

Ethnic Relations in Malaysia: Harmony and Conflict

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Book Review

With Malaysia in the throes of sweeping political change, academic turned political activist Dr Syed Husin Ali traces how ethnicity has been manipulated, since Independence, by Malaysian politicians for their own gain to the detriment of the masses. In articles spanning more than three decades, collected for the first time here, he dissects the origins, fallacies and destructive nature of ethnic politics in Malaysia and examines the issue of class versus ethnicity or race. It is time, he argues, for an end to race or ethnic-based politics. In this new edition, the author has updated the book in terms of facts and events.

This book has been found to be more relevant in view of the recent developments in the country, where ethnic relations have appeared to be more acute. In this new edition, the author has done mainly two things. Firstly, he has updated the book wherever necessary, relevant and possible, in terms of facts and events. Secondly, he has included two more articles, namely: 'Multi-ethnic Malaysia' and 'Outline of Ethnic Relations'. The main aim of Chapter 1 is to present, analyse and discuss the nature of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia and why they appear to have deteriorated, thus adversely affecting the agenda of national unity for the country.

Chapter 2 focused about the characteristics of ethnicity in Malaysia. The problems of ethnicity and ethnic relations are of much concern in Malaysia because they are ever present in Malaysian daily lives and are often regarded as threats to national unity and the welfare of the people. Here the country has groups of people from diverse origins having different socio-economic and belief systems living together at different levels of development. There are numerous problems associated with this [1].

Chapter 3 raises two broad questions. Firstly, what changes have taken place in the social stratification structure as a result of economic growth? Secondly, what are the significance and implications of social-economic stratification on development, on its nature, speed as well as its distribution? The first is historical in approach and should interest social historians; the second is more analytical and certainly meaningful to development strategists and planners. Nevertheless, it is useful to pursue the first question first, since it will help to clarify various problems related to the second question.

Chapter 4 discussed about a world of differences in Malaysia. In a country where heterogeneity is the rule rather than the exception, forging unity among the diverse ethnic groups is more than a passing need. For Malaysia, with its patchwork population of three major races, namely Malays, Chinese and Indians, and numerous other ethnic communities, inter-ethnic harmony lies at the very heart of its survival. Though the need for racial unity has often been emphasized in the past, this concern gained intensity of late with much talk of forging a united Malaysian nation or Bangsa Malaysia.

Chapter 5 discussed about the multi-racial Malaysia. Malaysia appears like an interesting but complex montage of distinct ethnic groups, each with its own internal variations. While it may be fitting to describe the Blacks and Whites in the United States and South Africa as racial groups, it is more appropriate to refer to the Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban, Kadazan and so forth in Malaysia as ethnic groups.

Chapter 6 discussed about the outline of ethnic relations, starting from pre-colonial situation, colonial situation and post-merdeka situation.

Chapter 7 discussed about the ethnic and class factors in social relations. Social relations involving individuals and groups, take many forms. This chapter focus mainly on those related to ethnicity in Malaysia. For this purpose, it will examine at the national as well as local levels, certain salient features pertaining to the nature of ethnic groups and inter-ethnic relations, especially those arising from social, economic and political factors. The focus will be on the Malays and Chinese who, together with the Indians, form the major component in the multi-ethnic composition of the country's population.

Chapter 8 discussed about the authoritarian state and ethnic violence. In a country where heterogeneity is the rule rather than the exception, forging unity among the diverse ethnic groups is more than a passing need. Ethnic conflict and national unity are connected or interrelated with the development of an authoritarian state.

Chapter 9 discussed why ethnic sentiments are still strong in Malaysia. The scope of Chapter 10 is confined to the experiences of indigenous peoples in electoral and party politics. There are two things that need to be clarified from the outset. Firstly, although the chapter is meant to provide a general overview of Southeast Asia, it will concentrate more of its discussion on the Malaysian situation. Secondly, whereas the focus will mainly be on electoral and party politics, other forms of politics will also be considered. The latter appear to be more prevalent on countries other than Malaysia.

In Chapter 11, the author discussed about the situation in Southeast Asia especially Malaysia following the 911 (11th September 2001) attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City. Chapter 12 discussed about the ethnic relations module in universities. Chapter 13 is a question and answer chapter. The final chapter discussed about the way forward in Malaysia. The author has long been concerned with the problem of inter-ethnic relations, both as an academician and a politician. Events leading up to and following the general elections inspired him to publish this book. It comprises a selection of eleven diverse articles, including a speech and an interview, collected over three and a half decades.

References

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