

## Malaysia's Dilemma: The Need for a New Identity Politics Framework

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### Abstract

*The Malaysian politics has been labelled communal politics and rightly so for one of the most dominant and enduring themes of politics in the country is about race. In such politics, most issues are framed within the compartment of race. This essentially is the political narrative in the country since its inception. However, recently many have argued for the transition towards non-communal based politics. This article seeks to explore the merits of non-communal politics and communal politics framed within the context of identity versus non-identity politics, arguing that while both have merits that cannot be ignored, both tend to have limitations. Extreme identity politics in term of racial identity tends to be divisive and confrontational while at the other extreme, complete avoidance of identity politics may ignore or sweep over real concerns such as marginalization, neglect, oppression, and discrimination. A more desirable alternative might be accepting identity politics as one of the many themes of politics promoting welfare of the people while rejecting the undesirable extreme version of identity politics. It is clear that the narrow conceptualization of identity politics within the contexts of race and religion may impede the promotion of other identities such as gender and the marginalize. However, a less extreme and positive version of identity politics can promote beneficial and needed social, political, and other changes if framed in a more positive way. Some of the characteristics of a more positive politics of identity include the focus on seeking to improve welfare of the discriminated, marginalized, neglected and/or oppressed groups using non-violence and non-confrontational approach, focusing on similarities and commonalities between opposing groups or identities instead of division and hatred, conceptualization of identity politics beyond communal politics and finally promoting instead of stifling dialogue or conversation in the name of political correctness.*

**Keywords:** Identity politics; Malaysian politics; Race politics; Marginalized groups; B40

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### INTRODUCTION

Received: 15 September 2023

Accepted: 12 December 2023

Published: 31 December 2023

Identity politics is a popular term in the study of politics. It is the “politics in which people engage when they mobilize on the basis of, and when they define their experiences, their political problems, and their aims in terms of the good of identity-groups” (Hayward and Watson, 2010). Identity politics is also usually referred to as the politics of identity or identity-based politics (Neofotistos, 2013). The phrase “is widely used in the social sciences and humanities to describe the deployment of the category of identity as a tool to frame political claims, promote political ideologies, or stimulate and orientate social and political action, usually in a larger context of inequality or injustice and with the aim of asserting group distinctiveness and belonging and gaining power and recognition (Neofotistos, 2013). Although identity politics may also have other

applications, identity politics is used in this article to refer to political mobilization on the basis of certain identity such as identity related to ethnic, gender, class and religion.

The exact inception of the use of the phrase is debated but new social movements began to emerge after the late 1960s emphasizing identity concerns and operated outside formal institutional channel (Cahoun, 1993). In the 1970s the black feminist lesbian movement highlighted inequality in resources and opportunities leading to experience of identity-based oppression (Hayward and Watson, 2010). Recognition is considered the driver for the social movements in the late twentieth century in Western countries (Taylor, 1994 cited in Hayward and Watson, 2010). This notion is supported by Fukuyama (Gardeis, 2018).

Identity politics encompasses “a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020). Identity politics seeks “to recommend, variously, the reclaiming, redescription, or transformation of previously stigmatized accounts of group membership. Rather than accepting the negative scripts offered by a dominant culture about one’s own inferiority, one transforms one’s own sense of self and community” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020).

Both the right and left had criticized identity politics. Some have argued that identity politics is divisive. For example, O’Neill (2015) not only branded identity politics as divisive but also narcissistic and needy. Some lamented the loss of individuality. “...A new threat to individualism has risen in modern politics from what is being described as ‘identity politics’...identity politics seeks to rally special privileges for the “protection” of a particular race, ethnicity, religion, class or gender on the pretext of correcting a supposed historical wrong against it...With the rise of this new brand of collectivism, individual identity and distinctiveness has been subsumed by the strident straitjacket of group consciousness, leading to uncompromising feuds and divisiveness in society. It is

not how an individual thinks or acts, but which group one belongs to (in the collectivist scheme) which is gaining importance in politics.” (Rasheed, 2018).

Schlesinger (1991) felt it is a barrier for ending marginalization while for Jones (2012) identity politics marginalizes the working class as proponents chose to devote attention on gender rights and ethnic minorities at the expense of the working class. According to Fukuyama the effect of identity politics over the years “began to take on an exclusive character where people’s “lived experiences” determined who they were. This created obstacles to empathy and communication. We are now in a phase where identity politics have moved to the right...” (Gardeis, 2018). Fukuyama further contented that identity politics is undermining democracy (Gardeis, 2018). Another criticism of identity politics is that it tends to ignore intersectionality, that is, differences within social categorization. “The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite- that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class” (Crenshaw, 1991). According to Hedges (2018), “the left, seduced by the culture wars and identity politics, largely ignores the primacy of capitalism and the class struggle.” Hobsbarm (1996) among others criticized identity politics as just another version of bourgeois nationalism.

