

## Editor's Review: The Social Sciences in Malaysia

The publication here of Rustam A. Sani and Norani Othman's "critical scenario" concerning the development of the social sciences in Malaysia requires some explanation, since its appearance in *Akademika*, with the consent of Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia (PSSM), is in the nature of a joint endeavour. Its primary publication, however, is in that association's own journal *Ilmu Masyarakat* 19 (1991).

The prior claim of PSSM and *Ilmu Masyarakat* to this critical scenario is due to the circumstances of its origin, when such a review of the sources, development, and current situation of the social sciences in this country was commissioned from PSSM by SERU (the Social and Economic Research Unit in the Prime Minister's Department, Kuala Lumpur). SERU itself had been charged by UNESCO with organizing a regional seminar in June 1990 to review the situation of the social sciences in the countries of Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

Even the characterization as a "critical scenario" - a term which has provoked some comment, even criticism - derives from the call issued by UNESCO to SERU and equivalent national bodies elsewhere in the region, indicating the character and orientation of contributions that were being sought by the seminar's sponsors. When UNESCO's call was in turn referred to it by SERU, PSSM set up a subcommittee to prepare the Malaysian response. After discussing and agreeing upon the kind of review or "scenario" that it thought appropriate for presentation, the members of that subcommittee chose from among their own number Sdr. Rustam and Sdr. Norani to prepare the paper itself for presentation.

Held in Kuala Lumpur on 18 & 19 June 1990, the seminar was opened by the Minister for Education, Datuk Seri (then Sdr.) Anwar Ibrahim, who in his keynote remarks commented in knowledgeable detail upon the Malaysian "critical scenario", even before it was offered as the seminar's lead-off presentation. That presentation, in turn, was followed by lively and, so those who were present suggest, largely approving discussion.

However, since then the critical scenario reviewing the origins and contemporary character of Malaysian social sciences has provoked considerable controversy. An editorial page article by Rose Ismail in the *New Straits Times* (1 September 1990) entitled "Unpalatable Aspects of our Social Sciences" attracted some additional comment upon the critique offered by the two writers. Following that, further reference was made to both the scenario and Rose Ismail's commentary at a seminar held at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia from 8 to 9 October 1990 to appraise and

review the accomplishments of its Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (Fakulti Sains Kemasyarakatan dan Kemanusiaan) over the twenty years since the university's foundation in 1970. The reaction on that occasion was heated and sustained. Both the critique itself and its underlying approach were challenged. More recently still, in criticisms made in December 1990 and January 1991 that were widely reported in the press, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim questioned the achievements of local scholars and academic institutions, including (or, as he put it, especially) in the social sciences. This intervention has encouraged further debate as well as several public and numerous private rejoinders to the Minister's censure.

Clearly, whether by accident or fate, this critical scenario of the Malaysian social sciences has somehow taken on a life of its own, and a significance rather greater than its own (as its authors would agree) very modest origins. But this inflation is not necessarily a bad thing. For while the analysis that it offered may have upset some, it also provoked many in the Malaysian social science community to reconsider and critically reassess their own accomplishments and intellectual stance. More, in a manner previously unprecedented in Malaysia, it has prompted the beginnings of a public debate that social scientists as concerned citizens and responsible members of a developing national community should welcome. After years of public silence and indifference over the character of our social sciences, and Malaysian intellectual life generally, this must be a healthy development.

Because of the attention which the PSSM critical scenario has attracted, the widespread controversy it has provoked, and not least because of the importance of the public debate which the Minister, Datuk Seri Haji Anwar Ibrahim, has now inaugurated, the editors of *Akademika* believe it important that the now perhaps notorious scenario also be published in its pages. Its publication here, however, is not intended merely as a matter of record, simply to be read and noted. Rather, its inclusion in our own pages is intended to encourage further intellectual reflection and debate. Convinced of the importance of such debate to the further development of our national intellectual life and to the formation of a distinctive modern Malaysian intellectual tradition, *Akademika* is happy to acknowledge its gratitude to PSSM and *Ilmu Masyarakat* for their consent to joint publication of the scenario originally commissioned from them.

**Samad A. Hadi**

Ketua Pengarang/*Chief Editor*