

4 Malaysia

Religion, Ethno-Nationalism, and Turf-Guarding

Religious nationalism, as Chapter 1 pointed out, is premised on the idea that religiosity and patriotism can weave together in a manner that gives rise to a narrative which articulates a confessional perspective of nationhood. At its extreme, however, and in a climate where assertive religious claims dominate the narration of national identity and the institutions of the state, a heightened religious discourse potentially results in identity diffusion within the nation-state along religious lines, where confessional claims engender the creation of in-group and out-group identities. Malaysia provides a compelling case for how this process takes place.

In Malaysia, fault lines have formed over the issue of what it means to be a member of the Malaysian “nation” according to the official narrative of nationhood, and how this narrative has changed as erstwhile pluralist conceptions of national identity embraced by (and embracing) minority communities have been threatened, if not supplanted, by a religious discourse that seeks to rearticulate nationhood along narrow and exclusivist terms of a growing Malay-Islamic nationalism. If the previous cases of the Philippines and Thailand have demonstrated how religion offers a language and metaphor of resistance in the process of conceptualizing alternative nationhoods and national identities, in Malaysia it has taken the form of a hegemonic narrative of supremacy and exclusion dominated by religious vocabulary that is harnessed to reinforce, express, and institutionalize a narrowly interpreted narrative of *Ketuanan Melayu* – the dominance and lordship of the ethnic Malay-Muslims in multicultural Malaysia. Correspondingly, this has elicited responses from religious minorities who contest the legitimacy of this reframing of national identity and consciousness for reasons of the existential threat that they pose to their claims to be part of the “Malaysian nation.”

The rise of religious conservatism among Muslim actors who dominate the discourse of Malaysian politics touches on issues of both national

identity construction as well as political legitimacy. This is so because of how social-political entrepreneurs operating both within and outside the state threaten by dint of explicit religious referents to erode any semblance of shared history, common sense of belonging, and “deep horizontal comradeship” upon which pluralist conceptions of nationhood stand.¹ Questions of how, and by what measure, nationhood is or should be conceived have taken the form of conflicting narratives and debate as competing formulations of the nation are envisaged by conservative right-wing Malay ethno-religious nationalists (who, as we shall soon see, are also ardent religious nationalists), many of whom form the bedrock of Malay political class in control of the levers of state power, and an increasingly besieged Christian community which has mobilized resistance through alternative narratives and politics. Indeed, it is in the context of Muslim–Christian relations where competing and conflicting narratives of identity and belonging, rights and legitimacy have found most acute expression.

By way of the above as a point of entry, this chapter will focus on how Muslim groups have attempted to assert, and non-Muslim groups resist and negotiate, this Islamization process in the context of their own interpretations of Malaysian nationalism and national identity, and the tensions and conflicts this has generated. This has been captured most profoundly in debates and narratives on constitutional and citizenship rights, and beneath this, the more fundamental question of what constitutes the key essence of nationhood and identity in Malaysia. Two aspects to this social and political disaggregation need to be stressed in particular. First, race and ethnicity in Malaysia are imbricated with religion, where the link between “Malay” and “Muslim” is as intimate as it is unstable (for reasons that will be elaborated later). Second, the dynamics generated take place against the backdrop not only of state strength (in terms of authoritarian tendencies) but more so the matter of political legitimacy defined by the need to reinforce the predominance, if not outright supremacy, of one ethnic-religious group over others. Together, these twin dynamics have precipitated a crisis of nationhood in Malaysia defined by the contest between ethnic and civic forms of national identity and the clash of their accompanying narratives of nationhood, both of which have taken on increasingly religious hues in terms of the construction (and defense) of communal identity on one hand, and pursuit of political legitimacy on the other.

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. New York: Verso, 1991, p. 7.

A Brief Note on the Religious Imperative in Malay(sian) Nationalism

From its inception, anti-colonial nationalism in Malaysia (Malaya prior to 1963, and British Malaya prior to 1957) was already to varying degrees influenced by religious (Islamic) imperatives. Organized Islamist movements were very much part of the fabric of anti-colonial activism in the early 20th century, long before the creation of UMNO (United Malays National Organization), the dominant Malay-Muslim party today.² Foremost among these were the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (Young Malays Union), a collection of young, educated Malay intelligentsia who were influenced by modernist Islamic anti-colonial thought emanating from the Middle East. It was, however, after the Second World War that anti-colonialism in British Malaya gathered pace. Although the dominant narrative casts the spotlight on UMNO, which was formed to defend the status of the Malay sultans and interests of the Malay community in response to the British plan for a Malayan Union, parallel movements had also emerged which sought to align the nascent independence movement with Islamic and socialist ideals.³ These views were represented by organizations such as the Malay Nationalist Party (successors to the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda*), *Majlis Agama Tertinggi Malaya* (the Supreme Religious Council of Malaya), and *Hizbul Muslimin* (also known as *Parti Orang Muslimin Malaysia* or the Muslim People's Party of Malaysia), all of which constituted what John Funston observed to be “the Islamic wing of Malay nationalism.”⁴ A notable point of departure with UMNO was the role envisaged for Islam in post-colonial Malaya. While UMNO under the leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman was prepared to offer Islam token constitutional recognition, the Islamist socialists were of the view that Islam should be accorded a more prominent place. This is not to say that religion played no role in UMNO. On the contrary, mainstream nationalists of UMNO were also attempting to establish their own

² The role of Islam in early nationalism in Malaysia is discussed in the seminal work William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*. New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1967. See also Tim Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

³ For a comprehensive treatment of the Malayan Union, see A. J. Stockwell, *British Policy and Malay Politics During the Malayan Union Experiment, 1942–1948*. Kuala Lumpur: The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1979 and Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaysia*.

⁴ See John Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of the United Malays National Organisation and Party Islam*. Singapore: Heinemann International, 1981, pp. 87–88.

religious identity and credentials by, *inter alia*, establishing an *ulama* wing, sponsoring Qur'an reading competitions and Islamic schools, hosting international Islamic conferences, and so on.

When UMNO eventually came to dominate the terrain of nationalism after the Second World War, it did so with the protection of Malay royalty and the Malay race as its *raison d'être*. Yet given the demographic constraints at the time of independence, when a substantial proportion of the population of British Malaya was non-Muslim, UMNO could not afford to take a dogmatic position on the matter of the role of religion in the post-independence state for fear of alienating this sizable constituency. More importantly, UMNO could ill afford to antagonize the British colonial administration, which demanded assurances that the former could oversee a moderate governing structure that would maintain multiracial stability. The result of this caution was a compromise struck between UMNO and key non-Muslim political allies, notwithstanding the agitation by vocal Islamist voices both within and outside the party, that while the religion of Malaya would be Islam it would not prejudice the secular orientation of the post-independence state.

At the same time, in an obvious concession to more radical Islamist elements in UMNO, the final constitutional document deliberately avoided characterizing Malaya as secular. This ambiguity was portentous, for it was precisely the constitution's ambivalence on the place of religion – and matters relating to religious freedom – that would eventually become a major point of contention among contrasting views of nationhood, citizenship rights and privileges, and questions of belonging, as religion became a focal point of national identity in the decades that followed. Subsequently, it was in the process of confronting complex challenges about rights and privileges in the context of the struggle to conceptualize a national identity that Islam emerged to play a key role, particularly in relation to the “rightful” place of non-Muslims in Malaysian society.

On this score, it has been relations between the politically dominant Malay-Muslim community and Malaysia's Christian minority that have by far been most testy and conflictual, given the growing limitations placed on non-Muslim expression and practice of their religious faith. Unlike the Muslim minorities in Thailand or the Philippines, however, the Christian minority has been the subject of considerably less scholarly attention in the case of Malaysia. It is in this vein that a closer look at this relationship would cast important and much needed light on these increasingly tense debates over the role of religion in the conception of Malaysian nationhood.

Christianity in Malaysia: History and Social Context

Malaysia is a Muslim majority country, where followers of the Islamic faith comprise about 60 percent of the total population.⁵ In terms of ethnic groups, Malays form the largest number of Muslims (approximately 50 of the 60 percent). Indeed, in Malaysia, ethnic Malays are constitutionally and legally defined as Muslims, and this imbricated character of identity referents would have fundamental implications for conceptions of nationhood. Apart from ethnic Malays, ethnic Indians and, to a lesser extent, Chinese and other smaller denizen ethnic groups make up the remaining 10 percent of Muslims.

Among the other major religions, Christianity is arguably one of the most consequential today by virtue of the fact that according to statistics on religious identity, they form the majority in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak and are a growing segment of the population of Sabah, especially among the Bidayuh (Sarawak), Dayak (Sarawak), and Kadazan (Sabah).⁶ As we shall see later in the chapter, the different religious profile of Sabah and Sarawak casts a somewhat different light on the dynamics of ethnicity and religious identity as they have played out in the conception of Malaysian nationhood.⁷

In total, Christians account for approximately 9 percent of the national population, although anecdotal evidence suggests the political and economic influence they command is incommensurate to their relatively small numbers. The Christian church is represented by a wide range of denominations, including the Anglican Church, the Roman Catholic Church, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, as well as a range of independent Evangelical and Pentecostal movements. It should also be noted that the spread of Christianity in Malaysia continues despite legal restrictions placed on proselytization by the Muslim-led incumbent government, restrictions that have arguably been exclusively targeted at the Christian church given its well-known prerogative to prioritize the conversion of non-believers.

⁵ For official information on Malaysia's demographics, see www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&id=1215.

⁶ There are several available studies on Christianity in Malaysia. For example, Robert Hunt, Lee Kam Hing, and John Roxborough, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*. Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1990; Daniel Ho, "Malaysia," in Saphir Athyal (ed.), *Church in Asia Today: Challenges and Opportunities*. Lausanne: Asia Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism, 1996; John Roxborough, *A History of Christianity in Malaysia*. Singapore: Armour Publishing, 2014.

⁷ For a comprehensive study of Christianity in East Malaysia, see Liana Chua, *The Christianity of Culture: Conversion, Ethnic Citizenship, and the Matter of Religion in Malaysian Borneo*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.

