AREA HANDBOOK
for
MALAYSIA

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# MALAYSIA

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SECTION I. SOCIAL

CHAPTER 1

GENERAL CHARACTER OF THE SOCIETY

Nation-building has been the preoccupation of the country’s leaders since 1963 when the new political entity of Malaysia was created out of a group of former British dependencies, with the Federation of Malaya, which already had become an independent state in 1957, as the nucleus. This nation-building process has proved to be an exceptionally difficult one because of the plural nature of Malaysian society and the disparate historical, economic, and political backgrounds of the country’s major components. The difficulties have been compounded by several years of armed hostility emanating from Indonesia on the south, by the separation of Singapore within 2 years of Malaysia’s founding, and the unremitting subversion of a minority of Chinese abetted by the Communist regime on the China mainland.

The establishment of an independent Singapore with its predominantly Chinese population created serious political problems for the country, since it disturbed an already shaky political balance that had been established mainly along ethnic-religious lines. The separation left the Malays with a substantial plurality in the country as a whole while Chinese political power declined. After the separation it was officially estimated that the Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani components of the population were about equal in combined numbers to the Malay population, while other indigenous and aboriginal groups made up less than 10 percent of the national total.

In late 1969 Malaysia had not yet had a census. Precise delineation of ethnic groups was not possible, so that the proportions of the various elements of the population could only be estimated. There was no doubt, however, that ethnic divisions formed the chief basis for the sharp political schisms that led to severe violence in 1969 and that offered potential for further explosive reactions in the future.

Because of Malaysia’s strategic position in Asia, lack of internal political stability has been a matter of considerable concern to its neighbors, such as Singapore and Indonesia, and to such Western
allies as Australia and New Zealand. Meanwhile, the government has followed an independent course externally, limiting its political alignments to membership in the British Commonwealth and to regional association with its Asian neighbors. At the same time the government, despite its insistence upon a neutral status, has maintained determined hostility toward communism. Controversy with the Philippines over the latter’s claim to Sabah, part of East Malaysia, has been a complicating factor in regional relationships.

Malaysian national society and political values have been created only by welding together groups not naturally homogeneous. Cultural and religious infiltration, immigration for economic reasons, foreign economic and commercial exploitation, colonial policy, and the will for independence have interacted.

Unlike some former colonial dependencies, Malaysia won independence without violent revolution, and the peaceful departure of former colonial masters has left a political attitude different from that which some other colonies have inherited. Instead, antagonism to communism and the identification of communism with the Chinese have become more of a preoccupation, which has added to the dangerous divisions that exist between the Malays and the Chinese.

The country is divided into two major segments. The lower third of the Malay Peninsula, which divides the South China Sea from the Andaman Sea, a part of the Indian Ocean, is West Malaysia; the states of Sarawak and Sabah, forming a strip along the northern rim of Borneo, comprise the second segment, East Malaysia. Within the Borneo segment are two small enclaves forming the sultanate of Brunei, a British-protected state.

Slightly more than 10 million people were officially estimated in 1969 to inhabit the two major Malaysian segments, most of them along the coasts of the Peninsula and the rim of the island of Borneo. Both geographic areas are the product of Britain’s voluntary divestiture of empire, which was stimulated in Malaysia by strong political sentiment favoring independence. Separation of Singapore after Malaysia’s formation left the country with 13 states, of which eight were hereditary Malay sultanates (Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Pahang, Perak, Perlis, Selangor and Tregganu), one elected royal head of state (Negri Sembilan), two former members of the British Straits Settlements (Malacca and Penang), and the two former British crown colonies of Sabah (formerly British North Borneo) and Sarawak.

For hundreds of years, particularly before the discovery of the Western Hemisphere by Europeans, the Strait of Malacca formed a corridor between India and the Pacific, between the Arab countries
and the East, and between Europe and the spice-growing lands of the Orient. Malaysia still dominates the trade routes and the straits connecting these regions. The Malay Peninsula also formed a land connection from the straits and islands to the mainland of Asia. Modern-day Malaysia has two land borders, one shared with Thailand in the north and the other with Indonesia on Borneo. In addition, some of Malaysia's islands and those of the Philippines and Indonesia are located within sight of one another.

