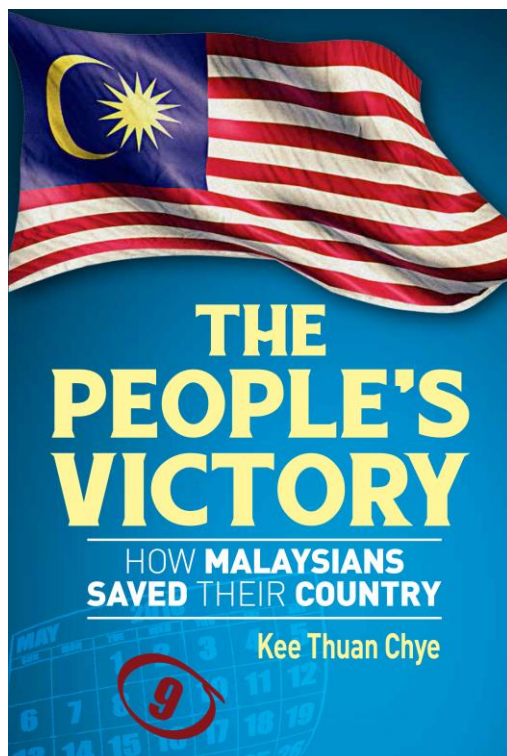


Kee Thuan Chye, *The People's Victory: How Malaysians Saved Their Country*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2019. 288 pp. ISBN 978-981-48-2884-0.



In *The People's Victory: How Malaysians Saved Their Country*, Kee Thuan Chye tells us the story of a Malaysia reborn. It is the story in which the actors are Malaysians from all walks of life, a political story not limited to the actions and deeds of the politicians. It is the story culminating in Malaysia being reclaimed by *the people*. On 9th May 2018, as it dawned upon us that Barisan Nasional (BN) will no longer be in power, we, the people, were given a second chance. “A second chance,” Kee tells us, “to restore the rule of law, repair the sullied institutions, unite the different races, work towards prosperity, inculcate positive values, and make Malaysia a great and respectable country” (270).

When Kee talks about the *people* in the book, he is not referring to a group that was readily there waiting for victory to fall into their lap. The people needed to be made. Heterogeneous groups and individuals needed to be brought together into unity. Around what will these groups coalesce in order to articulate a united position? How, ultimately, did they come to represent the people?

Let us ponder on this question from an academic perspective. The answer can be found in Ernesto Laclau's (2005) theory of populism. In the way that it has been conceptualised by Laclau, populism – rescued by him from the “disdainful rejection” (x) that mainstream social sciences has accorded it – is proposed as a means to understand how contemporary political alliances are formed. Among others, one of the features of the formation of such alliances is an investment in a *leader* as the main factor in bringing together disparate political forces into a moment of unity. In the case of Kee's story, as it turned out, it was not only the question of what would bring together those forces in the Malaysian opposition in the run up to the fourteenth general election (GE14). It was also the question of who. Before the year 2014, mention this person's name as the leader of the opposition alliance to face up against the excesses of UMNO and BN and we should be prepared to be scoffed at. Back then, by any stretch of the imagination, it was not going to be possible to see this person leading the charge against those excesses, many of which were results of the legacy from his 22-year rule from 1981-2003. This person is Mahathir Mohamad. Towards GE14, we saw former enemies, many of whom were themselves victims of his autocratic ways, rallying around his leadership.

As told by Kee in the book, the journey towards the people's victory was an arduous one. Along the way, there was despair (Act 1). But then there was also hope (Act 2). Finally, there was euphoria (Act 3).

In Act 1, Kee tells us the story of crushed hopes. The thirteenth general election (GE13) in 2013 was meant to be the time when BN would be toppled. There was already a united opposition alliance in the form of Pakatan Rakyat (PR), comprising Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). There was also the momentum that was carried over from the watershed twelfth general election (GE12) in 2008, when BN was denied 2/3 majority in Parliament and lost five states to PR. BN had looked like a spent political force, with its many transgressions and excesses exposed in the public eye. However, in the run up to GE13, Kee narrates how BN played “its old tricks of cajoling, bribing and threatening the electorate instead of attending to its own flaws” (17), still with the help of Mahathir then. PR lost GE13 despite the highest ever voter turnout in history.

However, Kee explains, “(d)espair turned to hope for the people on July 2, 2015.” Act 2 narrates this story of hope. For Kee, hope came in the form of the controversy surrounding 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB). This consequently led to allegations of the Prime Minister Najib Razak's role in the scandal, including his receipt of money into his personal bank accounts amounting to RM2.6 billion. BN, which until then was looking like it was regaining public support under Najib, experienced a rupture within its ranks. The Deputy Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, and the Attorney General, Abdul Gani Patail, along with a number of high-ranking others from the political and

bureaucratic executives, were sacked. Of course, as it turned out in the GE14 results, this was a rupture beyond repair. However, in the meantime, Najib managed to manoeuvre and steady the UMNO-BN ship. He was cleared of wrongdoing by Abdul Gani's successor, Mohamed Apandi Ali. Nonetheless, this was also the moment when Mahathir, who was already showing signs of turning against Najib before the 1MDB scandal became a matter of public discussion, came out in full support of removing Najib and his "kleptocratic" (174) government from office. This led to the Citizens' Declaration, which brought together leaders and politicians from all sides of the political divide in a show of unity against Najib's rule. Mahathir was not only the "comeback kid" (191), he also embraced the people who worked against him previously as well as political methods which would have been crushed under his own rule; he visited his long-time nemesis, Anwar Ibrahim, in a courtroom on 5th September 2016, and attended the Bersih rally on 19th November 2019. Crucially, with him on board, the newly formed opposition alliance, Pakatan Harapan (PH), believed that they now possessed the means to bring about a "Malay Tsunami," a phrase coined by Liew Chin Tong (215). Mahathir's party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU), was charged with taking on UMNO and bringing home the Malay votes for PH.

Next, Act 3. PH's strategy worked, as we all know. For the first time in its history, Malaysia saw a change in government through the democratic will of the people. It was achieved against all the odds. Surveys and polls were predicting a BN victory. It was truly, as the theme of Act 3 indicates, a euphoric moment. It was, to Kee, much more than a Malay Tsunami. It was a "*tsunami rakyat*" (272), "a victory of the Malaysian people" (285).

In *The People's Victory*, Kee not only highlights the more heart-warming and empowering aspects of Malaysia's journey towards change from 2008 (GE12) until 2018 (GE14). He does not only tell us of the myriad of things that UMNO-BN did to maintain power and break down the opposition. Along the way, we are also told of the many setbacks and dilemmas from within the dynamics of opposition politics that those who were fighting for change had to contend with. The chaos surrounding the Kajang Move in 2014, which laid bare frictions within PKR, is one example of the setbacks (90-104). The biggest dilemma remains to be Mahathir's entry into opposition politics leading to his installation as Prime Minister for a second time on 10th May 2019. Kee highlights the many voices from within the civil society which were suspicious of Mahathir's intention in getting involved in the move to remove Najib and his government (191-92). Ultimately pragmatism prevailed, Mahathir was embraced by the opposition team and the rest is, of course, history. However, since it has been a year since GE14, it would be interesting to know whether Kee feels that Mahathir has lived up to his end of the bargain.

Altogether, as the book's blurb suggests, *The People's Victory* has indeed honoured the concerned citizens who fought the good fight and contributed in ways big and small to bring about a "new" Malaysia. Moving forward, I am sure that Kee will agree that down the line, the good fight will have to be fought even harder, to make sure that the new Malaysia will stay on the path of change and reform.

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