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Transforming Malaysia: Dominant and Competing Paradigms

ANTHONY MILNER, ABDUL RAHMAN EMBONG, and THAM SIEW YEAN, eds.

Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014.

Racial divisions in Malaysia have long dominated academic and public discourse concerning Malaysia's domestic politics, its development, and its society. As Anthony Milner, Abdul Rahman Embong, and Tham Siew Yean argue in the preface of *Transforming Malaysia*, these divisions have consistently been used "as a weapon of mobilization, including by the right-wing elements in . . . UMNO (United Malays National Organisation)" (p. ix). However, following the downfall of the Barisan Nasional (The National Front) government, led by UMNO, in Malaysia's 2018 election, there were early indicators that the dominance of race-based politics and development was being challenged. Instead, there seemed to be an emergence of a transethnic solidarity and support for the competing Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope) coalition and government.

Following some reform and success after the election, commentators of a "New Malaysia" have been hopeful for greater inclusivity for all. However, this optimism seems misplaced. Post-election politics has seen the re-consolidation of the importance of race, as well as enduring—if not intensifying—divisions between "Malay," "Chinese," and "Indian" communities. The government's intention to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) was faced with strong Malay opposition—the latter fearing the loss of their constitutional privileges. By-elections have thus been dominated by the so-called "race-card" and explicit references to race-specific issues and fears. This makes the contribution of *Transforming Malaysia* increasingly significant. This book offers the critical and much-needed analysis of the dominant race-based paradigm in Malaysia, as well as the exploration of competing paradigms which could challenge it.

Transforming Malaysia discusses why the race paradigm, "the dominant societal paradigm of social and political life" (p. 1), requires critical analysis in relation to competing paradigms. Indeed, merely by identifying the role of race as a paradigm, and not some immutable fact of life, the editors are convincing in their conclusion that "the task of traversing the 'crossroads' becomes at least in part an ideological one" (p. 10). Such a critical and ideological focus on just how race became so important is one that has been sorely missing in prior discourse. Therefore, in examining the taken-for-granted nature of the divisions between the races, and its impact on Malaysia's politics and development, the book makes way for new frames of analysis, such as class. This contribution fits extremely well with the goals of the book, namely demonstrating how this race-based focus was constructed and evolved to become the dominant societal paradigm. It additionally questions whether it remains an adequate lens for analysis and a "foundational motif in public discussion" (p. 10) by provoking a thoughtful reflection on its nature.

The volume is essentially divided into two sections, the first of which is the strongest and

contributes most coherently to the discussion at hand. These first three chapters open up the most space for the re-thinking that the book wishes to provoke, as they analyze the construction and evolution of the race paradigm itself.

This is most evident in Milner and Helen Ting's Chapter 2, which directly builds upon the core thesis and persuasively argues that the race paradigm is a social construct. The authors demonstrate that our understandings of "Malay," "Chinese," and "Indian" are more flexible than commonly assumed, through a historical review of how race has been used and referred to. Focusing on the turning point of the British administration's role in the construction of the paradigm, Milner and Ting analyze how social relations previously structured on *kerajaan*—personal relations with the Sultan where people identified themselves as "subjects of a ruler" (*rakyat*, people)—came to be replaced by the emergence of a trans-sultanate Malay racial identity. This focus on early relations with the monarchy is of enduring relevance today. The authors convincingly argue that even though the monarchy consists of increasingly explicitly Malay rulers, "an older, inclusive *kerajaan* paradigm still exercise a degree of influence" (p.31) and "certain ingredients in this institution continue to have a potential for resistance" (p.26). Current debates concerning the role of the monarchy in a "New Malaysia" have intensified, with divisions becoming starker between royal institutions co-opted by ethno-nationalists, and inclusive democratic forces. As such, they not only unsettle our assumptions about the intractability of race, but also provoke reflection on essential institutions within Malaysia which are reaching a turning point regarding the direction they take. Despite questions intensifying over their current role, Milner and Ting argue that the monarchy's claims to represent the entire *rakyat*, regardless of race, continue to provide opportunities for a racially-inclusive paradigm. These opportunities should be taken, as further challenges to the race paradigm made by competing paradigms and policies—right up to Najib's "1Malaysia"—often become entangled with race, ensuring that framing has not been rejected and continues to be dominant.

