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Preface

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Divides and Dissent: Malaysian Politics 60 Years after Merdeka

Preface

An awareness of continual but varied social and political dissent as an important leitmotif of Malaysian politics came to me around 2011 and 2012, while I was working at the Institute of Developing Economies, Chiba, Japan. In that period, seemingly different streams of social and political dissent in Malaysia expanded and converged in anticipation of the 13th General Election (which was eventually held in May 2013). To understand some of the impulses and aspirations of dissent, I conducted interviews with a range of social and political dissidents (whose details are listed at the end of Chapter 9 in this volume). Those interviews made me more conscious of the range of social and political divides in Malaysian society and politics that was too often reduced to a preoccupation with “ethno-religious divisions.” Between 2013 and 2016, moreover, the politics remained fluid owing to an implosion of the opposition coalition that had contested the 13th General Election, a damaging crisis of the regime because of worldwide exposés of corruption that allegedly implicated the Prime Minister, a split in the leadership of the ruling party, and unforeseen but radical realignments of the opposition forces. Preparing for the 14th General Election, which had to be held by mid-2018, the regime and the opposition were engaged in a “war of maneuver.” They did so on political terrain that was shifting with a range of divides and dissent.

It was roughly then, on the eve of the 60th year of Malaya’s independence, that it seemed timely to have a Malaysian Studies Workshop devoted to critical reflections by Malaysian scholars on “divides and dissent” as a leitmotif of sociopolitical life in the nation. It was at such a workshop, held at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, Tokyo, on February 22–23, 2017, that the articles in this special issue were first presented and discussed. Although the papers were revised for publication, the editor and the contributors have not updated or modified them to take account of the result of the 14th General Election of May 9, 2018. That extraordinary electoral outcome will no doubt elicit much comment and analysis in due course. Suffice it here to have this special issue stand as a record of thoughts that were honestly expressed before the general election. A Postscript to the Introduction has been added, however, to bring in summarily the extraordinary outcome of the general election of May 9, 2018, and to discuss how the essays in this volume may provide some guidelines to analyzing “divides and dissent”

of the future.

As the workshop organizer, I wish to record my sincere appreciation of the funding support provided by the JSPS KAKENHI Grant No. 25101004 and Grant No. 25101006, respectively coordinated by Takashi Shiraishi and Keiichi Tsunekawa. Many colleagues from different institutions were unstinting in their support and cooperation. Excellent preparations and presentations were made by the paper presenters, now the contributors to this volume, namely, Abdul Rahman Embong, Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, Azmi Sharom, Faisal Hazis, Maznah Mohamad, Simon Soon, and Jeff Tan. The workshop had two sessions for special reflections on Malaysian politics. At the first session, Donald Nonini gave an engaging reflection on his vast fieldwork experience in Malaysia. At the second session, the panel of Michael Montesano, Donald Nonini, and Takashi Shiraishi offered fascinating views of “Malaysia in Southeast Asia.” The workshop sessions were ably moderated by Motoko Kawano, Jafar Suryomenggolo, Yusuke Takagi, Keiichi Tsunekawa, and Veerayooth Kanchoochat. Boon Kia Meng conscientiously acted as a rapporteur. And Eriko Kimura, Akiko Ishikawa, Yu Ito, Miori Maeda, and Yasuko Takano very kindly and efficiently managed the logistics of the workshop. I am deeply grateful to all of them.

As the editor of this special issue, I would like to record my gratitude to Caroline Hau for her encouragement and many suggestions, Nathan Badenoch for kindly steering the issue to a successful conclusion, Narumi Shitara for her constant and valuable assistance, and Sunandini Lal and Ayano Yamakawa for their meticulous help in the final stages of production.

Finally, as the author of Chapters 1 and 9, I remember with much gratitude the generous funding and warm support I received from the Institute of Developing Economies in 2012 that started me on this project.

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