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Malaysia: Towards GE15 and Beyond GE15. By Murray Hunter and Lim Teck Ghee. Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2022. 166 pp. *Dark Forces Changing Malaysia*. By Lim Teck Ghee and Murray Hunter. Petaling Jaya: Gerakbudaya, 2022. 206 pp.

Written by two of the most prolific and perceptive observers of Malaysian politics and society, these books, through a series of pungent and incisive articles, offer an alarming prognosis of the current state of the nation. They warn that Malaysia's future as a functioning democracy, and, more fundamentally, as a viable state, is threatened by stale and formulaic policies underscored by uncompromising ethno-religious narratives. The authors trace the origins of Malaysia's current predicament to the racial riots of 1969, but more specifically to forces moulded during the corrosive prime ministership of Mahathir Mohamad.

The 1969 racial riots inflicted deep wounds in Sino-Malay relations. Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak identified the main causative factor as Malay deprivation, and in response introduced a suite of economic and educational policies that, while couched in inclusive terms, essentially consisted of a programme of affirmative action designed to guide Malays into the full structure of Malaysian economic life. These policies, known generically as the New Economic Policy (NEP), were regarded as a necessary but strictly temporary measure. However, the NEP has become enshrined as a permanent feature of Malaysian political life.

It is generally acknowledged that Mahathir Mohamad played a pivotal role in re-inscribing the parameters of Malaysia's political culture. In 1970, Mahathir released his book *The Malay Dilemma*, a book so contentious that it remained banned until 1981 when Mahathir assumed the prime ministership. Written in reductive Social Darwinist terms, Mahathir portrayed Malays as a weak, indolent and tradition-bound "race" (Mahathir 1970, p. 16), incapable of resisting the predations of the Peninsula's more vigorous immigrant communities. Mahathir's book proved profoundly influential in inculcating a sense of Malay victimhood—an insular and often

resentful siege mentality—which continues to resonate with many Malays.

Mahathir's long prime ministership (1981–2003) transformed the dominant ruling party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and as a result, Malaysia as a whole. His administration, plagued by repeated financial scandals, forged new networks of money politics and cronyism. The subsequent pattern of patronage and corruption became deeply embedded in Malaysia's political and cultural life. His combative and increasingly authoritarian rule resulted in attacks on some of Malaysia's key institutions, including the judiciary, the media and the powers of the royalty. But more fundamentally, Mahathir, through the agency of his newly acquired protégé, Anwar Ibrahim, introduced a programme of Islamization designed to outflank the more extreme demands made by Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). These measures created their own momentum, especially through the agency of Jabatan Kenajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Affairs or JAKIM), which has over the years promoted an increasingly pedantic and invasive form of Islam, resulting in the vitiation of traditional Malay custom (*adat*). But Mahathir's influence did not cease following his relinquishment of the prime ministership. He launched withering attacks on his successor, Ahmad Abdullah Badawi (2003–9), and having campaigned vigorously for the elevation of Najib Tun Abdul Razak to the prime ministership (2009–18), issued a series of strident calls drawing attention to Najib's corruption.

In 2018, Mahathir, spurred by the impact of the 1MDB corruption scandal, joined Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu), founded by Muhyiddin Yassin in 2016. Mahathir partnered with the then incarcerated Anwar Ibrahim to head the Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope) coalition. Following his success in the 2018 election, Mahathir promised a two-year stewardship, after which he planned to step aside and allow a transfer of power to Anwar. However, Mahathir sidestepped the issue of reform and in February 2020, in an act widely regarded as betrayal, ceded power to a Malay-dominated government headed by Muhyiddin Yassin.

Both writers highlight factors that have hindered Malaysia's evolution to a mature democracy. These include the abandonment of local government, parliamentary gerrymandering in the form of extreme electoral malapportionment weighted in favour of Malay rural seats, and an appointed Senate that fails to perform as a house of review. Malaysian democracy has also been affected by developments that had no basis in either the Malaysian constitutional settlement of 1957 or the Malaysian Agreement of 1963. Thus, the term *Bumiputera* constituted the introduction of a new administrative taxonomy to manage the affairs of those regarded as indigenous to Malaysia, though, as both writers point out, the main beneficiaries have been Malays. A more egregious development has been the fiction of a political contract guaranteeing Malay dominance (*ketuanan Melayu*), first promulgated by UMNO member Abdullah Ahmad in 1986 and now firmly entrenched as reality among many Malay politicians.

The results of the recent Malaysian election (GE15) confounded nearly all observers. Few predicted the strength of the Bersatu vote, or the so-called "green wave" that elected an unprecedented forty-five PAS members, resulting in the party dominating the northern peninsular states. And no commentator could have envisaged either the routing of the previously powerful UMNO or that the new government would be largely formed on the back of the non-Malay vote.

The election ultimately resulted in the elevation of Anwar Ibrahim to the prime ministership and the forging of a hitherto unlikely coalition between Pakatan Harapan, a shell-shocked UMNO and the East Malaysian-based *Gebungan Rakyat Sabah* (GRS). Anwar commenced his career in the influential Muslim youth group *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM) and was subsequently recruited by Mahathir into UMNO. He rose rapidly through the ranks and became deputy prime minister. Twice jailed for alleged sodomy—both times after trials that provoked profound public scepticism—Anwar remains steadfastly opposed to religious nationalism, holds strongly to the concept of Islam's compatibility with parliamentary democracy, and has advocated major reforms affecting nearly every sphere of Malaysian public policy.

Both books survey in meticulous detail the formidable array of problems facing any Malaysian reformist government. These include economic underperformance hampered by over-centralization and rigidity in planning, resulting in entrapment within a low-wage, low-productivity syndrome; unsustainable financial outflows; an inert, grossly overstaffed and excessively conformist civil service, consuming 45.4 per cent of government operational expenditure; unchecked political cronyism and entrenched corruption; the decay of public institutions, including the judiciary, the police and schools, colleges and other tertiary educational establishments; and a damaging brain drain. East Malaysia, long neglected by peninsular-based governments and denuded of much of the autonomy guaranteed under the terms of the Federation of Malaysia Agreement (MA63), continues to suffer from distressing levels of poverty and a lack of basic infrastructure. There is increasing evidence that these cumulative factors are leading to major businesses either quitting or bypassing Malaysia.

Lim and Hunter consider that Malaysia has degenerated into a corrupt kleptocracy, with public discourse straightjacketed by increasingly obdurate racial and religious narratives. These detailed and strongly argued books warn that Malaysia has entered a state of precarious uncertainty and must either embrace wide-ranging reforms or face an inexorable spiral into economic, political and social stagnancy.

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