

**STATE-LED MODERNIZATION AND
THE MALAY MIDDLE CLASS IN MALAYSIA**

Abdul Rahman Haji Embong

Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya



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HAMSIH BT. MOHAMAD ZAHARI
UNIT REPROGRAFI
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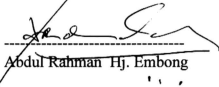
SYNOPSIS

This study, about the new Malay middle class in Malaysia first traces the evolution of the Malaysian class structure, and shows the role of the state as well as capitalist development in promoting structural changes and the formation of modern classes, including the new Malay middle class. From this historical macro-analysis, the study presents detailed analyses of the characteristics and roles of the new Malay middle class and its likely future transformations based on the field data obtained through the survey and interviews conducted by the author in 1996 (with short follow-ups in 1997 and 1998) among 284 Malay new middle class respondents in the metropolitan Kelang Valley (Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya), and two provincial towns in the east coast states of Peninsular Malaysia – Kota Bahru in Kelantan and Kuala Terengganu in Terengganu. The study shows that the new Malay middle class, which is still in the process of formation, is a 'first generation' middle class, i.e. a historically new class, whose parents came from humbler class backgrounds. As managers, professionals and administrators, they have experienced a transformation in their work culture and ethics, indicating that they have accepted the work regime of a rapidly industrialising society, something in keeping with the *Melayu Baru* work ethics. The study shows that members of the new Malay middle class possess high education, marry relatively late, and practise homogamous marriage patterns. Though their family structure is predominantly nuclear, they express preferences for large families and maintain close links with their parents and extended kin. In terms of lifestyles, the study differentiates two categories among the new Malay middle class: first, the most affluent new middle class fraction, which can be regarded as cosmopolitan urbanites, is part of the new rich; though small in number, they are very conspicuous, and have differentiated themselves from other classes by acquiring symbolic status items, etc.. Second, members of the larger fraction, though generally well-off, continue to maintain modest lifestyles, and have not differentiated themselves from the lower classes. The study also shows that many new Malay middle class respondents, especially in the two provincial towns, have become more religiously oriented; they usually attempt to construct communities with *kampung*-like characteristics in the new urban settings with the *surau* as a crucial religious-cum-

social institution, and many remain as folk urbanites. In terms of inter-ethnic relations, new Malay middle class respondents can be categorised into three groups: first, a small group that is more multi-ethnic and Malaysian in their outlook and ways of life; an equally small group that does not have social circles from other ethnic groups; and the third, a larger group, which falls somewhere in between. The study also shows that the political culture of the new Malay middle class is rather complex and far from monolithic, reflecting acquiescence and loyalty to state authority and leadership on one hand, and dissidence and opposition on the other.

Pengakuan

Dengan ini saya mengaku bahawa kajian ini adalah asli dan tidak pernah dikemukakan pada mana-mana universiti atau institusi untuk mendapatkan ijazah Doktor Falsafah.



Abdul Rahman Hj. Embong

Februari 1999

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My study of the new Malay middle class has come to fruition via a circuitous route. In my days as a young lecturer in the early 1970s, I studied and wrote about the peasantry, the working class and intellectuals in the midst of change. Peasants, fishermen and worker-squatters were the most popular theme in research and writing of the period, when Malaysia was still primarily agricultural and was just embarking upon rapid urbanization and export-led industrialization under the New Economic Policy. One of the few studies of the Malay middle class then was by Nordin Selat, with his focus on the administrative middle class. However, things have changed since then as the various chapters in my study attempt to show. Malaysia has become a modern and rapidly industrialising country, with bustling cities and towns. Unlike during colonial times, the peasants and workers of yesteryear have produced many children who no longer continue their parents' occupations as literate or better peasants, fishermen or workers, but have instead become middle class professionals and managers as well as entrepreneurs who are playing important roles in Malaysia's development and have become an important theme of social research. They are now very conspicuous in cities and towns in Malaysia. I thus found study of the new Malay middle class to be timely and necessary.

Though I was a university lecturer for about four years in the early 1970s, I was out of academia and the country for eighteen years from 1975 to 1992, and only rejoined academia in 1993. I am thus very much a self-taught person, but am greatly indebted to many colleagues and friends for my intellectual and academic life. Having been out of academia for almost two decades, I would not have undertaken and completed this study had it not been for the urgings and support of numerous friends, whose names are too many to be listed. A few, however, need to be mentioned, in particular, my current supervisor, Professor Jomo K.S., of the Faculty of Economics and Administration, University of Malaya whose unflagging support has been most appreciated; my first supervisor, Professor Wan Zawawi Ibrahim, with whom I started in 1995, moved from the University of Malaya to Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) from January 1998; my colleagues and friends -- Ishak, Halim, Noi, Shamsul, Hairi, Samad, Rustam, Kamaruddin, Rahimah and many others -- at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and elsewhere, with whom I have worked and traded ideas, criticisms, recycled jokes, etc.. I also would like to place on record a big 'Terima Kasih' to Nor Hayati Sa'at, who has been most helpful in providing me with technical assistance in the last four years.

