

# Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation

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Perpustakaan Negara

*To my mother, Nathalie Means,  
and to the memory of my father, Paul B. Means,  
who first brought me to Malaya and  
who dedicated their lives to the well-being  
of Malaysians, Singaporeans, and Indonesians  
in all walks of life.*

## Preface

THE focus of this book is on the pace and direction of political change in Malaysia, concentrating on the two decades of the 1970s and 1980s. The earlier period in Malaysian politics has already been covered in considerable detail by a number of authors, including myself, and from a variety of analytical perspectives. For the purpose of this book, the previous era of Malaysian politics will be referred to and will be used for contrast and comparison. A longer perspective is useful, not only for viewing the extent and rate of change, but also for asking the questions about direction and pace that allow us to contemplate and anticipate the future. Apart from occasional references and an introductory summary of the evolution of the Malaysian political system, the period before 1970 will not be covered. Rather than retell the saga of politics in colonial Malaya, of the Japanese occupation, of Malayan independence, of the formation of the Federation of Malaysia, of Singapore's exit from Malaysia, and of the racial riots and crisis of 1969, this volume will proceed on the assumption that the reader has some basic understanding of these earlier events.

What is happening in contemporary Malaysia is not merely a set of discrete and isolated political events without direction and consequence. Against the larger panorama, political change and process can be discerned out of the apparently random and idiosyncratic events that are part of continuing political contests. The discrete events can be interesting and important. The search for process and for explanation is, however, even more significant.

Any account of politics in a modern state must be selective and simplify reality to reveal significant processes, changes, and interactions. Various approaches have focused on class, on élites, on political economy, on culture, on ideology, on ethnicity, on institutions, on constitutional-legal structures, on political mobilization, on power, on political coercion, and a variety of other criteria. Each has its adherents and its utility. Each also, by focusing on some phenomena, of necessity, relegates other phenomena to insignificance. For the analyst, the choice too often is made between presenting and defending an elegant theory, or confronting the messy and contradictory ambiguities of the real world. There is no one model or theoretical approach that can be a touchstone for all political and social analysis.

This case study of two decades of Malaysian politics is no exception. I cannot pretend to make contemporary Malaysian politics neat and understandable in terms of any one fashionable political model or analytical paradigm. Rather than select a single approach or analytical model as the framework for the present study, a number of theoretical approaches will be utilized to highlight or illustrate aspects of the Malaysian scene. Hopefully, alternative theories of comparative politics will provide some insights so that processes and trends can be identified and the more important transactions can be highlighted. I know of no simple yardstick for making such selections, except for an intuitive sense of what may be more important and what may be less so. Other political observers would, no doubt, make different selections and concentrate on a different set of factors. Even so, I would hope that my account and assessments will be congruent in most respects with those of most other informed observers of the Malaysian political scene.

No work of this scope can be the product of a single unaided author. This work relies heavily on the work and productivity of other scholars engaged in research and writing on the Malaysian scene. For some parts of this work, I could do little more than to assemble and interpret the work of others—scholars, news reporters, and active political activists. For other parts of the work, I was able to do more primary research or rely on some of my previous research on Malaysia. My citations and bibliography represent an extended set of acknowledgements to the accumulated scholarship of others. What is less apparent from these sources is my indebtedness to those who have assisted me in other ways.

For one year, I was affiliated with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore and had available the full resources of that superb research centre. Special thanks are due to the Director of the Institute, Kernial Singh Sandhu, and the Librarian, Ch'ng Kim See, who, along with her very capable staff, went far beyond the call of their duties to find materials and even to check sources for me after my return to Canada. Among the many Research Fellows working at the Institute, Dr Chandran Jeshurun, Dr Stephen Chee, Dr Toh Kin Woon, and Dr Subbiah Gunasekaran were particularly helpful with comments and suggestions on parts of the preliminary manuscript as it emerged. The frequent seminars at the Institute brought together many important guests from Malaysia as well as foreign visiting scholars working on Malaysian research topics. These seminars and discussions between fellows and visitors all contributed to my understanding of developments in Malaysia.

During the year I made numerous visits to Malaysia and received especially generous assistance from many of the faculty and staff at the University of Malaya and from the staff at the Institute of Advanced Studies. Deserving special mention are Lim Teck Ghee, Murugesu Pathmanathan, Susan Ackerman, and Raymond Lee. Two former graduate students from McMaster University who have gone on to professional careers in Malaysia were also helpful and a source of substantive and interpretive materials on Malaysian politics. They are