



**PRAKSIS**  
THE JOURNAL OF ASIAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

ISSN: 2815-1046

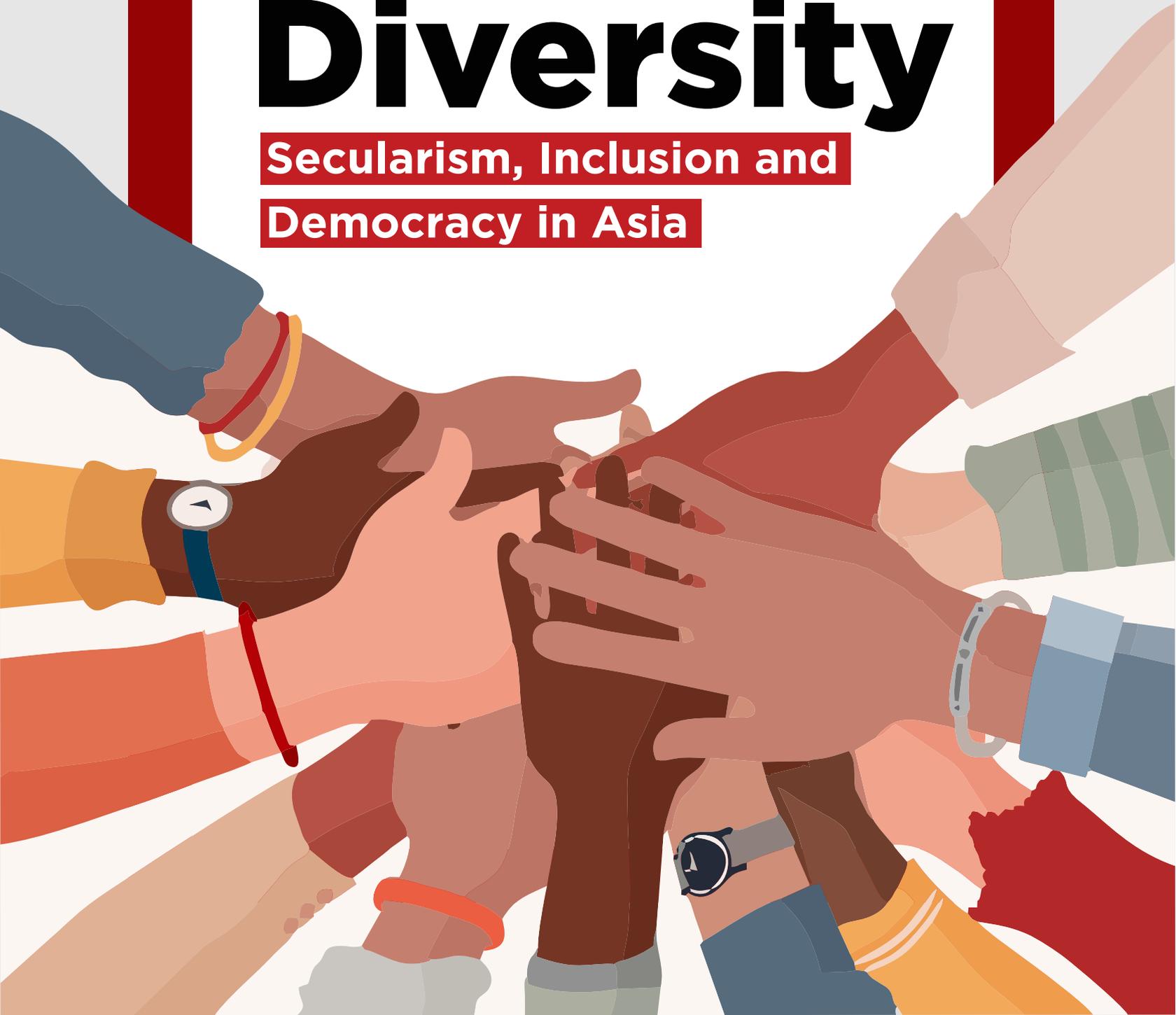
Volume 2

Issue 1

August 2022

# Unity in Diversity

Secularism, Inclusion and  
Democracy in Asia





**PRAKSIS** is a semiannual publication of the Network of Social Democracy in Asia (Socdem Asia). It seeks to combine theory and practice by providing cogent analyses to inform the strategy of the progressive movement and help shape the policy direction that should guide the region's governments.

