



In Malaysia, a promise to continue a race-based affirmative action policy will only entrench racism

□ *By Nazri Bahrawi. First published in the guardian.co.uk*

Last month, prime minister Najib Razak [vowed to continue](#) an unpopular affirmative action policy that favours the nation's Malays (who make up for slightly more than half of its population) over the Chinese and Indian minorities, who account for about 26% and 8% respectively.

The New Economic Policy (NEP), as this racialised national programme is known, was introduced nearly four decades back to raise the Malays' share of the nation's wealth from a meagre 1.5% to a more equitable 30% and create a Malay middle class. To this end, the government imposed racial quotas in such spheres as education and business.

The quotas resulted in civil service scholarships being granted to Malays over more deserving minority candidates, and the same could be said of government jobs. Meanwhile, businesses must meet a minimum level of 30% ownership for Malays and other indigenous people.

While Malaysia's Chinese and Indian minorities were at first agreeable, the prolonged implementation of NEP-type policies has today left them feeling like second-class citizens. Many, especially the affluent Chinese, left Malaysia to seek opportunities elsewhere. The largely working-class Indians were not as fortunate.

Ironically, a sizable segment of the Malay population – from the middle and working classes – also began complaining about these policies on the grounds that they benefited only a select group of well-connected Malays.

Such discontent has led to Malaysians registering their protest during last year's general election by voting overwhelmingly for the opposition instead of the ruling coalition that comprises a hotchpotch of race-based parties headed by Najib's United Malays National Organisation (Umno). Although the latter still won the polls, it took a severe hammering – losing its two-thirds parliamentary majority and the control of five states.

Little wonder that Umno which fashions itself as a party championing Malay rights since its

inception in 1946 has now decided to [tone down](#) its racial policies through a slew of reforms this year. Among others, it launched the "1Malaysia" concept to unite the nation's racially-fractured citizens. Najib also announced that a merit-based scholarship open to all races will be introduced next year.

While many analysts are quick to proclaim that Umno is now a transformed political entity, evidence that it has moved past racialism is sparse. For one thing, the tenets of "1Malaysia" are still nebulous at this juncture.

Yet the most telling sign could be gleaned from the rhetoric of its up-and-coming politician Khairy Jamaluddin who wants the party [to discard](#) its ideology of "Malay dominance" for "Malay leadership". Herein lies the crux of the problem. The pith of the "Malay leadership" ideal is no different from "Malay dominance" – Malays are to reign supreme over other races. In its basest form, "Malay leadership" resonates of the "Hutu Power" ideology in Rwanda and the white supremacist slant of South Africa's apartheid where one race dominates over others.

Instead of eradicating Malaysia's decades-long racialism, its ruling elites look set to entrench it further into the system by making it subtle. However, driving racialism underground has its social costs. To understand this, Malaysia needs to look no further than neighbouring Singapore where racialism is understatedly exercised in the way the city-state maps educational performances and social ills by race.

Doing so has put its minority Malays, largely from the lower income groups, in an unfavourable light. Official statistics show that this group which makes up about 14% of Singapore's largely Chinese population are overly represented in terms of social problems such as teenage pregnancies and divorces. This has the entrenched stereotypes that the Malays are a

problematic lot – oversexed and irresponsible.

So much so that some have hinted of racism. One journalist, for instance, likens being a Malay Singaporean to feeling "like the least favourite child in the family". The Singapore example suggests that subtle racialism gives rise to a population trapped in a worldview that hails race as their primary identity marker.

But Malaysia is probably in a worse quagmire. Two years back its capital, Kuala Lumpur, was the scene of a racial protest by lower-class Indians that saw the police clamping down on demonstrators.

If Umno leaders are serious about reforms, then they must seriously consider eradicating racialism in all its manifestations. An alternative proposal mooted by Malaysia's opposition calls for a needs-based affirmative action policy which dishes out aid by income group to replace the government's pro-Malay stance.

Still, the real litmus test of Umno's commitment to inclusivity is a controversial one: disband race-based parties altogether. This would mean outlawing Umno and their partners, supplanting in their place a political entity that is colour-blind. Perhaps only then could Malaysia truly claim itself to be one.