### *Soft and Harsh Approaches to Identity Politics*

There are different approaches in identity politics. The soft approach involves more on co-opting rather than coercing through appeal and attraction hence often use by NGOs as it does not directly challenge the status quo (Nye, 2012). Furthermore, soft approach is addressing underlying disposition since it extends beyond government operations and also includes private and society activities at large (Nye, 2012). Soft approach focus on experience. Identity politics rests on the connection between a certain undergoing and the subject-position to which it is attributed and thus on unifying claims about the meaning of politically laden experiences to diverse individuals (Zavarzade,

2021). This emphasizes the importance of understanding the experiences of individuals within the social structure that generate the injustice in addressing a problem.

On the other hand, the harsh approach involves challenging dominant identities which may involve a more confrontational tactics to challenge the status quo, promoting a victim mentality where individuals or groups are seen as solely defined by their opposition to a dominant identity and hinder efforts to find shared solutions to social injustices, and essentialism (naturalism) which can be problematic as they may not accurately represent the diverse experiences and perspectives of individuals within a group (Zavarzade, 2021).

## **MALAYSIA'S DILEMMA**

Malaysia has always been characterized by politics of identity albeit along racial lines or ethnic identities. The main ethnic groups are Malays, Chinese and Indians but there are also various ethnic groups in East Malaysia who considered themselves distinct from the Malays in West Malaysia. It need to be noted that Malay is applied to anyone professing Islam, practice Malay custom and habitually speaks Malay. Under the law, to be a Malay one must be professing Islam. Thus in Malaysia, Malay identity involves a conflation between religion and race.

Even prior to the independence in 1957, political parties were formed along racial line, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysia Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysia Indians Congress (MIC). A multiracial party like Parti Negara was not successful even though it was headed by the well-known leader, Dato' Onn Jaafar. While divided along racial lines, ethnic leaders sought to foster cooperation among the three ethnic groups by forming the Alliance Party comprising UMNO, MCA, MIC and a Sarawakian-based party. By the early 1970s the alliance was expanded through the formation of Barisan Nasional (BN) or National Coalition, UMNO as the dominant party. This inter-racial or inter-communal cooperation based on power sharing is called consociational.

BN's dominance was rarely challenge until the 2008 General Election (GE12), when the Anwar-led Pakatan Rakyat managed to deny two-third majority of BN in parliament but it took another 10 years when another opposition alliance, Pakatan Harapan, was able to defeat BN in the GE14 (2018). It was the first time the UMNO-led

coalition was defeated in a general election. However, in the early 2020, another alliance, Perikatan Nasional was formed, displacing Pakatan Harapan as government following the resignation of the prime minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Due to political instability the Perikatan Nasional called a snap election in 2022 which saw the return of Pakatan Harapan as government led by Anwar Ibrahim.

The standard narrative in the identity politics in Malaysia is that there are two main categories of citizen in the country--Malays/Bumiputeras and the non-Malays/Bumiputeras. Severe poverty and low education level existed among the Malays/Bumiputeras after independence vis-à-vis the non-Malays/Bumiputeras. This imbalance was blamed for the racial riots in 1969. Affirmative action policy to help the Malays/Bumiputeras was established to ensure a more equitable ownership of wealth between the two groups. This include priority of the Malays/Bumiputeras in receiving government scholarships, contracts and job allocations among others. Malays/Bumiputeras was given special status under the constitution by virtue of being the native, status that cannot be questioned. A compromise during independence whereby the non-Malays/Bumiputeras were granted citizenship in exchange for the Malays/Bumiputeras' special rights under the constitution was the justification of such status. This institutionalized preferential treatment brewed resentment among the non-Malays/Bumiputeras. On the other hand, far right members of the Malays/Bumiputeras are unhappy with the education policy allowing vernacular schools to exist. Religious and racial issues are sensitive in the country and action seen to provoke religious and racial sensitivities is punishable by law. To promote unity among the different races, Bangsa Malaysia was constructed to include all Malaysians (Gabriel, 2011).

