

ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

Li Dun Jen (Dun J. Li), *British Malaya: An Economic Analysis*, Published by The Institute for Social Analysis (INSAN), Kuala Lumpur, 1982

Li Dun Jen's book is essentially an analysis of the economic history of British Malaya prior to World War II period. Specifically, it traces the economic development of Malaya highlighting the economic impact and implications of the British Colonial rule, particularly with respect to the exploitation of Malaya's main economic resources, viz. tin and rubber, and labour for the development of the modern capitalist sectors. However, the book is significant not only because of the well-documented survey and presentation of facts relating to the British economic interests that it deals with, but the issues discussed and implied provoke equal interest as a historical background to the current developments in Malaysia.

The approach to dealing with conventional economic issues evolving around finance, trade, economic resources, population and labour is thought to be a reasonably rational presentation of the factors that could have an impact on any country's economic development, particularly in relation to the British economic interests then where a Colonial power relies heavily upon the economic wealth of a colony for the former's political and economic strength.

The author sets the political background of the British Malaya in the light of British expansion into the Far East to strengthen their position against the Dutch Empire, particularly to break the Dutch trade monopoly in the Far East. The possession of political, administrative and economic control over Malaya as the British Colony provides them with advisory and legislative powers on matters of their interests and with a direct rule enabling them to disregard "...numerical strength as well as the actual social and economic powers of the different racial communities in the colony." This serve well the British economic interests and implies the imperialistic tendencies of the British rule. It also has the advantage of allowing them to exploit the economic wealth of Malaya without much internal interference.

In the book, the analysis of Malaya's economic development and the discussion on implications of the British Colonial rule covered four major issues — finance, trade, economic resources, and labour and population — to indicate both the British capitalistic interests and imperialistic rule.

The analysis and discussion explicitly indicates that revenues of Malaya had been generously used towards financing imperial defense in addition to expenditure on public works, etc. and for the general economic development. The expenditures on education and medical services has never been important. This implies not only imperialism at work, but also, more significantly, the capitalist interest in laying infrastructural foundations through improvement and development of public works for the convenience of extracting as well as exploiting the Colony's economic wealth. Another interesting issue relates to trade. The author indicates that the exports of tin and rubber had so dominated the total export trade that other exports were comparatively insignificant. In fact, tin and rubber became an important economic assets to the extent that Malaya has been considered the "dollar arsenal" of Great Britain and this serves well the British economic interests. There was, however, little development trickling down to the Colony except for infrastructures serving the needs and interests of the Colonial power" for the continuous exploitation of Malaya's natural resources". In terms of import trade, the imperialistic as well as the exploitative and capitalistic tendencies emerged where Malaya became the largest importer of British Empire products. Again, it serves well the British economic interests.

The exploitation of rubber and tin are, not surprisingly, undertaken towards the gradual assumption of control over both industries by the British because they carry economic significance. At the same time, the author indicates the shrewd manipulations by the British for "domination" in these industries at the expense of rubber smallholdings and small tin producers. Their capitalistic interests further materialise with the help of the influx of immigrant labour, viz. the Chinese for the tin mines and the Indians for rubber plantations. This foreign-origin capital provided for the exploitation of Malaya's natural resources was considered necessary and it serves the British capitalistic tendency as they were cheap and easily controlled.

The picture that emerges reflects clearly that Malaya as a British Colony has been economically beneficial to the British Empire. At the same time, tin and rubber also provide the forces behind most of the fortunes and successes in the economic development of Malaya itself. In addition, the British economic interests in Malaya has given the Malayan population its cosmopolitan character; and this, to a large extent, created the roots of the present social, economic and political developments in Malaysia.

It should be noted that inasmuch as the Malays, representing the largest ethnic group in Malaya, were neglected in developing the

economic base and foundation of the Colony's development, viz. the modern sectors of tin and rubber, on the assumption that the Malays are "... as 'Nature's gentlemen' fond of 'simple life' in agriculture and fishing" and "were not active participants in modern enterprises and were satisfied with being left alone", it may also be the result of the British capitalist interests tending to prefer cheap labour for maximum profits as the author plainly states that "the sole purpose of encouraging alien immigrants to come to Malaya was to provide the capitalists with a labour force willing and able to exploit the hidden resources of that rich country". Moreover, the British were known to have adopted a "divide and rule policy" during their control over Malaya to avoid and reduce internal political problems. As it seems, the Malays then were never given the opportunity or encouraged to participate in (modern) economic activities other than their traditional agricultural activities; thus depriving the Malays of (modern) economic opportunities. Even in administrative matters, it was only the Rulers who were consulted and that only pertaining to matters relating to "the Muhammadan religion and Malay customs". The manipulations by the British are so shrewd that "though they (the Rulers) possessed this power, the British advisers saw to it that it was rarely exercised"

The entire analysis in the book has been closely related to the presentation of facts from documents. While it has served the purpose of a historical approach to economic development in relation to the British imperialism and economic interests as well as the development of modern capitalist sectors in Malaya, it has however neglected discussing some detailed and salient issues that may have significant contribution to or influence on the existing status quo. On the whole, the book is a positive contribution to the understanding of the economic history of Malaya. It not only contains an analytical presentation of documented facts and, for most part, quite clearly and dispassionately written and discussed, but it also provides a sound historical account and an economic analysis significant to the understanding of the Colonial heritage and the present existing social, economic and political scenarios in Malaysia. In fact, as history often repeats itself, the book highlights some economic and political issues as lessons that can be useful for a meaningful economic development of Malaysia. However, as the author himself is aware, there involved controversial issues where detailed analysis and judgements were not attempted; and as such, this book should be treated, among others, as an economic history of the development of Malaya under the British rule prior to World War II, viz. the Colonial heritage.

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