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Challenge of Chinese in Malaysia in the new politics - to reach out and engage with PAS to ensure that it represents a Political Islam in Malaysia which is compatible with justice, democracy, human rights, clean, open and accountable governance and cultural pluralism.

I wish firstly to thank the Centre for the Study of the Chinese Southern Diaspora (CSCSD) for the speaking invitation today. Firstly, I wish to make two qualifications. I am no academician but a practitioner, so to say, on the subject of the politics of the Chinese in Malaysia. There has been controversy as the actual nomenclature, whether we should be talking about Malaysian Chinese or Chinese Malaysian. Although Chinese Malaysia sounds a more appropriate term, in popular parlance, it is Malaysian Chinese which holds sway. I do not propose to enter into a controversy here, and for our purpose today, the term "Chinese" will refer to "Malaysian Chinese" or more appropriately, "Chinese Malaysian".

Secondly, I must confess to certain initial unease at the term "diaspora" including Abner Cohen's definition of "a nation of socially interdependent, but spatially dispersed communities" as it is open to a lot of misconceptions in Southeast Asia because of its common application to the experience and history of the Jewish people and the implied idea of a "return" to one's country of ancestral origin. However, Wang Gungwu's Inaugural CSCSD lecture in February last year has somewhat allayed these feelings of unease, particularly when he concluded with two observations: a) that in its widest usage and connotation, apart from the Greeks and Armenians, there are now the Irish diaspora, the Afro-American, the Indian, the Pakistani, the Italian, the Arab, Iranian, and so on; b) having moved from a rather exclusive use of the term to describe one kind of people to a promiscuous application to just about everybody, it may not be so difficult to say that there is no single Chinese diaspora but many different Chinese diasporas. It should also be noted that within each of these, there are differences in terms of their affinity to the country whether of their adoption, domicile or birth. In most cases, this does not involve their country of ancestral origin, i.e. China.

In my talk, "Chinese or Malaysian Identity? Issues and Challenges", I will focus on the recent general elections in Malaysia, the current and future political situation to illustrate my views. My discussion today will be divided into four parts, a brief history of the Chinese in Malaysian politics, Dr. Mahathir's Bangsa Malaysia, the 1999 general election and issues and challenges of the future.

A Brief History

The earliest recorded Chinese settlement in Malaysia was about 600 years ago around 1400 in the Malacca sultanate. Chinese experiences went through various phases in the Malay States and the colonial, Japanese Occupation, decolonization, independence and post-independence periods, from primarily transient sojourners before 1900, to an increasingly settled population after that and almost a settled population after 1945. Today, over 90 per cent of the Chinese in Malaysia are local-born in the country.

Until the Second World War, political consciousness among the Chinese in Malaysia was primarily China-oriented, as reflected by the competition between the Kuomintang Party Malaya and the
Nanyang Communist Party (renamed the Malayan Communist Party in 1930) for influence among the Malayan Chinese, raising suspicions and fears as to their role as potential fifth columnists which to some extent was compounded by the Cold War.

However, Chinese politics in Malaysia underwent a sea-change in the post-war and particularly in the post-Independence period, where the political contest was over the citizenship rights of the Chinese and the definition of the Malaysian national identity and nation-state.

In his article "Chinese Politics in Malaya" in The China Quarterly in 1970, Wang Gungwu wrote that the Chinese throughout South East Asia at all times manifested three distinctive political groupings based on their commitments to politics in China, i.e. Group A - which was never very large and has become increasingly small since World War II; Group B, to the politics of the respective overseas communities and Group C, to local politics whether indigenous, colonial or nationalist.

The second group, group B, are those who generally accept the necessity and possibly the desirability of being loyal to their host countries but who hold back from total commitment to all the ideals and aspirations of those countries.

As for the third group, group C, this consists of several sub-groups or 'modernized' or 'indigenized' Chinese who each in its own way has decided to identify politically with the host countries. In their minds, and probably in many cases also in their actions, this group would be prepared to live and die for their adopted country.

