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Malaysian rice malaise

iewed by Jomo K.S.

PHILIP Courtenay has distinguished himself for his modern historical geography studies of Malaysia since the colonial period. The Rice Sector of Peninsular Malaysia is yet another major contribution in this fine tradition.

There have, of course, been other such studies, most notably Hill's 1977 study, and Courtenay builds on them to take the story into the beginning of the 1990s.

Courtenay reiterates the now familiar argument about British colonial neglect of the rice sector, partly due to its general attitude towards the Malay peasantry, and partly due to the fact that most of the wet rice areas were in the northern Unfederated Malay States of Kedah, Perlis and Kelantan.

However, the British were also concerned with saving foreign exchange, which might otherwise flow out to rice exporting countries outside the Empire such as Siam. The colonial authorities also wanted to keep the price of rice - the main "wage good" - low, especially as peasants switched to rubber and the immigrant wage labour population grew in the tin mines, rubber plantations and the fast-growing towns.

Although Courtenay dates the change in official policy to 1960, in the post-colonial period, post-war late colonial policy was also different from the previous "benign neglect". In the face of the Communist-led insurgency from 1948, the British instituted modest political, labour and agrarian reforms from the early Fifties, including legal limits on land rents, to reduce the adverse consequences of growing tenancy on rice land.

At the same time, observers such as T.B. Wilson warned against the potential social and political consequences of not consolidating a yeoman peasantry.

However, Courtenay is basically correct in dating the more ambitious agricultural and rural development programmes to the period after independence in 1957. For Umno, the dominant partner in the ruling Alliance coalition, rural Malay electoral support was crucial. There was also some evidence of strong support for PAS, the Islamic opposition party, in the rice growing areas of the northern States of the peninsula.

Interestingly, Krian - the "rice bowl" of the Federated Malay States - was the only seat the Alliance lost in the first election in 1955 - to PAS. After all, traditional Islamic institutions were much more developed in areas with wet rice cultivation.

The major irrigation schemes in Muda (Kedah-Perlis) and Kemubu (Kelantan) were undertaken, paving the way for the Green Revolution of the 1970s, with new high-yielding varieties, chemical inputs (fertilisers, pesticides) and new use of agricultural machinery (to plough and harvest). However, the Green Revolution was only made possible - and viable for farmers - by the rice price support scheme, with consumers supporting prices higher than those in the world market, and thus the rice farmers.

Nevertheless rice farming has continued to contain one of the largest concentrations of the poor in Malaysia (the numbers were higher for rubber smallholders, but the proportion was lower; for the less numerous fisherfolk, the proportion was even higher). When the rice price increase in 1980 was introduced in coupon form, thousands of rice farmers demonstrated for the first time ever, an incident largely ignored in Jim Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985).

To placate the farmers, the price increase was enhanced from two to ten ringgit, i.e. the price was raised from RM30 to RM40. In contrast to the many increases in the 1970s, the next price increase only came a decade later, just before the critical 1990 general election, when the Mahathir regime was effectively challenged at the polls for the first time.

The limits to the productivity gains were thus largely realised by the end of the 1970s, especially after large-scale farming spread quickly in some irrigated areas, as mechanised harvesting dramatically reduced rice farming labour requirements.

Both the first and second versions of the National Agriculture Policy promoted much more commercial farming, envisaging reduced rice self-sufficiency. It is a pity that the comparative micro-economics of rice farming is not much investigated in the Courtenay book, as it might shed some light on the apparent paradox of continued poverty in an activity which has experienced so much technical change, especially in the 1970s.

Courtenay, however, reminds us quite correctly that rice farming has not just been confined to the irrigation schemes, though most of the abandoned rice farms since the 1980s are outside these areas. It is quite possible that only the most successful farms in irrigated areas will still be in operation by the end of the decade.

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