

Malaysia: Fifty Years of Diplomacy. By Chandran Jeshurun. Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2007. Hardcover: 458pp.

The inspiration for Chandran Jeshurun's book came from convivial sessions at the Selangor Golf Club, where the author met with a number of former Malaysian diplomats. A Board of Trustees was set up headed by former Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Wisma Putra) Tan Sri Kamil Jaafar and an Advisory Panel was formed to meet regularly with this redoubtable history professor to undertake the book project.

Dr Chandran's rendering of events through the trained eye of an "incorrigible historian" and his meticulous documentation of sources is coupled with important, crisp analysis, opinions and anecdotes that he draws from his numerous interviews with diplomats, a former prime minister and the incumbent premier of Malaysia. The book is structured chronologically into six chapters beginning with the Merdeka years (1957–62), the formation of Malaysia and immediate aftermath (1963–71), foreign policy under Prime Ministers Abdul Razak and Hussein Onn (1971–81), two periods under Mahathir Mohamad (1981–89 and 1990–99) and a final section dealing with Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (1999–2007). However, one would be mistaken to think that Chandran was only laying out a chronological narrative of Malaysian diplomatic history and foreign policy. At the outset of the book, in Chapter one, Chandran grapples with the broader problem of "historiography", offering his own perspective on the subject. Subsequent chapters are spliced with sharp commentaries and academic analysis, written in a highly readable style sans jargon.

Reviewing the work of foreign policy analysts such as Marvin Ott and myself, the author finds a lacuna in studies that show how diplomats and the diplomatic service have been involved in the foreign policy formulation process. He offers the view that for the most part, there is a close, even intimate, relationship between the presumed formulators of policy, prime ministers and the professional diplomats housed in Wisma Putra. Such a relationship was especially evident during the Tunku and Razak years although, from his account, the relationship was rather estranged during the Mahathir era.

Given the author's approach, it is rather odd that he provides no sustained account of the changing organizational character of Wisma Putra, such as the expansion of its various geographic and issue-oriented desks. Rather, his insights on the changing character of the diplomatic service are scattered in various chapters. Nor

does Chandran provide us with an organizational chart specifying the structure, positions, spheres and lines of authority, tasks and duties of Wisma Putra officials and how this may have changed over the years.

The book contains a number of interesting vignettes, including, for instance, the Tunku's "Japan option" in 1958 to negotiate for development aid when it was still perhaps controversial to do so with wartime reparations still unsettled (pp. 50–52). Attending the Tokyo Asian Games, the Tunku was able to strike a deal with Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke for closer bilateral relations and investment. As Chandran correctly observes, Tunku's "Look East" policy was established long before Mahathir's. On Malaya's United Nation's mission to the Congo in September 1960, the Tunku and Dr Ismail (then External Affairs Minister) allowed for a full debate on the pros and cons of the undertaking after the People's Progressive Party's S.P. Seenivasagam formally tabled a motion for a debate.

One of the most unusual appointments to Wisma Putra was that of P.G. Lim, sister to the late Lim Kean Siew, a Socialist Front Member of Parliament who was among the severest critics of Malaysia's foreign policy. P.G. Lim was herself a trade unionist. She was appointed as Malaysia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN in March 1971 and went on to serve in many missions abroad. As Chandran avers, her recruitment spoke volumes about the fair-mindedness of leaders such as Razak and Tunku (p. 108).

The book also alerts the reader to Malaysia's aggressive pursuit of territorial claims in the South China Sea. Former Foreign Minister Syed Hamid revealed that Malaysia had claims on fifteen geographical features in the Spratly Islands and had occupied five of them: Terumbu Layang-Layang (Swallow Reef) in 1983, the Ubi and Mantanani atolls (Mariveles Bank and Ardasier Reef) in 1986 and the Siput and Peninjau atolls (Investigator Shoal and Erica Reef) in 1999. In Layang-Layang, Malaysia has built a three-star resort popular with nature lovers (p. 236); in 1995, Prime Minister Mahathir himself spent a night at this hotel.

Chandran's sustained analysis of Malaysia-Singapore relations is found in two long sections on the subject (pp. 223–36 and pp. 293–97) and in various commentaries scattered throughout the book. The author provides an interesting account of the episode regarding the controversial Points of Agreement (POA) between Singapore and Malaysia. According to Chandran's account, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin agreed to jointly redevelop Tanjong Pagar through a company called

Malaysia-Singapore Pte Ltd in which the Malaysian government would have a 60 per cent stake. The Daim-Lee negotiations struck the author as “highly irregular”; he contends that Wisma Putra professionals were astounded that POA had neither official letterhead nor the insignia of the two governments. As we know, the POA has become a dead letter and the Tanjong Pagar matter remains intractable. What then is the lesson of diplomacy here? I wish the author could have been a little more explicit on this score.

In interpreting recent history, Chandran opines that the transition to Abdullah Badawi has ended “the almost exclusive domination of foreign policy that Dr Mahathir revelled in during his twenty-two years in office” (p. 345). In my view, such an analysis is only partially correct, as Mahathir was himself clearly subject to the constraints and restraints emanating from society. Islam was one such factor and the Anwar Ibrahim episode showed that Mahathir could not commit excesses with impunity. Paradoxically, it was under Mahathir’s watch that Malaysia’s Islamic orientation in foreign policy was implemented, much as his foreign policy was also geared to the changing tide of regionalism and globalization.

Dr Chandran Jeshurun has written a book that stands out not only as an excellent work of diplomatic history but one that will engage scholars, diplomats, politicians and the general public for many years to come. However, it is disappointing that a depiction of the evolution of Malaysian diplomacy and foreign policy came only in a postscript (pp. 365–77) with few theoretical insights on the subject.