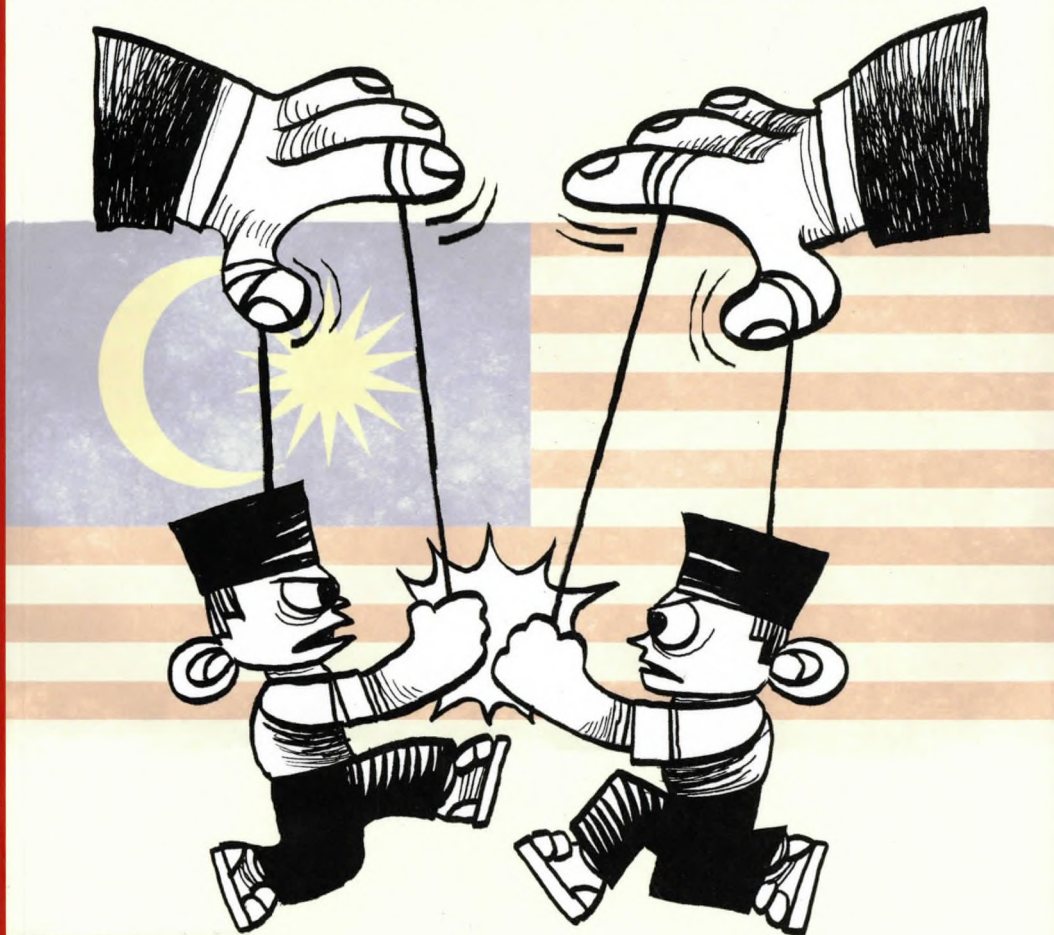


# ILLUSIONS OF DEMOCRACY

MALAYSIAN POLITICS AND PEOPLE VOLUME II



595

EDITED BY

**SOPHIE LEMIÈRE**

Malaysia is led by one of the most successful political parties in the world - UMNO-led coalitions have ruled since independence in 1957, a record that exceeds any elected government in power. Malaysia has also had an important international role as a leader of the regional ASEAN, and a global role as a moderate Muslim country.

But with declining support for the government in recent elections is UMNO rule secure? Is Malaysia still a democracy? And can Malaysia's international prominence be maintained with China exerting a stronger regional presence, and Islamic conservatives becoming more assertive at home? These issues are at the centre of this wide-ranging, excellent collection by Malaysian and international analysts.

**John Funston**

Visiting Fellow, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific  
Affairs, Australian National University



# Illusions of Democracy

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# Illusions of Democracy

## Malaysian Politics and People

### Volume II

*Edited by*  
**Sophie Lemièr**

**PUSTAKA PERDANA**



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Strategic Information and Research Development Centre  
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# Foreword

Contemporary Malaysia is a society in ferment. For years, the country has been led by the Barisan Nasional, a political coalition anchored by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Once believed to be unassailable, in the March 2008 general election the Malaysian opposition managed to deny Barisan its hitherto customary two-thirds parliamentary majority while also prying several state governments from its control. The momentum of the oppositions electoral success carried over into the 2013 election, when they inflicted a major blow on the incumbent coalition by winning the majority vote, even if the latter still managed to retain power by way of the first-past-the-post parliamentary process.

