PART ONE

The (Mis-)Rules of Ethno-Politics
The Illusions of Democracy
Chapter 1

*Demi Agama, Bangsa dan Negara: Silat Martial Arts and the ‘Third Line’ in Defence of Religion, Race, and the Malaysian State*

*Lawrence N. Ross*

This essay argues that if violence by Malaysia’s majority Malays against minority ethnic communities is carried out, as is threatened from time to time, then *silat* martial arts fighters would very likely form the vanguard of the forces executing this violence. For the greater part of the Malay-speaking world, the term ‘*silat*’ encompasses a broad number of hand and weapon fighting styles based on stylised movements that hold deep symbolism for Malay identity. The beauty of *silat* is counterbalanced by a latent threat of violence it can express as a form of social activity and organisation. During the post-independence period, several regional *silat* disciplines (*perguruan silat*) grew to become national-level organisations in Malaysia. Several of these groups have openly displayed their political allegiance and, through their talk and actions, have declared themselves ready for para-military activities within the country. Based in available documentation and fieldwork among *silat* practitioners in northern Peninsular Malaysia, this essay examines some of *silat’s* intertwined history with ethnicity, religion, and politics in Malaysia for more than the past half century.

---

*1 The author is a senior lecturer in the Academy of Malay Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. This paper reproduces, with permission, some of his material published previously in *Hybridity in the Performing Arts of Southeast Asia* (Mohd Anis et al., 2011). The research was supported in part by University of Malaya Research Grants (UMRG) RP017C-13SBS and RG194-12SUS.*