

BOOK REVIEW

Illusions of Democracy: Malaysian Politics and People – Volume II, edited by Sophie Lemièrre, Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information & Research Development Centre, 2017, 347 pp.

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Illusions of Democracy is a volume that aims to help the reader see beyond the mere façade of democracy in Malaysia. As its title suggests, this edited book is meant to unpack the public policies and practices of the powers-that-be that are considered undemocratic and public institutions deemed compromised by its writers. As argued in the Introduction chapter, while Malaysia has all the three elements of elections, civil society and institutions, it "is rarely called a democracy, but an illiberal democracy, young democracy or competitive or electoral authoritarian state" (p. xii). Furthermore, the writer adds, freedom of expression, which is one of the pillars of democracy, is curbed. In other words, democracy in the country is perceived to be contentious.

At a time when political anxiety hovers over the country, this collection of articles, which is a sequel to the earlier edited volume of *Misplaced Democracy: Malaysian Politics and People*, is a welcome addition to Malaysian studies as it strives to enlighten the reader with an up-to-date analysis of contemporary Malaysia. The book also examines the various forms of contestations that emerge in the public domain as a result of certain major issues confronting the nation.

Edited by political anthropologist Sophie Lemièrre, this book is divided into four parts, namely The (Mis-) Rules of Ethno-Politics; The Local Scene and the International Game; The Voice of the "Others"; and The (Mis-) Management of Resources. The interrogation of various issues affecting the Malaysian society in this volume is conducted using inter-disciplinary approach that involves disciplines of political science, anthropology, cultural studies, international relations, political economy and legal studies.

In the four parts of the book are slotted respectively the following 16 chapters over 347 pages: Demi Agama, Bangsa dan Negara: Silat Martial Arts

and the "Third Line" in Defence of Religion, Race and the Malaysian State; The Real World? Fabricating Legitimacy in a Semi-Authoritarian State; Malaysia's Constitutional Identity: A Chimera?; Rebooting the Emergency: Najib's Law "Reform" and Normalisation of Crisis; Federalism in Serambi Mekah: Management of Islamic Education in Kelantan; Malaysian Politics and the South China Sea; The Construction of Malaysia's Foreign Policy since 1957: An Emerging Middle Power's Choice to Follow, Challenge or Compromise with the Global Order; Ummah Revisited: Anti-Shia Hatred in Malaysia since the Outbreak of the Syrian Civil War; The Violent Trajectory of Islamisation in Malaysia; Life in Limbo: Refugees in Malaysia; "Malay Muslim First": The Politics of Bumiputeraism in East Malaysia; Troubling Malaysia's Islamic State Identity: The "Young" Struggle of LGBTQ's Narratives and the Art of Mis-Representation; Economics, Politics and the Law in Malaysia: A Case Study of the 1MDB Scandal; Collecting, Resisting, and Paying Corporatised *Zakat* in Contemporary Malaysia; Malaysia's Green Movement: Old Continuities and New Possibilities; and Responsible Resource Management of the Oil and Gas Sector in Malaysia: Issues, Challenges and Opportunities.

Part One of the book, which critically examines ethno-religious politics in Malaysia, opens up with the first chapter that deals with *silat* martial arts. *Silat*, contends the author, not only constitutes a platform for expressing Malay identity but has also become a convenient cultural symbol to be employed for political gains by Malay-based UMNO party especially when its political hegemony is, or perceived to be, under assault; hence, the rallying cry of "*demi agama, bangsa dan negara*" that often resonates within the *silat* movement at a critical juncture in Malaysia's history. It, therefore, came to pass that in June 2011 (i.e. two weeks before a *Bersih* mass rally) at a national *silat* gathering Prime Minister Najib Razak regarded the *silat* movement as a "third line of defence" (after the military and police) to fight against groups that purportedly threatened national security, peace and sovereignty (p. 3).

