

REINVENTING MALAYSIA

Reflections on its
Past and Future

edited by
JOMO K. S.

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REINVENTING MALAYSIA



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Contents

Introduction ... 7
Contributors ... 13

- CHAPTER 1 Continuities in Island Southeast Asia ... 15
Wang Gungwu
- CHAPTER 2 May 13: A Review of Some Controversies in
Accounts of the Riots ... 35
John G. Butcher
- CHAPTER 3 From End of Slavery to the ISA: Human Rights
History in Malaysia ... 57
Cheah Boon Kheng
- CHAPTER 4 Malaysia's Economic and Political Crisis Since
September 1998 ... 84
Rustam A. Sani
- CHAPTER 5 Seeing Like a Social Scientist ... 100
James C. Scott
- CHAPTER 6 The Role of Malaysian Social Scientists in a Fast
Changing Society ... 108
Syed Husin Ali
- CHAPTER 7 Internationalizing Social Science: Problems and
Prospects ... 114
Charles Hirschman
- CHAPTER 8 Looking Back, Looking Forward ... 134
M. K. Rajakumar
- Index ... 157*

Introduction

In August 1997, the Malaysian Social Science Association organized the first-ever International Malaysian Studies Conference (MSC1) at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. Professor James C. Scott of Yale University, who has published two very different books based on fieldwork in Malaysia, Professor Wang Gungwu and Dr Syed Husin Ali, both early graduates and then professors of the University of Malaya, were invited to deliver the three keynote speeches. Two years later, MSC2 was convened at the same location in August 1999, with Professor Charles Hirschman of the University of Washington, recently retired Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) history professor, Dr Cheah Boon Kheng, and former Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) lecturer Rustam A. Sani doing the honours. This volume contains the slightly edited texts of their addresses to overflowing audiences at the conferences.

The book also includes two other solicited essays of great significance to Malaysians, to Malaysian Studies and others concerned about the future of this sometimes fragile nation. The former by the historian Dr John Butcher was first presented two decades ago to the Malaysian Society of the Asian Studies Association of Australia. It has been revised for publication. The final essay in this volume was secured from Dr M. K. Rajakumar, a private medical practitioner, who has been actively involved in public life. His closing chapter was originally prepared for private circulation to friends and compatriots concerned about Malaysia's contemporary challenges and future.

Collectively, the eight chapters in this volume challenge us to rethink Malaysia as well as received wisdom about Malaysia. In different ways, all eight involve rethinking Malaysia with a view to changing Malaysia for the better, i.e. reinventing Malaysia. This is not an instance of the collective will urging a reinvention of the nation, but rather of various individual voices speaking out against the inadequacies of past notions and previous conceptions in favour of a more forward-looking view of the world and, yes, of the nation.

Wang Gungwu's opening essay reminds us of the distinctiveness of the island Southeast Asia experience, including Malaysia's. For others, the more familiar terms might be the Nusantara or the Malay world, but these terms bear strong cultural connotations which are often understood to exclude or deny the role of the non-autochthonous or non-indigenous.¹ Wang re-examines the key notions of the nation-state and cultural pluralism from the lens offered by the historical experiences of this world. He suggests that both Malay and Chinese notions of the nation are not imbued with the belligerent connotations which took European nationalism of the nineteenth century into imperialism of the late nineteenth, and fascism of the mid-twentieth century with its persistent strain of racism outliving these earlier manifestations. Part of the reason, he suggests, is that the larger pre-colonial collectivities were always ethnically or culturally plural, even without the later immigrations from China, India and elsewhere. This different experience must surely have problematized the understanding and reception of Western notions of nation-states and the imperative to assimilate to achieve the cultural homogeneity implied by ethnic national conceptions of the Old (European) World.

Historian Cheah Boon Kheng offers a brief history of human rights in Malaysia, beginning from the last quarter of the 19th century through the 20th century, to locate the Internal Security Act, 1960 (ISA) and other contemporary denials of human rights in Malaysia in historical perspective. He compares the pre-colonial and colonial human rights situations to underscore the progress actually made. Cheah then shows that Human Rights have regressed slightly in a few areas compared to the colonial period. His survey mainly focuses on the Liberty of the Individual, Freedom of Expression, and Freedom of Labour. Cheah suggests that while the pre-colonial situation was hardly free in most senses of the word, colonialism did not represent a simple progression to freedom and human rights – as suggested by many theories of modernization, democratization and legal development. He also critically reviews the Asian values debate and suggests that the Asian record has been quite varied and uneven, with no unambiguous trajectory of progress. While acknowledging some progress during the early and mid-eighties – i.e. the early liberal Mahathir years, which some would also associate with his first deputy, Musa Hitam – he concludes with a plea for the further extension of civil liberties as Mahathir's lasting legacy to the nation.

