

FINDING MALAYSIA

Making Sense of an Eccentric Nation

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ZAIRIL KHIR JOHARI

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Finding Malaysia

Dear Tun,
For a better Malaysia.

J. J.
6/4/18

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For Papa, who found Malaysia





TUN DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

Finding Malaysia

Making Sense of an Eccentric Nation

Zairil Khir Johari



SIRD

Strategic Information and Research Development Centre
Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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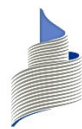
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Abbreviations and Acronyms

Amanah	Parti Amanah Negara (National Trust Party)
AMCJA	All-Malaya Council for Joint Action
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BEEA	Bumiputera economic empowerment agenda
Bersatu	Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (United Native Party of Malaysia)
BEST	Bridge Express Shuttle Transit
CACE	Central Advisory Committee on Education
CAT	Central Area Transit
CDU	Christian Democratic Union (Germany)
CPPS	Centre for Public Policy Studies
DAP	Democratic Action Party
EO	Emergency (Public Order and Crime Prevention) Ordinance
EPF	Employees' Provident Fund
ETP	economic transformation programme
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA)
FDP	Free Democratic Party (Germany)
GDP	gross domestic product
GLC	government-linked company
GTP	government transformation programme
IDE	Institut Darul Ehsan
IDEAS	Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs
IKIM	Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia)
Indah	Institut Dakwah dan Latihan Islam (Islamic Dakwah and Training Institute)

IPO	initial public offering
ISA	Internal Security Act
Jakim	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Islamic Development Department of Malaysia)
KBSM	Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (integrated secondary school curriculum)
KBSR	Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah (integrated primary school curriculum)
KMM	Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malay Union)
KSSR	Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (primary school standard curriculum)
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCKK	Malay College Kuala Kangsar
MEB	<i>Malaysia Education Blueprint</i>
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NEM	New Economic Model
NEP	New Economic Policy
NOC	National Operations Council
NSC	National Security Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
1MDB	1Malaysia Development Berhad
PAP	People's Action Party
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)
PCA	Prevention of Crime Act
Perkasa	Persatuan Pribumi Perkasa (Mighty Native Organisation)
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PKMM	Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (Pan-Malaya Malay Nationalist Party)
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party)
PMR	Penilaian Menengah Rendah (Lower Secondary Evaluation)
PPP	People's Progressive Party

PPSMI	Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris (teaching of mathematics and science in English)
PRIMA	Perumahan Rakyat 1Malaysia (1Malaysia Housing Programme)
psf	per square foot
PTPTN	Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional (National Higher Education Fund Corporation)
Putera	Pusat Tenaga Ra'ayat (Organisation of People's Power)
Saberkas	Syarikat Bekerjasama Am Syburi or <i>Sayang akan bangsa, ertinya redha korban apa segala</i> (General Cooperative Society of Syburi or to sacrifice everything for the love of one's nation)
SPAD	Suruhanjaya Pengangkutan Awam Darat (Land Public Transport Commission)
SPD	Social Democratic Party (Germany)
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education)
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UN	United Nations
UPSR	Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (Primary School Achievement Test)
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia
YAB	Yang Amat Berhormat (The Most Honourable)
YADIM	Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia (Malaysian Dakwah Islamiah Foundation)
YaPEIM	Yayasan Pembangunan Ekonomi Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Economic Development Foundation)
YB	Yang Berhormat (The Honourable)
YBhg	Yang Berbahagia (The Felicitous)
YM	Yang Mulia (His/Her Highness)



Glossary of Non-English Terms

<i>al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn</i>	Muslim Brotherhood
<i>bangsa Malaysia</i>	Malaysian race or nation
<i>bangsawan</i>	nobility
<i>bughah</i>	treason
<i>dakwah</i>	proselytising or preaching of Islam
<i>deen</i>	faith, way of life
<i>fatwa</i>	ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognised authority
<i>Grundgesetz</i>	Basic Law (Germany)
<i>haj</i>	Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca
<i>hidup Melayu</i>	long live the Malays
<i>hudud</i>	punishments mandated under <i>syariah</i> law, lit. limit (sing. <i>hadd</i>)
<i>ijtihad</i>	independent reasoning
<i>islah</i>	reformation
<i>kedaulatan rakyat</i>	sovereignty of the people
<i>kerajaan</i>	condition of having a raja
<i>keris</i>	dagger with a wavy-edged blade
<i>ketakutan Melayu</i>	Malay fear
<i>ketuanan Melayu</i>	Malay supremacy
<i>makan</i>	eat
<i>maqasid</i>	higher intention or purpose
<i>masjid</i>	mosque
<i>menteri besar</i>	chief minister
<i>pribumi</i>	indigenous or native

