

Book Review

Review of the book *Lim Kit Siang: Malaysian First, Volume Two — Bold to the Last Battle* by Thuan-Chye Kee. Strategic Information & Research Development Centre, Petaling Jaya. 549 pp. ISBN: 9786297575131

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At a time when conversations about our past are gaining renewed attention and long-held narratives are being examined anew, the need to document our history with clarity and intention becomes unmistakably important. Not because history is easily rewritten, but because every generation brings new context, new questions and new understanding to the stories that shaped us.

Looking back at the milestones, debates and personalities that built — and sometimes tested — Malaysia allows us to see the long arc of our nationhood more clearly. It reminds us how politics, ideals and individual convictions have woven together to create the country we inherit today, and underscores just how complex the journey toward unity, respect and shared identity has always been.

Understanding that journey means examining the people whose actions, for better or worse, have steered Malaysia's course. Through their stories, we gain clearer insight into the nation's political landscape and the forces that still shape it today.

A key political figure in the country's colourful narrative, Tan Sri Lim Kit Siang is someone you certainly can't ignore. As an outspoken critic whose political career spans more than five decades, Lim has shown remarkable resilience in advocating for a united Malaysia.

Throughout his journey, he has endured character attacks, faced numerous legal challenges and even imprisonment. Yet his steadfast commitment to his vision of a harmonious and integrated Malaysian society stands as testament to his enduring influence in the nation's political landscape.

Kee Thuan Chye, a multi-faceted personality known for his roles as a journalist, actor, dramatist, poet and prominent civil rights activist, took on the monumental task of documenting Lim's life. His extensive project culminated in two comprehensive volumes charting Lim's journey from his formative years to the evolution of his political career.

The first volume ended at a dramatic juncture: Lim's detention under Ops Lalang in 1987 — a cliffhanger that left readers anticipating the next chapter of his remarkable story.

That story continues in the recently released sequel, *Lim Kit Siang: Malaysian First, Volume Two — Bold to The Last Battle*. While the first volume explored Lim's early years, the genesis of his political convictions and the beginnings of his pursuit of the “Malaysian dream”, this concluding instalment delves deeply into the complexities, confrontations and defining moments of his political journey up to the present day.

Twists and Turns

The second volume opens with the dramatic events of Ops Lalang, a landmark moment in Malaysian history. This sweeping government crackdown targeted a broad array of individuals — activists, academicians, politicians (including MCA leaders), intellectuals and more. It also resulted in the revocation of publishing licences for two daily newspapers, underscoring the severity of the operation.

Carried out around Oct 27, 1987, Ops Lalang saw dozens detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA), held without trial at the order of the home minister, who was also the prime minister.

This period became a defining moment in the tenure of then-prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is often remembered for his authoritarian, iron-fisted and Machiavellian approach to governance throughout his 22 years in power. The book takes readers into the turbulence of that era, unpacking the political dynamics and controversies that shaped it.

Lim's dogged pursuit of the North-South Expressway scandal — which pointed to criminal conduct and cronyism — had earned him Mahathir's lasting ire. It was this clash that swept Lim into the same dragnet that ultimately landed him behind bars.

One of the most poignant elements of Lim's political odyssey is the emotional weight he bore watching his son, Guan Eng, endure similar political persecution.

In a context where nepotism is often associated with privilege, Lim offered a starkly different perspective: “What Guan Eng has received from my nepotism aren't business opportunities, mega-contracts and mega-loans, but a crown of thorns, the destruction of his political life, as well as putting in jeopardy his own public life and the welfare of his family and children.”

This wrenching assessment captures the personal cost and sacrifices endured by political families who stand on principle rather than benefit.

Lim's decades-long career also provides an illuminating examination of Malaysian politics,

where allegiances are fluid, rivalries evolve and adversaries can become allies — only to shift yet again. It is a reminder of just how intricate and unpredictable our political landscape can be.

Equally significant is the role of Lim's family. Their unwavering support — from his wife to his children — was crucial in helping him navigate the storms and confront the obstacles placed before him.

Covering a broader span of events — many still vivid in our collective memory — the second volume feels immediate and relatable to contemporary readers. Among the pivotal moments revisited are the 1998 dismissal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as deputy prime minister, followed by the politically charged sodomy allegations that shook the nation.

Kee also traces the rise of influential civil movements such as Bersih and Hindraf, both of which held their first rallies in November 2007 and pushed issues of governance and minority rights firmly into the national conversation.

From there, the story progresses to Pakatan Harapan's watershed victory in 2018 before culminating in the "Sheraton Move" of February 2020 — a political upheaval that once again altered the country's trajectory.

Throughout the volume, readers encounter not just political drama and ideological battles, but also moments of deep personal resonance, offering a multifaceted lens through which to view Malaysia's complex political evolution.

Kee's writing is notably accessible and engaging, even when he tackles intricate subjects. His ability to distil complex events into clear, compelling prose makes the work inviting not only to political enthusiasts, but to any reader seeking to better understand Malaysia's story.

This balance — depth without density, clarity without oversimplification — is one of Kee's strengths. His meticulous chronicling of historical and political events anchors the narrative and enriches the biography without overwhelming it.

Love him or hate him, Lim Kit Siang remains a political gadfly impossible to ignore. This book offers far more than a chronology of events; it invites readers to engage with a different viewpoint and to reflect on the broader narrative of our country's political history.

As Barack Obama aptly said: "Understanding our past and the sacrifices that were made is critical to our future as a nation and as a people."

Ultimately, this story underscores the importance of recording our past with clarity. History remains constant; it is leaders who shift, falter or rise — and the lessons embedded in their journeys are ones we cannot afford to ignore.

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