Although the race riots associated with 13 May 1969 took place more than three decades ago, there has been surprisingly little scholarly investigation into the events. The main work by academics of that period have tended to be accounts by foreign scholars who happened to be resident in the country during that traumatic period. Historian John Butcher first critically examined the literature of that episode two decades ago, but the failure of other scholars to investigate the riots since has meant that the Butcher assessment remains the most serious attempt to critically analyze the various accounts of the events. Contemporary politicians continue to invoke the riots for various sundry political ends and the national memory of the period is hardly a shared one. Many are doubtful that even a truth commission would be able to provide an authoritative account, especially with the passage of time and changing interests as well as perceptions. Others would prefer to avoid the memory, to 'let sleeping dogs lie'. Yet, understanding and coming to terms with what is often invoked as the defining moment in the nation's post-colonial history still seems necessary as well as desirable. Of course, resolving the controversies over accounts of the riots does not necessarily resolve all other related and contingent issues, but as the recent South African experience with its truth commission suggests, such an effort is necessary, not only to provide closure to the trauma it invokes, but also for national reconciliation, so necessary for nation building in Malaysia today.

Arguably, Malaysia's leading public intellectual, Rustam A. Sani attempts to analyze the present as history, locating the ongoing Malaysian political crisis since September 1998 against longer-term trends as well as the preceding economic crisis. Rustam locates the crisis from mid-1997 against the backdrop of the preceding decade-long boom, including the bubbles engendered by financial liberalization, internationally as well as domestically. Dissent declined during the boom as much of the politically influential and relatively large 'middle class' partook of the good times despite the proliferation of money politics and political business, now dubbed cronyism. However, as economic conditions deteriorated, these previously tolerated abuses became the subject of popular anger. The Mahathir regime's blatant efforts to save and bail out these cronies and to spend its way out of the downturn by reviving the increasingly illegitimate mega-projects ensured that Anwar Ibrahim's sacking and subsequent incarceration

lionized the Prime Minister's erstwhile lieutenant and heir apparent. Ever culturally sensitive, Rustam relates the significance of these political developments in terms of Malaysian – and especially Malay – political norms and idioms, which have been changing significantly despite their apparent continuity and persistence.

In refreshingly self-critical reflections on his own highly successful academic career, James C. Scott suggests that contemporary and conventional criteria of academic achievement may often be intellectually vacuous. This leads him to warn against narrow scholasticism, especially in his own North American academic environment. He suggests that the professionalization of the social sciences has been principally responsible for its scholasticism as well as the related problem of methodological fetishism, and argues instead for methodological eclecticism as well as heterodoxy, especially in the face of the hegemony of logical positivism. Scott notes that the most common problems facing Malaysian social scientists are quite different, namely bureaucratic absorption and upward mobility, government-contract research and sheer unproductivity. Arguing that since honest and independent research is bound to come to findings inconvenient for officialdom, honest scholarship is by nature subversive. This requires independent, courageous and patriotic public intellectuals — necessarily 'self-selected' — prepared to 'jealously guard' their distance from power, rather than serve as its handmaidens.

In his humble and humbling contribution, radical nationalist politician and ex-academic Syed Husin Ali is even more self-critical about his experience as an academic sociologist in Malaysia. He vividly describes how he works far more, and more closely with the people, gaining far richer and deeper insights about living in Malaysia than he ever did while in the university, where he was widely recognized as very conscientious and diligent, even by those who did not care for his intellectual stance or his politics. Syed also acknowledges the pitfalls and fallacies that academic social sciences lead to because of the very nature of knowledge generation and legitimation practised. He reminds us of the limitations of his and the official focus on rural poverty, well before the recent tragic deaths in an urban squatter community where he has twice stood for parliament. He also suggests that poverty research's focus on outcome tends to obscure inequality as well as process. Modestly, Syed acknowledges

how difficult it has been to compete with the powerful and the state-party in attracting the poor to causes in their own interest. Acknowledged as the pioneer of social stratification studies in Malaysia, Syed not only recognizes its limitations, but also the complexities of sociological analysis in multi-cultural Malaysia as well as the mistakes of transposing alien social categories. He concludes with an earnest plea for urgent research to advance social development and nation building tasks while lamenting the continued decline of university autonomy and growing commercialization in Malaysia.

Also reflecting on his long involvement with Malaysia on the one hand and his interests in population and inequality on the other, Charles Hirschman explores some of the new challenges and dilemmas of social science work in the contemporary period, particularly with the tendency towards home-country specialization in Malaysia and with the new options and possibilities opened up by the new information and communications technologies. He contrasts the decline of big sweep theorization of social evolution, which characterized so much of the work of the social science pioneers of the nineteenth century, with the twentieth century's preoccupation with methodology. Besides limiting social science theorization, how one studies something has become as important as what is studied, with research determined by the availability of good data for the application of modern analytical methods. Another consequence, he notes, is that area studies have become marginal to the disciplines and thus to the broader academic communities as research has become increasingly driven by theory or methodology. Some area studies researchers have very little contact and communications with local scholars of the very communities they study. But Hirschman suggests that recent developments, especially the implications of recent technological developments, have opened up new possibilities for international co-operation of a potentially more balanced nature.

