

Preface

In mid-1997 Malaysia became a hot issue in global mass media news coverage. At first the 'economic miracle', including ten years' high growth rates after the dip in the mid-1980s, was destabilized by the financial crisis in Thailand and the Thai devaluation. While the Malaysian government floated and depreciated the Malaysian currency (the ringlet) the Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad simultaneously attacked international speculative capital and especially Mr. Soros, a well-known global currency speculator, and tried in vain to curb the fall of the Malaysian stock market by restrictive measures. Malaysia had to adapt to the liberal regime of international finance capital and take measures to reduce the state budget deficit by e.g. postponing some of the large public investments.

Furthermore, in December 1997 the Malaysian government decided to switch from a high growth (average 7% per annum) to a middle growth (average 4% per annum) economic policy.

A misfortune rarely comes singly. Within a couple of months the environmental disaster of burning estates and forests in Indonesia affected Malaysia with heavy smog, and polluting the air at alarming levels. The Indonesian catastrophe added to the environmental problems of Malaysia, caused by the long and rapid growth and industrialization process, the massive migration from rural to urban areas, and the rising living standards. The haze immediately affected air traffic, tourism and working life, while causing health problems in the short and long term.

The present thematic issue on modern Malaysia aims to present various analyses of the modernity of Malaysian life and politics, leaving aside the more macro-oriented debate on economic development, industrialization and the political economy of development which has been publicized widely, not least by Malaysian scholars (e.g. Jomo K.S., Rajah Rasiah and Terence Gomez). The focus is on political discourses, socio-cultural changes and social movements, calling attention to aspects of everyday life which form part of the transformation of contemporary Malaysia, and the wider connection between the problems of modernity-postmodernity in the North and the modernization process in the South.

Although Malaysia has been changing fast during and after British colonialism, the Mahathir era, which commenced with his election as the first non-aristocratic Prime Minister in 1981, is probably the most transformative period in the history of the Malaysian population. In the first article in this volume 'Economic Vision and Political Opposition in Malaysia, 1981-96: The Politics of the Mahathir Era', Khoo Boo Teik draws a picture of Malaysia since the early 1980s, stressing the role of personality together with the paradoxes and the turbulence of modern Malaysian politics. In terms of domestic politics, Mahathir had won back in 1996 what he had lost in the mid-1980s. But the events of 1997 might prove to be a spoke in Mahathir's administration, which was expected to culminate with the Commonwealth Games to take place in Kuala Lumpur in 1998.

Applying a Foucault-inspired discourse analysis on the regulation of environmental hazards in Malaysian agriculture during the post-World War II period, Peter Triantafyllou's article 'Modern Arts of Governing the Use of Pesticides in Malaysia' delivers an account of the construction of cognitive and regulative frameworks regarding the use of pesticides. He argues that although the understanding of the opportunities and threats ingrained in the application of pesticides was technicalized, the evolving public health discourse provided a domain for regulating and protesting against the use of hazardous inputs in agriculture. However, the opposition was confined to a conflict over the various techniques of implementation, not the actual use of pesticides.

The article 'Malaysian Women in the Modern Era' by Rohana Ariffin addresses the changing life situations of Malaysian women since Independence in 1957, asking whether a common notion of 'the modern Malaysian woman' exists. Ariffin highlights the micro representation of women in all-important institutions of Malaysian society. In the domestic sphere the women continue to be responsible for the main tasks, although better-off women might pass on duties to domestic servants, and the social space of the daughters compared with the sons is much more restricted by the parents. Women's Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have evolved and achieved legal, servicing and informational improvements concerning women's issues, but both religious (Islamic) and secular (consumerist) discourses counteract and weaken the women's NGOs and their results. Rohana Ariffin concludes that these NGOs seem to forge

closer collaboration with the government, thereby becoming more mainstream and integrated into the evolving capitalist society.

At the beginning of the Mahathir era, the Prime Minister and the government switched from a Western to an Eastern development perspective, making Japan and also South Korea developmental models for Malaysia. The promotion of enterprise (in-house) unions became part of this Look East discourse, and while the general Look East rhetoric was de-emphasized with the economic crisis and negative experiences of Malaysian-Japanese collaboration, the promotion of in-house unionism continued. The purpose was to install or improve the collaboration between management and labour at the point of production, thereby invigorating mutual understanding and sharing based on increased productivity. Having bred industrial peace through an enforced system of conciliation and arbitration, the government aimed at industrial harmony by restructuring the trade unions to catch up with the industrial world. Based on selected case stories from the metal industry, the article by Peter Wad on 'Enterprise Unions: Panacea for Industrial Harmony in Malaysia?' questions the global perception of enterprise unions as docile, management-controlled organizations. The dynamics of enterprise industrial relations are described and explained by variations in trade union independence and democracy and by the policies and practices of management. It is argued that the 'stalest' (political or political economic) perspective has to be enlarged with an industrial relations approach which again needs to be grounded at the enterprise level in order to understand the dynamics of Malaysian enterprise unions.

Since the notion of 'Orientalism' was launched by Edward Said, the ethnocentrism of Western thinking on Asia has been profoundly criticized. On the other hand a new discourse evolved emphasizing the particularity of the West against the East. In the article 'Western Crisis, Asian Identities and Cultural Power' Raymond Lee takes the debate a step further by linking the rediscovery of culture in the West and the East and reassessing the power of culture. Arguing that the postmodernist cultural critique in the West might influence the debate on 'modernization-with-Asian-identity' in the East, the new cultural studies advance a multicultural and pluralistic approach, which presents a corrective to cultural ethnocentrism, hegemony and teleological convergence both within and between the East and the West.

In addition to the thematized articles the issue includes book reviews of Anders Uhlin, *Indonesia and the 'Third Wave of Democratization': The Indonesian Pro-democracy Movement in a Changing World*, and Donald B. Wagner, *The Traditional Chinese Iron Industry and its Modern Fate*.

Being the guest editor, I finally wish to thank the unnamed referees for their inspiring comments of high quality and the contributors and the editors, Viggo Brun and Søren Ivarsson, for smooth collaboration during the year-long editorial process.

January 1998
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