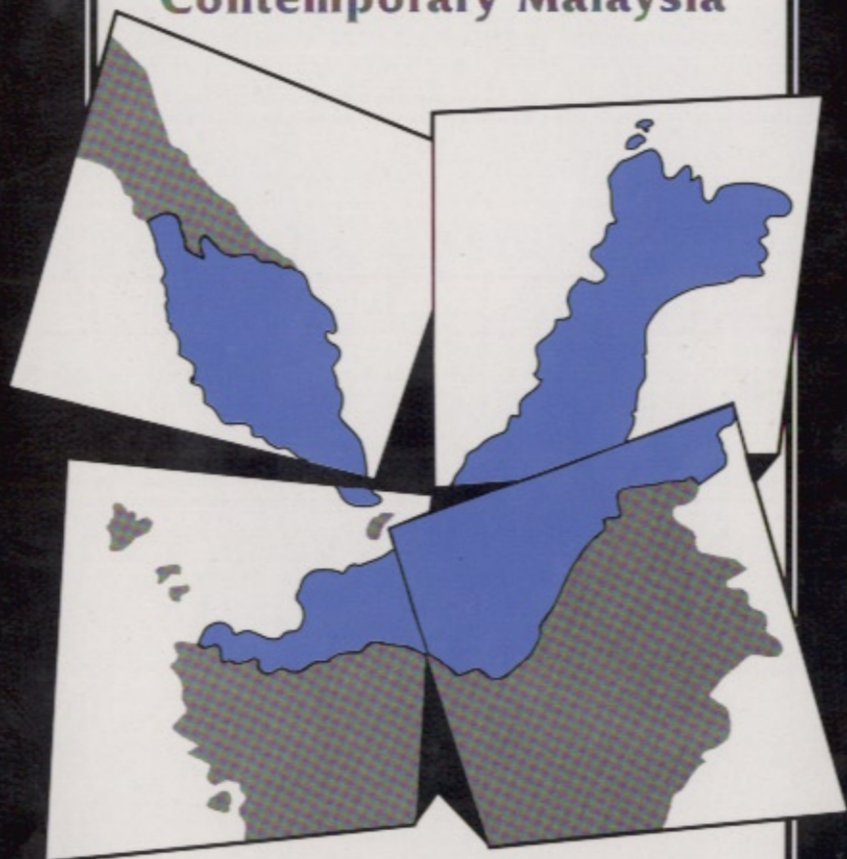


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FRAGMENTED VISION

**Culture and Politics in
Contemporary Malaysia**



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Introduction: Fragmented Vision

Francis Loh Kok Wah
Joel S Kahn

Malaysian society has undergone sweeping changes in the last two decades. Indeed the pace of change has been so rapid that each new development seems to catch the observer and analyst of Malaysian economy and polity unawares. Two kinds of transformation have drawn the most attention. These are the emergence of authoritarian structures and tendencies in the apparatus of the Malaysian state on the one hand, and the vastly accelerated rates of economic growth and a restructuring of the Malaysian economy on the other.

As Crouch (this volume) suggests, 1969 marks a significant shift in the mode of government, from a modified democracy to "a form of authoritarianism in which an entrenched elite takes whatever steps necessary to ensure its continued control of government." This authoritarian tendency is manifest in the increasingly wider use of the Internal Security Act (1960) and other forms of detention without trial, the Societies Act (1966), the Sedition Act (1971), the Universities and University Colleges Act (1971), the Official Secrets Act (1972), the Printing Presses and Publication Act (1988), most of which have been amended in the 1980s, to place tight restrictions on the activities of individuals and groups who would seek to challenge the legitimacy of the powers that be. In 1983 the Malaysian government, under Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed, also amended the constitution with regards to acquiring Royal Assent for the declaration of a State of Emergency. More recently in 1988, Mahathir began to undermine the doctrine of separation of powers between the executive, legislative and judiciary with yet another constitutional amendment. In this regard, the increasing inclusion of ouster clauses in new legislations is especially noteworthy. It marks a significant break with the policies of earlier governments.

At the economic level, the last two decades have witnessed relatively high rates of growth, prompting at least some recent observers to characterise Malaysia as the next NIC.¹ This economic growth has been achieved in the context of the development of new kinds of relations between political

¹ See, for example, *Far Eastern Economic Review* 7 September 1989.

instrumentalities and the economy. The State itself has played a more and more influential role, not just in economic planning, but it has also become more directly involved in financing and organising production. New circumstances have given rise to what in Malaysia has come to be called "Money Politics". This term covers a range of practices whereby the benefits of State economic sponsorship and protection are channelled to individuals, groups and private companies associated with the ruling political parties, in particular UMNO (the United Malays National Organisation). Consequently, the rise of Money Politics has resulted in the blurring of State and UMNO business interests and the increasing dominance of UMNO and UMNO associated enterprises in the economy (for some examples see paper by Khoo Kay Jin, this volume, and Gomez 1990).

These transformations in Malaysia's economy have contributed to the emergence of a more differentiated society which has been accompanied by, and interrelated with significant changes in civil society as well—in the nature of gender relations and the way in which these relations are perceived; in the lives of small-scale rural cultivators; in the composition, delineation and dominant symbols of the major ethnic groupings; in the circumstances of minority groups such as the Orang Asli and the indigenous peoples of East Malaysia; in the religious life of the nation (most clearly manifest in the rise of a new Muslim fundamentalism, but also in non-Muslim religious changes); in national and local cultural life—the list is potentially a very long one indeed.

What has, perhaps, most baffled observers is that the political and economic developments have occurred simultaneously. Analysts of liberal persuasion have, for example, been prepared for Malaysia's ability to stage economic recovery and yet often been at a loss to account for the activities of a state which contradict the ideals of classical liberalism. More radical critics have been less surprised by the authoritarian turn in Malaysian political life, but unable to account for the fact of sustained economic growth.

But analyses of what might be termed the *structure* of Malaysian economy and polity, as well as of the relationships between them, have only had limited reference to the cultural dimensions of social change in Malaysia. Two noteworthy exceptions are Muzaffar (1987) and Ackerman and Lee (1988). Apart from marking a significant gap in our understanding of contemporary Malaysia, this lack of attention to culture undermines those very structural analyses which predominate. Liberal analysts, for example, have failed to appreciate the extent to which culture, in this case the culture of democracy, must intervene between the terms of their standard equation, economic growth-political liberalism. And radical critics, by all too frequently relegating culture to the dustbin of false consciousness, fail to appreciate the unique features of the Malaysian social formation.

While we do not claim to have resolved these issues, our intentions in putting together this collection of papers on culture and politics in contem-