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Malaya's First Five Years:
Division and Cohesion

12 Road 5/35
Petaling Jaya, Selangor
Malaya
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366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

On Malaya's fifth anniversary of independence, I cannot resist the temptation to try to pull together my impressions of this country as a new nation.

Despite its record of five years of political stability, Malaya's major problem is still that of building a political community. I do not think there is yet sufficient agreement on the rules of the game, or a sufficient balance of political parties to ensure that free elections, with oppositions that sometimes win, will continue. For the moment, however, the past and the future look fairly good. A summary of some of the major divisive and cohesive forces will help to clarify this and perhaps to give some idea of what the future holds.

Divisive Forces: 1. Communalism. Communalism (racism) is believed to be the most powerful of all divisive forces in Malaya. If this is true, it is because communalism is confounded with or composed of a myriad of focal points for other sentiments. These include religion, language, loyalty, political and economic power and special privileges; all are the subjects of strong divisive sentiments.

The big division in the country is between the 50% of the population who are Malays and the 37% who are Chinese. Malays are by definition Muslim; Chinese are Buddhist and Christian, underlaid with the ancient and powerful Confucian ancestor worship. Buddhism and Confucianism are basically peaceful and tolerant, and Christianity has outgrown its old intolerant evangelical character. The explosiveness of the religious differences here derives largely from the militant intolerance of the Muslim population. Although religious freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution, there are periodic outbursts of movements against the non-believers. Khalwat, the "physical proximity" of a Muslim with another (Muslim or not) is an offense under Malaya's Islamic law. There is now a drive to apprehend and punish offenders, and even a move in the Selangor State legislature to bring non-Muslims under the jurisdiction of the law. Although this is an improbable development, it illustrates the sentiments that make religion a divisive issue here.

Article 152 of the Constitution stipulates that the national language shall be Malay, allowing ten years or more from independence (1957) for the official use of English as well. The current goal is to make Malay the sole official language by 1967; it is already a kind of market lingua-franca in the country. Unfortunately only about one-fourth of the population is literate in Malay. Less than half the Malays are literate in their own language, and even many of these show greater proficiency in English than in their own language. It does not help national pride to know that speeches of some of the Malay cabinet ministers have to be translated into Malay by the Dutch scholars who staff the Malay Studies Department at the University. Less than 5% of the Chinese and Indians are literate in Malay, a language these communities regard as inferior to their own. English has been and still is the important language for upward mobility; it is the basic requirement for entry into the high status government posts. Malay has become defined as the language of the backward, low status peasant. This stigma was built up over more than three generations of British rule and it will not be eradicated easily. All of this makes the Malay nationalists even more fanatic in their insistence that Malay be the sole official language by 1967; dissenters are called disloyal.

The loyalty of the Chinese to Malaya has never been firmly established, and it was seriously called into question during the Emergency (1948-60). Despite official attempts to play down the communal character of the Emergency, it is recognized that the Communist insurgents were primarily Chinese and the Malayan forces were primarily Malays. Many Malays still insist that the Chinese are at best fence-sitters, or at worst loyal either to Peking or Taiwan. This supports an already strong tendency to define non-Malays as the guests of the Malays. There was a movement to include in the Constitution a clause stipulating that the country belongs to the Malays; its lack of success did not put an end to this sentiment.

Malaya has been described as a classic non-Marxist situation. Here the Chinese hold economic power and the Malays hold political power. In an attempt to bring the two communities into greater economic balance, Malays are given special privileges in many activities. The Civil Service must include four Malays for every non-Malay. (This is actually an increase for the Chinese and Indians who were previously barred from the Civil Service.) Scholarships, directorships, fat jobs, and things like transport licences and some government loans are open for the Malays for little more than the asking. Different standards are often applied for Malays and non-Malays. Last year the University of Malaya graduated its first Malay civil engineer; it required ministerial action for the fellow had failed his exams a number of times. He is now an engineer with the Drainage and Irrigation Department. Many educated Malays feel this will weaken rather than strengthen them as a community, but they can see no alternative. They recognize the powerful political appeal of the argument that the sons of the soil should have special treatment, and they also fear the consequences of a laissez-faire policy that would throw the Malays into direct competition with the Chinese.

2. Mass Political Sentiments. There are two important political sentiments that pervade the masses; one is basically communal, both are anti-democratic. Many liberal district officers have told me that the thing they fear most is the attitude of the village Malays who say of the Chinese, "If we ever want to, we'll just wipe them out." This truculent, uncompromising attitude is also found among the younger urban Chinese. It is supported by the fierce chauvinism of the old China-oriented Chinese schools that are now fortunately fading away. For all communities these sentiments manifest themselves in communal block voting, a pattern that dominates Malayan elections.

At last week's convention of the leading political party, the United Malay National Organization, a resolution was presented from the floor to abolish local elections because they are useless, costly and divisive. The liberal leadership succeeded only in sidetracking the resolution by amending it to read that a committee be formed to determine the necessity of the local elections. The resolution was passed unanimously. This is only one symptom of a deep sentiment of a people who are impatient with the democratic process, especially if their party is on top and being attacked by a vocal opposition. Supporting this sentiment is the more sophisticated argument that the economic development the country ardently desires requires strong central control.

