

Book Review

Multiethnic in Malaysia: Past, Present and Future, by Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes and Azly Rahman (eds), Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD), 2009, 529 pp.

Ethnicity, as many know, is potentially a highly potent issue. As Chua (2003) argues, the disparity between economic power of the small ethnic group and the disadvantaged position of a majority ethnic group is a source of great political instability. The crucial question regarding ethnicity is, as argued by Brubaker *et al.* (2006: 7) “where it is, when it matters, and how it works”. This is juxtaposed to Brubaker’s (2004) earlier claims in his collection of essays, that ethnicity, race, and nationhood are not “things *in* the world,” but “perspectives *on* the world”. *Multiethnic in Malaysia: Past, Present and Future* is indeed compelling and stimulating as the book describes and explains the socio-economic, cultural and ethnic identity differences between communities in Malaysia. It also provides factual information and an analysis of the key events and transitions that have occurred in forming the reality of ethnic inequalities within the Malaysian society.

The book features a team of independent scholars drawing intellectually from over twenty scholars including leading historians, social scientists and political analysts. The book is divided into twenty-five chapters in five main parts, with each part corresponding to a central theme of discourse.

Introducing the collection in Part I, the book begins by describing the origins of the multi-ethnic construction of Malaysian society as it is today, focusing on the key processes that have shaped the multiethnic and multi-cultural society and nation. Aptly, the book drew from the country’s leading historian, Khoo Kay Kim to provide historical accounts of the Malay states and the beginnings of the immigrant communities and cosmopolitan population which thereafter changed the political, socio-economic, cultural and demographic patterns of life in the country. The subsequent contributions examine the early and middle period of colonial rule that was said to be devoid of opportunities for building a less divided and more cohesive society, and the period after the Japanese occupation which was described as “a meaningful unity among the various ethnic communities”. The last piece in this section employs an interpretative though historically informed approach to the subject of Malay nationalism, taking the lead from the views of other

scholars notably Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Ashis Nandy, Syed Husin Alatas and Edward Said.

Part II explores various facets of the nexus between economy and society. It reflects critically the existing perspectives and provides an analytical framework to better understand the very fabric of Malaysia. Themes central to the five chapters of Part II are: differing arguments regarding ethnic conflict and its management; social and economic engineering through the New Economic Policy (NEP); ethnic-based political parties; the role of the middle class and its impact on the ethnic character of Malaysian politics; and the sociological and cultural politics of Malaysians.

Part III addresses the interplay between language, education, religion and the formation of a multicultural identity and ethnic relations. Part IV brings to the fore perspectives on various marginalized communities in Malaysia. The central theme running through this part is the nexus between politics of ethnicity and the process of marginalization. It examines how these communities have become marginalized and how they have reconciled their marginality. A theoretical discussion in the chapter by Zawawi Ibrahim on the construction of identities sets in motion a critical discourse on Malaysian multiculturalism. Part V, the final section, examines whether the cherished dream held by many Malaysians of a harmonious and multiethnic society with its diverse mix of cultures, religions and languages can be realized. It deals with conceptual issues as well as some latest developments in the country to provide insights into what the future holds.

Overall the book delivers an impressive work. One is enlightened on a number of interesting issues and discussions, notably: the language hegemony; ethnic segregation in education; the role of religion and the socio-economic policy; the “stabilizing factors” that helped to diffuse Malay resentment towards the economically successful Chinese; the widening of the intra-ethnic inequality gap among all ethnic communities, most especially among the *Bumiputera*, and also on the *ketuanan Melayu*. These are all critically discussed and analyzed in a debate on the most divisive issues in the country. Many of the contributions are carefully weighed and argued.

However, there are some shortcomings in the book. With the exception of Terrence Gomez’s chapter on “Ethnicity, Equity and Politics in Multiethnic Malaysia”, which made some anecdotal references to Singapore, Philippines and Indonesia, there is no comparative study of other political structures in multiethnic countries in the region or around the world. Comparisons of this nature would not only expand the horizon of the book, but importantly, inform the reader on the ways different regimes successfully managed such diversity. Another shortcoming is that in some of the contributions one could sense a skewed leaning.

In spite of these shortcomings, two major strengths can be easily identified. First, the themes are clearly articulated and explained, in particular with reference to the beginnings of the various communities which arose from a complex plethora of factors. Second, the wealth of primary and secondary materials used for providing a comprehensive analysis of the development of the Malaysian ethnic society and politics is laudable.

Many of the previous studies on ethnicity in Malaysia relate to culture and identities of the broad categories of Chinese, Indians and Malays, with very scant passing reference to the indigenous groups like the Orang Asli and other minority ethnic communities. The book is further strengthened by examining the much neglected perspectives on various marginalized communities of Malaysia *viz.*, the Semai, a group of the Orang Asli of Peninsula Malaysia, Bhuket, Kelabit, Kayan and Penan (some of the natives of Sarawak), as well as the migrants.

Multiethnic in Malaysia: Past, Present and Future provides a rich range of disciplinary perspectives on the relationship between ethnicity, identity and politics in Malaysia. The comprehensive contributions are weaved together expertly, giving a discerning full picture of the complex dynamics of individuals, groups and interests identified with distinct ethnic, religious and cultural communities. The lucid style of writing makes the book an enjoyable and informative piece. Moreover, it adds to the important debate on ethnicity by providing a significant contribution to an emerging body of literature, and would appeal to a wide range of scholars, particularly those in the fields of ethnic studies, comparative politics, development studies and anthropology and sociology. I am also convinced that policy makers would find the book useful.

References

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