

conceptual literature somewhat cursory (pp. 71–74). Moreover, it is debatable how relevant Karl Deutsch's euro-centric expostulation of a security community is to Southeast Asia's particular circumstances as an aggregation of mainly developing states. Narine could have been more innovative in developing an alternative set of benchmarks for measuring ASEAN's performance and progress.

That said, *Explaining ASEAN* is strongly recommended for its clarity, fine scholarship, revealing insights and the thoroughness of its research into ASEAN's strengths and weaknesses. It is difficult to dispute Narine's conclusion that ASEAN has run up against its limits as a political organization and that the prospects for institutional reform are not encouraging. Salvation can only come through a greater commitment to regionalism, which will require member states to cede a measure of sovereignty and build a truly Southeast Asian identity. This is the major challenge for ASEAN in the twenty-first century.

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***Malaysia: State and Civil Society in Transition.* By Vidhu Verma.**
Boulder, Colorado, USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc, 2002. 253pp.

This book is about the nature and implications of the democratic process in Malaysia. In a more specific sense, it seeks to examine the intricate relationship between civil society and the state to ascertain whether the former has any impact on the latter in developing and sustaining democracy, human rights, and universal values. Of course, the relationship is not sought in a vacuum, but by considering a number of crucial variables, such as the nature and manner of nation-building in Malaysia, how citizenship was restructured under the affirmative action policy, the factors that led to the development of a strong authoritarian state, the oppositional challenge posed by radical Islam and, not least, the focus on current debates about the suitability of universal democratic values to Malaysia.

It is the central argument of the author that while civil society is making its presence felt in the Malaysian political arena, it does not have much impact on determining or influencing the role of the state. On the contrary, the authoritarian state in the country seems to be the

main stumbling block not only for the development of civil society but also for the creation and sustenance of a democratic space. The sorry state of civil society, according to the author, needs to be understood in the larger historical, political, social, and economic context. Two principal developments have constrained the role of civil society — the development of authoritarian politics under the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia, and the nature of state contestation emanating from radical Islam.

Civil society in Malaysia simply lacks the democratic space to function effectively. The state domination of society through its institution and programmes coupled with the effective use of repressive legislations have marginalized civil society groups. It is not that the state totally excludes civil society organizations, but the dominant discourse on ethnic rights and interests makes it difficult for these organizations to articulate broader and more universal concerns. Furthermore, given the ethnic hegemony of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), discourses that could potentially challenge the *status quo* have been discouraged or repressed by the use of legislative and policy mechanisms. Ethnic and cultural subordination of the interests of non-Malays has also meant that their concerns would also be directed to protecting and advancing their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic rights. Given this polarized position, there is little room in the country for the development of discourses that would be able to cut across ethnic and religious lines. Such a state of affairs works to the benefit of UMNO as the protector of Malay rights.

Although there is no denying the fact that contestation of the political and ideological hegemony of the state is dominated by UMNO, it is the form of religious contestation that seems to be mainly concerned with expressing and articulating the rights of Muslims. In this respect, radical Islam as the challenger of UMNO takes on a very exclusive pursuit to the detriment of broader participation of all Malaysians. While this contestation is important in exposing the myth of UMNO's invincibility as the protector of Malays, it is not broad enough to incorporate other aspects of human rights that could draw the support of non-Muslims. As a result, non-Muslims shy away from the radical Islam espoused by PAS (Parti Islam SeMalaysia), although there are some indications that there are other versions of Islam that might have the potential to frame their objectives in such a manner to elicit broader support. Anyway, such a development has not been fully realized in the Malaysian context. Radical Islam provides the most significant opposition to the UMNO-dominated state, but its narrow character makes it difficult to lay the seeds for the development of an all-embracing

civil society. In the past, UMNO might have co-opted some segments of radical Islam within its party structure, but such a prospect might be dim in the foreseeable future, given the Islamic perspective of PAS.

Thus, given the authoritarian nature of the UMNO-dominated state and the exclusive religious opposition emanating from political parties such as PAS, space for the articulation of the broader aspects of democracy are constrained. Although there are a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the country, many have been co-opted by the state to discharge its functions. Of course, there are some radical NGOs that oppose the state from the perspective of democratic and human rights, but their role has been heavily constrained by the Malay-dominated state through its policies, programmes, and legislations. Given the overpowering nature of the state, there is little democratic space for NGOs to engage in activities that would promote democratic development. Globalization might be impacting the state, but there is no clear evidence to indicate that this phenomenon is helping to transform or dilute the authoritarian character of the state. Lack of human rights and non-interest in democratic values seem also to be conditioned by the debates in the country that argue that Western values and universal human rights might not be appropriate to the particular cultural set-up in Malaysia.

The author is of the opinion that arguments against universal values and the need to curb excessive pre-occupation with democratic norms might not be sustainable. In the Malaysian case, the need on the part of the state élite to guard certain ethnic and religious privileges and to cushion those who have benefited from economic and social policies seems to be the reasons why broader notions of human rights and values are being neglected. More importantly, the author feels strongly that the preoccupation of Malays and non-Malays with ethnic and cultural rights appears to condone some of the undemocratic practices of the regime. Of course, this emphasis on ethnic rights has served to buttress and ward off significant political challenges to the regime in power. She feels that under the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad, authoritarianism has been well consolidated. However, his popular authoritarianism might not be permanent as radical Islamic politics and the materialistic nature of UMNO politics might corrode whatever political legitimacy in the long run.

Although the radical Islam of PAS has an important role in denying and diluting the legitimacy of UMNO, the exclusive pursuit of purist Islam is not conducive to the debate and resolution of human rights and the pursuit of democracy. However, the author is of the opinion that there are progressive Islamic groups that are inclined to emphasize

aspects of Islam that are compatible with other religions and cultures. Whether these groups will be able to gain ascendancy in the future remains to be seen. Nonetheless, one thing is certain: oppositional Islamic tendencies to the regime are not homogenous and there many variants; this itself is an important indicator that there is room for non-Islamic groups to engage in dialogue with those Islamic groups that articulate a broader and more egalitarian version of Islam, and show how the values of Islam are quite compatible with other religions and cultures.

This is an important book which makes a useful contribution to the ongoing debate on democracy and civil society in Malaysia. By the use of empirical data, it clearly demonstrates the major constraints faced by civil society in contributing to the development of democracy and cultural pluralism in the country. The book clearly highlights the development of the nature of the state, its primary articulations, and how it constrains the development of democratic space. Beyond this, the author is fully cognizant that society and the state are not static, while global calls for democracy and human rights are making important demands on the state and society. Whether the Malaysian authoritarian state will be able to ward off these progressive calls permanently remains to be seen. In more concrete terms, the process of delegitimation of the state by societal forces is in motion.

While the study makes an important contribution, there are a few drawbacks. First, the study could have been presented more efficiently had the author organized the theoretical material in the first chapter and allowed the rest of the chapters to touch on empirical developments in Malaysia. As a result, empirical data on civil society has been sacrificed to some extent. Secondly, there is too much guidance provided by the author that tends to interfere with the flow of arguments. Thirdly, some of the information provided by the author might not be very accurate; for instance, labelling the Acehnese struggle as based on Islam is somewhat misleading. Moreover, arguing that Mahathir Mohamad ordered the court to de-register the old UMNO sounds rather simplistic.

However, these problems notwithstanding, the author should be commended for producing a good quality book on the nature of civil society and democracy in Malaysia. This book is not only timely, but it will also certainly be useful for students of Malaysian politics interested in political and social change.

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