

ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

Ethnicization and Identity Construction in Malaysia by Frederik Holst. Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2012, 240 pp.

The diverse nature of multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious Malaysia, and its accompanying socio-cultural and political challenges, attracts the curiosity and, subsequently, prompts academic investigation of many researchers from within and outside the country to interrogate particularly issues of ethnicity, identities and politics.

In his doctoral study, which culminated in the form of a book titled, *Ethnicization and Identity Construction in Malaysia*, German scholar Frederik Holst looks at the processes of what he calls ethnicization and identity construction in the country where ethnicity usually takes centre stage.

Quoting Eder et al., Holst defines the major concept of his study, ethnicization, as such:

[T]he process of ethnicization [is] ... a special case of the process of *identification*, that is the chain of events through which objective conditions of economic or political grievances become the basis of political claims justified by reference to a collective identity. Identification is a process that we regard as general as individual actors attempt to solve problems of action, whereas ethnicization is a particular version of that.

(Cited in Holst, p. 19, emphasis in original)

This term of ethnicization is preferred by Holst to racialization because although the latter has gained currency and prominence, it is, to him, too confined to solely aspects of the rather spurious or ambiguous terminology of "race." On the other hand, the former allows for academic interrogation of dynamic political negotiations in the formation of collective identities. This in turn has facilitated Holst to adopt in his study a theoretical approach of manifestations and implementations of ethnicization.

Manifestations of ethnicization, according to Holst (p. 61), are "occurrences of ethnicization that have shaped a certain societal sub-system to such an extent that ethnicity has become a dominant reference point and associated policies no longer need to be pushed through in order to achieve their implementation. Often policies of ethnicization develop independently from a larger political framework once they become common practice." Holst further argues that only after getting a good grasp of where manifestations of ethnicization are located in the Malaysian society can one begin to examine the implementations of ethnicization. This theoretical framework, he contends, would help one to locate and examine agency and also where it is limited (p. 3).

This 240-page volume is broken into seven chapters: Chapter 1 on Introduction: configurations of ethnicization in Malaysia; Chapter 2 on Reconceptualizing ethnicized identities; Chapter 3 on History of ethnicization in Malaysia; Chapter 4 on Manifestations of ethnicization; Chapter 5 on Implementations of ethnicization; Chapter 6 on Impacts of ethnicization; and finally the concluding chapter.

As implied above, ethnicity and ethnicization are the concerns of this study because they relentlessly weave into the social fabric so that many things in the ordinary lives of Malaysians are defined and affected by ethnicity often to the point of being socially divisive and discriminatory. Indeed, ethnicity has become central to the political, economic, and socio-cultural life in Malaysia. That the term "race" or "ethnicity" is arbitrary and fuzzy (Holst, pp. 12–15) offers rich and vibrant possibilities in helping to construct ethnicized identities in Malaysia – and also elsewhere.

Identity, like ethnicity, is a contested terrain as it involves unequal power relations between the competing parties in their coveted quest to define who they are in the eyes of the larger community. Although possessing the potential of serving a positive role of providing necessary personal and collective location or a sense of belonging, identity can also operate as a vehicle for "Othering" where difference is amplified and manipulated to alienate others for certain ends. This is because identity is also about an inclusion that is often defined by exclusion (Allan in Weedon, 2004: vii), which can give rise to societal fault lines and contestations. Besides, as Mercer (cited in Weedon, 2004: 1) points out, "...identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty."

Holst, however, cautions us to look beyond ethnicity in the context of identity construction (p. 21). It is vital, he maintains, that we examine the wider social context that spawns ethnicization of the Malaysian society. Thus, he argues, it is important to trace the history of ethnicization in Malaysia to examine where and when ethnicization becomes a source of political, economic and socio-cultural contradictions and challenges. Furthermore, one could also assert that if ethnicized identities are associated with cultural tradition, then it is incumbent upon us to assess whether the process of identity construction involves a certain "tradition" that has been "invented" for the hidden agenda of certain vested interests.