<i>rahmatul-lil-alameen</i>	mercy for all
<i>reformasi</i>	reform movement
Rukunegara	national principles
<i>surau</i>	Islamic assembly building
<i>syariah</i>	Islamic law based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet
<i>tafsir</i>	Qur'anic commentary or exegesis
<i>taqlid</i>	blindly follow
<i>tazkirah</i>	sermon
<i>terawih</i>	additional prayers performed at night during Ramadan
<i>ulama</i>	body of Muslim scholars who are recognised as having specialist knowledge of Islamic law and theology
<i>ummah</i>	the whole community of Muslims
<i>weltanschauung</i>	world view
<i>zakat fitrah</i>	charity given to the poor

Preface: Making sense of it all

Maybe I'm just too demanding
Maybe I'm just like my father, too bold
Maybe you're just like my mother
She's never satisfied (She's never satisfied)
Why do we scream at each other?
This is what it sounds like
When doves cry.¹

'There are two kinds of compilations. There are collected essays, which are basically an amalgamation of everything you've written. And then there are selected essays.'

My editor, Gareth Richards, smiled in that impish way he does. I watched as he leaned back into his chair, hands behind his head. He reminded me of Brian May, lead guitarist of one of my all-time favourite rock bands, Queen. And it wasn't just because Gareth looked like him (it's the hair, I'm afraid), but more so because behind the exterior of a legendary rock star Brian May is an astrophysicist with a doctoral dissertation that could pass for a title of a Queen album (*A Survey of Radial Velocities in the Zodiacal Dust Cloud*). Although not quite an astrophysicist, Gareth can only be described as a genius in his field. No one, certainly not anyone I know in Malaysia, comes close to his copy-editing prowess, anal retentiveness in indexing and flair for the apposite word. Believe me, he could make a description of a mundane supper sound like it was a gastronomic delight that would not be out of place in the *Michelin Guide*.

'I want to do a greatest hits album,' I replied.

And so began the process of putting together this book of selected

¹ Prince, 'When Doves Cry', *Purple Rain*, Warner Bros., 1984.

essays. The collection here spans writings from 2011 to 2016, a period of five years during which I graduated from being an aide to a frontline politician. In looking back at some of my older pieces, I realise that my perspective on certain issues has evolved (in a broader and more mature way, or so I tell myself). This means that I may no longer share the same views that I once advocated, at least not in their entirety. However, they remain a reflection of a particular time in my life and career, and I have chosen to include some of them, if only as a reminder of how far I have come.

Gareth and I decided that the book should have as much sense and focus as possible, and so rather than present my essays chronologically they are divided into five themes that most reverberate with me. I begin with the bane of Malaysian politics – the ethnic question. ‘A Malaysia for Malaysians’ features essays that deal with identity cleavages within our polity, particularly the great Malaysian dichotomy between Malays and non-Malays. At the same time, I also delve into the socially constructed milieu of Malayness, because the interethnic debate cannot truly be understood without first deconstructing the essence of what it means to be Malay in the Malaysian context. In between I also tackle a variety of related issues concerning the national language, official attire and the very Malaysian obsession with honorific styles and titles. You will note that there are instances where the term ‘race’ is used to denote ethnicity or an ethnic community. While I realise the scientific fallacy of such a convention and try to minimise it where I can, I think it is also important to acknowledge the prevalence of this term in the context of Malaysian social reality.

In the second section, ‘No god but God’, I continue my analysis of the identity domain by exploring concepts such as secularism, pluralism and liberalism vis-à-vis Islam. Many of these essays have courted controversy, but interestingly only when I publish them in Malay. I also examine the growing appeal of extremism, conservatism and exclusivism that now appear to dominate the religious discourse in our country. Finally, no discussion about Islam in Malaysia can be complete without explicating the divisive matter of the *syariah* penal code, known colloquially as *hudud* laws.