The arrival of Christianity in Malaysia (and Indonesia) can be traced as far back as the 7th century when the religion was brought to the region by Persian and Turkish traders. Nevertheless, Christian influences remained relatively marginal in a region more heavily influenced first by Indianization and, later, Islamization. In the 15th century, Catholicism was introduced by the Portuguese, while Protestantism appeared following the capture of Malacca by the Dutch in 1641. Protestantism gained further appeal during the colonial era of British administration in the 19th century in the Malay Peninsula as well as in Sabah and Sarawak, which together constitute East Malaysia.⁸ The nature of Christianity's expansion during the colonial era doubtless contributed to widespread perceptions – to some extent still widely held today – that it was the “white man's religion” (despite the fact that the religion itself originated in what is today Palestine), and hence was a convenient veil for colonial domination. This would be a constant theme played up by Malay-Muslim nationalists of various stripes.

While colonialism proved the most potent vehicle for the introduction of Christianity since the 18th century, it was by no means the only one. Indeed, migrants also played a crucial role in facilitating the growth of Christianity in Malaysia. The role of Hakka Christians from China and South Asian migrants from the subcontinent was equally crucial in how they spread the religion through their transnational networks. In other instances, local networks such as the Borneo Evangelical Mission, which later morphed into the Borneo Evangelical Church (*Sidang Injil Borneo*), quickly sunk their roots and served as instrumental vehicles for proselytization among indigenous populations, especially in East Malaysia.

Aside from churches, the most visible manifestation of Christianity in Malaysian society can be found in the realm of education, where the influence of missionary schools remains strong. Missionary school networks such as the Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) found in Kuala Lumpur and Perak, the various St. Michael's Institution schools scattered across the country, and Selangor's prestigious Victoria Institution trace their heritage to various Christian denominations and foundations, and remain much sought-after educational institutions today, even among non-Christians who gain access on grounds of merit as such schools do not discriminate on the basis of race or religion. In addition, various uniform units such as the Boys Brigade and Girls Brigade movements continue to flourish in these missionary schools, imparting Christian

⁸ John Roxborough, *A Short History of Christianity in Malaysia*. Available <http://roxborough.com/sea/country/shmalaysia.htm>.

values through extra-curricular activity.⁹ Suffice to say, then, that the legacy of European (mainly British) missionary movements continued to thrive through these institutions long after the end of colonialism in Borneo (East Malaysia) and British Malaya. In more recent times, new networks of believers have surfaced to supplement the traditional networks of churches and educational institutions. Para-church organizations such as Fellowship of Evangelical Students (FES) and Graduate Christian Fellowship (GCF) provide venues through activities such as annual camps and conferences for Christian students, graduates, and young professionals to engage, network, discuss creedal beliefs through their bible study groups, and debate social issues of the day.

Despite strong institutional underpinnings and the fact that it is an essentially proselytizing religion, the growth of Christianity in Malaysia faces considerable obstacles. One of the reasons is the fact that members of the majority ethnic group in Malaysia – the Malays – are Muslims by birth. Both constitutionally and culturally, Malay-Muslims are prohibited from conversion to Christianity, or any other faith for that matter. Moreover, proselytization to Muslims is outlawed in the country. This lack of access to the Malay-Muslim community is further compounded by the fact that demographic trends in recent decades indicate a growing reduction of the non-Malay population relative to the Malay population. Yet, notwithstanding their minority status, Christians in Malaysia enjoy a very strong sense of community. In Peninsular Malaysia, anecdotal evidence suggests that Christians mostly consist of upper- and middle-class Malaysians from the ethnic Chinese and Indian communities, and tend to be better educated generally. This differs somewhat from the Christian community in East Malaysia, where they are spread across a larger number of ethnic groups. In fact, this overlay of class and ethnicity at least in Peninsular Malaysia has played no small part in contributing to the escalation of tension and conflict between Malay-Muslims and Christians by virtue of the perceived threat that the latter poses to the enshrined privileges of the former.

Ethnicity as Presumed Destiny

Scholars have argued that a significant change has taken place within Malaysia, whereby the outlook of large segments of the Muslim community has gradually shifted toward a more conservative register in terms

⁹ In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that quite a few Christian converts identify their membership in such groups during their school years as their initial exposure to the Christian faith.

of how social and political forces representing them have been asserting the prominence of Islam as a fundamental organizing principle for Malaysian society.¹⁰ At issue is the intensification of an exclusivist narrative of Malay-Muslim supremacy that derogates religious freedom and rights of minority communities. For the most part, Malaysia's Christian community has reluctantly acquiesced to this shift. Even so, the gradual amplification of ethno-nationalist sentiments within segments of the Malay community that are increasingly couched in religious language has generated stiff headwinds for non-Muslim confessional communities, in particular the Christian community, against their freedom to exercise their faith and rendered diffidence increasingly difficult. This state of affairs has also set the backdrop for dramatic mobilization of both Malay-Muslim and non-Muslim groups. Two incidents stand out in this regard, in terms of how they triggered a deterioration of Muslim-Christian relations over the fundamental question of how Malaysian identity and nationhood is being conceived and articulated, reframed and reinvented.

First, in 2008 the Mufti of Perak, Harussani Zakaria, publicly fulminated that up to 260,000 Muslims in Malaysia had left the faith and converted to Christianity.¹¹ Despite the fact that no evidence was ever mustered to support his spurious claims, Harussani had no compunction about repeating his careless remarks, and in so doing catalyzed a backlash from many segments of the Malay-Muslim community as several civil society groups seized upon the opportunity to pressure the Malaysian government to "defend Islam."¹² This reaction foregrounded a growing sense of insecurity that attends certain segments of the Malay-Muslim community regarding their indigenous rights, a concern nursed by decades of political rhetoric on the part of UMNO about the presumed existential threat that non-Muslims posed to Malay-Muslim identity and interests.¹³ This sentiment has also informed persistent talk of

¹⁰ Recent scholarship on this topic includes Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009; Farish A. Noor, *The Malaysian Islamic Party PAS, 1951–2013: Islamism in a Mottled Nation*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014.

¹¹ See <http://helpvictor.blogspot.com/2011/10/christian-proselytization.html>.

¹² Christian proselytization among the Malay-Muslim community was one of the immediate issues the post-independence government of Malaya sought to tackle, because of the latitude that the British colonial authorities afforded to Christian mission work. Since then, non-Muslim proselytization among the Malay-Muslim community has been banned by local religious authorities in almost all Malaysian states.

¹³ This was a far cry from the relationship that the prominent Malay literary figure Munshi Abdullah had with the Christian missionary William Milne. As John Roxborough noted: "Abdullah was never threatened in his own faith as a Muslim by his friendship with the LMS missionaries in Melaka and later in Singapore and his contribution to the rendering

cooperation between hitherto political opponents, UMNO and PAS (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* or the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), in the name of “Malay-Muslim unity.” In response, the Muslim dominated state has encroached deeper into the lives of non-Muslims in the name of “defending Islam.”¹⁴ Using Islam as an ethnic boundary not only to differentiate themselves from non-Malays but also, more importantly, to reinforce a narrative of Malay-Muslim supremacy, a greater constriction of religious space for non-Muslim religious communities has taken place and, in turn, fanned the embers of the siege mentality that has taken root in the minority Christian community.¹⁵

Second, the usage of the term “Allah” by a Roman Catholic periodical, elaborated later in this chapter, sparked outrage in conservative quarters of the Malay-Muslim community possessed of a proprietary view that the term was the exclusive right of Muslims. Not only did events such as these precipitate mobilization of Malay-Muslim groups in defense of the primacy they ascribe to their faith, but also it prompted a discernible increase in political activism and mobilization from the Christian community, including rare open criticism of the state by religious leaders as well as ecumenical bodies such as the Council of Churches in Malaysia (CCM) and National Evangelical Christian Federation (NECF). At issue is the question of freedom of religion, which Malaysia’s diverse Christian community has come to perceive as increasingly eroded in the wake of strong tides of Islamic conservatism that have infiltrated the Malaysian state.

Underlying this conservative turn is a domineering and heavily ethnized political discourse that places great store on the notion of *Ketuanan Melayu*, or Malay lordship. A controversial concept which more often than not is misrepresented and misinterpreted, *Ketuanan Melayu* has nevertheless come to serve as the hegemonic master frame of Malaysian politics today, where the dominant discourse argues that Malaysia is, in essence, a Malay, and by extension Islamic, nation, and Malaysian nationhood must begin with an acceptance of this “reality.” To get at the

of Christian scriptures into appropriate Malay was outstanding.” See John Roxborough, “Christianity in the Straits Settlements 1786–1842.” Available www.academia.edu/4503922/Christianity_in_the_Straits_Settlements_1786_to_1842. See also Robert Hunt, “The History of the Translation of the Bible into Malay,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 1989.

¹⁴ See Judith Nagata, *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam: Modern Religious Radicals and Their Roots*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984.

¹⁵ Chong Eu Choong, “The Christian Response to State-led Islamization in Malaysia,” in Bernhard Platzdasch and Johan Saravanamuttu (eds.), *Religious Diversity in Muslim-majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014.

issue of challenges that Malaysia's Christians perceive to derive from this discourse, and their reservations toward these jeremiads in the context of their own negotiation of how nationhood is being conceived in Malaysia, it behooves to first establish the content of this dominant narrative of Malay-Muslim supremacy and how it has come to frame the national discourse on identity and politics.

*The Master Frame of Malay-Muslim Dominance and
Rise of Malay-Islamic Nationalism*

During a lecture in Singapore in 1986, Abdullah Ahmad, then a Malaysian member of parliament and senior cadre of UMNO, famously exclaimed: "Let us make no mistake. The political system in Malaysia is founded on Malay dominance."¹⁶ Following Abdullah Ahmad's statement, *Ketuanan Melayu*, as Malay dominance was translated, quickly entered into the lexicon as one of the paramount features of national discursive landscape in Malaysian society.¹⁷ The profundity of what Abdullah Ahmad articulated cannot be overemphasized. According to the scholar of Malaysian Islam, Clive Kessler, these remarks all but triggered a major reconceptualization of the fundamental premises of Malaysian nationhood:

This was now a doctrine of explicit Malay political primacy and domination, one that went well beyond the NEP-era notion of simply the centrality of Malay culture to Malaysian national culture. That was one-half of the new approach. The other, and craftier, part was to assert that this notion of Malay ascendancy or domination was, and had been since 1957, part of the nation's foundational "social contract": that it had been an explicit or inherent part of the Merdeka agreements that had duly become embedded within the Federal Constitution itself. Radically revisionist, historically unfounded and even heretical when Abdullah Ahmad announced it, this idea was in following years powerfully promoted, and with insistent determination.¹⁸

¹⁶ "Dari Kacamata Melayu: Ucapan 'Malay Dominance' Abdullah Ahmad (1986) di Singapura." Available <http://pesanan-pesanan.blogspot.com/2008/12/ucapan-malay-dominance-abdullah-ahmad.html>.

