

***Class and Politics in Malaysian and Singaporean Nation Building.*
By Muhamad M. N. Nadzri. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2025. Soft
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An important and timely contribution to debates on state formation in Southeast Asia, *Class and Politics in Malaysian and Singaporean Nation Building* challenges conventional accounts of nation-building that treat culture, race or identity as the decisive forces. Muhamad M. N. Nadzri makes a sharper argument: nation-building is best understood as a political project, driven by elites, designed to protect their own power, manage social inequalities and maintain societal control. Through a comparative study of Malaysia and Singapore, Nadzri shows how governments use policies, institutions and narratives of “the nation” to generate loyalty, contain dissent and stabilize elite rule.

This book becomes particularly illuminating when read against Malaysia’s contemporary political landscape—and, more so still, when approached from the vantage point of the Malaysian Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak. Seen from East Malaysia, this helps explain a long-standing paradox: why Sabah and Sarawak often feel economically, politically, and culturally peripheral to the Malaysian nation, yet repeatedly become central when federal politics enter crisis.

Nadzri’s central claim is straightforward but powerful: nation-building is not primarily about cultivating a shared sense of belonging among citizens; it is about how ruling elites mobilize nationalism, development discourse, religion and ideology to govern society and secure their own positions. Culture and identity do not disappear from the story, but they appear largely as tools. Moreover, when read alongside David R. Saunders’s 2024 work *Chasing Archipelagic Dreams: The Expansion of Foreign Influence in Sabah amid the End of Empire, 1945–1965*, which argues that Malaysia’s formation in 1963 was driven by elite anxieties and geopolitical fears, Nadzri’s work reinforces the consistent theme that Malaysia’s political architecture has been sustained less by national harmony than by continual elite calculation.

This framework is especially useful for understanding Sabah and Sarawak. East Malaysia is often discussed through the language of ethnic diversity, indigeneity or underdevelopment. Nadzri’s shifts attention away from these descriptive categories towards questions of power: who designs the political system, who benefits from it and

who bears the costs. From this perspective, Sabah and Sarawak's long-standing grievances over autonomy, religion, natural resources and development are not simply the result of bureaucratic weakness or policy miscommunication; they are the predictable outcomes of a political system mainly designed in Peninsular Malaysia and upheld through elite arrangements that offer few incentives for a meaningful redistribution of power.

Sabah and Sarawak appear only intermittently in Nadzri's chapters on Malaysia (mainly in Chapters Three to Four), yet when they do, it is often at moments when Malaysia's nation-building project encounters tensions or contradictions. One example is Nadzri's discussion of the rise of the Sabahan politician Shafie Apdal and his Sabah-based Heritage Party (*Parti Warisan*). Shafie's break from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 2016 over the 1MDB corruption scandal was followed by his strategic mobilization of long-standing grievances about autonomy and local development to gain greater leverage in federal power struggles. This approach proved electorally successful: his party captured the Sabah state government in the 2018 general elections and repositioned Sabah as a pivotal player in Malaysia's fragmented coalition politics. However, this episode reveals the limits of Malaysia's nation-building framework: regionalism is only acceptable insofar as it can be accommodated within elite bargaining at the centre. From a Borneo perspective, this reinforces a familiar perception: East Malaysian political aspirations gain recognition primarily when they intersect with federal power struggles, while their deeper historical and regional foundations remain marginal to the national imagination.

In the Epilogue, Sarawak finally moves to the centre of the narrative. Following the collapse of the Barisan Nasional alliance in 2018 and the ensuing instability, Malaysian politics became highly fragmented. In this setting, Sarawak's cohesion under the *Gabungan Parti Sarawak* (GPS), the state's ruling coalition, became strategically invaluable. Indeed, while Peninsular-based parties splintered and realigned, the GPS remained disciplined and unified, thereby enabling Sarawak's lawmakers to wield significant bargaining power at the federal level. The appointment of Fadillah Yusof as a deputy prime minister in 2022, the first politician from Borneo to hold such a post, became the clearest symbol of this new leverage. However, Sarawak's enhanced influence did not arise from long-standing grievances finally being addressed, but from the weakening of the political centre. In other words, Sabah and Sarawak matter most to the federation when Peninsular politics become unstable.

The chapters on Singapore take on added force when read from Borneo. Like Sabah and Sarawak, Singapore became part of the new Malaysian state in 1963, but it left two years later to chart an independent course. Nadzri shows how Singapore's leaders turned separation into an opportunity to construct a strong, centralized state. Through housing, education, language policy and economic planning, they reshaped society in ways that served elite interests while also delivering stability and economic growth. As such, nation-building in Singapore was often coercive and tightly managed, yet also internally coherent.

Sabah and Sarawak followed a different trajectory. Remaining within Malaysia, their grievances, over time, became normalized and managed through negotiation, accommodation and elite bargaining rather than structural transformation. Singapore became a sovereign state; Borneo became a recurring bargaining partner. This contrast raises an uncomfortable question for East Malaysians: will Sabah and Sarawak ever be able to chart their own paths, free from Peninsular dominance? Nadzri does not pursue this question directly, but its absence (common in many Peninsular-centric narratives) reflects how often Borneo's political possibilities are taken for granted in Malaysian nation-building discourse.

Read from Borneo, *Class and Politics* offers a clear, at times unsettling, perspective. One of the book's strongest qualities lies in its refusal to romanticize culture or identity. Nadzri's elite-centred analysis offers a practical lens for understanding Sabah and Sarawak's position within Malaysia, while the comparison with Singapore further sharpens this contrast. Borneo's place in Malaysia was neither natural nor inevitable; it was the outcome of political decisions made in the 1960s and reinforced over the subsequent decades. This book may not prescribe a particular future, but it leaves readers with an urgent question: not only how Malaysia was built, but also whose interests that nation-building continues to serve and what that suggests about where it is heading next.

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