As the country stands at the cusp of another impending general election (due by mid-2018), a major financial scandal involving 1MDB, a state-owned strategic investment company, threatens to further undermine the credibility and legitimacy of the prime minister and president of UMNO, Najib Tun Razak. At the same time, civil society has become increasingly active - and agitated - as they engage the state on a raft of issues ranging from defence of the sacrosanct principle of Malay-Muslim dominance, implementation of Islamic strictures, freedom of worship for followers of minority religions, corruption and nepotism, indigenous rights of residents of East Malaysia as encapsulated in the '20 point' and '18 point' agreement documents signed between the state governments of Sabah and Sarawak and the Malaysian federal government, the gathering pace of environmental degradation, and the list goes on. While many of these issues are hardly new, the way they have unfolded in the post-Mahathir era has hastened academic and public discourse concerning them. More importantly, these issues have given rise to new research agendas in Malaysian studies. Indeed, the breadth of this new research agenda is reflected in the work of a new generation of scholars and 'Malaysianists', and finds expression in recent published scholarship covering the nexus between Islamic finance and politics, Islamist pop culture, the reframing of identity and nationalism among East Malaysians, environmental politics, the increasing prominence of *ulama* in everyday politics, and (un)civil activism.

In compiling a sample of this new scholarship in this present volume, Sophie Lemiere, herself among the new generation of scholars to watch, has

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done us a great service. Provocatively titled *Illusions of Democracy*, the essays cast light on the ambiguity and contestations that have in recent years come to define politics in Malaysia, especially in relation to issues that hitherto have not been subject to much scholarly attention or analytical scrutiny. In so doing, the volume constitutes an important collection of essays that makes a timely and original contribution to our understanding of the enigma of Malaysian politics. At this particularly crucial juncture of the country's history, the trenchant analysis provided in these essays deserves our closest attention.

**Joseph Chinyong Liow**

*Dean and Professor of Comparative and International Politics,  
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies,  
Nanyang Technological University*

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I am very grateful to my mentor and friend Olivier Roy, Professor at the European University, Brigid Laffan, director of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies and Karin Tilmans, director of the Max Weber Program at the EUI who have provided me with the financial means and the dynamic intellectual environment I needed to pursue my research in general and this project in particular.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this modest contribution to Malaysian studies to Joel S. Kahn and Cheah Boon Kheng, whose work has inspired, and will continue to inspire, generations of young students, and scholars.



# Introduction

## Illusions of Malaysia: Failed Democracy or Successful Authoritarianism?

### Spring is coming?

Since 2011, Spring is without fail associated with revolution, people power and democracy. In Malaysia, Spring has no meaning, neither climatically nor politically. Abdullah Badawi was a hope for change, as was Najib Razak with his calls for transformation and reform. Yet, despite their pledges for further democratisation, liberalisation and transformation, *Reformasi*, yet alone *Revolusi*, is yet to come.

When reading the website of the Prime Minister's Office, especially the page describing the Government Transformation Programme (GTP),<sup>1</sup> two things are immediately noticeable: the word *rakyat* appears as often as acronyms (the Malaysian government loves acronyms). After reading the summary we learn that Malaysia is, more than anything, a rakyat-crazy'. The semantic trick used here is to symbolically echo another word that is more often used by the opposition than by the government: Democracy. Demo-crazy is simply defined by the power of the people (*demos* - people, *kratos* - power): in Malaysia, elections have been organised since before independence and institutions were created to represent the peoples will. Elections are one of the first parameters to determine the level of freedom existing in a country. International organisations and institutions, that

<sup>1</sup> [http://gtp.pemandu.gov.my/gtp/About\\_GTP-@-GTP\\_Overview.aspx](http://gtp.pemandu.gov.my/gtp/About_GTP-@-GTP_Overview.aspx). Accessed on 21 May 2017.

*Illusions of Democracy* brings together over a dozen experts in Malaysian politics and society to explore various dimensions of identity, religion, regionalism, and power in contemporary Malaysia. At a time of political uncertainty in Malaysian politics, these contributions make for compelling reading for scholars and citizens alike.

**Thomas Pepinsky**

Associate Professor of Government, Cornell University

In a time when political discussion in the country seems to be reduced to the most basest of levels, it is with great relief that Sophie Lemière has decided to expand the work started in *Misplaced Democracy* in this new volume of essays examining the Malaysian situation. I hope that this book will spark more intellectual debate as to the direction this country is heading and perhaps more importantly: should be heading.

**Azmi Sharom**

Associate Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Malaya

Bringing together a group of both international and Malaysian scholars, *Illusions of Democracy: Malaysian Politics and People Volume II* offers an up-to-date and broad analysis of the contemporary state of Malaysian politics and society. Transcending disciplinary boundaries, it offers a look at Malaysian politics not only through the lens of political science but also anthropology, cultural studies, international relations, political economy and legal studies touching on both overlooked topics in Malaysian political life as well as the emerging trends which will shape Malaysia's future.

Covering *silat* martial arts, Malaysia's constitutional identity, emergency legislation, the South China Sea dilemma, ISIS discourse, *zakat* payment, the fallout from the 1MDB scandal and Malaysia's green movement, *Illusions of Democracy* charts the complex and multi-faceted nature of political life in a semi-authoritarian state, breaking down the illusions which keep it functioning, to uncover the mechanisms which really underlie the paradoxical longevity of Malaysia's political, economic and social system.

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