

Book Review ‘Found in Malaysia’

Selangor: ZI Publications Sdn. Bhd., 2010. 211 pp.

ISBN: 978-967-5266-13-3

The 2008 Permatang Pauh by-election was historic because it marked former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim’s return to the Malaysian Parliament, this time as opposition leader. But the by-election was notorious for other reasons too. On 25 August that year, in a Barisan Nasional ceramah, Bukit Bendera Umno division chief Datuk Ahmad Ismail called non-Malay Malaysians “pendatang” or “squatters”. Ahmad Ismail subsequently refused to apologise. And instead it was the Sin Chew Daily journalist who reported on his comments, Tan Hoon Cheng, who was detained without trial under the Internal Security Act on 12 September. Against this backdrop of polarising, racist rhetoric, and state intimidation against journalists, the news and analysis website, The Nut Graph felt compelled to respond in a way that would prevent public debate from degenerating.

Just what does it mean to be a pendatang? Does being a pendatang mean that you forfeit any sense of ownership upon the land? Who counts? Or rather, who does not? And more importantly, does it even matter? Because we Malaysians are, after all, a hodgepodge of races, not easily classifiable, or even quantifiable. This book explores this contentious and political issue in Malaysia, at a critical juncture in Malaysia’s history, in an attempt to reveal who Malaysians are and who the pendatang are among them. These are Malaysians who do not fall neatly into the official racial or religious categories. They are united despite the fifty-year age difference between the oldest and youngest candidate by their shared diversity of backgrounds and beliefs, and by their stories and aspirations that cut across racial and religious barriers. They are all of them truly Malaysian. The point would be to demonstrate that Malaysia is a diverse country, taking into account both our colonial history and the historical cosmopolitanism of Southeast Asia. In such a context as Malaysia’s then, it would be clear that terms like “pendatang” or “pribumi” are politically motivated and divisive.

In this compilation of 50 meticulously selected interviews from the news and analysis website, The Nut Graph, notable Malaysians share memories of growing up in this pre- and post-Independence nation; they offer tales of their ancestry and historical origins; recount cherished anecdotes from relatives and loved ones; and articulate their hopes and dreams for Malaysia’s

future. Virtually every interview has been a revelation, not just to readers, but to the newsroom as well. And so, they did not envy their publisher the task of choosing the 50 interviews to be featured in this book. The newsroom consider them a sampling of not just the racial and religious diversity they initially wanted to highlight, but also the gender, sexual, generational and political diversity found in Malaysia. The interviews include an impressive array of Malaysian public figures, including politicians, corporate figures, social activists, artists and entertainers.

A special mention also be made of the four special interviews the newsroom undertook specifically for the publication of this book - with veteran politicians Datuk Zaid Ibrahim of Parti Keadilan Rakyat and Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz of Umno, respected social activist and writer Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, and legendary dancer Ramli Ibrahim. Although the four are blandly classified as “Malay” by the state, Ahmad Ismail would likely be dismayed to find that at least three out of the four are quite proud to admit to a “pendatang” history. In compiling these interviews for print publication, the newsroom nevertheless came across some real imbalances. For example, out of the 54 interviewees featured in this book, only 20 are women. Worse, only four are East Malaysians. The newsroom has been diligent in ensuring as representative a selection of interviewees as possible since this book was launched. The imbalance is probably the result of the limited capacities of a small newsroom-it was hence difficult to attempt many interviews outside the Klang Valley. Also, the gender imbalance likely reflects the larger problem in Malaysia, where women are still under represented in various public leadership positions.

It will take more commitment and consciousness to overcome these limitations and oversights. Nevertheless, the newsroom hope that readers will find in this book a larger narrative of Malaysia through the generations, and through the experiences of a sumptuous variety of Malaysians. And the newsroom hope that these stories will encourage even more sharing, dialogue and empathy among Malaysians, especially in the midst of normalised prejudices. After all, it is through the telling of stories that truths are revealed, communities are healed, and bridges built.

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