

Book Reviews

Malaysia's foreign policy, the first fifty years: Alignment, neutralism, Islamism. By Johan Saravanamuttu. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, ISEAS, 2010, pp. 388. ISBN: 978-981-4279-78-9

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Malaysia's foreign policy is very much under-studied. Nevertheless, there exist several scholarly studies that have received commendable reviews in the past. Chandran Jeshurun's *Malaysia: Fifty years of diplomacy, 1957-2007* (Singapore: Talisman, 2008), subscribes to the 'great man theory' and singles out the Prime Minister's Department as the primary source of Malaysia's foreign policy during the period of the fourth Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. Shanti Nair's *Islam and Malaysian foreign policy* (London: Routledge & ISEAS, 1997) is an attempt at analyzing the role of Islam as an important component in the international relations of Malaysia since independence and its use to serve domestic political function especially during the Mahathir era. Nair examines Malaysia's role in the Organization of Islamic Conference, the United Nations and other organizations with reference to its stand on various issues affecting the Muslim world. Karminder Singh Dhillon's *Malaysian foreign policy in the Mahathir era, 1981-2003: Dilemmas of development* (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2009) dispels a single factor analysis and looks at idiosyncratic, domestic and external factors to explain Malaysia's foreign policy during the Mahathir era.

The various perspectives adopted by scholars found expression, to some extent, in Johan Saravanamuttu's *Malaysia's foreign policy, the first fifty years: Alignment, neutralism, Islamism*. Saravanamuttu's work goes beyond the typical single factor analysis and fuses intra-societal

and extra-societal dynamics to explain the intricacies of foreign policy decision making and implementation. To stop at such a description of the book is to do injustice to the author and provides only a partial explanation of the book. The book stands out as a distinct contribution to the understanding of Malaysia's foreign policy in several respects: One, the author provides 'macro-historical' narratives of the major trends in the country's foreign policy beginning from independence to the period of Najib Tun Razak. It thus provides a comprehensive understanding of Malaysia's international relations. Two, the author points out that the foreign policy did not originate from the leader alone but that a leader is bound by "socio-economic connectivity with previous periods of foreign policy" and "constrained by societal and economic imperatives both internally and externally" (pp. 184-185). Three, the study is theoretically informed. It employs a mixture of social constructivism and critical theories to appreciate, understand, and analyze Malaysia's foreign policy (p. 16) based upon a predetermined time frame. The framework is well-explained in the introduction to the book which many readers may find it difficult to fathom. In such a case, the author suggests skipping the introduction and reading the book simply as a chronicle of Malaysia's diplomatic relations. Thus, the book will be appreciated by the scholarly community as well as the general public interested in the formulation and implementation of the foreign policy of Malaysia.

Consuming 388 pages, *Malaysia's foreign policy, the first fifty years* is divided into 13 chapters including a 'postscript' analyzing the leadership challenges facing the sixth Prime Minister, Najib Tun Abdul Razak and a conclusion. The book is arranged around four broad themes of neutralism or non-alignment from the 1970s onwards; regionalism of the late 1960s which intensified in the post-Cold War period; globalization which has impacted on foreign policy since the 1980s; and Islam though present since independence but emerged as a primary driver of foreign policy from the 1990s onward. These themes provide the context for the study of foreign policy under the premierships of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Hussein Onn, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

The introductory chapter provides the theoretical framework of the study to cover the entire spectrum of Malaysia's foreign policy.

The second chapter analyses the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), better known as Wisma Putra, and the roles that certain prominent diplomats have played in policy formulation. This chapter may be read as a supplement to Charles Jeshurun's study which lamented the negligence of the MFA in studies on the foreign policy of Malaysia. The subsequent four chapters are improved and updated version of Saravanamuttu's earlier work: *The dilemma of Independence: Two decades of Malaysian foreign policy 1957-1977* (Penang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1983). These chapters explain the birth of Malaysian foreign policy which was pro-West, the crises the country faced leading to the quest towards neutrality, the features of neutralism establishing diplomatic relations with China and others, and Malaysia's relations with ASEAN which eventually resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). The four chapters capture the role played by the global, regional and domestic forces shaping Malaysia's foreign policy till the 1980s.

