

**UMNO Factionalism and The Politics Of Malaysian
National Identity**

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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.

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Glossary and Abbreviation

- ABIM: *Angkatan 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: *Majilis 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: *Petroliam Nasional Berhad*; 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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