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Point of departure

iewed by U-En Ng

A new collection of essays about Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad will likely cause a sensation. U-EN NG writes.

REFLECTIONS: THE MAHATHIR YEARS

Edited by Bridget Welsh

Southeast Asian Studies Programme

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FEW of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's actions or policies have elicited lukewarm responses - his admirers have quite reasonably tended towards blind praise, and critics have often launched their attacks merely out of habit.

Reflections, for these reasons, is a book rare in its critical distance - aided by its composition as a collection of (sometimes contradictory) essays, as well as by its generally competent editorship.

"The individuals who have contributed to this book might not actually agree to sit down with each other," said editor Dr Bridget Welsh when launching the book at the University of Malaya last Saturday.

"Their work must be read as such - as individual pieces, not as a single book with a single point of view." The contributors (around 45 of them) write from diverse positions - often critically, but with a good-humoured impartiality that reflects creditably on their subjects and on themselves.

Besides a formidable selection of foreign commentators, Reflections features the opinions of leading local analysts, for example: Marina Mahathir on healthcare, Lee Poh Ping on economics and Johan Saravanamuttu on foreign policy.

If a dominant theme to these pieces can be identified, it is likely to establish the view that Dr Mahathir's socio-political achievements have not progressed on par with the economy.

In his essay on art, for example, Karim Raslan contends that the subservience of aesthetics to the overwhelming power of nation-building has bred an artistically stunted culture of social conformity, with dreadful implications for the national soul.

"Given the scale of Malaysia's extraordinary economic growth and global outlook - the country's 23 million people export twice as much as India's one billion - the nation's artistic and intellectual milieu is depressingly thin and at times insubstantial.

"Still, the Government has by no means starved the arts of funding ... As much as the rest of Malaysia, the Mahathir years have witnessed a substantial investment by the Government in the infrastructure necessary for art-making," but, he writes, the results have been insipid and banal "to be slotted alongside kite-playing and batik-painting."

The book's strength is in its variety; but this is unfortunately also its weakness: A number of pieces stand unevenly when considered against the whole.

Sadly, many of these are locally written and their composition, while entertaining, is indistinguishable from the shrill pamphlets of the more obviously political variety.

Readers will also find themselves occasionally at odds with writers whose proofs, possibly because of a lack of space, fall short of the pudding. Challenging these claims is beyond the scope of this review, but two examples should illustrate the point.

In his intricate essay *The Mark of The Man: Mahathir's Malaysia after Dr Mahathir*, Clive Kessler contends that Dr Mahathir's controversial response to the Reformasi movement was based in on his fear of a "rampant political enthusiasm with its demands for active inclusion and mass involvement that cultural modernity threatens."

Kessler's object is to demonstrate that while the success of Dr Mahathir's economic policies have benefitted the majority of Malaysians, his social policies have not kept pace and that this unequal growth now prevents further progress

This culminated in the political aftermath of the Asian financial crisis. The Government was faced with an administrative decision whether or not to allow greater political space for dissenters. Kessler's recommendation is an unqualified "yes".

He does not, however, entertain an equally valid position: That Dr Mahathir's response to Reformasi was the result of a legitimate domestic political calculation, and that the impetus for street demonstrations lay more in the skilled manipulation of a rival than in any popular agitation for greater political space:

The Alternative Front at the time failed to challenge the Government on matters of national policy, which if it had, would have constituted a genuine socio-political improvement. It relied instead on a constant repetition of slogans to fuel its support.

Anil Netto's impassioned *Black Eye for Human Rights* justifiably condemns the Internal Security Act as a hindrance to civil society, but the writer fails to acknowledge the problem that what constitutes civil society in Malaysia is still very much a matter of opinion - often heated political opinion. Especially now in the euphoria of an imminent economic recovery, readers will be undoubtedly grateful for a reminder that issues of political consciousness remain unresolved.

Netto, however, does not consider if a society "built on justice, human dignity and basic rights" can exist without an equally compelling sense of duty and social responsibility - two terms that appear too infrequently in otherwise serious criticisms of the Government.

Reflections, like its subject, is unlikely to draw lukewarm responses. Some readers will find themselves wholly in support of the issues dealt with here, while others will find little common ground on which to stand.

What is true is that few can afford to ignore this book - especially those who seek to know even a modicum of the principle issues that have shaped political discourse in this country, and are likely to shape them in the years to come.

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