¹⁷ While the origins of the notion of Malay dominance as expressed in *Ketuanan Melayu* can be traced back to the pre-war anti-colonialist movement of the KMM, it has taken on several permutations since. Malay nationalists have used it to mobilize Malay support against the Malayan Union scheme (1946), the "Malaysian Malaysia" challenge from Lee Kuan Yew's Malaysian Solidarity Convention (1964), and the outcome of the May 1969 elections, which saw the Chinese opposition make significant inroads in Malaysian politics. Its more recent manifestations can be traced to the remarks alluded to here that were made by former UMNO stalwart Abdullah Ahmad.

¹⁸ Clive Kessler, "Where Malaysia Stands Today," *The Malaysian Insider*, May 16, 2014. Available www.themalaysianinsider.com/sideviews/article/where-malaysia-stands-today-clive-kessler.

To this, we should hasten to add that while the notion that the Malay-Muslim population of Malaysia enjoys a status of primacy has never been seriously disputed, at the inception of the Malayan nation-state in 1957 this took the form of a “thin” conceptualization of *Ketuanan Melayu* where, for instance, the special rights and privileges accorded to the Malay population were understood to be time-bound: they were never envisaged to exist in perpetuity, and were to be pursued with careful appreciation of non-Malay interests and sensitivities toward their place in the nascent nation-state. Indeed, it was with this in mind that the architects of Malaya’s constitution and “social contract” crafted a secular document that reflected the country’s inherent diversity. What Abdullah Ahmad articulated in effect amounted to an invidious frontal assault on this edifice of Malaysian pluralism. It signaled a discursive shift that for all intents and purposes represented what was already gradually taking place, namely, a stronger emphasis on Malay rights and privileges at the expense of the interests of and discursive space for minorities. In other words, a shift from “thin” *Ketuanan Melayu* to “thick” *Ketuanan Melayu*, a major departure from what was originally envisaged by those who inherited the British colonial state at independence, had already begun.

Ketuanan Melayu is defined in Malaysian history textbooks as “the passion for anything related to the Malay race such as political rights, language, cultural heritage and customs, as well as the homeland.”¹⁹ According to the *Kamus Dewan* produced by the influential *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (Institute for Language and Literature), *Ketuanan* can mean “the right to rule or control a country (*Negara*), state (*Negeri*), or a district (*Daerah*), or sovereignty (*Kedaulatan*).” Its root word, *Tuan*, in keeping with this context, means “master” or “lord” (in relation to a servant or slave), or, in a related context, “owner” (in relation to property). Hence, literally, *Ketuanan Melayu* means Malay sovereignty or the lordship and ownership claim of the Malay on the *Tanah Melayu*, the land belonging to the Malays and everything in/on it. As with all nationalist discursive signifiers, the concept is often also heavily romanticized. Consider, in this regard, the following definition found in a Form Three textbook: “The love for whatever that is related to the Malay race such as political right, language, culture, heritage, customs and homeland. The Malay Peninsula (*Semenanjung Tanah Melayu*) is regarded as the ancestral land of the Malays.”²⁰

¹⁹ See Yusu N. and Abu Chik A., *Eksel dalam PMR Sejarah*. Petaling Jaya: Pelangi Publishing Group Berhad, undated.

²⁰ Helen Ting, “Malaysian History Textbooks and the Discourse of *Ketuanan Melayu*,” in Daniel P.S. Goh (ed.), *Race and Multiculturalism in Singapore*. New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 3.

What is more interesting, perhaps, is that despite the controversy surrounding it, the term *Ketuanan Melayu* itself does not appear in the Malaysian Constitution. At any rate, its underlying logic of according special rights to Malay interests is, in fact, constitutionally sanctioned. According to the Federal Constitution of 1957, while non-Malays were granted citizenship rights, Article 153 decrees that it is the responsibility of the King (*Yang di Pertuan Agong*) to safeguard the special position of the Malays and *Bumiputera* (indigenous groups), while also taking into account the “legitimate interests” of other communities.²¹ In this way, the “special position” of the Malays and *Bumiputera* are codified. Rightly or wrongly, many Malay politicians, educationists, religious leaders, civil society activists, and culturalists have come to define this as Malay “*ketuanan*” over other segments of the population. In keeping with this definition, *Ketuanan Melayu* has become for them a legitimate organizing principle for Malaysian society by virtue of their view that the modern Malaysian state is built on the traditional Malay polity and anchored on the political culture and practices of its dominant ethnic group. The key questions, therefore, are to what extent this train of thought would or should be pursued to its logical conclusion in the process of imagining the Malaysian nation, and at what cost to the civic and pluralist conceptions of nationhood?

A critical feature of the discourse on *Ketuanan Melayu* is how the notion has been used to conceptualize the relationship between Muslim Malays and non-Malay citizens of Malaysia. Citing the following examples from history textbooks used in national schools, Ting points out how non-Malays are often cast in a negative light, and their citizenship – and, by extension, loyalty – called into question. Non-Malays are frequently referred to in such texts with depreciatory terms such as *anak dagang*, *golongan pendatang*, *pendatang asing*, or *imigran*, which she explicated to imply sojourners with no loyalty to the land, foreigners, aliens, or immigrants as opposed to *penduduk tempatan* or local inhabitants. It stands to reason that this is done to implicitly delegitimize their position in relation to Malay rights whenever the issue of citizenship is discussed. Moreover, the terms *orang dagang* and *golongan pendatang* are used in pejorative fashion to describe non-Malays in the context of Malay opposition to Malayan Union and advocacy of *Ketuanan Melayu*, thereby obliquely conveying the impression that any allusion to equal rights for non-Malays was essentially a threat to the position of the Malays. With

²¹ Article 153(1) reads: “It shall be the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article.”

this turn of phrase, *Ketuanan Melayu* became a zero-sum discourse with existential connotations for Malay-Muslim identity.

Needless to say, this view also carries religious connotations. Abdullah Zaik, president of *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia* (Muslim Community Union of Malaysia), has argued that because non-Muslims are “immigrants,” they should not be allowed a voice on the matter of whether and how Malaysia can be transformed into an Islamic state through the formulation and implementation of Islamic juridical strictures.²² Malaysian national Islamic religious authorities which provide texts for the Friday sermons delivered in mosques throughout the country have regularly launched veiled attacks on Christians by alluding to “enemies of Islam” within the country who sought to confuse Muslims into believing that all religions are the same.²³

This polarization of Malaysia’s two largest confessional religious communities is compounded, Manickam further suggests, by referencing British colonialism and how non-Malays (namely, ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians) were allied to the British and hence were beneficiaries of colonial rule, not to mention that unlike the Malays who claim themselves to be original inhabitants of the land, the ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians were immigrants.²⁴ In sum, proponents of *Ketuanan Melayu* believe it to be a “timeless reality” which affords them the right to claim primacy and supremacy over other ethnic groups in the land even as the role of non-Muslims in the ascription of national identity and conceptualization of nationhood has been marginalized.²⁵ This train of thought is captured clearly in the writings of the former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, who stolidly opined that: “The Malays are the original or indigenou people of Malaya and the only people who can claim Malaya as their one and only country. In accordance with practice all over the world, this confers on the Malays certain inalienable rights over the forms and obligations of citizenship which can be imposed on citizens

²² Dina Murad, “Abdullah Zaik: The Man behind Isma,” *The Star*, May 22, 2014.

²³ See Clara Choi, “Friday Sermon Irks Local Church Leaders as ‘Allah’ Row Rages On,” *The Malaysian Insider*, January 26, 2013. Available www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/friday-sermon-irks-local-church-leaders-as-allah-row-rages-on/. The logic here is also somewhat flawed, as most confessional Christians do not in fact believe that all religions are the same.

²⁴ Sandra Khor Manickam, “Textbooks and Nation Construction in Malaysia,” 2005. Available www.researchgate.net/publication/242203744_Textbooks_and_Nation_Construction_in_Malaysia.

²⁵ Historians and anthropologists have debated the indigenous status of Malays in the Peninsula. See, for instance, Tim Barnard (ed.), *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004. Needless to say, this argument is moot as far as political champions of *Ketuanan Melayu* are concerned.

of non-indigenous origin.”²⁶ Despite his formal retirement from politics, Mahathir, in his studied disinterest, has continued to prod ultraconservative ethno-religious nationalist elements with this line of thinking.

As the definitive statement of claim for the supremacy of the Malay “race,” *Ketuanan Melayu* has become arguably the most controversial concept that Malaysian society has to grapple with today. Given the assiduous myth-making that has surrounded the concept, the heavily racialized, ethno-religious nationalist discourse on *Ketuanan Melayu* can hardly be dismissed as merely a trope. While Malay politicians undoubtedly capitalize on the narrative of *Ketuanan Melayu* and the accompanying assumption that Malay interests and, indeed, survival are under threat and hence need to be defended, with far too much frequency, the fact of the matter is that this narrative continues to appeal to particular segments of the Malay community in Malaysia; and these segments are often large enough and influential enough to turn the tide of political contests in favor of ethno-religious nationalists. This is because the currency of the narrative of *Ketuanan Melayu* lies not only in its stress on the rights of denizens, but also the portrayal of non-Malays as a threat to these rights. Indeed, notwithstanding its seemingly innocuous role in outlining the markers of *Melayu* (Malay) identity as some scholars of Malay culture have argued, the etymology of the discourse has come to set more store by its political definition in relation to Malaysia’s other ethnic communities, to wit: it implies that Malays are self-referenced “*tuan*” or “lords” and “masters” over other identities. “Thick” *Ketuanan Melayu*, then, is a narrative of special “birthright” and ethno-religious supremacy that in the view of non-Malays strikes at the very core of attempts to envision a civic and pluralist conception of nationhood despite the fact that the very notion of Malayness, which underpins *Ketuanan Melayu*, is a heavily contested concept.