Mahathir Mohamad, who served as the Prime Minister of Malaysia for 22 years from 1981 to 2003, understandably received a larger space than others and is covered in chapters 7 and 8. Part of the information contained in these chapters earlier appeared in Saravannamuttu's "Malaysia's Foreign Policy in the Mahathir Period, 1981-1995: An iconoclast come to rule" (*Asian Journal of Political Science*, 4 (1) 1996). In any case, the author considers Mahathir an 'iconoclast' and not 'idiosyncratic' as labeled by Jeshurun and others. R.S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy in their *Malaysian politics under Mahathir* (New York: Routledge, 1999) describe Mahathir "as an idiosyncratic person within an idiosyncratic category." (p. 183). The idiosyncratic model is also found in Chamil Wariya's *Dasar luar era Mahathir* (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti, 1989). Saravanamuttu argues that Mahathir, in order to achieve his vision at any cost, initiated a series of policies under "an authoritarian capitalist political regime" (p. 185). Mahathir is also accused of severing the close ties Wisma Putra enjoyed with political leadership. Mahathir might have undermined the influence of Wisma Putra but he did consult senior diplomatic advisors before taking a stand on any international issue. Mahathir also adopted bold measures to confront the domestic political economic challenges from the onset of the 1997 Asian financial crisis until he stepped aside in 2003. The fifth Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, as discussed in Chapter 9, was unable

not merely to conceive and sell the notion of 'Islam Hadhari' (civilizational Islam) but was equally inept in administering the country. His amiable and gentle manner of leadership encouraged various forces to raise their ugly heads which ultimately forced him to hand over power to Najib Tun Razak. The question that was not answered nor raised was whether Abdullah should be held responsible for the instability in the country and, if so, with what consequences. Secondly, the author could argue that Abdullah interregnum strengthened the democratic forces in the country and thus unconsciously moved Malaysia towards a full-fledged democracy. Clearly, there is a need for a closer analysis of Abdullah's administration. Chapters 10 and 11, dealing with Malaysia's security and economic relations with its neighbors and others, apparently are out of tune with the overall scheme of the book. It is undeniable that the author has examined the issues extensively revealing facts not known before. However, these two chapters could have been neatly woven into the earlier eight chapters.

The concluding chapter, "Middlepowermanship in foreign policy," not merely summarizes the findings of the study but makes it theoretically sound. He "found that a critical-constructivist approach serves to provide important insights into the practice and conduct of foreign policy under the tenure of five prime ministers over some fifty years" (p. 345). He argues that Malaysia's relationships with its neighbours appear "to be a validation of the realist perspective that when push comes to shove, core values and interests determine the outcome of issues, conflicts and controversies" (p. 293). A couple of sentences later he adds: "Asean socialization has no doubt added a new dimension to a more constructivist way of addressing conflicts as evidenced by a predisposition, even in the most tense of situations, to settle for non-violent resolution of disputes and conflicts" (p. 293). In general, Malaysia's foreign policy in the first fifty years has navigated over the terrains of neutralism, regionalism, globalization and Islamism. The constructed foreign policy is suitable for small or medium powers like Malaysia. In this foreign policy, the author laments, very little space has been accorded to civil societies who have been clamoring for their voices to be heard on domestic and international issues.

The minor lapses notwithstanding, Saravanamuttu, the Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore, has provided a perceptive analysis of Malaysia's foreign policy dynamics during the first fifty years. The book is based upon considerable research and reflection. The data for this study came from a variety of sources including interviews with major players over the years and the wisdom displayed by the author in earlier publications. The author has argued convincingly for the model he has adopted for studying Malaysia's foreign policy. The book explains in a lucid style how Malaysia crafted its foreign policy in a rapidly-globalizing world without losing sight of its regional solidarity, and without sacrificing its Islamic credentials. The book is well structured and can be read by a broad spectrum of readers and hence it is well-worth having it on the library shelves.

Islam and democracy in Malaysia: Findings from a national dialogue. Edited by Ibrahim M. Zein. Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), 2010, pp. 201. ISBN 978-983-9379-54-9.

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A number of questions have been raised by scholars regarding the relationship between Islam and Democracy. For example, in *Muslims in democracy*, Abdou Filali-Ansary (in L. Diamond, M. F. Plattner & D. Brumberg [Eds.], *Islam and democracy in the Middle East*. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) posed the question: What is the status of democracy in Islam? He provides two possible answers to his questions: the first answer "accepts the strict identification between Islam and *sharia*-bound systems and thus rules out any possible future for democracy in this particular environment; the second answer hovers around the implied assumption that liberal democracy constitutes an ideal polity where