UMNO Factionalism and The Politics Of Malaysian National Identity

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

This thesis analyses UMNO factionalism from the perspective of the elite’s manipulation of the various modes of nationalisms. This thesis argues that UMNO factionalism, which is seemingly a power struggle between competing UMNO elites, has been significantly shaped by contesting nationalist ideologies that reflect the unresolved questions of national identity in Malaysia.

These two issues, that is, nationalism and UMNO factionalism, have shaped Malaysian politics in significant ways. UMNO factionalism has been related to such major political events as the 1969 ethnic riots, the introduction of the New Economic Policy, the UMNO split in 1987 and the Reformasi (Reform) movement in 1998. Frequently, the impact of these disputes extended beyond UMNO politics and affected wider Malaysian politics. At the same time, due to unresolved questions of national identity, nationalism has occupied a central position in Malaysian political discourse. There are ambiguities regarding the relationships among the various ethnic identities and national identity and between the individual and the larger Malaysian community that enable elites to construct and manipulate nationalist ideologies. In this thesis, the conflicting nationalisms are captured by five different concepts of nationalism – ethnocultural, civic and multicultural nationalisms in one group and collectivist-authoritarian and individualistic-libertarian nationalisms in another.

The Malaysian Prime Ministers have constructed nationalist ideology to define the Malaysian nation in their attempts to resolve the unresolved problems of national identity. The challengers’ arguments, to mobilise the community, mirror the community’s (negative) responses to the Malaysian Prime Ministers’ nationalist visions. In addition, the ideological arguments in the disputes extend the dispute beyond the elites, involving the community as well. Furthermore, because of the ideological conflicts, these factional disputes affect the direction of government policies in significant ways. This study shows that UMNO factional disputes have followed this pattern of ideological conflicts, although the exact contents may vary.

The 1969 factional dispute was a clash between Tunku Abdul Rahman’s shift towards multicultural nationalism and its challengers’ ethnocultural
nationalism. Tunku Abdul Rahman’s nationalist vision moved away from ethnocultural nationalism in pursuit of national integration. The challengers, reflecting the Malay community’s response to the Prime Minister’s vision, took a strong ethnocultural Malay nationalist stance. The successful mobilisation of the Malay community by ethnocultural Malay nationalists contributed to the policy shift towards ethnocultural nationalism in the 1970s. In the 1987 dispute, Mahathir’s economic policy, which moved away from ethnocultural nationalism, was challenged by Razaleigh’s ethnocultural nationalist argument. After the dispute, Mahathir could only mobilise the community by tactically employing the rhetoric of ethnocultural Malay nationalism.

In the 1990s, Mahathir’s attempt to define the national identity of Malaysia by constructing a civic Malaysian nation, Bangsa Malaysia, relieved the tension surrounding the ambiguous national identity of Malaysia. It was facilitated by rapid economic growth that ameliorated ethnic contests over limited economic resources. However, the collectivist-authoritarian aspect of Mahathir’s nationalism raised another nationalist question concerning the subordination of individual liberty and rights to the collective community’s will and interests – a nationalism that justified his authoritarian rule. There was tension between an increasingly confident civic Malaysian society and Mahathir’s collectivist-authoritarian control of the society. The 1998 UMNO dispute was a clash between Mahathir’s collectivist-authoritarian nationalism and Anwar Ibrahim’s individualistic-libertarian nationalism. The latter attempted to mobilise Malaysian society with his nationalist position (the Reformasi movement) which was expressed in the demand for liberal political reform. After the dispute, Mahathir was able to regain lost political ground through the politics of fear. It seems, however, that the fundamental question remains unresolved. This unresolved tension between the demand for individual liberty and rights and authoritarian control by state elites is likely to shape the ideological arguments in future UMNO factional disputes.
Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... i  
Table of Contents ......................................................................................................... iii  
List of Tables ............................................................................................................... v  
List of Figures ............................................................................................................. vi  
Glossary and Abbreviation ....................................................................................... vii  
Acknowledgement ..................................................................................................... viii

1. INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................. 1  
   1.1. LITERATURE REVIEW: UMNO FACTIONALISM ......................................... 2  
   1.2. UNRESOLVED NATIONALIST QUESTION AND THE PATTERNS OF NATIONALIST  
       CONFLICT IN MALAYSIA ........................................................................ 12  
   1.3. COMPETING NATIONALISMS: MODELS FOR ANALYSIS .......................... 22  
   1.4. MAIN ARGUMENTS, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THESIS STRUCTURE .... 32

2. ABDUL RAHMAN’S MULTICULTURAL NATIONALISM AND  
   ETHNOCULTURAL NATIONALIST CHALLENGE:  
   FACTIONALISM IN 1969 ................................................................................... 45  
   2.1. ABDUL RAHMAN’S MULTICULTURAL NATIONALISM .................................. 47  
   2.2. UMNO ULTRA’S ETHNOCULTURAL NATIONALISM .............................. 66  
   2.3. THE CONSEQUENCE OF THE 1969 CRISIS: TOWARDS AN ETHNOCULTURAL  
       NATIONALIST STATE ................................................................................... 84  
   2.4. CONCLUSION .......................................................................................... 96

3. MAHATHIR’S WEAKENED MALAY NATIONALISM AND  
   RAZALEIGH’S ETHNOCULTURAL NATIONALIST CHALLENGE:  
   THE 1987 DISPUTE ...................................................................................... 110 
   3.1. UMNO FACTIONALISM IN THE 1980s: AN OVERVIEW ......................... 112 
   3.2. MAHATHIR’S ECONOMIC POLICY AND ITS NATIONALIST IMPLICATIONS.... 116  
   3.3. RAZALEIGH’S ETHNOCULTURAL ALTERNATIVES: LONG LIVE THE NEP! .. 132  
   3.4. FRESH RACE FOR NATIONALIST LEGITIMACY AFTER THE MAHATHIR-  
       RAZALEIGH CLASH IN THE 1987 UMNO ELECTIONS ............................ 142  
   3.5. CONCLUSION ........................................................................................ 156

