

Fall 2002

Editor's Note

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Recommended Citation

(2002) "Editor's Note," *Macalester International*: Vol. 12, Article 8.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol12/iss1/8>

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Since we inaugurated Macalester's biennial Faculty Development International Seminars in 1995, and despite the geographical zone, one topic has always risen to be among the most recurring with all of our hosts: the challenge of imagining and instilling a socioeconomic paradigm that could combine fast economic growth and a substantial reduction in poverty. In South Africa, during January 2000, our intellectual conversations, reading materials, and quotidian encounters were always conditioned by the peculiar nature of a conjuncture so marked by a yearning for a plausible alternative to the ugly and extreme binary of apartheid. For some of the most discerning thinkers of that country, none seemed more comparatively appealing than the Malaysian experience—a country that itself once confronted an underdevelopment of the majority of its citizens. In the judgment of Pieter le Roux:

If one bears in mind that an important factor in the rapid growth of Malaysia was the low cost labor guaranteed to the companies that invested there, it may seem as though the success of some was premised on the exploitation of others. However, in the end, virtually everyone benefited from the high rates of growth. High GDP growth led to rapid growth in employment and the rapid expansion of rural development programs. Wages, although originally very low, increased dramatically over the 25 years to 1995. As a result, the proportion of the really poor declined from nearly 60% of the population in 1970 to about 15% by 1995. And since the rapid rates of growth made it possible to implement a widespread affirmative action program without too big a cost for the economically dominant Chinese community, everyone benefited from these policies. The income and wealth of the Chinese also expanded rapidly, even though not as dramatically as that of the Bumiputra.¹

In addition to Malaysia's reputation as a country with significant economic achievement that makes it part of the second generation of Asia's "Tigers," we were curious to know more about how this country had responded to the difficult vicissitudes of globalization, particularly after the massive financial shocks of 1997. But our interests were by no means limited to issues that pertain only to material structures of livelihood. On the contrary, we set out for Malaysia intent on exploring aspects of its varied cultures, artistic endowment, urban and architectural designs, ecological concerns, technological and scientific

development, and political evolution. Moreover, with the horrid events of September 11 so immediate in our consciousness, it took some daring on our part, as American scholars, to journey to a majority Muslim country. I hasten to add, though, that, as we expected, we were received with utmost hospitality and warmth.

With an area of about 330,000 square kilometers, tropical Malaysia is made of two physically distinct territories: peninsular Malaysia and the states of Sabah and Sarawak, the first separated by 650 kilometers of South China Sea. The peninsula has long, narrow, and steep mountains in the center, with coastal plains on both the east and west. Sabah and Sarawak have a similar geographical configuration. All told, about 60 percent of Malaysia is covered by tropical rainforest, with the greatest share in Sabah and Sarawak. Here, the country's varied ecology is breathtaking. This richness ranges from alluring islands and stunning coral reefs to orangutans and one of the world's greatest diversities of butterflies. While the beginnings of human habitation can be traced as far back as 35,000 B.C., in Sarawak's Niah Caves, waves of immigrants have continued to arrive to this day. Given the country's location, then, these movements of people brought together many cultures, races, and civilizations, a point underscored by the current kaleidoscope of communities that make up the nearly 24 million citizens. If Orang Asil are the original inhabitants, contemporary Malaysia is essentially made up of Malay, Chinese, and Indian stock. By far the oldest and largest of the three, Malay identity is defined by religious faith, Islam. But even here, the intimacy between these three groups has a great historical depth. As Hodgson reminds us:

Sea trade between the Chinese Far East and Indic lands, since the early centuries of the first millennium, had passed through [the Malay Straits]; the settlements along their coasts were in at least a direct relation with ports in India and China as with any of the areas more nearby. The Straits, then, were among the most cosmopolitan spots on the globe. The first great urban power in the region was centered on the Straits—the Buddhist mercantile state of Shrivijaya, which flourished by controlling the trade through the Straits and providing a compulsory exchange point for it. When it broke up at the end of the twelfth century, numerous independent trader cities took its place, none strong enough to prevent the exactions, or piracy, than its own.

