved and seems likely to remain so. The Malays' feeling of frustration continues to deepen" (Mahathir 1970: 51).

The same view was echoed equally forcefully in a working paper Mahathir presented at a seminar in Australia in 1971. He said:

"As growth in commerce is usually by geometrical progression, the result is that no matter how the Malays tried they could never catch up with the non-



Malays. This is the problem. The Malays will feel insecure for so long as they are left behind in the mainstream of Malaysian life. The years tend to whittle down their political dominance but they seem as far as ever from achieving parity in the other field with the non-Malays. To achieve parity and real progress they are required to rid themselves of the habits and values that they, with reasons, cherish. This is not an easy process. It takes time. But time in turn works against them for no matter how they spurt forward, the other went ahead faster" (Mahathir 1971: 80).

He concluded that their inability to compete economically, coupled with the threat of weakened political power had increased the Malay 'sense of insecurity'. 'And when the Malays are insecure the nation itself cannot be secure' (Mahathir 1971: 80).

What was the root cause of Malay backwardness and their inability to compete with the non-Malays, and what was the way out? In Mahathir's view, the Malay lack of progress was due to a mix of hereditary and environmental factors, especially Malay character, as well as their culture and value system, including their code of ethics (Mahathir 1970). To overcome the dilemma, he suggested a two-pronged strategy. First, the Malay problem had to be treated as part of the Malaysian problem. Arguing that 'the Malays cannot solve their problem unless all Malaysians are willing to help solve them' (Mahathir 1971: 80), he suggested that the government must pursue 'constructive protection', given the fact that the Malays were the definitive people of Malaysia (Mahathir 1970). Second, among the Malays, there must be some kind of 'revolution'. As he put it, 'To complete the rehabilitation of the Malays there is a need for them to break away from custom or *adat* and to acquire new



ways of thinking and a new system of values. Urbanisation [of the Malays] will do this to a certain extent, but there must also be a conscious effort to destroy the old ways and replace them with new ideas and values. The Malays must be confronted with the realities of life and forced to adjust their thinking to conform with these realities' (Mahathir 1970: 113). He maintained that 'If they [the Malays] admit this, and if the need for change is realized, then there is hope; for as in psychiatry, success in isolating the root cause is in itself a part of the treatment. From then on planning a cure would be relatively simple' (Mahathir 1970: 173). These ideas, propagated three decades ago, constituted the ideological precursor to Mahathir's concept of *Melayu Baru*.

When Mahathir became Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister in 1981, some quarters were apprehensive about whether he still maintained his views espoused in *The Malay Dilemma*, and whether he would pursue the same policies he had proposed in it. Mahathir admitted that he still maintained his views, but acknowledged that certain things had changed compared to the situation in the late sixties when the book was written.<sup>2</sup> However, in May 1997, after more than fifteen years in power, Mahathir went on record saying that he had revised some views. He said that the views expressed in the book about the inability of the Malays to succeed had been proven wrong. As he put it:

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<sup>2</sup> The question was posed by the former Malaysian Opposition MP, the late Dr. Tan Chee Khoo, who asked whether Mahathir had modified his views contained in *The Malay Dilemma*. Mahathir acknowledged that since the book was written in the late sixties, certain things were only valid then. However, he said 'All the views are still held by me. But certainly some of them are still valid and where they need to be acted on, we do act.' (Quoted in Khoo 1995: 25).



*'I no longer believe what I wrote in The Malay Dilemma... The Malays are not inferior to others... in fact, we are now a model to many other races'*

(*'Dr. M: Views in The Malay Dilemma proven wrong'*, *New Straits Times*, 12 May, 1997, p. 2; italics added).

His speech at the UMNO general assembly in November 1993 summed up his pride in successful Malays: 'Today we have Malays and Bumiputera as heads of departments, scientists, actuaries, nuclear physicists, surgeons, experts in the fields of medicine and aviation, bankers and corporate leaders. In fact, some are already managers of major conglomerates with assets worth billions of ringgit and able to acquire bigger companies in the open market or participate in mergers and acquisitions which are complex and sophisticated' (Mahathir 1993). He was all the more impressed since some of them came from humble backgrounds. He was of the opinion that the success of Malays and Bumiputera in the economic field was 'extraordinary' and well beyond 'expectations' (quoted in *Utusan Malaysia*, 17 April, 1997, pp. 1-2). In short, to Mahathir, the Malay dilemma was over since it had more or less been overcome as the *Melayu Baru* he had once dreamt of have been born, thus ending the 'prehistory' of the Malays (Khoo 1995: 338).

### **The Malay Dilemma and *Melayu Baru*: Perceptions by Malay Managers**

Before reviewing the debate on *Melayu Baru* in public and academic discourses, I will present some of the perceptions of the dilemma faced by the Malays and the meaning of *Melayu Baru* as understood and defined by a number of actors -- Malay managers

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and professionals I have interviewed. Reflecting on the move by Malay professionals to enter the corporate sector -- a change critical in the formation of the Malay new middle class -- a Malay corporate figure in his early sixties, who is today chairman of a group of companies in the financial sector, said thus:

“From my experience, the transition of Malays into the private sector took place from the early 1970s. Before that, the corporate world was a mystery and alien to them, an area they were not prepared to enter. One reason was they were not really prepared to take risks. In the corporate world, you have to compete. In the government, there is job security, and you feel you are protected; in the private sector, if you don’t perform, you’ll get sacked. But, from that time [early 1970s], the corporate sector began to be attractive – mainly the salary, the perks, and also the prestige. The government also encouraged Malays to enter the corporate world. Many Malays began to respond to this. So, you can see the beginning of the transition.”

However, during the early years, the entry of Malays into the corporate sector was still at the professional and administrative levels, and did not mean Malays went into business. As he put it:

“But then, even when I entered the corporate world, I went in not as an entrepreneur; I was just an employee in a big foreign company. So, it was just like being a civil servant, the only difference was my *tauke* was not the government and my pay was much higher and the prestige that came with it.



Later, when we set up business, we went into trading or services. In this respect, we have not entered the real world of entrepreneurship, of producing goods.”

This corporate figure has been following the debate on *Melayu Baru*. He has also observed the positive and negative effects of privatisation, and has reservations about a number of things. On *Melayu Baru*, while accepting the need for change, he takes a moralistic position and emphasises the importance of assisting the small and medium businessmen, and the creation of greater numbers of the new middle class.

“I don’t know what criteria you use to become *Melayu Baru*, I don’t understand why we should create *Melayu Baru*, and I don’t know for how long one can apply the term *Melayu Baru*. What will *Melayu Baru* become, say, after 100 years or 1,000 years? Will they become *Melayu Baru baru* [new New Malay]? And then, what about *Melayu Lama* [the Old Malay]? ... To my mind, what is more appropriate is *Melayu mengikut zaman* [Malays who keep up with the times] irrespective of whether they are new or old. Societies change because of modernization, with the development of science and technology, and Malays must keep abreast with that. ... What is important is to reduce the gap between the haves and the have-nots, and wealth should not be controlled by a tiny minority. For example, the implementation of privatisation projects should be more widely distributed, we should not just create a few millionaires or billionaires. My idea is the country should have more of the middle class and upper middle class....As I see it, in the corporate world, there are three types of corporate players. First, you have the professionals such as engineers, accountants, etc.; they don’t manufacture products but provide services. Second,



the technocrats and managers – they are like civil servants in the government, but they work in the private sector and they don't own the firms. Third, the entrepreneurs, big and small. To me, the small *usahawan* (entrepreneurs) must be given more assistance. The big ones, they have become giants – some become greedy, arrogant and often forget their roots. This is my worry.”

