

## *Book Reviews*

*The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.* Edited by Robert W. Hefner. University of Hawai'i Press, 2001. xi, 319 pp.

In recent years, heated debates over multiculturalism in the West have focused attention on the role of informal politics in shaping citizenship discourses. This view of citizenship as something alive and exciting — involving a multiplicity of actors struggling in the enlarged political space outside the juridico-legal realm — has added a new dimension to the study of pluralism and democracy. *The Politics of Multiculturalism*, gives us a useful perspective on some of the public issues in Southeast Asia, and a sense of the citizenship ferment in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.

In his well-crafted and informative “Introduction”, Robert W. Hefner invokes Putnam’s concept of “civil society” to note that civic organizations contribute “to the development of a public culture of democratic citizenship and inclusive participation”. His focus is on “the informal politics of civility” (p. 9). Hefner modifies Putnam by noting that civic associations do not share homogeneous views but are cross-cut by ethnic, religious, and ideological divides. More significantly, some social groupings can turn out to be violently anti-democratic and exclusionary in their activities and conception of the nation. Hefner does a marvellous job of summarizing the regional transition from the multicultural plurality of the earlier Malay-Indonesian civilization to colonial-imposed “plural societies” whereby ethnic and religious differences became key elements in the calculus of post-colonial citizenship. In a region that has had a history of cultural heterogeneity, exchange, and fluidity, can contemporary civic associations overcome the legacy

of the plural society, that is, ethnically differentiated citizenship? In the post-Asian crisis era, what are the emerging pluralistic interactions, practices, and values in the public sphere that can contribute to the articulation of “an equitable and inclusive citizenship”? Will political leaders open up to the possibilities of a “state-society synergy” in order to reap the clear benefits from dismantling segregations and fostering national solidarities that cut across lines of ethnicity, religion, and gender?

This eloquent set of statements contrasting the different modes of ruling and citizenship could have been used to frame the chapters. Five of the chapters deal with Malaysia, four with Indonesia, and two with Singapore. I will discuss them in terms of country clusters, since there is a continuity of substance and argument across them. For Malaysia, Francis Loh Kok Wah explores how the everyday patronage of local representatives shapes a view of citizenship — especially in rural areas — as the state delivery of goods and services. But debates about the substance of citizenship tend to be confined to cities, especially Kuala Lumpur, which appears to be the sites of the next four chapters. Abdul Rahman Embong notes that Malaysian claims of harmony are not based on reciprocity, but on a calculated unity. Nevertheless, there seems to be a new language of inclusion, balanced against the exclusionary policies of the opposition Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS). Sumit Mandel interviews different actors involved in artwork and performance who play a vital role in critiquing ethnic chauvinism and exploring the hybrid nature of Malaysian ancestry and culture. English has emerged as a language for renegotiating ethno-religious differences, and also to claim the possibilities for “cross-boundary” positionings as a way to disrupt ethnic segmentation. Other new figures include Sisters-in-Islam. According to Zainah Anwar, these elite feminists are crucial in fighting not only for gender equality within Islam, but for a vision of a multiethnic nation where individual rights are respected by the law. Similarly, Shamsul A.B.’s chapter maintains that Malaysia is experiencing a whole new era of “interest-based politics” dominated by the “new Malays”.<sup>1</sup> A multiplicity of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media groups, and Internet fora in the aftermath of the Anwar arrest have opened up a

chorus of debates about Mahathir's governance, long stabilized on Malay ethnic entrepreneurship and affirmative action.

The two chapters on Singapore, by contrast, suggest a more orderly picture. Chua Beng Huat and Kwok Kian-Woon describe the range of "segments" that have emerged despite extensive state control: performance groups, Tamil associations, feminists, religious voluntary associations, the homosexual community, and a network of civil society activists. The affluence and high education of the citizens have spawned a desire and belief in individual rights and endeavour, a political and social pluralism that may well exceed the capacity of the single-party state to represent. Sharon Siddique argues that the plural society idea remains relevant in her analysis of how the Association of Muslim Professionals fits into Singapore Inc., a process that suggests that pluralism feeds dynamism in the island-nation. The pluralism in Singapore nevertheless comes across as a managed social order, in dramatic contrast to the situation in Indonesia.

Four chapters concern themselves with recent events in post-Soeharto Indonesia. There is a sense of rushing to capture on paper the reorganization and repositioning of groups that promise a more democratic if somewhat chaotic future, as well as the threat of spreading communal violence. Mohtar Mas' oed, S. Rizal Panggabean, and Muhammad Najib Azca argue that unlike other cities in Indonesia, in Jogjakarta, the wider promotion of a tolerant kingly tradition has fostered pluralism, tolerance, and moderation in religion, politics, women's activities, and increasingly, the market-place. Indonesian feminists continue to struggle to free gender of Soeharto-era strictures of "*ibu-ism*" linked to developmentalism. Drawing on a small survey of urban women, Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin argues that male dominant hegemony is still the norm. Women from different walks of life consider politics a male realm even when a more pluralist approach to gender may be desirable. More clear-cut challenges to state ideology and policy are found in the labour movement. Labour struggles in Indonesia, Vedi R. Hadiz argues, are poised between becoming a major force for democratic reforms, and being manipulated and co-opted by New Order élites seeking to repo-

sition themselves in the new shifting environment. Religion has also made inroads into the armed forces, which was already riven by ethno-religious factionalism under Soeharto. Hermawan Sulistiyo observes that the army's (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, TNI) use of vigilant militias in religion-fuelled violence has been particularly deadly for society. The TNI has thus lost credibility among more progressive elements of society who no longer view it as a unifying force in the country. Rather belatedly, the public increasingly considers the army as an instrument of primordial ties and competing political élites.

Taken together, the chapters cover much ground, documenting recent changes and shifts in political culture, the emergence of new actors promoting democratic pluralism, and the pull of older forms of ethno-religious bonds that suggest a new round of fragmentation. What is clear is that the dimensions and substance of the public sphere are changing in all three countries, as a spectrum of groups and actors — social, religious, political, and economic — participate in broader and media-based debates about political culture.

Hefner suggests that in Southeast Asia, we must move from ethnic differentiation and being religion-differentiated to something more inclusive and participatory across the nation. But the chapters suggest that the hold of regimes of differentiated citizenship continues to be strong,<sup>2</sup> even as the discourses of individual rights, democracy, and *reformasi* have become more common, especially among the urban middle classes. There is a double movement of increasing pluralism and fragmentation induced by contrary forces such as the expansion of the middle classes and state manipulation on the one hand, and the uneven effects of globalization on the other. Finally, while scholars continue to invoke a Southeast Asian legacy of cultural cosmopolitanism, we still do not know enough about what exactly these indigenous values are, and whether they have been recast or misused by leaders for shaping a vision of an alternative modernity.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the volume is valuable for giving a recent picture of Southeast Asia and for showing how pluralism and multiculturalism have taken rather different directions from what is seen in Western advanced liberal democracies, where the state has

moved, though selectively and often reluctantly, in the direction of basic values of liberty, fraternity, and equality.

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#### NOTES

1. For a view of how Southeast Asian strategies of ruling have been shaped by the need to regulate privileged citizens who can operate with global capital, see Ong (1999).
2. For a different view of the structuring of citizenship in the current era of globalization, see Ong (2000).
3. An interesting example would be the vision given in Anwar Ibrahim (1997).

#### REFERENCES

- Anwar Ibrahim. *The Asian Renaissance*. Kuala Lumpur: Times Publications, 1997.
- Ong, Aihwa. "Zones of New Sovereignty". In *Flexible Citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
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