

DINA ZAMAN

Malayland



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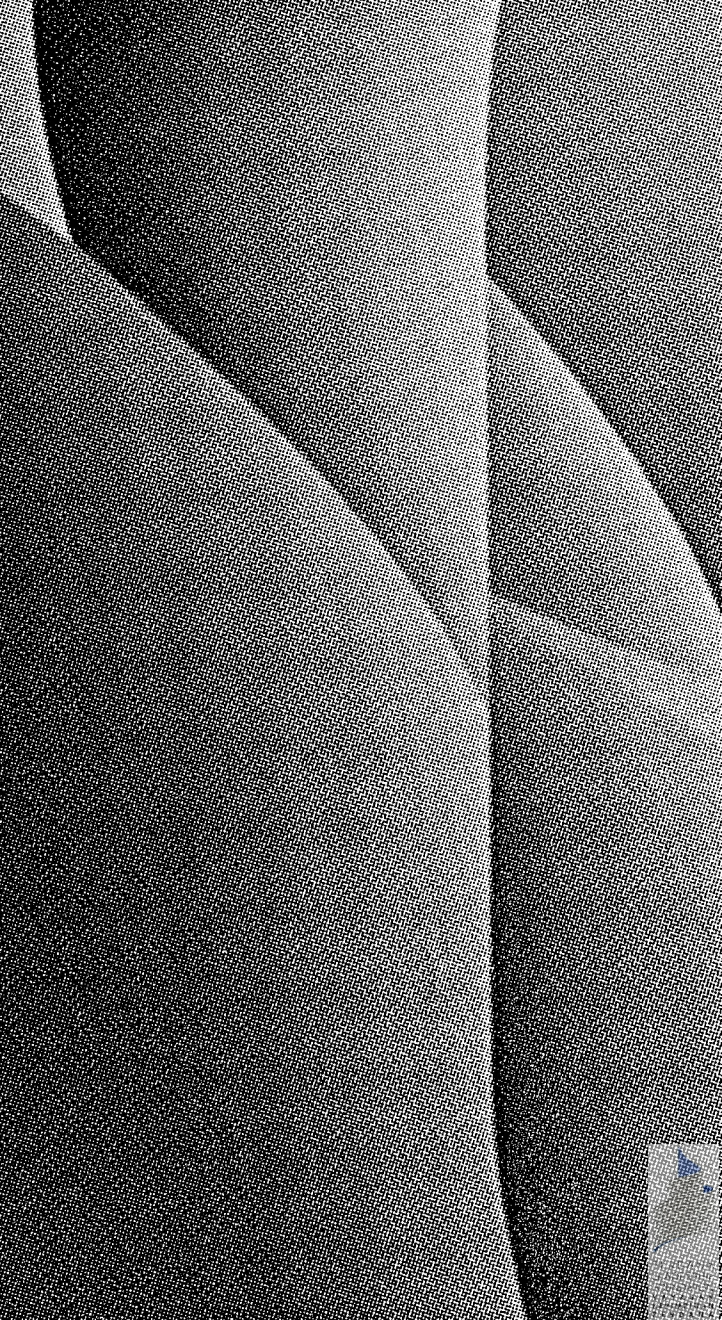
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Malayland

DINA ZAMAN

Foreword by

YAM Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin ibni Tuanku Muhriz

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For my parents,
sisters, brother-in-law,
nephews, and niece.



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SWELL

CREATIVE & EDITOR

Chye Shu Wen

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Lauren Chye

EDITORIAL CONSULTANTS

Melodie Wong and Shirley Low

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Foreword

Dina Zaman's 2007 *I Am Muslim* was an important book in disclosing how others experienced faith. Equally for those who thought themselves worldly and enlightened, and for those who were sure that their interpretation was the only correct one, her essays and interviews candidly, amusingly and non-judgmentally articulated the experiences of individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

I read the book in Washington DC, where I was working, having been a student and researcher in the UK for eleven years prior. There, the use and abuse of racial and religious identity for political purposes was fast evolving, and today, populist ethnonationalism is present all over the world in autocracies and democracies alike.

Conversations with fellow Malaysian students and professionals in the UK and USA had already opened my eyes to vastly different attitudes of race and religion among compatriots. My experience as an international school student where race was never discussed was revealed to be an anomaly, and friends and colleagues chided me for being ignorant of the racism that not only affected individual Malaysians every day, but also its pervasiveness (the words "institutional" and "structural" came into use later) in dividing citizens from a young age through the public education system and in the delivery of government services.