While his skepticism of *Melayu Baru*, dismissing it as a symbol of modern materialistic Malays, is shared by a number of other Malay managers and professionals, many others see it in a more positive light. They share in varying degrees Mahathir's definition of *Melayu Baru* as modern, sophisticated and competitive Malays who are prepared to take risks. As they put it, *Melayu Baru* consist of modern, progressive Malays who are not dependent on the government, who can stand on their own feet, and who take other ethnic groups and peoples in the advanced nations as examples to learn from. However, they emphasize that *Melayu Baru* must retain their identity and should not be greedy and materialistic. These perceptions can be detected in the views of another Malay corporate figure in his forties, in charge of an organization meant to assist small and medium Malay entrepreneurs set up their business and train and nurture them with entrepreneurial skills and ethics. To him, the *Melayu Baru* Mahathir talks about refers mainly to owner-managers, the new Malay entrepreneurs with serious commitment to his business duty, and possess sophisticated skills, extensive networks, and strong religious ethics.

“We already have many successful Malay professionals, [some of whom] later became big corporate figures and very rich. But, many professionals are not owner-managers. This is what Malays have to become – entrepreneurs, owner-



managers. But to become genuine entrepreneurs, they must have several important criteria: management skills, experience, good self-image, integrity and trust, communication skills, clear vision and commitment. ... I stress these criteria because once they become successful, they quickly develop inflated ego, their ego becomes so big. To control that, we instill Islamic values. So, we ensure that they participate in an orientation programme for about a week, including participating in *qiamullai* (activities at night devoted to collective prayers). This is important so that they remember Allah, God the Almighty, and when they succeed, they must always remember where their *rezeki* [good fortune] comes from. We also stress team-building so that they will help each other, and not only care for themselves."

An important field of business activity Malay managers feel they have created an impact and changed perceptions of other Malaysians is fund management. Many fund management companies have been set up, some by the government, for example, the Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA), the Permodalan Nasional Berhad and a number of other funds set up by the state governments; several such companies have also been set up by Malay bankers and other financiers on their own, while others have joined hands with non-Malay partners. The manager of a large fund management company had this to say:

"We have been able to manage Bumiputera funds. They place their savings and invest in our unit trust schemes. Now, non-Bumiputera also have faith in us, and invest their money in our funds, for example, in our property unit trust. Ten or twenty years ago, they thought Malays could only be politicians and government



servants – that was supposed to be their forte. But not today -- now they have changed their perceptions; they have accepted us as managers and financiers just like they accept non-Bumiputera managers and financiers. This means that we have gained the trust and confidence of *Malaysians*. To me that's very important."

However, this manager set his sights beyond Malaysian shores, eyeing the international market. Consistent with Mahathir's views of *Melayu Baru*, he felt his company has sufficient financial muscle, sophisticated managerial skills and confidence to become an effective international player. As he put it:

"But we are not going to stop here. We are working towards the next step – to gain the trust of the international community. We do not want to manage funds belonging to Malaysians only; we want to become an international fund manager, and would like to be seen as such. So we must improve ourselves. It just won't do if we merely benchmark against local standards, we're going beyond by benchmarking in the international market. We're stressing this to our managerial and professional staff. They must continuously improve their performance."

One major psychological block among Malay professionals in the 1970s perceived by our first informant quoted above was their reluctance to take risks. Today, this has changed. Besides the importance of networking, they recognise that one must be prepared to take risks. Another manager expressed the view this way:



“Though we must be prudent, we must dare to take risk. As the saying goes, no pain, no gain. To me in the corporate world, daring to take risk is the name of the game.”

Daring to take risk, seizing new opportunities and turning around an unfavourable situation to become favourable to one's company is considered an important characteristic consistent with Mahathir's *Melayu Baru*. Referring to the financial and economic crisis that erupted in July 1997 and how his company managed the crisis, the manager of the fund management company interviewed above regarded it as an opportunity to make new investments and increase their equity in several companies due to the falling value in their stocks. Through this way, his company increased stakes in a number of conglomerates that have a proven track record. However, he stressed that such activities should be selective and conducted prudently, preceded by thorough up-to-the minute market surveys.

### ***Melayu Baru*: Overview of the Debate**

The definitions and perceptions of *Melayu Baru* in the eyes of Malay managers quoted above stress three qualities: professional skills, vision, and ethics. In other words, they directly or indirectly accept Mahathir's redefinition of the agenda of modernization and transformation of the Malays, and as managers, they perceive their role is to execute it.

However, among scholars and other intellectuals, the *Melayu Baru* debate takes a different, more analytical and even critical plane. The rejectionist critics,



contra Mahathir, argued that the latter's idea of *Melayu Baru* is a 'political gimmick and not a people's movement' (Husin Ali 1993). In fact, quite a few raise doubts about the appropriateness of the term *Melayu Baru*. Their argument is that if there are *Melayu Baru*, then, by implication, there must be *Melayu Lama* (the Old Malays), and queried what was so wrong with *Melayu Lama* to require them to change to become *Melayu Baru*? (Abu Bakar Hamid 1992). The *Melayu Baru* concept has also been criticised as an abstraction, a mere political construct 'which has no reality because there is no basis for its existence, there is no process for its emergence, and there is no practice for its perpetuation'. It is regarded as nothing but a 'phantom born from the imagination of a desperate and frustrated Malay leadership because of the latter's failure in bringing progress to the race [Malays]' (Zainal Kling 1993). Arguing that the *Melayu Baru* campaign was actually aimed to benefit corporate Malays at the expense of the Malay masses, the critics regarded 'new' Malays as a new breed of vulgar, greedy, materialistic and Westernised corporate businessmen. It was argued that the emergence and expansion of the ranks of these *homo economicus* who were divorced from their own cultural roots, would sharpen existing economic and cultural gaps, and hence exacerbate class and status divisions within Malay society. They also felt that it would engender new ethnic tensions since the campaign would divert various ethnic groups from forging a *Bangsa Malaysia Baru* (new Malaysian Nation) into championing *Cina Baru* (New Chinese), *India Baru* (New Indian), *Iban Baru* (New Iban), *Kadazan Baru* (New Kadazan), etc. (Husin Ali 1993).

Besides the rejectionist position above, a less hard approach by some other scholars invokes a class viewpoint, while a rather 'soft' approach either looks at it as



a typology of desired new personality traits in the Malay character, or from the viewpoint of transformation and modernization of Malay society. Taking a class approach, Khoo Boo Teik, in his intellectual biography of Mahathir, considered *Melayu Baru* as signifying the successful rehabilitation of the Malays and the end of the Malay dilemma. He argued that Mahathir's *Melayu Baru* does not refer to the Malays as a whole, but to the new class of 'Malay entrepreneurs and the (non-government) Malay professionals who broadly make up the *Bumiputera* commercial and industrial community' (Khoo 1995: 337). Quoting Mahathir, Khoo drew attention to the latter's speech at the UMNO General Assembly in November 1993 (cited above) in which he expressed pride in the achievements of the Malays and Bumiputera who have become leaders in various fields which Malays would not have dreamt of being able to penetrate only a generation before. In Mahathir's view, these achievements are significant symbols and testimony that the Malays 'have arrived' and that they can be as successful as anybody else, as long as they not only accept '*Malaysia boleh*' ('Malaysia can do it'), but more importantly, '*Melayu boleh*' (Malays can do it) (*Utusan Malaysia*, 17 April, 1997, p. 2).