**Marie Chris Cabrerros**  
*Network Coordinator*

**Francis Isaac**  
*Editor-in-Chief*

**Carlo Angelo Vargas**  
*Communications Officer and Editorial Assistant*

**Nando Jamolin**  
*Art and Design Assistant*

**Bea Reyno**  
*Network Secretary*

**Editorial Board and Steering Committee**

Nurima Ribeiro Alkatiri  
Marie Chris Cabrerros  
Rafaela David  
Francis Isaac  
Anurag Shanker  
Piyabutr Saengkanokkul  
Sondang Tampubolon  
Teo Nie Ching

**Network of Social Democracy in Asia**  
Unit 3-E, 112 Maginhawa Street, Barangay Teachers' Village East,  
Quezon City, Philippines, 1101

Website: [www.socdemasia.com](http://www.socdemasia.com) Facebook: [facebook.com/SocDemAsia](https://facebook.com/SocDemAsia)  
E-mail: [secretariat@socdemasia.com](mailto:secretariat@socdemasia.com)

*The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of Socdem Asia and of its allied parties and movements, unless otherwise stated.*

By: Kasthuri Patto

# Uniting the Nation

## Addressing Malaysia's Race-Based Politics

Malaysia — a nation of rich resources, a melting pot of cultures, beliefs, civilizations and religions that was once pitted as the tiger of Asia — is now a nation plagued by political instability, sexism, racism, religious bigotry, radicalism, corruption, and abuse of power. In other words, social justice, cohesiveness, peace and harmony are on a downward spiral due to the deliberate actions of the government. And this alone is where the danger lies.

To understand the existence of race-based political parties in Malaysia, one must explore its history — from being a colony of the British called Malaya, to the Japanese Occupation, to the Communist insurgency, and finally independence on 31 August 1957, and subsequently the formation of the Federation of Malaysia on 6 September 1963 with Sabah and Sarawak. Having gained independence in 1957 from the hands of the British with Tunku Abdul Rahman as the country's first Prime Minister, the Federal Constitution was born — the supreme law of the land — and was ratified on 27 August 1957, four days before independence.

There is one particular article in the Federal Constitution that provides special privileges for Malays or *bumiputeras*, which are not accorded to all citizens. And this has been the root of Malaysia's identity politics, which has proven to be both a blessing and a curse.

“There is one particular article in the Federal Constitution that provides special privileges for Malays or *bumiputeras*, which are not accorded to all citizens. And this has been the root of Malaysia's identity politics.

Image: [www.malaysiakini.com](http://www.malaysiakini.com)



Today the national census stands at 69.8 percent bumiputera, 22.4 percent Chinese, 6.8 percent Indians and one percent others. Indian laborers were brought in by the British from the 1700s to the 1800s to toil in rubber estates, tin mines and tea plantations. Some served as teachers, police officers and medical personnel. Others worked on railway tracks, making their way up to station master. But most ended up living in the most rural parts of peninsular Malaysia — and many still stay in these enclosures to this day. Chinese traders, on the other hand, made their way into the Malaysian economy through the spice trade, and through their involvement in tin mining and rubber production.

With the influx of Chinese and Indian laborers, there was a need to set up primary schools and other education facilities that gave importance on the mother tongue or native languages to promote and protect its use as markers of cultural and ethnic identity. Over the decades, hidden hands have shifted the goal post of identity politics, with unsurprising results — identity politics is triggering identity politics.

Malaysia's economy, politics and race relations suffered greatly during the darkest day of its history when racial riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur on 13 May 1969. This further pushed the wedge, polarizing what was once a peaceful Malaysia. This then prompted the government to introduce five tenets known as the *Rukun Negara* (National Principles) in 1970, which supposedly embodies the spirit of the Federal Constitution. These five pillars — belief in God, loyalty to the King and country, supremacy of the Constitution, rule of law, and courtesy and morality — have been inscribed in almost every ministry and government agency, in every school, and on the back cover of every exercise book used by school students. However, over the decades, these principles (similar to the Indonesian *Pancasila*<sup>1</sup>) have been reduced to mere decorative pieces placed on plaques and framed to adorn empty walls in public offices in compliance with government directives.

As a follow-up to the *Rukun Negara*, the government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 during the second prime ministership of Tun Abdul Razak, the father of former Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak. The main objective of the NEP was to rebalance and recalibrate Malaysia's socioeconomic policies after the race riots of May 1969, which was a litmus test

to the system of administration as well as race relations in the country. The NEP strove to eradicate poverty, reconstitute both society and the economy, and achieve unity harmony and integrity.

### **Bumiputera Policy**

Article 153 of the Federal Constitution guarantees “*Reservation of quotas in respect of services, permits, etc., for Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak*” 153. (1) *It shall be the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong<sup>2</sup> to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article.*”

It is this provision which established the 30 percent equity ownership target for the *bumiputera*, supposedly to achieve a more balanced economy. But once a policy like this is introduced, overzealousness takes over and a siege mentality develops. And when racism is institutionalized, it would take more than a change in the law to bring Malaysia to the right track.

What started as a well-intentioned effort to ensure that no Malaysian is left behind resulted in a system riddled with double standards — not only between *bumiputeras* and non-*bumiputeras* but also among the ranks of *bumiputeras* themselves. And while it may be true that the big bulk of the socio-economic cake are owned by *bumiputeras*, they only comprise a small portion of the entire Malay or *bumiputera* population.

### **Political Parties**

At the same time, these race-based socioeconomic policies cannot be realized unless you have certain bodies or vehicles that would carry them out. What better way to do it than through race-based political parties? Hence, Malaysia's further polarization has been perpetuated by identity politics in the form of race-based political parties.