Doing a PhD on a part time basis while struggling for a living is no easy matter. I am very fortunate for having by my side, Suraya, who has always given me staunch support and encouragement in her own simple ways. I am also thankful to Azrian, our only child, whose distraction and inquisitive mind, not befitting his age, often provided me welcome relief from the otherwise onerous task of poring over materials and writing drafts of the manuscript.

Social scientists, including sociologists, everywhere have conducted research and presented findings and 'discoveries'. But do they come out with something

novel? The words of the well-known American sociologist, Robert K. Merton, cross my mind when reflecting on this issue. He reminisced that a sociologist is regarded as someone who spends thousands of dollars discovering something which everyone already knew; but if he discovers something which was not 'known', then there is a refusal to believe the findings, since 'common sense' decrees that it cannot be true. I do not know if the findings and conclusions of my study fall under Merton's category of stating the obvious, or of making 'unbelievable' claims. I leave it to the wise judgement of the reader to decide which.

Abdul Rahman Embong
Taman Kajang Jaya
Selangor

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GLOSSARY

Balik kampung

Literally meaning 'return to home village', a cultural practice of returning to home village or town during cultural festivals, and other occasions to visit parents and relatives

Bumiputera

Literally meaning 'sons of the soil', referring to Malays and other indigenous groups in Malaysia

Class

A highly contested concept in sociology. In this study, it is taken to mean social formations defined in terms of their position in relation to ownership of the means of production

Class, capitalist

The class that owns the means of production and command power over labour

Class, middle

The social class straddling the middle position between the capitalist class on the one hand and the working class on the other. Its members do not own the means of production, or only possess some capital, but they possess qualifications and technical skills. The middle class contains three class fractions, viz. the new middle class, the old middle class, and the marginal middle class.

Class, new middle

The upper middle class fraction comprising professionals, managers and administrators who have high qualifications and technical skills

Class, old middle

The middle class fraction with some capital, comprising small proprietors and the self-employed in the private sector such as shopkeepers, restaurant operators and other small businessmen

Class, marginal middle

The lower middle class fraction comprising lower-level white-collar employees such as non-graduate school teachers, clerks, nurses, administrative assistants, etc.

Class, working

The class that neither has capital nor high qualifications and sophisticated skills, but has labour power to sell to capitalists in return for wages

Dakwah

Muslim missionary activity to spread the message of Islam

Folk urbanites

Modern urban-dwellers whose lifestyles are relatively modest, with relatively strong family- and community orientation, rather than being cosmopolitan, individualistic and isolated from kin and community. Culturally, 'folk urbanites' – though living in modern urban settings -- tend to operate within the domain of their cultural values and religious practices.

Gotong royong

Mutual help, a traditional form of cooperation among Malay villagers, especially when performing tasks involving a lot of physical labour

Kampung-like urban community

A community or a local social system in an urban setting whose members generally have characteristics of 'folk urbanites'. The social relationships established within such a community are normally *surau*-based, with members knowing each other personally and practising *gotong royong* or mutual help especially when holding important social functions.

Haj

Pilgrimage to Mecca to fulfill Islam's fifth pillar performed in Zulhijjah, the twelfth month in the Muslim calendar

Hari Raya (Haji)

Also known as *Hari Raya Iduladha*, a Muslim celebration held on the 10th of Zulhijjah, the month Muslims perform their pilgrimage to Mecca

Hari Raya (Puasa)

Also known as *Hari Raya Idulfitri*, a Muslim celebration held at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan

Homogamous marriage

Marriage within the same social group; for example, members of the middle class marrying other members of the same class

Kampung

Malay word for 'village'

Kenduri

Feast held by Malays to celebrate important social occasions such as wedding, circumcision, house-warming, or any other event

Melayu Baru

Literally meaning 'the New Malay', a term first used by Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in his address to the UMNO general assembly in 1991 to call for the creation of a new work culture among Malays in keeping with his industrialization drive and the creation of a Malay capitalist class and a Malay middle class

Melayu Lama

Literally meaning 'the Old Malay', a term used to contrast it with *Melayu Baru*

Merdeka

Malay word for 'independence'

New Economic Policy

A policy implemented following the communal riots of May 13, 1969 in Malaysia meant to redress ethnic socio-economic imbalances. During its implementation over a twenty year period (1971 to 1990), it was supposed to achieve the two-pronged objectives of reducing poverty irrespective of ethnic group and to restructure society to eradicate the ethnic identification of economic activities.

Ontological security

Security of living and existence

Rumah terbuka

Literally meaning 'open house', a traditionally-based modern cultural practice of opening the house for guests to celebrate the *Hari Raya* festival. It is also used to refer to the practice of hosting guests to celebrate other major festivals.

Surau

Muslim community prayer-house which is smaller than a mosque

Tahlil

A thanksgiving feast among Malays and Muslims usually organised to remember deceased parents, relatives or friends

Umrah

Pilgrimage to Mecca performed outside the *haj* season

Warak

Fervently religious

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

APU	Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (Movement for the Unity of Believers)
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
DAP	Democratic Action Party
FOMCA	Federation of Malaysian Consumers Associations
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNP	Gross National Product
ISA	Internal Security Act
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
NEP	New Economic Policy
NDP	National Development Policy
NGO	non-governmental organization
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)