However, Khoo observed that while the Malay business and professional classes 'lie closest to Mahathir's *Melayu Baru* heart', there is no place in Mahathir's '*Melayu Baru*' scheme of things for the Malay royalty, Malay peasants and agriculturalists, as well as the Malay working class - the latter, 'the unsung hero of the NEP' (Khoo 1995: 336-337). According to him, Mahathir's *Melayu Baru* is all about the creation and expansion of Malay capitalism, and that Mahathir 'knows no other class [than the business and professional classes] to whom the Malay future can be



entrusted'. Khoo noted that Mahathir's identification with the Malay cause has always been characterised by a marked rejection of 'Malayness'. Thus, for Mahathir, the emergence of *Melayu Baru* signals the end of the 'pre-history' of the Malays, which in turn, marks the beginning of Malay history and, by extension, the history of *Bangsa Malaysia* (Khoo 1995: 338).

Sharing Khoo's view, Shamsul (1997) argued that Mahathir's *Melayu Baru* is a community of completely rehabilitated Malays, who have gone through a mental revolution and cultural transformation, leaving behind feudalistic and fatalistic values (Shamsul 1997: 256). To Shamsul, the creation of *Melayu Baru* involves 'a reconstitution of the concept of Malayness', a move which 'interrogates' and compromises 'the pillars of Malayness' (viz. Malay royalty, Malay culture and language). He is critical of the exclusivist nature of *Melayu Baru*, which refers only to the business and (non-government) professional classes, while the new Malay proletariat -- born out of and the basis for Malaysia's rapid industrialization and capitalist transformation through the NEP -- is not included in it. By implication, Shamsul is arguing that the Malay proletariat, a crucial component of the new Malay industrial society, should be accorded a proper place in future society if *Melayu Baru* is to be at all inclusive, and with them included, the new Malay industrial society would definitely be a larger community than presently envisaged (Shamsul 1997: 258-259). In a later article, Shamsul (1999: 92) said that while 'from the top down the *Melayu Baru* consist of the corporate players, political elites and the professional middle class', we should also examine it from the viewpoint of the grassroots. Taking what he called the 'cultural construction' approach, he suggested that viewed from the



grassroots, the term *Melayu Baru* is used 'as a phrase or cliché to 'make fun of others'[the new rich persons], both negatively (*perli, giat, kutuk* -- as an expression of ridicule) and positively (*puji, sokong, ampu bodek* -- an expression of praise)' (Shamsul 1999: 92).<sup>3</sup>

While the class approach looks at *Melayu Baru* as collectivities, the typology approach focuses on the personality traits of the individual, though the latter is not necessarily divorced or isolated from the collective. As argued by its proponent Syed Hussein Alatas (1995), the problem of 'New Man' has been found in many societies throughout the world during various historical epochs. When societies are confronted with new and different sets of problems, they attempt to solve it through the creation of the 'New Man'. History has seen this happening in Japan since the Meiji Restoration of the late nineteenth century, and in China, where the idea of the 'New Chinese' has been advanced since the beginning of the twentieth century. Similarly, the Malays who have faced their own different problems during different historical periods, have also tried to redefine their personality and what they want to preserve and consolidate. With these historically informed views, Alatas put forward a typology of personality traits of the 'New Malay', as rational, moral and selective, and to a certain degree, universal human beings. As he put it, the 'New Malay' views the world in a more rational manner, using reason, calculation and plans. 'He does not

<sup>3</sup> Shamsul (1999: 91-93) suggested that the term is actually a replacement for *Orang Kaya Baru* (lit. the new rich person), which was already in use in everyday conversation before the 1960s. 'The term *Orang Kaya Baru* was coined and came into popular use to refer to people who had just become rich, or *orang yang baru jadi kaya*, whose behaviour is rather odd and 'not really like the "real" rich people'. The way it is used in this context indicates that the emphasis is on the word *Baru*, not on *Orang Kaya*, because the term as a whole refers to those who have just become rich, but who adopt behaviour that is perceived as not in the repertoire of the 'really rich'. Similarly, it is used for those who are not really rich, but who behave oddly in trying to make out that they are.'



subscribe to merely rationality, but it is rationality combined with certain universality. Malays are Muslims and being Muslims, they participate in certain universality by belonging to a world religion having a universal system of values' (Alatas 1995: 8-9). But very importantly, Alatas stressed that the 'New Malay' 'is not a new or sudden creation, without continuity with the past.... [In fact, the] 'New Malay' ... is a new breed ... continuous with the past' (Alatas 1995: 6).

### **Project of Transformation and Modernization of Malay Society**

The preceding arguments bring us to the fourth strand of thought, which looks at *Melayu Baru* as an agenda or project of modernization and transformation of Malay society. To my mind, all the aforementioned approaches have their own merits, with each one informing a particular dimension of a larger historical phenomenon. However, I would like to offer another approach which is not necessarily exclusive of, or in disagreement with, the above views, but one which attempts to locate the phenomenon of *Melayu Baru* in broader historical perspective, by seeing its present advocacy in a modernization trajectory, but not a linear one. I am suggesting here that *Melayu Baru* is at once a concept, an idea and a movement of modernization and social transformation; that although the term may be of recent origin and is associated with Mahathir and the UMNO leadership, *Melayu Baru* as an idea and a project of modernization and transformation of Malay society has old historical roots. It is an idea that historically has set things in motion and still has compelling power today.



My approach here is not new. A similar approach has already been advanced by Rustam Sani, whose views I shall deal with briefly here. According to Rustam, the term *Melayu Baru* actually has the potential of becoming a concept, provided it is theoretically informed (Rustam 1992; 1993; 1997; Abdul Rahman 1994). Benefiting from insights offered by the Weberian thesis on transition from tradition to rationality and modernity, Rustam posits that *Melayu Baru* is the latest expression of the idea of renewal or renaissance of Malay society in the present historical juncture. Critical of what he called the mainstream 'economistic and quantitative' approach adopted by the UMNO leadership, which emphasizes the creation of a predetermined number of Malay entrepreneurs, he is of the opinion that *Melayu Baru* should be treated as a movement of transformation, involving the socio-cultural modernization of Malay society, to complete the 'unfinished agenda of Malay nationalism'. Such a transformation would require an attack on two fronts, viz. a thorough-going reform of the educational system and a concerted effort at nation-building for the formation of *Bangsa Malaysia*. Educational reform, according to him, is absolutely necessary to enhance the cultural literacy, modernity and competence of the Malays to overcome what he termed 'the cultural and intellectual crisis' besetting them, while the establishment of *Bangsa Malaysia*, based on Malaysian nationalism, is a critical factor for the consolidation of the nation-state, undermined by the forces of globalisation.