Prof. Wang wrote that despite all the various changes in political and social conditions throughout the past century, the majority of the various Chinese groups in the region are group B Chinese and they have found it most satisfactory to identify first and foremost with their own community, with their own minority group rather than with either the great Chinese community or with the new Southeast Asian nations since World War II.

In Malaysia, however, post-Independence Chinese politics was producing a new group, which is a fusion between Groups B and C to produce Malaysian Chinese who fully identify politically with the country of their birth, who owe no loyalty to any other country and are prepared to live and die for their only homeland of their birth but who want to preserve their separate linguistic, religious and cultural identities as an integral part of the Malaysian national mosaic.

The new Chinese in Malaysia differs from the traditional group B Chinese in that they do not identify first and foremost with their own community, but with the Malaysian national identity and yet differs from the traditional Group C Chinese in resisting assimilation by insisting on their citizenship rights to have their language, culture and religion respected as an integral part of the new national identity.

Chinese politics in the post-Independence Malaysia was primarily the politics of national identity in the Malaysian nation-building process, their citizenship entitlements politically, economically and educationally and the recognition and respect for their language, mother tongue education, culture and religion. This politics of national identity was not confined to the Chinese but also affect the Indians in Malaysia, who represent the third largest ethnic community in the country.
However, the politics of the Chinese and Indians to help shape the Malaysian nation-building process took on a communal coloration when politics and nation-building were regarded as zero-sum games, where the incorporation of non-Malay features and characteristics were regarded as a loss to the pristine restoration of a Malay polity instead of a sum total gain to a new multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious Malaysian nation.

As a result, for over three decades from Independence until the early nineties, the country expended enormous amounts of national time, energies and attention on the fundamental question of nation-building in Malaysia's plural society - whether it should be on the basis of assimilation or integration, with many political leaders paying the price in terms of loss of personal freedoms and suffering political persecution for courageously defending and upholding the rights of all races, religions, languages and cultures in plural Malaysia.

I had served as a Malaysian MP for 30 years from 1969-1999, and my first term as a Member of Parliament coincided with the time when the mould for Malaysian nation-building based on assimilation was at its strongest and most relentless. I can still remember the shock and disbelief when I spoke in Parliament about the legitimate aspirations of the Chinese and Indians to be accepted as full and equal citizens in the country, not only politically and economically, but also where their languages, cultures and religions are given full recognition and respect as an integral part of the Malaysian national identity.

It was as if I had committed something sacrilegious in Parliament in raising issues of national integration as the basis of nation-building when assimilation had become the official but unspoken policy, seeking to debate issues about the legitimate place for the Chinese language, culture, Chinese schools as well as the different religions in the country.

In fact, on one occasion in the mid-seventies, when debating on the burning issues and concerns of the Chinese and non-Malays about their citizenship status, one senior and very powerful UMNO Minister was so annoyed that he interrupted me and told me that if I did not like the government’s policies, I could leave Malaysia. What he had not expected was my instant retort that as I was elected by Malaysians to speak up for them and if he did not like what he had heard, he himself could leave Malaysia.

I am glad that since that episode, no non-Malay Member of Parliament had been told to leave Malaysia if he or she did not agree with the government’s nation-building policies, as such an attitude reflected innate doubt about the loyalty of the non-Malays to the nation.

In the seventies and eighties, misguided nation-building policies aimed at assimilation rather than integration, such as the "One-Language One-Culture" Policy, refusal to allow free cultural expression as the performance of lion dances or the free use, teaching and learning of respective mother tongues, and the long-term objective to close down mother-tongue Chinese and Tamil primary schools, reflective of the attitude that non-Malay languages, non-Malay schools, non-Malay newspapers, non-Malay buildings and non-Malay costumes are unMalaysian and should be either banned or restricted, continued to be frequent flashpoints of national discord.
This was the setting when the National Economic Policy was introduced to redress Malay economic backwardness and restructure inter-ethnic economic imbalances, which spawned a new class of UMNO-putras (princes of UMNO) as well as a new Malay middle class.

Dr. Mahathir’s Bangsa Malaysia - A change in attitude?