At the same time, I noticed many contradictions among the university student body. While much was said and done to promote multi-ethnic solidarity, particularly through

food events, theatre productions and the Malaysian Games, there were many whose embrace of other cultures stopped at our nation's borders; and a significant number hung out exclusively among their own ethnic group.

As I graduated and started work in Westminster, the growth of the Malaysia Think Tank London (later to become the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs [IDEAS]) saw conversations and research interests exploring Malaysia's political, economic and social history, giving rise to what is now sometimes derided as an unhealthy obsession with romanticised nostalgia: Overplaying the notion that the Malaya and Malaysia of the past was a multi-ethnic multi-religious paradise destroyed later by pernicious politicians. If only we fixed our politics, the theory went, we would restore that utopia.

The truth of the formative years of our nation is much more complex, of course, but the point is that a multi-ethnic, multi-religious paradise really was conceived and articulated as a goal expressed, imperfectly though it was (and from time to time, updated to suit political incentives), in documents like the Proclamation of Independence, the Federal Constitution, the Proclamation of Malaysia, the Rukun Negara, and Vision 2020.

Unfortunately, consensus even on how legitimate these declarations are, let alone how they are interpreted, has lessened, not increased, over time, commensurate with — or indeed, driven by — the increasingly diverse ways in which people identify themselves. It is perversely ironic that at a time when so many claim to be promoting unity among Malays and Muslims, there have never been so many

political parties and movements claiming to represent us!

The subjects in *Malayland* showcase an even broader set of identities than its predecessor of seventeen years before — Dina’s 2007 book *I am Muslim*. Since then we’ve had 1MDB, unprecedented general elections resulting in changes of government and a hung parliament, the Sheraton Move and various other attempted Moves, and of course a coronavirus pandemic that has further confused our political scene. All of these incidents — experienced differently by different Malaysians — have contributed to how people have drawn on and reacted to their Muslim and Malay identity. Some are aligned to a political agenda; others in opposition to one. Some were cultivated from a wilful rebelliousness; others the result of soul-searching in a cacophonous world. Some see their faith as deeply personal; others as the prime characteristic they want to exhibit.

In my work across Malaysian civil society, the corporate sector and the arts — and indeed at family and social events — I recognise the individuals that Dina writes about in this book. For the most part, they do still yearn for a common journey alongside Malaysians of different backgrounds — including Malays who define their identity differently — but unfortunately, this isn’t true of everyone.

That’s why it is so vital that we seek solace in the vision of our Founding Fathers and the Federal Constitution, a document which still is the highest law of our land, still possesses legitimacy and must still form the basis for our shared destiny.

Is that achievable? It will certainly be tough, but I remain hopeful that the identities Dina outlines in this book can peacefully coexist. Perhaps another book from her a decade from now will update us!

YAM Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin ibni Tuanku Muhriz
FOUNDING PRESIDENT OF THE INSTITUTE FOR
DEMOCRACY AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS (IDEAS)
SEREMBAN, NEGERI SEMBILAN
14 MARCH 2024

Prologue: In the Beginning

In 1998, the deputy prime minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, was arrested for alleged sodomy. I remember a flurry of discussions at work, on the office intranet system, now heated up by mentions of Islam and Anwar. I knew that Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, was angry with him, but over what exactly, I didn't know.

I didn't feel good that morning, and once I was deep inside the Commissioning and Production Department of the fledgling broadcasting station where we worked odd hours, it took a different medium for the news to reach me. When I picked up the newspapers declaring "Anwar Liwat!" I had to shoot off an innocent email to a friend.¹

"Liwat' tu apa?"

I was apolitical then, very much like many young women in Kuala Lumpur who wanted to earn good money and marry men with similar family and economic backgrounds. Perhaps one difference was wanting, and failing, to write the Great Malaysian Novel, and so I was

1 At that time, I had a lively column in the *New Straits Times* called "Dina's Dalca", recounting our cats, my friends and abysmal love life. It was the Sharia-compliant version of *Sex and The City*.

awaiting the results of the Chevening scholarship, having applied for a master's in creative writing. But the unsettling news of Anwar's arrest and its possible implications refused to abate as I drove back home that afternoon from Seri Kembangan, where the drivers all seemed to be looking upwards. Helicopters. The menacing sound of their whirring blades droned into my car as I entertained the thought of one of them crashing into me.

We lived a few roads behind Anwar's house in Damansara Heights — swarms of people and cars had almost choked off all access; many held placards demanding his release. Leaving my car near someone's house, I ran uphill back home, pushing my way through the crowd. Inside, I found my mother speaking into the orange telephone with its gaudy Telekom sticker, rehashing the news with her sisters. Meanwhile, my sisters were shouting. "Bah, Bah, what is 'liwat'?" Like me, they did not understand what it meant.

