Scott: Political Ideology in Malaysia
Contents

Preface vii

I. Malaysia and the Study of Ideology 1
   1. The Setting 3
   2. An Orientation and a Method 16
   3. Exploring Personal Ideology in New Nations 31

II. Basic Value Orientations 57
   4. Human Nature and Politics 59
   5. Man and Nature: The Struggle for Slices of a Constant Pie 91
   6. The Dynamics of the Constant-Pie Orientation and the Nature of Transitional Society 118

III. Democracy and Ideology 151
   7. The Sources of Support for Democracy 153
   8. The Nature of Support for Democracy 168
   9. Cynicism: The Tyranny of the Western Model 202
  10. Sources of Support for an Administrative Elite 214
  11. Reality and Political Beliefs in a New Nation 244

Appendixes 255
  A. Interview Guide 257
  B. Attitudinal Measures 277
  C. Constant-Pie Correlations 293

Index 295
1

The Setting

THE COSMOPOLITAN PYRAMID

The drive from Malaysia's modern, air-conditioned university outside Kuala Lumpur to my interview in the city with Ja'afar bin Musa takes a scant fifteen minutes. In that brief span alone any skepticism about the cosmopolitan character of this administrative capital is quickly dispelled. The satellite town of Petaling Jaya occupies either side of the broad, new Federal Highway leading to the city. It is barely saved from resembling the drab suburban sprawls of Western cities by its red tile roofs and the surfeit of orchids thriving on sunny front lawns. Here, in this neatly laid out residential area, live a good portion of the professional men, higher civil servants, and businessmen who work in the city. Distinguished largely by their comparative wealth and often by English education, Malays, Indians, and Chinese live here side by side and share common middle-class concerns about the education of their children, the installment payments on their new cars, and their domestic help. This class of industrious, educated, nouveaux riches is in large measure a product of the colonial past. It is this class, with its skills and learning, which for the moment at least is entrusted with the building of a postcolonial nation.

Not more than five hundred yards farther along the Federal Highway toward Kuala Lumpur live some of the presumably ultimate beneficiaries of this postcolonial society. They are Malay squatters who have established a small kampong or village on the higher ground beside the highway. Their poverty is mild compared with that of Javanese villagers in Indonesia, or even when compared with the lot of their rural kinsmen in thousands of kampongs scattered throughout Malaysia's countryside. But it is poverty nevertheless. Women dressed in baju kurung must fetch water from across the road in five-gallon tins secured to either end of a long pole. The kampong houses are hastily built fragile affairs,
for these are squatters, and one day they will have to move on to make way for some new building needed by a new Malaysia.

But already these squatters benefit in some measure from the new Malaysia. The Ministry of Labor helps the men locate jobs, the Welfare Department looks after the handicapped and needy, and the Ministry of Health tries to cope with the medical problems of the kampong. Long lines of neatly dressed village children—boys in blue shorts, girls in blue sarongs—dawdle on their way to the Sekolah Kebangsaan (National Primary School) two hundred yards down the road. The school itself is an unpretentious frame building with a small play area surrounding it. Boasting neither the air-conditioning nor the bold modernity of the university, it nevertheless is equally symbolic of the new Malaysia. Chances are the children studying here will know the Malay roman script and the national anthem before their parents. Their generation is the first that will be more than 50 percent literate and the first to be instructed en masse in the heady ways of nationalism.¹

That such benefits as these were not entirely absent in pre-independence Malaysia should not obscure the fact that the relationship between rulers and ruled has changed in a fundamental way. For the first time, the kampong folk have a measure of power, however tenuous. The mere giving or withholding of their votes makes a difference in the fortunes of greater men in the State Assembly and Federal Parliament. Their small measure of power over these orang besar (big men) ensures that services will continue to expand and that when they are forced to move, a new piece of land and building materials will be offered them by politicians anxious to please. To be sure, the chief beneficiaries of the power the British left behind are represented by the middle class of Petaling Jaya, but the kampong Malays enjoy their own modest share as well.

On the outskirts of town, a multitude of small but prosperous stores and restaurants owned by Chinese and Tamils cater to their daily clientele. The scene is familiar, for the Chinese, and to a

¹ Total school enrollment increased by over 400,000 to 1.39 million from 1956 to 1962, and the rate of increase has accelerated since. Moreover, the number of pupils in English language schools more than doubled, from 199,689 to 406,480 in that same period. *Malaysia, Buku Rasmi Tahunan, Official Year Book, 1963* (Kuala Lumpur, Government Press, 1964), p. 532.
much lesser extent the Indians, dominate small commerce and industry in Malaysia and, indeed, in much of Southeast Asia. Just across the road are the modest cement quarters built by the government for the largely Tamil labor force of Malaysian Railways. Originally brought to Malaya by the British, they, together with their countrymen who were imported to tap rubber trees in vast plantations or work on the roads for the Public Works Department, have forged a strong trade union movement. Through their organization they have wrested a share of the new nation's economic pie, as have their neighbors, the Chinese shopkeepers, who benefit from the increasing wealth of their clients.

