

## BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

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| <b>Abstract</b>               | <p>The article discusses two terms including communal and communalism which are widely used in academic studies of the political process in Malaysia. The Democratic Action Party (DAP) is the principal opposition party of Malaysia and without it communal politics would not arise. Another political party called Partai Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia considers Barisan Nasional, DAP, and Parti Islam as communal. It is said that communalism elaborates those beliefs which support communal attitudes, orientations, and actions. Author K. J. Ratnam's book "Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya," does not give the clear picture of the word communalism. Rather it focuses on the intricacies of the political process of Malaysia.</p> |

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# Research Note

## Communalism and confusion: towards a clarification of terms in the study of Malaysian politics

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The terms 'communal' and 'communalism' are widely used in both the daily language of politics and in academic studies of the political process in Malaysia. Indeed, an understanding of these terms is central to an understanding of Malaysia's political system. Yet, despite their importance and widespread usage, these terms are seldom (if ever) defined, and are frequently used in ways which are confusing and sometimes contradictory.

In these notes we will firstly examine these terms as they have been commonly used by actors within the Malaysian political process, before proceeding to investigate their usage in academic writings on Malaysian politics. In each case, usage will be critically evaluated to reveal imprecise applications, paradoxes, and contradictions. In this brief survey, we will concentrate upon writings and statements made about Malaysia's political parties, since this area of the political process readily highlights problems of usage. The terms will then be examined in a broader comparative context in order to see how they are used in academic writings on other societies characterized by ethnic cleavages. Having considered the problems revealed in our examination of the Malaysian context, and bearing in mind much comparative usage, some suggestions will be proposed for an improved understanding of the usage of these terms in the existing literature.

### Political usage of the terms

In daily usage the terms 'communal' and 'communalism' are frequently employed in a pejorative and partisan fashion, although they can also be used to objectively describe a particular phenomenon. For example, speaking a few months after the racial riots of May 1969 which had led to the suspension of Parliamentary rule, the late Tun Abdul Razak told a meeting of Commonwealth Parliamentarians that:

The major concerns of Malaysia . . . are communalism and militant communism. These are problems which, by their very nature, impose constraints on any completely liberal concept of democracy.<sup>1</sup>

However, the terms are invariably used by each of the political parties to denigrate its opponents. Some examples taken from the statements of political leaders will serve as an illustration. In 1980 Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad in attacking the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Malaysia's principal opposition party, claimed that:

Without the DAP, communal politics would not arise. The MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) would not need to adopt chauvinistic attitudes and UMNO (United

Malaysia National Organisation) would not need to be extreme . . . If there is any sort of racial dissatisfaction arising among the people of Malaysia it is the work of the DAP.<sup>2</sup>

For his part, the Secretary-General of the DAP claimed, in the wake of the 1978 General Elections, that his party enjoyed overwhelming Chinese endorsement, a substantial Indian following, and growing support from the Malay electorate; consequently:

. . . the DAP is the only party which is multi-racial in character and support in Malaysia. All the component parties in the National Front thrive on racial appeals, and when Ghaffar Baba (Secretary-General of the National Front) said after the elections that Malaysia must do away with communal politics, let him answer what he is doing to do away with the communal politics of UMNO, MCA and MIC.<sup>3</sup>

In similar fashion almost all of Malaysia's political parties condemn each other. The *Partai Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia* (PSRM) sees the ruling *Barisan Nasional* as well as the DAP and *Parti Islam* (PAS) as communal. PAS stresses the universality of the Islamic creed to counter accusations that it is communal. The *Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia* (GRM) with its professedly non-communal platform attacks both the DAP and even the MCA, its partner within the ruling coalition, for their communal approach. Thus a web of accusations and counter-accusations links the various parties as each publicly labels its rivals as communal, while defending itself against the same charge.

