

Building Bridges, Crossing Boundaries – Everyday forms of inter-ethnic peace building in Malaysia by Francis Loh Kok Wah, Jakarta and Kajang: Ford Foundation and PSSM, 2010, 296 pp.

In contrast to all its ASEAN neighbours except for Singapore and Brunei, Malaysia is relatively free from political violence. The only two major episodes of political violence in living memory of most Malaysians are the communist insurgency in West Malaysia (1948–1960) and Sarawak (1962–1974) and the 'May 13' post-election Sino-Malay ethnic riot in 1969. Notwithstanding class war and communal conflict, the Malayan/Malaysian state successfully preserve civilian rule for most of the time after its independence from Britain in 1957/1963.

The relative peace has allowed the Alliance/Barisan Nasional government to claim credit in maintaining peace *despite* the cultural diversity of the population. However, while the salience of class conflict faded after 1969, the prospect of communal violence has never gone away. With the exception of 2004, every post-1969 election saw politicians of the ruling coalition warning the citizens of a replay of May 13 should the incumbent be ousted.

A deeper understanding of peace maintenance in Malaysia is therefore necessary to understand both its logic and pattern and this book serves this need well. Francis Loh in his overview rightly starts with Thomas Hobbes' description of anarchic life: "nasty, brutish and short" as the challenge before Malaysia is indeed one of whether peace can be maintained without creating too powerful a state which may turn around and harm peace. A more often overlooked aspect is in fact state violence, in the forms of detention without trials under the Internal Security Act (ISA) used in the past especially against the leftists, as an extension of the class war.

Loh offers a menu of new types of conflict and violence: Indian-Malay clashes (replacing the Sino-Malay conflicts in the early years), worsening federal-state relations (however, focused exclusively on Sabah in illustration), intra-Malay conflicts arising from Political Islam, conflict between the Common law and Syariah law jurisdictions, Orang Asli's conflict with the developers and the state, Dayaks' conflict with big businesses and the Sarawak state, urban settlers' struggle against forced eviction and plantation estate workers' struggle against retrenchment and eviction.

Some of these new forms of conflicts, between ethno-religious communities; communities, businesses and government; and between governments, were explored further in the six chapters of Part II.

Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid offers an interesting account of how the official Islam controlled by the dominating United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) is challenged by the autonomous Islam in the form of political opposition (Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party, PAS) and sect community (Al-Arqam). While PAS dismissed Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's *Islam Hadhari* (Civilisational Islam) as a 'hybrid religion', the regrouped Al-Arqam followers in Rifaqa' Corporation have chosen to strike a peaceful *modus operandi* by embracing *Islam Hadhari*.

The conflicts between the indigenous people and the business and the state are captured by Andrew Aeria in his Sarawak chapter. While the state's pro-business development policy 'has caused severe stress, sowed conflict and disrupted whole communities in Sarawak', efforts by communities and individuals do successfully reclaim peace and identity, with the help of NGOs working on logging, land and agricultural issues. Studying various experiments of alternative development, Aeria argues that a new development model which draws the internal strengths of the local communities to promote peace and solidarity between the communities and the environment is possible, and necessary, until a more humane form of welfare capitalism emerges.

The Sino-Malay relation is often seen as the greatest threat to peace in Malaysia, not least because of the 1969 riot and the post-1969 tension and under-currents. One of the most contentious issues in Malaysia is the nativism or Bumiputeraism which is largely embodied in the New Economic Policy, a 20-year programme which officially ended in 1990 but whose spirit has lived on in successive policies. As a result of the privileges given to the Bumiputera, many nominal partnerships between the Chinese entrepreneurs and their Bumiputera sleeping partners have mushroomed into cronyism and rent-seeking in the name of inter-communal redistribution, both alienating the Chinese community and frustrating the goal to lift the poor natives. Chin Yee Whah, however, argues that there are also Sino-Bumiputera 'smart partnerships' which thrive on mutual benefits, thus promoting inter-ethnic cooperation.

Cecilia Ng provides an interesting account of how the progressive women movement builds peace by challenging the socio-political division along ethno-religious lines. From issues that affect all communities like rape and violence, the women movement gradually moved into more contentious territories like the

issues of Bumiputera special status, Hudud and sexuality. As she rightly points out, rights, democracy and development are "critical preconditions towards the establishment of peace". A participant herself, Ng offers a picture of personal and collective growth of women activists expressed in interviews.