In the late 1200s, at least two ports on the Sumatran side of the Straits adopted Islam. . . . Not only Muslims from India and points west helped establish these Muslim centers, but local converts to Islam and even, on occasion, adventurous Chinese.²

Malaysia, then, is both an ancient and young country. For, if the rich genetic origins go back deep in history, its present form is only forty years old. The post-independence era (particularly the last twenty years) is associated with a sustained economic growth, unity, and heightened propulsion towards further modernization. Of the concrete testimonies toward this effort, none are more conspicuous than the new and dazzling Kuala Lumpur International Airport, the Petronas Twin Towers, still the world's tallest duo of buildings, the Multimedia Super Corridor Information Technology project, the massive and architecturally venturesome and gleaming new capital, Putrajaya, and the proclamation of *Wawasan 2020*, to boot! The last is a national vision to graduate Malaysia into a full-fledged advanced industrial nation. In this context, the uncommon achievements of the city-state of Singapore, once part of the Peninsula, seems to be an adjacent and comparative reference.³ Given the relatively abundant reserves of oil (about 3.8 billion barrels) and gas (68 billion cubic feet), rubber, palm oil, tourism, timber, increasing manufacturing capabilities which are already up to more than 30 percent of gross domestic product, and heavy investments in both human capital (e.g., technical colleges and universities) and infrastructure, Malaysia is a good bet to transform itself from what was a colonial plantation and tin-mining outpost barely half a century ago to one of the great success stories by the first quarter of this new century.

But, as with all human endeavors of this kind, there are, as it were, a few "flies in the ointment."⁴ First, and in immediate focus, is the transition to a new leadership that is committed to further modernization.⁵ As Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad winds down his long tenure, a *wazi* with comparable astuteness and stamina seems necessary.⁶ But the issue of leadership transition is closely tied to a more robust democratic and inclusive politics. Designing and living in a pluralistic yet united Malaysian society fit for the publicly articulated domestic ambitions, as well as a model for others, is difficult but inescapable.⁷ More to the point, the challenge is how to maintain a capable and legitimate state that reflects the Islamic identity of the majority Malay and yet recognizes the full stakeholding, to the highest levels, of the Chinese,

Indian, and aboriginal communities. Even at the best of times, positive pluralism has never been an easy project,⁸ and the continuing experience of the United States attests to the conundrum. But to avoid the task is at once to discount the optimum potential of the country and foreclose the possibilities of a successful multiculturalist effort that would be an example for others. The latter is badly needed in an age defined by a dialectic of weakening borders and increasing nativistic anxieties.⁹

A second issue relates to economic opportunities for the majority, particularly at the commanding heights of private accumulation. The May 1969 riots, lastingly etched in the postcolonial memory, were driven by Malay nationalism—that is, a combination of political, cultural (i.e., language), and economic grievances. Nearly three decades after the inception of the National Economic Policy (NEP), the political and cultural prominence of the Malay is undeniable. Moreover, Malay entrepreneurs, through intensive state support, have made significant headway into partaking of an expanding economy. But if political and cultural power have been reconfigured to the advantage of the majority, including bureaucratic appointments in the various organs of the state, the dominance of Malaysians of Chinese heritage in the sphere of accumulation is equally conspicuous. Consequently, less group-based pluralistic democratic practice cannot be sustained without its correlate—equally inclusive economic activities. In short, Malaysia's individual, family, and ethnic accumulators face the challenge of linking their parochial interests to the greater development of a civic bourgeoisie. In such an ambiance, the privileging of public or private sectarian calculation is curtailed and, as a result, larger national imperatives take center stage.

A third concern is the fate of the environment in the face of aggressive industrialization and economic and political growth.¹⁰ This is also a familiar dilemma that is not confined to Malaysia. Nonetheless, though the country is reputed to have done relatively well in managing its natural resources, the projection that the human population is expected to double in 2025, a time coterminous with *Wawasan 2020*, compounds the dangers facing Malaysia's beautiful but fragile ecosystems. During our sojourn, we saw enough troubling signs in the increasing urban congestion in Penang and Kuala Lumpur, defilement of beaches, and intensive logging. The latter activity is worrisome enough for a one observer to write:

The virtually insatiable demand for timber and wood chips from countries such as Japan, Taiwan and Korea who then export the finished products to regions such as North America and Europe pose a real threat to Malaysian forests and indeed forests everywhere in the world.¹¹

A fourth item relates to educational standards and public and private investment in academic excellence and innovative research. Few doubt that the preferential state policies for Malay advancement have had a substantial, if not definitive, impact. From quantitative registration and graduation from educational institutions to faculty and administrative appointment, the achievements are visible. We heard frequently that the policies had their intended purpose and, therefore, the time has come to phase them out. This perspective seems to be shared by the key architect, the Prime Minister himself.

Dr. Mahathir made his political career by espousing affirmative action for Malays, and has presided over a mild Islamization of both state and society. But he recently revised his views, calling on Malays to make do without special treatment, and declaring that the "greening" of Malaysia had gone far enough. At his behest, the party agreed to reduce the number of places reserved for Malays at universities, and rolled back the use of Malay in schools.¹²

Many Malaysians, from all racial and religious communities, who believe in the potential of their country, stressed the indispensability of new, universal, and stringent criteria for performance. In other words, Malaysian society has arrived at the juncture of primarily corrected historical deficits and unavoidable excellence in standards in all vocations. As one reflective host intimated, the companion warning, if the steep gradient of national ambition is to be scaled, was long ago captured by the 14th century Muslim and virtuoso poet Hafiz of Shiraz who uttered that, "...no one has plucked the rose without the stab of a thorn."