In the chapter on the history of ethnicization in Malaysia, the author critically dissects the problematic notions of race, *bangsa* and *kaum* that dominate the public life of ordinary Malaysians, which includes the category "Malay." The advent of the colonial power in then Malaya gave rise to the introduction of ethnic categorisation into the colonised society with the underlying objective to assert the colonialists' supposed racial superiority over the subdued population. It is noteworthy, though, that this divide-and-rule policy

of governance is still being perpetuated even after the attainment of independence of Malaysia from British colonial rule.

It is here that Holst presents (p. 32) examples of Malaysian prime ministers whose (mixed) ancestry doesn't square with the static definition of "pure" Malay: "Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's maternal grandfather originated from Hainan, whereas Tunku (Abdul Rahman) had some Shan-Thai blood; Razak, some Bugis (Indonesian); Hussein, some Turkish; Mahathir, some Indian' (Milne and Mauzy, 1999: 4)." There are others who also encounter problems with such rigid categorisation: For instance, people who are classified as Chinese are actually made up of those with different dialects but are now lumped together under the rubric Chinese; the same goes with the ethnicized "Indians" who have diverse backgrounds.

At the same time, adds Holst, tracing the history of ethnicization also offers an opportunity to identify avenues of transethnic endeavours and cooperation among members of society. For instance, the existence of Baba-Nyonya, or "Straits-born Chinese", personifies the cultural intermingling between people from Malaya and China (p. 50). Another example is the transethnic cooperation prior to the Malayan independence between a coalition of diverse groups called All-Malaya Council for Joint Action (AMCJA) and Malay-based Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (PUTERA) who drafted the so-called "People's Constitutional Proposals" that was inclusive and promised equality for all citizens (Holst, p. 54). Similar initiative was also mounted later by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) with the collaboration of the Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM). However, reminds Holst, these historical accounts did not make it to the country's "official" history as they constitute an ideological challenge to the national narrative that only highlights the political achievements of UMNO-Alliance (p. 57). It is unfortunate that historic transethnic endeavours such as the above were eclipsed and ethnicization of the political system was, and remains, enhanced as a result. Indeed, history often goes through a selective process where the victors play a significant role.

As alluded to above, the ethnicization of Malaysia's political system bears witness to the vital role played by the ethnicized United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and most of its ethnicized Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition partners particularly in terms of certain national policies they pursued and implemented in ways that have far-reaching implications. In the chapter on "Manifestations of ethnicization," Holst points out that such ethnicization regime has also affected supposedly non-ethnic political parties. For instance, issues that purely concern democratic principles and practices have been ethnicized to stave off political challenges from the opposition parties in an ethnicized fashion. In demonstrating his dislike for the opposition in the state of Melaka, Chief Minister Ali Rustam opined that "... there is no need for an opposition [i.e., Democratic Action Party (DAP)] to voice their problems because the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) representatives are capable of carrying out their duties

effectively (p. 65)". Thus, the DAP as a legitimate political entity in a democracy has been reduced, at least in this case, to playing the role of representing ethnicized interests.

Additionally, under such ethnicized political environment that is immensely challenging, even political parties that strive to be non-ethnic in their political philosophy and character find themselves having to resort to ethnicized stance to a certain degree in order to maintain some level of representation in the Malaysian parliament (pp. 71–72).

In chapter 5 that discusses the "Implementations of ethnicization," Holst looks at such implementations as a way or mechanisms of helping to secure positions of power for the powers-that-be within a larger social context. In this regard, he examines three arenas where such implementations occur: [a] language and religious policies; [b] the process of defining discourses and identities; and [c] the function of ethnicized implementations so as to manage positions of power.