As explained above, the problem of 'the New Man' is not something peculiar to Malay history and society. Neither is the idea of 'the New Malay' or *Melayu Baru* new, since it has 'a long historical pedigree' beginning in the nineteenth century with



Abdullah Munshi, considered the 'forefather of *Melayu Baru*' (Harper 1996: 242). However, the inseparable symbiotic relationship between man and society needs to be more clearly stressed, since creating the 'New Man' cannot happen in a vacuum, but must occur in the context of society, with its various institutions and structures. Thus, to this idea of *Melayu Baru* as the 'New Man' should be added the larger idea of Malay reformation and the emergence of a new kind of modern society which would emancipate the Malays from the shackles of feudalism, servitude, blind religious faith (*taqlid buta*) and moral degradation. Such ideas, for example, had already been mooted in the writings of Abdullah Munshi, a pioneering Malay reformist thinker of the first half of the nineteenth century. Abdullah could be described as an archetype of *Melayu Baru*, but more importantly, he was propounding a vision of a new society as implied in his critique of Malay feudalism. In his visit to the East Coast states of Peninsular Malaysia in 1837/1838, he made critical observations of Malay society which he wrote of in *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah* [Travels of Abdullah]. To him, the poverty among Malays which he saw was not due to indolence, but feudal oppression, which had killed the people's incentive and will to work. Abdullah explained: 'To my mind, this is the cause of [Malay] poverty in Pahang. All the subjects live in constant fear of the injustice and greed of the ruling house and their nobles' (Abdullah 1964: 44).<sup>4</sup> Abdullah attributed such injustice and the general weakness of the Malay states

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<sup>4</sup> Abdullah's sharp observations about the cause of Malay poverty and their so-called indolence are worth pondering over. According to Abdullah, the people only saw futility in greater striving; as they argued: 'What is the point of working hard? When we get a little bit of money or food, they attract the greed of the nobles who are sure to seize them. That's why the people remain in poverty and indolence all their lives' (Abdullah 1964: 45). Abdullah was of the opinion that 'there has never been a country in the world in which all the subjects are complacent. If they can get the benefits of their own work and efforts, and the profits arising thereof, and feel secure at heart, and if just half of the population in the country work hard to earn their living, the country is sure to be great and rich' (Abdullah 1964: 44). (For a further discussion of Abdullah's views, see Shaharuddin Maaruf 1988).



to the poor education of their rulers and aristocrats, and also because of their deviation from the true teachings of Islam (Abdullah 1964: 123). He wanted the transformation of such a society, which he believed could only be achieved through education and reform of Malay beliefs, appreciation by Malays of their own language and modern learning<sup>5</sup> as well as changes in their attitude towards Islam. The social change advocated by Abdullah already contained the germ of the project of transformation and modernization of Malay society.

However, Abdullah's modernization project was too futuristic and revolutionary for a society deeply entrenched in feudalism, and thus found no support for over half a century. But, by the beginning of the twentieth century until the Second World War, with the awakening of Malay nationalism, the project gathered momentum and manifested, for example, in the writings of a diverse group of people such as Syed Sheikh Alhadi;<sup>6</sup> Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad (Za'ba);<sup>7</sup> Abdul Rahim Kajai (or Kajai for short);<sup>8</sup> and Ibrahim Yaacob and Ishak Haji Mohamad<sup>9</sup>. In the post-war years, with Malay nationalism on the upsurge, the modernization project gathered greater momentum in socio-cultural, political, and economic movements urging the reform of Malay society and political independence (Ariffin Omar 1993). The birth of

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<sup>5</sup> Abdullah criticised the Malays for their orthodox practice of only reading the Quran in Arabic without understanding its meaning. He also regretted that Malays did not study their own language seriously, and neglected the pursuit of learning. He warned that in the end, the Malays would neither acquire Arabic, nor be well-versed in their own language, and ultimately 'the name of Malay itself would disappear from the face of this world' (Abdullah 1964: 36-38).

<sup>6</sup> Islamic reformist and founder of *Al Imam* in 1906, a periodical espousing Islamic reforms along the lines advocated by the Middle Eastern Islamic reformist Mohamad Abduh (Roff 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Pioneering Malay language scholar and writer who systematized Malay grammar and wrote essays on Malay backwardness in the 1920s (Roff 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Pioneering Malay journalist and chief editor of several Malay newspapers in the 1930s (Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar 1984).



Malay-based political parties and movements, such as Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM) in 1945, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1946, the radical youth movement Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API) (1946), the women's movement Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS) (1946), and the various political, economic and cultural congresses during the pre-independence period were all part and parcel of this growing modernization movement to bring Malays to the fore in the modern world. The pre-independence modernization project was not couched in class terms; it was, instead, more populist in nature, involving the whole 'race' (Malays), and not merely a particular class(es) or fraction of it as is the emphasis in contemporary discourse. The project grew from below, from the small, but vocal, intelligentsia, or members of the incipient middle class, with a vision for a modern Malay society that could be built only with the attainment of the country's independence.

Why was the Malay modernization project then more populist in nature? In part, it was because Malay society then, although increasingly differentiated, could still maintain a certain degree of internal 'homogeneity', given their relatively low level of urbanization and industrialization. There were no substantial Malay business and professional classes to speak of, unlike today (see Chapters 3 and 4). At the same time, there were clear 'boundaries' between them and the non-Malays as well as the British colonial masters, thanks to the existence of a Furnivallian 'plural society' and the colonial divide-and-rule policy (Furnivall 1956; Saunders 1977). Besides, the fact that political power was in the hands of the British, and not in the hands of the

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<sup>9</sup> Two left-wing Malay nationalists who formed the first Malay political party, the *Kesatuan Melayu*



Malays, meant that it was impossible to implement the Malay modernization agenda, and that to achieve it, the Malays had to remain as one to gain the country's independence through the mobilization of the Malays as a whole.

The situation had changed dramatically with *Merdeka* (independence), more so with the social engineering of the NEP. Economic development through industrialization, urbanization and rural development, as well as the democratization of education over the last four decades, more so during the recent two and half decades, had transformed Malaysian society, especially Malay society, from being basically traditional, rural and agrarian into a predominantly urban and modern society. The transformation has brought about marked internal differentiation, especially within Malay society, characterized particularly by the ascendance of the capitalist and middle classes, and the decline of the traditional rural-based classes.

With political power in the hands of Malay leaders who shared it through consociational arrangements with the non-Malays, the post-independence project of transformation and modernization of Malay society had been state-sponsored and state-led. However, it should be remembered that the leaders were responding to the modernization impulse and demands 'from below', namely from members of the small Malay middle class, who demanded for Malay economic, cultural and social modernization. The demands grew louder with independence. For example, the Malay economic congress of 1947 was followed in the post-independence years by the two Bumiputera economic congresses in 1965 and 1968, whose demands were



incorporated in the NEP; the struggle for Malay language, culture and education of the pre-independence years continued with greater vigour in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in the setting up of the National Language Policy, National Education Policy, and the National Culture Policy, etc.. What the state leaders did was to appropriate the demands emerging in the struggle, used them as their political platform in keeping with their ideology and inclinations, and translated some of them into policy programmes, thus making the modernization agenda as something being 'pushed from above'.<sup>10</sup>

The role of the state in modernization and transformation is not peculiar to Malaysia or to Malays. Japan's modernization, for example, initiated during the Meiji Restoration of the late nineteenth century, was state-sponsored and state-led (Kunio 1988). Malay modernization -- hampered by centuries of colonialism and Malay feudalism -- needed the synergic force of the state to carry it through, which it did through various policies, the most important being the NEP. (See for further details, see Chapter Three).

The earlier phase of post-Independence Malay modernization especially under the second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein (1970-1976), was clearly in response to the movement from below, indicating clear dissatisfaction with the slow progress the Malays made under the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. The NEP-modernisation project involved the Malay masses, to unlock them from the shackles of poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, and rural backwardness so that they could



participate in the modern economy. During a period of about two decades, it had produced new social classes and groups – especially the Malay capitalist and new middle classes -- and had generally broken down the psychological impasse, characterized by a lack of confidence previously found among the Malays. The affirmative action carried out by the state had ensured a partial achievement of this earlier phase of the modernization agenda, and today the modernized Malays -- better educated, urbanized and placed in better positions and statuses in the social hierarchy -- have generally rid themselves of their inferiority complex and emerged with greater self-confidence and assertiveness.