'Philosophy, politics and economics' is the catch-all section in which I include my thoughts on a wide range of issues, actual and theoretical. My essays here include socio-economic observations, attempts to analyse the muddled landscape that is Malaysian politics, proposals for legal and institutional reform, as well as my take on how our nation in crisis should move forward.

The last two sections, 'Back to the Federation' and 'Oh, our education', contain writings on two issues that I have consistently espoused as part of my policy agenda, namely the question of federalism and the national education system. It is indeed a peculiarity that while our country is in name a federation, in practice it is anything but. Almost all aspects of institutional control have been centralised and concentrated in the hands of the federal executive, thereby not only facilitating greater autocracy but also suppressing the burgeoning demands for greater democratisation, responsiveness and accountability in governance. This problem extends to our education system as well. While the declining quality and standards of our schools are corollaries of over-politicisation and misplaced priorities, the underlying problem, as I argue in my essays, is actually structural. Solutions to our education dilemma therefore require fundamental reforms, some of which have been recognised, but none of which are adequately addressed.

All things said and done, I can now attest that putting together a compilation of essays is not as straightforward as I initially thought it would be. Not only do they have to be ordered in the most readable and meaningful way possible, they also require much editing to ensure minimal repetition, consistency of style and that facts are not too dated. These are no easy tasks, and my gratitude for doing them goes out to my editor, the Brian May doppelgänger. That is a compliment in more ways than one, but a compliment he thoroughly deserves.

The essays in this book first appeared – sometimes with a different title and in a slightly different form – in various print and online publications. These include *The Edge*, *Penang Monthly* and *The Malaysian Insider*. I would like to thank all of them for providing space for my work, and of course for allowing me to reuse them in this publication. In particular, I would like to single out *The Malaysian Insider*, which offered me my first column back in 2011. I was one of thousands of Malaysians

who mourned the demise of the news portal after it was blocked by the government in February 2016 and subsequently shut down on 15 March 2016. The vacuum left in its wake has not since been filled.

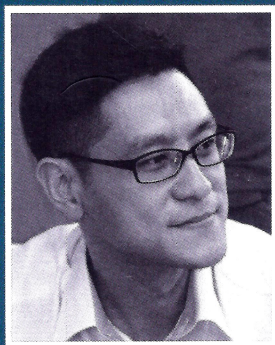
This book would of course not have been possible without the support of my numerous friends, who are too many to name. I thank each and every one of you for your friendship, and for allowing me to sharpen my arguments through regular bouts of cerebral jousting. I would also like to extend my sincerest appreciation to the good people at SIRD, whose dynamism, creativity and efficiency were most inspiring. Last but not least, I am forever indebted to my loving family. To my wife and children, thank you for putting up with a politician, a student and a late-night writer.

Zairil Khir Johari

George Town, 31 August 2016

FINDING MALAYSIA

Some of the most engaging contemporary writing has seen the transformation of the political column into a literary art form – an important way of taking in the world and thinking deeply about it. In his first collection of essays, Zairil Khir Johari offers quick-witted and focused reflections on some of the most pressing and contentious issues of the day. At the heart of the matter is the bane of Malaysian politics – the ethnic question – from which he explores a range of high-profile issues: identity, secularism, federalism, the economy, good governance and education. After sixty years of nationhood, Zairil finds much that is wrong with Malaysia. Its eccentricities are by no means benign. Yet these essays also offer answers to his own assertion that ‘we need to move beyond this.’ At once both philosophical and practical, *Finding Malaysia* lays down a marker for any serious debate over the future trajectory of the country.



Zairil Khir Johari was elected as the MP for Bukit Bendera, Penang in 2013. A graduate of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, he is currently the Democratic Action Party's assistant secretary for national publicity and vice-chairman of the party's Penang state committee. He is also the executive director of the Penang Institute, a public policy think tank. Through his work in Parliament and the Penang Institute, he actively spearheads discussions on issues such as national education, identity politics and federalism.

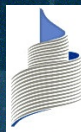


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