Wrapped up in stereotypes and notwithstanding the conviction with which Malay-Muslim ethno-religious nationalist right-wing groups mobilize around the banner of *Ketuanan Melayu*, using it to justify the implementation of various affirmative action policies, discourses on this chief identity signifier in Malaysian society – the notion of *Melayu* or Malayness – are, as several recent scholarly collections have pointed out, highly ambiguous.²⁷ Be that as it may, promulgators of Malay supremacy

²⁶ Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma*. Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International, 1970, p. 133.

²⁷ See Barnard (ed.), *Contesting Malayness*; Yamamoto Hiroyuki, Anthony Milner, Kawashima Midori, and Arai Kazuhiro (eds.), *Bangsa and Umma: Development of People-Grouping Concepts in Islamized Southeast Asia*. Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2011; Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (eds.), *Melayu: The Politics*,

would be quick to point out that the concept, or rather what it implies, has cultural and legal currency. This is captured in the special privileges guaranteed in the Federal Constitution. Specifically, reference is made to how the Constitution “expressly authorizes” certain “special provisions” such as the “special position” of the Malays and natives of Borneo (in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak). This was promulgated in Articles 153 (1) mentioned earlier, and 153(2) of the Constitution, which states that:

The Yang di-Pertuan Agong shall exercise his functions . . . necessary to safeguard the special provision of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and to ensure the reservation . . . of positions in the public service . . . and of scholarships, exhibitions and other similar educational and training privileges or special facilities given or accorded by the Federal Constitution.²⁸

All this is doubtless true, except for the fact that, first, as this chapter pointed out, the term *Ketuanan Melayu* itself does not appear in the Constitution; second, the phrase “special provision” is hardly synonymous to “supremacy” or “lordship”; and, third, to the extent that it is implied in the Constitution, its coverage is clearly not limited to the “ethnic Malay” for it encompasses “natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak” as well, a large number of whom are not, as it were, ethnic Malay.²⁹ Indeed, the amorphous nature of Malayness is captured in the concept of “*Masuk Melayu*,” which refers to how a person could “become” Malay upon conversion to Islam (which also implies that, at least in theory, a Malay may not have been a Malay at birth).³⁰ In

Poetics, and Paradoxes of Malayness. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2011.

²⁸ The Constitution of the Federation of Malaysia can be found at <http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/malaysia.pdf>.

²⁹ Indeed, the conundrum of Sabah and Sarawak has remained poorly understood. The current Malaysian Constitution states that “the States of the Federation shall be Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Penang, Perak, Perlis, Sabah, Sarawak, Selangor, and Terengganu.” This, however, was not always the case. That phraseology contained in the latest Constitution, was revised in 1976. The original Constitution of September 16, 1963, mentions, in Article 1(2), that: “the states of the Federation shall be (a) the states of Malaya, namely Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Penang, Perak, Perlis, Selangor, and Terengganu; (b) the Borneo States, namely Sabah and Sarawak; and (c) the State of Singapore.” In other words, the original Federation of Malaysia was conceived as a conglomeration of three different but equal entities. This was further substantiated in the special provisions provided for Sabah and Sarawak, provisions that have over time been ignored and forgotten by the Malaysian state.

³⁰ A fine, though dated, article that covers this complexity is Judith Nagata, “What is a Malay? Situational Selection of Ethnic Identity in a Plural Society,” *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 1, No. 2, May 1974, pp. 331–350.

point of fact, it is this that renders the implicit religious character of *Ketuanan Melayu* explicit.

Reframing the Narrative: From Ethnicity to Religion

Islam and Malay identity, already fused together constitutionally at the creation of independent Malaya, became even more intimately imbricated on the social landscape during the administration of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad when *Sunni* Islam was embedded institutionally within the state, and formed the foundation for a growing Malay-Islamic nationalism. A central impetus to this process of Islamization was the escalating competition for Malay-Muslim votes that was taking place between Mahathir's UMNO party and the opposition Islamist party, PAS. Formed in 1951 by disillusioned members of UMNO's religious wing, the leadership of PAS took a decidedly religious turn in the early 1980s when the party replicated the Iranian example and voted in clerics into the top ranks of party leadership. Both parties subsequently became engrossed in the "Islamization race" that ensued, with UMNO using the levers of the state to bolster its Islamic credentials.³¹ Needless to say, this uptick in religious politicking gave added impetus to the narrative of the primacy of Islam as religious credentials and the ability to "out-Islam" each other served as crucial source of legitimation for these Muslim political parties.

An outcome of this Islamization race was the amplification of a hegemonic discourse of both Islamic and Malay supremacy, which under the aegis of Mahathir's leadership took the form of the propagation of a brand of Islam that was articulated as progressive and modern, yet was distinctively conservative in praxis. Shaping this state-sanctioned Islamic landscape was the introduction of a host of Islamic programs on public television; Islamic banking; the building of mosques, Islamic schools, and the International Islamic University; and the proliferation of Islamic civil society organizations, many with close links to the ruling UMNO party. At the same time, activist Muslims began taking control of the levers of the state when the religious bureaucracy all but ballooned during this period.³² Formed in 1968 as MKI (*Majlis Kebangsaan Hal*

³¹ Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Political Islam in Malaysia: Problematising Discourse and Practice in the UMNO-PAS 'Islamisation Race,'" *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 2, July 2004; Joseph Chinyong Liow and Afif Pasuni, "Islam, the State and Politics in Malaysia," in Meredith Weiss (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia*. London: Routledge, 2015.

³² For this topic, see Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "Political Islam and Islamist Politics in Malaysia," *Trends in Southeast Asia*, No. 2, 2013; Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani,

Ehwal Ugama Islam Malaysia or the Malaysian National Association of Islamic Affairs) and incorporated into the Prime Minister's Office in 1974, JAKIM (*Jabatan Agama Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* or the Malaysian Department for Religious Development) and its affiliates that operated in the various states under the Malaysian federal system were endowed with extensive powers to define Muslim orthodoxy and orthopraxy in Malaysia. Accompanying this was a particularly disconcerting amendment in the Malaysian Constitution in 1988 that further empowered these religious authorities to police the practice of Islam.

Indeed, it is through these transformative processes that Islam has come to assume a prominent place in the Malaysian political psyche leading Malaysian national identity to be increasingly ascribed with religious (Islamic) markers, accompanied by a discomfiting puritanical rigidity on the part of a small but growing segment of the Malay-Muslim population. Even though freedom of worship is constitutionally guaranteed, Islam is enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution as the sole official religion of the country. Not only that, but also constitutional articles such as the controversial Article 121 1(A) accord Islamic *shari'a* law equal status with civil law on a range of jurisprudential matters concerning Muslims. Islam assumes further significance by virtue of the fact that, according to the Constitution, one of the chief criteria for the definition of "Malay" is that a person must be Muslim. As noted previously, the fact that converts to Islam in Malaysia are deemed to be "*Masuk Melayu*" is demonstrative of how ethnicity has blurred into religion on a level as fundamental as personal identity.³³

While there may certainly be an element of brinkmanship and posturing in how the UMNO-led government has used religion to enhance its credibility and political legitimacy, it would be a mistake to presume that Islamization was merely sabre-rattling and politicking in religious

"Islamization Policy and Islamic Bureaucracy in Malaysia," *Trends in Southeast Asia* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), No. 5, 2015.

³³ Beyond this, the role of Islam as a core foundation of Malay identity has taken on further credence for the fact that the two other pillars upon which this identity is constructed, namely language and royalty, no longer carry the same weight as they used to as identity signifiers. The Malay language remains of consequence politically, but it is precisely because of this that led the state to formulate and implement an education policy based on its primacy in the national curriculum. What was the result? Simply put, knowledge of the Malay language was no longer an exclusive "Malay" prerogative. Similarly, royalty in Malaysia today has had a highly problematic relationship with the Malay ruling elite, where it is seen by the latter as a competitor to their legitimacy. Moreover, royalty have also further undermined their own legitimacy in the public eye as a result of a number of controversial episodes and scandals. For a study on Malaysia's constitutional monarchy, see Ali Fuat Gökçe, "Federal Parliamentary Democracy with a Constitutional Monarchy: Malaysia," *International Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 6, No. 5, May 2013.

guise. As a matter of fact, it strikes at the very essence of national identity and belonging. The combination of the factors discussed above, amplified by the prevalence of a state-orchestrated discourse of ethno-religious supremacy and narrative of rampant Malay-Islamic nationalism that politicians from the UMNO party and its affiliates enjoy free rein to engage in, has effectively ascribed to members of other ethnic groups and religions the status of “second-class” citizens in everything but name. Concomitantly, the fact that non-Muslims perceive this as a dereliction of the constitutional right to freedom of religion, enshrined in Article 11, appears to hold little sway as narrow exclusivist views carry the day amidst the deafening silence of the “moderates” in the Malay-Muslim establishment.

What is even more striking is the fact that while ethnicity has long been seen as the primary identity marker for Malays in Malaysia, recent research indicates that there may well be a shift in reference points away from ethnicity toward religion taking place today, with Malays prioritizing religious signifiers over ethnic ones.³⁴ According to this narrative, the centrality of Islam to Malay identity – and by extension, the Malay polity upon which the modern Malay(sian) state is built – becomes an inexorable ontological principle, disconnected from the pluralist social landscape comprising multiple “nations” bounded within the territorial state, or the constitutional rights which they lay claim to. While an *idea* of a Malaysian identity may exist, the hierarchical nature of the Malaysian political structure where power is essentially held in the hands of Malay-Muslim elite, and the dominant yet profoundly narrow narrative of nationhood they promulgate, weakens any effort at building Malaysian national identity as a collective whole, for fear that “a particular definition may favour the interests and identity of one sub-national group over another.”³⁵ Consequently, the ascriptive identity of Malay-Muslim supremacy has gradually eroded the Malaysian political-constitutional identity that accommodates non-Muslim minorities, and that was envisaged by Malaysia’s founding fathers.

Prognostic Frames: Christian Mobilization and Legal Recourse?

Since the 1980s, this exclusivist and restrictive conception of Malay-Muslim identity – bleeding into hegemony on grounds of religion and

³⁴ Carolyn Hong, “Increasing Religiosity in Malaysia Causes a Stir,” *Straits Times*, September 5, 2006.