My mother hung up and turned to my father. "What is going on?" she demanded. "How can the papers write 'liwat' on the front page? We are Malays. We do not use such words. There are students, young people reading newspapers."

My father, normally a calm and quiet man, snapped. "If you mention that word again, I will rotan you. That is a bad word!"

He rolled up the papers and struck the dining table. Our cats ran off and the maids retreated into their rooms at the back of the house as he sat down on the sofa, cradling his head with his hands.

"Today is the day we Malays have lost our moral compass."

He looked at us steadily.

“Your mother and I lived through the Japanese occupation, our Independence, and May 13. And now this. I cannot believe this has happened.”



When I think of the conclusions of the focus group discussions that we conducted for IMAN Research² since 2016, my memory of my experience that fateful day always returns. Our focus groups had found that the overwhelming consensus among young Malaysians was one of disempowerment. Where did all this negative sentiment come from? How did we get here? The answer is tricky to pin down, but the rise of the Reformasi movement in Malaysian politics, and the turning point of Anwar’s sodomy accusation, form key components.

The Reformasi movement that began in the late 1990s — during a period of unrest and acute financial crisis — was a direct response to the previously hedonistic and materialistic fervour that had swept the country. Money and success were king, and the Bumiputera³ commercial class dominated media and gossip in Kuala Lumpur. I think almost every Malay person then had high hopes of making it big, or at least joining the middle class. Or perhaps it

2 After I was done with the Asian Public Intellectual Fellowship, sponsored by the Nippon Foundation, I had a barking mad idea of creating a think tank and roped a few friends into it. Somehow, it took off and became IMAN Research Berhad.

3 The category “Bumiputera” was created to legally classify the Malays and the indigenous peoples during the formative nation-building period.

began earlier, with Dr. Mahathir Mohamad — the prime minister that spearheaded many economic drives to create Bumiputera millionaires⁴ since taking office in 1981; whose mode of governance relied less on the social welfare and affirmative action policies of the past decade, and more on the advancement of the commercial class.

However, such “progress” had several faces and was steered at Mahathir’s whims. As Sonia Randhawa writes, “[It was n]ever attached to democracy, Mahathir found in neoliberalism, particularly when married to neoconservatism, an ideological ally”.⁵ In the 1990s, before the Reformasi movement kicked off, conservatism was completely alien to us in Kuala Lumpur. Women taking to the tudung⁶ were shunned as backwards — indeed, the privileged and the professional danced at clubs like Tin Mine, Regine’s and Scandals, owned by the nightlife impresario Rhona Drury. The younger set, many of whom benefited from government scholarships and support, danced their nights away as well, and went to work nursing hangovers in a city flush with money, success and great pride; all taken in by the notion of national success.

Perhaps Professor Shaharuddin Maaruf was correct in a prescient assessment, written at the start of Mahathir’s ascendancy, when he argued that the elite were less enamoured with Umar Ibn Khattab or Jose Rizal than they were with the Rothchilds.⁷ Religious belief, national pride and personal fame were nowhere as valued as financial and material wealth. Meanwhile, men like Halim Saad and Samsudin Abu Hassan could remain shrouded in mystery, but none dared to ask more questions because they were Bumi billionaires.

We wanted to own Protons even though they started croaking after a year, motoring to jobs where our bosses — with the choicest of words — decided that we were “recalcitrant”. (Away from them, my friends and I observed fewer niceties and simply swore at each other.) I will tell you this though: you’ll never have the 1990s back. We were an unofficial Asian Tiger, admired by the world, slaying the global forum just like Alexis Colby and her eye-poking shoulder pads from *Dynasty*. Right up to the early 2000s, Kuala Lumpur was also one of the epicentres of raves with international DJs flying in and out of the capital. You weren’t cool if you hadn’t partied at places like Backroom, Modestos, Heaven and Hard Rock Cafe; you’d also be considered really low on the party ladder if you had never said hello to the King of Nightlife, Bob Wong.

It was these two decades that created the conditions for the Reformasi. Looking back, perhaps it was a manifestation of backlash from the grassroots Malays who

4 The construction of the term Bumiputera (“literally, son or prince of the soil”), which includes ethnic Malays and those of other groups officially classified as native or indigenous by the state, “began to be used officially to refer to Malays and the indigenes of Sabah and Sarawak in the 1960s”. See Rusalina Idrus, “Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity”, in Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (eds.), *Melayu: Politics, Poetics, and Paradoxes of Malayness* (NUS Press, 2011), pp. 113–14.

5 Sonia Randhawa, *Writing Women: The Women’s Pages of the Malay-Language Press (1987–1998)* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 21.

