

Kee Thuan Chye, *March 8: The Day Malaysia Woke Up*. Kuala Lumpur: Marshall Cavendish, 2008. 324pp. ISBN 978-967-3035-11-3.

The first immediate feeling I got about *March 8: The Day Malaysia Woke Up* (henceforth *March 8*) as I quickly skimmed through the 300-something pages was that it is another typical assemblage of political laments by Opposition supporters dissatisfied with the BN (Barisan National or National Front) Government and want to further damage the latter's already badly-fractured image while putting their newly-elected PR (Pakatan Rakyat or People's Alliance) leaders on a pedestal. But upon reading *March 8* page-by-page afterwards, I realised that I was wrong. On the contrary, this collection of essays represents the previously unheard voices of concerned Malaysians who genuinely love their country and want to see it prosper. They write, not as Indians or Chinese or Malays, but as Malaysians. They write, not as supporters of DAP (Democratic Action Party) or PAS (Party Islam SeMalaysia or Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party) or PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat or People's Justice Party), but as valiant citizens of their beloved country. They neither blindly support the Opposition nor sightlessly oppose the Government. They simply want to make things right. Hence, although on the surface level this book does seem to be all about politics, on a more profound and deep-rooted level, I judge it to be first and foremost patriotic in nature.

Kee Thuan Chye is a name not unfamiliar in the Malaysian literary scene. His plays that include *1984 Here and Now*, *The Big Purge* and *We Could **** You, Mr Birch* are known for highlighting sensitive and controversial issues confronting the Malaysian society for decades long – real issues that have become a rotten nuisance deeply ingrained within many Malaysian hearts but are very rarely purged out in the open. That was true, of course, prior to March 8 when Malaysians, perhaps for the first time in 51 years, left behind their racial, cultural, and religious differences, and voted for a change. In one voice, the Malaysians denied BN Government the two-thirds majority in the 12th general election, for the first time ever after five decades of independence. March 8, even to the most politically ignorant Malaysians, will be remembered as the day that Malaysians woke up to a new dawn. This is what this book is about.

Divided into PART ONE and PART TWO with the themes CHANGE and HOPE, *March 8* contains a solid collection of 33 articles, not by politicians with their own political agenda, but by professional elites across different fields: the academia, journalism, literature, politics, economics, law, and engineering. These essays deal with many different aspects of the Malaysian life, but with one common goal in mind: how Malaysians could come together and create a better future for all Malaysians. The major concerns that surround most discussions are the serious defects and lack of transparency in the Malaysian judiciary system and the Government-controlled mainstream media that feature lopsided news, which many hope will soon change.

Another core issue that ties the whole book together is Malaysians' demand for basic human rights including the freedom of expression and for equal opportunities to all Malaysians especially in education, in that scholarships should be awarded to

deserving students on the basis of merit, not race. Among the strongest voices that condemn the New Economic Policy (NEP) come from the so-called Bumiputeras themselves who view it as the Government's dangling bait for votes from the un-informed and less learned Malays, whereas in reality NEP brings little benefit to them, if at all. Others who talk about NEP also insist that all underprivileged Malaysians should be assisted, not just underprivileged *Malays*. Many well-meaning Malaysians are waiting for the day to come when they are no longer identified as *Melayu, Cina, Indian, dan Lain-lain*, or as Bumis or non-Bumis. Other recurring criticisms towards the federal government include its inability to solve ever-growing problems like the incompetent management of the country's resources, inefficient public transportations system, and various social plights faced by the general public that are counterproductive for the country's growth. There is also a strong urge for the government to revamp the Malaysian education system.

Equally important are the eight medium-length interviews that cover a wide range of boiling-hot topics related to national policies, including NEP, Internal Security Act (ISA), Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), the Judicial Appointments Commission and a two-party system government. Among the interviewees are influential politicians such as Lim Guan Eng (DAP), Zaid Ibrahim (UMNO¹), Dr S. Subramaniam (MIC²), and Husam Musa (PAS). But perhaps the hottest and most hard-hitting one was the super-long 29-page interview with the daredevil political activist Raja Petra Kamarudin entitled "How Big are Your Balls?" The remaining seven interviews are generally successful, but Kee appears to be slightly provocative in his role as the interviewer when interviewing pro-Government representatives, Dr S. Subramaniam and Zaid Ibrahim, where the interviewees seem to be pinned down into a corner by some of Kee's questions.

PART TWO: HOPE opens with "One Hundred-Odd Days After March 8" – a compilation of political developments after March 8 presented in a chronological timeline. This is immediately followed by an evocative piece on the people's celebration of Anwar Ibrahim's end of six-year prison sentence and five-year ban from active politics, which symbolises hope, entitled "Anwar's Coming-Out Party" by Toh Seow Beng. Toh, like many other Malaysians, sees himself as a frustrated optimist who finally dares to dream again, after witnessing what happened on March 8 when the Chinese voted for PAS and the Malays voted for DAP. This appears to give Malaysians the glimmering hope that racial segregation is finally making its way out of their lives. In this second half of the book, the writers express their concern that the most challenging time is yet to come, and remind the Opposition leaders to not be complacent with the people's support because they have an unimaginable lot to do to prove their worth. To end, "The Last Word" is reserved for the people of Malaysia from all walks of life to frankly and openly express their thoughts and feelings about the significant transformation in the Malaysian political landscape after March 8, as well as their hopes and dreams for Malaysia.

¹ United Malays National Organisation.

² Malaysian Indian Congress.

As a whole, *March 8* has been well written and edited. The essays are organised based on subject matters and each part connects to form a natural flow with the next. They contain the ingredients of a good writing including concision, cohesion, coherence and humour. An article in *March 8* begins with a quote from Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi saying, prior to March 8, “Do you think Penang people are stupid to support [Guan Eng³]? We Penangites are not stupid” (24). The content of the individual essays is dense but brief and focused, many of which are in the range of 3-5 pages, and makes reading “heavy” issues rather light. Only “A Tale of Two Malaysias” features percentages on electorate votes, while other essays are relatively free from dry numbers and statistics. Collectively, the essays are poignant, pungent and provocative, featuring informative reports and intellectual discussions at the same time. But, above all, anchoring these strengths is the patriotic emotions that the group of writers convey to the reader about the day many of them consider the real *Merdeka* (independence) day for Malaysia. Nowhere have I heard nor read a good number of Malaysians talk or write so passionately about their country before reading *March 8*.

In “Merdeka on March 8,” Kee records with vivid emotions, “after having shed tears of joy innumerable times” (34), that he did not want that historic moment to end as he sentimentally rejoiced the feeling of freedom, “Merdeka!” In the next piece that follows, Dr Ooi Kee Beng refers to March 8 as “the exhilarating experience of collective strength of [Malaysians’] individual decisions” (36). There are also unforgettable accounts of Malaysians admitting to “falling in love with Malaysia all over again” and more heart-warming stories by non-flag-waving patriots who care about their country and their fellow Malaysians, regardless of background or breed, colour or creed. And the spirit of national loyalty and togetherness I found in this book is one that no giant-sized record-breaking *Jalur Gemilang* (the Malaysian national flag) in any “world book of records” could compete with. Nonetheless, amidst the celebration of freedom or change or whatever they call it, the “woken up” Malaysians should constantly remind themselves that the time for lingering in bed is up. The day is still very long and the journey has only but begun. We have to get up and get going. We have a long way to go.

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³ An Opposition candidate, sworn in as Penang’s Chief Minister on March 11, 2008.