But what do these political actors really mean when they employ these terms? As we have seen in the case of Tun Razak's remarks, the terms can be used in a relatively objective sense to describe actual phenomena. Thus the term 'communal' may be used to describe the mode of organization of a particular organization, if there are ethnically-based restrictions upon membership. However, in its critical sense, most political actors in Malaysia employ the term to refer to those attitudes, orientations, and actions motivated by a preoccupation with the interests of a single ethnic group (or combination of ethnic groups) at the expense of another ethnic group or the nation as a whole. Paradoxically, it would therefore be possible to organize political action along communal lines yet eschew communal attitudes. Similarly, a party composed almost entirely of one ethnic group might still seek to oppose communal attitudes.

'Communalism' would describe those beliefs which permit or even foster communal attitudes, orientations, and actions. Such beliefs might range from a pragmatic acceptance of the inevitability of communal politics, to a positive predilection for political action organized along ethnic lines. Such values are generally regarded as undesirable since they perpetuate social divisions, may jeopardize harmonious relations between the various communities and are a continuing hindrance to national integration. Moreover, particular sections of Malaysian society regard 'communalism' as a direct negation of cherished universalistic value systems such as Islam, socialism, humanitarianism, and so forth.

While political actors might agree upon a general understanding of these terms and concur as to their undesirability, there is considerable disagreement over their application to actual action, attitudes, and entities within the political process. A critical examination of both the organizational principles and actual ethnic orientations of the principal protagonists in the Malaysian party system underscores the degree by which the respective parties differ in their perceptions of what is 'communal', and what constitutes 'communalism'. Such an examination should also alert academic observers to some of the problems in applying these terms to the realities of Malaysian politics. We will therefore briefly deal with the cases of the ruling *Barisan Nasional* and three of its opponents — the DAP, PSRM, and PAS.

The *Barisan Nasional* (and its predecessor the Alliance Party) have unashamedly and pragmatically organized political action along ethnic lines. Illustrative of the extent of such organizational differentiation was the case of the Alliance Direct Membership Organization (ADMO). ADMO was established to give access to those who did not wish to join their appropriate ethnic component (Malay, Chinese, or Indian) within the tripartite Alliance Party, as well as to those who were quite literally ineligible to join any

of these components due to their particular ethnic origin (among such elements were Eurasians, Ceylonese, Thais and other minority groups). Following the 1969 riots the Alliance took steps to expand the appeal of this 'non-communal' channel to Alliance membership. In February 1971 the Grand Alliance National Council decided to establish ADMO as the fourth 'pillar' of the party, and suggestions were openly made that ADMO would serve as the model for the Alliance Party of the future.<sup>4</sup>

However, with the expansion of the Alliance into the *Barisan Nasional*, with two of its component parties, the GRM and People's Progressive Party (PPP), open to all citizens regardless of ethnic affiliation, ADMO was rendered redundant. In 1975 ADMO was abolished and its members instructed to join either the GRM or PPP. With the subsequent decline of the PPP as a serious political force it would now seem that supporters of the *Barisan Nasional* who wish to join the ruling party through a 'non-communal' channel must do so through the GRM. Yet the GRM is almost totally Chinese in composition and has effectively played the role of 'an alternative MCA'. Should the GRM ever withdraw from the *Barisan Nasional*, those not fitting into the neat ethnic classification of the three original Alliance components would find themselves in the same position as in pre-ADMO times. In the organizational sense then, the *Barisan Nasional* is demonstrably communal, as was its predecessor the Alliance Party. But is its behaviour communal as its opponents maintain?

