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Personalized Politics



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Personalized Politics

The Malaysian State under Mahathir

In-Won Hwang

SILKWORM BOOKS, Thailand

INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES, Singapore

First published in Singapore in 2003 by
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang
Singapore 119614

E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

First published in Thailand in 2003 by
Silkworm Books
104/5 Chiang Mai-Hot Road, Suthep, Chiang Mai 50200
Ph. 0-53-27-1889, Fax +(66) 53-27-5178
for distribution in Thailand, Myanmar, and Indochina

E-mail: silkworm@loxinfo.co.th
<http://www.silkwormbooks.info>

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Hwang, In-Won.

Personalized politics : the Malaysian state under Mahathir.

1. Malaysia—Politics and government.
2. Malaysia—Ethnic relations—Political aspects.
3. Mahathir Mohamad, Dato' Seri, 1925-
4. UMNO.

I. Title.

II. Title: Malaysian state under Mahathir

DS596.7 H98 2003 sls2002025517

ISBN 981-230-185-2 (softcover, ISEAS, Singapore)

ISBN 981-230-186-0 (hardcover, ISEAS, Singapore)

ISBN 974-9575-32-6 (softcover, Silkworm Books, Thailand)

Typeset by International Typesetters Pte. Ltd.

Printed in Singapore by PhotoPlates Pte. Ltd.

Dedicated to my parents
Hwang Kwang-Yeon and Lee Yong-Soon
with love

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Foreword

In 1955, when Malaya was still part of the British Empire, the colonial authorities held a general election as a step towards independence in 1957. That election was won by an alliance of three racially based parties headed by its Malay component, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Over the next decades, that alliance expanded to include other parties but its essential structure remains much the same — a dominant Malay party heading an alliance of parties representing smaller ethnic groups. The UMNO-dominated alliance won all but one seat in 1955 and has won overwhelming majorities in every election since then — usually occupying around 80 to 85 per cent of the seats in the national parliament and controlling almost all of the state governments. If, as Samuel Huntington has said, one of the marks of an institutionalized political party is adaptability in the face of changing circumstances, then UMNO and the Barisan Nasional (BN), as the alliance is now known, must be considered as very successful cases of institutionalization.

Malaysian society has undergone enormous change since the 1950s. The predominantly rural population of the 1950s has become increasingly urban. An economy based on the export of tin and rubber

is now moving towards industrialization. An economy which was largely owned by foreigners is now largely in the hands of Malaysians. Malays, Chinese, and Indians who were concentrated in their own segments of a plural society are now all represented in the modern economy and have increasingly acquired a common “Malaysian” identity. And a society that appeared to be on the brink of national disintegration after racial rioting in 1969 has not witnessed major ethnic violence for more than thirty years. Most societies that have undergone the type of transformation experienced by Malaysia have also experienced considerable political upheaval and often drastic change in their political system. But in Malaysia the core framework of the political system has largely survived while adjustments have been implemented only gradually.

How has the political system, and particularly the dominant party institutions, UMNO and the BN, adjusted to social and economic change? Political scientists have always debated the nature of Malaysia’s political system. Concepts such as consociationalism, limited democracy, semi-democracy, soft authoritarianism, and personal rule have all appeared in this debate and are used by Dr Hwang in this book. It is Hwang’s argument that the nature of the political system has in fact changed quite radically despite the continuity in formal political institutions. In the 1960s the consociational model provided insights but by the 1970s and 1980s the system was moving from semi-democracy to a form of authoritarianism. By the 1990s, according to Hwang, Malaysian politics could be best understood as a form of personal rule. Although the main institutions remained in place, the long-serving prime minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, exercised almost unfettered personal dominance.

The extent to which the Malaysian political system has adapted successfully to social and economic change was shown most clearly in its response to the economic collapse that hit Asia in mid-1997. Many had argued that Malaysia’s political and social stability was simply a product of a rapidly growing economy and that the system would be very vulnerable to a major economic setback. But when the setback occurred in 1997–98, the much anticipated renewal of ethnic violence did not eventuate and the political system continued much as before.

