

***Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia.* By Meredith L. Weiss. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006. Softcover: 324pp.**

Academic works on the role of the opposition in Malaysian politics are few and far between. Even if there is a limited number of works, they mostly prefer to focus either on the role of the opposition political parties or the non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In fact there are hardly any systematic studies on Malaysian politics that seek to discuss opposition politics in terms of cooperation and coalition-building among the disparate opposition forces such as the NGOs, informal groups, and opposition political parties. In this respect, the recent publication of the above volume by Meredith Weiss is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of knowledge on Malaysian politics in general and opposition politics in particular.

The book seeks to examine and analyse how civil society agents cooperate with opposition political parties to bring about democratization of the Malaysian society. In a more specific sense, the book is mainly about the rise of the *reformasi* movement in Malaysia following the ouster of the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and how it sought to build and sustain coalition capital with a wide variety of civil society agents including the mainstream opposition political parties. At the theoretical level, the author argues that the trajectory of coalition capital between the different forces of the opposition cannot be established a priori. In the Malaysian context, it was the nature of democracy — illiberal democracy that broadly determined the space in which civil society agents and opposition political parties sought to bring about changes from a broader universalistic perspective.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the subject matter of investigation and lays out the broad conceptual parameters for the study. Chapters 3 and 4 provide the colonial context and the expansion of the civil society and political society between 1957 and 1997. Chapters 5 and 6 are about the genesis of the *reformasi* movement and its implications for Malaysian politics. Chapter 7 provides an overview on the *reformasi* era in Indonesia with the aim of relating it to the Malaysian experience. And finally, Chapter 8 concludes by providing theoretical and empirical insights about the formation and sustenance of coalition capital in Malaysia and how is it different from the Indonesian experience.

Weiss' study provides important insights into the nature of civil society agents, how they matured during the post-independence

periods, and how they manifested during the critical *reformasi* period in the 1990s. More importantly, by providing a detailed focus on the pro-Anwar Ibrahim *reformasi* movement, the author seeks to explain how the movement sought to move beyond communal politics and to what extent it was successful. The ultimate fusion of the movement into Parti Keadilan (Justice Party), its bridge-building endeavours resulting in the formation of the opposition coalition of Barisan Alternatif (BA), and its how it sought to challenge the hegemony of Barisan Nasional (BN) takes on an added importance in this study. Beyond the empirical, the study has theoretical and comparative significance. It tries to determine the conditions under which oppositional coalition politics take shape, the relationship of regime-type to the formation of coalition capital and the problems of sustaining coalition capital over a period of time. By bringing in the Indonesian case, the author seeks to drive home the point that the ultimate determining factor behind the success or failure of coalition capital would be the nature of the state.

Although this study has theoretical, comparative, and empirical significance, there are some obvious problems that need to be addressed. First, the use of the concept hegemony seems to be problematic in this study. It is not clear whether the author uses it to mean dominance through coercion or consensus, following the distinction provided by Gramsci. She says that “the government is not hegemonic; it leaves at least some space for both CSA’s [civil society associations] and opposition parties” (p. 5). Well, if one argues from the Gramscian perspective, then the government’s provision of space for civil society organizations and political parties should be construed more as “hegemonic” conduct as opposed to “non-hegemonic” conduct as claimed by the author. The problem arises from the author’s failure to provide a definition of the concept of hegemony in the first place.

Second, the section on the colonial period does not do much justice to the nature and intensity of protests waged by labour. For instance, the author omits to mention the 1937 Ulu Langat district strikes waged by primarily Chinese labour and the 1941 Klang district strikes waged by Indian labour under the influence of Indian nationalism. These episodes might not be central to the present study, but omission of these important events might dent a good study on oppositional politics in general.

Third, in the historical section, the author seems to be under the impression that the caste factor inhibited the development of radicalism leading to protests amongst Indians in the country. Numerous studies on Indians and on Indian labour have shown that

the presence of caste was never a constraining factor on the rise of Indian oppositional politics. The protests waged by Indian plantation labour in 1900s, 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s, not to mention in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese occupation, would testify to the radical nature of Indian labour.

Fourth, bringing in the Indonesian case study on the *reformasi* movement is certainly important for the present study as it provides for a comparative perspective. However, devoting merely one chapter for the case study and depending on a few secondary published materials as sources might not be empirically sound to arrive at some definitive conclusions.

Fifth and finally, the study seems superficial at times. While the author adopts a critical perspective in analysing the political programmes of the opposition coalition and how it sought to move beyond communalism, she is a bit hesitant to acknowledge the centrality of the communal question in the arena of Malaysian politics. Like many liberal-minded scholars, she avoids focusing on such questions even though communalism was the main reason for the weakness of the BA coalition and how it fared in the 1999 and 2004 general elections.

However, the above shortcomings should not detract readers from appreciating some of the positive aspects of the book. Scholars interested in Malaysian politics in general and those interested in examining the important question of democratic change in particular should read it.