However, despite these changes, Mahathir was still not happy. As argued in the preceding section, he continued urging Malays to change themselves and become *Melayu Baru* in the mould he defined. There are several reasons for this. In order to respond to the on-going changes in the regional and global scenario, and manage it effectively, Mahathir set the Vision 2020 agenda for Malaysia to become a fully developed industrial nation within a matter of one generation. Though Malaysia and the Malays had achieved some successes, he warned that ‘we cannot be satisfied with ordinary successes’ for, in order to catch up with the advanced nations, we ‘have to run faster than them’, otherwise we run the danger of being ‘re-colonised by a new form of colonialism’ (Mahathir 1997: 6). To catch up with the advanced nations, he again stressed the importance for Malays to learn from and adopt the work culture of the advanced countries, especially their commitment to work, their critical attitude towards their own achievements, and their efforts at enhancing quality and

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<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 2, especially on views by Joel Kahn (1996b).



strengthening resilience. At the same time, he called for reform of Malay views and approach to Islam, giving greater prominence to its substance, rather than to rituals.

What was recently advocated by Mahathir thus constitutes the latest and most articulate expression of the idea and movement of Malay modernization and transformation, and that the idea now has a greater force of action because of his leverage as Prime Minister and President of UMNO since 1981. The *Melayu Baru* project today becomes a distinctively pro-business movement because it is stamped with the ideology and vision of the Prime Minister who believes that the salvation of the Malays lies in the development of full-blown Malay capitalism. In keeping with his overall belief in privatization, deregulation and Malaysia Incorporated, Mahathir believes that the Malays' future cannot be relied on the state by becoming routinized bureaucrats who feel secure in their posts, or as salaried middle class employees with limited purchasing power, or even as traditional rural producers, but by becoming entrepreneurs and corporate professionals in the private sector.

Nevertheless, to be fair to Mahathir, new social categories are also being included in his version of *Melayu Baru*. Having focused on the creation of the big corporate figures as part of an emerging Bumiputera capitalist class through various privatization projects, Mahathir in early 1997 turned his attention to creating small capitalists, or what he termed as 'a Malay/Bumiputera entrepreneurial middle class', comprising small- and medium-scale Malay/Bumiputera businessmen, whom he also wanted to be part of the Bumiputera commercial and industrial community. The shift in part was a response to the growing dissatisfaction among the small capitalists who



felt they had been left out of the game. The Federal Ministry of Entrepreneurial Development and specialized institutions such as the Perbadanan Usahawan Nasional Berhad (PUNB) (National Entrepreneurs Corporation Limited) and other relevant state agencies have been entrusted with this task. In this exercise, arrangements are made to have the small Bumiputera capitalists networked with banks and Bumiputera-based corporate giants, who -- as part of dispensing what is termed as their 'social responsibility' -- are supposed to serve as an 'umbrella' to help nurture their growth (for example, through the vendor system). The results of this programme are yet to be seen, but it is clear that the inclusion of small capitalists has not changed the strongly pro-big business orientation of Mahathir's *Melayu Baru*.

### ***Melayu Baru* and Cultural Modernization**

As argued above, the *Melayu Baru* is a modernization project that had been propelled by Malay nationalism, but the project had experienced changes throughout different periods, with its content determined largely by the ideological orientation and vision of the Malay leaders in power. Needless to say, the changes at the level of ideas need to reflect the changes occurring in the economy and society, and that these ideas should be sufficiently advanced and visionary to provide guidance and direction to the changes. This explains why certain long established beliefs of Malay nationalism had been redefined. Mahathir's *Melayu Baru* project, in fact, involves a redefinition of Malay nationalism to give it new relevance for Malaysian nation-building and globalisation.



In an obvious rebuttal to his critics who argued that Mahathir's *Melayu Baru* project has 'sacrificed' Malay language and culture at the altar of market forces by giving prominence and pride of place to English, Mahathir maintained that *only* when Malays are successful economically would the Malay language be respected. In his presidential address at the UMNO general assembly in September 1997, he redefined what, to him, is a nationalist.

"True nationalists are those who work so that their race can progress and will be capable of competing successfully with the advanced nations. True nationalists are people who are respected because they hail from a successful race... True nationalists are those who ensure that their race gains respect and emulation of others due to their excellent achievements." (Mahathir 1997).

'Competitiveness', 'success', and 'achievements' – the key words running through Mahathir's thinking -- refer to the economic realm, but the route to success is not merely through economic or financial means, but more importantly, through culture, for, to him, 'culture is the determinant of achievement'.<sup>11</sup> He maintained that the new culture Malays need to inculcate, including the mastery of the English language, would not make them any less Malay. To drive home the point, he posed the rhetorical questions:

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<sup>11</sup> This slogan, which in Bahasa Malaysia reads 'Budaya Penentu Kecapaian' was proposed by Mahathir for the 39th National Day celebration in Malaysia held on 31 August, 1996. This slogan is meant to underline the importance of developing a work culture and ethics in line with the imperatives of modern industrial capitalism.



“Will we lose our identity, the identity of our race if we rectify our values so that we can build a new culture and civilisation; a culture and civilisation which is more suited for progress, and with which can redeem and establish our dignity? ... [W]ould we become less Malay, or less Iban or less Kadazan ... just because we accept certain aspects of foreign culture?” (Mahathir 1997).<sup>12</sup>

While in the Prime Minister’s formulation of *Melayu Baru*, he took the instrumentalist view of culture, which is to answer the pragmatic question of ‘how to bring about development?’ – an important thesis fairly extant in the development literature especially following the Weberian tradition – a critical dimension in the *Melayu Baru* discourse somewhat underplayed in Mahathir’s formulation, but implicit in the modernist impulse of the early Malay nationalists, and in the arguments of some of the critics of the state-led Malay modernization, is the philosophical question of ‘development for what?’ The social-transformation approach adopted in this study hinges upon the recognition that, while culture change, namely the adoption of new work culture, is necessary to bring about development, prosperity and wealth, the latter cannot and should not be an end or an ideal in itself. Wealth creation is a means to a larger and more noble end, i.e. the creation of a modern society with a modern culture (including modern work ethics) and modern civilization in Malaysia. The

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<sup>12</sup> Note that in the above formulation, Mahathir had widened the scope of cultural reform to include non-Malay Bumiputera (Iban and Kadazan) as well.

Despite Mahathir’s repeated urgings to UMNO members to discuss seriously the issue of culture change and Islamic reform, the party has not risen to the occasion. Mahathir was rather disappointed that very few UMNO delegates took up the two issues on which he spoke at length in his presidential address at the UMNO general assembly in September 1997. He felt that the delegates shied away from the subject (culture and religion) not only because it was ‘academic’ in nature but also because they were being politically cautious (*New Straits Times*, September 8, 1997, p. 6).



latter should be characterized by a flowering of cultural activities, especially high culture, art and literature, intellectual creativity and wisdom, spiritual fulfillment, scientific invention and innovation, and the enlarging of civil society. Wealth creation, to be achieved by adopting capitalist work ethics, can become devoid of a human soul, if it is not integrated as part and parcel of overall human development.