It was only in the 1990s that the Malay political leadership in government responded to pressures for a nation-building policy based on integration and adopted a more open and liberal attitude towards issues of language, education and culture. As a result, there had been what I would describe as "minor liberalisation" on government polices on the primordial issues of language, education and culture and a greater acceptance and recognition of Malaysia as a plural society.

In his Vision 2020 enunciated in 1991, the Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad spoke of the emergence of a Bangsa Malaysia in three decades, a new and united Malaysian society with a people who would be entirely Malaysian in perspective - a view which the DAP had always advocated.

In 1995, Dr. Mahathir openly acknowledged that the policy of assimilation cannot succeed in plural Malaysia. In an interview with TIME magazine (December 9, 1996), responding to a question about his earlier statement that "efforts to assimilate races have not been successful and it was time to try something else", Mahathir replied:

"The idea before was that people should become 100% Malay in order to be Malaysian. We now accept that this is a multi-racial country. We should build bridges instead of trying to remove completely the barriers separating us. We do not intend to convert all the Chinese to Islam, and we tell our people, the Muslims, 'you will not try to force people to convert'."

At a local function, Mahathir conceded that Malaysians should reduce their strong sense of ethnicity in order to achieve Bangsa Malaysia and that while a citizen of a nation may associate himself with the country, he would not be readily prepared to give up his culture, religion, or language.

He said:

"Previously, we tried to have a single entity but it caused a lot of tension and suspicions among the people because they thought the Government was trying to create a hybrid. There was fear among the people that they may have to give up their own cultures, values and religions. This could not work, and we believe that the Bangsa Malaysia is the answer".

These are certainly healthy and positive developments in the politics of nation-building in Malaysia, although only time can tell as to how deep-seated is this embrace of integration.

The reversal of the nation-building policy based on assimilation and its replacement by a policy of integration has also given the DAP the opportunity to focus on trying to break another National Front political mould which has become a threat to democratic and just governance - political hegemony as a result of uninterrupted two-thirds majority in Parliament in every general election.

The 1999 general elections

Let me now consider the current situation.
"Chinese or Malaysian Identity? Issues and Challenges"
CSCSD Public lecture at the ANU, 1 May 2000

The breaking of the National Front (a coalition of 14 political parties but dominated by UMNO) political hegemony was the main reason why the DAP teamed up with the other three Opposition parties in the last general election - marking a commitment to involve the non-Malays and the Chinese in the larger politics not just in defining national identity of a plural society but in shaping the system of government in terms of justice, freedom, democracy and good governance.

The tenth Malaysian general election held five months ago on 29th November 1999 was one which many had hoped would be a watershed event. The aim of the opposition parties was to end the 42-year political and electoral dominance of the National Front's two-thirds parliamentary majority, reducing its political hegemony and in the process to break the mould of Malaysian politics to create a paradigm shift where Malaysian politics would not be so dominated by ethnicity and religion and be more issues-centred as on issues of justice, freedom, democracy and good governance. The two-thirds majority has allowed the National Front to amend the Constitution at will.

For the first time in Malaysian history, the ruling National Front coalition was challenged not by disparate opposition parties but by an united Opposition coalition (Alternative Front) uniting four main opposition parties in the country on the basis of a common election manifesto, namely National Justice Party (KeADILan) - formed by supporters of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and headed by his wife Dr. Azizah Ismail, People's Party of Malaysia (PRM), a long-standing Malay-based socialist party, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) transcending race, religion and class.

In the event, the Nasional Front secured its two-thirds parliamentary majority by winning 71 per cent of the seats although it only won 55 per cent of the national vote. The National Front won 148 out of the total of 193 seats while the Opposition collected 45 seats. This is the product of the undemocratic features of the electoral system, presided over by an Election Commission which had never been able to assert its constitutionally-bestowed independence to conduct free, fair and clean elections. In the last general election, the Election Commission was directly responsible for the disenfranchisement of 680,000 new voters by an inexplicably long-drawn-out process of voters' revision exercise dragging out for some 10 months thereby fitting into the scheme of things of the incumbent coalition. The National Front was fearful that the new young voters representing some eight per cent of the national electorate would have voted for change and altered the political power equation. The electoral system also suffers from the defects of gerrymandering of the constituencies, which ranges from 100,000 voters to 23,000 voters in Peninsular Malaysia or 16,000 voters Malaysia-wide; the 'first-past-the-post' system; a tightly-controlled and highly-manipulated electronic and printed media which by-and-large blacked out Opposition news and rejected Opposition advertisements.