³⁵ Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997, p. 98.

ethnicity – has been gathering momentum at the expense of religious freedom for non-Muslims in Malaysia. This constriction has been expressed in the activism of state Islamic authorities (including the policing of religious “practice” by these authorities, even when offenses involve non-Muslims), as well as the perpetuation of discriminatory laws and practices, such as the denial of the right to proselytize for Christians (a long-standing proscription), restrictions on permits for the construction of church buildings, obstacles to the importing of Christian literature, and the interference of zealous Muslim civil servants in the handling of issues pertaining to the Christian community.³⁶ So how has Malaysia’s Christian community responded?

Unlike Muslim minorities in Thailand or the Philippines covered in previous chapters, the prognostic frames that Christians in Malaysia have chosen have not involved violence in any significant form but rather to emphasize citizen and belonging.³⁷ That is not to say, however, that the Christian community has demurred in the face of these exclusivist narratives promulgated by those favoring a more restrictive and “Islamic” interpretation of the fundamental tenets of Malaysian nationhood. In fact, Christian leaders have since independence sought to mitigate the effects of Islamization via quiet channels of dialogue with the state and its interlocutors.³⁸ Yet the increasing intrusion of the state into the non-Muslim sphere has provoked a shift from this traditional torpor. Concomitantly, previous practices of restraint, discreet dialogue, and lobbying have given way to more visible resistance and push-back in the form of deepening civil and political engagement for the cause of religious freedom and the mobilization of civil society groups and coalitions toward these ends.³⁹ The result has been the unfolding of high-profile legal cases which have cast a harsh light on religious freedom amidst an air of Malay-Muslim supremacy and dominance.

³⁶ See Peter Rowan, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker: The Malaysian Church as an Agent of Reconciliation in a Multicultural Society*. Oxford: Regnum Books, 2012; Chong Eu Chong, “The Christian Response to State-led Islamization in Malaysia,” in Bernhard Platzdasch and Johan Saravanamuttu (eds.), *Religious Diversity in Muslim-Majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014.

³⁷ Albert Sundadaraj Walters, *We Believe in One God? Reflections on the Trinity in the Malaysian Context*. Delhi: ISPCK, 2002, p. 59.

³⁸ Interview, Negri Sembilan, June 17, 2012.

³⁹ The formation of local ecumenical bodies was telling of the extent to which various Christian denominations perceived the intensification of state restrictions on religious freedom and freedom of worship for non-Muslims. This is because, while a universal religion, Christianity has always been plagued by doctrinal differences and different modes of church governance which have often proven impediments to unity and cooperation between churches and denominations.

As suggested earlier, the encroachment of rigid Islamization into the realm of creedal allegiance and worship has become more discernible over the years, resulting in the deepening of inter-religious and inter-ethnic cleavages. Permits for church buildings have become harder to come by as Christian communities began facing a raft of obstacles including the reduction of land for non-Muslim religious buildings and bureaucratic foot-dragging. As a consequence, many churches have resorted to renting commercial property or office premises for their worship. Smaller congregations were denied usage of the word “*gereja*” (church), and were only allowed to operate as “*pusat*” (center). More disconcerting is the fact that debates over conversions, particularly involving Muslims, have become rampant, amplified, and heated. Nowhere has this been more so in recent times than over the case of Lina Joy.

The case revolves around Azalina Jailani, a Muslim convert to Christianity who changed her name to Lina Joy in 1998. As Malaysian law requires all Muslim citizens to have their religion (Islam) reflected in their identity card, after her conversion Joy attempted on several occasions to have the word “Islam” removed. Her application was rejected by the National Registration Department on the grounds that she had to furnish written authorization from the *shari’a* court that officially declared her an apostate before such a change could be made.⁴⁰ The Federal Territories *Shari’a* Court, which she consulted in the issue, refused her request for the document, thereby denying her any right to leave the religion. Joy’s appeal against the decision of the *shari’a* court in 2001 was likewise dismissed on grounds that civil courts had no jurisdiction over matters concerning religion. Finally, Lina Joy appealed the *shari’a* court decision to the Federal Court, the highest court in the land, on constitutional grounds, thereby setting the stage for a watershed decision.

On May 30, 2007, the Malaysian Federal Court finally made a much-awaited decision regarding the Lina Joy apostasy case. In a landmark pronouncement which reverberated across the Malaysian social-political landscape and set a legal precedence, the Federal Court ruled by a margin of two-to-one in favor of dismissing Lina Joy’s appeal and upholding earlier legal decisions that her case had no standing in civil courts. The panel concluded that only an Islamic *shari’a* tribunal could certify her renunciation of Islam and, by virtue of that, the legality of her conversion. In other words, in the eyes of the Malaysian judicial system, Lina Joy

⁴⁰ According to the Malaysian Constitution and Malaysia’s dual-track system of governance over religious issues, the state *shari’a* court is the final arbiter on all matters pertaining to a Muslim’s practice of his/her faith. This includes matters of conversion.

remains a Muslim despite her public renunciation of the faith by virtue of her baptism into the Christian religion many years ago.

Predictably, the debate over apostasy lent itself to greater controversy precisely because of the multi-cultural and multi-religious nature of Malaysian society. Political expediency, coupled with a concern for the alleged proliferation of apostasy cases over the past few years, has forced the UMNO-led government's hand and pressured the state into engaging this controversial debate.⁴¹ JAKIM stood at the forefront of the state's response by suggesting the possibility of a parliamentary bill on apostasy in 1998, the contents of which were never fully fleshed out. Following this, legislation was put in place that levied punishment in the region of a RM5,000 fine or a three-year jail term, or both, for the Islamic offense of *murtad* (apostasy).⁴² In addition, these laws also clarified Article 11(4) of the Federal Constitution forbidding the proselytization of Muslims by other faiths in Malaysia.⁴³ In sum, this provision permits states to outlaw the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam, and to take penal action against non-Muslims caught proselytizing to Muslims.

The Lina Joy court ruling received extensive coverage in local and international media, and was predictably met with consternation within Christian circles in Malaysia and abroad. Within Malaysia, ubiquitous Christian bible study groups met in prayer for Joy, while Christian leaders concerned for the legal *cul-de-sac* of the Lina Joy ruling, mobilized to draw the Malaysian government's attention to constitutional guarantees of religious freedom. In an open letter, the CCM raised concerns that the sanctity of Article 11 of the Federal Constitution of 1957 had been severely diminished by the decision, and called on the Malaysian government to set in motion measures to protect religious freedom as originally intended in the document.⁴⁴

Muslim-Christian antagonism in Malaysia escalated in January 2010 with a series of attacks on Christian churches, followed by seemingly retaliatory attacks on a couple of Muslim *surau* (prayer facilities). Though

⁴¹ Patricia Martinez, "Mahathir, Islam and the New Malay Dilemma," in Ho Khai Leong and James Chin (eds.), *Mahathir's Administration: Performance and Crisis in Governance*. Singapore: Times Books International, 2002, p. 240.

⁴² Norani Othman, "Islamization and Democratization in Malaysia in Regional and Global Contexts," in Ariel Heryanto and Sumit Mandal (eds.), *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: Comparing Indonesia and Malaysia*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, p. 128.

⁴³ Article 11(4) stipulates that "State law . . . may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam."

⁴⁴ Rev Dr. Thomas Philips and Rev Dr. Herman Shastri, "Freedom of Religion Has Been Severely Diminished," in Nathaniel Tan and John Lee (eds.), *Religion Under Siege; Lina Joy, The Islamic State and Freedom of Faith*. Kuala Lumpur: Kinibooks, 2008, p. 26.

never conclusively proven, it was widely believed that the attacks on twelve churches were a direct response to a High Court ruling in December 2009 that permitted the use of the term “*Allah*” in the Malay language version of the Roman Catholic magazine, *Herald*, with the requisite disclaimer that such publications were for circulation among non-Muslims only.⁴⁵ The court ruling was met with widespread disapproval among the Malay-Muslim community, which viewed the use of the term “*Allah*” as the exclusive prerogative of Muslims.⁴⁶

The consequences of a ban on the use of the word “*Allah*” by non-Muslims would have the greatest impact on Malaysian Christians from the Eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak, where most indigenous followers of the religion are illiterate in English and hence rely heavily on religious publications (bibles, religious tracts, hymnals) obtained from neighboring Indonesia, which are published in the cognate Indonesian language. The fact of the matter is that East Malaysian Christians have been using the word *Allah* for centuries without opposition from Muslims. In this regard, the attempt to ban the use of the word has been perceived as unwelcome regulation of their worship, thereby once again contravening constitutional rights to freedom of worship.

Traditionally, Christian representative bodies such as the CCM, NECF, and Churches of Federation of Malaysia (CFM) have occasionally lent their voice to the cacophony of electoral campaigns with generic calls for their followers to exercise responsible citizenship by voting for good governance, justice, and equity. Even so, Christian congregations have for the most part been apathetic in terms of active political participation, in that mass mobilization toward collective action in the form of a Christian “movement” in Malaysia has never materialized, nor had cause to. Likewise, preachers seldom preached on issues of nation-building, minority rights, or other potentially controversial topics over the pulpit.

All this has started to change. There has been a discernible shift away from this tradition of political indifference in the wake of anxiety over an Islamization process that has accelerated and deepened in recent years, and disenchantment over the inability of moderate Muslim and non-Muslim political leaders in the incumbent government coalition to arrest

⁴⁵ The case arose when customs officers confiscated 15,000 bibles translated into the Indonesian language (which is similar in many ways to Malay) in the last quarter of 2009. The rationale for the confiscation was the discovery of the use of the term “*Allah*” in these bibles, and attendant concern this would “confuse” Muslims in Malaysia.

⁴⁶ This was despite the fact that key religious scholars from the Islamist opposition PAS party, including its popular and respected spiritual leader Nik Aziz and president Abdul Hadi Awang, explaining that based on historical precedence followers of the Abrahamic faiths should be permitted to use the term.

the decline toward an exclusivist form of conservatism. Political quietism has given way to increasingly open vocal support for the cause of the political opposition.⁴⁷ Newly registered voters openly declared their allegiance to opposition parties, while older voters – many of them hitherto staunch supporters of the status quo – voiced disillusionment with the current non-Muslim component parties in the incumbent regime, whom they felt had perforce capitulated to the right-wing elements within UMNO.⁴⁸ Significantly, during the 2008 and 2013 election campaigns pulpits across the country were used to mobilize a “vote wisely” campaign, in which congregations were encouraged to vote with a critical mind. The hardly veiled subtext was for Christians to support the opposition.

