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## Introduction

Every morning I surf the Net to look up the news about Malaysia. There's nothing like some juicy gossip from home to start the day. Life in Europe can be isolating without this daily fix. Sure I scan the websites of the mainstream media to get the official line. But the 'umph' just isn't there. So like thousands of other Malaysians, it's the blogs and alternative media sources that I go for. It's the difference between instant and freshly brewed coffee. Once you've tried high quality beans that are grown and hand picked with love and dedication, it's hard to go back to something mass produced, bland and predictable!

But as much as good gossip is entertaining, the content of many of the stories is worrying. There cannot be smoke without fire. And sometimes the smoke is so dark and thick, you just know that its source is menacing.

Everything that we see today, by way of allegations of a lack of transparency and accountability of leadership, corruption, the stifling of dissent, and the exercise of patronage, is the same as what we've seen time and time again over the last 25 years.

It's like a soap opera that goes on season after season. The heroes and villains might change, and the alleged dastardly acts might be different, but if you dissect the subplots, they all look much like what we've seen before. Today, the buzz is about whether or not lawyer V.K. Lingam unduly influenced the appointment of senior judges as an agent of higher authority. And only yesterday we were preoccupied by the sacking, arrest and subsequent conviction of Anwar Ibrahim. And before that we were captivated by whether or not there was sufficient independence in the judiciary. Remember all the corporate bailouts; the money politics; *Operasi Lalang* and the Internal Security Act (ISA); and cronyism and nepotism? Has anything really changed? You sense that even if you skip forward to some time in the future, you'll still be seeing more of the same.

If something bad happens once, it is seen as a freak incident. If it happens twice, it's an unfortunate coincidence. But what if it keeps happening over and over again? Surely something is amiss? Even if you dispute the underlying facts behind these individual stories, surely the patterns and trends suggest a deeper and more fundamental weakness in the Malaysian governance system, than simply the guilt or failure of a particular leader and his policies? Surely it is also not wrong for us to imagine the worst case scenario if it continues to persist. After all this is our country. We have a major stake in its success or failure. If I was a passenger of a ship and it was sinking, I'd like to be informed. Wouldn't you? Unfortunately the captain might not always tell you.

What if the cycle of issues continues unabated such that it causes the economy to be in tatters, the wealth to be held in the hands of a few, the trust for the government to be so broken down, and communal relationships to be at its lowest point.

Some would say that three of these four “ifs” are well on their way to being a reality. Is there not a risk that all that we’ve built over the last 50 years could be significantly undone?

Some people will accuse me of scare mongering. And that such speculation is irresponsible. But our failure to assess and manage these risks is similarly irresponsible, as far as I am concerned. In particular, since that failure may impact our lives and the lives of our children.

The cynics tell us that the ills are down to having had a bad run of corrupt and inept leaders, and it’s a matter of changing those at the helm. If it is not Dr. Mahathir or Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at fault, then it is some other leader’s fault. Or if it is not them, it’s the people around them, who wait to feed on scraps that are dished out. Others might say that nothing will change for so long as we continue to vote the Barisan Nasional (BN) into office, as they have showed no real appetite to strengthen checks and balances.

It’s hard to ignore these arguments. After all, the symptoms keep recurring and it is presumed that the link to persons at the top is easy to establish. So how can the suggestion be flawed? And yet, something has nagged me about its simplicity. If we reject the power-sharing model of the current national government and choose to support any of the alternative political parties, will we really be helping to fix the problem? Or will such a choice be this country’s ultimate undoing?

In the recent 2008 General Elections, the BN was denied the two-third’s majority in parliament that it had enjoyed since 1969. Five state governments fell to the hands of a variety of coalitions made up of the various parliamentary opposition parties. By anyone’s measure, these are devastating results for the BN. Do the results show that Malaysians have finally grown up

to the power of democracy? Does this signal that the government of the day will take to heart the message from the electorate, and by doing so become more transparent and accountable? Will the underlying tones of chauvinism that have become its trademark be removed? Is Malaysia going to get well?

Recognizing symptoms is one thing, but diagnosing the condition is quite a separate matter altogether. And what you diagnose, in so far as politics and leadership are concerned, depends on your frame of reference, prejudices and experience. Unfortunately, most commentators have a vested interest in the matter upon which they commentate, and so it is hard to assign any proper value to their views. That's not to say that these opinions should not be heard. But we must exercise care if we are to avoid being duped into supporting self-serving interests.

This country has survived through long periods of distrust, prejudices and antagonism between communities, and managed to considerably scale back its effects, by recognizing natural political cleavages along communal lines. It is not by any accident that we have arrived at where we are today. We have successfully relied on communal representation to work together in a spirit of a cooperative joint venture for the sake of nation-building. Given what we have achieved, its value cannot be underestimated. When richer countries that had gained independence at the same time as us have faltered and imploded, we have, instead, progressed steadily. When all is said and done, we've not done too badly. Can we honestly say that we have so fundamentally changed such that we can afford to discard a model that has worked so well for us in the past? So if we throw out the bath water, aren't we risking throwing out the baby too? We must reflect on our history

and our natural inclinations to put things into perspective, before forming too hasty a decision that we might live to regret.

As Malaysians, we all have a critical stake in understanding what, if anything, is ailing the country, and ensuring that the right medicine is prescribed. The wrong treatment could be hazardous.

