

Malaysia, the Making of a Nation

Review >
Southeast Asia

Ethnic pluralism has long been a Malaysian hallmark. Prior to independence from Britain in 1957, the polity was fashioned by the integration strategies of the colonial government and the distinctive roles of – and potential frictions between – the major ethnic groups. The complexities of the Malaysian case stem from the make-up of the population: Malay (58 per cent), Chinese (24 per cent), Indians (8 per cent), and others (10 per cent). Efforts to integrate these diverse groups in the interests of national unity have been, and remain, at the heart of the Malaysian enterprise of nation-building.

By Marie-Aimée Tourres

Malaysia, *the Making of a Nation* is the first in a five-volume series on nation-building histories in Asia. Defining nation-building as ‘both economic progress and socio-political integration of a nation, i.e., prosperity and national unity’, Cheah Boon Kheng conceptualizes Malaysian nation-building as an ongoing process with each successive Prime Minister adding a stone to the larger construction. From this perspective, the author, himself a Malaysian national, reviews the legacies, responses, and roles of four Prime Ministers towards the various ethnic groups since 1957.

The book is comprised of six chapters. The first two provide background to nation-building in Malaysia and Malay dominance within the process, indispensable to understanding the country’s contemporary politics and

political economy. Given the salience of ethnicity in the early 1950s, it was hardly surprising that most of the effective parties formed to contest the first federal election for the legislative council in 1955 were ethnically based: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. That year, an informal ‘historic bargain’ or ‘social contract’ between the different parties was struck, establishing the political framework within which ethnic groups would henceforth operate. Laying the basis for sharing power, this contract also upheld the ‘special position’ and rights of the Malays – Bumiputra (son of the soil or indigenous people).

The following four chapters devote themselves to the Prime Ministers: Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Razak, Tun Hussein Onn, and Mahathir. According to Cheah Boon Kheng, ‘every one of these Prime Ministers started off their political career as an exclusivist Malay nationalist, but ended up as an

inclusivist Malaysian nationalist’. Each Prime Minister was influenced, above all, by the extent of political support from his own party: United Malay National Organisation (UMNO). When, however, their positions were weak, Prime Ministers had to rely on the other parties in the Alliance: ‘Tunku [Abdul Rahman] tried to be even-handed towards the Malays, Tun Hussein Onn continued this policy but Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir first adopted pro-Malay policies and then latterly reached out to the non-Malays, each time largely determined by his need for political support and for his own political survival’.

In view of the imminent changing of the guard in Malaysia, Cheah Boon Kheng’s book presents a timely account of the constant contest between Malaysian ethno-nationalism and Malaysian nationalism in the making of the nation.

‘The fact that all the four Prime Ministers have been Malays has led to an unwritten accepted norm that the Malaysian leadership of the nation is biased towards the Malay community. Malays have used this position as an argument to support their goal of Malay dominance vis-à-vis the other ethnic communities in the political, cultural and social fields. For almost two decades after the 1969 riots, it has been almost impossible to raise the idea of a non-Malay as Prime Minister’. Ultimately, Malay political primacy rests on the assumption that the Malays are united and that this unity and political strength will continuously reinforce Malay superiority and dominance.

Over the years, religion became an increasingly powerful binding force among the Malay majority. The search for some kind of personal identity as part of a group may partially account for this. By stressing that Malay means being a Muslim, government has turned Islam into a convenient tool in the service of Malay unity. Yet Islam can hardly be the driving force for nation-building: not all Malaysians are Muslims, and a more ‘Islamic’ State would alienate many citizens.

The author concludes his book by

raising the issue of religion in nation-building. ‘Since 1999, religion has become another contentious element in the making of the Malaysian nation-state.... As most Muslims in Malaysia are Malays, an Islamic state is actually another form of a “Malay nation”.... It seems clear that under the present perspective taken by Malaysia, both ethnicity and religion would continue to compete for the attention of the multi-ethnic population’. One wishes Cheah Boon Kheng delved more deeply into the religious aspect of the Malay identity: the next Prime Minister will surely have to handle the question carefully. ◀

- Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia, The Making of a Nation*, Singapore: ISEAS (2002), pp. 264, ISBN 981-230-154-2

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