

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Mr Yang Razali Kassim.

Ketuanan Melayu: What's in a Name?

By Joseph Chinyong Liow

Synopsis

The idea of Malay primacy or Ketuanan Melayu in Malaysian politics tends to reverberate whenever its traditional advocate, UMNO, comes under siege. There is a need to better understand this concept.

Commentary

AT UMNO's general assembly in November, the trope of "*Ketuanan Melayu*" rang loud and clear yet again through the halls of the Putra World Trade Centre. It drowned out Prime Minister Najib Razak's "1Malaysia" in the same way that it drowned out Abdullah Badawi's "Islam Hadhari" not too long ago, and Mahathir Mohamad's "Bangsa Malaysia" before that. What exactly does "*Ketuanan Melayu*" mean? Furthermore, what does it imply?

At first glance, the meaning of *Ketuanan Melayu*, in the Malaysian cultural and historical context, is factual enough. According to school textbooks, *Ketuanan Melayu* is defined as "the passion for anything related to the Malay race, such as political rights, language, cultural heritage and customs, as well as homeland". Much in the same vein, the influential *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (Institute for Language and Literature) defines it as the right to rule or control a country (*negara*), state, (*negeri*), or a district (*daerah*) on the basis of the principle of sovereignty (*kedaulatan*).

Its root word, *tuan*, in this context means "lord" or "master" (in relation to a servant) or "owner" (in relation to property). Hence, literally, *Ketuanan Melayu* means Malay sovereignty, or the lordship claim of "the Malay" on the "*Tanah Melayu*" - the land belonging to the Malays and everything in/on it. Underlying this logic is the romanticism of Malay heritage: the Malay Peninsula (*Semenanjung Tanah Melayu*) is regarded as the ancestral land of the Malays.

As Mahathir himself once wrote, in *The Malay Dilemma*: "The Malays are the original or indigenous people of Malaya and the only people who can claim Malaya as their one and only country. In accordance with practice all over the world, this confers on the Malays certain inalienable rights over the forms and obligations of citizenship which can be imposed on citizens of non-indigenous origin."

Special rights and constitutional sanction

It is important to also stress that while the term *Ketuanan Melayu* itself does not appear in the Constitution, its underlying logic of according special rights to Malay interests is, in fact, constitutionally sanctioned. According to the Federal Constitution of 1957, while non-Malays were granted citizenship rights, Article 153 decrees that it is the responsibility of the King (*Yang di Pertuan Agong*) to safeguard the special position of the Malays and *Bumiputera* (indigenous communities) while also taking into account the “legitimate interests” of other communities.

In this way, the “special position” of the Malays and *Bumiputera* are codified. It is by this token too, that *Ketuanan Melayu* and the sovereignty of the Sultan(s) become intertwined. In fact, such is the sanctity of the Sovereign in the constellation of Malaysian politics, the country has nine sitting kings at any one time. All this is to say that Malay culture lies at the centre of Malaysian national culture, and it is the traditions (including the pomp and pageantry) of the traditional Islamic-Malay polity that shapes the nature of governance and government in Malaysia today.

Politics and myth-making

Notwithstanding its rich cultural and historical legacy, a critical feature of contemporary discourse on *Ketuanan Melayu* is how the concept has been used to frame the relationship between Muslim Malays and non-Malay citizens of Malaysia. The currency of the narrative of *Ketuanan Melayu* lies not only in its stress on the rights of denizens or the essence of Malay statecraft, but also its portrayal of non-Malays.

Indeed, notwithstanding its seemingly innocuous role in outlining the markers of Melayu (Malay) identity, the etymology of the discourse has come to set more store by its definition in relation to Malaysia’s other ethnic communities: it implies that Malays are self-referenced as “*tuan*” or “lords” and “masters” over other identities. More to the point, the rhetoric of *Ketuanan Melayu* espoused by UMNO today but also echoed in Malaysian textbooks, often casts non-Malays in a pejorative light and questions their citizenship, ergo, loyalty.

Non-Malays are frequently described in Malay books as *anak dagang*, *golongan pendatang*, *pendatang asing*, or *imigran*, which implies that they are sojourners with no loyalty to the land, foreigners, aliens, or immigrants as opposed to *penduduk tempatan* or local inhabitants. For non-Malay Malaysians, the implications that follow are self-evident. Their position in relation to Malay rights whenever the issue of citizenship of non-Malays is discussed (if not questioned), as it unfortunately still is 57 years after independence, is delegitimised.

Ketuanan Melayu then, becomes a narrative of special birthright and ethnic primacy - if not supremacy - that in the view of non-Malays strikes at the very heart of attempts to envision a civic and pluralist conception of nationhood. Yet amidst the controversy that the usage of *Ketuanan Melayu* stirs up today in Malaysian discourses on identity and belonging, there is one mistaken assumption – that the essence of “Melayu” or Malayness is immutable. Perhaps in a future piece I will elaborate why this is not quite so.

Communal identity has long been a fundamental organising principle of Malaysian politics and society. At the heart of the matter is how national identity in Malaysia is constructed around one ethnic and religious group, the Malay-Muslims. It is this optic through which *Ketuanan Melayu* must be viewed. Indeed, considering that the term itself does not even appear in the Federal Constitution, its emergence as arguably the most important and controversial concept in the Malaysian political lexicon is certainly remarkable.

Joseph Chinyong Liow is Dean and Professor of Comparative and International Politics, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He is also Lee Kuan Yew Chair in Southeast Asia Studies, Brookings Institution. This commentary appeared earlier in The Straits Times.