### *Ethnic Politics and Division*

Although the recent national election in 2018 (GE14) initially seemed to indicate willingness by the voters to vote less along race especially in the urban areas, the collapse of Pakatan Harapan dashed hope that the country is finally transitioning towards non-racial politics (Rahman, 2018). However, urban voters are less racially oriented in voting compared to rural voters. A survey conducted by EMIR Research (2020) found that 97% of the urban voters did not put race and religion as the main criteria in choosing their representative even though most of the voters from rural areas do so (Peredaryenko, 2020). Other prominent issues related to identity in the country include demand of autonomy by the eastern states of Sarawak and Sabah due to their distinct positions within

Malaysia vis-à-vis the other states (see Hah,2018), religious conversion and the LGBT community who had been active during Mohammad Najib Abdul Razak's rule. However, the recent election (15<sup>th</sup> General Election) has shown that ethnicity remains a major factor in determining voting behavior, with more than 80% of non-Malay voters supporting Pakatan Harapan and almost a similar proportion among Malay voters voted against Pakatan Harapan suggesting voters in Malaysia still vote along ethnic lines, although other factors such as economic concerns, governance issues and political instability also play parts (Ostwald and Nazri, 2023).

Identity politics based on race and religion has polarized the country contributing to resentment, fragmentation and political instability. Politicians, fundamentalists and political parties often appeal to divides over religion, race and competing visions for political reform to mobilize their supporters, creating a polarizing atmosphere of hatred causing the intensification of divisions. This caused intolerance, increasing apathy, endangering inter-ethnic harmony and eroding social cohesion (Elumalai, 2023). This hinder much needed reform (Welsh, 2020).

There are those who wish to do away with identity politics, more specifically racial or ethnic politics, including the current prime minister. In a recent Bernama report, the then Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin proposed that “identity politics or race politics in multi-racial Malaysia should not continue even if it can't be totally erased...with social media now a part of our lives, society is easily triggered when issues related to race, religion, and income are raised, in the process affecting inter-racial relations.” (“Race politics in multi-racial society should not continue – Muhyiddin”, 2020).

If identity politics is blamed for so many problems, is it time to totally abandon identity politics as a basis for political mobilization in the country? The objective of this article is to suggest that while extreme and negative expressions of identity politics should be avoided, total abandonment of such politics is counterproductive. There is a need for identity politics to continue in Malaysia provided the flaws in its framework and

expression are overcome and a more positive approach is used in mobilizing support for marginalized, neglected and oppressed groups.

## **RELEVANCE OF IDENTITY POLITICS IN MALAYSIA**

As stated earlier some had called for politics in the country to be uncoupled from race or identity politics. It is understandable due to the polarizing effects of extreme identity politics in the Malaysian society. It seems to be the right proposition but a further reflection will suggest that total rejection of politics of identity in general may not be beneficial in a democratic society, at least in Malaysia at present.

The existence of groups with socioeconomic or political goals is expected in democratic societies. Politics of identity is a legitimate aggregation for political demands. Furthermore, the critique of identity politics stems mostly from western experience. In the context of Malaysia, social movements based on identities have not really taken off beyond race, religion, parochial and LGBT movements have not been very successful at least successful in terms of recognition.

Marginalized and neglected groups need attention and/or recognition to improve their welfare. There are marginalized and neglected groups in all societies. It is a real problem facing our country today. Identity politics allows us to avoid sweeping away demands of certain groups related to ethnicity such as orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and stateless children in Sabah. In fact, it cannot be denied that affirmative actions had allowed many poor Malays/Bumiputeras to improve their standard of living. However, the poor and the marginalized in all ethnic groups must be helped as well. Certain grievances are meaningful only in terms of race such as the rights of vernacular school to exist.

Identities politics continued relevance can be seen by several marginalized groups such as the challenges faced by women in juggling between work and home responsibilities due to the culture placing more responsibility on women at home compared to men thus more efforts should be done to address this issue (Ning and Karubi, 2018), discrimination against Person With Disabilities (PWDs) (Khoo et al., 2013), neglect of indigenous people (Khor & Shariff, 2020; Bernama, 2019), and exploitation of foreign workers (Amnesty International, 2010). Thus, identity politics as a way to promote the well-beings of marginalized groups is necessary but should be framed within



a soft approach. A soft approach which relies more on persuasion seeks to avoid divisions and thus a more positive approach.

## **FRAMEWORK FOR A POSITIVE IDENTITY POLITICS**

Extreme identity politics is not desirable because it tends to be divisive and confrontational while ignoring or complete avoidance of identity politics may overlook or sweep over real concerns such as the marginalized, the neglected, the discriminated and even the oppressed. A more desirable alternative might be accepting identity politics as one of the many themes of politics in the country but not the only theme. Identity politics should not only focus on recognition, equality and fairness but practical, bread and butter concerns such economic and welfare. Nevertheless, the extreme version of identity politics especially in term of violent expressions, assertion of dominance and the sowing of hatred are unacceptable. The narrow conceptualization of identity politics within the contexts of race and religion may impede the promotion of other identity politics such as gender and the marginalized, and therefore not desirable. A less extreme and positive version of identity politics can promote beneficial and needed social, political and other changes if framed in appropriate way. The characteristics of a more positive politics of identity include:

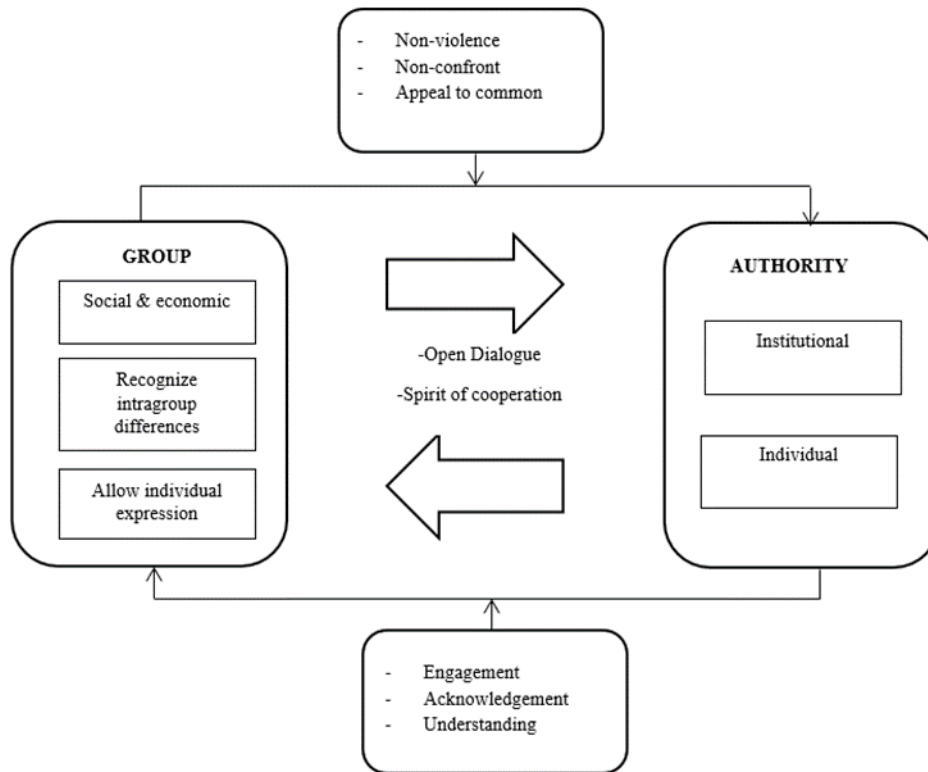
- (1) Focus on seeking to improve welfare of the discriminated, marginalized, neglected and/or oppressed groups using non-violent and non-confrontational approach.
- (2) Appealing to similarities and commonalities between opposing groups or identities instead of division and hatred and avoiding the “We” versus “Them” trap.
- (3) Conceptualization of identity politics beyond communal politics without neglecting class identities, intra group differences and recognizing multiple



identities including individuality as not to completely subjugate individual autonomy.

- (4) Promoting instead of stifling dialogue or conversation in the name of political correctness.
- (5) Remaining true to identity politics' focus on ending injustice and recognition while avoiding being narcissistic.
- (6) Conducted in the spirit of living together as a community/neighbour.

Some may suggest such propositions as naïve, but history shows that such seemingly weak and non-confrontational approach can be successful in bringing about needed change. Ghandi, Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. show that soft approach can work. In high power distance society like Malaysia coupled with culture that disdain direct assertiveness in making group demands, the “love” approach may be more appropriate approach in bringing about recognition and change.



*Figure 1: Framework of Positive Identity Politics*

## CONCLUSION

Demand based on certain identities is an important right under a democratic country and does not necessarily undermine democracy. However, identity politics should be decoupled from its extreme expression of violence, divisiveness and promotion of hatred from both the left and right as observed from recent experience in western societies

such as the United States. The politics of identity should be seen as contributing the good of society as a whole. The various social identities in society need to be treated with kindness and respect even without completely agreeing with their stands or demands. Rather than doing away with identity politics, it should remain to serve its original purpose – correct injustice albeit in nonviolent and non-confrontational way. It needs to reason and appealing to society as a whole including those in power to reconsider certain engrained narratives that may have caused suffering to certain groups. Identity politics should be pursued in the context of our identity as human. “...It is tempting to write that “identity politics” is an out-moded term, over-determined by its critics and part of a reductive political lexicon on both the Marxist left and the neoconservative right. Still, there are recent iterations of the recognition versus redistribution debate, ongoing arguments about the demands of intersectionality, and new forms of political resistance to the movements that circulate under the sign “identity politics”... Whatever limits are inherent to identity political formations, however, the enduring rhetorical power of the phrase itself indicates the deep implication of questions of power and legitimate government with demands for self-determination that are unlikely to fade away” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020). Identity politics is not inherently bad or good. How it affects us is really up to us.

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