

MALAYSIA

DEATH OF A DEMOCRACY

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INTRODUCTION

The race rioting and mob violence which broke out in Malaysia, in May 1969, perhaps marked the end of democracy in that country. In Kuala Lumpur, the capital, for twenty-four hours the whole machinery of government was halted and, for several days afterwards, it functioned only ineffectively. Many hundreds of people were killed; many thousands were maimed or injured. A curfew was declared but not impartially enforced; houses were systematically looted and burned. Refugee centres in different parts of the city hurriedly filled with families who had lost everything they owned.

These riots brought to an end the multi-racial experiment which, for twelve years of independence, had shown signs of being successful.

On the third day of the rioting, in a radio broadcast, a Government minister said: 'Democracy in Malaysia is dead.' Anyone attempting to evaluate the effects of the disturbances both on Malaysia and, in the long-term, on south-east Asia, will probably agree with him. But the causes of the riots provide an object lesson for multi-racial countries in other parts of the world. These recent events in Malaysia are all too relevant to happenings in other countries a long way from Asia. It is not difficult to draw a number of parallels.

The problems which the Malaysian Government has had to face, before and after the May riots, are not problems peculiar to Asia alone. They are to be found in any country where people of different races or different religious beliefs have to live and work together. The riots were the inevitable result of decades of racial friction and the failure of the Malaysians themselves to create a viable communal society. This failure serves as a sad example for multi-racial communities everywhere.

The May riots were, in the main, confined to the capital. The interaction between the different racial groups demonstrates a degree of prejudice, ineptness and failure which will disturb anyone who, like myself, regards Malaysia with great personal affection.

The scars left by this racial conflict are deep and lasting; the vital period immediately following the riots was a time of procrastination

and lost opportunity. In retrospect it seems unlikely that Malaysia will ever again be able to return to the kind of communal harmony it has experienced in the past.

The present political issues in Malaysia now need to be discussed, openly and frankly, with full realisation of the fears which prompt the thought and action of the country's racial communities.

Regrettably the present government in Malaysia takes the view that discussion does not help. It insists that information about the causes of the disturbances, the casualty figures and the parts played by each of the three racial groups should not be disclosed since this would only lead to further outbreaks of violence.

Because I am convinced that the opposite is true, and because I believe these events have a significance far beyond the borders of Malaysia, I have written this account of the Kuala Lumpur riots and their causes. I believe that strict censorship has exacerbated the situation and nothing is to be gained by asserting that 'a state of calm prevails in the capital'. It does not.

Feelings are still running high in Malaysia. Beneath the thin, surface normality are tensions, anger and hatred which cannot be controlled indefinitely by force and Emergency Regulations.

The account of race rioting must inevitably contain stories of bravery, of cowardice and of atrocity. It is not my intention to include unnecessarily details of atrocities which were perpetrated (by people of all races) during the first days of the riots. Nevertheless, some mention of them must be made in order to appreciate the amount of hatred which exists in Kuala Lumpur today and the irreparable damage which the riots have done to the chances of a multi-racial society.

Nothing whatsoever is to be gained by trying to sweep all the multi-racial problems (which are of considerable magnitude) under some sort of embroidered magic carpet. This account will, I hope, make people not yet involved realise fully the gravity of the situation. Malaysia is the corner-stone of stability in south-east Asia. After British troops withdraw from the Far East (by 1971) and the Americans leave Vietnam, Malaysia's continued stability in the vacuum created by their departure is of the utmost importance. The outlook for the country, if not hopeless, is certainly bleak. Nothing is to be gained by continued silence. It is unwise, so soon after the event, for anyone to think that Malaysia is 'back to normal' and that the riots were of little consequence. They were of great consequence;

they will have a serious effect on the country and on the rest of south-east Asia for many years to come.

Some readers may feel that I have at times been biased and it is perhaps necessary for me to stress that I have tried throughout to be objective. My information has been gained from a wide cross-section of Malaysian society—from people of all races and different occupations. Many of them are friends whom I have known for nearly twenty years and many are those with whom I have worked.

JOHN SLIMMING

Kuala Lumpur/Hong Kong

May–September 1969

1959 Labor Party of Malaya

1960 Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia & Malaysian People's Movement

1961 Pui Malaysia (Malaya Party (English-Speak. Malays))

1962 People's Progressive Party

1963A Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army

1963 National Chinese Party (Malaya)

1964 Information Communication Centre

1965 Civil Defence Bureau

* The Malayan Party (Malaya)