

The Chinese Dilemma

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Editorial

Malaysia is a prosperous, modern Islamic nation in which three main ethnic groups-Malay, Chinese and Indian-coexist peacefully, while maintaining their unique cultural identities. Yet this stable society is founded upon a form of affirmative action that has led to condemnation of Malaysia as an inherently racist society, and to criticisms of the architect of that policy, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who outlined his ideas in his book, *The Malay Dilemma*, in 1970. The winners from Mahathir's New Economic Policy have been the indigenous Malays who receive preferential treatment in education and business; the losers are the Chinese who feel they are the victims of inherently undemocratic restrictions. The author, a Chinese Malaysian businessman, argues controversially that whatever the cost, the benefits of the policy are indisputable. He not only queries many of Mahathir's ideas, he also challenges the simplistic views of the leader's Chinese and Western critics. Besides making a major contribution to Malaysian political and social thought, this book raises broader questions about Chinese cultural identity and the role and expectations of the overseas Chinese-a people who have left their mark in almost every corner of the world.

The title of this book echoes Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's *The Malay Dilemma*. The book deals with the relations between the two main races in Malaysia: the indigenous Malays, who form roughly half the population, and the immigrant Chinese, who make up a third. Mahathir's proposition is that the Malays are ill-equipped by their racial traits, upbringing and conditioning to compete against the commercially advanced and acquisitive Chinese in their midst. The Chinese dominated the domestic sector of the economy (the part not owned by British interests), all the more since the Malay achievement of independent nationhood, confirming the Malay in his fear that he had regained his country from the colonial British only to have it taken from him by the Chinese. This was an untenable situation, one that could spark off a repeat of the May 1969 crisis.

May 13, 1969 was a turning point in Malaysian history, the date on which communal tensions flared up in rioting. Why this violent rift

between the Malays and the Chinese? Mahathir's answer in his book is that there can be no racial harmony so long as the imbalance of economic power remains. And that imbalance can only be redressed by giving Malays preferential treatment over the other races. Push the scales to their advantage, Mahathir argues. Give them a better shot at business, for so long considered the special preserve of the Chinese. Left alone, the Chinese may well deliver Malaysia faster to the common goal of national prosperity. But should the Malay stand aside and, poor but proud, watch his country prosper under the Chinese? Or should he demand a share in that prosperity, even at the cost of slowing down the economy? This, Mahathir says, is the Malay dilemma. It is not possible to describe the Malay dilemma and not discuss the British, any more than it is possible to write about the Malay dilemma and not talk of the Chinese. In his book Mahathir does deal with the British and the Chinese, but of course only as aspects of the Malay problem.

This is a highly controversial book and, had it been released at the same time as Mahathir's *The Malay Dilemma*, it would probably have been banned too. Those who can read the book rationally rather than emotionally still form a small segment of Malaysia's population. This book should be read by the younger generation of Malaysians. It may help the unprejudiced mind to see things in a better perspective. Writing this book, the author runs the risk of being condemned as a traitor or a racist. He found it awkward to question the long-held beliefs of the Malaysian Chinese-a feeling akin to betrayal. Few Chinese will be unacquainted with this feeling, which comes of the cultural baggage most of them carry. The author is sure his views will draw detractors from all sides. However, he can claim to be true of heart. He has no political axe to grind, nor does he harbor any political agenda, and there is certainly no money in this. It is his hope that this book will be read, and not only read but discussed, because if he have any purpose it is to encourage debate and reflection, which in turn would help the Chinese to see their way forward in Malaysia more clearly. This is because there has never been anything like this book submitted by a Malaysian and particularly, a rare case of a Malaysian Chinese.