The last general election was significant for non-Malay and in particular Chinese politics in Malaysia and Malaysian politics as a whole for several reasons.

Firstly, it was the first time there was any electoral co-operation or understanding between DAP and PAS in the eight general elections contested by both parties since 1969. DAP was formed in 1966 and PAS in 1955, but both parties were regarded as occupying opposite ends of the political spectrum - the DAP a multiracial political movement committed to social democracy and secular governance though limited in its support hitherto to the non-Malay, i.e. predominantly Chinese and Indian electorate while PAS advocated an Islamic state.
For the DAP, the decision to co-operate with PAS in the Alternative Front marked a policy shift into the Malaysian political mainstream from the non-Malay political compartments it had been entrapped.

Right from the beginning, the DAP had never been a Chinese political party fighting for the interests of one community, but a multi-racial political movement dedicated to the creation of a free, democratic, just and equitable Malaysian order for all Malaysians, regardless of race or religion.

However, in the first quarter of a century of the DAP’s history, from 1966 - 1990, although the DAP continued to espouse democracy, human rights, clean and open government, economic justice and environmental protection, these were overshadowed by the most salient political issues of the period - the place of Chinese in Malaysian nation-building and national identity.

Both the DAP and PAS took great risks in coming together for the first time to forge the Opposition front in 1999.

As far as the DAP was concerned, there was no way the Alternative Front could topple the National Front and capture power in the tenth general election. But it was the golden political opportunity, the first time in the nation’s 42-year history, to break the two-thirds parliamentary majority of the ruling coalition, i.e. the National Front and its predecessor the Alliance, and to lay the basis for a new Malaysia where justice, freedom, democracy and good governance become the top political agenda in the country.

A week before the 1999 general election, the DAP leadership reaffirmed its commitment to the Alternative Front, fully conscious of the great risks involved, where it could either win an unprecedented victory in the party’s history, better than the 1986 general election when DAP won 24 parliamentary seats or suffer unprecedented defeat, even worse than the 1995 general election when the DAP’s parliamentary representation was slashed from 20 to nine MPs.

The great political risks faced by the DAP in teaming up with PAS, KeADILan and PRM to form the Barisan Alternative was not because the alliance was an opportunistic or indefensible one, but because it gave the National Front, with its virtual monopoly of the 3Ms of money, media and government machinery, the opportunity to confuse and mislead the voters about the real issues at stake in the general election.

DAP would have won unprecedented victory if the non-Malay and Chinese voters addressed the real issues at stake in the tenth general election - the restoration of justice, freedom, democracy and good governance by breaking the National Front political hegemony and ending its uninterrupted two-thirds parliamentary majority - but would suffer unprecedented defeat if the National Front succeeded in playing their campaign “trump cards” of fear. These included playing on the spectre of racial violence, May 13 riots and the plight of Indonesian Chinese during anti-Chinese outbreaks and mass rapes of Chinese women and the issue of the Islamic state. The National Front also claimed that a vote for DAP was a vote for PAS and an Islamic State.

The DAP would not have to face these great risks if it had decided to contest alone in the general election, as it felt quite confident that fighting on its own, it could look forward to winning 20 to 25 parliamentary seats. In teaming up with PAS, KeADILan and PRM to form the Alternative Front, assuming the best results, the DAP could look forward to winning at most 30 to 35 seats.
Was it worthwhile hoping to win an extra five to ten parliamentary seats in the Alternative Front when the risks were so high that the DAP might suffer unprecedented defeat, because the National Front would then be able to exploit its mass media monopoly to confuse and mislead the non-Malay and Chinese voters against the DAP?

