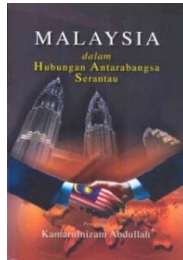


BOOK/ARTICLE REVIEW

MALAYSIA DALAM HUBUNGAN ANTARABANGSA SERANTAU



Author: Kamarulnizam Abdullah (ed.)
Book: Malaysia dalam Hubungan Antarabangsa (Penerbit UUM, 2010)
Reviewer: Farizal Mohd. Razalli, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

“Malaysia dalam Hubungan Antarabangsa Serantau” fills some critical gap within the literature on Malaysia in International Relations (IR). More often than not, the IR discourse in Malaysia pays more attention to the global analysis that may or may not thoroughly feature implications on Malaysia. As a result of this, Malaysians in general often view IR as an exclusive domain that discusses high profile foreign policy and international issues, remote from one’s daily life routine. This book, however, attempts at correcting this notion of IR being too exclusive by two ways; situating the IR discourse within a much more familiar geographical space- regional analysis and presenting the discourse in the Malay language, which helps to popularize IR discourse among the Malaysian society.

The book features the key theme of Malaysia and her conduct of IR regionally. By region, this book focusses on the East Asia region that comprises two sub-regions: Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia. The chapters address current regional issues that impact Malaysia besides observing analytically Malaysia’s response. Overall, it celebrates Malaysia as a significant regional and global actor- a rather rare attempt in the contemporary literature.

A quick look at the chapters’ contributors provides another interesting observation. It combines both senior and upcoming scholars in their respective fields. This good mix of authors brings in wealth of diverse perspectives that help readers gain a reasonably broad and in-depth understanding of the issues in question. As such, the book does not employ a comprehensive approach in analyzing the issues but rather it leverages expertise and unique approach of the different authors.

There are eight chapters including the Introductory chapter written by the book’s editor, Kamarulnizam Abdullah. The editor outlines some of the important fundamentals that underlie the Geist of the book. Albeit briefly, the Introductory chapter excellently spells out the main categories to which the subsequent chapters belong. Generally, one can categorically group the rest of the seven chapters into, at least, three separate themes. They are: 1) contemporary regional politics, 2) foreign policy analysis, and 3) regional issues and challenges.

Based on her vast experiences in Southeast Asian history and politics, Ruhana Harun presents her easy-to-follow historical account of Southeast Asian regional politics in chapter 2. Ruhana highlighted the clear divide between the communist and non-

communist Southeast Asia during the height of the Cold War. Such a divide saw countries in the region defining their foreign policy within the narrow ideological Cold War politics. The convergence of regional interests then was almost impossible. However, things began to change with the end of the Cold War as countries in the region became entangled in an entirely new web of regional challenges. Security issues are no longer strictly defined in terms of the military challenges but more in terms of non-conventional security challenges namely human security and environmental security. Ruhanas critically observes that as the security issues become more complex, there is an urgent need for policymakers to accurately understand the evolution of the regional politics.

Izani skillfully exploited the contentious issue of Islam and democracy. With the main argument that Islam in Malaysia is not monolithic, Izani asserts that the more tolerant and pragmatic approach by both the government (led by UMNO) and the opposition (significantly represented by PAS) in Malaysia has contributed significantly to the harmonious co-existence between Islam and democracy. He demonstrates quite succinctly the issues and challenges facing Malaysian domestic politics as globalization creeps into the daily life of the people and the government. Global phenomena like terrorism has indeed put Malaysian politics to the test. Having embraced Islam as the main pillar of the domestic politics, Malaysia lends herself to some criticisms that link Malaysian Islamic approach to weak democracy that potentially breeds terrorism. Izani's article proves this wrong and proposes instead that challenges like terrorism has only strengthened the harmonious relationship between Islam and democracy as both the government and the opposition reject radicalism and political violence that clearly jeopardize democratic values (which are shared by Islam).

Chapter 4 features the most talked-about issue- terrorism. In this chapter, both the practitioner police officer, Sail Hassan, and the established academician, Kamarulnizam Abdullah, jointly approached the subject through the rarely used local perspective. The chapter situates terrorism within the Malaysian perspective and discusses Malaysia's unique response to the issue. It revisits the Malaysian experience with communism and analytically explores the nation's success in defeating the Malayan Communist Party (PKM). The two authors provide three factors that make Malaysia more capable of dealing with terrorism. Firstly, given the country's historical success in dealing with communism, Malaysia has vast experiences to fight against terrorism, as compared to her other regional neighbors. Secondly, the relative political stability that Malaysia enjoys also helps in allocating the right resources to better strategize and implement the necessary policies to address terrorism. Finally, the preventive law- the ISA- serves as a good deterrence to keeping the country's political stability and peace.

