

- Transition Politics in Southeast Asia: Dynamics of Leadership, Change and Succession in Indonesia and Malaysia* BY YANG RAZALI KASSIM. [Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005. viii + 309 pp. Paperback: S\$40.95]
- Era of Transition: Malaysia after Mahathir* BY OOI KEE BENG. [Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006. xxiii + 183 pp. Hardcover: S\$26.15]
- Islam, Knowledge and Other Affairs* BY MAHATHIR MOHAMED. [Kuala Lumpur: MPH Group Publishing, 2006. xvi + 344 pp. Paperback: S\$23.63]

TRANSITION Politics assesses the dynamics, and interprets the results, of leadership change and political succession in Indonesia and Malaysia in the last 15 years or so. This book, by a former senior journalist who had been covering Indonesia and Malaysia since the 1980s, lends an excellent historical perspective on a subject that continues to exert its impact today in both countries—in both the way the political legacies left behind impact on the consciousness of the successor political administration, and the direction taken to grapple with the quest for effective political leadership.

Although the book is divided into two equal portions on the transition politics in the Suharto era and the Mahathir era in Indonesia and Malaysia respectively, this composite review concentrates on the coverage of that in Malaysia.

The Mahathir era saw the laying of new economic, political and socio-cultural foundations in Malaysia. One of the most durable and outspoken figures on the world political stage, he was the Prime Minister of Malaysia for a continuous period of 22 years, from 1981 to 2003.

The book dissects in detail the ascendancy of a new generation of leaders, led by Anwar Ibrahim, followed by the global economic disruptions of July 1997 that brought about the ensuing financial and political maelstrom in Malaysia, and the subsequent key leaders' jostling for power, political and economic leadership. It also goes on to analyze the pitfalls of leadership transition, and finally the falling-out between Mahathir and Anwar, that escalated into a *reformasi* movement. Its analysis throughout is sharp, and interpretation of its results to-the-point. In some parts of the book, it offers a blow-by-blow account of the struggle for political leadership and economic thrust.

Nonetheless, what seems weak is the insufficient scrutiny of the extent of damage to the credibility of the administration then, which spurred a more fundamentalist opposition to the Mahathir administration.

It was a smooth transfer of power from Mahathir to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in October 2003. What the author also fails to bring to the fore, is that towards the last quarter of the Mahathir administration of 22 years, Mahathir succeeded in alleviating some persisting social resentments by modulating some of the clientelist patronage flows. More significantly, Mahathir also achieved some success in infusing the basis of his leadership legitimacy based on single-party dominance and pseudo-democratic practices, with more elements of consensus-seeking practices. Mahathir indeed achieved some success in building consent in the broad mainstream section of society, leveraging on developmentalist strategies, which are astutely based around an all-inclusive Vision 2020.

It is also not quite successful in bringing out the competing conceptions at play in the contestation of ideas in the process of political succession. The book is also

repetitious in some various parts, failing to cobble together a more seamless flow of the events. A clearer re-organisation would have been beneficial. Overall, it is still an interesting account of the political drama of the second half of the Mahathir era.

How is Abdullah to deal with Mahathir's complex, massive and multifaceted legacy of success and failure? Has Abdullah found his own space and niche, different from Mahathir's more overpowering manner?

Era of Transition, a collection of Dr Ooi Kee Beng's previously published commentaries, provides one of the best informed analyses on the Abdullah administration's performance in the first 24 months.

In many of the commentaries, Ooi's analysis was lucid and succinct, providing the readers with the necessary historical background and some interesting anecdotes. In some pieces, Ooi was more suggestive. The main thread that holds the collection together is Ooi's emphasis that the Mahathir's legacy is complex and complicated, leaving the Abdullah's administration with the struggle to limit collateral damage, in areas such as human rights, corruption, money politics, the handling of political Islam, and key administration.

The rapid development under the Mahathir's administration created its own complex class identities, economic dislocations and social pressures. A number of pieces in this collection offer an insightful understanding of the contending forces at play. The book also introduces the engagement of new conceptions of ideas taking place within Malaysia's fast-changing political landscape. In some of the pieces, Ooi also poses some timely questions on the competing conceptions of what the future direction for Malaysia should be, although it would be more beneficial if these had been expanded further.

