



MIER POLICY BRIEF

Vision 2020 Betrayed: Whither Malaysia?

BY JOMO K. S.

In three weeks, the year 2020 will end. Incredibly, it has been a year largely devoid of any serious discussion of Vision 2020, its significance, and the lessons its achievements and failures offer for the future. The philosopher Santayana warned, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Hegel had observed earlier that history repeats itself, to which Marx added, "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce". In February 1991, then Prime Minister Tun Mahathir articulated a bold vision for the future of Malaysia in three decades, branded Vision 2020, soon after the New Economic Policy's (NEP) Outline Perspective Plan for 1971-1990 ended.

Thirty years later, instead of realising its promise of perfect vision, 2020 will soon end differently. The reality today is quite different, with the blame game continuing over what went wrong.

Many agree that 2020 unexpectedly became *l'anno di vivere pericoloso*, Sukarno's 'year of living dangerously'. But worse, it has been a disastrous year for most of the world for various reasons, Elizabeth II's *annus horribilis*.

Vision and Hope

Nevertheless, Vision 2020 offered a visionary commitment, comparable to Tun Razak's Rukunegara and NEP two decades earlier in 1971 after May 1969. Razak sought to promote 'national unity' -- by 'eradicating poverty' and 'restructuring society' to eliminate the identification of race with economic function.

Vision 2020 aspired for a psychologically liberated, liberal, mature, ethical, tolerant, democratic, scientific, developed, industrialised, prosperous, progressive, caring, economically just, united and civilised Malaysian bangsa (nation).

This was soon accompanied by the notion of Melayu Baru, asserting a new self-confident Malay in 'bangsa Malaysia' rid of ketuanan Melayu's supremacist racist pretensions.

Vision 2020's forward-looking vision was elaborated by three now departed Malay intellectuals at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), namely Director-General Noordin Sopiee, economist Ismail Salleh and political sociologist Rustam Sani.

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Long preoccupied with nation-building, Rustom was the son of radical nationalist politician, Ahmad Boestamam, who helped craft the 1947 Perlembagaan Rakyat. Vision 2020 sought a bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian nation), just as the People's Constitution envisaged a bangsa Melayu, defined by patriotism, not ethnic genealogy or religion.

Vision Lost

The project was abandoned early, arguably due to the 1997-1998 financial crisis and the ensuing Mahathir-Anwar political fallout. However, although abandoned soon after birth, Vision 2020's promise, and the dreams it generated, however briefly, suggest all is not lost.

Unfortunately, the country has not had a real debate over what happened to Vision 2020. This progressive national vision sought to go beyond the divisive dominant interpretation of the NEP which effectively undermined its own declared objective of forging national unity.

In 1986, Mahathir began economic, educational and cultural liberalisation, following the economic downturn and political challenges of the mid-1980s. Ketuanan Melayu was coined, almost in reaction, to boost the political comeback of an ambitious, erstwhile Razak aide, detained without trial for half a decade after his untimely passing in January 1976.

Capturing public policy and its interpretations, ruling party politicians and their business 'cronies' undermined prospects for improved inter-ethnic relations by invoking ethno-populist 'victimhood' to secure ketuanan Melayu privilege.

Like Trump's beleaguered whites, Hitler's Aryan nation and Afrikaner-driven apartheid (against 'Anglo' dominance and the 'Black' threat), ketuanan ideology is legitimised by invoking such ostensibly racial 'victimhood'.

Ironically, for example, South Africa's NEP-inspired 'Black economic empowerment' (BEE) was reimported as 'Bumiputera economic empowerment' to emulate creating Black billionaires despite the continuing sorry lot of most Africans there a quarter century later.

Vision Betrayed

Although many consider Vision 2020 to have been Mahathir's finest, statesman-like moment, rising above the divisive legacy of NEP implementation, privatisation and the 1980s' UMNO factional splits, Mahathir has hardly mentioned it in his recent political comeback, for reasons best known to himself.

Mahathir successfully courted Pakatan Harapan (PH) leaders to take its helm before its May 2018 election victory. His campaign portrayed him as an old general coming out of retirement to save a nation hijacked by Najib and his mainly UMNO enablers.

However, despite wishful thinking by some enthusiasts, he did not abandon his ethno-populist politics. Wise and patient, he seemed to work well with most, within and outside PH, keeping his new partners in check.

No longer master of the moment, he expected his closest allies to let him lead a government of national unity as indispensable leader. But they seized the moment, hoping to capture the mantle of 'Malay-Muslim unity' from the well-funded Najib-Hadi 'bromance'.

Meanwhile, some DAP leaders' behaviour, seemingly insensitive to declining public support for PH, only seemed to confirm the 'Malay-Muslim' opposition's 'bogeyman' caricature of their party. Thus, PH's popular legitimacy, especially of its Malay leadership, was undermined by their conduct, enabling Bersatu's February palace coup.

Dreams of A Nation

The major political tendencies in Malaysia invoking ethno-populist agendas have inevitably torn the already divided nation apart, even while vehemently claiming otherwise.

While most post-colonial societies still struggle to overcome colonial legacies, ethno-populism employs pseudo-nationalist rhetoric for narrower, often reactionary agendas. By undermining national resolve, they enhance the influence of foreign interests and ideologies.

Yet, there is still potential in Vision 2020's promise of a modern, industrialised, developed and united Malaysian nation. Despite responding to ethno-populism in Malaysia, Vision 2020, like its predecessors, also has the potential of transcending it. Such are the dialectics of history.

Hence, the latent progressive nationalism of the Rukunegara, NEP and Vision 2020 is still relevant, but remains largely unrealised. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed much disruption, but this remains potentially creative, but only if wisely steered.

This will most certainly not involve a return to 'business as usual', or even a 'new normal'. We will only emerge stronger as a nation if we can pull together, instead of working at cross-purposes for dubious short-term political advantage and personal economic gain.

The pandemic has emphasised the need for an 'all of government' approach, involving the 'whole of society', not only to contain and overcome COVID-19 contagion, but also to build the Malaysia promised three decades ago by Vision 2020, and half a century ago, by the Rukunegara and the NEP.

The Audacity of Hope

Is the nation condemned to wallow in more contemporary variations of the same old 'ethno-populist' travesty? Is Malaysia condemned to keep replaying the same tragic charade, albeit with new casts and stage designs? Or can we still salvage our national future from this sham?

Malaysian politicians' ambitions and greed -- encouraged by ethno-populism the world over invoking identity politics a la Trump -- seem to have conspired for Malaysia's 'perfect storm'. But Malaysian politics of the last year is exposing the self-serving hypocrisy of all ethno-populisms.

But unlike in 1971, or even 1991, now, there is no shared alternative national project on offer to fill the vacuum post-2020 beyond recycling ethno-populist slogans spiced with buzzwords from Washington, London and Davos.

Emerging generational and gender differences in attitudes and priorities have opened cracks allowing occasional beams of light to inspire hope as we grope our way forward in this darkness, unaided, if not actually impeded by politicians and other would-be leaders.