Furthermore, in moves never previously witnessed in the country, churches across Malaysia actively facilitated voter registration, with some even offering their premises for such purposes. Since the 2008 election campaign, church pulpits have been frequently used as tools of mobilization, with sermons on national identity, nation building, and responsible citizenship taking place with regularity. The NECF rolled out its document titled “*Transform Nation Agenda*” which sought to establish a framework for Christian community activism.⁴⁹ A book titled “*Reflections on Christian Political Engagement in Malaysia Today: The Bible and the Ballot*” was also published, in which church leaders openly expressed that they would vote against the incumbent government.⁵⁰

As suggested earlier, a key ecumenical Christian organization at the forefront of the discursive debate over the rights of minority religions has been the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM). Founded in 1985, CFM has been an umbrella body representing diverse Christian denominations in Malaysia in their dealings with the government. The component bodies of the CFM include the CCM, the NECF, and the Catholic Bishop’s Conference of Malaysia. The CFM’s charge is to serve as a platform for the expression of sentiments of the Malaysian Christian community on national issues of interest to them. The relationship between the CFM and the Malaysian state has grown testy in the last two decades. The denouement was reached with the *Kalimah Allah*: the matter of proprietary rights to the usage of the term *Allah*.

⁴⁷ I encountered this myself on numerous occasions in the course of fieldwork during the campaign period for the 2008 and 2013 general elections.

⁴⁸ Several church leaders interviewed for this chapter expressed similar sentiments on condition of anonymity.

⁴⁹ Eugene Yapp and Samuel Ang (eds.), *Transform Nation Agenda*. Selangor: NECF Malaysia Research Commission, 2009.

⁵⁰ Joshua Woo and Tan Soo-Inn (eds.), *The Bible and the Ballot: Reflections on Christian Political Engagement in Malaysia Today*. Singapore: Graceworks, 2011.

What's in a Name?

In December 1981, the Ministry of Home Affairs banned the printing, publication, sale, issue, circulation or possession of the Malay Bible (*Al-Kitab*) in Malaysia under Section 22 of the Internal Security Act (ISA) 1960, noting that it was prejudicial to the “national interest” and “security” of the country. The Christian community responded by filing an appeal. The order was subsequently amended in March 1982 to say that it would not apply to the possession or use of the Malay bible within church premises by Christians. Four years later, the Christian community faced another set of restrictions, when the government declared the words “*Allah*,” “*Solat*,” “*Ka’abah*,” and “*Baitullah*” – words that hitherto appear in Malay language Christian publications – to be exclusive to Islam. CFM leaders did not openly protest against these directives for, after appealing to the authorities, they were given assurances by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and later his successor Abdullah Badawi, that it would not be an issue for the words to be used within the Christian community. According to Herman Shastri, General Secretary of the CCM, Christian leaders had refrained from stronger action as they were told by Mahathir that the issue was sensitive. However, in 2006, during the premiership of Abdullah Badawi, the Home Ministry began taking a tougher line on the usage of the word *Allah* in Christian publications. A Catholic weekly, *Herald*, began receiving letters from the ministry warning against the use of the word *Allah* in the publication. After receiving a sixth warning from the ministry and faced with the threat of revocation of its publishing license, the *Herald* sought redress through the courts. This process finally led to *Herald* filing for a judicial review in the Malaysian High Court on the Home Ministry’s ban of its usage of *Allah*.

On December 31, 2009, the Malaysian High Court ruled that the Malaysian Home Ministry’s ban was illegal, and that it was within the Catholic magazine’s right to use the Arabic word *Allah* in reference to God in its Malay-language section. Predictably, Malay-Muslims took offense. Subsequently, public protests were organized, and the ruling challenged in several online chatrooms. This catalyzed further protests by vocal Malay ethno-religious nationalist right wing groups throughout the country that again mobilized “in defence of Islam.” While these protests were for the most part peaceful, a hint of controlled violence lurked in the background as groups threatened to burn bibles as well as raid churches and the Malaysian Bible Society.⁵¹ Meanwhile, moderate

⁵¹ The Bible Society was indeed raided by Islamic religious authorities from the state of Selangor in January 2014.

voices within the Malay political establishment, careful not to go against the grain of popular sentiment stoked by these right wing Malay-Muslim groups, stayed conspicuously silent.

The controversy over proprietary claims to the word *Allah* has invariably triggered heated debate in Malaysia over the history and etymology of the term.⁵² Malaysian Christians have pointed to the fact that the term *Allah* predates the founding of Islam, and has been used by Arab Christians and other Christians all across Southeast Asia for centuries. In Indonesia the term has been – and continues to be – used by both Catholics and Protestants since the arrival of Christianity in the Archipelago.⁵³ Yet in Malaysia, etymological and historical debates over the proprietary use of the term *Allah* among faith communities in the country (we should also note that the term features prominently in Sikh scriptures in the country as well) are, unfortunately, amplified, if not determined, by the political baggage that they carry. Even though freedom of worship is constitutionally guaranteed in Malaysia, Islam is enshrined in the Constitution as the sole official religion of the country. As the chapter pointed out above, constitutional articles such as the controversial Article 121 1(A) accord Islamic *shari'a* law equal status with civil law in jurisprudential matters in the private lives of Muslims. Islam assumes further salience in the Malaysian context by virtue of the fact that according to the Constitution one of the chief criteria for the definition of “Malay” is that a person must be Muslim, for both identity signifiers cohabit in a mutually reinforcing relationship. Because of these conditions, the claims of Malaysian Christians, particularly those residing in Eastern Malaysia, have been rejected by many Muslim organizations and leaders, including politicians, who betray a sense of insecurity in maintaining that allowing the term *Allah* to be used by non-Muslims would confuse Muslims and threaten their identity.

The controversy soon boiled over to public protests after Friday prayers at the National Mosque, which the government claimed they were unable to prevent.⁵⁴ Following this, several churches in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya were torched and fire-bombed, and threats were made online

⁵² See Joseph Chinyong Liow, “No God But God: Malaysia’s ‘Allah’ Controversy,” *Foreign Affairs Online*, February 10, 2010. Available www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/malaysia/2010-02-10/no-god-god.

⁵³ Likewise, this common belief in a singular universal God also happens to be the factor that binds both Muslims and Christians (and Jews) so close together, as they come from the same Abrahamic tradition and believe in the same Prophets. And lest it be forgotten, the Prophet Adam was neither Muslim nor Christian, but simply a Prophet of *Allah*.

⁵⁴ “Najib: We Cannot Stop Friday’s Protest.” Available www.malaysia-today.net/najib-we-cannot-stop-fridays-protest/.

against members of the Christian community.⁵⁵ The Home Ministry filed an appeal against the court judgment. By that time, the *Kalimah Allah* controversy had become even more complicated as local Islamic religious authorities began taking the initiative to add more Arabic religious words to the list of the four words that the Home Ministry had initially deemed exclusive for Muslim usage.

In an attempt to break the impasse, some political leaders from UMNO ostensibly called for restraint, and for the issue to be resolved through interfaith dialogue. These gestures were however received a cold reception from many in the Christian community, whose sentiments can be summarized by the following response:

The time for dialogue is over. Meaningful dialogue can only happen when all parties to the dialogue are treated as equals. In the current scenario, I'll wager that any 'dialogue' will involve non-Muslims acceding to the perceived 'sensitivities' and assumed rights of Muslims to own copyright to the word '*Allah*'. And mind you, the use of the word '*Allah*' is not a 'sensitive' issue, as top Umno leaders and the Umno-backed *Utusan Malaysia* are fond of restating repeatedly. It's a copyright issue. And there is nothing at all that gives Muslims in Malaysia, or elsewhere, the copyright to use the word to refer to God and deny others the right to do so an interfaith dialogue where non-Muslims are likely to be asked to compromise on their rights to protect the false sensitivities of some Muslim.⁵⁶

One of the reasons why the non-Muslim community was not receptive to these calls for an interfaith dialogue to resolve the issue was the fact that the powerful Home Ministry had appealed the Federal Court's decision, thereby implying it was not merely an issue of confessional faith and belief, but one that spoke to the legitimacy and authority of the state as well as the constitutional right of religious minorities. In the event, the Home Ministry also changed its stand on its prohibition order concerning the Malay bible despite a compromise reached with Christian leaders on this issue in December 2005, which allowed the distribution of *Al-Kitab* on condition that the words "*Penerbitan Kristian*" (Christian Publication) along with the symbol of the cross was embossed on the cover.⁵⁷

The controversy surrounding *Herald* was hardly happenstance. In March and September 2009, the port and customs authorities in Port Klang and Kuching seized a total of 15,000 Malay bibles that had arrived from Indonesia. About a year earlier the authorities had confiscated

⁵⁵ See "Allah Controversy in Malaysia: Church Burning has Happened." Available <http://christianity.livejournal.com/3752432.html>.

⁵⁶ See Jacqueline Ann Surin, "Allah Issue: Who Started It?" Available <http://blog.limkitsiang.com/2010/01/13/allah-issue-who-started-it/>.

⁵⁷ It is important that one bears in mind the difference between the Bible, which is for Christians a holy scripture, and *Herald*, which is a magazine.

Christian children's books in several bookshops in three states in Peninsular Malaysia (Johor, Negri Sembilan, and Perak). However, even as they protested these actions by state authorities, Christian leaders made it clear that they were prepared to work toward an amicable solution. In November 2009, when calling for the immediate release of the confiscated bibles, the Executive Secretary of the CFM Tan Kong Beng noted that "we (CFM) are open to and desire further discussion with officials so that this problem can be resolved."⁵⁸ Even in the matter of the court action on *Herald*, which was possibly the first instance of a Christian entity in Malaysia seeking legal recourse in a confrontation with the state, it was more of an act of last resort. Indeed until the case was brought before the High Court, the CFM and its components had clearly preferred a non-confrontational approach with the government, seeking dialogue with government officials and leaders (as in the compromise over the Malay bibles reached in December 2005) and keeping a low profile on disputes with the state, rather than escalating matters out into the public domain.

