

BOOK REVIEWS

March 8: Eclipsing May 13

By Ooi Kee Beng, Johan Saravanamuttu and Lee Hock Guan

Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008, 131 pp, ISBN 978-981-230-896-2 (Hardback, RM55)

Review by Joseph M. Fernando, University of Malaya

This book provides an insightful and balanced analysis of the underlying issues and events that shaped the watershed 12th General Election in Malaysia held on 8 March 2008. It is a well-researched and well-argued evaluation of important selective facets of the general election.

The book, however, does leave one wanting for more. Comprising only of three main chapters, many aspects of the general election remain untouched, unexamined. The book is organised, perhaps due to constraints of time in rushing it to print, in an unorthodox way. It comprises essentially of three main chapters of medium length, each written by one of the three authors, all Malaysian studies specialists, and examines different facets of the general election. It is unorthodox because it does not begin with an overall analysis of the general election. Instead, it begins with a more narrowly focused chapter on the opposition strategies. This does not, of course, necessarily undermine its overall merit which reflects good scholarship.

The first chapter by Ooi Kee Beng examines the opposition parties pre-election postures as well as their campaign strategies. In the second chapter, Johan Saravanamuttu, a seasoned scholar of Malaysian politics and a former professor at Universiti Sains Malaysia prior to joining ISEAS, provides an overall analysis of the general election. The third chapter by Lee Hock Guan examines a more specific theme - the ethnic voting patterns in Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor. The book has a good collection of visuals of the general election campaign and some impressive statistical tables and graphs which provide depth to the analyses and will be an important addition on general election analyses in Malaysia.

The book should perhaps have led with the Sarvanamuttu's analysis as it provides a broader overview and in-depth analysis of the change in voting patterns and the underlying reasons for what he describes as the 'tectonic shift' in Malaysian politics. This would have provided readers with a broader overview of the elections before engaging in the more specific and selective themes in the book. In a sense the three chapters that make up this book come up a little short in explaining the outcome of the general election. Some additional discussion of the electoral patterns in several of the states and possibly several other themes (performance of some of the leading parties, for example) would have provided a broader representation of the issues and trends in the general election.

Possibly the most attractive piece in this book is Saravanamuttu's analysis which threads together a very persuasive argument on the shift in electoral support to the opposition parties from the ruling Barisan Nasional in the 2008 general election. He argues that a range of political, economic and social issues in the period leading up to the general election together with the Bersih and Hindraf protest rallies created much discontent among the electorate causing a substantive swing in the votes across the communal divide

to the opposition coalition of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) which contested under the label 'Barisan Rakyat' (later renamed Pakatan Rakyat). His well developed arguments are adequately supported with ground research and statistical data, indicating a substantive swing in votes to the opposition in practically all the states.

Ooi and Lee's pieces complement Saravanamuttu's analysis and strengthen the main thrust of the analyses and arguments developed in the book. Ooi's chapter serves as a useful backdrop to the central piece in this book although it would appear that he could have gone a tad deeper in his examination and evaluation of the opposition approaches and strategies in the pre-election period and during the campaign period.

Lee's piece on the ethnic pattern of voting, on the other hand, is better developed and has more depth in its analysis and is well-supported by impressive statistical data. Lee's research indicates clearly a significant shift in the ethnic voting pattern in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, traditionally a strength of the Barisan Nasional, across the board towards the opposition parties which contributed significantly to the defeat of the BN in these areas.

On the whole, and for the time being at least (while we await other scholarly works to appear in print), this book is an important scholarly contribution to the analysis of the 12th Malaysian general election as it provides a good and balanced assessment of the underlying issues and trends which brought about a phenomenal change in the Malaysian political landscape.

Swee Lian, Tears of a Teen-Age Comfort Woman

(Edited by Ralph Modder), Singapore: Horizon Books, 2008, 256 pp.

Review by Danny Wong Tze Ken, University of Malaya

To confront one's own past is never an easy thing to do, especially when the past was a tragic one. This is exactly what this book attempts to do. Written by a woman using the fictitious name of Swee Lian, the book relates the story of her early life in Jesselton, British North Borneo (present day Sabah), and how during the Japanese occupation she was forced by the Japanese army to be a comfort woman, a 'sex slave' to Japanese soldiers. The story also tells of Swee Lian's future husband, Choon and their good friend, a Japanese-American soldier named Billy Suzuki. The book also provides an insight into the anti-Japanese army activities carried out by the locals.