This does not mean, however, that no challenges are looming. At

the conclusion of his book, Dr Hwang discusses what he calls “the rise of new politics”. He devotes particular attention to the extraordinary treatment meted out by the prime minister to his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim. Although public protest against Anwar’s imprisonment was not sustained, it was clear in the 1999 election that Malay support for UMNO had declined sharply. On the other hand, non-Malay — especially Chinese — support for the BN had strengthened. At the turn of the century, many of the basic assumptions of political analysts about Malaysian politics were being undermined. UMNO’s record of adapting itself to new challenges has been impressive but it remains a question whether it can successfully adapt to the post-Mahathir era.

In-Won Hwang is a young scholar who has spent many years studying Malaysian politics. His research led him to live in Malaysia for several years and to learn the Malay language. During his time in Malaysia he was able to meet and interview many members of the Malaysian political élite — both from the government parties and the opposition — as well as journalists, academics, and other observers of the political scene. His work, therefore, contains an authentic quality that can only be acquired through close association with the subjects of his study. Dr Hwang provides a fine analysis of Malaysian political trends and a valuable foundation for thinking about Malaysia’s future.

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Acknowledgements

This book is based on my Ph.D. thesis entitled “Changing Conflict Configurations and Regime Maintenance in Malaysian Politics”. With both an update and an elaboration of the thesis, the journey towards and preparation of this volume has been long.

I am indebted to numerous individuals for the completion of this book. First of all, I owe a great debt to Professor Harold Crouch, Professor Ben Kerkvliet, and Dr Ron May. I have been fortunate to have had these three people as my Ph.D. supervisors. I thank all three for their intellectual guidance, for their immeasurable support, and especially for their strong encouragement and great patience.

I must note my appreciation to Allison Ley. She was kind enough to spend invaluable time editing not only my earlier drafts of the Ph.D. dissertation but also the final revision of this book. My special thanks also go to Claire Smith, Bev Fraser, and Jill Wolf. They provided efficient administrative assistance and a conducive environment during my decade-long stay in the Department of Political and Social Change, the Australian National University. I would like also to extend my gratitude to other departmental colleagues and many Korean fellows for their warmth and hospitality. I sincerely regret being unable to name all of them here.

During the three-year long period of my fieldwork in Malaysia, I was greatly indebted to many people. I must note my appreciation of many Malaysian friends for their academic support and warm friendship, though I cannot thank them all by name. My special thanks go to Professor Lee Kam Hing, Professor Jomo, Dr Gomez, Lim Kit Siang, Datuk Rais Yatim, Datuk Kamarudin Jaffar, Tian Chua, Teresa Kok, Shamsul Akmar Musakamal, Ahmad Shabery Chik, Saifuddin Nasution Ismail, Soo Yew Thet, and Liew Chin Tong. Regardless of their different political orientations, they share a great enthusiasm and love for Malaysian people. My understanding of Malaysia has been immeasurably enhanced by formal and informal conversations with them.

I would also like to express my appreciation to the teachers I had when I was a graduate student in Korea: Professors Kim Sang-Joon, Oh Kie-Pyung, Rhee Sang-Woo, Chang Dal-Joong, Lee Kap-Yun, Park Ho-Seong, Kang Jung-In. My special thanks go to Professor Sohn Hak-Kyu and Professor Shin Yoon-Hwan. They advised me to study at the Australian National University and have continued to offer their encouragement. Now as then, my teachers, directly or indirectly, have continued to inspire me to continue to undertake research.

My greatest appreciation must go to my family. To my lovely wife Bo-Ai, thanks will never be enough for her sacrifice and love. She remains always there when I need her, full of trust. This book could not have been written without her complete support and encouragement. My son Jin-Ha and daughter Sun-Young are our most valued blessings of God. For the last decade, my mind has been at peace with their smiles and love.

My final and largest appreciation must go to my parents, Hwang Kwang-Yeon and Lee Yong-Soon. Their trust and patience towards their son gave me the strength and courage throughout the course of this study. I dedicate this book to my parents with love.