Critics would regard the organizational orientation of the ruling party as to a large extent determining its behaviour. Since it is based upon parties which (with few exceptions) profess to strive for the welfare and protection of a particular group, be it ethnic or religious, the *modus operandi* of the *Barisan* must be based upon communal criteria. Hence the MCA or GRM petition the dominant Malay component (UMNO) for specific measures of benefit to the Chinese, the MIC acts for Indians, and so forth. In essence, the key concern of the *Barisan Nasional* is multi-ethnic representation within the realities of UMNO dominance. As Tun Razak explained at the first General Elections contested by the expanded *Barisan* in 1974:

Malaysia needs a multi-racial Government. The National Front wants the Chinese to participate in governing their country. It does not matter whether the Chinese vote for MCA, Gerakan, PPP or SUPP candidates . . . If the Chinese want to participate in the Government they will have to vote for Chinese candidates in the National Front.<sup>5</sup>

Critics would argue that such a rationale acts to further reinforce ethnic divisions, and retards progress towards the goal of overcoming communal thinking. They would further argue that it is actually in the interests of the ruling party to exacerbate communal thinking in order to strengthen both the established political system and their position of primacy within it.

Certainly, at the micro level the ruling party is not only, for the most part, organized along communal lines, but much of its rationale would appear communal. But is this the effect at the macro level? Defenders of the *Barisan* would point out that the coalition, while pragmatically and honestly accepting ethnic differences and unhindered by idealistic impedimenta, actually overcomes narrow communal imperatives in the interests of ethnic harmony and political stability. Such a process involves goodwill, a willingness to make concessions, and keeping conflict within the realm of private discussion and well away from the public political arena. Moreover, such a communally-based entity is the only feasible system for Malaysia at this stage in its development. In short, the *Barisan* would admit to communal means toward non-communal ends.

But how do the *Barisan Nasional's* opponents stand up to such critical analysis? The DAP professes to be 'non-communal' in both its organizational principles and actual political approach. Yet as its critics have frequently pointed out, it has consistently failed to return a single Malay to the Federal Parliament and has rarely even returned one at the State Assembly level. Few Malays have joined the party and even fewer hold positions of power or influence in the party's national executive. Although the DAP has

championed a variety of issues, it has consistently and most vigorously fought to defend the rights and privileges of non-Malays in the face of the *Barisan* Government's declared policy of accelerating the educational and economic opportunities of the Malays. Indeed, almost all of the party's electoral support has come from predominantly urban non-Malay areas.

In its defence the DAP admits its predominantly non-Malay composition but says that it has eschewed appointing 'token Malays' to leadership positions; its championing of the non-Malay cause is merely part of a commitment to a 'Malaysian Malaysia' which would guarantee equality to all communities.

PAS also suffers a gap between professed intentions and actual practice. The party claims to be based upon the universalistic teachings of Islam and its membership is therefore open to all Muslim citizens. In reality, however, PAS is virtually 100% Malay and has been a vigorous champion of that community's position, although in recent years it has sought to temper this reputation with pledges of concern for the welfare of all communities.

The PSRM, which as a socialist party is opposed to all forms of communal thinking, is nevertheless almost entirely Malay in composition, although it does make a point of fielding candidates from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. In past years, ethnic issues played a role in the PSRM's stance; its serious disputes with the Labour Party (which has since become defunct) over the question of the position of Malay as the national language, and other issues involving the special treatment of the Malays was one of the reasons for the demise of *Front Rakyat* (People's Front) which had been formed between these two parties in 1957.

This brief survey of political parties presents us with a somewhat confusing picture. All of these parties, according to their own criteria, deny that they are communal (in the pejorative sense of the word); yet, as even a cursory examination reveals, each may (depending once more upon the observer's criteria) be described as communal. The spectacle of these mutual recriminations reminds one of the Malay proverb '*ketam suruh anak jalan terus*' (the crab tells its offspring not to walk sideways), and there is a strong temptation to simply dismiss all Malaysian parties as communal and part of the overall phenomenon of communalism. Yet it is incumbent upon the academic researcher to make at least some effort at differentiation. Such a task will involve discriminating between the parties in a variety of areas such as eligibility for membership, actual membership patterns, professed policies, involvement in issues exclusively the preserve of particular ethnic groups, and sources of support.

