

# Introduction

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## The Series

This volume is the first of a series of histories on nation-building in Southeast Asia. The idea of having such a series had its beginnings in Bangkok at the 14th Conference of the International Association of the Historians of Asia (IAHA) in 1996, where I noted that nation-building in Southeast Asia began fifty years ago and suggested that it was time for historians to write about that phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Most books on the region's new nations have been written by journalists and social scientists. I wondered whether historians would tell the story differently. Decades of anti-colonial nationalism came to a climax with the Japanese invasion of 1941–45. New states like those of the Philippines, Indonesia and Burma were born immediately after the war, followed soon by those of Malaysia and Singapore. The independence of a unified Vietnam was delayed by a bitter war and this held back the liberation of the two other Indochina states, Cambodia and Laos, but the independence of all three was only a matter of time.

Many of the protagonists of the early phases of nation-building have described their roles in this new process. Political commentators and journalists provided up-to-date accounts and analyses. But historians of the region have been concerned not to write prematurely about this subject. Many were, like me, fascinated by the first generation of nationalist leaders, men like Sukarno, Tengku Abdul Rahman and Ho Chi Minh, followed by Lee Kuan Yew, Soeharto, Ferdinand Marcos and Ne Win, but hesitant to take on full-length studies about them. These men had offered their different peoples sharply distinct visions of their countries' future. Would historians

wait, as they are wont to do, for all sources to be available before they began research on their countries? How long would it be before the story of each country in Southeast Asia is told by the historians themselves?

When I returned from the Bangkok conference, I brought the question to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) and was gratified when the then director, Professor Chan Heng Chee, encouraged me to try and find out. With that support, I approached five of the leading historians of the original members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN in 1968 consisted of Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore). They were Taufik Abdullah, Charnvit Kasetsiri, Reynaldo Ileto, Cheah Boon Kheng and Edwin Lee. We met to discuss the feasibility of a joint project to write the contemporary histories of these five countries. They agreed that this was worth doing and I sought ISEAS and other funding to allow us to proceed. The support we received enabled us to meet and hold a series of meetings to define the scope of the project.

We began our meetings by focusing on the common features of the Southeast Asian “nation-state”. We knew that there had been attempts to study the early products of new nationalisms in the region. It was clear that some of the peoples of each country were less prepared than others to be citizens of these nation-states. Furthermore, the unfamiliar models taken from Europe have seemed alien, and each of the leaders who advocated using these models often had great difficulty explaining why any one of them should be adopted. We also noted that historians in these countries have closely observed the stresses and strains that were generated, and some have felt the urge to study the actual business of nation-building more systematically. The five historians who met to discuss this phenomenon felt that they would not wait any longer before they began their task. They agreed that they would use their historical skills to take on this project.

We began with questions about what kind of a series we should write. Very early, we agreed that each country had its own story and each author would write a volume about his own country. At the same time, we should try to find out how much the five countries had in common and whether we should adopt a common approach to the subject. From the discussions over several months outlining the main features of the nation-building story in

the region, it became increasingly clear that there were several kinds of stories here. Despite their coming together in a regional organization like ASEAN, each of the five had very different experiences inside their countries. While this fact itself was no surprise, it was astonishing how contrasting their respective stories were. The more we surveyed what each country had to do to attain their nationhood, the more it seemed that the ingredients they had to start with forced their leaders to seek very different routes to achieve their goals. We concluded that it would be a mistake for us to try to treat them as if they were different examples of similar models. Although the foreign models that each country used may have appeared to share common characteristics, what each country inherited from previous regimes at the point of independence was so different that we had to think afresh what needed to be done to capture the essence of each experience. We agreed that these differences justified our adopting distinct and separate approaches to each story. Ultimately, each volume would follow the dynamics of change that each country encountered and allow that to determine the shape of the history that the country deserves. This series of histories is the result. The writing has taken somewhat longer than we first anticipated. We are grateful to Professor Chan Heng Chee's successor, Professor Chia Siow Yue, for her sustained support for our project.