Yeoh Seng Guan and Mustafa K Anuar offer two case studies of communal relations at a local level. For Yeoh, Kampung Mariyamman, an urban poor settlement in Petaling Jaya, is a contrast of quotidian peace and structural violence. While co-existing peacefully, the different ethnic communities lack cross-ethnic solidarities due to economic pressure to focus on earning, the natural segregation by dietary practices, the inadequate public spaces for interaction and the presence of communal political parties. This makes neighbourhood conflict vulnerable to ethnicisation as in the neighbouring Kampung Medan, where a Malay-Indian neighbourhood conflict claimed several lives in 2001. Yeoh however reminded us the potential offered by a community experiment called "the Petaling Jaya Project" initiated by radical Christians in the early 1970s. The project successfully built a cross-communal solidarity in the working class neighbourhood of Mariyamman-Medan but unfortunately declined soon thanks to accusation that it aimed to proselytise the Malay-Muslims.

Mustafa's story of Kampung Kovil in Kepala Batas, the mainland territory of Penang is more of a conflict between the community, the business sector and the state. The threat of eviction managed to forge some sense of inter-ethnic solidarity between the residents who were ethnically, predominantly Indians with tiny minorities of Chinese (less than 10%) and Malays (about 1%). The bridge-building and peace-making effort was however informed by utilitarianism and was soon to be co-opted by the communal political parties in the ruling coalition. Like in the Mariyamman case, community-building did not move far for the odd-job workers, technicians, factory hands and teachers here, perhaps thanks to politics of development and economic priorities of the individuals. While peace is not threatened by the Indian-Chinese segregation, neither has the capacity for peace-building been built for future.

Moving away from communities and NGOs working on peace building, Part III of the book investigates the roles of arts, literature and new media.

From the examples of the classical *Bangsawan* performers and two contemporary musical projects, the Rhythm in Bronze Gamelan group and Young Theatre Penang (YTP), artist-academic Tan Sooi Beng portrays the multiethnic and multicultural nature of Malaysian art, which goes beyond the Furnivallian imagination of segregated plural society. The classical *Bangsawaan* Theatre

featured stories from the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, China, India, Middle East and even Europe while the Rhythm in Bronze group too take pains to break the ethnic identity of the Gamelan music. Besides using musical instruments from various cultures, the YTP even embodies daily conversations in Malaysian market place, eateries, homes and schools with Hokkien, Malay and English phrases. By recreating their own post-colonial identities and representation of the Malaysia nation, the Malaysian artists help in mediating inter-communal communication and promoting social cohesion.

Similarly, Janet Pillai reflects her journey as a person and an artist in search of her identity, between language (English), ethnicity (Ceylonese) and nationality (Malaysian). Using the example of *Anak-anak Kita* (Children of the City) project, in which youngsters between 12–18 in inner city of George Town explore their history and community, Pillai shows how 'engaged art' involves the stakeholders, builds alliance and maps culture, connecting everyday reality and fictionalized reality.

Analysing a novel and two children plays, Shakila Abdul Manan demonstrates how creative arts may help to dismantle ethnic and gender stereotyping. In "Green is the colour", novelist Lloyd Fernando broke the standard expectation that forced cultural assimilation would be supported by a Malay and opposed by a Chinese, hence allowing the readers to reflect on intra-ethnic conflicts and see ideological conflicts beyond the communal lenses. Meanwhile, by throwing out the question how to classify a 'transgendered chicken', the children play "Hen or Rooster", a joint project of YTT involving Janet Pillai, dismantles stereotypes for the deconstruction of gender. The other play "*Ronggeng Girls*" – again involving Pillai – explores the tension between culture and gender experienced by the Malay dancers in the Merdeka Era. What creative arts do in these three examples is that they dismantle the fear, mistrust and hatred for the Other, thus paving way for real peace.

The last chapter by Tan Lee Ooi studies the new media that incidentally emerged around the same time Malaysia underwent tremendous political transformation with the sacking and purging of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim by his mentor Dr Mahathir Muhamad. Alongside the growth of netizens is also the mushrooming of pro-*Reformasi* websites, which Tan characterizes as the "Civil Society in the Net". Studying three online media, Malaysiakini, Aliran and The Free Media (Chinese), Tan shows how new media has allowed Malaysians to cross the ethno-religious boundaries towards some notion of trans-ethnic solidarity.

This book does not give you standard stories of peace-building in war-torn countries because the threat to peace in Malaysia is much more subtle. As a matter of fact, violence and conflict are often more imagined and feared than actualised. Such threat or fear nevertheless prevents the emergence of real peace, which is beyond just the absence of violence, and imprisons hearts and minds.

How can Malaysia move from the superficial peaceful tolerance to real peace that empowers her citizens? As told by its title, this book offers vivid accounts of efforts taken and experiences lived by Malaysians in various communities and sectors in building bridges and crossing boundaries.

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