It is not difficult to categorize political parties according to concrete criteria such as their openness to multi-ethnic membership, or even the actual composition of their membership. However, any judgement as to whether a particular party's motivations or actions are communal runs the risk of becoming highly subjective. We may forgive loose or subjective usage on the part of political actors anxious to denigrate an opponent. However, in academic analysis such usage makes for serious problems. Yet as we shall shortly see, such subjective judgements have been commonly made by academic researchers.

#### Academic usage of the terms

A major problem in studies of Malaysian politics is the absence of even a rudimentary definition of either terms. K.J. Ratnam's *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya*, despite its central concern with 'communalism', assumes that the term is self-evident and launches into the intricacies of the political process without providing even a preliminary working definition. Standard reference works on Malaysian politics all gravely assert the dominance of communal considerations. Gordon Means writes that 'the central issues of Malaysian politics have been those of a communal character'.<sup>6</sup> R.S. Milne and D. Mauzy state that 'it has proved impossible to separate most issues from communalism, because they nearly all have inescapable communal implications'.<sup>7</sup>

Neither work actually defines the authors' understanding of these terms. Most other works on Malaysian politics suffer from the same definitional defect.<sup>8</sup> The terms 'communal' and 'communalism' are simply assumed to have a general meaning readily comprehensible to the reader. Such an assumption, however, is problematic. As we shall see, there is by no means general agreement upon how these terms should be used in a comparative sense. As one Indian scholar of comparative ethnic politics has emphasized, the use of the word 'communalism' is almost solely confined to former British colonial territories.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, researchers of Malaysian politics sometimes contradict one another in the application of these terms, as well as using them in an ambiguous way. Some examples from the literature on Malaysian politics will serve to illustrate this problem.

K.J. Ratnam would apparently have us believe that the Alliance 'ran with the fox and hunted with the hounds' when it came to communal questions. He relates that in its early days:

... UMNO and the MCA were successful because they were practical enough to realize that at least *for the first few elections* to be held in the country, voting would almost always be communal. In achieving its immediate ends the Alliance, at least for the time-being, *ignored the desirability of campaigning on a non-communal platform*.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this observation, and a subsequent statement that the 'Alliance is thus an inter-communal organization, and not non-communal as is often claimed'<sup>11</sup> the author concludes that:

The Alliance has conducted an extensive campaign (*especially during elections*) against communalism, and has met with some success in convincing the electorate that inter-communal politics is the best solution for everyone, that communal politics is irresponsible politics.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly the meaning of communal in these examples differs with context. Otherwise, Ratnam would be suggesting that the Alliance was opposed to the very basis of its own existence.

R.S. Milne's use of quotation marks allowed him a degree of flexibility in his usage. Writing in 1967 he observed that:

The Alliance ... as an intercommunal party subject to internal stresses, might think that its own cohesion could be imperilled by discussions on communal issues which might become hard to control. The resulting paradox was that the Alliance was a party with a communal structure, which believed that too frequent open discussion of the problems of communalism is itself 'communal'.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, despite such adroit punctuation, we are still left in some confusion as to what is meant by 'communal'. Nor have subsequent academic studies done much to clarify this general confusion. More recently, Nancy Snider concluded that:

... noncommunal parties in Malaysia, while not without some voter attraction, have generated greatest appeal only when they accommodated their noncommunal stance to a more communally oriented one.<sup>14</sup>

One wonders how political parties can be considered as non-communal when they have actually 'accommodated their noncommunal stance to a more communally oriented one'.

Contradictions between researchers also occur. For example, Alvin Rabushka describes the DAP, GRM, and PPP as 'the more extreme-minded Chinese (cum Indian) communal parties'.<sup>15</sup> Yet these are the very same parties included in R. Vasil's study of non-communal political parties.<sup>16</sup> However, Vasil himself does not escape apparent internal contradiction. On the very first page he states that the non-communal parties in his study are included:

... because, even though they may not have remained entirely non-communal political parties *in a strict sense*, they were launched by their founders as genuinely non-communal political parties.<sup>17</sup>

Once more, 'communal' appears to be a most fluid term capable of various shades of meaning depending upon context. Regretably, Vasil does not inform us what the 'strict sense' of 'communal' actually is.

