

Whose social contract?

JUDGING from the Malay response to the event, the organisers of the Malay Dignity Congress must be congratulating themselves for staging one of the most memorable, contentious and rancorous Malay unity meetings in the recent political history of the country.

The meeting succeeded in bringing together leaders from Malay political parties from both sides of the divide. Heavyweights included PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang, Pakatan ministers Azmin Ali, Maszlee Malik and Syed Saddiq Rahman, and Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Annuar Musa and other Malay political notables and wannabes. It also had no less than the prime minister himself to address the occasion.

The meeting also brought in the intellectual resources of four of the nation's leading public universities, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Universiti Teknologi Mara and Universiti Putra Malaysia to lend substance to and highlight the Malay dignity crisis.

With an emeritus professor as the congress secretariat's CEO in making the keynote address, it had the added firepower of a speech by Universiti Malaya's vice-chancellor, Datuk Dr Abdul Rahim Hashim and featured mainly young speakers from the four universities to emphasise what they see as the future orientation for the country.

Congress resolutions and response

The outcome was the most comprehensive list of racially charged resolutions presented to the government since independence.

Clearly targeted towards the Malay younger generation, the key resolutions in education, religion, economy, culture and government and politics included proposals to

➔ phase out all vernacular stream schooling

➔ increase the scholarship percentage for the B40 and bumiputra; and liberalise PTPTN repayment solely for bumiputra graduates

➔ make Malay the only teaching medium in primary and secondary schools and the dominant language at institutions of higher learning. Jawi is also to be made compulsory at primary, secondary and tertiary levels

➔ ensure that all top government positions are held only by Malays. This includes positions such as chief justice, attorney-general, chief secretary, inspector-general of police, chief of defence forces and the highest political positions such as the prime minister, deputy prime minister, chief ministers and mentris besar, finance minister, defence minister and education minister. In addition, key government posts are to be reserved for sunni-Malays only

➔ strengthen Malay economic institutions and government-linked companies; and establish a special commission to monitor these entities to protect the interest of Malays.

Further augmenting the

resolutions were charges that non-Malays who have broken the social contract and disrespected Islam's position in the country would be punished in keeping with a Quranic injunction requiring Muslims to oppose oath breakers and treaty violators until they repent or submit. This would be done through stripping them of their citizenship rights.

In his speech to the assembly, Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad stated that "I have faith in this Congress that it was organised to look for ways that we can ourselves embark on actions to improve the fate of the community." But he also reminded that dignity was not accorded by expecting help from others, but through accomplishment if Malays wanted to stay ahead.

Since the congress Mahathir has tried to reassure the larger public that that not all the demands would be met. "There is a demand, but it doesn't mean that the government has to accept the demands. We have to look into what we can do and what we cannot do."

From the non-Malay and East Malaysian side (supported by a small group of critical Malay commentators) the responses which have flooded the social media have ranged from sadness and angst to disbelief and outrage. Point by point rebuttals of the resolutions and congress proceedings have been made and have gone viral; and police reports relating to Prof Zainal Kling's speech have been lodged by concerned individuals and groups.

What next for the social contract?

It is obvious that the majority of Malays and non-Malays are divided as to what comprises the social contract and the constitutional rights of Malays and non-Malays, as well as the position of Malays in the peninsula, and that of East Malaysians and other bumiputra.

This rift has reached dimensions with the potential to destroy the nation if not addressed urgently, sensibly and in accord with the indisputable facts of history. The targeting of young Malays so that they become advocates of a *ketuanan Melayu* complex should especially be of great concern to policymakers and educators.

Nine years ago a multiracial group of scholars issued a press statement in response to the speech made by the then prime minister Najib Razak on Oct 21, 2010 to the Umno general assembly. In it the prime minister gave the impression that there is a "social contract" whose terms are set in stone and which no Malaysian should question.

The scholars argued that it is important for Malaysians not to be gagged into silence on what they saw as the most contentious issue standing in the way of better inter-communal relations.

They proposed that for the nation to reach consensus on what the social contract means – not only on what was agreed by the nation's early leaders but also, more importantly, on how

understood by Malaysians today – it is necessary to have the facts on what took place during that critical period to be fully disclosed and available for public discussion.

Thus relevant reports of the Reid Commission should be made available in Bahasa and other languages and widely disseminated so that Malaysians have the opportunity to understand the logic and wisdom of the constitution and do not have to depend on delusional or politically skewed interpretations of the agreement reached for that period.

The scholars also called on constitutional and legal experts, historians and other scholars to lend their expertise to the public understanding.

Professional organisations such as the Bar Council, the Malaysian Social Science Association, and other bodies should organise talks, seminars and forums so that the best minds on the subject can

have their opinions known and disseminated.

In this matter it needs to be emphasised that Zainal Kling does not appear to have undertaken any research on the subject on which he delivered his keynote speech. Similarly with the vice-chancellor of Universiti Malaya. Neither have the two written any academic work on the nation's social contract and constitutional history that has been cited by reputable scholars.

The concerned scholars ended by noting that "the Malaysian public has reached a level of political maturity so that we can have a rational and public debate on the way forward in terms of any inter-communal accord or understanding arrived at, and on what needs to be honoured and respected."

For that reason, they argued that "in not debating the issue openly there is a real danger not only of driving that debate underground but also of reinforcing or entrenching ethnocentric

interpretations that do not reflect the true intent of the constitutional agreement reached more than 50 years ago."

Positive side of the congress

What happened at the Malay Dignity Congress may perhaps be seen optimistically as opening our eyes to the disingenuity and extremism that is present in some segments of the Malay community. At the same time it provides the opportunity for a truth seeking examination to take place without any further delay.

The Pakatan government should open up the Malay dystopian box of the "social contract" so that we can finally put this contentious issue behind us and concentrate on the real nation building that is being undermined.

This article is the twelfth in the series on the state of Malay dominance. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com



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