As regards the language and education policies, the author observes that "...what guides Malaysia's language and education policies is not necessarily the idea of finding a common language that is most feasible for use by most members of a polity" (p. 98). Indeed, the implementation of ethnicized language and education policies must be located within the larger context of other such equally important policies as the New Economic Policy, National Cultural Policy, and the ideological thrust of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay Supremacy) if we were to understand deeper the ensuing contestations between the stakeholders concerned pertaining to the issues of language and education. If language, among other things, forms an important part of a cultural identity, then its position is further enhanced and jealously guarded if and when a particular ethnicized and cultural community perceives that its vernacular language and its very cultural survival are under threat, real or imagined, from the dominating "Other". In this context, a language transforms into a cultural weapon of defence of the cultural/political minorities.

Just as language and education policies have been ethnicized, so has religion particularly Islam in Malaysia. The categories of Muslim and Malay have often been used interchangeably primarily because of the constitutional definition of "Malay" where professing the Islamic faith is one of the requirements of being Malay. Hence, a perceived attack on Islam by the non-Malays is largely considered as an affront against the Malay community as a whole. And ethnicized politics rears its ugly head when religion becomes a site of conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims as in the case of, for example, the over-zealousness of enforcement officers in apprehending and fining a non-Muslim couple "for hugging and kissing in a park in Kuala Lumpur..." (p. 108)". The "Allah Controversy" is another case of fierce contestations between the adherents of Islam and Christianity, which can also be given a slant, particularly by the mainstream media that are owned and controlled by certain component

parties and economic allies of the ruling coalition, of a conflict between Malays and non-Malays with *Ketuanan Melayu* being thrown in for good measure. Incidentally, the emergence and popularity of the Internet has helped to check to some degree the ethnicized discourses in Malaysia's mainstream media.

As a research attempt at assessing the impacts of ethnicization upon the Malaysian society, Holst has conducted several interviews with selected civil society groups, namely the Anti-Broga Incinerator Campaign, Universiti Bangsar (not "Bangsa" as in the original text) Utama, Save Ourselves (SOS) and Young Theatre Penang. The Anti-Broga Incinerator group and the Young Theatre Penang were able to include diverse ethnic participation in their respective projects whereas the other two activist groups failed to attract substantial participation of people outside of their ethnic communities. In this regard, it may be more beneficial to also examine one or two groups in the women's movement in terms of transethnic endeavour and commitment, such as those championing the rights and concerns of poor women, single mothers, rape victims etc. irrespective of ethnic considerations and affiliations.

Although the author concludes on a somewhat pessimistic note, he does nonetheless see, or at least hopes to see, a thin ray of light at the end of the tunnel. Holst observes that the ethnicization of almost all sectors of society has become so entrenched that it is difficult to remove traces of ethnicization even if there were to be a regime change. This is because the ethnicized system and values will still be intact in varying degrees for a long time. Also, there are social forces (such as Perkasa) that have become more brazen in their articulation of ethnicized politics in recent past, which, to Holst, renders the BN ineffective in controlling such extremist elements and as an arbiter of ethnicized negotiations and conflicts (p. 202). On the contrary, one is compelled to wonder whether the increasing rabidity and offensiveness of certain public expressions may well be due to the seeming acquiescence of the powers-that-be that could serve as an informal *modus operandi* to make members of the respective ethnicized communities fall in line and unite under the umbrella of the respective ethnicized component parties of the ruling coalition in the face of a supposed external threat.

But all is not lost. Holst believes that there are already individuals and certain groups who have embarked on transethnic cooperation to make that much-needed difference in the Malaysian society despite constraints imposed by certain ethnicized interests. One could also add that the reactionary and rabid impulses above have been countered in varying degrees by enlightened voices that champion human rights and more inclusive policies, thanks to – not necessarily solely – the emergence and popularity of the alternative and social media that in many ways provide liberating, not only warped, ideas to politically awakened sections of the general public.

This interesting book, which is dedicated "to opponents and proponents of racial ideologies alike," should appeal to students of identity and ethnic politics, Malaysian politics and human rights.

REFERENCE

Weedon, C. 2004. *Identity and culture*. Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press.

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