6 This headscarf is also called “hijab”: both variants are equally understood in Malaysia.

7 Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Concept of a Hero in Malay Society* (SIRD, 2014), p. 18.

had since joined the middle class. Fed up with hedonism and freewheeling corporatism, not entirely bought over by their scholarships or material gain, they felt what was needed was a movement to rein in corruption and push for the kind of Islam that they thought Malaysia needed. Success was now redefined in terms of religiosity, and theological backing arrived, curiously, from their children studying abroad, who spoke of an inclusive and popular Islam practised among the American Muslims. Dato' Sopian Ahmad, a former diplomat, commenting on one of my Facebook posts sometime in 2017, echoed this sentiment:

It was different then because “Orang Kampong” were not involved yet. Soon after that era the “Orang Kampong” came out to towns. They were “certified” people (i.e., the beneficiaries of official education policies and initiatives) but lived by the “old conservative and traditional” values. Perhaps they called such “values” religion or “Islamic”? This phenomenon of “physical transmigration” from “kampong to urban” coupled with a “rejuvenation or a resurgence” of Islamic “kesedaran” challenged your great parties (in Kuala Lumpur) — this gaveway to “angst” against “Melayu Secular or Liberal”!

We would not have seen it coming that afternoon in Damansara Heights, but Islamic revivalism was rekindling. This was not the existing, state-sponsored form of Islamisation that had been so amenable to capitalist development, but one with a greater affinity with the outlawed Al Arqam movement. Revivalism was not a new

phenomenon. The Kaum Muda's movements in the early twentieth century had aimed to unseat the syncretic but admittedly conservative religious establishment which they blamed for perceived Malay backwardness, in the wake of rising nationalism and anti-imperialism. "To be rid of the infidels (and elites), to have an independent Tanah Melayu, you must have Islam," these teachers told our forefathers.⁸

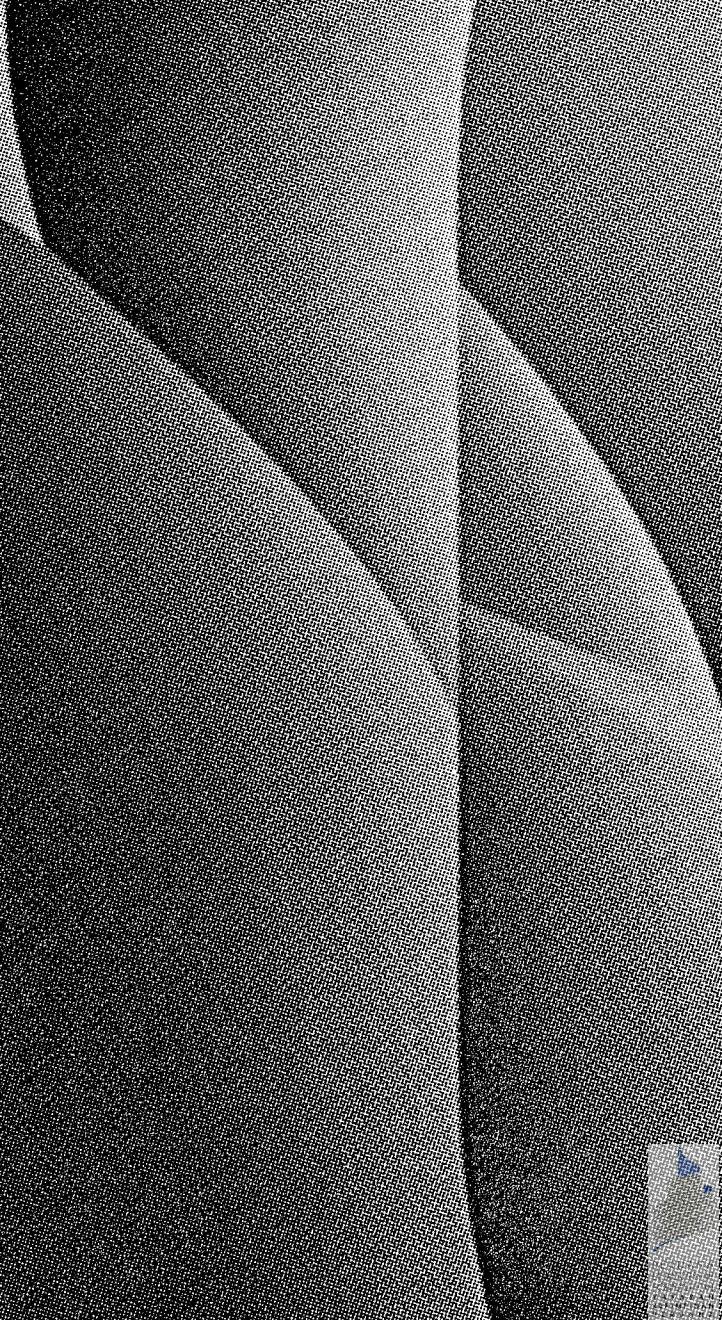
Islam, interpreted varyingly, now had applications for both the political left and right. Besides being a tool for emancipation among disenfranchised citizens — in the spectre of the Cold War, the ruling government could speak about a red and green menace — it could also be appropriated by the ruling establishment and transformed into an institutionalised penal code.⁹ Today, our faith has become a capitalist tool as well: The children of that generation of Malay-Muslims who once chanted for reform and demanded a revamp in governance now want to promote a more inclusive and Sharia-compliant brand of their faith.