Abdul Rahman also develops on this alternative, in Chapter 3. As the *rakyat* is now more related to sovereignty than exclusively related to the *kerajaan*, the author argues that this inclusive paradigm has the potential to provide the biggest challenge to race. This is despite the fact they have existed side-by-side. Through his analysis of its evolution, he brings up the divisions between the *rakyat* and racial paradigm, and the "infection" of the former by the latter. Concluding that it is a viable answer to uniting Malaysia may appear overly optimistic—even with the victory of Pakatan Harapan and the lauded multi-ethnic support—since the race paradigm continues to dominate. However, the chapter contributes well to intensifying the reflection over alternative paradigms in Malaysian society.

Rather than examining alternative paradigms, Ting in Chapter 4 prioritizes unsettling the taken-for-granted nature of the race paradigm. She does this through her analysis of how governmental nation-building policies have contributed to shaping and deepening it. Her analysis is

particularly compelling, as it demonstrates the way in which the paradigm has been utilized by the government for political expediency. It also shows that part of the challenge of overcoming the paradigm is by shining a light on the actors that use it. When explaining the chapter's focus, Ting identifies that the public sphere in which she focuses differs from the realm of the micro-level day-to-day interethnic interactions. By doing so, the author has perhaps identified most clearly one of the limitations of the book. It is overwhelmingly top-down, and pays most attention to the government and over-arching policies that have contributed to the paradigm's construction. There is much more literature emerging on everyday practices, however, and the impact that these can have on wider society. It would have been extremely insightful to have introduced these ideas into the volume and developed them. This would have shown how everyday practices and interactions may also contribute to both the construction and reification of the race paradigm, which does not exist independently at the levels all the authors have chosen to analyze.

While in the first section the authors rightfully emphasize the leading role of race, there are some limitations in the discussion. These include the lack of emphasis on the role that religion plays in the race paradigm—something which seems to be an oversight, considering how what it means to be Malay is so intrinsically linked to developments concerning Islam. The way the race paradigm remains the same or differs in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak—with their radically different ethnic balance and trajectory—is also a significant gap which limits the potential for finding alternative paradigms. On the one hand, this can explain why this first section is largely a success in demonstrating the way in which the paradigm is constructed, and therefore in problematizing it. On the other hand, it is less successful in developing and analyzing viable alternatives and solutions. This has perhaps been identified by the authors, as there has since been work done that explicitly examines alternative paradigms such as class, that develops on the ideas in the book (Abdul Rahman 2018). As much as the race paradigm dominates Malaysian society, so too do the initial chapters in *Transforming Malaysia* struggle to escape from focusing solely on it, thus creating some overlap, repetition, and limitations.

The limitations in the first section become particularly problematic as the second section falters. The latter half of the volume continues to limit discussion to analyses of the influence of the race paradigm. Instead of developing the argument further, the chapters instead serve to reinforce the notion that the race paradigm has a strong influence in various sectors. In Chapter 5, Ragayah Haji Mat Zin explores the issue of poverty and income distribution, and demonstrates that the paradigm pervades all analysis of it despite attempts to move toward a class-based approach. Azizah Kassim in Chapter 6 also argues that the paradigm plays a role in foreign worker policy, through its subsuming to security considerations of not upsetting the racial balance. In Chapter 7, Tham Siew Yean demonstrates the linkages between trade policy and the race paradigm. Chapter 8, by K. S. Nathan, is perhaps the odd one out. Foreign policy is found to be not heavily influenced by the paradigm, and instead directed by “pragmatic calculation of how best the national interest

can be advanced” (p. 203). However, it is unclear if this has any lessons for other sectors. Across the chapters in this section, there is little cohesion in developing alternatives.

All in all, *Transforming Malaysia* is a thought-provoking and critically insightful book, and should be of interest to both scholars and practitioners of Malaysia’s domestic politics and development. Its conclusion—that the task of gaining public consensus for change will be difficult, as a result of the strength of the race paradigm—resonates extremely strongly with the current debates in Malaysian politics and society. While this conclusion may seem extremely pessimistic, the book is a useful starting point for change, as it achieves its goal of forcing a retrospection and problematizing of the racial paradigm’s inflexibility. More reflection of just how the race paradigm has become entrenched can increase skepticism of its employment and the actors that depend upon it. However, more work still needs to be done in terms of identifying, analyzing, and strengthening paradigms that can replace it.

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Reference

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