



palgrave▶pivot

**Intellectual  
Conversations**  
Malaysian Writers and  
Thinkers in the 1970s

**Daniel Regan**

palgrave  
macmillan

# Intellectual Conversations

Daniel Regan

# Intellectual Conversations

Malaysian Writers and Thinkers in the 1970s

palgrave  
macmillan

Daniel Regan  
Northern Vermont University  
Hyde Park, VT, USA

ISBN 978-981-97-4813-6      ISBN 978-981-97-4814-3 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-4814-3>

The print edition is not for sale in Singapore and Malaysia. Customers from Singapore and Malaysia please order the print book from GB Gerakbudaya Enterprise Sdn Bhd. ISBN: 978-629-7575-30-8.

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2024

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: © Melisa Hasan

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.

The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

## PREFACE: HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL REFLECTIONS

As its title indicates, this book aims to convey the essence of a series of guided conversations that I was privileged to have with leading Malaysian intellectuals—predominantly writers, journalists, academicians, some artists, and other thinkers—in the early 1970s. Obviously, its origin has been a long time in coming. Why that has been the case necessitates a confession of sorts.

The long gestation period is because, when I began the research upon which the book is based, I was preoccupied with coding the responses of those with whom I had these discussions. For purposes of analysis, I was bent on recording whether their responses indicated full or partial agreement, or perhaps full or partial disagreement, with the particular interview questions posed. In proceeding this way, I was following the social scientific fashion of the day: a penchant for survey research, for aggregating responses to describe a collective tendency, and for displaying the results in tables with percentages or some other statistical measures. In this endeavour I experienced some modest success, publishing a series of articles in academic journals and chapters in edited books.

Proceeding this way, however, had its drawbacks, which I only came to grasp more recently. Poring over my detailed notes 50 years later, I was taken aback. I realized that my earlier work had tended to ignore the individual voices of my informants, which is what gave real flavour and nuance to the Malaysian intellectual community. This book, primarily

composed of descriptive portraits of Malaysian writers and thinkers from the 1970s, is a long overdue attempt to remedy that shortcoming.

It is not the place for biographical sketches of famous Malaysians or dissections of their works. That ground is well covered elsewhere, for instance in books such as the DBP's *Kesusasteraan Melayu Moden 1970–1979*, edited by Siti Aisah Murad,<sup>1</sup> or even in Wikipedia. Besides, in keeping with the ethical demands of research, I have taken some pains to obscure the real names and identities of those featured in these pages. Despite the passage of time and the absence in the 1970s of formal mechanisms to give informed consent, providing a measure of confidentiality seems to me the best course of action. What this book does seek to do is highlight the reflections of leading intellectuals about important issues of the day—including freedom of expression, their cultural lodestars, parliamentary democracy, and religion—that informed their creative work as well as their lives both as intellectuals and citizens.

My acquaintance with Malaysia started in December 1966 when, just 20, I began as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer at Sekolah Panji Alam in Kuala Terengganu, while my then-wife taught at the English-medium secondary school up the road from where we lived on Jalan Batuk Buruk. Two years later we extended our two-year commitment and moved to an inland rice-growing and rubber-tapping village. There, at the request of the Peace Corps and the local health department, we conducted a rudimentary house-to-house health survey over a six-month period. A year later, while pursuing post-graduate study in the U.S., I resolved that any future research in Malaysia would focus on those more highly placed in the social order. In line with the social scientific conventions of the day, I referred to them as “elites.” That research direction was intended to fill in the blank spaces of my own experience in Malaysia, where I had interacted mostly with residents of a small town, with kampung dwellers, as well as with local teachers. But part of that choice arose from a conviction that in most societies the lives of ordinary people and their families were exhaustively chronicled by anthropologists and others, while the ins and outs of those who wielded more power and influence escaped close scrutiny. I began with a small study of medical professionals, including doctors as well as bomohs and other traditional practitioners. When faced with a

<sup>1</sup> Siti Aisah Murad, ed. 2010. *Kesusasteraan Melayu Moden [Modern Malay Literature] 1970–1979*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

decision about fieldwork for my Ph.D., I eschewed the study of economic, military, or political elites per se, although I recognised their power to shape Malaysian society. Instead, I was drawn to the study of intellectuals. Probably my background as an English major while at university won out and swayed me in that direction. Later in this book I describe how I defined and identified those whom I subsequently interviewed.

My passion for this research was fuelled by an outpouring of Western books and articles at the time, making universal-sounding assertions that claimed to describe the very “nature” of intellectuals and the lives they led. A torrent of words about intellectuals and their roles had begun to grow, largely about the U.S., various parts of Europe, and the Soviet Union. The main genre was the speculative essay, mostly produced by intellectuals themselves, out of which a set of prescriptive statements and a composite portrait arose. These statements substituted a general image of the intellectual world for one more tempered by societal context.

