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Old v New Politics in Malaysia: State and Society in Transition by Francis Loh Kok Wah, Petaling Jaya: SIRD and Penang: Aliran Kesedaran Negara, 2009, 316 pp.

If a new student of Malaysian politics and society tries to make sense of the country in rapid but uncertain transition after the 2008 elections, this could be a useful book to begin with.

A collection of articles published in the Penang-based political commentary magazine *Aliran Monthly*, a local business magazine (*Malaysian Business*) and two foreign publications (*Australian Society* and the *ACHRO* book), the book does not offer any grand theory to explain the transition nor any prediction of what may follow. Published in the first half of 2009, it does not cover the cow-head protest days before the National Day that year and the Allah row which led to arson of churches and mosques in the following January. It however gives a detailed account of Muslim-Hindu conflict in Kampung Rawa, Penang over a Hindu Temple in 1998, an incident before the *Reformasi* movement forgotten by most. This example exactly illustrates the merit and value of the book. It is a reminder how Malaysia has come to where it is today. Reading the past and comparing it to the present allow one to see both the constants and variables as well as both challenges and hopes in Malaysia's society and politics.

The book covers a quarter of century from 1984 to 2008, which – in my personal opinion – may be divided into five different periods separated by major political milestones. Four articles were written in PM Mahathir's Early Years (till 1990) including the important accounts of the 1987 *Operasi Lalang* mass arrest and the 1984–1986 Sabah political crisis. Francis Loh wrote five articles in the next period, the Vision 2020 Years (1991–1997), which began with Mahathir's inclusive nation-building blueprint Vision 2020 and ended with the ascendance of the East Asian Financial Crisis. The political science professor at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) provided insightful critiques on consumerism and mass media in the 1990s as well as the 1994 Sabah elections which saw *Parti Bersatu Sabah* lose to crossover of lawmakers within a month after the polls.

Other than the pre-*Reformasi Kampung Rawa* conflict, he left seven important records of the *Reformasi* Years (1998–2003), covering issues

from informal politics of the Anti-Internal Security Act (ISA) movement, the *Suqiu Appeal*, the Chinese community opposition to the Nanyang Press takeover to the formal politics of election and federalism. In PM Abdullah's first term (2004–2007), Loh offered insights on assorted issues from the saliency of crimes to the decline of public universities. More importantly, as Malaysians became politically conservative partly due to "developmentalism", a thesis pioneered by him, the public intellectual in Loh invited the Malaysian public to reflect on the old politics of ethnicity and the new politics of democracy. The remaining two articles were written after the 2008 tsunami, one of which calls for the reorganisation of the federalism, a favourite theme of his.

Personally, I think a chronological sorting of the articles would do more justice to both the book and readers who are unfamiliar with Malaysia's political history. This should be considered in the future for its second edition.

If news is the first draft of history, most of the commentaries here are history's second draft as they were documented just weeks after the incidents. Hence, they are not only the specific accounts of incidents like the 1986 Sabah crisis, the 1987 *Operasi Lalang*, the 1998 *Kampung Rawa* conflict, the 2000 witch-hunt of *Suqiu*, or the 2007 *Lina Joy* verdict, but they also capture the feeling and atmosphere then and there, in a way analyses done many years later may not.

In his account of the *Kampung Rawa* Muslim-Hindu conflict (pp. 242–252) for example, Loh told the readers in the first paragraph the surreal normalcy, when the tension "peaked during the weekend of 27–29 March", "a huge open-air dinner organized by the MCA to encourage to buy local products was held at the Esplanade", just another corner in the small island of Penang. Soon after praising the maturity and sensibility of the majority of Penangites, the self-restraints exercised by UMNO and MIC members upon the calls by their leaders, and the firm and impartial actions by the state, he also revealed that the news was blacked out, a common practice of crisis management in Malaysia.