Glossary

ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement)
ADIL	Pergerakan Keadilan Sosial (Movement for Social Justice)
APU	Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (Muslim Unity Movement)
<i>AWSJ</i>	<i>Asian Wall Street Journal</i>
BA	Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front)
Berjasa	Barisan Jamaah Islamiah Se-Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Council Front)
Berjaya	Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (United Common People of Sabah)
Bernama	the government-controlled national news agency
BMA	British Military Administration
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
<i>bumiputera</i>	indigenous person (literally: son of the soil)
<i>ceramah</i>	a political meeting in a non-public place
CPM	Communist Party of Malaya
<i>dakwah</i>	Islamic revival (literally: call)

DAP	Democratic Action Party
DNU	Department of National Unity
DTCs	deposit-taking co-operatives
FAMA	Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority
<i>fatwa</i>	an authoritative legal ruling given by an authorized official interpreting Islamic law
FDD	Federal Development Department
<i>FEER</i>	<i>Far Eastern Economic Review</i>
FELDA	Federal Land Development Authority
FIDA	Federal Industrial Development Authority
GAGASAN	Gagasan Demokrasi Rakyat (Coalition for People's Democracy)
Gagasan Rakyat	People's Concept
GDP	gross domestic product
GERAK	Majlis Gerakan Keadilan Rakyat (Council of Malaysian People's Justice Movement)
Gerakan	Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Movement)
GNP	gross national product
<i>hudud</i>	Koranic criminal punishment
Iban	indigenous community in Sarawak
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMP	Independence of Malaya Party
ISA	Internal Security Act
JUST	Just World Trust
Kadazan	indigenous community in Sabah
<i>kampung</i>	village
KeADILan	Parti KeADILan Nasional (National Justice Party)
<i>Ketuanan Melayu</i>	Malay Supremacy
<i>konfrontasi</i>	Indonesia's confrontation campaign against the formation of Malaysia
<i>korupsi</i>	corruption
<i>kronisme</i>	cronyism
MARA	Majlis Amanah Rakyat (People's Trust Council)
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCS	Malaysian Civil Service

<i>menteri besar</i>	chief minister
<i>merdeka</i>	independence
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MIDF	Malaysian Industrial Development Finance
MP	member of Parliament
MPAJA	Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army
MPH	multipurpose holdings
MTUC	Malaysian Trade Union Congress
NCC	National Consultative Council
NDP	New Development Policy
NEAC	National Economic Action Council
NEP	New Economic Policy
<i>nepotisme</i>	nepotism
NGO	non-governmental organization
NOC	National Operations Council
<i>NST</i>	<i>New Straits Times</i>
NSTP	New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Bhd.
OPP2	Second Outline Perspective Plan
OSA	Official Secrets Act
PAP	People's Action Party (see PMIP)
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia
PBB	Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (United Bumiputera Pesaka Party)
PBDS	Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (Sarawak Dayak Party)
PBS	Parti Bersatu Sabah (United Sabah Party)
Pekemas	Parti Keadilan Masyarakat Malaysia (Malaysian Social Justice Party)
PERNAS	Perbadanan Nasional Berhad (National Trading Corporation)
PHEI	private higher educational institutions
PM	Prime Minister
PMIP	Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party
PPP	People's Progressive Party
PPPA	Printing Presses and Publication Act
PRM	Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Party)

PSRM	Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaya (Malayan People's Socialist Party)
<i>reformasi</i>	reformation
RIDA	Rural and Industrial Development Authority
<i>Rukunegara</i>	Basic Principles of the State (the National Ideology)
Sdn. Bhd.	Sendirian Berhad (Private Limited)
SEDC	State Economic Development Corporations
Semangat 46	Spirit of 46
SNAP	Sarawak National Party
SUPP	Sarawak United People's Party
SUARAM	Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Voice)
<i>surat layang</i>	flying letter, photocopied letters, and political tracts, often containing unsubstantiated allegations and revelations
<i>syariah</i>	Islamic law
TARC	Tunku Abdul Rahman College
Tengku	prince
Tun	highest non-hereditary Malaysian title
Tunku	prince
UDA	Urban Development Authority
UEM	United Engineers (M) Berhad
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
UMNO (<i>Baru</i>)	New UMNO
USNO	United Sabah National Organization
<i>wanita</i>	woman
<i>Wawasan 2020</i>	Vision 2020
Yang di-Pertuan Agong	King