Part one of the volume brings together the commissioned papers. We begin with a splendid lead essay delivered at Macalester College by **Johan Saravanamuttu**. With Southeast Asia as a backdrop, he engages the theoretical dialogue around the concept of multiculturalism, examines the burning issues of identity that face Indonesia, the Philippines,

and Burma, and puts forth Malaysia as a specimen of a “multicultural polity.”

Our presence in Malaysia begins with a suitably related piece by **Abdul Rahman Embong**. This essay explores the concepts of pluralism and diversity in the evolution of Malaysia. He concludes with a discernment of current challenges, with an eye to some effects of the events of September 11.

Maznah Mohamad addresses the myriad ways in which the variables of gender, race, and religion interdigitate in the making of Malaysian nationalism and the state. She adopts a three-phase periodization to organize the flow of the analysis.

Given the general importance of political transition, particularly in developing societies on the move, leadership and democracy rise to the top of concern. **Khoo Boo Teik** takes up that item in the wake of recent “political turbulence” and the imperatives of succession given Dr. Mahathir’s long time in office.

Macalester reflections begin with **Elizabeth Cogswell’s** informative essay. Hers is an examination of private philanthropy in Malaysia and the myriad challenges, both philosophical and organizational, which face such a tradition.

Karl Egge shares with us his insights from a comparative exploration of entrepreneurships in Singapore and Malaysia — particularly the initial stages of the formation of a firm.

Jeffery Evans begins with snippets of various adventures. His main interest is in the sensitive area of biodiversity and logging.

Roxane Harvey Gudeman focuses on the omnipresent and complicated issue of multiculturalism. She brings forth the intriguing paradox of individual ease and group tension. This is a detailed and thoughtful piece, with a substantial relevance beyond Malaysia.

Ellen Guyer reflects on the intersection of multiculturalism and the experience of university students. Her conclusions are candid, and underscore the importance of “proactive teaching” in the search for a workable multicultural institution or society.

David Lanegran’s essay begins with an important snapshot and then takes us on a compact tour of the diversity and complexity of urbanization. Penang, Melaka, and Kuala Lumpur are given brief but fascinating treatment.

Carleton Macy's attention is directed at music. His encounter with composers of "concert music" brings forth a sharp sketch of the way in which "professional existence" conditions the music one composes.

Karen Nakamura cogitates upon a rare topic: deafness in the ethnic complexity of Malaysia. After a reference to the deaf movement in the United States and Japan, she tells us about the deaf experience in Malaysia.

Wayne Roberts addresses scientific leadership in the context of the ambition of modernization. Mathematical performance in Malaysia is the subject of his conversations with the many Malaysian colleagues and alumni.

Clayton Steinman combines his earlier journalistic acumen with scholarly observation of the media in Malaysia. He contrasts the presence of admirable socio-democratic public policy and the limitations on crucial individual and public freedoms that are necessary for a vibrant media.

Robert Warde's piece examines Malaysia's "linguistic life" to convey his sense of "its particular individuality." The literary referent is a work of verse by Dr. Che Husna Azhari.

Notes

1. Pieter le Roux, "Competing Paradigms: Socioeconomic Development in South Africa," *Macalester International*, Vol. 9 (2000), p. 105.
2. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 545. Also, Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: Glencoe, 1960).
3. Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First, The Singapore Story: 1965–2000* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).
4. Maznah Mohamad and Wong Sook Koon, eds., *Risking Malaysia: Culture, Politics and Identity* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001); and Abdul Rahman Embong and J. Rudolph, eds., *Southeast Asia into the Twenty First Century: Crisis and Beyond* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2000).
5. "The Long Goodbye," *The Economist* (June 29–July 5, 2002): 37–38.
6. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, translated by Fraz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).
7. Syed Farid Alatas, "Democracy and Authoritarianism," in *Indonesia and Malaysia: The Rise of the Post-Colonial State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).
8. William McNeill, *Poly-ethnicity and National Unity in World History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).
9. Jeremy Harding, *The Uninvited: Refugees at the Rich Man's Gate* (London: London Review of Books, 2000). Also, Christine B. N. Chin, *In Service and Servitude: Foreign Female*

Domestic Workers and the Malaysian "Modernity" Project (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

10. Mohamed Rozali Ali, Jeffrey R. Vincent, and Associates, *Environment and Development in a Resource Rich Economy: Malaysia under the New Economic Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

11. N. Prakash, "Flora," in *The Shaping of Malaysia*, edited by Amarjit Kaur and Ian Metcalfe (New York: Macmillan Press, 1998), p. 42.

12. "The Long Goodbye," p. 38.