



The establishment and **the people**

Comparing mindsets and mass movements in Southeast Asia.
Review by Azmi Sharom.

There is a scene in Rehman Rashid's *A Malaysian Journey* where, in the wealthy suburbs of Jakarta, he asks an old school friend what the Indonesians thought of Malaysians. She answered that we (the Malaysians) were "essentially the same people, but a few rungs lower down". To which Rehman laughingly replies that we felt the same way about them.

That passage rings with "home truths", one that provokes a nod of understanding (I would imagine) on both sides of the Straits of Melaka. And like all home truths tend to be, it's only partially accurate. There are other "home truths" that we may have about each other. In the socio-economic field, it was a given that although both nations are essentially the same, there are some glaring differences. For all its weaknesses, Malaysia has always been presumed to be the more "democratic" of the two nations, for example. The events of the late 1990s has turned that particular homily on its head and *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: Comparing Indonesia and Malaysia* attempts to examine the situation as it stands today.

Written exclusively by academics, this book is, except for those with Vulcan-like powers of concentration, hardly the thing to browse through while on the LRT. But it would be a shame if the good work done here were appreciated only by the 10 per cent of social science students who actually bother to read.

Steering clear of dissecting its subject to death, the essays in this book take a more holistic view at several aspects of the socio-economic situation in Indonesia and Malaysia, focusing on what can be described as the Reformasi period. Specific questions regarding issues like definitions are acknowledged but not pandered to. In this way, what we get is a more organic examination. Although this approach is perhaps not empirically perfect, it is in many ways more valuable as the final portraits of the anti-authoritarian movements in the two countries have room for nuances that more accurately reflect the various shades of messy human society. More importantly, it makes the book interesting.

Authoritarianism is here broadly described as situations where the distribution of power is greatly unbalanced. The writers do not make a simple distinction between authoritarianism as bad and democracy as good, because the imbalance of power is not necessarily limited in the hands of the elite few. On the contrary, oft-times the majority supports and propagates this imbalance. The authors on the whole avoid making moral judgements but the underlying idea is that any imbalance in society needs redress. This can be achieved through many means, not necessarily limited to mainstream politics as in the form of elections and the like.

With the exception of Norani Othman's chapter on Islam and democracy which is almost exclusively focused on Malaysia, and Melani Budianta's essay on the role of women during Reformasi, which is Indonesia-centric, all the other parts of the book make significant attempts at cross-refer-

encing between the two jurisdictions.

Ariel Heryanto writes about the role of the middle classes in battling authoritarianism and his essay sheds light on why Indonesian intelligentsia (here represented by academia and the media) appear to be so much more vigorous than their Malaysian counterparts. A somewhat perplexing question, seeing as Indonesian repression has usually been classified as far more extreme than in Malaysia.

His examination of Satya Wacana Christian University's experience and the level of dissent that was achieved over the question of the choice of the head of the university lie in stark contrast to the mute impotence of the staff of Universiti Malaya when (in an act that was clearly politically inspired) Chandra Muzaffar's contract of employment was not renewed (in the wake of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's sacking as deputy prime minister). Heryanto makes observations about how the private nature of the Indonesian institutions of higher learning and the intellectual and economic independence of its staff (led by the necessities of market forces) have created a fertile breeding ground where opposition to the status quo is given credence and a culture of vigorous resistance on matters of principle becomes the norm.

Yet it would be too simplistic to say that Indonesians are more progressive than us, the timid cousins, for in Phillip Kelly's comparison of civil society between Penang and Batam, we see also how historical development can make a specific area within a larger whole develop in a way quite different from the norm. Even though the two islands share many outward resemblances, the independent spirit shown by Penangites as reflected by its active civil organisations like the Consumers Association of Penang and Aliran, and their ability to create a powerful civil alliance like the Friends of Penang Hill, is missing from Batam.

The differences can be partly traced to Penang's past where its largely non-indigenous populace developed an attitude of independence that was evident even in its mainstream politics until the early 1970s. What this chapter shows is that the complexity of challenges towards authoritarianism is such that one cannot and should not paint with large brush strokes when examining individual societies and nations.

This complexity is further illustrated by the surprisingly relatively small role that workers played during the Reformasi period. Vedi Hadiz's chapter on labour relations ends on the rather subdued note, concluding that the labour movements in both countries have some way to go before they can be a force of any real meaning, as in Korea, for example. The labour movement in Indonesia was crushed along with the Communist Party in the 1960s, and the Malaysian labour movement slowly and more peacefully emasculated over the years through legislation. But the result is still the same: a group with tremendous political potential being firmly consigned to the fringes of societal change.

