Ooi Kee Beng, *Catharsis: A Second Chance for Democracy in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur/ Penang: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre with Penang Institute [co-published in Singapore by ISEAS Publishing], 2018, x + 223 pp. ISBN: 97898148189, price: SGD 25.90 (paperback).

The recent past has not been kind to democracy. The rise of nationalist, illiberal regimes in hitherto democratic strongholds such as the United States, Turkey, and Hungary has placed democracy under strain. Brexit has been interpreted through a similar lens. Within Southeast Asia itself, democratic rollback has occurred to varying degrees in the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar. Whether the mounting force of political Islam aids in placing Indonesia on this list remains to be seen.

For its advocates, democracy was in dire need of a shot in arm. On May 9, 2018, Malaysia, a country of considerable ethnic heterogeneity and geographic diversity and lacking strong democratic institutions, improbably provided that shot. In the country's fourteenth General Election—exercises where money politics, gerrymandering, and malapportionment had consistently and severely tilted the playing field in the favor of the ruling regime—the opposition coalition secured a historic victory. Comprised of five main parties, the Coalition of Hope (*Pakatan Harapan*) more than outpolled the incumbent coalition, the National Front (*Barisan Nasional*, BN). It trounced the BN. The BN, led by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), had ruled Malaysia with near impunity for some sixty years.

The Pakatan Harapan's stunner makes the 2018 publication of Ooi Kee Beng's *Catharsis: A Second Chance for Democracy in Malaysia* timely and immeasurably relevant. First a few notes about the author's provenance. Originally trained as a Sinologist, in 2004 Ooi took up a research fellowship at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. By 2011, he was named the deputy directorship, where he sat until 2017 when he returned to his home state of Penang to head a government-linked think tank now known as Penang Institute. In between these dates and through a combination of industriousness, perspicacity, and skill in writing, Ooi established himself as a foremost observer of Malaysian politics. In addition to a number of political biographies that he has penned, Ooi informs us in his all-too-brief introduction that *Catharsis* represents his seventh compilation of short essays. Given the magnitude of events that it covers—in essence, the lead-up to the Pakatan Harapan's monumental 2018 victory and its immediate aftermath—*Catharsis* could become Ooi's most consequential. At minimum it cements Ooi's reputation as a leading public intellectual.

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

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Catharsis is comprised of fifty-five columns and editorials, which average about four pages in length. The majority previously appeared in domestic publications; the rest in large part were published in neighboring Singapore. In this way, the essays assume a level of familiarity with the country that makes the volume ill-suited for the newly initiated. That said, throughout *Catharsis* Ooi pleads with his countrymen to better acquaint themselves with their country's turbulent history to understand how Malaysia has come to assume the forms of governance that it has—principally, how a functioning (though imperfect) democracy based on multi-ethnic accommodation has come to be run by a semi-autocratic, Malay-centric party whose legitimacy to rule has shifted from robust economic growth to appeals to hardline Islam and blatant patronage. Similarly, Ooi urges his readers to ponder the conflicted and complicated meanings of evocative terms that are regularly bandied about in Malaysian public discourse, to consider the original contexts from which the rule of law, state-building, nation-building, identity politics, freedom, democracy, and good governance emerged and how they might inform or apply to the Malaysian experience.

The weight of the book, however, lies with Ooi's recounting of the rise of the opposition that finally toppled the UMNO-led behemoth in 2018. Although the original publication dates of the essays contained in this volume begin in 2013, Ooi continuously harkens to the anti-government, street protests of September 1998 amidst the Asian Financial Crisis as the critical moment that made a multi-ethnic oppositional force viable. While these *Reformasi* (Reform) mobilizations failed to accomplish what their counterparts had achieved in Jakarta—that is, regime change—they gave rise to a new generation of politically aware citizens and activists, imbued with a sense of duty, urgency, and purpose. Pivotaly, this political fallout also provided the opposition a Malay face around which to rally. That visage belonged to Anwar Ibrahim, the then Deputy Prime Minister who was sacked and jailed by Mohamed Mahathir, the Prime Minister, over disagreements how the UMNO-led government should respond to the economic-cum-political crisis. Anwar championed reforms—accountability, transparency, good governance, and the rule of law. In power since 1981, Mahathir proposed more of the same—crony capitalism, political patronage, and rule by law.

Mahathir's retirement from politics in 2003—he was nearing eighty at the time—enabled the opposition, including Anwar's newly formed People's Justice Party (PKR), space in which to grow. Notably, in the 2008 polls, the opposition—a cobbled-together, ideologically discordant coalition of the PKR (backed by urban Malays), the Democratic Action Party (backed by Chinese-speaking Chinese), and the Malaysian Islamic Party (backed by rural Malays

especially in the country's northeast)—performed admirably enough to deny the BN its customary two-thirds majority in parliament. (This number is crucial since it determines whether the ruling regime can amend the country's constitution unilaterally). By 2013, the opposition, then known as the People's Coalition, actually won the popular vote, although it still obtained a minority of seats in parliament due to government manipulation of the electoral system. Among the myriad factors that finally put the Pakatan Harapan over the top in 2018, Ooi speculates that three were key, two of which were contingent; the other was more structural in scope. First were the mounting scandals and glaringly kleptocratic features of the prime minister Najib Razak's administration. Second were the intertwined developments of the return to politics of the ninety-two-year-old Mahathir (motivated by his disgust of Razak's egregious corruption), the 2016 public reconciliation between Mahathir and Anwar, and the establishment of Mahathir's new party, the Malaysian United Indigenous Party that would successfully siphon support from UMNO's core constituency. Lastly, Ooi underscores the drastic changes that urbanization has wrought within the Malay community. Specifically, the growth of an urban Malay middle class—ironically as a result of decades of BN policies—has been pivotal in producing a critical mass of voters willing to put the national interest and the ideals of political inclusiveness ahead of narrow, ethnically-based concerns.

But Ooi also speculates—and here I think he is spot on—that in hindsight, winning the 2018 election and the consequent peaceful transfer of power will prove to have been the easy part. Razak's ugly and blatant kleptocracy constituted a convenient rallying point around which the opposition and frustrated voters could unify. Now living up to unrealistic expectations, governing in line with the promoted aims of arresting the country's worsening inequality, curbing corruption, defusing the ethnocentric/Islamist-inspired rhetoric, instilling the rule of law, institutionalizing good governance, and, perhaps most importantly, building a nation around which a genuine Malaysian (instead of Malay) identity could take root and be imbibed with patriotic, democratic meaning will be the more daunting task. We anticipate the publication of Ooi's subsequent compilation of essays in a few years time to tell us whether the Pakatan Harapan government delivered on its promises.

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