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Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow. By Meredith L. Weiss. Ithaca and Singapore: Cornell Southeast Asia Program and NUS Press, 2011. 302 pp.

Meredith Weiss's *Student Activism in Malaysia* is the first comprehensive work on the student movement in Malaysia. Weiss innovatively employs the resource-mobilization, opportunity-structures, and identity-resources theories of social movements to analyse the emergence and decline of Malaysian student activism. Drawing on studies of social movements in advanced democratic countries, the existing social movement literature largely ignores how greater state repression and more-limited access to communication media affect social mobilization. The illiberal Malaysian state provides an excellent contrasting case study of variations in social activism as it is shaped by different sets of resources, opportunity structures and identities. In addition, the Malaysian experience shows the intractable difficulties in mobilizing students in a society deeply divided by ethnic and religious cleavages.

In brief, political opportunity structures refer to the dimensions of the political environment, while identity resources denote aspects of collective identity that favour or discourage activism. Thus the dynamics of student activism correlate with the interface between “objective features” (political opportunity structures and campus ecology) and an agency dimension (collective identity). Weiss writes,

While political opportunities structures are ultimately objective features, agency matters: activists act on their understanding of these structures — in the jargon of contentious politics, on their attribution of opportunity and threat.... Attention to political opportunity structures offers leverage in understanding both states' efforts to check or confine campus-based protest, and how states and students mutually calibrate their approaches. (p. 285)

She argues that the Malaysian state has cautiously and cleverly deployed both structural and agency-related instruments to suppress and contain student activism.

From the postwar period to the early 1970s, the student movement in Malay(si)a was vibrant and politically engaged. In the post-independence years, political opportunities and the high status of students in Malaysian society favoured student activism. In addition, the transition to postcolonial society was marked by debate and contestation over nation-building and social justice, and by an emerging political society, all of which together provided affirmative opportunities for student activism. Moreover, the high status of students was reinforced by the new political elites, who regarded them as “special and pushed them to engage, but as aides to the state, not adversaries” (p. 89).

For Weiss, campus ecology was favourable to student activism in the early years after the independence of Malay(si)a. In spite of periodic state intervention and crackdowns, students and faculty were generally accorded relative associational and intellectual freedom. The majority of students lived on campus, there was common space for students to socialize and assemble, and ideas and debate freely circulated thanks to the accessibility of open communication channels. Students, though a minority, saw themselves as a privileged group whose members should contribute to the betterment of society. Unhindered by the ethnic and religious cleavages in society, student activists established multi-ethnic groups, some of which advocated on non-communal issues and agendas. In the early 1970s, students organized a series of major demonstrations, whose consequence was to press the state to institute a comprehensive crackdown on students and academics.

With the ascendance of the National Front coalition led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the attendant racialization of politics and enactment of certain legislation, especially the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA) of 1971, student activism was severely curtailed. Student associational life and activism became incrementally affected by ethnic and religious cleavages. Changes to physical environments and communication channels hindered student socialization and assembly, and students were deprived of alternative non-communal ideas and discourses

while being subjected to UMNO's prevailing ethno-religious politics and frames. The history of vibrant and politically engaged student activism was erased from collective memory, and, with the massification of Malaysian higher education, students' previously high status was downgraded; the *mahasiswa* was now considered a *pelajar*. The end result, as Weiss points out, was the state's intellectual containment of universities with the effect that students became passive and docile and their collective identity communalized.

Weiss points out that campus life in Malaysia essentially mirrored the prevailing ethnic and religious cleavages and political discourses and mobilizations in society from the mid-1970s till 1998. The expanding Islamization of student activism was effectively neutralized by Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad through coercion, collaboration and co-option. In 1998, the emergence of *Reformasi* after the split between Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim and the subsequent fragmentation of the Malay community provided favourable political opportunities for student activism. Weiss argues that, in spite of these opportunities, student activism was diminished to the "sideshow" of her book's title during and after *Reformasi* because of the normalization of politics and society and, especially, the intellectual containment of collective identity.

Even with the emergence of an opposition coalition since the 2008 election and of the Internet as a means to circulate alternative ideas and agendas among students, the author asserts that student activism has remained a sideshow in Malaysia. Although this book was completed before the amendment of the UUCA in 2012, which appears to permit students some intellectual and associational freedoms, Weiss's argument that student activism has been inhibited by state intellectual containment and fragmented by ethnic and religious cleavages continues to hold true.

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