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Book Review

Jamizol Zainol (2020). Malaysia's Political Philosophy: A Discourse of Tradition, Custom and Culture. Kuala Lumpur: Peace. 154 Pages. ISBN: 978-967-18046-0-5.

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Basic impulse of the western liberal Enlightenment Project had begun since the late 16 centuries, and it has passed many phases from 17th centuries to this day. It is governed by modelling science and individual rights, with assertions that its foundation has always been the Cartesian absolute certainty and the fallibilism concept of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Such philosophy has been always the method employed to bring people what the project believes as the truth, rejecting the religious claims of truth.

This project of Enlightenment was welcomed by many, but it also been rejected by some scholars, the story of anti-enlightenment that are not known by many especially by nonwestern citizen. Key thinkers of the past, such as Edmund Burke (1729-1797) in the 18th century, and contemporary ones like Richard Rorty (1931-2007), Michael Walzer (b. 1935) and Alasdair MacIntyre (b. 1929), of which the latter two are still alive, are a few among the names that demonstrated their flat rejection under the name of liberalism. Such anti-Enlightenment venture is quite common in the west, especially under the political science department which teaches political philosophy, and such rejections are visible in bumper stickers such as those of communitarian. However, they unfortunately received scant attention by many of the eastern universities, let alone in public conversation.

Proudly acknowledging himself as a conservative, Mohammad Jamizal, in his book "Malaysia's Political Philosophy: A Discourse of Tradition, Custom and Culture," critically examined the penetration of liberalism into Malaysia, of which he claims had become radical. Pointing to a certain type of liberal thinking called egalitarianism, he claims that arguments for such thinking by certain sectors of this country (Malaysia) were not only very lop-sided, but they are contradictory to the spirit of tradition, custom and culture of the evolving Malaysian nation.

Mimicking Edmund Burke's work, "Reflections on the Revolution in France," Jamizal provides his reflection on what he termed as "liberal radicalism," in which he foresees that it would only sow its seed of appalling carnage, recalling us to the riot of 13 May 1969. He reiterated that the existing political system which privileges the Malays and Bumiputeras without discriminating other ethnics has been the system that provides not only firm political stability but also steady economic growth, and any form of radicalism would only work against the advantages Malaysia has established.

As an activist, he has made attempts to explain many issues concerning Malaysians employing jargons such as utilitarianism versus deontology, the concept which is only accessible to those exposed to the subject of philosophy and is usually expressed only in English in this country. By using such jargons, he wanted Malaysians to develop the appetite to have dialogues in following how western political philosophy and history developed.

Unlike books produced by the academic community which are mostly in English, Jamizal managed to make big ideas accessible to the Malaysian public, as all of his books are in the Malay language, which is the national language of Malaysia. To him, liberal discourses present Malaysians with an unhealthy environment, hence every party should be more concerned for the pillars which uphold and stabilise Malaysia and the Malays, which are Islam, monarchy, the Malay language (known locally as Bahasa Melayu), and the rights of the Bumiputeras.

In Chapter 2, he discusses the importance of understanding the trajectory of the constitution in this country, followed by why we should conserve tradition, custom and culture in Chapter 3. He then proceeds by debating over the ideas of human rights and its applicability and compatibility with Islam

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in Chapter 4, detailing on economic justice in Chapter 5, and sustainable development in Chapter 6, which he believes can be rather controversial, but with the spirit of tolerance enshrined in the constitution, Malaysia can move forward shoulder-to-shoulder. Discussions on ethical themes are written in Chapter 7, while details on the sense of common value within the Malaysian society is depicted in Chapter 8, in which without this common value, we would be unclear as to what glues the community together as Malaysians.

Being Burkean, he demonstrates how people should suspect the potential catastrophic nature of nongradualism, especially referring to our own nation's trajectory and culture. Neither do we have any experience, nor do we want to experience what many countries have, especially those in the west which changed through revolutions such as the American Revolution in 1776, the French Revolution in 1789 and the Russian Revolution in 1917. He upholds the idea that the feudal system, which is based on the symbolic power of the Monarch is, paramount for Malaysia, and any attempts to underestimate the system would only bring Malaysia to a slippery slope towards instability, and hence anarchy.

Although he, in many ways, demonstrates his ideas like Edmund Burke who saw appalling carnage of the French Revolution as opposed to the English Revolution (also known as the Glorious Revolution) in 1688, Jamizal did not see the English Revolution as just a minor palace affair. To him, if we Malaysians underestimate the monarch system, it would not be at all surprising if the country plunges into civil war, similar to what happened in England.