The first episode of showdown happened on 20 March when 200–250 Muslims confronted a group of Hindu youths at a nearby Hindu temple as they perceived the ringing of bells during Muslim Friday prayers as a form of deliberate provocation. Only a week later, two press conferences

were respectively held by the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and the Inspector-General of Police after 5,000–7,000 Muslims and a huge Hindu crowd marched towards each other. In between the two showdowns, the Chief Minister Koh Tsu Koon only issued two press statements about relocation of the temple. Loh criticised that in retrospect, the decision by the authorities and the media not to provide the public with adequate information only fuelled the rumour mills. He offered a blow-by-blow account of how the tension escalated and eventually calmed down and, subsequently, provided more contextual information regarding the rivalry between Indian Hindus and Indian Muslims in Penang and their link to Indian politics.

Just 12 years down the road, the *Kampung Rawa* incident was almost out of the public memory, at least for Malaysians living outside Penang. This was only partly due to the state's policy to downplay incidents of communal conflicts except when it served their partisan interests. The more important reason was perhaps it happened just half a year before the chief arbitrator of the conflict, Anwar Ibrahim, himself was purged by his boss Mahathir. After Anwar's purge and imprisonment, alternative news sites began to mushroom and provide unofficial or anti-official perspectives for every major incident Loh's accounts on *Kampung Rawa* and many historical incidents before the internet era – and the *Aliran Monthly* in general – are therefore especially useful for anyone interested in Malaysia's socio-political history as they offered rare alternative records and interpretation to what one may find in the archives of mainstream newspapers at the same time.

On the other hand, Loh's stock-taking analyses on federalism (pp. 3–20), ISA (pp. 175–187), social movements (pp. 39–51), constituency redelineation (pp. 91–102) or public universities (pp. 256–268) provide useful overviews, with tables and lists of incidents compiled by himself or other researchers.

As this author was part of the movements in some of Loh's accounts, some facts should be corrected for the record. First, the "People are the Boss" declaration in 1999 which advocated Schumpeterian procedural democracy in simple business language was initiated by a few non-partisan individuals rather than "by a smaller group of Chinese organizations that were supportive of the BA" (p. 236). Second, the individual-based Committee Against the Takeover of Nanyang Press by

MCA (CAT) and the group-based Committee of Chinese Organisations Against the Political-Party Takeover of Nanyang Press (COAT) were two different organisations, even though both worked very closely and the key persons in CAT like Mr. Tang Ah Chai and myself did assist the work of COAT.

This book is not only a record of Malaysia's history in 25 years, but also a record of the activism of the author and *Aliran Kesedaran Negara* in those years. While many academics shy away from commenting on politics, fearing repercussion – real or imagined – under the University and University College Act (UUCA), this political science professor openly made his calls to the voters on the eve of key elections.

In 1999, he eloquently debunked the BN's fearmongering campaign to tie the *Reformasi* movement with political violence in Indonesia, Ex-Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka and Rwanda: "the danger arose in Indonesia and elsewhere because of a lack of change, not because of it" (p. 104). To Malaysians at that historic juncture of transition, he dissected the BN's narratives into five central tenets to expose the flaws: the peril of a multicultural society, the justification of a strong state, the BN's ability to lead and arbitrate, the BN's record in bringing stability and growth and Dr Mahathir's leadership (pp. 108–111). Politics, to Loh, "must be based on ideals, however utopian they might be" (p. 117). And that is certainly the best characterisation of the conviction of Loh and his *Aliran* colleagues.

He renewed his call for change in 2008. He forewarned the Malaysians the hype the mainstream media would be offering. He predicted that some editors and feature writers would claim that there were "no important issues" worth discussing because those issues have recently been resolved through a new promise or a recent policy initiative. He did not mince his words by questioning if the media practitioners would act as "professional journalists or propagandists" (p. 77). Loh paid special attention to the role of media in many of his analyses and was highly critical of the failure of the media as the fourth estate by selling on colourful makeover, puzzles and *feng shui* (Chinese geomancy) (pp. 279–286).

In that sense, Loh was a rare member of the real fourth estate that Malaysia needs, deserves and is privileged to have. He is a watchman of

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the “state and society in transition” from his ivory watch tower. And this collection of semi-academic writing is part of his journals during the interesting quarter century preceding the political tsunami in 2008 that many are now keen to understand.

Wong Chin Huat
School of Arts and Social Sciences
Monash University Sunway Campus
Selangor