

## **Book Review**

*Ethnic Relations in Malaysia: Harmony & Conflict (New Edition)* by Syed Husin Ali, Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 212 pp.

*Ethnic Relations in Malaysia: Harmony & Conflict* looks at the complexity of the societal structure in Malaysia. The book answers the question as to what constitutes inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic issues in the country based on historical events and personal memoirs of the author. The author, Syed Husin Ali, who was born in 1936, during the era of British colonialisation and later Japanese Occupation, observed the state of the nation pre-and post-Independence (Merdeka) in 1957 and described inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relationship between the three major ethnic groups - Malay, Chinese and Indian - and to a lesser extent the indigenous community in Malaysia.

Syed is a social and human rights activist and a prolific writer, was detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for six years from 1974-1980. The chapters are a compilation of the author's original articles, Q&A from interviews and text of speech from 1974 – 2009 with latest updates. Due to this, the chapters do not flow smoothly in addition to repetitions.

This book comprises 14 chapters that can be categorised into three broad themes: (1) characteristics of the plural society in Malaysia pre-and post- British colonialisation, (2) the effect of government policies and political parties on ethnic relations in Malaysia, and (3) the author's personal anecdotes and the way forward for the nation.

Based on the first theme, the author successfully argues there is economic and social disparities between the Malays, Chinese and Indians (chapter 2 and 6). During the British era, there was little social and economic integration between the ethnic groups. Chinese immigrants were brought in mainly to work in the tin mines, Indians in the rubber plantations and railroad construction, while the Malays were paddy farmers in the rural areas. It was also argued new upper and middle class were created and these socio-economic groups thrive on political and economic influences. Even today, social stratification based on ethnicity is still prominent and is a cause for concern.

Post-Independence, the ruling government led by Barisan Nasional (National Front) enacted New Economic Policy (NEP), following the racial riots of 13 May 1969, to uplift the economic and social status of the nation (chapter 3). Although the author agreed that the overall status of the nation has improved through NEP, he argued that the new policy did not fully serve

its objective as it was prejudicial and favoured the Malay community and to a lesser extent the landless Malay peasants. The NEP was not effective in eliminating poverty among the poorest peasants irrespective of ethnicity. In chapter 9, the author delved deeper into ethnic polarisation which saw Malays dominate politics and administration of the country while the Chinese focused on business and Indians predominated the professional sector. The author argued that the ruling party (UMNO) often used the media to manipulate news and cast the opposition parties in a bad light in addition to using religion and fear of widening Chinese economic influence to gain political mileage from the Malays and the indigenous community.

The third theme is collection of author's personal anecdotes during the Japanese Occupation (chapter 8). Inter-ethnic violence and distrust between the Malays and Chinese was widespread during this time and this continued until racial riots of May 13, 1969. To achieve inter-ethnic unity, the author suggested free and rational discussion among the people with the ruling party and restructure the education system to end mono-ethnic schools (chapter 1), ensure no suppression of another culture and have policies that integrate cultures to promote a common heritage (chapter 5), dispense with repressive laws (chapter 13) and ensure equitable distribution of wealth (chapter 14).

Syed Husin Ali's book is intriguing and genuine as it goes to the root cause of the ethnic conflict. He described how the ruling party manipulated ethnic diversity to gather strong support from the Malay community and disregarded socio-economic inequity between the upper class, middle class and lower class in Malaysia.

Worth mentioning here is the growing number of outspoken younger voters who believe in promoting social justice, thus voting for multi-ethnic parties. However, the author failed to explore this argument in depth. It would have been enlightening if the author had provided examples of the growing number of urban young voters irrespective of ethnic background that is united for a cause. The recent Bersih 2.0 demonstration 2007 and 2011 captured this group as they demanded for clean and fair electoral roll and free access to media.

This book is very insightful and will appeal to scholars from multi-disciplinary background, from sociology, geography, economics, political science, law and the general public. The book also engages civil society and policymakers by shedding light into the role of state policies and the rule of law and thereby contributing to knowledge on Malaysia's social development.

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