

SHORT COMMUNICATION

CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA AND CHALLENGES OF THE TIMES

Abdul Rahman Embong

Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti
Kebangsaan Malaysia, MALAYSIA
Email: rahmanhe@ukm.my

Of late much has been debated in both the academic and the public spheres on several key challenges faced by contemporary Malaysia. A number of research and writings have been produced discussing the subject. In this short piece, I would like to address two things with regard to the theme, namely, the challenges of the times from the perspective of social science; and second, to comment on a recent edited volume entitled *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia* (edited by Meredith Weiss) which is part of the scholarly debate on the various dimensions of this country.

First, what are some of the challenges of the times in Malaysia that should be of immediate concern to social science? Here I would like to relate to an address I made in August 2013 at the 9th International Malaysian Studies Conference (MSC9) pertaining to the question of development, and the role of social science. In it I did make a call for the strengthening of reflexive and critical discourse among social scientists in Malaysia on various issues, and the need to be intellectually upright and correct, rather than to be politically correct.

What are some of the issues? We are today at the stage where Malaysia is supposed to be a mere five years away from becoming "a fully developed nation" as envisaged in Vision 2020 in 1991. The crucial point here is the concept of "a fully developed nation", which in the last few years has shifted to "a high income nation". What does this shift imply? The concept of a "developed nation" is more holistic and multidimensional, while that of a "rich" or a "high income nation" focuses more on numbers, on things quantifiable, and less on the intangibles, i.e. the human dimensions of being "developed". If we were to achieve the gross domestic product (GDP) figures, the per capita income of at least US\$15,000 from US\$7,000 in 2010 as stipulated in the government's Economic Transformation Plan, thus becoming a "high income nation", have we by the same token achieved a "developed nation" status? The two things – though related – are obviously not the same. Being rich does not automatically mean being developed.

Related to this is another issue, which is the question of growth. To achieve a high income nation requires growth, but the question is: what kind of growth? The kind of growth we need is quality growth which addresses not only

the increase in wealth but also income and wealth distribution and inequality, i.e., closing socioeconomic gaps, ensuring social justice, and growth that does not destroy but protects and preserves the environment.

And very importantly, what kind of model to follow – a continuation of the New Economic Policy with ethnic affirmative action redefined under the new conditions of the 21st century, or a New Economic Model with needs-based affirmative action suited to the current high competitive environment? A number of scholars have discussed this lately, and more debate should ensue.

In the "high income" and "growth" discourse, a major component, i.e. societal growth has been neglected. Societal growth is a multi-dimensional concept that refers to growth of institutions, culture, values, social capital, human relationships, respect for diversity, social inclusion and social equality, all of which are absolutely necessary for Malaysia to move forward. We need to focus our minds on this because looking at the situation in contemporary Malaysia, instead of the flowering of institutions, culture and civilisation, with enhanced social cohesion, our society seems to have taken a nose-dive rolling backwards, rather than forward, especially in ethno-religious relations, while those with the means and power to arrest the deterioration have not done so. Not only that, the democratic space that has been opening up for a while has come under serious threat by outmoded authoritarian laws and ethno-religious politics that has surged with a vengeance contesting new politics of beyond ethnicity, while the fledgling two-coalition system seems to be fragile, facing the risk of breaking up.

Obviously, there is a need for deep reflections, serious study and policy discussions on several fronts: the economic front about quality growth and a sustainable and competitive yet inclusive economic model; the societal front particularly on societal growth and social cohesion, ethno-religious understanding, acceptance and respect for diversity; and the political front on the country's federal-state relations and governance within the rubric of the Federal Constitution, as well as on the coalition system.

Besides these, there is one other theme which Malaysian social science has somewhat under-emphasised. It should be recalled that 26 December 2014 was the 10th anniversary of the great Indian Ocean tsunami, which brought untold devastation to lives and property especially in Aceh, Indonesia. While Malaysia then was somewhat spared with relatively marginal losses, today, we have just witnessed in December 2014 the worst floods in decades causing untold devastation to homes and property in the East Coast states, quite similar to the tsunami effects, except the toll on human lives is much smaller. While the impact of the Indian Ocean tsunami has elicited an unprecedented outpouring of human emotions and goodwill irrespective of creed and colour throughout the world, we can similarly say that the great flood in Malaysia has also brought people of various ethnic groups and religions together to support and help each other, demonstrating the close bond and oneness of being Malaysians.

While governance is lagging behind in terms of proactive and holistic big-scale disaster and crisis management, there is also a lack of a holistic multidisciplinary or even trans-disciplinary approach to disaster studies. The social scientists cannot afford to remain in their own silos – this great flood should push us social scientists and scholars from other fields to work together to undertake disaster studies in a wholesome manner, and recommend appropriate short term and long term solutions to address them. To me, this is the new historic challenge for social science.