On January 12, 2011, the Home Ministry seized a further shipment of 30,000 Malay bibles at Kuching port. On the same day, the CFM released a statement signed by its head, Ng Moon Hing of the Anglican diocese, alleging that the "authorities are waging a continuous, surreptitious and systematic programme against Christians in Malaysia to deny them access to the Malay Bible in Malaysia."⁵⁹ It was the strongest statement yet from a leader of a minority religion against the state and conveyed the impression that the CFM had reached the end of its tether with the authorities. The CFM even began its statement saying that the organization was "greatly disillusioned, fed-up and angered" by the repeated seizure of Malay bibles. Confronted with such protests, the government relented on the impounded bibles but at the same time also seemed determined to have the final word. The decision was made to release the seized bibles, but not before they were marked with serial numbers and each copy stamped with the disclaimer: "*Peringatan: 'Al Kitab Berita Baik' ini untuk kegunaan penganut agama Kristian sahaja. Dengan perintah Menteri Dalam Negeri.*" ("Reminder: This Good News Bible is for the use of Christians only. By order of the Home Minister.")⁶⁰ Instead of

⁵⁸ Don Fisher, "Seizure of 15,000 Bibles in Malaysia Stuns Christians." Available www.christianheadlines.com/news/seizure-of-15-000-bibles-in-malaysia-stuns-christians-11616546.html, November 10, 2009.

⁵⁹ Eric Young, "30,000 Bibles Detained by Malaysian Government, Claim Christian Leaders," *The Christian Post*, March 11, 2011. Available www.christianpost.com/news/30000-bibles-detained-by-malaysian-govt-claim-christian-leaders-49377/#!

⁶⁰ Home Minister Hishamuddin Hussein provided a defense of his ministry's action by claiming that the stamping was done because the importer, the Bible Society of Malaysia

welcoming the Home Ministry's release of the impounded Malay bibles, Christian groups took offense at what they deemed to be the desecration of their holy books. The CFM issued another strong statement on March 17 condemning the Home Ministry's action as disingenuous and "wholly offensive to Christians," and challenged the state's contention that the bible in the Malay language was prejudicial to the national interest and the security of Malaysia.

After consultation within CFM, the two importers of the Malay bibles, namely Bible Society of Malaysia and The Gideons, chose not to collect the books on those terms, and instead demanded the unconditional release of the 30,000 Malay bibles together with another 5,100 bibles that had been detained earlier in Port Klang in March 2009. Later, on March 22, the Federal Government backtracked, this time using Idris Jala, a Christian senator from the state of Sarawak and a minister in the Prime Minister's Department, to offer a compromise whereby the government would no longer stamp or serialize imported Malay bibles but would require the words, "For Christianity," to be reflected on the bible covers. Although in its official response on March 30, the CFM did not reject the new proposal, it made it clear that it sought further concessions from the state in the form of assurances that they would "remove every impediment, whether legal or administrative" to the use of *Al-Kitab*, and requested them to revoke the order that Christian scripture posed a threat to national security. Apart from the CFM statement, the head of the Catholic Bishops Conference, Bishop Paul Tan, urged for a return to the previously agreed designation of "Christian publication" on each copy of the Malay bible noting that this phraseology was more neutral than the words "For Christianity" being proposed by state authority. (Bishop Tan who headed the CFM in the 1980s had, like Bishop Moon, publicly condemned the Home Ministry's serializing and stamping of the imported bibles as "flatly unacceptable" and a "crass form of censorship redolent of the communist era."⁶¹)

Strains between Christian and Muslim communities worsened when the state's decision to release the bibles provoked outcry in many quarters of the vocal Malay-Muslim civil society. The influential Mufti of Perak, Harussani Zakaria, condemned the release of the Malay-language bibles

(BSM), had wanted the Malay bibles to be released quickly and that the action was based on practices adopted since former Prime Minister Mahathir's tenure. However, as the authorities had never before put serial numbers or their own stamp on seized bibles, their action was clearly perceived as offending the religious sensitivities of the Christian community.

⁶¹ See "BN Turns Communist with Bible Conditions." Available <http://malaysianjustice.blogspot.com/2011/03/bn-turns-communist-with-bible.html>.

while *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM or Islamic Youth Movement) also registered its disapproval of the state's concession. In comments calibrated to contrive a link between the ascribed supremacy of Islam and the qualifications of Malaysian citizenship, Harussani, along with several other Islamic scholars, even suggested that the citizenship of those who questioned the ban on non-Muslim usage of the term *Allah* be revoked.⁶² In the same vein, Ibrahim Ali, head of the ethno-nationalist Malay right-wing group Perkasa, threatened to burn bibles even as he brazenly warned Christians not to make "unreasonable demands" and "test the patience" of the Malay-Muslim majority.⁶³ In a baffling response to calls by non-Muslim political and religious leaders for Ibrahim Ali to be charged under the Sedition Act – a colonial era law that has been used frequently in contemporary times against those who are alleged to have threatened ethnic and religious harmony by questioning Malay supremacy and the primacy of Islam – for his incendiary remarks, the Malaysian Attorney-General retorted: "He (Ibrahim Ali) had no intention to create religious disharmony when he called for the burning of Bibles with the word 'Allah'. It is clear that his intentions were to defend the sanctity of Islam."⁶⁴

As the controversy over impounded Christian scripture brewed, on October 15, 2013 the Court of Appeal reversed the December 2009 ruling of the High Court and retained the ban on *Herald*. According to Attorney-General Abdul Ghani Patail who elaborated on the decision, the primary consideration was national security. Abdul Ghani noted: "National security – that was the issue the government was concerned with. It had nothing to do with freedom of religion. It was only concerned with national security. . . . The crux of the issue in the whole Kalimah Allah debate is whether it could be used to propagate Christianity to Muslims. It is not an issue of freedom of religion for Christians themselves."⁶⁵ Following this, attempts by the publishers of *Herald* to seek further legal redress were denied as the Federal Court, the highest court in the land, upheld the Court of Appeal decision and reinforced the ban by a four-to-three margin, thereby shutting the legal door to *Herald* and setting a precedent on the rights of Christian publications to use the term *Allah*.

⁶² See "Revoke Citizenship of 'Allah' Fatwa Dissidents." Available <http://malaysiansmustknowthetruth.blogspot.com/2014/01/revoke-citizenship-of-allah-fatwa.html>, January 1, 2014.

⁶³ Boo Su-lynn, "Terrorising the Christian Minority," *Malay Mail*, October 17, 2014.

⁶⁴ Tan Yi Liang, "A-G: Ibrahim Ali's Bible-burning Remark not of 'seditious tendency,'" *The Star*, October 27, 2014.

⁶⁵ V. Anbalagan, "Ban on Allah in Herald a Matter of National Security, Says A-G," *The Malaysian Insider*, November 19, 2014. Available www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/ban-on-allah-in-herald-a-matter-of-national-security-says-a-g.

The ruling however, did not seem to placate vocal Islamic NGOs, many of which have kept up the pressure on the state and the legal system to further restrict the public space available to Christians in the name of the defense of Islam. This is reflected in the comments by the leader of one such group: “We are dealing with aggressive, confrontational groups of Christians. Their demands over the Alkitab, kalimah Allah are connected to their attempts to spread Christianity . . . They are using this strategy to tame Muslims, by using terms that we are familiar with in our own religion.”⁶⁶

East Malaysia

For the moment, friction between the Christian and Muslim communities in Malaysia have mostly been confined to the Peninsula. The social and political climate in the two Eastern Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, geographically removed from the Malaysian mainland, have for the most part been insulated from the deterioration of Muslim-Christian relations and deepening restrictions on freedom of worship. On their part, political leaders – especially those associated with the incumbent coalition government – have repeatedly reassured Christians of East Malaysia that their religious freedom would not be undermined (ironically, the frequency of these assurances suggest a tacit acknowledgment that religious freedom of co-religionists in the Peninsula are indeed being undermined). Even Islamist opposition candidates from PAS have refrained from talking about *shari’a* and the Islamic state when campaigning in East Malaysia, to the extent of even introducing non-Muslim candidates.

Aside from geography, several other reasons account for how East Malaysia has been set apart. The growing power of the Islamic religious establishment, so visible and consequential in the Peninsula, has yet to penetrate the cultural and religious norms in East Malaysia. Indeed, it remains possible for Muslims to renounce their faith in East Malaysia, whereas that is all but impossible in West Malaysia given the rising conservatism of Islamic practice there. Further to that, unlike the constellation of power in the Peninsula, in Eastern Malaysia Christians have enjoyed greater access to office and positions of influence by virtue of the fact that many indigenous politicians and community leaders are Christians

⁶⁶ Shazwan Mustafa Kamal, “Pembela Blames ‘aggressive Christians’ for Muslim Siege Mentality,” *The Malaysian Insider*, May 7, 2011. Available www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/pembela-blames-aggressive-christians-for-muslim-siege-mentality/.

(some are even pastors of congregations). By dint of the terms through which the states of Sabah and Sarawak were integrated into the Malaysian Federation in 1963, the access of these indigenous leaders to political and economic power in these states remain protected.⁶⁷ Moreover, as the chapter established earlier, Christians form the majority of the population in both these states. Therein lies an existential paradox, for their confessional allegiance as Christians has made it difficult for them in reality to claim the “rights and privileges” accorded to *Bumiputera*, an identity marker they as indigenous communities have legitimate right to at least in theory, because of the Malaysian state’s move to extend their ethno-religious conception of nationhood and nation building to East Malaysia.

There are, however, indications that the insulation of East Malaysia from the intrusion of ethno-religious narratives of nationhood may be fraying at the edges. For starters, left unresolved, the *Kalimah Allah* controversy will doubtless have more profound effects on the Christians in East Malaysia than those in the Peninsula, given the reality that because of generally lower literacy levels, the former are more reliant on Indonesian language bibles and Christian literature as compared to their co-religionists in the Peninsula who are far more conversant in English and hence have access to English language scripture. Second, there is already an active effort by opposition political leaders who have drawn the attention of East Malaysian Christian religious and political leaders to the plight of their co-religionists in the Peninsula, and networks linking Christians to both sides of the South China Sea have begun to emerge.⁶⁸ In turn, this activism has increased awareness in East Malaysia of their rights as a religious minority. As a leader of *Perpaduan Anak Negeri Sabah* (PAN or Solidarity of the People of Sabah), Esther Golingi, asserted: “We want to worship God. We want to be united as Christians. With more than 30,000 Sabahans working in the peninsula, what happened to our religious freedom. . . . We need to uphold the Constitution of our land

⁶⁷ More importantly, in their accession to Malaysia in 1963 it was made clear constitutionally that the provision for Islam to be the official religion of the Federation does not extend to Sabah and Sarawak. Indeed, as Joshua Woo reminded me, whereas in West Malaysia public events oftentimes begin with an Islamic prayer, in East Malaysia such events frequently open with a Christian prayer.