In addition, the Lee Foundation, Singapore, and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, Taipei, helped to fund the project and I would like to thank them here for their generous support.

Let me place the series in a broader context. The study of modern nationalism was the work of European historians. The historians of the American and French Revolutions were the first to underline its global significance while others turned back to study the evolutionary stages of earlier nations like Britain, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands. Later, historians worked with linguists, philosophers and lawyers to shape narrower kinds of nationalisms in Central and Eastern Europe. Their work stimulated social scientists later to embark on theoretical explanations of what the nation-state system meant to the world. The work of historians, however, continued to be influential, most of all by providing ideas for many of the Asian nationalists of the 20th century. Those who studied in

Western universities, in particular, were inspired by these histories to use the ideas in them to prepare their platforms for political leadership.

For the post-World War II period, nationalism was largely seen in the region as a positive development, an organized quest for independence, freedom, and modernization. The Cold War determined that leaders of the newly independent countries could look in at least two different political directions. Some chose to build their nations with the help of capitalism and liberal democracy. These would use the Western European models as the basis for nationhood and, for them, the best way to modernity was through an open market economy. Soon, they found the United States more than willing to help them along that route. Others chose to follow the socialist path either against the capitalist democracies or seeking some kind of neutralism in the Cold War. These were encouraged by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China to contest the global economic and military power represented strongly in Asia by the United States. The more radical among them went further to advocate the overthrow of neo-colonial and feudal structures by mobilizing the working poor who were the majority in each of their countries.

The new leaders soon discovered how difficult nation-building was. It was not enough to proclaim independence. They needed outside help if they wanted to modernize quickly. Large amounts of capital were needed to build a new infrastructure for industrial development. Basic literacy was essential, so were the skills that could only come from secondary and tertiary education for the next few generations. But the nation-state as a new kind of polity was more alien than most people realized at the time. Learning from Western and Eastern Europe, or Japan, China or the United States, may have looked easy for the small group of élites who captured power in the post-colonial states, but building a stable and prosperous nation has been much more elusive.

The responses by historians in the former colonial territories of Southeast Asia have varied from country to country, for example, from those in older countries like the kingdom of Thailand to that of the Philippines, and from those in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore to those of war-torn states like Burma (Myanmar), Vietnam and Cambodia. Up to now, these different

national experiences have largely been studied professionally by political scientists, and the dominance by political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists has continued to the present day. On the whole, there have been few academic historians of the region who have ventured into the period after 1950. This is understandable. The first generation of historians had enough to do to write the story of national origins, often to meet a teleological need, because they realized that the task of nation-building from scratch was a painful one. Some felt it their duty to delineate the contours of the future by giving a new and greater certainty to their countries' more distant pasts.

However, I believe that historians here, as in Europe and elsewhere, will have an important part in shaping future understanding of the phenomenon of nation-building in this part of the world. It is now more than fifty years since many of the new states began making their respective nations. There is now a rich record for historians to study and some official files are open for the first two decades of nationhood. The historians who wish to come closer to the present can now begin to do so. Theirs is a different kind of training, and their intellectual make-up and methodology have much to offer the subject. Therefore, it is time for more historians to take up the challenge and tell the story of the nation-building that many of them have themselves lived through. More than ever, we should not depend on existing theories of nationalism and what they do to the actual task of building nations. The study of each national history should take into account the specific conditions of the nationalism found within its borders. When more historians write their countries' contemporary nation-building history, other social scientists may look at the subject afresh, examine new facts and interpretations, and re-assess the theoretical work done so far. They might find that a new set of theories would be needed to make sense of what the new nation-states of Southeast Asia have achieved. Or, they might find that the simultaneous development of nations in the context of an exceptional regionalism like ASEAN has rendered previous ideas of nationalism inapplicable, if not irrelevant, and a new paradigm is needed.

