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COMMUNALISM

and the political process

IN MALAYA

PUSTAKA ILMU

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PREFACE

IN this book I have tried to present the political consequences of communal divisions in the Federation of Malaya. I have concentrated on the post-war period¹ because it is only with the Second World War that the bulk of the non-Malay population in the country ceased to be transient and became a part of the settled population, demanding widely increased political rights and thereby threatening the privileged position of the Malays. Further, it is mainly as a result of the political advancement seen during the post-war period (such as the creation of Malayan citizenship, the introduction of elections, and the attainment of independence) that the problems inherent in a plural society have come to be really felt.

As can be seen from the chapter headings, I have approached the subject by selecting for discussion those topics and issues which form the basis of communal disagreement. As a result I have had to sacrifice a certain amount of historical continuity; but I find this approach more suitable for a detailed analysis of my main theme. However, within each chapter I have tried to preserve some sense of the sequence of events and the accompanying changes in attitudes. This may unfortunately have led to some repetition, although I have attempted to keep it to a minimum.

Perhaps I have not made any significant use of findings in related studies or, for that matter, of the more general contributions to theory in the social sciences in so far as they are relevant. I can explain this only in terms of my very modest objective, which is simply that of presenting the communal problem as it exists in the Federation of Malaya. I have neither set out to make any direct contribution to theory in political science nor tried explicitly to make use of current concepts and terminology. However, studies of this kind may not be without value as a basis for the general development of theory and in many ways may even be necessary for that development.

Many of the observations found in this book, particularly those pertaining to communal attitudes, are in the main projections of

1. Roughly up to 1961, when work was completed.

expressed *élite* opinions (of which there are examples in the text), newspaper comments and so on, and are no doubt also influenced by my own familiarity with the Malayan political scene and participation in that society. Some of these opinions have, subsequent to the writing of this book, been confirmed through lengthy interviews with officials of all the major political parties undertaken as part of a different project. There are, in addition, other general observations on the nature of communalism and its relation to politics (such as those found in the last chapter) for which no claim is made except that they either seem logical or appear to be reasonable in the light of what is said in other parts of the book.

In the absence of any extensive and carefully planned surveys, it would be impossible to make claims about the accuracy of statements on communal attitudes. It may, of course, be possible roughly to estimate the relative popularity of different viewpoints on the basis of support given to different political parties whose chief distinguishing feature is their stand on the communal problem.² But then the fortunes of these parties, because they are also influenced by other, often temporary, factors, can easily fluctuate without corresponding fluctuations in the popular appreciation of their respective platforms. It is also relevant that leaders often succeed in 'creating' the interests which they eventually seem to represent, a fact which limits the scope for generalizations on basic communal attitudes. It may of course also be argued that, given the existence of political propaganda, even opinion surveys are liable to the same limitations. At times, objective factors, e.g. the indebtedness of the members of one community who are mostly farmers to money-lenders who belong to another community, may account not only for the presence but also for the intensity of communal attitudes.

What is important, however, is that the country does not have a satisfactorily developed system of interest articulation with voluntary organizations performing a useful political role. This makes the testing of collective opinion extremely difficult, especially at the lower levels of political participation. Even organized labour, so prominent in the politics of Singapore, plays a relatively unimportant role in shaping and expressing political attitudes in the Federation.

2. In fact most political parties are classifiable by the positions they occupy in the Malay versus non-Malay continuum.

As in other 'developing' countries, the inadequacy of organized interests has resulted in a communications network which, to the observer, is uneven in that the volume and continuity of the flow of messages from authoritative channels (and from the political *élites* generally) to the society far outweigh the flow in the opposite direction. By and large, the interests which most clearly seem to act as pressure groups on the political system are those which, though appearing to be functional, are efficacious mainly because they operate within a communal framework and represent communally sensitive issues. In the case of the Chinese community, the best examples would be the various guilds, chambers of commerce and educational groups; among the Malays, teachers and religious leaders (between them representing the areas of Malay culture which are politically of most consequence today) are the ones with greatest political influence. But for these, there are few effective pressure groups in the country.

It may on the whole be quite reasonable to argue that the inadequate system of interest articulation is in many ways a product of the major and clear-cut communal divisions which discourage popular interest in functionally specific groups. In Malaya communal interests undoubtedly override economic interests. This has produced a situation where political parties have to be relied on to perform the task of articulating particularistic demands. There is thus no accurate and continuous indication of the policy preferences of organized interests except, of course, for those which are expressed by political parties and which therefore stand the risk of distortion both by the advocates and by the policy makers (in cases where the two are different). As for larger communal interests, those publicly known to be championed by communal bodies vying for popular support in the open political scene are naturally difficult of aggregation in a competitive process. Unfortunately, even in the urbanized modern sector one does not have the mitigating influence of politically significant functional groups.

Much of what I say in this book would indicate the predominance, in Malayan politics, of issues which in most Western democracies may be felt to be politically neutral. This feature, common to many Asian and African states, has often been taken to be a reflection of a tangled and confused political scene where issues are most imperfectly conceived even by the active par-