BOOK REVIEWS

Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes and Azly Rahman (eds) – *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future*

(Kuala Lumpur: UCSI University and SIRD, 2009), xxv+530 pp.

ISBN 978-983-3782-78-9 (paperback), ISBN 978-983-3782-81-9 (hardback)

Abdul Raqib Karim *Intersocietal and Scientific Sdn Bhd. (INAS)*

The average Malaysian non-fiction section in any bookstore looks like a country club photo-album full of political elites, a stoic collection of post-colonials endorsing the viewpoint of the *status quo* they help create. There are few books on the market that address the evolution of Malaysia's multiethnic society, let alone those that address its tumultuous colonial past, its uneasy scandal-laden present and its often uncertain and constantly shifting future trajectory. So being able to read just such a book in *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future*, with its no-holds-barred approach to addressing the country's ethnic issues was sorely needed. Indeed, its attempts to challenge and counter the currently prevailing rather bland and simplistic narratives on social history – and thus, the justifications for the various economic and political policies – is very much the whole point of the book.

Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future is a compilation of 25 papers written by 20 of the country's most well-known academics, political experts, activists and columnists. These include Khoo Kay Kim, currently on the board of the National Human Rights Commission, P. Ramasamy, the current Deputy Chief Minister of Penang, Syed Husin Ali, the deputy president of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, and Zainah Anwar, a founding member of Sisters in Islam. They cover various aspects of Malaysian interethnic relations, including current social trends, conflicts with new and old ideologies, the postcolonial ethnic schisms that persist to this day and the complex interconnecting issues of culture, language, religion, education and race politics as well as the effects of history behind current social phenomena.

A major theme that runs throughout the contributed articles is the effect of hegemonic government influences on various important social aspects, such as political and historical narratives that are used to this day to justify such policies as the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the current rise in ethnic-religious conservatism. It also affects other social and political realities, like the persistence of ethnic-based politics and political ethnocentrism and the various effects it has

on the democratic process as well as issues pertaining to culture, education and national identity.

In short, the thesis of the book is essentially the fact that if we as Malaysians are to deal properly with the divisive issues of race and ethnicity, politics and economics, as well as religion and culture, we must learn to deal with the various diverging viewpoints and critically evaluate and construct an understanding of our society's tumultuous evolution. In the past, we already relied on the hegemony of colonial powers to influence and define how we should interpret races and their issues. Unless we are keen on letting the errors of the past repeat themselves, we should not allow the current political elite a monopoly of social narrative, to dictate to us how we should view ourselves and each other either.

What marks this book out as being more than just a critique on current policies and political settings is that it is honest enough not to toe the line of any one agenda. From the onset it is clear that these 25 papers will not, as the editors put it, "find common ground on these vital events and processes" (2). It is, however, these same differing views that offer more detailed insights into the evolution of Malaysian interethnic relations so badly needed for those who wish to critically evaluate the state of the nation's socio-political and economic realities, all of which are unfortunately bound to the divisive issue of race. Like a forum where debates are held, the book succeeds in providing an "open space to explore, analyse and assemble the complex local knowledge on this challenging subject", and while the contributors tend to elaborate on matters that concern their own ethnic, ideological and academic leanings, it still remains a bold and detailed corpus of knowledge about interethnic issues.

There are two thematic issues with the book that need to be pointed out in particular. At times, in terms of thematic issues, it is not so much the articles that contradict one another so much as the writers who contradict themselves. For example, Lee Hock Guan's chapter on "Language, Education and Ethnic Relations" does point out – as many of the other articles do – that the ruling UMNO party's preoccupation with the notion of *Ketuanan Melayu* or 'Malay supremacy' gives rise to an unease amongst non-Malays (as he demonstrates with the issue of the preservation of Chinese medium school education) and concludes that "perhaps the single most important root cause that needs to be dealt with immediately is the extensive practice of ethnic discrimination in the public education sector". However, by the same token, Lee also says that *Ketuanan Melayu* and the political power of the ruling government are sustained by the vestigial elements of postcolonial ethnic segregation (202). It might be difficult to understand how a postcolonial ethnic schism and the forced assimilation implied by the threat to Chinese-medium schools can both sustain the ruling government's powers, since – ironically – the desire to maintain such schools can be said to be a continuation of that same postcolonial

ethnic schism. Simply put, most people would assume that political power can be sustained either by keeping people separated or by forcing them together, but not at the same time by the same political power.

