The Anatomy of Betrayal

Over 2,700 delegates at the Papuan Congress gathered in West Papua’s capital of Jayapura in June 2000 to proclaim their independence from Indonesia and call for a major historiographical revision that would straighten the history of West Papua. Indonesian nationalist historians have depicted the incorporation of West Papua into their nation’s fold as a transparent and uncontested process. Leaders of the 2000 Papuan Congress, many of whom have contested Indonesian rule since it began in the 1960s, were aware that their perspective had been written out of history. The Anatomy of Betrayal responds to Papuan nationalist calls for historiographic revision and argues that the transfer of West Papua from the Netherlands to Indonesia violated international agreements. John Saltford’s timely book examines whether the people of West Papua were ever given a genuine opportunity to exercise their right to self-determination.

By S. Eben Kirksey

On 15 August 1962, representatives of the Netherlands and the Republic of Indonesia signed an accord at the United Nations headquarters in New York. According to Saltford, this accord, which is known as the New York Agreement, explicitly acknowledged and guaranteed the right of self-determination for West Papua. The Agreement obligated the UN, the Netherlands, and Indonesia to protect the political rights and freedoms of the Papuans and to hold a referendum in accordance with international practice. Saltford argues, however, that Cold War politics and the interests of ‘big power’ meant that Papuan self-determination would never be considered a serious option.

While Saltford outlines the gross anatomy of West Papua’s betrayal, he does not explain how this treachery was orchestrated. Racism colonial discourse, for example, was one tool used by ‘big power’ for denying Papuans the right to self-determination. At the time of West Papua’s transfer to Indonesia the international community deplored Papuans as cannibals, headhunters, and Stone-Age savages: as a people not fit to govern themselves.

The United Nations Temporary Executive Authority (UNTEA) administered West Papua from 1 October 1962 to 1 May 1969. According to the preamble to the UN Charter, one of the aims of this international body was to ‘establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained.’ The Anatomy of Betrayal details how the UN ignored the obligations of the New York Agreement and violated its own mandate in West Papua, for example by banning Papuan nationalist marches during this period.

The author concludes his book by raising the issue of religion in nation-building. ‘Since 1999, religion has become another contentious element in the making of the Malaysian nation-state. As many Muslims in Malaysia are Malay, an Islamic state is actually another form of a “Malay nation”... It seems clear that under the present per- spective taken by Malaysia, both ethnicity and religion would continue to com- pete for the attention of the multi-ethnic population.’ One wishes Cheah Boon Kheng delved more deeply into the reli- gious aspect of the Malay identity: the next Prime Minister will surely have to handle the question carefully.

Malaysia, the Making of a Nation

By Marie-Amélie Tourne

Malaysia, the Making of a Nation is the first in a five-volume series on nation-building histories in Asia. Defining nation-building as ‘both eco- nomic progress and socio-political inte- gration of a nation, i.e. prosperity and national unity’, Cheah Boon Kheng conceptualizes Malaysian nation-build- ing as an ongoing process with each successive Prime Minister adding a stone to the larger constitutional edifice. From this perspective, the author, himself a Malaysian national, reviews the lega- cies, responses, and roles of four Prime Ministers towards the various ethnic groups since 1957.

The book is comprised of six chap- ters. The first two provide background to nation-building in Malaysia and Malay dominance within the process, indispensable to understanding the country’s contemporary politics and political economy. Given the salience of ethnicity in the early 1950s, it was hard- ly surprising that most of the effective parties formed to contest the first fed- eral election for the legislative council in 1955 were ethnically based: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. That year, an informal ‘historic bargain’ or ‘social contract’ between the different parties was struck, establishing the political framework within which ethnic groups would henceforth operate. Laying the basis for sharing power, this contract also upheld the ‘special position’ and ‘rights’ of the Malays – Bumiputra (son of the soil or indigenous people).

The following four chapters devote themselves to the Prime Ministers: Tun Abdul Rahman, Tun Razak, Tun Hussein Onn, and Mahathir. Accord- ing to Cheah Boon Kheng, every one of these Prime Ministers started off their political career as an exclusivist Malay nationalist, but ended up as an inclusivist Malaysian nationalist. Each Prime Minister was influenced, above all, by the extent of political support from his own party: United Malay National Organisation (UMNO). When, however, their positions were weak, Prime Ministers had to rely on the other parties in the Alliance: ‘Tunku Abdul Rahman’s position was strengthened by the increasing number of the MLAs elected towards the Malays, Tun Hussein Onn continued this policy but Dato’ Sri Dr Mahathir first adopted pro- Ian lines to maintain his position against the UMNO. The UMNO was elected in 1978 and Malaysia is a multi-ethnic state. As most Muslims in Malaysia are Malay, an Islamic state is actually another form of a “Malay nation”...’

The ‘fact that all the four Prime Min- isters have been Malays has led to an unwritten accepted norm that the Malaysian leadership of the nation is biased towards the Malay community. Malays have used this position as an argument to support their goal of Malay supremacy — vis-a-vis the other ethnic communities in the political, cultural and social fields. For almost two decades after the 1969 riots, it has been almost impossible to raise the idea of a non-Malay as Prime Minister.’ Ultimately, Malay political primacy rests on the assumption that the Malays are united and that this unity and political strength will continuously reinforce Malay supremacy and dominance.

Over the years, religion became an increasingly powerful binding force among the Malays. Malaysia has maintained for some kind of personal identity as part of a group may partially account for this. By stressing that Malay means a Muslim government has turned Islam into a convenient tool in the service of Malay unity. Yet Islam can hardly be the driving force for nation- building – not all Malays are Mus- lims, and a more ‘Islamic’ State would alienate many citizens.

The author concludes his book by raising the issue of religion in nation-building. ‘Since 1999, religion has become another contentious element in the making of the Malaysian nation-state. As many Muslims in Malaysia are Malay, an Islamic state is actually another form of a “Malay nation”...’ It seems clear that under the present per- spective taken by Malaysia, both ethnicity and religion would continue to com- pete for the attention of the multi-ethnic population. One wishes Cheah Boon Kheng delved more deeply into the reli- gious aspect of the Malay identity: the next Prime Minister will surely have to handle the question carefully.


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