Cohesive Forces: 1. Communalism. If communalism is one of the most powerful divisive forces in the country, the fear of communalism must be listed as one of the most powerful cohesive forces. There is a very generalized fear of an outbreak of racial violence that tempers even the hottest of the extremists. The rules of the House of Representatives expressly forbid any utterance that might give rise to communal sentiments. The most serious charge that can be made against a political leader is that of appealing to communal sentiments. It is tantamount to treason, for it is considered to strike at the very roots of the nation's existence.

Malaya's...
Affective and...

Leadership
Instrumental



Tungku
Abdul Rahman

2. Education. Although there are divisive forces in the attempt to meet the demand for education in a plural society, education must in balance be seen as a cohesive force. For the first time in her modern history Malaya has a single national educational system with almost all primary school age children in school. For the first time the country is bringing up all of its children under a common curriculum that emphasizes their common citizenship. Although this system is less than five years old, it totally dominates the old Arabic, Chinese and Indian schools that left the children either illiterate or totally ignorant of the country in which they lived. The next generation, coming of voting age in a scant fifteen years, will be quite unlike the present generation in ways that will increase stability. Even if they are unemployed, Malaya will still be the country of these children. Many see this as the country's only hope, implying



Tun
Abdul Razak

that the next fifteen years must be concerned with keeping mass communal sentiments under control.

3. Economic Development. Despite lack of accurate measures outside of government spending, there can be little doubt that Malaya's record of economic development in the past five years has been a good one. In part this is the result of the good fortune of high rubber and tin prices. The independent government took power with a surplus in the national coffers and has been willing and able to raise whatever it needed for development from revenues or loans.

The actual development that has flowed from this wealth, however, is not a matter of good fortune alone. It is the product of an efficient administration and dynamic leadership, a healthy combination of British legacy and modern nationalist spirit. The British built an efficient bureaucracy that provided technical and administrative services to all parts of the country. Now Tun Razak, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Rural Development, is effectively pushing the bureaucracy to increase its output. The bureaucracy is growing larger, but the new roads, schools, clinics and land being opened all over the country give dramatic testimony that its effectiveness as well as its size is increasing.

The independent government has given a strong rural emphasis to its development program. This is advantageous because even a successful development program will generally not raise the aspirations of rural people more rapidly than they can be satisfied. The isolation of rural people gives them a lower level of aspirations to begin with, and softens the impact of any specific development project. Thus the rural emphasis reduces the political protest that comes with economic change. Even in Malaya, opposition politics is largely concentrated in the large cities: Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Penang and Malacca. The disadvantage of this emphasis lies in the disparity between its short-term and long-term effects. With a rapidly growing and urbanizing population, the country will have to turn greater attention to industrialization if it is to maintain high employment. Although the leadership may well be pragmatic enough to shift the emphasis from rural to national development, it may be forced to maintain the rural emphasis because of the over-representation of the rural population in government. This may

prove to be an unresolvable dilemma in the future, but for the present, the development program provides strong cohesive forces in the country.

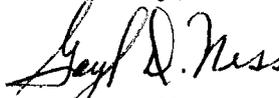
4. Leadership. By far the most important cohesive force in the country lies in the composition of its top leadership: the Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Rahman, and the Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak. In these two men the country has perfect examples of what sociologists call affective and instrumental leaders. The Tun's great value lies in his ability to hold together the country's diverse forces. He is the gentle arbiter, the conciliator, the father who settles fights and smooths over hurt feelings. Tun Razak has little of the warm, informal personality of the Tun. He is the epitome of the cool, hard-driving administrator, impatient with excuses and demanding results. Both men are immediately acceptable to the Malays because of their royal or noble ancestry. In addition, the Tun is acceptable to the non-Malays because of his complete lack of anti-Chinese or pro-Malay sentiments, which are generally attributed to Tun Razak.

It is a happy historical accident that Malaya has this specific combination of leaders at this time, for except in the case of truly great men, these two types of leadership cannot be provided by the same person. Although this makes the present look bright, it raises the serious problem of succession. Tun Razak is the heir apparent, but there is as yet no one in sight who can provide the kind of affective unifying leadership of the Tun. How successful Tun Razak can be in providing this kind of leadership is not known, but it worries many who are concerned with the future of Malaya's leadership.

Malaya's first five years have been good ones. The country has had a measure of good fortune and good leadership that have laid the foundations for future success by maintaining a balance between the divisive and cohesive forces. It must be admitted, however, that the balance seems precarious. Malaya's political community is only an embryonic one whose future is by no means certain. Nor am I certain that I am even thinking about this in the most useful terms. My frame of reference derives from the political and economic development of the western countries. I suspect that Malaya, as all the new states, will show some peculiarities that will be partly idiosyncratic and partly the manifestation of something more generally non-western, whatever that might be.

The biggest problem in Malaya's immediate future lies in the coming merger with Singapore and the Borneo territories under Greater Malaysia. The problem is whether Malaya's leadership will prove capable of holding together and providing growth for the even greater diversity of forces that Greater Malaysia will contain. The key probably lies in the ability of the leadership at the center to keep its hands off the new territories except to help them to develop as they desire. In their prosecution of the Emergency, the British have left Malaya a fine heritage of decentralized control that will go a long way in providing the kind of leadership climate required. At the same time, the forces of centralization and oligarchy are powerful here as they are in all the new states. If they dominate in Greater Malaysia, they could well produce strong and uncontrollable reactions against the Federation in all the new territories.

Sincerely,


Gayl D. Ness

Pictures are by courtesy of the Federation of Malaya Department of Information.