



Marshall Clark and Juliet Pietsch, *Indonesia-Malaysia Relations: Cultural Heritage, Politics and Labour Migration*

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THOSE WHO are interested in reading an account of the intricate relations between Indonesia and Malaysia that goes way beyond government-to-government politics will enjoy *Indonesia-Malaysia Relations* by Marshall Clark and Juliet Pietsch very much. Whereas official diplomatic relations stress the cultural commonalities of siblings and common economic and political interests, usually portrayed through friendly handshakes in front of press cameras, Clark and Pietsch have produced a fascinating analysis of how the love-hate relationship plays out in everyday people-to-people encounters.

Suspicious of the shallow statements of politicians in both places, who continuously stress the concepts of *serumpun* (originating from one stock) and *saudara* (sibling) to enforce notions of cultural and linguistic closeness—paradoxically in meetings that are nowadays conducted in English—Clark and Pietsch have opted for a more anthropological approach. In order to see what is really going on and to capture telling encounters between Malaysians and Indonesians, they have, amongst many other exercises, depicted the fiercely intense atmosphere of the soccer final in the 2011 Southeast Asia Games, combed through many one-sided, often vulgar, internet blogs and Facebook pages, examined various movies and soap operas, visited museums and cultural sites and, most importantly, talked to many ordinary people. In the end, Clark and Pietsch found that “the greater the sense of cultural affinity, the greater the sense that the two nations seem destined to remain apart” (211).

Among the main foci of the book are migration, heritage, Islam, and the roles of ethnicity and citizenship in and across both states. Similar to other close neighborly relationships, the Indonesia–Malaysia connection could be summarized as the “tyranny of proximity.” Issues that have produced major controversy and media outcry, if not sensationalism, such as the poor treatment of Indonesian domestic workers, border disputes, and heritage claims, appear throughout the book in different contexts and are discussed from various angles. Most chapters are very balanced in their account, dedicated in equal part to developments in Indonesia and in Malaysia. Despite these foci acting as a red thread through the book, the structure of the book (nine chapters plus an introduction and a short conclusion) and the combination of its individual chapters is not always immediately obvious.

In chapter 1 the authors provide a historical overview of the political relationship since independence, concentrating mainly on events before, during, and shortly after Sukarno’s “Ganyang Malaysia” (Crush Malaysia) campaign. This is followed by an overview of territorial disputes, most of which Indonesia has lost, except for the

ongoing Ambalat case regarding a small sea block located off the east coast of Kalimantan. In chapter 2, on language and mythology, the authors scrutinize shared cultural heritage, such as the Ramayana myth, hoping to find cultural items that could serve as a unifying force. They also discuss alternative theoretical approaches to the region (*nusantara*) that abandon the binary interpretations that seem to overemphasize difference and give little emphasis to similarities. However, the authors cannot but conclude that the prospect of a change in perspective at this point in time is rather limited, because “when a neutral observer points out the similarities between Indonesian and Malay, citizens of both nations will be very quick to point out the differences, even if the differences are merely cosmetic” (66).

Chapter 3 delves deeper into spheres of dispute and controversy by shedding light on a number of tourism campaigns, including the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism’s use of Indonesian dances to promote Malaysian culture. Indonesians reacted very irascibly to this faux pas, fearing that Malaysians were trying to “steal” certain cultural showpieces. Dispute and controversy arose around not only dances, but also recipes and other material tokens such as batik. Clark and Pietsch not only shed light on the disputes and their different contexts but, more importantly, they call for a more relaxed and nuanced treatise on such matters, particularly as it might not always be possible to determine who came up with a certain pattern or tune, as culture in both countries has always been a product of many external influences and inspirations. Chapter 4 is mainly concerned with museumized heritage protection (Malaysia) and heritage destruction as well as “living culture” (Indonesia). In other words, old wooden boats exhibited in Malaysia are still used for fishing in Indonesia. Clark and Pietsch explain these differences as arising mainly from the different roles of the middle class in both countries, leaving aside the role of the state and its policies.

Chapter 5 concentrates on Islam and how it has become more important for everyday life, taking into account how the importance of Islam is very different in both countries. According to the authors, “nothing seems to separate Indonesia and Malaysia more than the religion they have in common” (115). In order to illustrate their findings effectively, Clark and Pietsch discuss first and foremost Islamic films, soap operas, and TV shows. While current productions in Indonesia grapple predominantly with gender roles and polygyny, thus regularly causing uproar among more progressive groups, the number one topic to stir controversy in Malaysia is the inter-ethnic love affair.

The next three chapters turn to issues of ethnicity, citizenship, and regionalism. Each chapter offers a solid analysis of its specific topic, be it the economic and political roles of the Chinese minorities or the treatment of Indonesian labor migrants and their lack of rights. Chapter 8 continues the discussion of previous chapters on the lack of protection and political representation in light of the overarching ASEAN framework. Despite their solid analysis, these chapters are quite a bit shorter and seem to lack the empirical finesse characteristic of the first part of the book. Because some issues are discussed in several chapters, they become a little repetitive.

The final chapter scrutinizes support for democracy in both countries, with most deductions based on a rather small survey ($N=2000$) from Asia Barometer. While

Malaysians lack many of the political rights enjoyed by their neighbors, they do not necessarily envy Indonesians for their greater freedoms as they seem more concerned about their economic stability, which might, after all, be undermined in a less authoritarian political system. This observation alone provides plenty of food for thought and will, it is hoped, get picked up by other scholars soon. Other topics worthy of the attention of future scholars of the Indonesia–Malaysia relationship might include student exchange, business and investment, Islamic terrorist networks, and political diasporas, especially the personal links between Malaysian politicians (such as Anwar Ibrahim) and their Indonesian counterparts.

Junior and senior scholars alike will enjoy reading this book as it is not the usual academic killjoy treatise; in fact it is quite a page-turner. Serious matters get dealt with thoroughly, yet, at the same time, the book offers good entertainment, thanks to the many great examples and quotations chosen to illustrate the intricacies and paradoxes inherent in the Indonesia–Malaysia relationship.

Antje Missbach
Monash University