Ooi, in a number of the pieces in this collection, offers fresh perspectives on how Malaysia is slowly being transformed over the past 24 months under the Abdullah administration, and at the same time, highlighting some of the key challenges for the future, all in a rather mild manner.

In the last 30 years, Islam has become increasingly prominent in the public domain in Malaysia. The Mahathir administration had responded to politicization of Islam by the Islamic opposition party through various policies designed to out-Islamicize the opposition, to retain Malay support. This included a declaration in 2002 that Malaysia was already an Islamic state.

In the few pieces on Islam, Ooi does not quite manage to bring out the trends of how Islam has increasingly become a major symbol of Malay-ness. And as faith is inseparable from the Malay ethno-cultural heritage, the division between the Malays and non-Malays is widened by religious divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, creating pressures on the inter-ethnic relationship, and aggravating the inter-ethnic fracture, in the Malaysian society.

On the issue of Islam, Mahathir has been consistent in his opposition to Islam becoming a religion of rituals. He has been battling the politicization of Islam by the Islamic opposition party throughout his era. It was after all, Mahathir who brought in Anwar in 1982 to carry out the mission to give UMNO an Islamic ethos that would bolster its cultural appeal, to match the challenge of the Islamic opposition party.

Mahathir's more robust counter-attacks and more overpowering version of modernist Islam comes out clearly in *Islam, Knowledge and Other Affairs*, a collection of his speeches made in 2004 after his retirement. In the book, Mahathir urges Muslims,

whether in Malaysia or in other countries, to shed the preoccupation with ritualistic Islam.

Mahathir also argues that the inward interpretation of Islam and the refusal to pursue excellence in the sciences and other branches of knowledge cause Muslims to lag behind in development, lamenting that '[t]oday the Muslim *ummah* ('Ummah' refers to the community of believers—the whole Islamic world) is at its weakest [and] Muslim countries have not been able to adapt to the changing world' (page 7). He points out that Islam attained the pinnacle of its glory and success when Muslims were a people prepared to pursue knowledge outside the confines of religious studies and education, as '[t]here is nothing in the Quran which enjoins that the reading and the knowledge must be exclusively confined to the knowledge of the religion of Islam' (page 43). His constant emphasis has been 'the first message to Muslims is to seek knowledge' (pages 3 and 37).

In the few pieces in *Era of Transition on Islam Hadhari* ('*Islam Hadhari*' is generally taken to mean 'Civilisational Islam', a moderate doctrine that emphasizes the importance of progress, with an Islamic perspective, in the economic, social and political fields, as well as the need for balanced developments in both the physical and spiritual areas. It comprises 10 fundamental principles: faith and piety in Allah, a just and trustworthy government, freedom and independence to the people, mastery of knowledge, a balanced and comprehensive economic development, good quality of life for all, protection of the rights of minority groups and women, cultural and moral integrity, protection of the environment and a strong defence policy), Ooi also does not quite bring out the full flavour of the political rationales in bringing forward *Islam Hadhari*, to counter and soften the more aggressive Islamic revivalism, slow down the rapid promotion of a confrontational culture in the name of Islam, its politicization and the more aggressive push for an enlarged role for Islam in public life. Nonetheless, it should also be pointed out that Abdullah's *Islam Hadhari*, despite the preliminary study in Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas and Ng Tieh Chuan, *Abdullah Ahmad Badawi: Revivalist of an Intellectual Tradition* (2005), and its attempt to provide an intelligible meaning to the concept, is a generally bland concept, without much intellectual significance.

All in all, these three books are an interesting collection of writings that provide the necessary backdrop for a clearer understanding of the political legacy that continues to impact on the direction taken to grapple with the quest for effective political leadership, as well as the ongoing contestation of ideas to chart the future direction of Islamic revivalism, in Malaysia.

TEY TSUN HANG
National University of Singapore