

Interview with Sophie Lemière

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Q: What inspired you to research Malaysian politics?

A: I did my first Masters on Cambodia, on the Muslim community in Cambodia, and that was extremely interesting and I really liked Cambodia—it's a very interesting place. But there are a lot of French people working on Cambodia and I was trying to look for something less occupied by French people, so Malaysia actually was a good option. Malaysia is a bit of a niche, there are not many Malaysia specialists in the world.

The other thing that made me choose Malaysia is that it's actually a very complex country: from outside, it used to look like a young democracy, and soon we realized, especially with the financial scandal, that politics were actually very messy in Malaysia. While I knew that for long already, because I had been working on the country since 2006, there is this intricacy of ethnic politics, religious politics that makes things extremely interesting and extremely complex, and for a political scientist or political anthropologist this is just the dream country. And of course then you have the weather, the people, the food—it is a very nice country to work in. I really feel at home right now in Malaysia, when I go back to Malaysia I feel like I'm really going back home, and I now spend much more time in Malaysia than I do in France, my original country, so for me it is a second home.

Q: Why should we view the results of the May 2018 Malaysian election as extraordinary?

A: Of course most observers were shocked by the election results in Malaysia that brought to power Mohamad Mahathir, at the age of 92 years old. Knowing that the man had been in power for 22 years until he resigned in 2004, most people were really surprised, because he was known for being an authoritarian leader, at least in part of the society, yet he was reelected on a democratic agenda, so that was just incredible, though credible enough for it to work.

Whether I was surprised, well, yes and no. I had made a bet to actually work with him prior to the campaign and to follow him during the campaign, to write a new book about how one can reinvent oneself in politics, and to look at the question of legitimacy and political imaginary. So I had the feeling that something extraordinary was going on and that there was a chance for him to win. That was the subject of a laugh: a few French journalist friends in Malaysia kind of mocked me and laughed at me, because I was following Mahathir full of hope. At the end, well, he did win, so I think we didn't expect—we observers, academics, journalists—we did not expect a win, we did not expect this incredible score that he made and the former Malaysian opposition to power with a very comfortable majority—that was definitely unexpected.

What makes this event extraordinary is because the win of the Malaysian opposition slayed 61 years of one-party rule in Malaysia. The Barisan Nasional, the National Front party, had ruled the country for the past 61 years since independence without ever being challenged to that level. And that was extremely surprising. We knew that the situation in Malaysia had become extremely bad, extremely critical in terms of the political legitimacy of the then Prime Minister, Najib Razak, who was embedded in one of the largest financial scandals in the world and in history. So Malaysian people were facing a crisis of political legitimacy, because they could not see the Prime Minister as legitimate enough and as the one

who should be leading the country any longer due to this corruption. Secondly, the people were feeling a financial pull-and-stretch: for them the economic situation in Malaysia became really bad.

Mahathir is the one who challenged that, the IMF, the one who challenged the West. He is the one who asserted that Malaysia was a Muslim country and a Muslim power, pushing it to the extent of claiming that Malaysia was an Islamic state—but that was definitely to serve his political agenda and to undermine the credibility of the Islamist opposition in Malaysia at the time. So Mahathir has this image of a strong man who is not afraid of taking strong decisions. And the way he has come back to politics—that he actually never really left—was portrayed as the coming back of a savior. So for an extraordinary situation an extraordinary leader is needed, and Mahathir was the one.

Q: What was it like to follow the Mahathir's campaign?

The idea came up in 2017, even before we had a date for the campaign and even before he was announced as a potential candidate. I remember that when I told Mahathir about the project—I told him, “I want to follow you during the campaign”— he laughed at me and said, “Well, we don't even know when the campaign is going to be, and we don't even know whether I'm going to be a candidate.” And I told him, “I think you will be.” So he said, “Well, you know, I'm just here to contribute.” I told him “Oh you're not a contributor, you are a leader, there is no chance you will just stay behind,” and he just laughed.

A few weeks later I received a very good fellowship from Harvard University that allowed me to start the project and then later to go back to Malaysia. I arrived in Malaysia in December 2017, right in time for the first annual assembly of Mahathir's new party, called Bersatu. Then in January, the entire opposition coalition gathered for its own annual assembly as well, and then Mahathir was nominated as a potential prime minister candidate. From that time on I started to follow him.

But following someone like Mahathir is extremely difficult. What was agreed upon never happened. I was supposed to be with him most of the time, but this had to be renegotiated permanently with his staff, with the inner circle, because there is a culture of secrecy that's very strong. It's coming from UMNO as well, his former party—and any party that's been ruling for so long has this culture of secrecy and, in a way, of authoritarianism as well. So I would face a lot of blocks all the time. But with a little bit of diplomacy, a lot of patience and psychology, eventually I managed to make my way. And because people started to see me around so much I really started to belong to the landscape, even if I kind of stand out—I can't help it, I don't look Malaysian. But I was more and more accepted as time went on.

Working my way through the inner circle of a man with so much power was very interesting in itself. That was an experience—as an ethnographer, as a female scientist, as a female from France—all of those experiences raised a lot of questions regarding methodology, epistemology and human experience as well, and that was absolutely fantastic.

The other thing that brought me a lot of new ideas and that constitutes a great experience was to see how a man can really reinvent himself. It's what I just mentioned earlier: how do you remake the story, how do you change your legacy when you're seen as such strong leader with all of the baggage that it has as well, and you suddenly want to sell a new agenda—“selling” as in politically marketing. So, how do you reinvent yourself to the point that it's going to be credible, or seen as legitimate enough by the people to vote you back to power?

I learned that basically nothing is impossible, that's for sure, because, again, not many would have bet on what looked like a leap of faith of an old man. But he made it. And I learned that he was definitely an excellent tactician. Mahathir is not an intellectual, he is a doctor by training, a physician, and so he sees symptoms and he finds cures, he's very pragmatic. So it is very interesting the way that he's solving problems.

Q: What is your assessment of the new governing coalition?

The new coalition has been in power since May, so it's been about seven months now. It is difficult, because we have many members of government for whom it is the first time to be in power—they never held any position before on a federal or the state level, so it is a challenge. The other difficulties come from the fact that the coalition is very diverse. So we have Mahathir's party, which is a more Malay nationalist party; then we have Anwar Ibrahim's party, Keadilan, that is a much more inclusive, multi-ethnic, multi-religious party; and then we have the DAP (Democratic Action Party) that is seen as a Chinese-based party (when I say "Chinese" I mean the Chinese minority, not Chinese from China, of course). And then we have Amanah, which is an Islamist party, so the base of the party is mostly Malay as well. Francis Fukuyama has written an excellent book recently about the politics of resentment, and it's what we're facing in Malaysia.

So with this new government, having a ruling coalition that represents the composition of society and the diversity of society—which is a very good thing—the cohesion of power is facing challenges, because there is a need for reform of political culture. The question is how do you reform political culture, and that is extremely difficult, because it doesn't happen overnight. It comes from education, from changing the way of doing politics, and this is a change of system, of mode, of habits, of codes, which takes a lot of time. It's not just a political decision, but social change as well. There is a push in society for those changes, but it seems that some part of the government and some part of the state, as civil servants, are resisting this change.

For Mahathir, the way of leading is new as well, because he used to be a very strong leader, as we mentioned before, a very strong man who pretty much ruled alone, and now he has to rule in a coalition and he's not used to this democratic exercise. So I think that a lot of people have to learn new ways of making and doing politics, and it's taking time.

But they don't have that time, for several reasons. First, there are only five years, because the next elections are coming. Secondly, Mahathir is now 93 years old, so time is counting as well for him. Third, Mahathir has been elected on the promise that, within two years, he will hand power to Anwar Ibrahim, the "real" leader of the opposition, if I may say so, who was in jail at the time of the election—he had been in jail since 2015 on politically constructed charges of sodomy, and then was released one week after the election. So Mahathir has two years to make changes. There is a long way to go and the government needs more time to prove its worth, but there are a lot of challenges that were expected, of course. I think some reforms should be pushed a little bit farther, that's for sure.

Q: What are you working on, as the Lee Kong Chian National University Singapore-Stanford Fellow on Southeast Asia?

I'm the happy recipient of the Lee Kong Chian fellowship, so this means that I've been sharing my time between Stanford and the National University of Singapore. My time at Stanford is coming to an end, and I'm leaving next week to start chapter two of my fellowship at the National University of Singapore.

It's very exciting, because I'm going to be back in Malaysia, as Singapore and Malaysia are just next door, so I'll be able to go back to work in Malaysia on a regular basis, to interview and observe Mahathir as well. A lot of things are happening now in Malaysia, so it's very exciting.

I have a lot of projects going on. I'm finishing the revisions of one book manuscript on complicit militancy, based on my PhD. It's about how gangs have been creating umbrella NGOs to offer political services to political parties. That was going on a lot during the previous government and the previous ruling, though actually this phenomenon still exists in what we call new Malaysia. I'm updating this manuscript and hope to finish it early next year, send it to the publisher and have it released by late 2019 or early 2020.

The second work is a book about Mahathir. I'm definitely looking to write a book for a larger audience. I'm really trying in my work to address multiple audiences. I think that academia is in crisis, to be very honest with you. I think that a lot of my colleagues feel that we're not being listened to, but my feeling is that we have to change the language in which we speak—and of course I'm not talking about English, or French, or Chinese. I think the way we address audiences is just wrong. Some of us are doing it really well in certain ways—they're either a good professor, or very good at doing policies and talking to people in D.C., others can do K-12 outreach, and we do that really well at Stanford. But there is a very large population in between that seems that we can't talk to, and I'm really trying to find ways to talk to those people, because they actually represent the largest portion of society and they're the people who vote.

So I have started to try to talk to those people in Malaysia. I created a series of books on Malaysian politics that is being published in Malaysia, and now being republished in Europe and the US as well, with Amsterdam University Press. The third volume is on the way and will be published in May. It's called *The Others' Democracy*, and it's the third volume of the series *Malaysian Politics and People*.

The reason I wanted to have it published in Malaysia is to make it affordable for Malaysian people. I think it's very important. When we work on a country we tend to just go there for fieldwork and forget that what we do should actually serve that country with all those people first.

Having this in mind, this idea of reaching people in another way, I'm currently working on the first book in a series on the contemporary history of Malaysian politics in a form of a graphic novel. The series is going to cover Malaysian politics during the Reformasi time, so it's the history of the democratic movement from 1998 to 2018.

This is not just a small story: this is a graphic novel based on my research, with my insights from my ethnographic research and analysis, translated into another kind of support that can actually talk to a different audience, from teenagers to older adults, without any distinction. It doesn't diminish in any way or discredit the quality of research. It's actually a very difficult intellectual effort to translate and synthesize complex political methods into ways that can fit in a graphic novel without losing the complexity and the precision of the kind of research we do here at Stanford. So it's a very important exercise. I really do encourage my colleagues to look at all those ways that we have to offer what we do to other people and to share our research, because without being shared ideas cannot live.