

Book Reviews

Malaysia at 50: Achievements and Aspirations. Edited by Syed Arabi Idid. Kuala Lumpur: Thomson Learning and International Islamic University Malaysia, 2008, pp. 374. ISBN:10:981-4232-90-4.

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During the last 50 years, Malaysia has made tremendous achievements in various spheres. International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) felt the need to document the achievements and aspirations of Malaysia. The result is the book entitled *Malaysia at 50: Achievements and Aspirations* edited by Prof. Dato' Dr. Syed Arabi Idid, the Rector of IIUM. Containing 30 chapters, the book takes a look back over the last 50 years and then looks ahead to 2020 and beyond. Contributors to the volume include the Prime Minister of Malaysia, the Deputy Prime Minister, cabinet ministers, veteran politicians and renowned scholars in various fields.

The editor deserves to be commended for coming up with such a compilation and at the appropriate time. His introduction to the volume is very informative and comprehensive. It is possible to get the gist of the entire volume simply by reading his "Fifty years in brief."

Eight of the thirty contributions are from the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, cabinet members and other dignitaries. Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in "Reflections on Fifty Years of Independence" recalls Malaysia at independence when he was 17 years old. Malaysia's independence, to him, is unique and praiseworthy because it was achieved without bloodshed thereby illustrating the wisdom and maturity of the freedom fighters. Through the years, Malaysia has managed to compile an impressive set of

accomplishments due largely to inter-ethnic harmony and stability. However, the tragedy of 1969 illustrates that the unity is very fragile. As a junior officer working at a government department, Abdullah Badawi witnessed the terrible events, which he calls “symbols of doom.” He took a vow not to let it happen again.

The IIUM President, Sanusi bin Junid’s “Reflections on Malaysia at 50” is highly informative revealing things not known to many observers of government and politics of Malaysia. He reveals the reasons for Malaysia’s success in managing ethnic relations including the sagacity of the leaders and the manner in which the “social contract” among the Malaysian communities was hammered out. He also describes the peaceful, orderly political succession and the resultant developmental policies, which illustrate the underlying maturity of Malaysian leaders’ balanced and pragmatic approach to nation-building.

The Deputy Prime Minister, Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak, writes about the kind of Malaysia he would like to see when it is fully developed by 2020, with emphasis on the hospitality industry. Mustapa Mohamed, the Minister of Higher Education, recounts Malaysia’s achievements in the education sector and discusses the challenges of the higher education in the globalised world.

Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, highlights the success of Malaysian government policies on women empowerment and gender mainstreaming. Dato’ Seri Syed Hamid Albar, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, explains foreign policy commitment to the nation’s peace and harmony. It is significant that even after the ascendancy of a single global superpower in the late nineties, the nation has sought to preserve a measure of independence and sovereignty in an environment in which most states have chosen to submit totally to the dictates of that superpower.

The former first lady, Tun Dr. Siti Hasmah Mohd. Ali, collaborated with Dr. Raj Karim to present a comprehensive study of Malaysia’s success in developing its maternal and child health services. Finally, the former chief of civil service, Ahmad Sarji Abdul Hamid, discusses civil service reforms instituted during his tenure to achieve efficient national administration from an Islamic perspective.

The remaining 22 chapters are written by scholars of local and international renown, each highlighting Malaysian achievements, in their respected field of specialisation. That Malaysia has been a functioning, constitutional state which upholds to a certain extent the basic principles of democratic, civilian rule receives attention in four chapters. It is clearly shown that in Malaysia, elections have been held regularly within the constitutionally stipulated time frame, that the elected Parliament and State Assemblies remain the source of legislation, that the nominal and real executives at Federal and State levels continue to formulate public policy, and that the Judiciary remains conscious of the importance of preserving its independence.

The book gives a clear impression that Malaysia's achievements during the last 50 years is most evident in the economic sphere. A total of ten chapters deal with the economic development of the country, showing that poverty has been drastically reduced, about 97 percent of the citizenry has access to primary health care facilities, and about 96 percent are literate. Basic amenities such as piped water and electricity are available to well over 95 percent of the population. The government, the businesses, agriculture and small and medium enterprises have all played their part in Malaysia's stupendous economic development. Significantly, the contributors have made it a point to show the linkage between Islam and economic development.

The volume also contains chapters on education and nation building, International Human Rights Law, advances in medical and health education, non-governmental organisations, and the contribution of the state news agency Bernama to nation building. The concluding chapter, aptly titled "Recreating a sanctuary for scholars in the service of the Ummah," is a lively explanation of the architecture and layout of the International Islamic University Malaysia. What is missing in *Malaysia at 50* are chapters on the achievements and aspirations of Malaysian youth and on Malaysia's successes in sports.

This book is unique in many respects. First of all, it is a comprehensive book covering achievements in politics, economics, society, culture, education, women, and health. Second, it adopts a historical approach, beginning with the pre-colonial period and ending at 2007. Finally, it contains contributions from statesmen,

politicians, civil servants, and well recognised local and international scholars. To cap it all, the book contains a short, crisp and to-the-point “Foreword” by His Royal Highness, Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah Al-Musta’in Billah, the Constitutional Head of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

Reading the book thoroughly, one comes away with the clear impression that Malaysia’s major achievement at 50 is the highly laudable maintenance of inter-ethnic peace. Malaysia thus has a lot to offer to other “deeply divided” societies. However, it is also clear that Malaysia must go beyond the maintenance of inter-ethnic peace to the achievement of inter-ethnic unity which alone will secure the future of this country. In other words, Malaysia should continue with its state building activities but must invest more heavily on nation-building activities. This is what Malaysia should aspire for and this message is well emphasised in some of the chapters and specially in Najib’s “Where we want to see Malaysia go.”

The book contains beautiful and attractive four colour photos to complement the topics discussed. The reader with a keen eye may spot several typographical errors which hopefully will be taken care of in the second edition of the book. This anthology will provide useful insights to policy makers, researchers, students, and the public at large.

Singapore-Malaysia Relations Under Abdullah Badawi. By Saw Swee Hock and K. Kesavapany. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006, pp. 103+xvii. ISBN: 981-230-378-2.

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