These fine values are actually found in Vision 2020, but in practice, they have not been given prominence, because the vision has been appropriated by the wealthy from the corporate world. Thus, there is no attempt at integrating the economic modernization agenda of the *Melayu Baru* project with the all-encompassing vision of establishing of a modern Malaysian civilization. Such integration is very necessary because the newly-created wealth enjoyed by many corporate and new middle-class Malays and non-Malays alike is neither accompanied by a flourishing culture nor by a renaissance in the social, intellectual and artistic spheres;<sup>13</sup> instead, it has been accompanied by a growth of consumerism.<sup>14</sup>

It is clear that the project of modernization and transformation of the Malay society will only be meaningful if it pays attention to three fronts simultaneously, i.e. the generation of wealth in order to be advanced economically; the creation of a modern society with modern culture and civilization so that the wealth created would not become a bane, but a boon to ensure that the people can enjoy the higher things in

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<sup>13</sup> In my discussion of Malay middle class lifestyles in Chapter 6, it was shown that the middle class respondents did not have a strong reading habit.

<sup>14</sup> In popular discussions, the ten years or so (prior to the financial turmoil of 1997) had been regarded not only been 'a decade of growth' in economic terms, but also 'a decade of greed' in moral-cultural



life; and the creation of modern classes, namely the middle class which can play the role of standard-bearer of modern culture and civilization.

## Conclusions

This chapter has argued that *Melayu Baru* is an historically-based project of transformation and modernization of the Malay society, propelled by Malay nationalist aspirations. The project had been championed by various nationalist leaders during different historical epochs. However, today it has assumed a distinctively pro-business character because of the ideological orientation and vision of its champion, Dr. Mahathir who believes that the salvation of the Malays lies in the establishment of a Malay/Bumiputera commercial and industrial community through the building of a prosperous Malaysian capitalism, and his views have found resonance among Malay managers and professionals. To carry this through, Mahathir believes that Malay nationalism today has to be redefined to assume a more globalist and cosmopolitan outlook to be integrated with Malaysian nationalism for establishing *Bangsa Malaysia*. Nevertheless, the project is still unfolding, and whether an integrated *Bangsa Malaysia* -- consisting of various ethnic groups having a common identity -- would evolve remains a big challenge, given the undermining forces of globalisation.

Based on the analysis of the various viewpoints in the *Melayu Baru* debate and of the character, changes and complexities in Malay modernization, I would like to

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terms. Some people attribute the moral backlash in the form of religious conservatism today as a reaction to such consumerism.



propose by way of conclusion, that the term *Melayu Baru* be accepted as an investigative concept in Malaysian social science. My arguments are as follows.

First, the historically-based project of transformation of the Malay society -- a project which has its own specific characteristics despite certain similarities with modernization projects elsewhere -- requires a short-cut but comprehensive reference to the above-described processes. The utilization of this concept can contribute meaningfully to the universal discourse on modernization and transformation that has been the preoccupation of thinkers since the birth of the modern age and of social science generally. The *Melayu Baru* concept is the particularization of the universal modernization discourse in Malaysia.

Second, the *Melayu Baru* discourse shows that the modernization project is not unilinear, and that it assumes not only an anti-feudal stance as in Europe, but also an anti-colonialist position, which was not present in European modernization. At the same time, the concept is informed by a complex interplay between multi-ethnicity and nation-building, for *Melayu Baru*, which began as a movement that interrogated not only feudalism (though partially) and colonialism, but also the migrant communities, today accommodates and cooperates with the latter, who are accepted as rightful partners in establishing and consolidating the independent Malaysian nation.

Third, the utilization of the concept of *Melayu Baru* also helps scholars to explore an intellectual route to a fruitful discourse on the modernization of culture and religion, which is also a major theme in social science. In Malay intellectual history,



these two issues (Malay culture and Islam) had been part of the Malay modernization discourse, which posited that for Malays to succeed, there must be a reform of Malay culture as well as a critical re-examination of their orthodox approach to Islam, and that the discourse is becoming increasingly vocal and pervasive today, not only because it is informed by the views of Prime Minister Mahathir, but also by those of intellectuals and the previously silent voices of Muslim women activists.

Fourth, the *Melayu Baru* discourse too helps to unravel the complex interplay between the instrumentalist role of culture in development, and culture as embodying the fine values or the higher things in life that human development should strive for. The concept thus embodies the spirit of pragmatism as well as philosophical idealism.

In short, the *Melayu Baru* as a concept is a useful and comprehensive reference to an historically-based on-going intellectual and social-cultural movement for Malay modernization and advancement in the modern world which will continue into the twenty first century. This modernization project is not only being pushed 'from above', but has been articulated in various forms 'from below'. Its utilisation as a concept will enrich the corpus of Malaysian studies of social change, modernization and the middle classes, provided it is theoretically informed, and viewed with intellectual rigour, irrespective of the fact that its current usage has been due to the vigorous and often controversial espousal by a public intellectual-cum-Prime Minister, and not by some figure(s) within academia.



## CHAPTER 10

### CONCLUDING REMARKS:

#### THE NEW MALAY MIDDLE CLASS AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

In this study, we have argued that though the emergence of modern classes -- the capitalist, middle and working classes -- in Malaysia began to take place from the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, their rapid expansion and development are recent phenomena, closely tied up with the drive towards industrialization and modernization in post-independence Malaysia, spurred by capitalist development and expansion of the developmentalist state. Through the New Economic Policy implemented since 1971, the UMNO-controlled Malaysian state has sought to create a Bumiputera commercial and industrial community (BCIC), a euphemism for Bumiputera capitalist and new middle classes, and in the process, developed a Bumiputera working class too. Unlike the earlier new Malay middle class, which comprised a small group of administrators and school teachers, a new Malay middle class, comprising professionals and managers working in both private and state sectors, has emerged and expanded in the last thirty years, and demonstrated a conspicuous presence in Malaysian cities and towns. The NEP's affirmative action programmes, however, have not precluded the growth of the non-Malay capitalist and middle classes; nevertheless, the state's role in the formation of the new non-Malay capitalist and middle classes has been indirect, that since the state has generally



been market-friendly, even when implementing the NEP's action programmes, it enhanced the growth of capitalism, which provided the economically stronger Chinese community, opportunities to produce their own new middle class. Unlike the pre-1970 period, when the new middle class in Malaysia tended to be dominated by those of Chinese origin, the new Malaysian middle class today is multiethnic in composition, with the new Malay middle class constituting a major component. The changes that have taken place, which led to the emergence and expansion of a multiethnic new middle class, indicate that the middle class is not a static social category, but a historically constituted and dynamic entity, which has emerged in the specific historical, political, economic and cultural context of the country's development. The dramatic changes in the ethnic and sectoral composition of the new Malaysian middle class is closely related to Malaysia's social transformation in the last thirty years.

After presenting a historically-based macro class map of the emergence and expansion of modern classes, namely the new Malay middle class, we then proceeded to give a portrayal of the new Malay middle class at close range based on our empirical study conducted in 1996 (which was followed up in 1997 and 1998) of 284 respondents in the metropolitan Kelang Valley (Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya), and in two provincial towns -- Kota Bharu in Kelantan and Kuala Trengganu in Trengganu, both on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Using comparative data on the new middle class in East Asia, we showed that like their East Asian counterparts, the new Malaysian middle class, especially its Malay component, is a 'first generation' middle class, i.e. a historically new class, whose parents came from humbler class backgrounds, as farmers, fishermen, labourers, policemen, clerks, petty



traders, school teachers, etc. and with only a small proportion coming from the ranks of government administrators; upward inter-generational mobility has been very much dependent upon the state, with the latter providing material assistance (scholarships and loans) to see them through their higher education. The 'first generation' phenomenon – very dominant among the new middle class in the two provincial towns – was also found in the Kelang Valley metropolitan area.