It was in this context that I wrote *I Am Muslim* in 2007.



8 Regardless of its religious overtones, the political discourse espoused by the Islamist reformers at this time were very syncretic and decidedly modern. See Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

9 See some useful studies: Farish A. Noor, *The Malaysian Islamic Party PAS 1951–2013: Islamism in a Mottled Nation* (Amsterdam University Press, 2014); and Tamir Moustafa, *Constituting Religion: Islam, Liberal Rights, and the Malaysian State* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).



Chapter One: Past and Present



I

Writing during a pandemic was challenging. I embarked on this project simply to learn why some members of my ethnic group chose to fight for causes that made little sense to me. Why some chose to believe in heretics. Why others viewed their own people with distaste. But virtual interviews are shorn of the essence of their subjects, as well as the nuances of physical conversations and interactions.

When I reviewed my notes, I fretted. Will this book be readable? The early drafts were filled with transcriptions of interviews, and even then, not all of them were used. The text felt flat because I didn't go out into the field. I had also exercised a different writing style in the past few years: reports and briefs for IMAN Research, articles. Oh dear.

Yet, the book had to be written. The narrative on the ground has been reduced to media sound bites, with the subjects constantly represented by activists and academics of all stripes, from the far-right to liberals alike. In conversations about Malayness, can these experts be truly considered as speaking on behalf of the average Malay? Is there such a person as an average Malay? Who am I to speak on their — our — behalf?

In the end, curiosity won. I don't like this word, but admittedly I am somewhat an outsider with my peripatetic childhood, someone who loves Malay culture but gazes ironically at the idiosyncratic antics depicted in the judgmental media. Still, no matter how many books I read about us, there remain repeated questions, the "why" and "who" at the heart of our identity, whether singular or

plural. And so, I kept writing about Malayness. I became a very singular person, conjured into myth by strangers to explain my enigmatic aloofness and “outrageous” columns, as a friend in Malay high society called them.¹⁰

If you know me, then you would know how I have always spoken about fitting in better elsewhere, in any destination beyond Malaysia. You would also know how I have spoken about being so fed up with politics, and that I should have moved years ago. I have been told I am not Malay enough so many times, and how I don't even *look* Malay — if anything, I appear more Chinese. When I tried to explain that my late paternal grandmother was of Siamese descent, the reception was disbelief. “Your family must be liberal then, to marry out of the race and faith,” an acquaintance sneered knowingly. With people like this, I had two choices: righteous anger and arrogance, or I could choose to ignore them. Many times, it's a combination of the two, or else I do not bother responding. Whether malicious or innocent, this confusion presupposes that we must forget the historical nature of interethnic marriages, not to mention how the ever-shifting colonial construction of “racial” categories had been codified alongside the emergence of the metropole's possessions, and later adopted uncritically by the nation-state.¹¹

10 You tell me: I think my columns are funny. But no one had a sense of humour up there.

11 Various studies on this topic exist, but perhaps one of the most cited is that by Charles Hirschman, “The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology”, *Sociological Forum*, 1(2) (1986), pp. 330–361.

Dina Zaman has spent her life writing about identity, race, and religion. During the pandemic, she found herself thinking about Malaysians who expressed their disempowerment and sense of displacement from their own country. Where did all these feelings come from? How did we get here?

Nearly two decades after the publication of *I Am Muslim*, Zaman returns with *Malayland* to explore what it means to be Malay and Muslim in the 21st century. Part memoir and part observation, Zaman draws on her life-long fascination with identity, race, and religion as a third culture kid, who has seen the growth of post-colonial Malaysia ebb and flow for the past few decades.

Malayland aims to spark debate among readers on what the meaning of identity is, how class and rural-urban migration play a role in the ethnic chasm, and explore the many faces Malays and Malaysia have in different contexts.

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