The second chapter, which is written by the book editor herself, looks at how the Malaysian regime maintains its political legitimacy in society. Here Lemièrre investigates the political and ideological mechanisms employed by the ruling coalition in order to preserve its grip on power, such as the promotion of siege mentality particularly within the Malay community in the face of supposed threat to "Malay supremacy" and special privileges, and also the manufactured fear of physical clashes among the ethnic communities. In this regard, the role of Malaysia's mainstream media in dutifully protecting and promoting the vested interests of the ruling coalition, especially at a time when its political hegemony is perceived to be under threat, should have been factored into this essay. In turn, readers may be interested to see how news portals – apart from social media – critical of the government attempt to subvert or contradict the dominant discourses

of the powers-that-be in the mainstream media that are largely owned or/and controlled by the ruling elite.

As prime minister, Najib Razak has made a number of promises to transform the Malaysian society so that it would eventually become a "more open and dynamic democracy ... at par with other democratic system in the world" (p. 59). It is in this context that scholar Amanda Withing critically examines the change in laws that took place in Malaysia between 2011 and 2016. The social reality, as she observes, is that the country has regressed over the years in terms of its democratic practices and commitments of the Najib administration towards an open society. Under his watch, Najib helped to annul in 2011 the Emergency Proclamations of 1966, 1969 and 1977. However, certain old draconian laws are given new garb or remain the same, such as Printing Presses and Publications Act, Official Secrets Act, University and University Colleges Act, Communications and Multimedia Act and Sedition Act, while new laws with similar or more restrictive features such as Peaceful Assembly Act and Security Offences (Special Measures) Act (SOSMA), are creatively formulated to replace the old ones such as the dreaded Internal Security Act. And many, if not most, of these undemocratic laws are crafted predictably in the name of protecting "national security" and "public order" to such an extent as to make these pieces of legislation appear "normal" and "natural" in the eyes of the general public. These laws obviously have serious implications on the democratic rights and freedoms of Malaysians.

Federalism in Malaysia has not functioned as effectively as it should be given the traditionally domineering stance of the federal government towards the component states of the federation. This dominance of the centre is made more entrenched by the creation of statutory bodies and government-linked companies that operate in many parts of the country in the wake of the robust implementation of the New Economic Policy. Political scientist Azmil Tayeb puts the state of Kelantan under his microscope to investigate how federal power holds sway in the management of Islamic education in the northern state. This study provides an excellent insight into the operation of well-funded federal institutions and their strategies to gain influence in the state, in particular the Ministry of Education and the powerful Jabatan Kemajuan Islam (JAKIM, or Department of Islamic Development) that intersect with state outfit, State Islamic Council (MAIN, or Majlis Agama Islam Negeri). There is also another dimension to the federal weight in the state, which takes the form of ideological coherence between these public institutions so that "there is less resistance at the local level against the dominance of the federal government" (p. 89). This notwithstanding, the scramble for influence in the state via religion was the outcome of stiff political competition between UMNO and PAS in their desire to gain political control of the Malay heartland.

As intimated above, religion plays a major role in Malaysian life, especially that of the Malay-Muslim communities. The demonisation and marginalisation

of followers of the Shia sect in Malaysia constitutes an important study that is pursued in Part Two of the book in the chapter on "*Ummah* Revisited: Anti-Shia Hatred in Malaysia since the Outbreak of the Syrian Civil War". It contends that the hatred towards the Shia has escalated over time, largely fuelled by the state Islamic bureaucracy that is entrusted to protect and promote its "true version" of Islam to the exclusion of other interpretations of the faith. Such exclusive approach to Islam obviously puts into question the federal government's self-proclaimed "Islamic moderation" that pursues a "middle path" or *wasatiyyah*. But worse, as the author argues, the heightened hatred for the Shia has also found similar expression among Islamic extremists and radicals in and outside the country. Such aversion towards the Shia are shared ironically between the conservatives and the radicals among the *Ummah*, which is a cause for concern.

Very much concerned about a possible violent impact of conservative and extreme forms of Islam, the following chapter, "The Violent Trajectory of Islamisation in Malaysia", argues that the Islamisation race between UMNO and PAS, which is underpinned by a largely conservative approach to the faith, has given rise to a situation in Malaysia where it "inadvertently legitimised violent extremist discourses" (p. 176). Islamic righteousness of Jihadist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the author contends, becomes attractive to Muslims, particularly the youth, who seek a life of righteousness that is supposedly devoid of corrupting Western and other negative influences.