From these examples we are able, once again, to identify confusions between purely descriptive categorizations, and subjective judgements as to the intentions of the political parties under discussion. Clearly, more precision is required for terms which are central to an understanding of the Malaysian political process. To this end let us examine some of the ways in which the terms have been used elsewhere.

### Comparative usage of the terms

On a very general level, the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines 'communal' as: 'Of or pertaining to the community; esp., in India of any of the racial or religious communities'. 'Communalism' is said to be 'a theory of government which advocates the widest extension of local autonomy for each locally definable community'. While the term communal is frequently used in the sense of this definition, the same is not true of communalism. If one were to read most of the standard texts on Malaysia with this dictionary definition in mind one would be totally misled.

Turning to a more specific application of the terms, a most useful definition is offered in J.D.B. Miller's discussion of communalism in *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences*.<sup>18</sup> Miller quotes W.K. Hancock's 1937 definition:

the phenomenon of collision or tension between several communities coexisting on a single territory.<sup>19</sup>

and adds that communities are regarded as based upon race, language, or religion. He also observes that 'a community is one which by reason of race, language, religion, or historical memory, considers itself to be one and acts accordingly'.<sup>20</sup>

A more concise definition is offered by Milton J. Esman:

Communalism can be defined as competitive group solidarities within the same political system based on ethnic, linguistic, racial or religious identities.<sup>21</sup>

While both Hancock and Esman regard communalism as a phenomenon, Robert Kearney in a most useful preliminary discussion to his study of politics in Sri Lanka, prefers to see it in terms of the attitudes of political actors, and identifies communalism as:

... an attitude which emphasizes the primacy and exclusiveness of the communal group and demands the solidarity of the members of the community in political and social action.<sup>22</sup>

As in our earlier examination of usage in the Malaysian context, this brief comparative survey reveals differences in emphasis. On the one hand the terms are used to describe an observable and obvious phenomenon — the existence of communities based upon a shared sense of identity 'usually on the basis of a distinctive language, religion, social organization, or ancestral origin', and the political competition between such groups.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, as Robert Kearny suggests, there is the *attitude* which emphasizes political and social action based upon these divisions. Once again we confront the problems involved in making judgements about the attitudes of political actors.

### Some suggestions for a clearer understanding of the terms

The principal purpose of these notes is to alert the students of Malaysian politics to the pitfalls of usage of the terms 'communal' and 'communalism' in the existing literature.

It is therefore not our intention to suggest new definitions. Rather, we wish to ensure that we are aware of the particular usage in any given application of these terms. By way of both summary and suggested clarification, we will conclude with a brief outline of these differing applications.

First, let us clarify the uses of the term 'communal'. In general, it may be used simply as an adjective applied to a group with an observable sense of solidarity based upon shared characteristics of a fairly immutable kind, such as language, religion, and ethnic identity. By extension it could also be applied to issues and problems identified with the existence of such groups. Of course, the composition of a communal group is not always certain. For example, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) has sought to mobilize joint 'Indian' political action, but has met resistance from some Indian Muslims and Punjabis who have left the party to found their own political parties. It could be suggested that, in the context of the Indian subcontinent, a party such as the MIC which contains Tamils, Sikhs, Punjabis, Bengalis and other 'Indian' ethnic groups as well as adherents of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, might well be considered to have overcome communal barriers. Clearly it is the competitive position of these groups (sharing a common geographical origin) beside the politically dominant Malays which promotes a communal solidarity which would be unthinkable in the Indian subcontinent.

Since this usage of the term 'communal' refers to the actual characteristics, composition, or organizational principles of a particular group it is the least vulnerable to subjective judgements, although it must be conceded that demarcational problems might arise.

