

Ceritalah 3

MALAYSIA
A DREAM DEFERRED

9595 KARIM RASLAN

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KARIM RASLAN

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Preface

Putting together a collection of essays is always an exciting if slightly daunting venture. In this case, I have been reading, editing and writing whilst on the road. It has been an exhausting period matched by the surreal craziness of Malaysian politics post March 8: today a Statutory Declaration, tomorrow a round of ISA detentions, the day after, a change of government?

Still, the whole process of compiling the collection has been cathartic. It has forced me to reread what I have written, all the while assessing its validity, its relative strength and honesty, not to mention whether or not the contents were prescient. Whilst I would prefer not to have written some of the articles calling the election wrongly was not one of my highpoints as a columnist, I think it is best in our increasingly open and egalitarian times to leave you, the reader, with the final conclusions.

In this case and this is my third collection I have found myself focusing on Malaysia once again, which is ironic given that I have spent much of the past five years in Indonesia. Still, the book charts, albeit in a highly episodic, impressionistic and personal fashion, the country's dramatic roller-coaster ride from Dr Mahathir's retirement in 2003, Abdullah's extraordinary victory in the 2004 polls and then the slow but steady deterioration in his administration's fortunes culminating in his drubbing at the hands of the Malaysian voters in March 2008. The collection wraps up just as the Umno division elections began in early October 2008.

Back in 2003, I was understandably enthusiastic and optimistic about the transition, Malaysia's first in over 22 years. As a consequence, this confidence infused my earlier writings about Abdullah and the remarkably orderly and dignified transfer of power that took place in late 2003. In my defence, I would argue that the Malaysians were

very much at one with my conclusions, witness the 2004 poll results. Of course, subsequent events were to show that being a 'good' man was just not enough to carry the nation forward.

For my part, as the Malaysian elections came to an end, I quickly headed off to Indonesia. I can remember, beginning my travels in Medan, landing in one of the archipelago's most cacophonous and crowded cities just as Amien Rais' entourage hit town and Ibu Mega's was heading off ... but that is another story (and perhaps another collection?).

Having spent so many months on the election trail crisscrossing the Republic, it was a relief to know that I did not have to travel anymore. By then, Jakarta beckoned and I settled into the capital with the incessant beat of *dangdut* and Ahmad Dhani's plaintive anthems ringing in my ears.

Between 2004 and 2008, I was a relatively infrequent visitor to Kuala Lumpur—sometimes for only a day or two a month. I heard murmurs of unhappiness and frustration but I shrugged them off. However, as 2007 drew to a close and events seemed to gather in intensity—as Dr Mahathir's criticisms grew more vitriolic and the anger of the minorities less manageable, I knew that I had to return to cover the upcoming polls. I realised that I had lost touch and that the elections would provide a chance for me to 'touch base'.

Thankfully, I found two newspapers and their editors (Wong Chun Wai and Wong Sai Wan from *The Star* and CC Liew and Miss Siew Nyoke Chow from *Sin Chew Daily*) who were willing to accept my columns. However, what started off as a short-term three-to-four week project soon turned into a marathon. Fortunately, both newspapers have been very accommodating despite the extended time-frame and I am very grateful for their support.

Moreover, I have been lucky enough to find a suitably independent-minded, Malay-language newspaper (the recently