The literature of the era depicted intellectuals as oppositionists, by their nature seeking to transform the existing order. Although presumably no observer, if pressed, would have denied their legitimacy-granting function, that was a minor theme. Instead, the image of an intellectual was of one who, as part of the obligation to create, rejected the status quo in culture, politics, as well as religion. Intellectuals were said to be members of an “ideological minority” (Feuer, 1974, 1975, 1976),<sup>2</sup> to be alienated individuals and, above all, to be “strangers” to their own society.

These claims sounded, if not outright fishy to me, at least worth examining. I wondered whether this master claim of “stranger” status was true. Apart from the question of whether that depiction was even the case for the U.S. or the UK, was it true for a society like Malaysia? Why should intellectuals everywhere function just the way their counterparts did in London, New York, Paris, or Berlin?

To answer this question, I undertook the research on which this book is based. Absorbing it asks you, the reader, to return to a time, 50 years ago, when Malaysia was a recognisable though quite different country.

<sup>2</sup> Feuer, Lewis S. 1974. “Definition of the Intelligentsia and Criteria of Its Separation from Other Educated Strata of Society.” Paper presented at the VIII World Congress of Sociology, Toronto, Canada; 1975. *Ideology and the Ideologists*. New York: Harper & Row; 1976. “What Is an Intellectual?” Pp. 47-58 in Aleksander Gella, ed., *The Intelligentsia and the Intellectuals*. Sage Studies in International Sociology 5. Beverly Hills and London: Sage.

The 1970s, while not precisely a forgotten era, is certainly an underappreciated one. In retrospect, the period from which the intellectual portraits in this book come was pivotal for the development of the new nation's aesthetic and political culture, as well as its literature and other creative arts. It is also noteworthy as a bridge, between what preceded and what followed it. At that time, at least one generation of intellectuals still felt the direct sting of colonial rule. And all were wrestling with the seemingly boundless opportunities as well as difficult challenges posed by the immediate post-colonial era.

Fifty years ago, seared within the living memory of leading intellectuals and others was World War II, independence, the formation of Malaysia, Konfrontasi with neighbouring Indonesia, as well as the communal violence of 13 May 1969. In countless articles, opinion pieces, stories and novels, speeches, artworks and conferences, intellectuals wrestled over Special Rights for Malays and the place of the national language, bahasa Malaysia, in daily life as well as the development of a Malay-language literary tradition. They discussed the role of Islam in a multiethnic and multireligious nation and debated issues of development as well as a new regional (ASEAN) identity. As well, along with other Malaysians they expressed fascination with but also anxiety over the emergence of a youth-oriented counterculture that had originated in the West.

In those first decades of freedom from colonial rule, Malaysian nationalists tended to assume that political independence would solve everything. Soon, however, it became clear that economic independence, from Western and other industrial powers, would prove difficult to attain. A new governing apparatus and political arrangement could not alter a worldwide market system out of recognition. In addition, Malaysia, among many new nations, faced the rise of new privileged classes, this time of local origin. Their emergence revealed sharp inequities in the social structure and made official declarations about economic homogeneity ring false. The new quest for economic restructuring and fiscal independence stimulated attention to class formation, foreign investment, and the activities of multinational corporations.

A critically important theme at that time, especially for intellectuals, was the question of cultural dependency and the quest for intellectual independence. It is not that Malaysian intellectual leaders scorned Paris, London, New York, or Berlin as centres of creativity in a variety of fields. A long-standing regard for Western intellectual endeavour in the arts, literature, and science continued to exist. It was, however, tempered



with critical scrutiny and a healthy concern for what transpired in Manila and Bangkok, neighbouring Indonesia and other parts of the Afro-Asian world, the Islamic lands of west Asia, occasionally Peking and Moscow, Kuala Lumpur, and the nation's own rural hinterland. Intellectual horizons increased in breadth and complexity and the cultural map of the world for Malaysian intellectuals became markedly multipolar.

Even beyond the foregoing, the 1970s have turned out to be pivotal in Malaysia's intellectual and political history. Its effects have resonated beyond the decade and continue even today. Highly public ruminations by intellectuals, over a need for a "revolusi mental" versus more profound structural alterations, foreshadowed continuing debates over the demands of societal change and presaged an era of politics dominated by Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, one of their own. And in November 2022 one of the intellectuals interviewed was named Malaysia's 10th Prime Minister.

Hyde Park, VT, USA

Daniel Regan

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks for research assistance in Malaysia to Omar Abdullah, Zaharah Ahmad, Divakaran Ceilia, Dino S. S., Sylvia Adams, and Ellen Berne. Special gratitude to Jessica, Adam, and Ellen for being there with me during the research.