An 'alphabet soup' of race-based and religious-based political parties had been formed since the time of British colonial rule up to the modern day. They are namely the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) and ethnic and tribal political parties in the states of Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo. UMNO, PAS, MCA and MIC are

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Pancasila* (Five Principles) is the official ideology of the Indonesian state — *the editor*.

<sup>2</sup> The *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* is the official title of the Sultan of Malaysia — *the editor*.



Image: edition.cnn.com

“Malaysia's further polarization has been perpetuated by identity politics in the form of race-based political parties.

political parties that have strongholds in peninsular Malaysia, whereas parties like the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO) represent the Muslim Suluk-Bajau community. There are also other parties that do not identify themselves according to ethnicity or religion, such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP), *Parti Sosialis Malaysia* (PSM or Malaysian Socialist Party), *Parti Rakyat Malaysia* (Malaysian People's Party) and in the last 20 years, *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (KeADILan or People's Justice Party), *Parti Amanah Negara* (National Trust Party) and other smaller political parties.

Since independence in 1957 until 9 May 2018, the same Barisan Nasional (BN) government comprising of UMNO, MIC, MIC, Gerakan and other component parties had been in power for over 60 years and enjoyed a two-thirds majority in the Dewan Rakyat (Parliament), making it a walk

in the park to amend the Federal Constitution by virtue of votes.

In 2008, there was a great uprising, a Malaysian Spring, when opposition parties won five of the country's 13 states and finally broke BN's two-thirds majority in Parliament (which the latter has not regained up to this day). Prior to the elections, in November 2007, hundreds of thousands of Malaysian Indian men and women took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur to demand justice and the protection of their rights. This led to mass arrests, targeting prominent opposition figures and civil society leaders. Apprehended under the now defunct Internal Security Act (ISA), this meant that those arrested were detained without trial. This, in turn, triggered a massive protest wave against the government's heavy-handed handling of ordinary Malaysians who were only asking for what are rightfully theirs.



Image: www.vulcanpost.com

**“Many Malaysians still feel the need for political representation based on race.**

### **Two-Court System**

While we pride ourselves for our cultural, religious and ethnic diversity, identity politics is still a tool that is being used and abused by all. Many Malaysians still feel the need for political representation based on race. Decades of fearmongering has led to the establishment of race-based parties that churn out race-based policies.

These policies are so ingrained in the system that even interpretations by the courts seem to vary. Because Malaysia has a two-court system — civil and Syariah — there are clear and separate matters that can and should be referred to either court. However, in a most recent case, hundreds of Malaysian mothers were not able to pass their citizenship to their children who were born overseas. On the other hand, Malaysian fathers are allowed to do so. This sort of discrimination, although not race-based, is still a form of discrimination.

Malaysia has seen its fair share of conflict between civil and Syariah courts, particularly in unilateral conversions to Islam by either the father or the mother without the knowledge and consent of the other. Because apostasy is considered as a crime, the entire reversal process is often shrouded by race and religious considerations instead of what should be done in the best interest of the child based on the country's civil laws.

Indira Gandhi is a Hindu woman was not aware that her husband Ridhuan Abdullah had become a Muslim convert and had their youngest daughter's religion changed to Islam without her knowledge or consent. The man then kidnapped their daughter, who was still a baby then, and has been on the loose for the past 14 years.

When he was asked why he refused to nab the rogue ex-husband, the former Inspector General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar answered that there were contradicting orders from the civil court and the Syariah court. This, coming from the top man responsible for law and order. Statements like this makes one shudder to think of the direction that the nation is taking.

It has been 14 years since Indira Gandhi had seen, cuddled or hugged her daughter, and yet there have been reports of Ridhuan Abdullah renewing his driving license and has apparently purchased a new car. Yet, no arrests were made.

### **Using the Race Card**

In 2010, former Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin proclaimed in Parliament that he is “Malay first and Malaysian second.” He was Deputy Prime Minister at that time. When a leader can blatantly identify himself according to his ethnicity and only to assure his supporters that he is like them and vice-versa, the country is in deep trouble.

After Pakatan Harapan became the government (which broke UMNO's 60-year winning streak), one of the reforms on the agenda was the ratification of international treaties, particularly human rights conventions and chapters.

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) should have been an easy enough convention for Malaysia to sign and ratify. Yet, it was met with rallies and threats of subsequent rallies. This was further worsened by academics who parroted the sentiments of both conservatives and radicals who opposed the ratification of the Convention. It was referred to the Council of Rulers, where the proposal died a natural death.

## Hope for Malaysia

The country has moved regressively when it comes to unity, cohesion and respect. However, all is not lost. With strong and formidable partners in the form of the National Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM), the Malaysian Bar Council and civil society, the issue of identity politics is being given the limelight that it deserves — that it must be directly addressed with nation-building, peace and national unity in mind.

This would be Malaysia's 65th Independence Day celebration. And yet, the race card, paired with identity politics, always takes center stage. Efforts must be done to finally put this to an end. ■

**“Identity politics must be directly addressed with nation-building, peace and national unity in mind.**

Image: [www.m.malaysiakini.com](http://www.m.malaysiakini.com)



 /SocDemAsia  [www.socdemasia.com](http://www.socdemasia.com)