The Part Three of "The Voices of the 'Others'" addresses the challenges faced by two largest refugee communities in Malaysia, i.e. the Chin and the Rohingya of Myanmar; the political marginalisation of non-Malay and non-Muslim Bumiputera in Sabah and Sarawak; and the problems faced by the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) group in their endeavour to exercise their human rights in the face of social antagonism from sections of the ruling elite and Muslim groups. This section of the book makes an interesting read as it examines selected marginalised groups that rightly deserve to be centre-staged and subjected to scholarly interrogation. Having said that, this section would have been a lot more stimulating if it had also included essays that touch on ethnic minorities who are also stakeholders in this country, such as Orang Asli, Eurasian and Thai communities, as these groups are often way off the radar of mainstream society. It would be interesting to examine, for instance, the uneven power relations between these marginalised entities and the centre. In this regard, one could think of one recent scholarly endeavour by Patrick Pillai whose book, *Yearning to Belong: Malaysia's Indian Muslims, Chitties, Portuguese Eurasians, Peranakan Chinese and Baweanese* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015) examines the marginalised groups concerned.

Transparency and accountability are vital factors in the management of the country's rich resources. Thus, the final section on "The (Mis-)management of

Resources" is well placed in this volume as it critically investigates contemporary issues that have wide repercussions to the nation, namely the huge financial mismanagement of the state fund 1MDB; the management of corporatised *zakat*; Malaysia's environmental movement and its political encounter; and the issues, challenges and opportunities facing the oil and gas sector in the country.

The chapter on 1MDB in this section traces the origins of the state fund as well as examines the relationship between politics, economics and corruption in the country's arguably biggest financial scandal. It also looks at the scandal within a larger international context. This essay is a good starting point for a reader who wants to understand the complexities of the scandal.

One of the five pillars of Islam, *zakat* (or alms-giving), is subjected to scholarly scrutiny in another chapter. Here, Patricia Sloane-White looks at how the management of *zakat* was first "modernised" in a corporate manner during the Mahathir administration. It was decided by the government that the collection and disbursement of *zakat* be conducted centrally by a single authority. In managing *zakat*, religious authorities have set up private corporations, some of which have dabbled in real estate, building and operating hospitals, and sponsoring *zakat*-funded universities and corporations for economic development of Muslim Malaysians. Muslims in general pay their *zakat* to the authorised collecting agencies. However, there are the "*zakat* resisters" among them, especially the well-heeled, who would rather pay *zakat* directly to the poor and needy as it offers them better human connection with these groups. One may add here that there are Muslims who are critical of the way *zakat* is disbursed and used, such as indulging in economic activities that may not necessarily benefit the poor directly.

Chapter 15 examines the development of Malaysia's environmental movement that has witnessed alliances of sorts forged, challenges encountered and societal reform pursued in the overall objective of protecting the environment and its natural resources. It also has seen how undemocratic practices of the government posed an obstacle to the green movement.

The last chapter, the title of which bears some resemblance of the title of a chapter in the previous edited volume mentioned above, seeks to investigate the good governance in the management of the oil and gas sector in Malaysia. Government-linked company PETRONAS is critically analysed given that it is the country's major income earner as well as a corporate entity that fuels development of the economy. For example, PETRONAS built and owns the PETRONAS Twin Towers, pumped money into the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Cyberjaya, Formula 1 Sepang Circuit and the administrative centre of Putrajaya. But money from PETRONAS is also used to subsidise the independent power producers, and bail out debt-ridden shipping company Konsortium Perkapalan Berhad and debt-laden car company Proton and Malaysia Airlines. Such questionable use of the country's oil money necessitates transparency and accountability of PETRONAS,

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a factor that is equally important in ensuring resource sustainability especially after taking cognizance of the fact that Malaysia has now transformed into an oil-importing country (p. 328).

Given the invigorating analyses of contemporary Malaysia that are accompanied by critical drawings of political cartoonist Zunar, and despite certain shortcomings, this volume serves as a useful and important reference to interested scholars and students and those who are concerned about recent developments in Malaysia and their trajectories.