4. UNRAVELLING MAHATHIR’S NATIONALISM IN THE 1990S:  
   COLLECTIVIST CIVIC NATIONALISM AND AUTHORITARIAN  
   POLITICS ........................................................................................................... 167 
   4.1. MAHATHIR’S CIVIC NATIONALISM AND ITS SUCCESS ............................. 168  
   4.2. MAHATHIR’S COLLECTIVIST-AUTHORITARIAN NATIONALIST VIEW ....... 191  
   4.3. MAHATHIR’S RHETORIC OF THREATS TO THE CIVIC MALAYSIAN NATION 203 
   4.4. CONCLUSION ........................................................................................ 216

5. CONFLICT BETWEEN COLLECTIVIST-AUTHORITARIAN AND  
   INDIVIDUALISTIC-LIBERTARIAN NATIONALISM: THE 1998  
   UMNO DISPUTE AND POLITICAL CRISIS ..................................................... 227  
   5.1. THE MAHATHIR-ANWAR RELATIONSHIP AND TENSIONS IN THE 1990s .... 230  
   5.2. ANWAR’S INDIVIDUALISTIC-LIBERTARIAN NATIONALISM .................... 234  
   5.3. THE 1998 UMNO DISPUTE AND COMPETING NATIONALIST VIEWS: FROM THE  
       1997 ECONOMIC CRISIS TO THE REFORMASI MOVEMENT ................. 246
5.4. Institutionalisation of Reformasi and Competition between the Two Ideological Positions ................................................................. 266
5.5. Mahathir Mobilises People with a Collectivist “Garrison-under-siege” Strategy .................................................................................. 281
5.6. Conclusion ............................................................................................ 295

6. Conclusion ........................................................................................................ 309
   Bibliography ........................................................................................................ 320
List of Tables

Table 1-1. Civic, ethnocultural and multicultural nationalisms

Table 1-2. Individualistic-libertarian/collectivist-authoritarian nationalisms

Table 2-1. Allocation of Parliamentary seats in Alliance Party, 1955-69

Table 2-2. Votes polled by UMNO/PMIP in Malay Heartlands: 1964/1969

Table 3-1. Development Budget Allocation for Ethnic Restructuring, 1986–90

Table 3-2. Changes in share ownership: 1970–1990 (%)

Table 3-3. 1990 Malaysian General Elections Results (Parliament)

Table 5-1 Major Economic Policy Change from 1997-98*

Table 5-2 Major Parties’ Performance in Recent Elections: Parliament Seats

Table 5-3 Parliament elections results of selected states/selected parties

Table 5-4 By-elections from 1999 General elections until the end of 2002
Glossary and Abbreviation

ABIM: Angakatan Belia Islam Malaysia; Malaysian Islamic Youth Council
BA: Barisan Alternatif; Alternative Front
Bangsa Malaysia: Malaysian Nation
Bangsa Melayu: Malay nation
BCIC: Bumiputera Commercial and Industrial Community
BMF: Bank Malaysia Finance
BN: Barisan Nasional; National Front
CIC: Capital Issues Committee
CLC: Communities Liaison Committee
Dakwah: Islamic missionary
DAP: Democratic Action Party
Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka: Language and Literature Council
EPU: Economic Planning Unit
Felda: Federal Land Development Authority
FIC: Foreign Investment Committee
GDP: Gross Domestic Product
Gerakan: Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia; Malaysian People’s Movement party
HICOM: Heavy Industries Corporation of Malaysia
ICA: Industrial Coordination Act
IMF: International Monetary Fund
IMP: Independence of Malaya Party
ISA: Internal Security Act
Keadilan: Parti Keadilan Nasional; National Justice Party (until 2003) or Parti Keadilan Rakyat; People’s Justice Party (since 2004)
KLSE: Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange
KMM: Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia; Malaysian Mujahidin Group
MARA: Majlis Amanah Rakyat; People’s Trust Council
MCA: Malaysian Chinese Association (before 1963, Malayan Chinese Association)
Melayu Baru: New Malay
Menteri Besar: state chief minister
Merdeka: Independence
MIC: Malaysian Indian Congress (before 1963, Malayan Indian Congress)
NCP: New Cultural Policy
NDP: National Development Policy
NEP: New Economic Policy
NGOs: Non-Governmental Organisations
NOC: National Operation Council
Orang Kaya Baru: New Rich People
PAP: People’s Action Party
PAS: Parti Islam Se-Malaysia; Pan Malaysian Islamic Party or PMIP
PBB: Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu; United Pesaka Bumiputera Party
PBS: Parti Bersatu Sabah; Sabah United Party
Pernas: Perbadanan Nasional; National Corporation
Petronas: Petronas; National Petroleum Corporation
PNB: Permodalan Nasional; National Equity Corporation
PPP: People’s Progressive Party
PRM: Parti Rakyat Malaysia; Malaysian People’s Party
PSRM: Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia; Malaysian People’s Socialist Party
Reformasi: Reform movement
SEDCs: State Economic Development Corporations
Semangat 46’: Parti Semangat 46’; Sprit of 1946 Party
SNAP: Sarawak National Party
Suhakam: Human Right Commission
SUPP: Sarawak United People’s Party
UDA: Urban Development Authority
UEM: United Engineering Malaysia
Ulama: religious teacher
UMNO: United Malays National Organization
USNO: United Sabah National Organization
Wawasan 2020: Vision 2020
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