It is an accusation that cannot be directed at women as shown by Melani Budianta who writes about how the role of

women in challenging authoritarianism goes far beyond merely being part of mainstream politics. Megawati Sukarnoputeri, as Indonesian president, is merely the tip of the iceberg; to use her as a symbol of women's empowerment ignores other vital roles that Indonesian women play in bringing about change, from grassroots activism in the face of poverty to protest over specific issues such as sex crimes.

Norani Othman also deals with women in detail in her chapter on Islam, but the real value of this particular section is the elucidation on the process of Islamisation in Malaysia, which has been partly driven by oneupmanship between Umno and PAS — a knee-jerk process, contends the writer, with little thought given to the implications that it might have on the fundamental rights of citizens and even whether they were in line with Islamic principles, primarily of justice and compassion.

The closing chapter is on the role of the arts in challenging authoritarianism. Do the arts, at the most, merely reflect societal mood? Sumit Mandal does not write with any pretensions as to the extent that the role the arts have in bringing about changes but he does seem to suggest that it matters. However, despite his assertions that the Malaysian arts scene in the 1990s was a cog in Reformasi, the examples used only went to confirm the conviction that at least here, the arts remain merely an indulgence of the bourgeois.

It is a situation that is not the same in Indonesia, where much greater efforts have been made to ensure that the arts, whether theatre or poetry, have their roots and its audience among the working classes, thus lending it greater legitimacy and credence, attempting, as it does, to reach beyond the enclaves of the wealthy. From his descriptions, Mandal shows that there is robustness in Indonesian arts that is missing in Malaysia. But this is not a surprise seeing as Malaysia has absolutely no equivalent, for example, of the quiet power and dignity of men like Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

This book seeks to record one aspect of life in Malaysia and Indonesia, the battle of the last few years against oppression. It does not provide any blue print for the future but it does provide valuable insights into the present — insights that are necessary for a more accurate view of the socio-political situation of the two countries. This is important not only for aiding a better understanding of one another, but also as a foundation upon which to build a more cohesive and informed approach towards the opposition of tyranny. A foundation cannot be built upon the rubble of home truths. ■

**CHALLENGING AUTHORITARIANISM
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: COMPARING
INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA**
Routledge
Hardback, £65

Azmi Sharom is a law lecturer at Universiti Malaya

God of The Earth is a historical fiction and partly biographical work centred around the author's grandfather who migrated from China as a 16-year-old in 1870 to start a new life in Papan.

Ho Thean Fook's book offers rich glimpses into life in the early 20th century in Malaya. It touches the hearts of all generations. For those of his generation, it recaptures nostalgic memories of yesteryear. For the young, it vividly explores the value of hard work, dedication and social tolerance among the different races and adherence to ancestral customs and traditions. Ho also describes the social pastimes of his era, mystical events, and interactions with the environment and the development of the tin industry.

Social tolerance, cooperation and the

Life in a small town

Mohd Taib Mohamed, Perak state librarian, provides a perspective of a new book about life in Papan, the place they built on tin mining fortunes

spirit of *muhibbah* are portrayed in no less than three chapters of the novel. This spirit is not orchestrated by the author but an honest observation of actual events. *Muhibbah* is a natural human interaction for co-existence, resulting in respect for each other and the wish to make the best out of life. There is, for example, a description of an Indian and a Sikh using chopsticks at Tuck Yuan Teahouse, a reference to an European settlement at Gunung Hijau and the close-knit Malay/Chinese communities in Papan.

Chapter 13, "Principle of The New Order", illustrates an example of the spirit of *muhibbah*. Istana Rajah Bilah and other Malay houses are neighbours on the left side of Pak Foo's house separated only by a bamboo fencing. Rajah Bilah, the leader of the Mandailing clan was appointed Penghulu for Mukim Belanja (Kinta) in 1882. Due to his high standing among the local communities, he became one of the few non-British members of Batu Gajah's Sanitary Board (Town Council) in December 1895.

This chapter describes the Muslim call for prayer every morning in Papan. For the non-Muslims living close by, they found the voice of the muezzin pleasant and the recitation of the Quran and sound of the *kerantung* like an alarm clock telling them to wake up and go to work.

The spirit of *muhibbah* was cherished among the local communities long before Malaya gained independence in 1957 and should be strengthened as we celebrate 46 years of independence.