Muhammad

The new Malay middle class – a new social formation in urban settings brought about by social change – has a dynamics of its own. The dynamics of the formation of the new Malay middle class has produced a myriad of cultural forms including a complex array of adaptations, innovations and changes, which has been examined at two levels: socio-cultural, and political. We now present some aspects of both the social and political cultures of the new Malay middle class, and explore some of their implications for Malaysia's social transformation.

impaired character-driven luxury cars, carrying 'gold' credit cards and subtle  
pieces, driving in golf clubs, often spending \$400 on themselves regularly

### **The Dynamics of the Social Culture of the New Malay Middle Class**

First, members of the new Malay middle class in our study can be recognized by their professions as managers, professionals and administrators who work in air-conditioned offices in modern complexes, often in large organizations, earn relatively high incomes, and enjoy authority and prestige most of their parents probably never dreamt of. They have developed a new work culture and ethics. Many are industrious, working beyond the stipulated eight hours a day, often taking home urgent office work to complete, not always using up their annual leave because of heavy work



schedules, with many describing themselves as 'workaholic' or 'partially workaholic'. All these suggest that there has been a transformation in their work culture and ethics, indicating that they have accepted the work regime of a rapidly industrialising society. This suggests that, at the micro level, a segment of modern Malays, viz. elements of the new middle class, have gone through cultural transformation, something in the nature of the *Melayu Baru* espoused by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

Fourth, a major segment of the new Malay middle class respondents was class  
 Second, many new Malay middle class respondents were generally well off, with a few very affluent. They lived in suburban housing areas, either in bungalows or terraced housing different from earlier generations. The most affluent new middle class fraction – small in number, but very conspicuous -- differentiated themselves from other classes by acquiring symbolic status items such as luxurious bungalows fitted with alarm systems and electronically controlled gates, moving around often in imported chauffeur-driven luxury cars, carrying 'gold' credit cards and mobile phones, joining in golf clubs, often spending quite lavishly on themselves, regularly dining at hotels, engaging in foreign travel often to Europe and America, shopping abroad and sporting branded clothes, shoes and other consumer items. This small new middle class fraction made up the cosmopolitan urbanites who are part of the new rich that has been created during the last two decades of rapid economic growth.

Third, unlike their parents, our new Malay middle class respondents possessed high education, married at relatively later ages, and practised homogamous marriage patterns, though men tended to marry lower, and women higher, and often formed



dual career families, with some having domestic maids. Their family structure was predominantly nuclear, with strong emphasis on conjugal relations, which often involved spending leisure hours together with their children. Though there was some degree of male dominance in several families when it came to major decisions, there was a tendency towards egalitarian relationships with power shared between husbands and wives.

Fourth, a major concern of our new Malay middle class respondents was class reproduction. They manifested a 'fear of falling' with regard to their children's future, showing concern as to whether their children would be able to reproduce their parents' class position, or go down instead. We have argued that in Malaysia, success in education is perceived as the key avenue for social mobility. The 'credential explosion' in Malaysia over the last two decades has intensified competition among young students to enter tertiary education. Realising that the ability of their children to reproduce their class position is not assured, new Malay middle class respondents put tremendous pressure on them to excel in their studies by making them undergo private tuition classes. At the same time, reflecting market changes in their career preferences for their children, they wanted them, especially male children to work outside the government sector, either by joining the private sector or by setting up their own businesses.

The characteristics of the social culture of the new Malay middle class discussed above may be quite universal as they are also found among the new Chinese and Indian middle classes in Malaysia, and among the new middle classes in other



societies. There are, however, certain aspects of their social culture that may be specific to the new Malay middle class, some reflecting innovations in their ways of adapting to new urban environments, while some others were responses to religious movements.

First, many new Malay middle class respondents, despite being modern and highly educated, expressed strong preferences for, and actually had, large families -- a practice commonly found in traditional societies, but today continued, being influenced by the *dakwah* movement as well as the government's population policy. They also maintained close links with their parents and extended kin through regular flows of remittances, by returning regularly to their birth place to visit parents or relatives, especially during the annual *balik kampung*, and through other means of communications. Living within a network of kin and friends, the new Malay middle class family, though nuclear, was not isolated in the urban setting. Their extended family relations were being reconstituted and reaffirmed continuously, which transformed them into a modified extended family system adapted to urban conditions.<sup>1</sup>

Second, unlike the highly affluent new middle class fraction that differentiated themselves from other classes, many of our respondents were generally modest in their lifestyles. They frequented shopping outlets also patronized by the working class; they were always on the look out for 'sales' rather than branded items, ate out at

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<sup>1</sup> As shown in Chapter 5, the modified extended family system is not specific to the new Malay middle class as it is also found among the new Chinese middle class in Malaysia and sections of the new middle class in advanced industrial societies. However, preference for, and practice of, having large families, while common among Malays, are not common among them.



economy restaurants and *warung*, shunted golf clubs, took their families for vacations domestically, or had vacations abroad in neighbouring countries, rather than in far-away Europe or the United States, which are much more costly. In short, they have adapted to urban living by trying to live within their means, a carry over of the frugality of their humble origins.

Third, when Malays move to urban areas, they usually attempt to construct communities with *kampung*-like characteristics in the new urban settings, by relying on certain cultural resources they had acquired as young persons growing up in rural villages, and many remain as folk urbanites, i.e. urban-dwellers who operate within the domain of Malay cultural values and religious practices, and whose lifestyles are relatively modest, with strong family- and community-orientations. Under the influence of the Islamic *dakwah* movement emerging since the seventies and eighties, our Malay middle class respondents showed strong religious affinity. In fact, a major factor contributing to the construction of communities with *kampung*-like characteristics in middle class residential areas was the respondents' commitment to religion, expressed in both individual ritual performance and congregational prayer, thus revitalizing and reinforcing both the sense of community and identity. The *surau* is an important religious-cum-social institution which brings believers together and forms the basis of community interactions. Compared to rural areas, the *surau* as an institution in the changed material conditions of new urban environments, where neighbours are often strangers, becomes all the more important and pivotal in community-building among the new Malay middle class. *Surau*-based religious and social activities help Malay urbanites to know each other and to interact more



frequently as neighbours. This can be considered as a cultural innovation in a new environment based on traditional cultural resources. As such, the residential areas, of the new Malay middle class, especially those in the two provincial towns (Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu), and also many areas in the metropolitan Kelang Valley, are not mere aggregations of dwellings, but communities in which many people know each other personally, interact on a regular basis, participate in *gotong royong* (mutual help) activities, and show concern for neighbours who suffer personal tragedies such as death of their family members and so on. This suggests that large proportions of our new Malay middle class respondents do not feel ill at ease in cities and do not consider the urban environment as anonymous, alien and hostile to them.

Fourth, while ethnic and religious identities were strong and important among our new Malay middle class respondents, the latter were not a homogenous category in terms of their attitudes to, and relationships with, the non-Malays. Generally, new Malay middle class respondents can be categorised into three groups: first, a small group who had close relationships with and had many friends from other ethnic groups, frequently attended open houses of other ethnic groups, and tried to understand and appreciate the latter's cultures. This group can be regarded as multi-ethnic and Malaysian in their attitudes and ways of life. The second group, which was much larger (about half the respondents), had non-Malay friends, interacted with them, and sometimes attended open houses held by the latter. But, their circles of non-Malay friends were smaller, and their interactions were limited. The third group, smaller in proportion, did not have friends from other ethnic groups, did not attend the latter's cultural festivals, and did not try to understand or appreciate the meaning of



their cultural activities. They can be regarded as conducting their lives mainly within their own ethnic community, except at the market place where they meet with other ethnic groups.

