

**Kee Thuan Chye, *Can We Save Malaysia, Please!* Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2014. 296 pp. ISBN 978-981-4561-23-5.**

I trust that Kee Thuan Chye would approve it if I were to assert that Malaysian politics, at present, particularly since the publication of his last book which I reviewed in this journal, is marked by a dizzying increase in political bullshitting. Kee likes the word bullshit, even though the book under review, *Can We Save Malaysia, Please!*, does not contain that word in its title. However, this is not the only reason why I believe he would agree with such a characterisation of the country's political sphere. The way politics is being played out at the moment, i.e., the constant political bullshitting which is dished out to the Malaysian public on a daily basis, marks the crossroads at which the country has arrived. *Can We Save Malaysia, Please!* superbly captures this uncertain moment. And, crucially, Kee reminds his fellow Malaysians that a real change is long overdue in the country. At a time when their "political leaders are more bent on other pursuits" (18), it is up to concerned Malaysians from all walks of life to be the movers of this change.

*Can We Save Malaysia, Please!* brings together a collection of Kee's articles from his weekly columns in *MSN Malaysia* and *Yahoo! Malaysia* online news portals, as well from his bimonthly column in the *Penang Monthly* journal. The collection is set against the backdrop of the collective disappointment of reform-minded Malaysian voters, whose hope to see an electoral takeover of Putrajaya by a progressive political agenda as represented by the Pakatan Rakyat (Pakatan) did not take place after the thirteenth general election (GE13). Disparate, yet resolutely mutually anti-Barisan Nasional (BN), the opposition parties that formed Pakatan, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), spurred on by a diversity of forces from civil society as well as by the general public, all had to resign themselves to the reality of five more years of BN rule once the dust of the 5<sup>th</sup> May 2013 election had settled.

Until the time comes again for us to cast our votes, the BN government needs to be reminded that those who struggle for change shall remain watchful of its actions. This collection serves as a means to amplify such voices, covering a range of issues which are relevant to the lives of all Malaysians. These voices are divided into nine sections, each containing a number of essays addressing a loose theme. The first section, "Nation of the Absurd," offers us a macro picture of the happenings surrounding BN and Prime Minister Najib Razak's governance of the country, especially since GE13. Kee highlights, among other things, the fervent politicisation of religion by the ruling regime which has led to increasing pressure on religious minorities, and the increase in the use of

racial rhetoric by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the largest party in the BN coalition, to the extent of – despite it actually holding on to power – openly blaming the Chinese voters as being the main cause of BN’s electoral setback, both of which characterise the “besieged mentality” (23) that the BN has taken since GE13.

Following the broad outline that the above section has set out, the second section, “Racism Rules,” deals with Kee’s worries about the racist undertones of (particularly) UMNO’s politics and the willingness of its leaders and members to use racial issues as a means to gain political support. This includes, for example, the things that the current Minister of Home Affairs had been saying in the run up to the UMNO party elections, when he was vying for the vice-president’s post (70-72), as well as the penchant of some in UMNO for evoking the memories of the May 13 incident to garner political advantage.

Next, “God Almighty!,” the third section, as the title implies, brings together essays that deal with issues related to religion and its central role (alongside race) in the articulation of the UMNO-BN siege mentality. Of utmost importance here, as highlighted by Kee, is the ongoing Allah controversy, which has divided Malaysians from all walks of life, given the issue’s highly politicised nature, the culmination of which is its use by those in power to blame “others” of threatening Islam and trying to “confuse” Muslims in Malaysia. The fourth section, “Fiscal Fix,” discusses issues surrounding how the Malaysian economy has been managed by the BN government. Kee reminds us how, as a result of BN’s (mis)management, the Federal Government’s debt had been steadily increasing year by year. This, coupled with corruption, is of course a cause for worry. The problem, Kee states (142-51), is whether or not the BN government can be trusted to be the leading force in any fight against corruption, if there is already the perception among the general public that it is incapable, especially with the presence of dodgy personalities within itself.

Moving on, in the fifth section, “Save Sabah,” Kee also offers us his thoughts on the Project IC issue, where illegal immigrants were allegedly given Malaysian citizenship as part of a political scheme to shore up the electoral roll with Muslim voters in Sabah in the 1980s and 1990s. The sixth section, “Errant Laws,” highlights and details how political dissent has been curbed by the BN government through the use of the Sedition Act. What is interesting, Kee highlights, is how it is opposition politicians and civil society activists and organisations who always end up being arrested, while those who are sympathetic to UMNO’s ideological agenda are not, even if they go to the extent of belittling the religious beliefs of non-Muslim Malaysians, calling for burning of bibles, or publicly asking Malaysian citizens to leave their own country.

In “Justice in Jeopardy,” the seventh section, Kee discusses a number of issues related to the state of the judiciary in Malaysia. He calls for the

restoration of the Malaysian public's confidence in the Attorney General's Chamber, which is now seen as acting on behalf of the BN government rather than the country (205). He also reminds us of the late Karpal Singh's contributions and fearless effort to uphold the Constitution and the laws of the country, against forces that try to manipulate them to their advantage. The eighth section, "Heat on the Media," deals with the long-standing issue of media control in Malaysia. Kee's undeniable passion for reform in media regulation comes to the fore in this section. It is indeed amazing that, as Kee has highlighted, unless via the internet, Malaysians are still overwhelmingly forced to consume news from media outlets which say little beyond the ideological propaganda of the ruling party. In rare instances where alternative voices are found in the print media, they are harassed and eventually are persecuted, as with the case of *The Heat* newsweekly (245-253, 262-265). In *Mayday for MH370 and Malaysia*, the ninth section of the book, Kee shows us how the government's handling of the MH370 tragedy has given the world an insight into the workings of governance and public management in Malaysia. From high officials contradicting one another publicly, to bumbling and silly answers to queries about the circumstances surrounding the tragic event, we have, according to Kee, showcased our mediocrity to the world.

Kee, one of Malaysia's master polemicists, has yet again presented us a book which would get the thinking Malaysian to think even harder. He wants us to chart our own future, to imagine a Malaysia free from racism, bigotry and crookedness. He "bull bashes" not only the BN government, but also the opposition. For example, he questions Anwar Ibrahim's – who was still the leader of the opposition when the essays in this book were written – commitment to ending race-based policies should Pakatan come to power (79). He takes issue with Anwar's occasional preference for street protests over talks and debates on issues of national importance, as with the case of the introduction of the goods and services tax (GST) by the BN government (140). He questions the state of Selangor's Pakatan government's commitment to equality in its appointment of state government officials (81). He also reminds Anwar of his many involvements in policies and schemes while he was in government, which today have returned to haunt the BN, such as Project IC in Sabah (155-56). He also warns us to be vigilant of the possibility of an overture from UMNO to PAS to leave Pakatan and participate in its politics of besieged mentality (220). As it is, PAS today is on its way to return to its conservative and exclusivist identity of old, and Pakatan's future hangs in the balance. In the final essay of the book, "Apa Lagi Malaysia Mahu?" (288-92), Kee reflects on how much the country that he loves has changed over the past few years. Gone are the days when the diverse peoples of Malaysia could mingle, learn about and celebrate one another's cultures. In times when prejudice and exclusivity have set the tone for the country's social and political exchanges, Kee, through his

writings such as those that are featured in this book, invites us to join him in his struggle to reclaim his country. Invitation accepted, Kee.

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