Not long ago, Al Gore made a documentary called *An Inconvenient Truth* in which he presented what he considered to be irrefutable evidence of global warming and its effects, and why it can no longer be ignored. His message was simple. Let's work together to save the planet.

He showed a picture of the Earth from hundreds of thousands of miles away from outer space. It had a profound effect on me. Why? Well, because I am conditioned to think that we live in a world of conflicts and war. It feels as though all we do is fight with each other to wrestle control over important resources and to selfishly ensure that our own way of life prevails.

But when you see it from such a distance, it immediately hits you that we are all passengers on the same spaceship called planet Earth. His call, to look beyond our differences to make a collective change to the place we call our home, made absolute sense.

This book is trying to do something similar albeit on a much smaller scale. It is trying to present an analysis of how democracy works in Malaysia, and to explain, why it is that the environment in which political parties and the government of the day have to operate, is fundamentally flawed. These flaws need to be understood and appreciated by all Malaysians as factors that will substantially increase the risk of our nation-building failure, no matter where they are in respect of the political

divide. They aren't just a function of the men and women in power, but something much more fundamental in the make-up of our nation. For the sake of the country that we all call home, it is my sincere belief that we need to get these flaws fixed.

*An Inconvenient Truth* was based on an analysis of the scientific data that was collected by the UN-Based Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Both Al Gore and the IPCC won the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts. The Prize and many other awards only served to strengthen the credibility of their argument. The images and the data are both vivid and very easy to understand. You would think that everyone who saw the documentary would have been convinced and converted by its thesis.

And yet, at the recent 2007 IPCC Conference in Bali, major countries and economies failed to make much progress on resolving the issue of global warming. They disagreed with the scientific findings as to its extent and impact, and they disagreed as to what each country should do to help tackle this phenomenon. But the underlying problem of arriving at a consensus was the disagreement over the duty that each participant country had to the other, and the nature of their collective responsibility to protect the Earth's fragile environment.

The lesson for me is clear. If you are going to attempt a diagnosis and common prescription that all Malaysians can share about the state of our democracy, you must galvanize a collective mindset regarding the roles and responsibilities that each of us have towards the other and the rules that should govern our interactions.

The political differences between communities remain strong. They relate to how the "social contract" between the communities should be read. The social contract is the bedrock

of our constitution and the basis upon which our communal interactions occur. Without bringing into alignment our views as to what the social contract means it will be very difficult to galvanize a collective understanding of the problems associated with our democracy.

It is therefore a necessary pre-condition to building the central hypothesis of this book that I attempt to develop a commonly acceptable view of the fundamental elements of the social contract. The first section of the book – *Aligning Views on The Social Contract* – is dedicated to this task. Of course, some will not support my explanation of this foundation of nation-building, and it is a reality that I must accept. Indeed this failure to get a broad alignment on this fundamental issue is itself an indication of the difficulties we face as a nation.

Once the common view around the social contract is laid out, I will then outline what I believe to be the key nation-building principles, taking into account, amongst other things, how this contract can be commonly read. Having done so, I then explore in the following section – *The Case for Change* – whether or not the environment, to which the process of democratic selection is subject, impedes the development and implementation of policies that address these nation-building principles. And in answering the question in the positive, I will proceed to outline in the third and final section – *Reset* – a proposal that addresses these impediments.

Maintaining a balance between opposing viewpoints will be extremely challenging. And there will be some things that I say or quote which might be hurtful, or which might impinge on certain sensitivities. And if that is the case, let me apologize in advance. But sometimes we need to be willing to keep an open mind if

we are to wrestle with some difficult issues. I implore you to take these statements at face value, and not as a personal affront, but as a means to help frame the discussion into context.

To be able to fully appreciate the contents of this book, you need to put your prejudices aside and look at Malaysia from a sufficient distance away so that you can recognize its nation-building challenges with objectivity. If you cannot do this, then your defence mechanisms will get the better of you and you might end up seeing ghosts that are not there. This will affect your perceptions and your responses.

But at the same time, to read and digest the contents of this book as an alien in space will not do. You need to be sufficiently moved by the sense of being a Malaysian, and be willing to embrace and recognize your natural inclinations, whether it be your sense of loyalty to those who are closest to you, your family, your religion, or your culture and traditions. So wearing spectacles that tell you what you are and who you are is okay. But if those spectacles are tinted with bias, or worse still, hatred, because of what you perceive yourself and others to be, and what you think others perceive you to be, then this book is not for you.

I have intentionally excluded any discussion on the different stakeholder groups within the Bumiputra community, the political dynamics between the state governments and the federal government, and the balance of competing interests between West Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. I have chosen to do so, not because they aren't important, but because I wanted the book to focus on those elements of our socio-political fabric that I believe are putting the country at the greatest risk of failure. There will be times when a reference to "Malay" can be read to mean as

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“Bumiputra”. You will need to determine the appropriateness of such a reading, given the context.

This book is about how Malaysians, no matter their political affiliations, religious or ethnic backgrounds, can develop a common understanding of our situation and the gaps that need to be addressed. To do that, we must not pass judgment on the past or present in a way that creates stumbling blocks for a mature debate. We need to be able to confront our inner fears and be willing to share them with each other. Our goal must be to collectively understand and determine what we need to do, as individuals, as a community, or as a nation, to make Malaysia fulfil its potential as a common home for all of us.