BOOK REVIEWS

March 8: Eclipsing May 13
By Ooi Kee Beng, Johan Saravanamuttu and Lee Hock Guan
(Hardback, RM55)
Review by Joseph M. Fernando, University of Malaya

This book provides an insightful and balanced analysis of the underlying issues and events that shaped the watershed 12th General Election in Malaysia held on 8 March 2008. It is a well-researched and well-argued evaluation of important selective facets of the general election.

The book, however, does leave one wanting for more. Comprising only of three main chapters, many aspects of the general election remain untouched, unexamined. The book is organised, perhaps due to constraints of time in rushing it to print, in an unorthodox way. It comprises essentially of three main chapters of medium length, each written by one of the three authors, all Malaysian studies specialists, and examines different facets of the general election. It is unorthodox because it does not begin with an overall analysis of the general election. Instead, it begins with a more narrowly focused chapter on the opposition strategies. This does not, of course, necessarily undermine its overall merit which reflects good scholarship.

The first chapter by Ooi Kee Beng examines the opposition parties pre-election postures as well as their campaign strategies. In the second chapter, Johan Saravanamuttu, a seasoned scholar of Malaysian politics and a former professor at Universiti Sains Malaysia prior to joining ISEAS, provides an overall analysis of the general election. The third chapter by Lee Hock Guan examines a more specific theme - the ethnic voting patterns in Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor. The book has a good collection of visuals of the general election campaign and some impressive statistical tables and graphs which provide depth to the analyses and will be an important addition on general election analyses in Malaysia.

The book should perhaps have led with the Saravanamuttu's analysis as it provides a broader overview and in-depth analysis of the change in voting patterns and the underlying reasons for what he describes as the 'tectonic shift' in Malaysian politics. This would have provided readers with a broader overview of the elections before engaging in the more specific and selective themes in the book. In a sense the three chapters that make up this book come up a little short in explaining the outcome of the general election. Some additional discussion of the electoral patterns in several of the states and possibly several other themes (performance of some of the leading parties, for example) would have provided a broader representation of the issues and trends in the general election.

Possibly the most attractive piece in this book is Saravanamuttu's analysis which threads together a very persuasive argument on the shift in electoral support to the opposition parties from the ruling Barisan Nasional in the 2008 general election. He argues that a range of political, economic and social issues in the period leading up to the general election together with the Bersih and Hindraf protest rallies created much discomfort among the electorate causing a substantive swing in the votes across the communal divide.