

## Waking a Sleeping Public

*Agnes S.K. Yeow*

Kee Thuan Chye, *March 8: The Day Malaysia Woke Up*. Kuala Lumpur: Marshall Cavendish, 2008. (324 pages)

General elections are held once in every five years in Malaysia, and the one held on March 8, 2008 proved a tremendous event for the nation since for the first time in decades, a much larger share of the votes went to the opposition parties while many of the older regime's leaders were roundly defeated by opposition veterans and newcomers. So phenomenal was the outcome of the March 8 elections that many people were prompted to describe it as a political tsunami: a catastrophe for those who no longer have the people's trust and a clean sweep for those who embody the nation's hopes for a better tomorrow.

Kee Thuan Chye's latest book *March 8: The Day Malaysia Woke Up* will undoubtedly strike a powerful chord in many Malaysians. It's a safe bet that even those unfamiliar with the Malaysian political landscape pre-March 8, 2008 will be bowled over by the message that emanates from the pages of this book: a message that clearly spells hope for a better future. Kee's choice of a title is intriguing, not least because it seems to imply that Malaysian society was asleep prior to the nation's twelfth general elections on March 8, 2008. It also implies a momentous event which has the effect of ending a fifty-year slumber. Either way, the contributors, including Kee himself, whose recollections, testimonies, opinions and interviews are collected in this book, agree on one thing: that the nation, stirred from its long (and in some ways, induced) hibernation, had acted like never before on that unforgettable day in voting for change. For sure, the book's title connotes quite justifiably that March 8 marks the nation's defining moment and that, henceforth, every Malaysian will look to this magical date as the day the Malaysian people asserted their power dramatically and unequivocally as they denied the overweening ruling government its two-thirds majority in parliament. In this way, the electorate, weary of all the corruption, double standards and moral bankruptcy among those in power, had voted in a stronger opposition to ensure greater transparency, accountability and integrity in the government of the land.

In his introduction "Change and Hope and People Power", Kee describes himself rather self-effacingly as "just an ordinary Malaysian who cares about his country and wants to see it develop in the right direction". He claims to consider Malaysian politics "from the point of view of the layman". The book, he writes, "is not written by an expert in politics". This comes from a writer whose plays like *1984 Here and Now*, *The Big Purge* and *We Could \*\*\*\* You, Mr Birch* reveal an astute and politically-engaged imagination which has been nothing short of

relentless in its questioning and challenging of the political status quo and in its protest against political and social injustice, abuse of power and tyrannical practices. Kee's declared position and approach as a layman has the effect of making him immediately accessible to the reader. He sets the tone for the entire volume and that tone is conversational, frank, unpretentious and, most of all, infectiously optimistic. At times, the discourse reminds one of the popular political analyses one would expect to hear in the ordinary folk's coffee-shop or *mamak* (Indian Muslim) tea stall or even in the common taxi and, indeed, the victors of the 2008 General Election, as Kee reiterates, are the Malaysian public. Kee's next testimony "Merdeka on March 8" (Freedom on March 8) cannot fail to move the reader, the reality of the election outcome almost cathartic for a playwright whose literary career has been concerned largely with the dire effects that despotism and political domination can have on society, not just Malaysian but any society for that matter. He admits shedding tears of joy "innumerable times" on learning of the results of the polls, and, in this utterly human response to the best of news, Kee embodies the hope, relief and exhilaration that his book imparts.

The book has two parts: the first is simply titled "Change" and the second "Hope". The voices gathered here are many and varied; they represent a wide cross-section of Malaysian society ranging from prominent politicians to outspoken bloggers and from forward-thinking students to seasoned critics of the establishment. They include, among many others, Lim Guan Eng, the newly-elected Chief Minister of Penang, Raja Petra Kamarudin, intrepid editor of website *Malaysia Today*, Steven Gan, editor of online news website *Malaysiakini*, journalist Martin Vengadesan, writers Ann Lee and Kam Raslan, law lecturer Azmi Sharom and university student Mohammad Khairie. They also include Kee's two children who are the authors of "One Hundred-Odd Days After March 8": a chronology of significant events which took place after March 8 right up till July 17. Kee has taken pains to be inclusive in mapping out his book; apart from the pro-opposition bastion, two cabinet ministers from the post-March 8, ruling National Front, Dr S. Subramaniam and Zaid Ibrahim, are interviewed in this book. Coincidentally, Subramaniam and Kee were once classmates at Penang Free School, and, incidentally, Zaid Ibrahim has since resigned from his ministerial post and from the United Malays National Organization in protest over the recent arrest of Raja Petra Kamaruddin and many others under the oppressive Internal Security Act. This act, as we know, empowers the government to detain people without trial and keep them locked up indefinitely as long as they are considered a threat to national security.

Regardless of political affiliation, the writers and interviewees of this book succeed in tackling many contentious issues with grit, honesty and passion. Among these topics are racial politics, the freedom of the press, alternative media, landmark rallies and election campaigns, discriminatory policies, Anwar Ibrahim (erstwhile Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia who was jailed on a sodomy charge and is now the leader of the opposition), the lack of trust in a scandal-plagued judiciary and bad governance in general.

Reading this book, it's hard not to be swept along by the tide of euphoria generated by March 8. Change and hope have never seemed so real before to the average Malaysian. Kee and the contributors to this important book have immortalized the triumph of the day Malaysia woke up, and with it, the expectations and dreams of an entire nation.