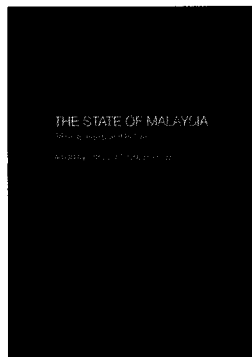




NIP AND TUCK OR EXTREME MAKE-OVER?

SHARAAD KUTTAN MULLS OVER A COLLECTION OF
ESSAYS ON THE SHAPE OF THE NATION



THE STATE OF MALAYSIA: ETHNICITY, EQUITY AND REFORM

EDMUND TERENCE GOMEZ (Ed)
(ROUTLEDGE CURZON, 2004)

IF ONE WERE to use a medical metaphor, this book presents itself as something of a diagnosis of the nation. It could be said that it gets to much of the functioning central organs—heart, liver, alimentary canal, brain—but only hints at its personality, temper and mind. The non-specialist could learn much from this collection, although he or she might come away from it with a rather one-dimensional view of how Malaysia functions. We get neither a sense of the country's cosmetic surfaces (both that which is seductive and repellent) nor of its psychoses, anxieties as well as inner strengths.

To be fair, the book is not an ambitious attempt to represent the 'state of Malaysia' in its entirety. Rather, it offers an explication of the dynamics around selected terms expressed in the subtitle: 'ethnicity, equity and reform'. On its own terms, the collection adds to our understanding of the many ways in which the state and governance operate.

However, apart from Sumit Mandal's attempt to clarify the all-pervasive concept of 'ethnicity', many of the writers take for granted the meanings attached to these terms and their associated notions, such as 'equity and social justice', or 'reform and democratic governance'. Mandal's inclusion, though, suggests that the editor, Terence Gomez, is more than aware that other forms of analysis are necessary to provide a fuller view of the Malaysian condition. Perhaps his dilemma is one of the availability of socio-cultural analysis

of sufficient quality. Perhaps, authoritarian governance has conditioned both scholars as well as ordinary folk to experience their reality through a state-centred lens. Political and corporate leaders are the key brokers in this view of Malaysia. What gets neglected in this analysis is how meanings are generated through these very institutions, such as authority, community, individuality. The fragmented and inchoate everyday of our lives is even farther away, even less valued as a source of understanding.

This is a book to be read, but with a sensitivity to some of the common pitfalls of scholarship that package reality to reflect the neat frameworks that have been theorised. For example, William Case's 'Testing Malaysia's pseudo-democracy' is so captive of the racialised approach that he forces himself to describe the human rights organisation Suaram as a 'predominantly Chinese NGO'. He could have done better to characterise it by the predominance of English-speaking middle-class individuals in its ranks. This ethnic approach again leads Case, in his zeal to pronounce on Malaysia's 'pseudo-democracy', to fit the facts into his 'Malay/Chinese' box. He writes: '...Mahathir denounced the Election Appeals Committee (Suqiu), a grouping of Chinese associations, as 'worse than communists', then admonished *after ethnic killings in a Kuala Lumpur squatter settlement* that 'the Malays must fight as one' (emphasis mine). The reference to the 'ethnic killings' is never explained, and one can only conclude that Case imagines a connection between Suqiu and what can only be the killings at Kampung Medan; even though the murders have often been portrayed in terms of clashes between Malays and Indians.

In this regard, Bridget Welsh's contribution is much more nuanced. She notes that 'although Malaysian ethnic identity is much richer than the labels used politically and ethnic relations are multi-faceted, during election campaigns, politicians resort to old clichés to provoke fear and uncertainty. Election campaigns serve to remind Malaysians that ethnicity is *the* defining feature of politics'. The idea that political (and administrative) practices generate the reality of ethnicity is one worth exploring, perhaps as a complement to the idea that social and cultural differences (read pluralism) make ethnicity the major feature of our body politic.

Welsh's contribution makes many bold assertions about trends in electoral politics, not least this: 'The electoral changes provoked by *reformasi* point to conflicting trends and suggest a limited and gradual democratisation, at best. Interestingly, however, the leadership transition in Umno potentially offers more options for democratisation in the longer term.'



Bursa Malaysia: Equity, equity, equity

IN TERMS OF institutional analysis, Kikue Hamayotsu's contribution makes for a fascinating read. Links between political party interests and business, the BN's Islamisation project, and poverty alleviation are analysed. The 'hijacking' of the Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia poverty alleviation programme, while not central to Hamayotsu's piece, is instructive. It points to the distortions resulting from the use of state machinery and policy-making for personal political advancement. Hamayotsu touches on the role played by Anwar Ibrahim in this history, as the resurgent politician is now increasingly being called to account for his policy initiatives.

Lorraine Carlos Salazar's examination of the realpolitik of policy 'non-formulation' in the telecommunications sector is rather chilling. She writes: 'A National Telecommunications Plan (NTP) was only released in 1994, after all but one of the licences had been awarded. The issuance of the NTP seemed an afterthought. One former senior official of Telekom described the release of the NTP as an "act of trying to correct faults of what has been done, rather than a policy statement of the way forward". Thank goodness for small mercies but it does leave you wondering if and how other policies are formulated.

There will always be details to quibble about in any publication of substance. In this regard, Jason P Abbot's exploration of 'the Internet, *reformasi* and democratisation' is

marred by some factual mistakes, along with typographical and spelling mistakes. More troubling is his compulsion to render the actual lived experience of activists in black and white terms. Perhaps it is all the more heroic if the odds are completely stacked against them, but to assert that it is 'virtually impossible for alternative voices to reach the public' is inadequate to the situation. Observers, both foreign and domestic, often assume that the reality of Malaysia can be read simply from the laws and policies that govern us, when in fact, so much is negotiated, resisted and rendered inert by everyday dynamics (between journalists and editors) as much as through collective action and advocacy work.

There are many surprising insights in this collection, not least that which the editor himself makes in his introduction. By showing that the relative neglect of the rural sector (and the Malay community associated with it) in the process of rapid modernisation played a role in the erosion of support for Umno leading up to the General Elections of 1999, we can begin, for instance, to read the politics that underscore the political rhetoric we often take at face value. Similarly, there is much to recommend this excellent collection, especially if the reader resists the temptation to accept all that is written as authoritative, and enters into the spirit of social enquiry by bringing to the writing their his or her informed criticism. ■