According to Ralph Modder, the editor, the story is based on an extensive and mostly handwritten notes compiled by the author and her husband who died in Australia where they migrated after their marriage at the end of World War II in 1945. The manuscript was given to a member of her family who later sold the copyright to Modder, who edited the manuscript and had it published.

The book is divided into ten parts, each containing several short chapters arranged in a chronological order. The opening introduction section is unconventional as it deals first with the ongoing debate on the issue of comfort woman. This of course is the contribution

of Modder the editor who tried to set the story into the larger context of the war in Asia. The second part of the introductory section zeroes in on the Jesselton Revolt of October 1943, a watershed event of the Japanese occupation in North Borneo. Her future husband, Choon, was part of the guerrilla force. Also in this part, Swee Lian provides some background to her society – including a discussion on the gender bias practiced by the Chinese in those days.

Part One deals with Swee Lian's early life in pre-war Jesselton, leading to the outbreak of the war and ends with the surrender of the territory to the Japanese. Part Two and Part Three deals with the initial stage of Japanese occupation. Part Four to Part Eight are the main chapters revealing Swee Lian's ordeal from being arrested by the Japanese to the time when she was forced to serve as a comfort woman in a Japanese military brothel. Part Nine deals with Swee Lian's escape to Singapore to join her aunt, Clare, who was her mother's sister. Also highlighted in this part are the sufferings endured by Clara and her family in Singapore. In the last chapter, Part Ten, Swee Lian talks about the end of the war and how she and Choon eventually migrated to Australia in 1948 and of their reunion with Billy Suzuki later in 1952.

Written in a most readable language, Swee Lian's story provides us with glimpses of three interesting dimensions of the past. The first is the image of old North Borneo that is no longer available to us. These are narrated in the early parts of the book. Coming from a fairly well-to-do family, Swee Lian's father was a Chinese medicine doctor (*Sin Seh*) of Hokkien origin, whereas Choon's father was a dentist. The book provides interesting descriptions of life in Old Jesselton: the Chinese migrants, the cinema in town, and a bookstore where books could be ordered from Singapore.

The second dimension is that of the tragic story of life and suffering of the people in North Borneo under Japanese occupation, including that of being a 'comfort woman' as in the case of Swee Lian. The book reveals many incidents involving locals who were punished by the Japanese, sometimes for trivial matters such as not bowing to the Japanese soldiers to incidents involving anti-Japanese activities. But the greatest insight is of the sad life of Swee Lian as a 'comfort woman.' The horror that girls went through as sex slaves to the Japanese Army is something difficult to comprehend. It would require someone with a very strong character to pull through; someone like Swee Lian who bravely confronts her own past by putting them down in writing.

The third dimension is the bits and pieces of extra historical information concerning the Japanese occupation that come through the various chapters. For a start, the existence of Japanese 'comfort women' brothels in Jesselton; something of common knowledge to many of that generation but which had been categorically denied by some quarters. Swee Lian's story confirms their existence. Another piece of information concerns anti-Japanese activities in Jesselton. Like many of their generation, both Swee Lian and Choon's parents supported the China Relief Fund. Choon was an active guerrilla. One interesting piece of information in the book is that of an incident at Tenom in April 1942 where a group of guerrillas from Jesselton attacked a train killing 16 Japanese soldiers and wounding ten. This information is not found elsewhere. If the information is reliable, then it means there was already in existence, an anti-Japanese guerrilla force in North Borneo as early as April 1942 and almost a year prior to the establishment of the Kinabalu Guerrillas in 1943.

There are some minor factual errors, especially those concerning North Borneo and Sabah (here the editor could have done more). Nonetheless, the book still makes for excellent reading. Swee Lian's story is one of the very few war-time memoirs that have emerged from Sabah. Now that the end of the war is already sixty three years away, most of those who went through war as young men and women are no longer with us. It is high time that every effort be made to have their stories told – some may be highly dramatic as in the case of Swee Lian, others may be less so – but all have a story to tell of their own experiences as well as to relate to us the stories of their respective localities.

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

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