A brief introduction to Malaysia

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No country can be adequately captured in a single volume, however intellectually or physically weighty. A complete picture of all that comprises ‘contemporary Malaysia’ would hence clearly be beyond the possible scope of this volume. And yet, our aim is for more than a set of static descriptions or assessments. Instead, this volume presents a series of thoughtful, hopefully thought-provoking engagements with different dimensions of Malaysian politics, economics, and society. Each chapter can stand on its own; taken together, however, they offer an especially rich perspective on the extraordinary complexity of modern Malaysia. This brief introduction lays the ground for the more substantive chapters that follow, offering a sketch of key moments and attributes, then an overview of the volume as a whole.

Malaysia: a snapshot

Malaysia has never had the benefit or option of isolation. Located along key sea-lanes, at the tip of the Southeast Asian landmass, what is now Malaysia grew out of shifting suzerainty of wide-reaching empires, localised sultanates, and ideological flows. These tides left more than material artefacts. Two were most important: the entry and spread of Islam in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, then the arrival of the first Europeans shortly thereafter. Islam has remained. (See the chapter by Liow and Afi if for the contemporary political implications of the faith’s ever-greater entrenchment.) Europeans – first the Portuguese, next the Dutch, then, more extensively and intensively, the British – have since departed. But these paired influences arguably did more than any other exogenous or common internal factors to shape Malaysian culture, identity, institutions, and borders.

Malaysia today is a constitutional monarchy, with a federal, parliamentary framework. Most power, as well as most fiscal resources, is vested in the central government and bureaucracy, although Sabah and Sarawak reserve somewhat greater authority (and largesse to dispense) than their peninsular counterparts. (See the chapters on federalism by Francis Loh Kok Wah and on public administration by Norma Mansor and Raja Noriza Raja Ariffin for details.) Singapore was briefly part of the Federation of Malaysia upon its formation, but left after a mere two years, in 1965. Local elections have been suspended altogether in Malaysia since the mid-1960s, although Goh Ban Lee makes the case for their reinstatement in his chapter here.
An upwardly mobile, newly industrialised country, Malaysia aspires to attain fully developed status by the year 2020. Now, it is considered an upper-middle-income state, with a reasonably diversified, generally open, export-oriented economy, but also a significant state sector and role in development (see the chapter by Greg Felker for more on Malaysia’s developmentalist framework). As the chapters by Hwok-Aun Lee, Helena Varkkey, Jeff Tan, and Xiaoye She in particular detail, politics and economics are closely intertwined in Malaysia. The multi-ethnic Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) coalition, and especially its dominant partner, the United Malays National Organisation, use the rewards of economic development not only to enrich fortunate elites (see William Case’s chapter for a discussion of this key stratum), but also to cultivate support – and make real progress along human development and economic indicators – among the public. It is in large part by way of such distributions that the BN (or its progenitor, the tripartite Alliance) has retained power at the federal level and in most states since independence.

That said, while Malaysia is classified as a competitive electoral authoritarian, or simply semi-democratic/semi-authoritarian state – multiparty, competitive elections are held regularly, as Bridget Welsh describes, but those elections fall short of free and fair, and civil liberties face significant curbs, as John Liu explains – its politics are far from static. A heated campaign and closely fought election that culminated in Malay–Chinese riots in May 1969 ushered in new controls on political discourse and mobilisation. Even so, the past two decades in particular have seen rising popular mobilisation, in forms ranging from artistic production (see the chapter by Kathy Rowland) to mass street protests (Anantha Raman Govindasamy details three exemplars of such mobilisation). The elections of 2008 and 2013 were especially noteworthy, not only for the loss of the BN’s two-thirds majority in parliament (sufficient to pass constitutional amendments), but also for the apparent solidification of a two-coalition order, as Ong Kian Ming posits in his chapter. Nor are the roster of hardest-fought issues fully consistent. Some, like education (see the chapter by Molly N.N. Lee) and healthcare (Chee Heng Leng and Por Heong Hong) are perennial concerns; others, such as gender equality (Tan Beng Hui and Cecilia Ng), sexuality rights (Pang Khee Teik), or environmental sustainability (Adnan A. Hezri), are newly or unevenly politicised.

As the chapter by Shamsul A.B. and Athi S.M. details, among the key legacies of British rule was an ethnically segmented (and accordingly catalogued) society, reflected in a carefully moulded economic order. The constructed categories of ‘Malay’, ‘Chinese’, and ‘Indian’ are omnipresent in Malaysian socio-political life, albeit with important permutations in the two offshore states of Sabah and Sarawak (see the chapters by James Chin and Arnold Puyok in particular). The category *bumiputera*, literally, ‘sons of the soil’, includes both the narrow Malay majority and Malaysia’s relatively small percentage (higher in East Malaysia) of indigenous peoples. *Bumiputera* enjoy political, cultural, and economic privilege in Malaysia, as a result of both a constitutionally decreed special status and that position’s operationalisation in far-reaching, deeply entrenched affirmative action policies. Economic inequality and policies generate perennial tensions, not least due to this structural preference, but questions of the extent to which the Malays’ special position should translate into cultural, and specifically religious, sovereignty are today especially fraught, as the chapter by Carolina López C. in particular details. Meanwhile, the Malaysian social fabric is changing in fundamental ways, with increasingly prevalent migrant labour, both skilled and otherwise (see Amarjit Kaur’s chapter), and rural–urban flows; on the impacts of the latter dynamic in rural and urban areas, see the chapters by Eric C. Thompson and Yeoh Seng Guan, respectively.

Domestic permutations and polity trajectories notwithstanding, Malaysia has remained throughout, too, a key player within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)
and a sometimes-fiery middle-power state on the global stage; in his chapter, Karminder Singh Dhillon lays out and evaluates Malaysia’s array of foreign policy objectives. Aspiring to, and achieving, prominence among trading states, among Muslim-identified states in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, and in security alliances alike (see the chapters by Lai Yew Meng and Carolin Liss), Malaysia claims more prominence than its small size might suggest. (The chapters by Heng Pek Koon, Kuik Cheng-Chwee, and Ruhanas Harun assess Malaysia’s relations with the US, China, and Europe, respectively.) Yet even in this policy domain, changes in leadership, fluctuating priorities, and the inevitable buffeting of booms and crises make for a never-dull picture.

Overview of the volume

As noted above, this volume cannot hope to be fully comprehensive. Rather it aspires to be thorough and analytical – to lay out relevant facts and background on a wide range of issues and topics, then to make something of those details: to draw conclusions, to test theorised relationships among factors, to offer suggestions, to venture predictions. Moreover, while the volume is purposely biased toward present-day Malaysia, the chapters are sensitive to history and context, and some are more pointedly historical in their approach.

The chapters are divided among four sections: domestic politics, economics, social policy and social development, and international relations and security. In reality, these sections necessarily overlap – Islam, for instance, as not just a faith, but a social cleavage, an ideology and/or a strategic priority colours all four sections – but the contributions within each section are generally more directly complementary than those across sections. Each author had relatively free rein in deciding how to structure and orient his or her chapter. The authors come from a range of backgrounds – most, but not all, are academics; the majority, but not all, are Malaysians (locally based or expatriate); and they run the gamut of most presumed-relevant socio-political cleavages in Malaysia – so their perspectives are obviously multifarious. In short, our aim with this volume is to capture manifold perspectives on and paradoxes within Malaysia as a state and a nation, more to provoke further reflection and debate than with the pretence of offering pat answers.