Wan Syawaluddin and Ramli changed the mode of discussion from contemporary regional issues and history to a more focused foreign policy analysis. They tackled one of ASEAN's most delicate bilateral relations between Malaysia and Indonesia. The chapter centers upon several issues namely illegal immigrants (PATI), Indonesian foreign workers (TKI), and territorial integrity- the Ambalat issue. The authors admit that Malaysia-Indonesia bilateral relations have been experiencing various ups and downs. Right from the beginning of the formation of the two nations, Malaysia and Indonesia had been involved in a number of crises that saw the two countries being on the verge of war against each other. During the Confrontation (1963 – 66), for instance, Indonesian

army encroached into Malaysian territory that led to some local fighting on Malaysian coastline. But the bilateral relations became normalized when Soeharto took over Indonesia by military intervention from the former Soekarno regime. Syawaluddin and Ramli, in elaborating on the present issues confronting Malaysia and Indonesia, once again demonstrate the role of political personalities as one of the critical factors that govern the bilateral relations. Ascribing the stable bilateral relations to the leaders of both countries, the authors strongly view that the cordial relations at the highest political leadership between President Susilo and Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi are catalyst to preventing conflict or war between the two neighboring ASEAN countries.

A rather veteran scholar in security and foreign policy studies, Balakrishnan contributed a chapter on Malaysia's contributions to ASEAN's regional process. In this chapter, Balakrishnan divided Malaysia's contributions into two timeframes: the initial years after the formation of ASEAN and the present contemporary time. The chapter discusses the various initiatives undertaken by Malaysia toward ASEAN regional process which is neatly framed within the changing context of Malaysian foreign policy. Balakrishnan argues that Malaysia's contribution toward regionalism in Southeast Asia can be viewed in different perspectives. While Malaysia scores positively on several of its foreign policy initiatives with regard to ASEAN regional process, there are equally negative scores on the other initiatives. For example, Malaysia's sponsorship of Myanmar's membership in ASEAN is seen today as an unpopular decision in achieving ASEAN wide integration. Malaysia's success in its economic development, on the other hand, can serve as a good model for the less-developed ASEAN member countries to minimize their economic disparities. Balakrishnan noted that despite being faced with competing national and strategic interests, it does not lead Malaysia and the rest of ASEAN member countries to abandon regionalism process.

Chapter 7 once again features an interesting analysis on Malaysian foreign policy. Ramli and Syarifuddin critically analyze Malaysia's unique approach of separating politics and economics in its bilateral relations with Taiwan. Taiwan is undoubtedly an important economic powerhouse in East Asia. After establishing diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1974, Malaysia decisively severed its diplomatic relations with Taiwan in accordance with her recognition for 1-China policy. Nevertheless, in reality, Malaysia continues to maintain informal relations with Taiwan especially in the economic domain. The "Southward Policy" that Taiwan initiated in 1994 has brought the Island closer with its Southeast Asian counterparts including Malaysia. The chapter discusses several important aspects namely foreign direct investment (FDI), trade, and overseas aid. Ramli and Syarifuddin observe that Malaysia's successful bilateral approach vis-a-vis her relations with Taiwan has benefited Malaysia. Taiwan's economic strength has indeed helped develop and modernize Malaysian economy over the years. At the same time, such a unique bilateral approach allows Malaysia to keep her diplomatic relations with China intact and sound.

Faisal is the only contributor whose analysis deals with the non-conventional security issue. Looking at the nuclear energy development in East Asia, Faisal's analysis attempts at discovering some implications from such a development on Malaysia. The chapter reveals the rapid progress made by a number of countries in the East Asia region in setting up nuclear reactor as a new energy source. Malaysia is of no exception. Given the positive outcome from a well-managed nuclear energy program that feeds the

economic development of several regional countries, Malaysia is now seriously considering implementing its own nuclear energy program. Labeling such a program as strictly a civilian energy program, Malaysia aims at broadening its energy mix that will enhance economic efficiency by reducing cost and sustaining long-term profits. The chapter also observes that Malaysia's nuclear energy development can shield the country from the vulnerability of oil price fluctuations apart from reducing dependency on the depleting fossil fuel energy sources.

Overall, "Malaysia dalam Hubungan Antarabangsa Serantau" delivers what it originally promises; how Malaysia has been affected by some selective regional issues and the observable Malaysian responses to those issues. Perhaps more non-conventional security issues that confront the region namely food and energy security can be thoroughly explored in future series. These issues will, in the coming years, significantly affect Malaysia and the other regional countries.