

Whither Democracy?

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An Analysis of the Malaysian Experience

edited by

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Differences of opinion in my community is a Divine blessing.

Hadith

Meng-tse said (to King Hsuan), "...when all your immediate ministers say that a man is worthy, it is not sufficient. When all your great officers say so, it is not sufficient. When all your people say so, look into the case, and if you find him to be worthy, then employ him. When all your immediate ministers say that a man is no good, do not listen to them. When all your great officers say so, do not listen to them. When all your people say so, look into the case, and if you find him to be no good, then dismiss him."

Meng-tse

3rd century B.C.

"In the so-called free countries the majority of the people are not free, they are driven by the minority to a goal which is not even known to them. This becomes possible only because people do not acknowledge moral and spiritual freedom as their object. They create huge eddies with their passions.... But the doom which is waiting to overtake them is as certain as death – for man's truth – is moral truth, and his emancipation is in the spiritual life."

Tagore

"Freedom is a human not a western ideal. The whole earth is the temple of freedom. Its spirit moves wherever men are learning to do justice to each other."

Lionel Curtis – quoted in

Muhammad Natsir *Capita Selecta*

(Bulan Bintang, Djakarta, 1973, p. 305).

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PREFACE

This book is composed of the whole series of speeches and discussion sessions that transpired at the Forum Rakyat on "Democracy in Malaysia" organised by Aliran on December 10-11, 1977 in Penang. After twenty years of independence and for a multi-ethnic country like Malaysia, this book on democracy is but a small step towards the true understanding of a system of government that Malaysians would very much like to see strengthened. It is a modest contribution to the existing literature on democracy. It also serves as an important platform upon which all of us could reflect and ponder on how much we have achieved in terms of democratic values. Idealism is not the essence of this book; rather it is the reality of a developing nation struggling to achieve higher economic standards and national unity.

Three themes were selected for discussion at the forum: Democracy and the Man-in-the-Street, Democracy for Development and the Future of Democracy in Malaysia. The participants were from different walks of life – academics, trade unionists, politicians, parliamentarians, lawyers, journalists and leaders of interest groups. They gave their frank opinions and expressed deep concern for the need to preserve democratic values and ideals in our country. We all know that in a multiethnic society where problems of national unity are more complex than in other societies, there are greater challenges confronting the creation of a just and equitable society. These challenges were most interestingly elucidated in a talk by Aliran's President.

It is Aliran's fervent hope that readers would find this book useful and beneficial. It is not our aim to provoke or to agitate or even criticize for its own sake. Our aim is merely to bring about a greater level of consciousness among the Malaysian public on issues and problems that have direct relevance to their lives so that a more enlightened citizenry will emerge. This objective is in consonance with the aspirations of the Rukunegara.

It must be noted here that each individual speaker presented his viewpoints from his own experience, knowledge and analysis of the existing situation. While the opinions of Aliran members reflect those of the society, it must be emphasised that we are not responsible for the views expressed by the other speakers who spoke for themselves or on behalf of their organizations.

Whether the reader subscribes to all the viewpoints is left to his good judgement. The book should be read with an open mind and whatever conclusions arrived at, one cannot but believe that in a democratic system the rakyat and those in power must work together effectively to safeguard democracy so that the aspirations of the people from various communities can be fulfilled.

Aliran wishes to express its gratitude to all the speakers who participated and who consented to having their speeches published in this book. Also I would like to thank all those who in one way or another helped to make this book possible.