If the DAP was thinking solely in selfish party terms, the risks were clearly too great and it was definitely not worth it. However, the DAP believed that the risks were worth taking to bring about a paradigm shift in Malaysian politics as the 1999 general election provided the historic opportunity to break the political hegemony of the National Front by ending its two-thirds parliamentary majority.

In the event, the National Front missed losing its two-thirds majority by 21 seats - which would have been achieved if the DAP had not been the biggest casualty in the Alternative Front in the general election. The DAP won ten seats.

Issues and Challenges - Post-1999 general elections

Ironically, in the 1999 general election, the Alternative Front opposition parties were preaching and practising national unity encompassing the diversity of races and religions in Malaysia, while it is the National Front ruling parties - which had ruled the country for four decades - were sowing inter-racial and inter-religious distrust, suspicion and disunity, i.e. back to the communal politics before 80s.

The Alternative Front had a common programme "For A Just Malaysia", but the National Front spoke with forked tongues, telling the Malays that DAP Plus PAS Equals Islam Hancur (Destroyed) while warning the Chinese and non-Malays that a vote for DAP is a vote for PAS and an Islamic state where there will no pork, no alcohol, no temples, no churches, no karaoke, no Chinese schools, women will have to cover their heads, beautiful women cannot find jobs and that there would be the chopping of hands and feet.

By and large, the Malay voters did not take the bait but the non-Malays particularly the Chinese voters fell victim to this campaign of falsehoods and fear of the National Front, resulting in an outcome where PAS was the biggest winner in the Alternative Front, securing unprecedented electoral victories emerging as the largest Parliamentary opposition with 27 MPs and capturing the Terengganu state government in addition to Kelantan - in contrast to the National Front, where UMNO was the biggest loser as compared to the other parties in the ruling coalition.

It is clear that the public outrage at the abuses of power, corruption and human rights violations, including subversion of the independent organs of government, the erosion of the rule and the undermining of the independence of the judiciary, as highlighted in the cases of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim and former DAP MP Lim Guan Eng were insufficient to smash the National Front’s political hegemony and end its uninterrupted two-thirds parliamentary majority. The Anwar factor had a greater impact on the Malay electorate than on the non-Malay electorate and it was in no small measure a contributor to the great electoral strides achieved by PAS, whether in the magnitude or margin of victory at both parliamentary and state levels.

To the Chinese and non-Malay electorate, however, artificial fears engineered by the National Front over possible racial riots, economic instability and an Islamic State overshadowed sympathy and support over the plight and persecution of Anwar.
With Dr. Mahathir Mohamad fully entrenched and ensconced in his political hegemony, the stage has been set for the most dangerous times for Malaysian nation-building as external checks-and-balances have been gravely weakened and even dismantled in certain important sectors while there are totally no countervailing forces inside UMNO and Barisan Nasional to give him a reality check.

The following developments in the past five months since the last general elections are testimony that such a bleak prognosis is not without basis:

The utter contempt shown to the Yang di Pertuan Agong, the Constitution and Parliament in the unconstitutional convening of the new tenth Parliament on December 20, 1999, creating a constitutional case of the millennium as all laws and businesses passed by the tenth Parliament could be infected by illegality and unconstitutionality. With time running out for the new Parliament to meet before the year-end, the Prime Minister disregarded the constitutional provision that only the Cabinet can advise the King to summon Parliament and acted on his own volition even before the formation of the new Cabinet.

The crackdown against the rule of law, press freedom, the right to information, fundamental liberties and democracy in the arrest and prosecution of DAP Deputy Chairman and former five-term MP for Jelutong Karpal Singh, Parti Keadilan Nasional Vice President Marina Yusoff, KeADILan Youth chief Mohamed Ezam Mohd Noor, Harakah editor Zulkifly Sulong and Harakah printer Cheah Lim Thye as well as the curtailment of publishing rights of opposition or critical publications, such as Harakah which was reduced from a biweekly to a bimonthly and the ban imposed on periodicals like Detik and Exclusif.