Kuala Lumpur is a boom town in a boom nation. Construction gangs of Chinese girls mix concrete or scurry about carrying baskets of stone and sand for the new office buildings which rise on every hand. With the starched cloth sun visors they wear, they could easily be mistaken for a crew of welders who have momentarily tipped back their face shields. While the commercial skyscrapers on which they labor are the most dramatic evidence of Malaysia's new wealth, the construction boom has left its mark on more modest edifices as well. Across the street a Sikh cloth merchant helps hoist a bright new sign above his entrance, and two doors down the modern facade of a popular Chinese restaurant receives its final touches.

The prosperity that makes all this activity possible has come about comparatively recently and rests on shaky foundations. Who would have thought fifteen years ago that television sets would be within the reach of a modest civil servant, that those who then

2. The foundations of Malaysia's prosperity are shaky both politically and economically. Political problems will be examined later, but it goes without saying that any new nation set amidst the turmoil of Southeast Asia and troubled internally by communal tensions cannot take its security or stability for granted.

Economically, Malaysia has the best rate of economic growth in Southeast Asia over the past decade. Nonetheless, the economy is still largely dependent upon natural rubber for foreign exchange earnings, and the rising costs of production, coupled with both a downward trend in the world price and the competition of synthetics, do not augur well for the future. Replanting schemes designed to raise per acre yields and diversification into palm oil and other products offer some hope for the long run, but they do not appreciably affect Malaysia's present vulnerability as a primary producer to world market trends. Cf. Gayl D. Ness, Bureaucracy and Rural Development in Malaysia (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967), pp. 66-69.
aspired to a motorcycle now own a car, while those who hoped for a new bicycle now ride proudly on their Japanese motorscooters? Amidst this new wealth there is some uneasiness. A prosperous Chinese shopkeeper still takes care to fill his huge earthenware pot to the brim with rice each year—just in case. He hopes good times will continue, but he is not foolish enough to act as if they will, for he has a long memory. He recalls only too vividly the drastic fall of rubber prices in the late 1920s that made his father a poor man almost overnight. The family had slowly recovered some of its former wealth by trading in gold when the Japanese occupation forced them to flee Kuala Lumpur and take up subsistence farming. Even today, when he is rich beyond his father’s fondest hopes, he remembers what happened and sets aside enough rice for his family’s needs in the event everything else is lost. The war with Indonesia, the breakup of Malaysia, communal riots in Singapore—all remind him that his prosperity is a tenuous achievement.

There is a lot of money to be made in any boom town, but it must be made quickly, for no one knows exactly when the vein of gold will give out. The trick is to get as much out as fast as you can before the opportunity disappears for good. The premonition that a pain economy will return is precisely what gives this and every other boom town its frenetic character.

Che’ Ja’afar bin Musa and the Selangor Club

The Ministry of Information, where Che’ Ja’afar works at an important job, is just off the center of the old town. Across a wide padang, or green, from the Ministry’s offices lies the Selangor Club, a rambling Tudor structure looking self-conscious and out of place in its tropical setting. A brief decade and a half ago it was a spot to which Englishmen could retire in the company of their countrymen for an evening of dancing, billiards, and amiable conversation, free from the rigors of their administrative or business affairs. Like hundreds of identical sancta sanctorum throughout the once vast British Empire, it was not so much a symbol of racism as

3. Between 1955 and 1962 the number of private motorcars more than doubled (from 53,545 to 112,843), while the figure for motorcycles increased almost fivefold (17,999 to 88,207). If anything, the rate of importation has increased since then. Malaysia, Buku Rasmi Tahunan, Official Year Book, p. 528.

4. Comparable to “Mr.”
of public school snobbery extended to colonial peoples. It was only in 1952 that General Templer, a grammar school product appointed head of operations against communist insurgents, made a symbolic dent in the colonial social system by threatening to turn the august club into an army barracks unless Asians were admitted immediately. Today the barriers to membership are really only financial, and Asian ministers and higher civil servants pass freely through its portals. But ironically, that is all that has changed; the style of evenings at the Selangor Club remains essentially the same—only the members are new. Whether what has happened at the Selangor Club is seen as a credit to the British or a credit to the Malayans does not matter here as much as what it says about the colonial history of Malaya and the civil servant we are about to meet.