He highlighted the impact and role of the King in the transfer of power from the Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan) to the National Alliance (Perikatan Nasional) in the Malaysian political saga. He not only provides a snapshot story of the English revolution, but also the stories of Musa and Khidr in Surah Al-Kahf as found in the Quran, as well as the stories in Shakespeare's plays, such as Romeo and Juliet, and Hamlet. In the story of Musa and Khidr, he states that there are things that we are politically oblivious of, and sometimes preemptive measures are necessary, therefore acts that are deemed Draconian by some should be abided by us instead. Shakespeare's work, to Jamizal, can act as a self-criticism for Malays who lack many virtues, especially magnanimity. Only those with their chest out, and head held high will not just talk but also walk like a winner. This is the message that he wants the Malays to not only learn but change themselves from the long slumber.

Before I jot down my take on this book, let me summarize Jamizal's overall idea as written in his book, which he regarded as Malaysia's political philosophy. With a house as an analogy, he depicted that the floor represents the constitution, in which he called as the document of tolerance, followed by the three pillars which are human rights, economic justice and sustainable development. He believes that the house would only be appropriate to be built with ethics represented by the wall, and the sense of togetherness or the sense of same value, portrayed by the roof.

I would like to mention four important interconnected points to review his work. First, while such so-called conservatism line of thinking is not new in academic works, Jamizal's explanation is more interesting to laymen, since many academic works are detached from the larger public audience. Works developed by Shamsul Amri and Nazri Muslim had similar takes over the importance of the mentioned pillars; Islam, monarchy, the Malays, and Bahasa Melayu. Hence, perhaps many of these works should be cited by him. Although such exercise would only make the book less accessible to the public, he should attempt to write about them in a separate part, probably in the preface.

Second, this book would be more useful and balanced if other concepts such as libertarianism were used together with the term egalitarianism. I do not think he is ignorant of this thinking, and no matter the excuse and argument, he cannot deny the important facts that people are more libertarian than egalitarian, as he explains in his book. The debate on human rights would only make sense if the concept of libertarianism is used rather than egalitarianism.

Third, it would feel incomplete to discuss about the Malaysian politics or Malaysian political philosophy the way he wants it to be without proper discussion on why Islam and Bahasa Melayu should be at the center of ideology or philosophy. He describes in the book the importance of kings, but what about the other two factors? These factors are especially crucial to be explained in his discussion on Malay rights, which also points towards the area of Islam. Based on a separate communication session

I had with him, he said that there is only one Islam; the Islam of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). However, the Islam of Prophet Muhammad which he meant was the Islam propagated by Imam al-Shafi'i, al-Asha'irah which is believed to be the Ghazalian take of Sufism. Such concept of only one Islam is ubiquitous. Those who follow the footsteps of the sahabah and practices the Sunnah (traditions and practices of Prophet Muhammad), especially the Athari group within the Hanbali school, would definitely say that there is only one Islam which is their own understanding, and this also holds true to many other schools; for example, liberal Islam, sufistic Islam, and Deobandi Islam.

Fourth, I think that his ideas can be even more impactful if he includes contemporary debates on western political philosophy rather than continuing with his Burkean outlook. Contemporary thinkers like MacIntyre who has both continental and analytic takes on philosophy, and just as important, Ian Shapiro who is known for his democratized-Burkean outlook, were among the analytic philosophers, and they are said to be the ones to continue the tradition of communitarianism, implying that Burke's impulse is still kicking. Shapiro, with his take on democratic justice for instance, suggested that individuals can express their rights widely through democracy, and by understanding the purpose of life, which he sometimes calls as superordinate virtue, then only will individual rights be guided towards the right virtue.

The author is an activist whose idea can greatly influence the public if he can familiarise himself with what is internal and external to Malaysia, as MacIntyreans would propose, or what is superordinate and subordinate, as followers of Shapiro would suggest. It is true that many of things he said in this book are right, but they are only the internal or superordinate aspects of Malaysia. Never mind debating conservatism versus liberalism, he must admit that the crafted constitution was neither made from scratch nor fell from the sky, it has its own previous form, its own beginning, which was not only the history of Malaya internally, but even the history of others which were related to Malaya externally. Withal, do not forget that what was external 40 years ago was not accessible with a click of the fingertip the way it is today.

Hence, what is external or subordinate to Malaysia today, such as variables like Islam of different persuasions or liberalism of different takes must be critically included in the complex equations of what we owe from the past, what we borrowed from the future, and afterwards what we must consider if the idea of Malaysia's political philosophy has to be internalized before it can be forcefully expressed.