

***Anatomy of an Electoral Tsunami.* By Lim Teck Ghee, S. Thayaparan and Terence Netto. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Strategic Research and Development Centre, 2018. Softcover: 245pp.**

On 9 May 2018, the Malaysian electorate terminated 60 years of dominance by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) of Malayan/Malaysian politics by voting into office the opposition Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope). *The Anatomy of an Electoral Tsunami*, written by three of Malaysia's leading political observers, is not so much a dissection of the election itself, but rather a compilation of opinion pieces which analyse the increasing social, political and economic decay which, under the UMNO-dominated government of Prime Minister Najib Razak, threatened the future of Malaysia as a viable parliamentary democracy. All three writers are well credentialed for this task. Lim Teck Ghee is a long established public intellectual, S. Thayaparan is a pungent and incisive political analyst and Terence Netto is a respected veteran journalist.

The comprehensive coverage of issues of concern within the Malaysian body politic makes for discouraging reading. The book details gathering authoritarianism and intolerance of opposition, the rapid growth of religious extremism — spurred by UMNO-PAS rivalry and impacted by an increasingly assertive and intrusive religious bureaucracy — unchecked racial chauvinism and bigotry, declining educational standards, economic stasis and massive corruption.

As Lim observes (pp. 13–14), corruption, including a series of major economic scandals, had long been a feature of Malaysian political life. Routine government abuses included extensive patronage and cronyism, rent seeking, dependency on government handouts, and tolerance of gross inefficiencies. However, revelations regarding the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) took corruption to a new and indeed grotesque level. Reports revealed losses totalling RM42 billion (US\$11.7 billion), of which a reported RM2.7 billion (US\$700 million) had been allegedly deposited in Prime Minister Najib's personal account. The suppression of any investigation into the 1MDB scandal resulted in the dismissal of Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and Attorney-General Abdul Ghani Patail, a Cabinet reshuffle which resulted in the termination of the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee investigation, together with collateral damage visited upon associated prosecuting agencies

including the police, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission and Bank Negara.

In sum, as Lim notes (p. 56), UMNO's rule had degenerated into an arrogant authoritarianism, continued adherence to an ossified foundational ideal bequeathed from the colonial era and structured on the divisive imperatives of "race", a party completely out of touch with the changing realities of modern Malaysia.

Despite the scale of the 1MDB scandal, UMNO and the wider Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition entered the 2018 election with established strategic advantages. These included a docile mainstream media (though to some extent this was counterbalanced by the non-traditional media), a politicized bureaucracy, a compliant Electoral Commission (which as Lim demonstrates, had devised a gerrymander disproportionately favouring the conservative rural Malay heartland, pp. 51–52) and threats of violence. But more crucially, as Thayaparan points out, UMNO could play upon long inculcated Malay fears of loss of control; a development, which however unlikely, would supposedly jeopardize the future of Islam and of Malay identity itself (p. 98).

All three writers identify the leadership of former Prime Minister Dr Mohamad Mahathir as the catalytic factor in the defeat of the Najib government. However, as Netto remarks (p. 143), in many respects this was deeply ironical, because as prime minister, Mahathir had been responsible for setting in train the very processes likely to culminate in the accession of a figure like Najib. While Mahathir had proven adroit in undermining the prime ministership of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003–9), he was forced to concede that dislodging Najib would require public support. On 7 January 2018, Dr Mahathir and the still imprisoned Anwar Ibrahim publicly joined forces to pursue this quest. Mahathir also formed a new Malay-based political party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM).

Thayaparan emphasizes (pp. 97–99) that Harapan's decision to appoint Dr Mahathir was an act of political realism and a belated recognition that the election was to be based more upon personalities than policies. With the collapse of the non-Malay vote in previous elections, BN was dependent upon retaining the Malay vote. Mahathir's leadership acted as a counter to the fear, assiduously promulgated by UMNO, that an opposition win would invariably result in a governing DAP–Chinese-Christian alliance which would negate Malay interests and imperil the future of Islam in Malaysia. Mahathir was known as the creator of modern Malaysia and as the redefiner of Malay identity as well as a strong advocate of Malay

rights. His campaign stressed that UMNO had betrayed Malays and mocked Islam by plundering the national wealth to enrich themselves. Thayaparan makes the often overlooked point that Mahathir as a leader would act as a reassurance to the so-called “deep state” — that is, those authorities who could affect a transfer of government (p. 99). This also mitigated concerns that UMNO would refuse to concede defeat should they lose the election (see Lim, p. 4).

The Anatomy of an Electoral Tsunami chronicles the many issues affecting Malaysian political public life leading to the groundbreaking election of 9 May. This not only swept away a government portrayed by all three authors as weary, corrupt and authoritarian, but more significantly implicitly challenged a foundational ideology derived from colonial narratives and which continued to inform BN rule. As such, this work constitutes an important historical record and a marker of Malaysia’s maturation as a functioning democracy.

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