

Malaysia: Tradition, Modernity and Islam. By R.S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy. Boulder: Westview Press, 1986. 180 pp.

In this volume, one of a series of profiles on contemporary Asia, the authors set out to explain “what is going on” in Malaysia and also to provide readers with a picture of the complex cultural composition of this ethnically diverse country. The book is pitched at an introductory level and is meant for both the general reader and undergraduate students. As the authors explain in the preface, this work is not the result of any specialized research; rather it is written from the long-standing research experience of the authors, which extends over many years and has produced a number of works on Malaysian politics.

The authors provide a concise historical background to the contemporary scene, taking the reader through Malaysia’s early history, the colonial era, the winning of independence, the main events of the post-independence period and developments under the present Mahathir administration. Subsequent chapters deal thematically with the political process. Ethnicity, class and culture are examined, the major political institutions and processes identified and the structure, strengths and weaknesses of the Malaysian economy discussed. A separate chapter is devoted to developments in Malaysian foreign policy.

There are a number of attractive features in this book. The various themes and background are handled in a concise way, enriched with the insights of the authors, and expressed in a clear and readable style. Care has also been taken to explain the political saliency of some of the more complex dimensions of ethnicity, such as language and religion.

Less attractive, however, is the marked tendency of the authors to view developments from the perspective of the regime. In a number of instances, the authors display a dangerous willingness to accept uncritically the official version of events, to regard opponents of the government with suspicion, and even to slip into the partisan language associated with the pronouncements of the ruling party. Thus, for example, Malaysians of Chinese descent campaigning for the recognition of Chinese as an official language prior to the 1969 inter-communal riots are branded as “chauvinists” (p.40), while the more contemporary dissidence of some Malay youth studying overseas, is dismissed as “activities of an Islamic extremist variety” (p. 94). Elsewhere, in their discussion of the mass media, the authors are apparently sympathetic to official controls in the interests of preserving inter-ethnic harmony. Nothing is said of the controlling interests held in almost all of Malaysia’s press by component political parties of the ruling coalition and the political consequences of such control. The authors are embarrassingly effusive in their praise of the ascendant leadership. We read that Dr Mahathir is a “serious, impatient, resolute, and direct individual” whose action-oriented administration has sought “to propel the country, and particularly the Malays, toward modernization” while at the same time seeking “to reinforce moral values and discipline in society” (p.121). No doubt, events since the publication of this book may lead other observers to a more sober view of the Mahathir administration. By contrast, the opponents of the ruling party, who are described as adopting “strident and abrasive positions” at elections, are judged by the authors as seeming to be “more intent on delaying proceedings, arguing or embarrassing the government than on offering constructive criticism” (p. 123). Little effort is made to explain why opposition parties regularly receive a significant percentage of the vote.

At an analytical level, this work also has some problems. At times the authors become somewhat confused and muddled in their apparent desire to reconcile a benign view of the government’s (that is, the UMNO-dominated Barisan Nasional) policies and actions, with the objective reality. For example, despite their statement that the Malays are

politically hegemonic and that certain Malay goals are non-negotiable (p. 118), the authors persist in concluding that, in inter-communal relations, “the spirit of accommodation continues” (p. 119). There is also a marked failure to reconcile the apparent contradiction between “modernity” (as the concept is commonly understood in political science literature) with Islamization. Sooner or later the dominant Malay (Muslim) leadership must reach an impasse in attempting to Islamize a multi-ethnic nation state whose constitution is essentially secular and Western in concept and whose Muslim citizens form but a slender majority of the overall population. In this regard, the present reviewer cannot accept as accurate the authors’ claim that “by 1984, because UMNO was still responding to the basic concerns and fears of the non-Muslims, the alarm over Islamization had been smoothed” (p. 54).

On balance, the book provides a useful and readable introduction to Malaysia and its ethnic and political complexities for the general reader and undergraduate student. However, the view of Malaysia presented is perhaps more benign and in conformity with the official version of events than is actually the case.

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China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict. By William J. Duiker. Indochina Research Monograph Series No. 1. Berkeley, California: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1986, 136 pp.

This small volume is a most comprehensive and highly readable general account of Sino-Vietnamese relations from a historical perspective. Containing six chapters, the book begins with a survey of the legacy of history and then highlights the troubled relationship between the two countries during the 1945–75 period, before examining more recent developments. A separate chapter is devoted to each of the two Indochina wars, and one to the immediate aftermath of the Second Indochina War and the Cambodian conflict. The book ends with a general evaluation which places the Sino-Vietnamese conflict in the larger geopolitical context involving the superpowers, and also assesses its future prospects.

In his search for the roots of the conflict, Professor Duiker exhausts virtually the complete range of factors that have helped shape the relations between the two countries over the past forty years. Among the major factors that have been given special attention are conflicting security concerns, ideological differences, divergent perceptions of the Soviet Union, the issue of the overseas Chinese, and territorial disputes, all of which are blended into an essentially chronological and therefore straightforward survey of developments in Indochina. The end product is a most carefully balanced and succinct summary of important variables and events. As such, the book serves as an excellent introductory text on Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Perhaps precisely because of the extent of coverage and the limited space available, instead of examining in detail any major cause or aspect of the conflict or advancing any new theory, the book seeks only to construct a somewhat simplified picture of a highly complex story, which Duiker must be commended for having done successfully. By the same token, the book does not shed any new light in its analysis on the subject nor does