Compared to those in Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu, a larger proportion of Kelang Valley respondents belonged to the first category who had closer relationships with other ethnic groups. However, in the Kelang Valley too, there is also an almost equal proportion of new Malay middle class respondents who conducted their lives mainly within their own ethnic group, with no circles of friends outside their ethnic boundary. This finding suggests that one's presence in a multi-ethnic surrounding (such as Kuala Lumpur or Petaling Jaya) does not automatically induce one to establish contacts with those from other ethnic groups. On the contrary, it may make one feel a greater need to keep within the same ethnic boundary. In Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu, the proportions of respondents who had non-Malay friends were smaller, and those with no friends from other ethnic groups were larger than in the Kelang Valley. However, this should not be interpreted to mean that they shunned non-Malays because in the two provincial towns, Chinese and, more so, Indians are small minorities. In fact, one may argue that in predominantly Malay areas such as Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu where there are less inter-ethnic rivalries, Malays feel more secure and may be more open towards non-Malays, while in the Kelang Valley, where such rivalries are more common, attitudes and feelings vary from being open, secure and confident, to one of being less open, insecure and suspicious of other ethnic groups.



Our study, which compares the new Malay middle class in the metropolitan Kelang Valley and the two provincial towns of Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu, highlights not only their similarities, but also some important differences. New Malay middle class respondents in the three urban centres have experienced changes in their social culture, though the degree of change differed, with greater proportions of new Malay middle class respondents in the Kelang Valley showing a greater degree of class differentiation compared to those in Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu. In the Kelang Valley, in particular, the small highly affluent class fraction has developed high-status lifestyles and become a 'class for itself'. The sense of community and community life among the Kelang Valley middle class respondents, though present, were relatively weaker than in the two provincial towns.

Given the above scenario, what is the likely trend in terms of future social transformations? Does this mean that the new Malay middle class in metropolitan areas face the danger of the demise of community and of losing their roots because of a much stronger ethnic plurality, cultural heterogeneity and cosmopolitanism in the latter? These possibilities are there. This is so, not only because of generational change, as the first generation middle class gives way to the second, third and so forth, but more so because of the frenzied drive to modernize the country in order to achieve Vision 2020 (Mahathir 1991). In fact, the metropolitan city of Kuala Lumpur and its suburbs are being symbolically transformed into a cosmopolitan global city, appropriating numerous global icons of material modernity such as the world's tallest skyscraper (the Kuala Lumpur Twin Tower), the world's longest building (the Linear City), a cyber city (Cyber Jaya), and so on. However, there are some policy 'brakes'



along the way, expressed in the form of the need to become a developed nation within 'our own mould'. At the same time, as our study has shown, communities and identities are constructed and reconstructed by relying on socio-cultural and religious resources held in common by members of a community under changed material conditions, given the consciousness and desire on the part of their members to 'preserve' -- in the face of change -- some of their traditional characteristics. This explains the staying power of some aspects of the social culture of the new Malay middle class that appear seemingly 'traditional'. However, as argued in the study, the desire to relate to 'tradition' or 'pastness' among members of the new Malay middle class, is not 'residual' or traditional, but itself is a modern, recent construct.

### **The Dynamics of Political Culture**

What are some important political implications of being a first generation new Malay middle class which is state-sponsored? Are members of the new middle class capable of developing a certain degree of autonomy to exercise some restraints upon the state and market, and to become a force promoting democracy and civil society?

While the social culture of the new Malay middle class gives a varied picture, their political culture is far from monolithic, reflecting acquiescence and loyalty to state authority and leadership on one hand, and dissidence and opposition on the other. In this regard, it is worth recalling the arguments by Chandra (1979, 1998) that unquestioning acceptance of, and acquiescence to, the authority of the state and of the man at the helm of government, within a significant segment of society has been part



of Malaysian, especially Malay political culture for a long while.<sup>2</sup> Such a tendency was also found in our study of Malay middle class politics, especially among respondents in the Kelang Valley. At the time of the study, many seemed to accept the overall BN government framework, even tolerating its authoritarianism ostensibly to maintain ethnic hegemony, political stability and continued growth.

However, it was also shown that an important, though much smaller, segment of the new Malay middle class has grown to be critical of the BN government and has voiced support for democracy and civil society. We have to not only look at political parties and NGOs, but beyond them for such voices. As pointed out earlier, some of these middle class elements were members of, and voted for the opposition. A smaller number was also active in political NGOs, some were within UMNO, while others remained outside political parties and NGOs. Whatever their organisational affiliations, they constantly provided critical voices, calling for more democratic space and serving as a moral restraint upon the state and market.

The latter was part of the broader force that would probably grow – albeit much more slowly -- had they not been energised two years after the study by the call of *reformasi* (reformation) for justice, democracy and an end to authoritarian rule by the sacked Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, previously appointed successor to

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<sup>2</sup> “Conditioned by the feudal background of Malaysian society, this relationship between ruler and ruled which was particularly strong within the majority Malay community, was reinforced by its deep psychological need for a ‘protector’ to look after the community’s interests in the face of the competition posed by the economically better-off Chinese minority. Invariably, it was the UMNO President and Prime Minister, who donned the mantle of ‘protector’. Blind loyalty to the protector was, however, not just a product of a feudal psychology. As in other political systems, what assured the protector of the loyalty of his followers were the perks and positions he could provide” (Chandra 1998).



Premier Mahathir. In his campaign against Mahathir, Anwar openly challenged the man at the helm of the state, and to a certain extent, had succeeded in demolishing what Chandra (1998) calls 'the halo of the protector'. It was the Anwar incident (his unceremonious sacking from government and ruling party in early September 1998, his character assassination in the media and his infamous 'black eye' -- proof of police brutality while in custody at the top security command of the Federal police headquarters) that had served as an 'exogenous' fillip making many members of the Malay new middle class and others more politically aware to demand for change. However, to what extent this development constitutes a 'watershed in Malaysian politics' (Chandra 1998) is too early to gauge. The Malaysian political scene is complex. While the Anwar incident triggered the upsurge, and has the potential to garner broader support and momentum because of its convergence with calls for justice and democracy raised earlier by both Malay and non-Malay middle class-based parties and NGOs as well as intellectuals, the forces of change are still too fragmented. It should be recognised that Malay middle class politics does not follow a straightforward equation of either for, or, against democracy and civil society. Among these forces, the idea of change may not mean the same thing to different groups. While some may see change in terms of promoting greater democratic space for civil society, others may see it as change in the leadership. This means that their demand for change cannot automatically be taken to mean a demand for democracy, and the insistence on maintaining the current political order by some quarters does not necessarily mean support for authoritarianism.



Social transformation is not just change. It involves fundamental alterations in the character of society and in social relations between classes and groups. It also brings about changes in people's minds, especially in the way they look at things, their ideology and political culture, together with changes in their ethics and lifestyles. The changes can be gradual, but can also be rapid. The new Malay middle class, while economically still in the process of formation, is currently at a cultural and political cross-road in this great transformation. The class is a product of social change, and after having reaped the benefits of change, a substantial proportion wants to maintain the status quo, though some may demand certain changes. Both the social and political cultures of the new Malay middle class are evolving at their own pace, though currently the political culture seems to be changing slightly faster. The character and pace of this change plays a significant role in shaping the contours of Malaysia's social transformation into the twenty first century, but there are justifiable reservations regarding the extent to which the middle class will and can effectively carry it through.



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