There is also the book's 'habit' of placing the bulk of the blame for the nation's ethnic divisions on the effects of colonial rule. Sheila Nair addresses this directly by stating that the current political players internalise cultural stereotypes and geographic and occupational divisions crystallised by the British (10). But when an avenue for races to dissociate themselves from these stereotypes by the pre-independence PUTERA-AMCJA political party, by amongst other things using the term 'Malay' as a mark of citizenry rather than limiting it to race, as per the historical usage of the term sans any religious connotation, it fails not just from opposition by the British but more strikingly from interethnic animosities between races. As Ariffin Omar notes, "Malays were unwilling to trust the non-Malays and the non-Malays were not confident that the Malays would act fairly towards them". Ariffin goes on to state that both saw the British as impartial, even through ample evidence to the contrary (8).

In the view of this reviewer, at times far too much blame is placed on the influence of British colonial bigotry, rather than on the inability of the various ethnic groups themselves to truly make a *concerted* effort to come together, all too often in the past trusting the British to organise ethnic groups they themselves had a poor understanding of. Indeed, it seems that with the postcolonial ethnic schisms in place, at least the ruling Malay elite have managed to leverage the ethnic schisms to their advantage by striving for Malay political hegemony, as P. Ramasamy points out when examining the policies of UMNO before and after the creation of the NEP, in his piece "Ethnicity, Patronage and its Legacy: Leadership Conflicts in UMNO" (95).

What is more alarming is the fact that Malaysians often exhibit extraordinary prejudice not only towards each other – quite independent of any hegemonic government racial agendas – but to outsiders as well, and in particular to migrant workers. Wazir Jahan Karim's piece on migrant discrimination, "The Affairs of the Bogeyman: Migration and Class Across Borders", highlights this disturbing fact by emphasising the class discrimination aspect that happens to any impoverished ethnic group (408, 410, 420). Diana Wong in her piece about "Malaysia's New Migrants: Problems of Incorporation and Management" emphasises Karim's point even further by pointing out the hostility of the local press towards migrant workers by associating them with criminality, infectious diseases, hogging scarce land resources and undue access to public amenities as well as the authorities singling out migrant communities for drug raids (398).

Moreover, Diana Wong's piece also highlights the physical abuse, cheating involved with migrant worker wages and even corruption of law by parts of the

enforcement agencies (399). It is also interesting to note that by the same token, authorities often make no distinction between illegal immigrant workers and political refugees (399). These facts further provide proof of the existence of an endemic seam of xenophobia that runs through the Malaysian ethnic consciousness. Whether the government is driving public xenophobia as a means to rally support and distract the public from their own short-comings, or whether it is merely reacting to the xenophobia of individual citizens is still a tenuous, chicken-and-egg issue. It does, however, still imply that ethnic schisms and xenophobic attitudes towards 'the Other' are not just *colonial* vestiges.

In sum then, *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future* is a thought-provoking and intellectually stimulating and necessary book. As mentioned earlier, several of the articles do not necessarily find common ground as per the causes and effects of history's various happenings on Malaysian interethnic relations today. As a whole however, the various issues that are pointed out in some of the contributions do emphasise or explain arguments that are made in other pieces. This interconnecting thematic strength is what makes the book a stimulating read, apart from the disagreements between the pieces giving rise to a kind of lively asynchronous debate. *Multiethnic Malaysia* should therefore be in the libraries and on the shelves of all those who are interested in finding solutions for contemporary Malaysia.

Muhammad Mumtaz Ali – *Critical Thinking: An Islamic Perspective*

(Batu Caves [Malaysia]: Thinkers Library, 2008). xv+169 pp.

ISBN 978-967-69-0726-4. MYR 25.00

Abdul Karim Abdullah (Leslie Terebessy) *International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies*

This book explores 'critical thinking' within the context of the Islamic revivalist movement. At 169 pages, the book consists of an Introduction and five chapters. Upon closer inspection, however, the book turns out to be more of a critique of 'modernist', 'moderate', and 'liberalist' Muslims than an inquiry into the meaning of critical thinking from a purely Islamic perspective:

Today we observe a large number of Muslim scholars and intellectuals who do not hesitate to call themselves modernist, progressive, liberalist, moderate Muslims or flag-bearers of civilisational Islam. They advocate the *compatibility of modernity and Islam*. (x) (emphasis added)

It appears that – to Ali – Islam and modernity are simply incompatible (42). Modernisation and Westernisation to him are two sides of the same coin. The fact that large numbers of Muslims have successfully integrated in Western societies seems to have little significance to him. By 'modernity' Ali means 'secular ideologies'