Because of its geographic position, the Malay Peninsula was exposed to successive waves of Hindu, Islamic, and European cultures. Malays adapted each of these to their own underlying Malay and aboriginal society. European influence included first Portuguese, then Dutch, and finally British. The British influence has left a marked imprint on the modern social order through, among other contributions, legal institutions, language, and the development of a modern civil service system. The country was subjected also to waves of Chinese and Indian immigration. While Islam retained its Malay following, the Chinese brought Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian beliefs. Thus many social systems exist side by side. For example, some affairs are regulated by customary law, some by Islamic law, and some by Western-style jurisprudence.

In general, Malaysian society is rural and agricultural, with the Chinese tending to concentrate in urban centers and Malays favoring rural settlements, fishing villages, and smallholder agricultural production. Much rubber estate labor has been drawn from the Indian immigrants, while tin mining and certain other industries as well as retail trade have attracted immigrants from China. With new emphasis on industrialization since independence there is a greater trend to urbanization, with marked changes in social patterns generally.

The architects of Malaysia realized that it would take much time and great effort to harmonize their country's ethnic and cultural diversities. They knew that the development of multiracial nationalism embracing the entire country would encounter difficulties in the ethnically heterogeneous components, especially between the Malays and Malay-related groups, which consider themselves "indigenous," and the Chinese, Indians, and Pakistanis, whom the Malays consider "immigrants."

The Malays have in common their language, their religion, and a basic Indonesian-Malay culture seen in the nature of village life and individual characteristics. Many of their actions and relationships are defined by adat, the customary law or "way of doing things" that combines Islamic law with ancient Malay custom and Hindu elements. For the Malays work is a means of living, not a
way of life, and accumulation of wealth is a goal neither for its own
sake nor for prestige. Cooperation is more highly valued than is
competition.

The distinction conferred by noble birth is basic in Malay society.
Within the aristocracy, birth determines rank in the social hierarchy,
and the sultan of the state is the head of both the government and
the religious structure. Royalty and members of the aristocracy are
his advisers, and this relationship is reflected throughout Malay
society in the prestige attached to government service.

The life of the Chinese presents a series of contrasts to that of
the Malays. The proportion of Chinese in Malaysia is greater than
it is in any country outside of China. The Chinese have relatively
few roots in Malaysia’s older past. Their primary ties are to the fam­
ily and secondly to associations based on dialect and geographic
origin in China or on business interests. They retain their own lan­
guage and sponsor their own cultural activities. Work and profit are
virtues of the highest order, and material accumulation and display
represent the primary means of fulfilling one’s obligation to ances­
tors and of achieving personal and family prestige.

The Indians and Pakistanis live primarily within the communities
of estate workers in West Malaysia, although some work as laborers,
clerks, and merchants in the cities. Like the Chinese, they tend to
keep to themselves, although they have made some inroads into Ma­
laysian life through the labor movement in which they predominate.
Most, however, use their own languages, preserve their Hindu, Sikh,
or Islamic religion and traditions, and join organizations to promote
ethnic interests and social life.

The indigenous people of non-Malay origin in West Malaysia con­
tinue their isolated life and perpetuate their own characteristic
culture. The indigenous communities of East Malaysia find it diffi­
cult to adjust to the comparatively more complex society of Malaysia
as a nation. They lack a single primary language, and local dialect
differences divide even those communities that otherwise share a
common tradition. Some of the indigenous people profess Islam and
some have adopted Christianity, but the majority still hold to ani­
mistic beliefs and practices.

Political control and offices of the federal government remained
in the hands of Malays on the eve of 1970. Under the 1957 Constitu­
tion of the Federation of Malaya, which was extended to cover
Malaysia in 1963, the form of government remained a constitutional
monarchy, in which the offices of the Supreme Head of the nation
(Yang di-Pertuan Agong), the Deputy Supreme Head (Timbalan
Yang di-Pertuan Agong), and the prime minister were open to