A second usage in the Malaysian context is linked to the *professed* aims or intent of political actors (both organizations and individuals). If an actor claims to eschew communal motives and to work for the benefit of all citizens, that actor is classified as non-communal. No other criteria are applied in such a judgement. Thus a political party which has non-communal aims in its constitution or platform, and which is open for membership by all citizens regardless of ethnic affiliations would be considered non-communal. Such a classification would be made regardless of its actual ethnic composition or behaviour. Such usage runs the risk of a degree of naivety, as well as the acceptance of apparent contradictions between professed intentions and actual behaviour. As we have seen, both Nancy Snider and R.K. Vasil classified non-communal parties according to those parties' own claims. Yet both were obliged to moderate, and even contradict, such classifications in the light of the actual behaviour of the parties.

A third usage relates to judgements about the attitudes and behaviour of political actors *regardless of their professed aims and attitudes* and is, in effect, the antithesis of the second approach discussed above. Such usage, while obviously necessary in the interests of rigorous analysis, is nevertheless highly subjective. For example, are we to judge the *Barisan Nasional* by the means it employs to ensure multi-ethnic participation or by the outcome of the *Barisan* concept? Is it possible for a political entity to be communal in its components yet non-communal as a whole? It is therefore not surprising that this usage is most open to discrepancies between different researchers.

Differences in meaning are also evident in the term 'communalism'. In both general and specifically Malaysian usage, 'communalism' refers to the phenomenon of political or social action based upon competitive group solidarities where such groups derive their cohesion from relatively immutable factors such as language, religion, race, and ethnic identity. This definition invariably implies some form of conflict – especially in the Malaysian context. Once again it is purely descriptive – a phenomenon is identified and its characteristics noted.

Yet in the Malaysian context, the term also frequently involves a value judgement. 'Communalism' commonly describes attitudes resulting in a positive belief in the efficacy or desirability of, or a predilection for, the organization of social and political action along communal lines. This often involves judgements as to the motives behind such a preference for communally based action. Such motives might range from a cynical or opportunistic exploitation of fears in the interests of political power, to a simple prag-

matic belief that, given the complexity of Malaysia's plural society and the immutability of communal identity, communally-based political action is the natural order of things. Thus, communalism is more than a description of actual conditions. It is a statement about the actual attitudes of political actors and the impact of these attitudes in shaping the political system.

If the distinctions discussed above are kept in mind when reading the literature on Malaysian politics, some of the confusion revealed in this brief survey of terms should be avoided. When embarking upon new writing on these subjects two courses of action are open. We may either choose to completely avoid the use of 'communal' and 'communalism' and, as some scholars have done, use the term 'ethnic'.<sup>24</sup> Although the term ethnic is itself subject to problems of definition, it does avoid the dangers of confusion with pejorative everyday language. A second course is to continue to use 'communal' and 'communalism' but to clarify particular definitions at the outset of each application of the terms.

### Notes

\*The author wishes to express his appreciation of the critical comments of Professor R.D. Scott and Dr. P. Arudsothy upon an earlier draft of these notes. All responsibility for the opinions expressed in these notes remains with the author.

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2. Reported in the *Star*, 28 November 1980.
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8. See for example R.K. Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Noncommunal Political Parties in West Malaysia*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971; Karl Von Vorzys, *Democracy Without Consensus: Communalism and Political Instability in Malaysia*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975.
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10. K.J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, p. 160 (emphasis added).
11. *Ibid.* p. 161f.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 209 (emphasis added).
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17. *Ibid.*, p. 1 (emphasis added).
18. J. Gould and W.L. Kolb (eds.), *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, New York: The Free Press, 1964, p. 111.

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21. Milton J. Esman, 'The Management of Communal Conflict', *Public Policy*, Vol. XXI, (1973), p. 49.
22. Robert N. Kearney, *Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1967, p. 5.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
24. For example, Stanley S. Bedlington consistently uses the term 'ethnic' in preference to 'communal' in his general text on Malaysian politics. See his *Malaysia and Singapore: The Building of New States*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978.

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