Having said all that, I would like to comment on the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia* and its place in Malaysian studies. Some quarters sometimes question the value of edited volumes, saying that their quality is uneven and the scope often diffuse. While admittedly this may be true, the genre of edited works should not be dismissed; it is always an important piece of work for various reasons. An edited volume is a collection of scholarly chapters written by different authors, and harmonised by an editor(s); they are of value because they present different viewpoints and experiences on various dimensions, and are often published in a timely manner. This genre has been developed by Malaysian scholars and Malaysianists since independence, which I will illustrate with a few examples.

More than five decades ago, several years after Malaya's independence and around the time of the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, two important edited volumes were published. First was the edited volume on the Malayan economy, the product of a research seminar at the Australian National University in 1962. This work, edited by T. H. Silcock and E. K. Fisk, was entitled *The Political Economy of Independent Malaya: A Case-Study in Development* (published by the Australian National University Press in 1963), containing 11 chapters, with eight contributors focusing on economic policies of independent Malaya. Two years later, in 1965, the eminent scholar-historian Wang Gungwu published an edited volume, which was broader in scope, entitled, *Malaysia: A Survey*. This 466 pages volume contains 26 chapters plus an Introduction and covers five subthemes: natural and human structure, historical background, society and culture, economy, politics and government, and is intended to provide a kaleidoscope, a window to understanding the newly formed entity, called Malaysia.

Almost twenty years later, in early 1980s, Syed Husin Ali spearheaded another edited book, with the title *Ethnicity, Class, and Development, Malaysia*, published by the Malaysian Social Science Association. This 382 page volume consists of chapters that examine the dimensions of class and ethnicity and how they figure in development in Malaysia.

At the turn of the century in 2000, another edited volume was published – this time in Malay – entitled, *Negara, Pasaran dan Pemodenan Malaysia* (State, Market and Modernisation of Malaysia) edited by Abdul Rahman Embong, and published by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Press. This

680 page volume – containing 27 chapters, and contributed by some 20 contributors – tries to present another view of Malaysia and its challenges at the beginning of the 21st century.

Today, we have the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia*, the latest on the state of Malaysia, edited by Meredith Weiss, a political scientist from the State University New York (SUNY) at Albany and a keen observer of Malaysia. This book containing 35 chapters and some 486 pages, with an exceptionally big team of multidisciplinary contributors is arguably the most ambitious and comprehensive thus far in the series of edited volumes in Malaysian studies. It covers four subthemes – domestic politics, economics, social policy and social development, and international relations and security.

It is to the credit of the editor, Meredith Weiss, who through diplomacy and persuasion has brought together an international team of experts: an interdisciplinary mix of forty contributors from Malaysia and elsewhere, including many of the leading specialists on Malaysian affairs. The chapters each introduce a different aspect of the Malaysian polity, economy, or society, offering both historical perspective and a current assessment or investigation. In my view, the Handbook is both comprehensive and rigorous, which attempts to grapple with as many relevant issues as possible using the varied lenses of the contributors. Given its voluminous nature, instead of having only one introduction for the whole book as is the norm, the editor provides something extra, i.e. an overview for each of the four subthemes, thus guiding the reader through each section without much trouble.

One more thing needs to be said. The team of contributors is a good mix of senior and not-so-senior scholars, a suitable approach not only in injecting confidence in younger scholars but also important for succession purposes. When I was President of the Malaysian Social Science Association between 2000–2010, I always paid attention to nurturing successors, and I would like to commend the editor for putting this into effect in this wonderful endeavour.

Of course, however voluminous a book may be, it cannot be fully comprehensive as this book readily admits. While there is a noteworthy chapter on mainstreaming environment and sustainable development policies, there are still gaps in terms of the interplay between environment, political economy and society, of disasters and crisis management, the question of vulnerabilities and social inclusion, human security and the media. Nonetheless, what the volume presents is already awesome, its treatment of domestic politics and economics is fairly extensive, providing useful analysis and thoughtful insights for readers. Its treatment of social policy and social development – though a bit diverse – is nonetheless perceptive, while the section on international relations defines foreign policy priorities, and addresses Malaysia's relations with three major partners – the US, China and Europe, and with one chapter on security, namely on maritime piracy. In all, this edited volume is a major piece of work on contemporary Malaysia and a significant contribution to Malaysian studies which

researchers, policy makers, students and the general public should not give a miss.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A slightly longer version of this piece was delivered by the author as a special address at the launch of the book, *Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia* (Routledge 2015, edited by Meredith Weiss) at the Faculty of Economics and Administration, University of Malaya, on 13 January 2015.

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The author is Emeritus Professor in Sociology of Development and Principal Fellow at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. He was President of the Malaysian Social Science Association in 2000–2010, and is currently the Association's Advisor.