I especially want to thank the many members of the Malaysian intellectual community without whose cooperation this project would not have been possible. Among those particularly hospitable and helpful to me and to those who worked with me during the research phase were A. Latiff Mohidin, A. Samad Ismail, Ahmad Kamal Abdullah, Ahmad Sebi, Asraf, Azizi Hj. Abdullah, Baharuddin Zainal, Chu Chee Chuan, Ishak Hj. Muhammad, Ismail Hussein, Jeshurun Chandran, Kamaluddin Muhamad, Kassim Ahmad, Khoo Kay Kim, M. Noor Adam, Mahathir Mohamad, Mohd. Redza Piyadasa, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Noor S.M., S. Othman Kelantan, Eric Peris, Shahnnon Ahmad, Subky Latiff, Taib Ahmad, S.H. Tan, Usman Awang, Wahab Awangtih, Zainal Abidin Wahid, and Zakry Abadi. I wrestled with the interview materials trying to make fair sense of the individuals and their viewpoints as well as the way they presented themselves. Of course, neither the individuals mentioned here nor any other individuals are in any way responsible for the interpretations made herein. Those are my responsibility.

Thanks as well to Charles Brophy, for his encouragement, support, and good advice throughout this book project, and to Rachel Wong, Publications Executive extraordinaire, for her expertise and good cheer. I am

also pleased to acknowledge Palgrave Macmillan's executive editor Vishal Daryanomel for his responsiveness and sound judgment, and the staff at Palgrave Macmillan for making the production process a smooth one.

And most of all thank you to Judith, Jonah, and Katie (and our pets) for being there during the process of transforming long-ago experiences into this book.

For permission to adapt and reprint passages from some of the author's previous publications, thanks are owed to the following publishers:

Cambridge University Press for "At the crossroads of civilizations: The cultural orientations of Malaysian intellectuals." *Journal of South-east Asian Studies* 11, 2, 320–334, 2009 © Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission.

The Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, for "Secular city? The religious orientations of intellectuals in Malaysia." Chapter 4 in Lent, John A. (ed.), *Cultural Pluralism in Malaysia: Polity, Military, Mass Media, Education, Religion and Social Class*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University (Center for Southeast Asian Studies), 1977.

Elsevier for "Does everyone want free expression? Viewpoints from Malaysia." Pp. 49–100 in McCormack, Thelma (ed.), *Studies in Communications IV*. Greenwich, CT: JAI, 1990. Thanks also to Emerald Publishing for tracing the winding history of this volume's publication.

Asian Research Service for "Portraits of intellectuals in 1970s Malaysia." *Asian Profile* 51, 1 (March): 77–92, 2023.

E.J. Brill for "The politics of Malaysian intellectuals." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 13, 3-4: 212–230, 1978.

# CONTENTS

1	Malaysian Intellectual Life in the Early 1970s	1
2	Who Are the Intellectuals?	5
3	Islamist Voices	11
4	Voices from the Establishment	27
5	Independents Reflect	45
6	Populists and Progressives Speak Out	57
7	Youthful Voices	73
8	Voices Outside the Dominant Media	83
9	Women Speak Out	91
10	Publishers and Impressarios Have Their Say	105
11	The Intellectual Community Reflects on Key Issues	115
12	Epilogue	135
	Index	139

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Daniel Regan** a sociologist, holds a Ph.D. in the field from Yale University (USA) as well as an M.A. in Southeast Asia Studies from Yale. His B.A. (Hons) is from Amherst College. Before turning to academic administration, he was a faculty member at the University of Pittsburgh (USA) for 21 years, six of them as Sociology department head. He has held academic administrative positions at Lewis-Clark State College (Idaho, USA) and, before retiring, as long-time dean of academic affairs at Northern Vermont University-Johnson (now part of Vermont State University) in Vermont, where he lives. His academic writings have focused on higher education, religion and politics, intellectual life, and Malaysia.



## Malaysian Intellectual Life in the Early 1970s

**Abstract** In the early 1970s intellectual life in Malaysia was lively, interesting, and, publicly, more amicable than contentious. Taking account of the changed political landscape, in which the Alliance had given way to the ruling Barisan Nasional, this chapter identifies some of the leading intellectuals of the day and their more memorable works. The lives of public intellectuals tended to be compartmentalised along ethnic lines, within a few key organisations: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the New Straits Times Press, the Utusan Group, Pustaka Dian, several universities, and one or two ministries. This chapter asserts that intellectuals tended to reflect more than challenge the prevailing outlooks of mainstream society. Many of those portrayed in subsequent chapters exemplify this moderate tone, alongside portraits of more strident dissenters. But for all, a government crackdown on dissent, soon after this research concluded, brought an end to this period of lively debate amidst relative calm.

**Keywords** Intellectual life · 1970s · Barisan Nasional · Public intellectuals · Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka

A half century ago intellectual life in Malaysia was extremely lively and interesting, but—in public anyway—more amicable than contentious and not always profound. Tun Razak began the decade as Malaysia's