Until we have done the work, it is premature to talk about a borderless region, least of all a new world order in which nation-states and

nationalisms will begin to fade away. From what is known so far of the modern history of “a world of nation-states”, it would seem that nation-states are here to stay, if only as basic units of regional groupings that will increasingly play a major role as distinct protagonists. Therefore, the sooner we have the more recent developments of aspiring nation-states fully studied by historians in their regional setting, the sooner we will know how to live with them and even how to make them serve the cause of peace in our region.

## **Malaysia**

Was Malaysia primarily an Anglo-Malay creation or the unintended product of an UMNO-MCA-MIC co-operative leadership that has lasted over fifty years?<sup>2</sup> If the former, we must wonder what was in the British constitutional experience that led hard-headed Malay élites to accept the idea of a multi-racial or multi-communal state. If the latter, we are led to ask what kind of men could have wrought such a lasting compromise? It was, of course, not simply either one or the other, more likely both, together with other powerful internal and external forces. It might even be argued that the other factors were more decisive. For example, within the country, the unique mix of communities of Malays, Chinese, Indians and other indigenous peoples were thought by some to have been impossible ingredients for a new nation, certainly a severe challenge to any idea of nation-building. On the more positive side, this was a microcosm of continental Asia's encounter with the Western world, and could also be seen as an uneasy co-habitation of several cultures whose merchant classes had known one another well for several centuries. Of course, none of the historic cultures they represented had any notion of the nation-state in their pasts. It is a measure of the pragmatism of the leaders of each community at that time that they not only looked within themselves for defensive strength but also faced realities and drew inspiration from other relevant experiences. There were deep fears and widespread skepticism in the 1950s that independent Malaya would be a fiasco if not a tragedy. What a contrast that was to the optimism of the 1990s when many commentators expected Malaysia to become a future economic powerhouse in East Asia.

For historians, international pressures on the region would also have to be taken into account. Throughout Afro-Asia, the pressures of decolonization were as irresistible as those of the ideological war that threatened every country. The coming end of the British and French empires certainly focused the minds of that generation of leadership. The struggle for dominance between the Soviet Union and its satellite states and the Western allies led by the new superpower, the United States, had impinged on the fates of every nation. Malaya/Malaysia in the 1950s and the early 1960s faced the most contradictory of choices. Its Malays looked to an Indonesia that toyed with a radical and left-leaning neutralism in the Cold War. Its Chinese, on the other hand, found their ancestral homes in China tightly under communist rule. As for its Indians, at least the democratic socialism that India represented was still widely admired.

Clearly, the country had to look within itself to find its own way out of an extraordinarily complex position. Looking back, was it merely good luck that Indonesia after 1965 changed direction from neutralism to a form of capitalism and thus offered Malaysia both timely support and also a more rational choice? Was it even better luck that the Great Leap Forward and the Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China turned most Chinese in Malaysia away from the China experience? Certainly it was not merely luck that brought the United States and its Western allies to support all enemies of communism and its collaborators. Taking sides became even more essential when the Vietnam War threatened the future of the region as a whole. Whether luck or not, these dramatic changes in the neighbourhood gave the leaders of Malaysia an opportunity to firm up the ideological direction that they had, in any case, preferred. Thus they turned fully to the capitalist world to find the answers for the nation-building tasks they had taken on.

This volume on Malaysia by Cheah Boon Kheng is the first in the series. Malaysia, with its peoples of very different races and cultures, including many of recent immigrant origins, offers a striking example of the complications that a yet-to-be nation has to face. As the communities were asked to acknowledge a common future nationality, they have needed wise leadership to survive the immense strains to which all of them have been subjected. Cheah Boon Kheng has lived through those tense and exciting

years and has drawn on all his historian's skills to tell us what it has been like to make a nation. He has thought deeply about what the people hoped for, the quality of their leaders, and the processes that rendered Malaysia so distinctive. He has written a terse and focused account about the hopes and realities that the country's many communities have experienced. His venture into contemporary history makes an appropriate start to this series.

## NOTES

- 1 Wang Gungwu, "Nationalism and its Historians", *Bind Us in Time: Nation and Civilisation in Asia* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002). That volume of essays is offered as a companion volume to the series.
- 2 The three political parties were the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC).