

The 1969 May Riots in Malaysia: A comparison of reporting in English and Chinese Newspapers in Singapore

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It has been almost four decades since the worst riot in Malaysia – the racial riots of May 13, 1969 - broke out. The official version maintained that the violence was triggered by the provocative actions of Chinese-dominated opposition supporters during their electoral victory parade in the Malay district of Kampung Baru in Kuala Lumpur. The ruling Alliance Party had suffered a major setback in the polls.

Dr Kua Kia Soong's latest book¹ offers a fresh political analysis based on declassified documents in London. He maintains that the May 13 incident was a coup d'état against the Tunku by emergent Malay state capitalists, who wanted to seize power from the old aristocrats so that they could implement the new Malay agenda to suit their own end. This riot was exploited by the ruling party UMNO, to allow the Malays to gain the upper hand in the economy. In the name of racial inequality, the new 'Malay-ultra' dominated government swiftly moved to placate Malays with the Malaysian New Economic Policy (NEP), enshrining affirmative action policies for the bumiputra (Malay) class. Many of Malaysia's draconian press laws also date from this period. The May riot marks the shift from conventional economic growth to a radical racial biased redistribution growth. This incident changed the political and economic landscape profoundly.

Newspapers have been a primary source for political or historical events for researchers. This paper looks at this important source of information - the major newspapers published in Singapore regarding this significant event. It examines the coverage of May 13, 1969 race riots in Malaysia from the Singapore main papers - *Straits Times*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and *Nanyang Siang Pau* regarding the event: how much coverage did each paper have? How was the event reported in each paper? How much details were revealed? How did each paper explain the reasons for the events? What did their respective editorial say about the event? Who were their major reporters and where they obtain the news? How different were these newspaper's reports on the

event? Compare to Dr. Kua's arguments and findings in his recent book, how much was already known or not known in 1969 as reflected in the newspapers reporting and editorials? Lastly, what is the strength and limitation of the newspaper reporting on the event.