The UMNO Supreme Council "no contest" decision for the two top UMNO posts and the disqualification of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Dr. Mahathir's most serious remaining challenger, from contesting even for the UMNO Vice President's post, showing UMNO increasingly undemocratic and authoritarian and the propensity of the political rulers not only to double up both asreferees and players, but to change the rules of the game mid-way when it suited them.

Deepening concerns, both national and international, about the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, the integrity of public institutions as recently highlighted in the international indictment of the system of justice in the report by four international legal/juristic report, "Justice in Jeopardy: Malaysia 2000".

Politics of hatred and vendetta initiated by the Malacca State Government on the persecution against civil servants and the private sector who had supported the Opposition.

The massive pre-emptive police action to break a peaceful gathering on April 14, 2000 to mark the first anniversary of the first jail sentence for Anwar, although the Malaysian Prime Minister commended the demonstrators at WTO Seattle and the World Bank/IMF meetings in Washington.

Did the 1999 general election result imply that the Chinese and non-Malays in Malaysia are averse to political and economic reforms, good governance, democracy and human rights as compared to their Malay brethrens and sisters in the fourth decade of nationhood after Independence?
This will be a fallacious conclusion. From the sixties to 1990, the Chinese and non-Malays had been the bulwark of the DAP's support for social and cultural democracy, demonstrating their concern to establish their full citizenship rights in a plural society.

The question is their perception of the order of national priorities. Asked to choose between racial riots and economic recovery or between an Islamic State where they lose their religious freedoms and customary way of life and the status quo, the answer is quite unequivocal.

In the short campaign in the last general election and given the 3Ms, it was not possible for the Alternative Front to disentangle the baseless fears from the legitimate concerns of the Chinese and non-Malays about the DAP's co-operation with PAS and an Islamic State.

This was why established DAP leaders were also defeated in the parliamentary election, for fears about deprivation of one's religious rights and customary way of life, although baseless, are very potent forces.

In the last general election, the DAP made the error of believing that if the Barisan Alternative could reach a common election platform on justice, freedom, democracy and good governance, leaving aside subjects which the component parties could not reach agreement, it would suffice for the occasion. The Opposition Front should be wiser after the general election and the recent Sanggang by-election in Pahang where an expected PAS victory in a constituency it lost narrowly in the general election did not eventuate. The lesson is that it is not enough to try to debunk the baseless fears of the Chinese and non-Malays but it is also necessary to address their legitimate concerns about an Islamic State.

Failure to do so will give the National Front the classic justification to perpetuate the colonial "divide and rule" tactics by keeping Malaysians in their separate ethnic and religious compartments.

This is the challenge of the Chinese in Malaysian politics, how as full Malaysian citizens, to reach out and engage with PAS to ensure that it represents a Political Islam in Malaysia which is compatible with justice, democracy, human rights, clean, open and accountable governance and cultural pluralism.

Likewise for PAS, the party will need to spell out its position of an Islamic State and its implications on non-Muslim Malaysians in a nation where less than 60 per cent of the population are Muslims and where other religions like Buddhism (19%), Christianity (11%), Hinduism (8%), and other religions (9%) such as Sikhism are also strongly represented. I need only observe that this situation is not new with the Muslim world as attested by events in Iran where considerable debate is raging on the respective roles of religion, politics and society.

In substance, the Barisan Alternative common manifesto "Towards A Just Malaysia" spells out precisely such a Malaysian vision, and the question is whether the conditions are ripe for the Opposition alliance to fill out this accord in greater detail to allay both the baseless fears and legitimate concerns of the Chinese and non-Malays about an Islamic state so that it could be a viable and supportable alternative for the majority of Malaysians, regardless of race, religion or class.

For if this can be achieved, then for the first time in Malaysian politics since Independence, there would be an alternative Opposition Front which could challenge not only the political hegemony, but...
also the mandate to govern, of the National Front in the next general election. In this, all like-minded Malaysians, Malays and non-Malays alike, have a vital role and challenge before them.