M. K. Rajakumar's closing chapter offers a retrospective prospectus on the country in the face of various challenges it faces at the turn of the decade and century. Without resorting to academic jargon or social science obscurantism, he takes a longer view of Malaysia's future by reflecting on its past against the rapid changes overtaking human society globally. Rejecting historicist determinism and linearity, he challenges us to identify new modes of thought necessary for human

survival. He is especially concerned that Malaysians have acquired many dysfunctional norms, attitudes and behaviours. At the international level, the challenges posed by globalization, environmental deterioration and post-Cold War power relations seem most worrying. After a brief survey of challenges faced by other developing countries, especially in ASEAN, he sees the Malaysian dilemma as rooted in the political system, the failure of educational reform, specifically to advance the Malays, and pervasive moral decline and corruption. Yet, he sees hope in political and educational reforms as well as efforts to develop a shared cultural life for the still fractured nation.

Taken together then, the eight chapters offer much unexpected complementarities as well as coherence. More importantly, all offer analyses which seem to be useful, if not necessary for forging a new Malaysia capable of facing and overcoming the challenges it faces as it enters a new decade and century bound to be unlike the last one. Rapid economic growth and structural change, new political contradictions and options, as well as social and cultural metamorphoses, seemingly accelerated by the compression of space and time made possible by new technologies, will undoubtedly pose new challenges for Malaysia as well as for students of the nation. Will Malaysia be sufficiently reinvented for these challenges? And will such analyses contribute enough to reinventing Malaysia?

Jomo K. S.

Notes

1. In a 1999 exhibit on prison islands in Southeast Asia using ostensibly indigenous plant materials, the Malaysian artist Wong Hoy Keong played with the double-entendre in the use of the Malay word *pulau*, comparable to the words 'isle' and 'isolate'. He also reminded his visitors that many ostensibly indigenous tropical plants including the most important commercial crops of the country - rubber and oil palm - are actually relatively recent imports. The historian Sumit Mandal provided an important essay for the exhibition which also carried the work of two other young women artists.

Contributors

JOHN G. BUTCHER teaches at the School of Asian and International Studies, Griffith University. He has written on British colonial society in Malaya and revenue farming in Southeast Asia and is completing an ecological history of the marine fisheries of Southeast Asia.

CHEAH BOON KHENG retired as a Professor of History at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang. He has written extensively on Malaysian social and political history, including *Masked Comrades, Red Star Over Malaya and The Peasant Robbers of Kedah*.

CHARLES HIRSCHMAN is Professor of Sociology at the University of Washington in Seattle. He teaches and conducts research in the areas of demography, race and ethnic inequality, and Southeast Asia. His publications include a book *Ethnic and Social Stratification in Peninsular Malaysia* (1975, American Sociological Association) and many articles and book chapters on Malaysia. He first came to Malaysia as an American Peace Corps Volunteer in 1965, and had lived for two years at Kampong Mengkuang in Baling, Kedah. Hirschman completed his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin in 1972 and taught at Duke University (1972-81) and Cornell University (1981-87) before going to the University of Washington. He is currently conducting research on social and demographic change in Vietnam.

M. K. RAJAKUMAR is a medical doctor practicing in Kuala Lumpur. He was last Acting Chairman of the Labour Party of Malaya (LPM), President of the Malaysian Scientific Association, President of WONCA, the World Organisation of Family Doctors, and first Vice-President of the Academy of Sciences of Malaysia.

RUSTAM A. SANI is a Vice-President of Partai Rakyat Malaysia and was President-elect of the Malaysian Social Science Association before becoming a politician. He did post-graduate work at the University of Kent, Canterbury, and at Yale University. He is considered one of the Malaysia's leading public intellectuals and has published extensively on politics, society, culture, statistics and poetry in both Malay and English.

JAMES C. SCOTT has several academic affiliations (Director, Program in Agrarian Studies and Professor of Political Science and Anthropology) at Yale University, reflecting the broad scope of and appreciation for his work. He is the author of many celebrated volumes, most notably *Political Ideology in Malaysia*, *The Moral Economy of the Peasantry*, *Weapons of the Weak*, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* and *Seeing Like The State*.

SYED HUSIN ALI was a Professor of Human Development and then of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Malaya and President of the Malaysian Social Science Association (MSSA) during the eighties, and has been President of the Partai Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) since 1990. Best known for his pioneering work on the Malay peasantry, inequality and leadership, he has written extensively on a variety of contemporary issues covering politics, society, culture and literature.

WANG GUNGWU is now the Director of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore and is a member of the Board of the Social Science Research Council. He was a Vice Chancellor of the University of Hongkong, as well as a Professor of History at the Australian National University and, prior to that, at the University of Malaya.