Part III

Social policy and social development
This page intentionally left blank
Famously glossed as a ‘plural society’, Malaysia remains complex, in terms not just of ethnicity, but also class, religion, gender, sexuality, and other dimensions. Known equally, too, for its developmentalist aspirations (as discussed in the last section), which have required both ambitious educational and social service expansion and a degree of media and other openness, and for a restrictive human rights regime, Malaysia struggles with endemic tensions among competing goals and along varied axes, as inequalities and unmet benchmarks put prescriptions and policies to the test.

Shamsul A.B. and Athi S.M. kick off the discussion by seeking the historical roots of the ethnic categories so pervasive and internalised in Malaysia today. They trace this organisational rubric to colonial authorities’ administrative and functional demarcation of communities and the eventual reification of these categories in everyday life. Key to that process was a colonial division of labour that effectively separated ‘Malays’, ‘Chinese’, and ‘Indians’, and which persisted, with much the same parameters, well beyond independence. It was only with the expansion of industrialisation and urbanisation, as well as state-organised agricultural restructuring and resettlement schemes, particularly after 1970, that patterns began to change. In particular, with increasing occupational and social mobility, Shamsul and Athi argue, intra-ethnic distinctions have come to rival inter-ethnic ones.

Alberto G. Gomes highlights a particularly stark manifestation of Malaysia’s inter-ethnic disparities. However impressive Malaysia’s accomplishments overall in reducing poverty and boosting opportunities across ethnic categories, indigenous minorities in particular remain deeply disadvantaged. Gomes focuses on the Orang Asli (indigenous peoples) on the Peninsula, whom he describes as endemically marginalised in the face of market forces – willingly embraced or otherwise – as well as government-sponsored development plans, forcible resettlement, and social engineering, including Islamisation. He argues, among other measures, for security of land tenure, for both economic and cultural/identity reasons, and for more appropriate and higher-quality education, better healthcare and nutrition, and political and economic power broadly.

Echoing and expanding upon Gomes’s call for empowerment, John Liu examines the ups and downs of civil liberties in Malaysia, over the course of successive administrations. While the Malaysian constitution grants a full raft of civil liberties and both positive and negative
rights, these are contravened or curbed by enactments that prioritise aspects of public order over individual rights. While particular enactments and events represent these dynamics especially well, the overall picture is relatively consistent: one of side-lining civil liberties in conjunction with, and in support of, larger political contests and arguments for Malaysia’s exceptionalism.

We move next to a more positive story, as Molly N.N. Lee details Malaysia’s well-developed, well-supported primary, secondary, and tertiary education system. Here, too, though, she finds room for improvement. From a perspective of national unity, different language streams across school types limit ethnic mixing at the primary and secondary levels, and matters of media of instruction remain controversial. From a more material perspective, Malaysia has not met its own targets either for overall higher education enrolments or for the share of graduates in science, technology, and engineering fields. Echoing Shamsul and Athi’s as well as Gomes’s findings, Lee notes a lack of equity not just across ethnic groups, but also, for instance, between urban and rural students, across classes, and between men and women. Moreover, Malaysia has performed below expectations in international assessment exercises, at all levels, and issues of graduate employability remain keen. She recommends updating and revising standards for educators as well as student achievement, thinking seriously about the appropriate economic model for higher education (e.g. state support versus corporatisation and privatisation), and determining the right mix of central regulation and institutional autonomy, especially, but not exclusively, in higher education.

We turn next to healthcare, another much-touted Malaysian success story, but one similarly subject to pressures and plans for reform. Chee Heng Leng and Por Heong Hong examine healthcare financing and access, including the latest system rebranding, ‘1Care’. Healthcare expenditures have been rising and private healthcare has expanded – neither of which development is likely optimal. Opposition to the ‘1Care’ plan has come both from healthcare practitioners and advocates and from the public, given concerns over potential (and substantially unknown) escalating costs and bureaucracy as well as potentially worse access to services, accessibility, and patient choice. Yet the latest bout of civil society opposition is in line with responses to prior rounds of privatisation and restructuring of healthcare financing. After detailing several alternatives proposed, Chee and Por recommend a well-designed social health insurance fund as the best option.

Carolina López C. picks up the thread of civil society, but in a different context. She focuses on Malaysia’s longstanding cultural and religious pluralism, recent tensions disrupting interfaith relations, and initiatives, originating both with government and with civil society, to sustain harmony. Structural features of the Malaysian state, she argues, socialise Malaysians toward a deeply internalised dichotomy between Malays/Muslims and ‘others’ – a dichotomy perpetuated in laws and policies. That framework lays the ground for potential inter-group conflict, as has periodically emerged in Malaysia. The sorts of efforts at collaboration López describes, she suggests, offer a way out of or around these impasses, but to be effective, must address that underlying dichotomy.

Kathy Rowland similarly engages with sparring cultural visions, but on the terrain of visual, musical, and performance art. She sketches the arts in Malaysia as a site of ongoing contest, between the state’s hegemonic vision and ambitions and generations of artists’ alternatives. While local arts practitioners have taken advantage of discursive openings from changes in Malaysian cultural policies as well as increasingly available private and public sponsorship, much development, especially in recent years, has been in parallel to more mainstream forms and venues. In particular, in the face of increasing efforts by the state and its allies to police identity and conceptions of the nation and ‘the public’, artists working across genres and languages have offered their own, varied imaginings.
In their chapter on gender in Malaysia, Tan Beng Hui and Cecilia Ng describe a similarly thorny process of engagement with state policies and visions. In terms of covenants signed and quantitative indices, Malaysia has made progress over the past several decades toward women’s empowerment and gender equality; however, closer attention to context and nuance suggests important lacunae. The authors argue for a critical, rather than merely instrumental, approach to gender, to explore the distribution of power and resources in Malaysian society, as well as how gender aligns with or intersects other social constructs and structures. Lack of systematic, gender-disaggregated data or innovative approaches to undercut essentialism in assigning/presuming tasks, and deeply entrenched structural inequalities as well as legal provisions and cultural norms limit the scope of women’s advance.

Pang Khee Teik depicts an even more fraught discursive and embodied landscape as he parses the controversy over Seksualiti Merdeka, a recent Malaysian sexuality rights initiative. The banning of Seksualiti Merdeka served to raise popular awareness of sexuality and gender diversity as well as the ways in which these challenge normativity – or in the apocryphal language of opponents, threaten the very fabric of the nation and Islam. Debate over the festival brought to the fore questions of LGBTs’ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) own identification and priorities, engaged local and international norms and laws, and amplified both the exclusionary boundaries of full Malaysian citizenship and the limits of ethnonationalist or economic alternatives. Pang closes the section with an appeal for a more inclusive, but also more flexible and empowering, national imaginary.
This page intentionally left blank