Malaysia
Recent Trends and Challenges
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Malaysia
Recent Trends and Challenges

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Preface

The chapters in this book are derived from commissioned papers and those presented at an ISEAS Workshop entitled “The Political Economy of Malaysia: Current Trends and Future Challenges” held in September 2004. Chapters 1, 2, 10, and 12 are specially commissioned from ISEAS scholars who are experts in their own field of interest. The other eight chapters are extensively revised versions of the papers presented at the Workshop. Both the Workshop and this book are the products of the Institute’s Malaysia Study Programme.

We would like to thank Professor Wang Gungwu, Chairman of the ISEAS Board of Trustees, for contributing the Foreword, ISEAS scholars for preparing the commissioned essays, and the Workshop speakers for revising their papers for publication.

Saw Swee-Hock and K. Kesavapany
I am very pleased to have been invited to take part in the one-day workshop on “The Political Economy of Malaysia: Current Trends and Future Challenges” held at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, in September 2004. Most of the papers were by scholars from Malaysia and Singapore who were still very young at the time when Singapore was separated from the Federation of Malaysia. They would not have had the searing experience of the tensions that led the two to separate in 1965, but both have lived through some of the consequences of that separation and are now able to examine coolly the most recent manifestations of what I see as the “one plural society, two countries, two systems” syndrome. There have certainly been many ups and downs in that bifocal effect for the past 40 years.

After an absence of 28 years, I returned in 1996 to the plural society in which I had grown up, from where I had received my education and where I had taught for ten exhilarating years. This was on the eve of the financial crisis that badly hurt the region. That crisis contributed to the tense relationship between Malaysia and Singapore for the next seven years, although among observers, some of the issues seemed unnecessarily discordant. Only on the rare occasions when scholars of both countries came together to discuss the issues in dispute, often at the Institute of
Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), was I reminded of the underlying oneness of all the protagonists concerned. The workshop in 2004 that led to this volume of essays was an exceptionally warm gathering of like-minded authors who rejoiced at the restored friendliness between the two countries. It had, of course, as everyone commented, much to do with the fresh tone of the administration under the new prime minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi. The 11 months before the workshop had seen a marked improvement in the way various leaders of the two countries had begun to conduct diplomacy with one another. The changes are outlined in the last chapter in this volume by the Director of ISEAS, K. Kesavapany, who also recalls for us what he knows only too well: how it felt during those difficult years before he joined ISEAS, when he served as Singapore’s High Commissioner to Malaysia.

The chapters here contain detailed information about the changes that are taking place in Malaysia, much of it of great importance to all Singaporeans who have business or family in Malaysia, those who have to deal with Malaysian officials at all levels, and not least, those whose job it is to analyse the longer-term trends in development that are likely to have profound bearing on both countries. Of immediate interest are the chapters examining the Malaysian general elections of 2004. The many facets of Malaysian society reflected in the way opposition political parties and their allies have sought to challenge the new leadership of the dominant member of the Barisan Nasional, the United Malays’ National Organisation (UMNO), are particularly revealing. Understanding the changes occurring in that arena leads one to better appreciate the broader issues of governance and adaptation to global economic challenges that Malaysia still has to confront. At an even deeper level, we are shown some of the longer demographic trends, the undercurrents in the shaping of Islam Hadhari as a new marker for social harmony, and the re-examination of educational goals for nation-building, all key factors that will surround the future of Bangsa Malaysia for a long time to come. How these are eventually resolved would be of special importance to those tasked with determining how Singapore itself moulds its own national identity. Although such subterranean currents are difficult to observe from year to year, they should always be kept in mind as new generations in Malaysia and Singapore contemplate the darker aspects
of their heritage, those earlier acts of truculence, and displays of distrust that had prevented greater cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

I am encouraged to see so much fraternal feelings among Malaysians and Singaporeans coming through in the 12 chapters here. It reminds me how strong that had been when I was young and how carefully nurtured it was in ISEAS right from the day it was founded. ISEAS was established in part to help ameliorate the painful feelings that accompanied the separation and to put in place a cross-border institution that would regularly bring scholars to re-examine and keep alive the positive relations that the peoples on both sides of the Straits of Johore have long enjoyed. I am delighted that ISEAS has sustained this role in the way that it has. This volume is a fine example of the efforts made by scholars on both sides to cement a feeling of trust.

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