

Malaysia: Bumiputra Privileges – A Disguised Jizyah – Continue

by Hugh Fitzgerald



It has been just over a year now since the office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, reversing a previous pledge by his government to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), declared that it would not do so, without giving a reason for the decision. Since then, nothing has changed.

The Convention was opposed by Muslim Malays (almost all ethnic Malays are Muslim, while the Chinese and Indians in Malaysia are non-Muslim), who feared it could lead to an end to the “Bumiputra” (Sons of the Soil) system that has long favored

them. The "Bumiputra" system is essentially affirmative-action on stilts, meant to improve the lot of the ethnic Malays, who economically do not fare as well as the more industrious and entrepreneurial Chinese and Indians. Its origin dates back to 1969, when there were riots by Malays against the more prosperous Chinese, hundreds of whom were killed when their shops were burned down. It was economic resentment at Chinese economic success, which was also racial resentment, compounded by religious animus at the Chinese (who were Infidels, and therefore "the most vile of creatures"). To avoid more such upheavals, the government in 1971 instituted a New Economic Policy designed to improve the lot of the aggrieved Malays through the Bumiputra system. It was supposed to be a short-term measure, to end when the Malay Muslims had made sufficient economic progress. But apparently they haven't yet done so, for the Bumiputra system of privileges is still in place, and the Muslim Malays have no intention of getting rid of it now or, one suspects, ever. **For some of them, the economic privileges they enjoy under the Bumiputra system can be interpreted, and justified, as a kind of "Jizyah" payment from the Infidel Chinese and Indians that should continue forever.**

According to the Bumiputra system, 70% of all civil service positions in Malaysia are reserved for the Muslim Malays; as of now, 85% of the civil servants are Malays. Another provision requires that a certain proportion of the shares of any publicly quoted company be owned by Malays. This is achieved by making stock available to them at below-market prices. Further, Bumiputra-owned firms are favored for various government contracts. Malay home buyers are entitled to a discount of 5 to 15 percent on new developments. Special professional schools have been established for the exclusive use of Muslim Malays.

The Muslim Malays are also favored in college admissions, with most universities in Malaysia required to reserve 70% or more

of their places for bumiputras. As a result, Chinese and Indian students flock instead to private and foreign universities. Those who leave often stay away. A World Bank study in 2011 found that about one million Malaysians had by that stage left the country, which has a total population of 29 million. Most were ethnic Chinese, and many were highly educated. **Some 60% of skilled emigrants cited “social injustice” as an important reason for leaving Malaysia. The “social injustice” is the privileging of Muslim Malays.** This exodus of talented Chinese and Indians makes Malaysia a less attractive place to invest in. The Bumiputra system is thus driving away the most industrious and entrepreneurial young people, all in order to assure the Muslim Malays that they will be favored in jobs, in corporate equity, in the awarding of government contracts, in new housing, and in college admissions.

Supporters of the NEP argue that, without such assistance, Malays will not catch up economically or academically. Critics claim that it dulls their incentives to excel. There is evidence of a skills gap between the Muslim Malays and the Chinese and Indians.. Nearly half the managers at Malaysian manufacturing firms surveyed by the World Bank said that the ability of local skilled workers, mostly Malays, to handle information technology was either “poor” or “very poor.”

In discussions of the Bumiputra system, the Malays are normally identified simply by their ethnicity: “Malays.” But since all but a handful of them are Muslims, it is reasonable to identify them as such – “Malay Muslims” – and to see their resentment at lagging economically behind the non-Muslim Chinese and Indians as based less on ethnicity, and more on religion. They feel entitled, as Muslims, to receive this package of preferences for the “Bumiputra” as a kind of Jizyah from non-Muslims.

A different discussion needs to take place. It is not that the Chinese and Indians have ever been favored in Malaysia. They

never were, and certainly are disfavored now, but they continue to outperform the Malay Muslims. The reason for the lack of economic progress among those Muslim Malays can be found in aspects of Islam itself. Think of how the Muslim oil states, the beneficiaries of the largest transfer of wealth in human history – some twenty-five trillion dollars since 1973 alone – have fared, or rather, have failed.. They have yet to create modern economies, but remain almost entirely dependent on their oil and gas revenues. Furthermore, they rely on vast armies of wage-slaves from the non-Muslim lands, for their doctors, nurses, teachers, petroleum engineers, for their technical advisers of every sort, their pilots, their mechanics, their programmers, their shopkeepers, their drivers, their cooks, their cleaners, their domestic workers of every sort. It is to the West that the Arabs who can afford it go for health care, and to that West they send their children for education. It is from that West that they obtain practically everything that they need, for they produce nothing, they make nothing. In Dubai, there are 250,000 natives and more than a million non-natives who are the workers who make the economy, such as it is, go – and much the same scenario, with that staggering ratio of foreign workers to natives – holds true for Abu Dhabi and the other emirates, and in Kuwait, in Qatar, in Saudi Arabia.

The Muslim hostility toward innovation, *bid'a*, extends from the sphere of religion, to that of the economy. And the ability to innovate, or to accept the innovations of others, in a world of start-ups, of a constant dizzying flow of new products, and new ways of manufacturing, advertising, selling, and delivering both new and old products, is indispensable. But in Islam, Believers have been taught to distrust innovation. Some Muslims, too, have acquired a dislike of work, as the ex-Muslim Syrian Wafa Sultan has argued, from the 7th century Arabs whom they read about in the Hadith. These Arabs, and Muhammad himself, display a *razzia*-mentality, the mentality of the desert raiders who in Muhammad's day lived by

looting. Another aspect of Islam that may limit the economic achievement of Believers is the *inshallah*-fatalism that Muslims so often display. If in the end you may become rich, or poor, because Allah wills it so, then it makes sense not to try too hard. Besides, Malay Muslims clearly understand, the Bumiputra system remains solidly in place, *inshallah*, to guarantee their quite undeserved, and therefore maddening, economic success.

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