From behind an enormous desk Che' Ja'afar presides over a smallish room filled almost to the ceiling with old files dog-eared by countless reverential clerical hands. The piles of folders seem almost an essential structural feature of the building. The impression is given that if one of them were removed hastily, the entire ceiling would immediately collapse. Peering out owlishly through a slot created by two columns of files, Che' Ja'afar smilingly bids me to be seated and sends one of several office boys scurrying off to fetch coffee. He is a middle-aged Malay, and although he has risen quickly in the civil service, he feels frustrated by younger superiors whose very presence limits his future chances. Under the circumstances he has turned his thoughts to retirement and the quiet pastoral life he hopes to establish for himself and his family. The relaxed, affable manner in which he speaks of his boyhood, his job, and his political ideals always makes our regular two-hour interview seem shorter than it really is. He obviously welcomes this diversion from the normal bureaucratic chores.

If Che' Ja'afar were suddenly to find himself chatting with the former members of the Selangor Club during its halcyon days, he would not feel much out of place. Like the colonial elite, he is well educated, and what is more, his political ideals are entirely British. Even if the conversation turned to the prospects for democracy in Malaysia, Che' Ja'afar's comments would be quite in keeping with the company. In particular, he is saddened by

the opportunism of politicians, by the inability of the Malays to compete with the Chinese, and by the lack of civic consciousness and national loyalty among his people. "The people I work with have no fixed idea—we're all British trained. We think things here haven't reached the standard we expect. Maybe we expect too much, though."

His whole tone is one of regret rather than condemnation. Where the British might feel some compulsion to exaggerate Malaysian shortcomings to justify Western rule, Che' Ja'afar labors under no such psychic handicap. He and his colleagues would readily agree with many an Englishman's appraisal of democracy in Malaysia, but for them the appraisal is a cool-headed and realistic one in which animus toward the subject people plays little or no role.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Che' Ja'afar's political views, however, is the almost complete absence of anticolonial or anti-British sentiment. The same is more or less true for the other sixteen civil servants I spoke with, but since Che' Ja'afar expresses himself more explicitly than the others, I have chosen his views to portray an essential element of the setting for my later discussion. The familiar declarations issuing forth from Afro-Asian meetings do not speak for Che' Ja'afar, and he is quite clear about it. In his personal case, some training in England itself may help account for his views, but for many young men from British colonies a similar experience has had quite the opposite effect. When talking of the crisis in Southern Rhodesia, he speaks of the "low level of civilization" of the Africans and concludes, "I wouldn't want a quarter of a million whites to be governed by seven million half-civilized blacks."

While some of the racial myths of colonialism seem to have rubbed off on Che' Ja'afar, I should hasten to point out that he considers himself a nationalist and a patriot and is proud of Malaysia's independence. What is missing are the traces of bitterness one might expect to find—the standard diatribes of colonial rule. Instead, he feels the British governed Malaya "impartially" and even muses, "perhaps I was unconsciously pro-British myself." This comes from someone who gave serious thought to entering politics himself during its nationalist phase.

How is it that for Che' Ja'afar and others, being a nationalist
does not mean being anti-British or anti-West, and being proud of independence does not mean vilifying the whole of colonial rule? I would like briefly to suggest here that the cause for this anomaly is to be found largely in the nature of Malaya's colonial experience.

Malaya was colonized rather late compared with, for example, Burma, Ceylon, and India, and a good many of its constituent states were governed in a way that preserved, perhaps artificially, much of the precolonial power structure. The human suffering attendant on economic dislocation, which characterized lower Burma's colonial history, was much less severe in Malaya. Education policies in Malaya did not produce the large unemployed, alienated, educated elite who formed the core cadre of nationalists in many other colonial nations. With the exception of the Chinese, who by and large considered themselves temporary residents, the great bulk of the English educated were absorbed into the administrative structure of the colony. Finally, unlike India, which for the greater part of its colonial history was governed by an alien elite with an unshakable conviction of its right to rule, British rule in Malaya was barely consolidated when doubts about the white man's burden had begun to sap the confidence of imperialists. The relative brevity of colonial rule, a measure of indirect rule, the lack of overwhelming economic hardship, the absence of a substantial, unattached “shadow” elite, and the early loss of the colonial raison d'être all conspired to make Malaya's colonial experience comparatively untraumatic. The basis for large-scale bitterness just did not exist, nor were there many unattached intellectuals available to organize it.

The nationalist movement was slow in coming, and when it did arrive after World War II, the issue that touched it off was the British Malayan Union proposal, which Malays felt threatened their political rights vis-à-vis other communities. Inevitably a split developed in nationalist ranks, and a more Indonesian oriented, populist faction of Malays, including Islamic reformers under the leadership of Dato Onn bin Ja'afar, pitted itself against a liberal democratic, Western-educated group of moderates who drew considerable support from the ranks of the civil service. That