⁶⁸ This is not to say that there was not already an awareness of the deterioration of freedom of worship for non-Muslims in the Peninsula. Rather, opposition politicians have taken to organizing prayer rallies in East Malaysia for the churches and congregations in the Peninsula. Some have even actively taken East Malaysian church leaders on “field trips” to the Peninsula where they interact with Christians from other states and are told firsthand of the restrictions and curbs they face.

and it says we have our freedom of religion. Freedom of religion means freedom of religion.”⁶⁹

More to the point, these percolating issues are gradually playing out against the backdrop of calls for greater autonomy within the Federation and growing assertiveness for denizen rights.⁷⁰

The Hindu Community

To be sure, the Christian communities of Malaysia are not the only ones at the receiving end of these attempts by a politically influential segment of the Malay community and the Islamic religious establishment to re-define the terms of citizenship along religious lines. In 2007, the Hindu population mobilized a mass rally involving more than thirty ethnic and religious organizations, triggering a chain of events that culminated in the watershed general election result in 2008 when the incumbent UMNO-led coalition lost its hitherto customary two-thirds parliamentary majority.⁷¹

The ethnic Indian community in Malaysia, comprising those of South Asian descent, make up approximately 7 percent of the Malaysian population. While a significant minority are Christian and Muslims (particularly those of Pakistani descent), most of them are followers of the Hindu faith. Grievances of this ethnic Indian minority are, essentially, two-fold. Many nurse a grievance against Chinese and, by virtue of affirmative action policies, Malay dominance of the economy, which has seen the vast majority of ethnic Indians, who trace their roots to South Asian migrant labor imported to work in the railway and rubber plantation industries of the colonial economy, disadvantaged in terms of economic opportunity and social mobility.⁷² Consequently, despite the existence

⁶⁹ Trinna Leong, “Sabah Christians Ban Together to Stop Conversion to Islam,” *Malaysia Today*, January 23, 2014. Available www.malaysia-today.net/sabah-christians-band-together-to-stop-conversions-to-islam/.

⁷⁰ For a thorough discussion on the topic of the place of Sabah and Sarawak in the Malaysian Federation as well as the evolution of the relationship between East Malaysia and the central government, see Andrew Harding and James Chin (eds.), *50 Years of Malaysia: Federalism Revisited*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2014.

⁷¹ Notwithstanding the role that the mobilization of widespread Hindu-based opposition played in eroding the parliamentary majority of the incumbent government, later moves by the latter to co-opt leaders of this segment of the opposition enervated the protest movement, leading to its eventual demise.

⁷² The problem was further compounded by the fact that these rubber plantations were situated some distance from urban centers, and as a consequence, the children of ethnic Indian families located in these plantations had no access to modern education facilities. Their only option was vernacular schools created within the plantations themselves, which did little to prepare these students for a modern, industrialized economy.

of a small upper class, the bulk of the ethnic Indian population remains trapped in working-class poverty.

Economic displacement is but one side of the coin. Ethnic Indian grievance is also possessed of a decidedly religious dimension. Since the early 1990s, the urbanization of Malaysia had resulted in large swathes of rural land, many previously part of plantations, commandeered for redevelopment for modern industry and residences, particularly in the capital and its immediate outskirts of Klang Valley and Shah Alam. The process of demolition of the existing rural infrastructure involved the dismantling of numerous Hindu temples and shrines scattered across these lands. Despite protestations of the ethnic Indian Hindu community, the state proceeded with these demolitions on grounds that these temples, and the land on which they were built, lacked any legal status.⁷³ Needless to say, this move on the part of the state was seen as a deliberate marginalization of the religious rights of the Hindu community, for whom the temples and shrines were sacred spaces.

The Hindu narrative of marginalization became further entrenched with the increase in the number of cases of “body snatching” that were taking place. In present-day Malaysian local parlance, “body snatching” refers to the incidences when the bodies of deceased Hindus were forcefully taken – snatched – from their families on (usually substantiated) grounds that the deceased had at some point in life converted to Islam and hence had to be buried according to Islamic, not Hindu, funeral rights. The fact that these bodies are literally “snatched” by representatives of local Islamic authorities bearing a simple letter from the state *shari’a* court certifying the deceased to be Muslim only further compounded the sense of religious discrimination, not to mention the fact that the family would have no legal recourse as non-Muslim testimony has no standing in *shari’a* courts.

Because of the impotence and torpor of self-proclaimed representatives of ethnic Indian minority interests within the establishment, Hindu groups coalesced into the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) and staged a major rally for minority rights on November 25, 2007. The rally was preceded by a countrywide road show that aimed to give voice to deepseated resentment and anger on the part of the Indian-Hindu community by framing it as victimization with no recourse for justice. Such frames identified injustices and grievances, and laid the responsibility for the plight of the Hindu community squarely at the feet of the state.

⁷³ The main problem was the absence of any land titles or deeds to prove that the land on which the temples were built actually belonged to the communities which claimed ownership.

Emotions articulated by the participants in the rally substantiated the value of framing as a trigger for collective action. For instance, words and phrases such as “fed up” and “life or death situation” were used by those who were present at the rally in demonstration of their deep sense of grievance against the state.⁷⁴

Islamization and *Ketuanan* in Context and Retrospect

As we have established, the increasingly tempestuous climate that defines Muslim-Christian relations today is related to the processes of Islamization that have taken place over the past three decades, and that have seen the Malaysian government introduce a range of policies and institutions to govern the country according to Islamic norms and strictures, not to mention empower the Islamic religious establishment. Yet these have been but institutional expressions of a growing mindset where the Malay-Muslim public has become more conscious about the primacy of religion in their definition of identity, and where the bureaucracy, staffed mostly by ethnic Malays, have put these conceptions of identity into practice, for instance in how customs officers stop (or stall, as it were) shipments of non-Islamic religious material.

The clout of the Malay-Islamic nationalist narrative of *Ketuanan Melayu* perpetuated by UMNO and ethno-nationalist right-wing Malay civil society groups, and how it relates to Islamization, bears noting, to wit: this clout has grown precisely because of how *Ketuanan Melayu* has assumed religious dimensions that together with the discourse of threat has lent the narrative even greater currency. Because of the intimate, constitutionally enshrined relationship between Malay ethnic identity and the Islamic religion, it stands to reason that the UMNO logic on Malay “rights and privileges” segues into a discourse of the primacy of Islam – “*Ketuanan Agama*” – over other religions. Indeed, as some have noted, “the conjunction of ethnicity and religion in Malaysia dichotomizes the religious arena into a Muslim and non-Muslim field.”⁷⁵ This is evident, among other things, in how numerous Muslim civil society organizations and political leaders view the controversial issue of public interfaith dialogue. While it is an initiative that has won endorsement and support from Malaysia’s religious minorities, many Muslims have responded with apprehension, in some cases outright rejection, on the grounds that by

⁷⁴ K. Kabilan, “Fearless Indians Fight for Rights,” November 26, 2007. Available www.malaysiakini.com/news/75289.

⁷⁵ Susan E. Ackerman and Raymond L. M. Lee, *Heaven in Transition: Non-Muslim Religious Innovation and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988, p. 4.

virtue of its ascribed primacy, Islam should not be placed in a position that might entail compromises. As Azman Amin Hassan, Director General of the National Unity and Integration Department in the Prime Minister's Office, has conceded: "Interfaith dialogue is something new in Malaysia. Some religious groups do think that if they participate in an interfaith dialogue, they are giving way to other religions. There are also those who think that because Islam is the official religion, there is no need to initiate dialogue and explain why certain things are so."⁷⁶ Again, the sense of insecurity is not far from the surface of such thought, for central to concerns in many Malay-Muslim quarters is the perception that any dialogue on religion would threaten the sanctity of Islam.

The reality is that Islamization and the constriction of space for non-Muslims must be understood not through Islamic frames, but that of the overwhelming concern for the primacy of Malay ethnicity and interests on the part of Malay political stakeholders, the accompanying sense of insecurity which is abundantly clear in the discourse of "security threats" and "defence of the faith" that Malay-Muslim political and religious leaders provoke and engage in, and how these have intruded into every sphere of ordinary life in Malaysia. This brings us back to the concept of *Ketuanan Melayu*, how it has come to be ascribed by its promulgators as a core principle for the identity of the Malaysian nation and state, and the reaction among Christian communities to how the narrative has been seized upon by certain quarters of the Malay-Muslim population and political leadership to justify and perpetuate a hegemonic and exclusivist religious discourse. It is worth noting, too, that the fact that such an exclusive and "ethnicized" view of Islam goes against the grain of the religion's universalist principles has not stopped its proponents in Malaysia from imposing this interpretation of nationhood on the national discourse.

Through this discussion of Muslim-Christian relations, it is clear that *Ketuanan Melayu* has led to the marginalization, if not exclusion, of Malaysia's religious minorities from national discourses that directly bear on their constitutional rights as citizens of Malaysia.⁷⁷ For the Christian community in Malaysia, it is freedom of religion as a feature of citizenship and constitutional right that has been at stake. As one Christian minister put it in response to the ruling on the *Allah* issue: "It is more than just

⁷⁶ See "Time is Right for Inter-faith Dialogue," *The Star*, April 18, 2010.

⁷⁷ Peter G. Riddell, "Islamization, Civil Society and Religious Minorities in Malaysia," in K.S. Nathan and Muhamad Hashim Kamali (eds.), *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social, and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005, pp. 172–174.

a word. It is about the fundamental right to worship God in the way we have been doing for generations without hindrance.”⁷⁸

Unpacking the Narrative of Ketuanan

Not unlike the Philippines where the concept of Bangsamoro is itself a contested one within the Bangsamoro community (as is the validity of a singular Moro-Muslim history and identity), the notion that *Ketuanan Melayu* should lie at the foundation of the Malaysian nation at the expense of non-Malays and non-Muslims is one that has been contested not only by ethnic and religious minorities, but within Malay-Muslim quarters as well.

Notwithstanding the foregoing discussion, the relationship between Islamization and the deterioration of Muslim–Christian relations is not axiomatic or teleological, and the expanding visibility and influence of Islam in everyday life need not automatically result in the constriction of social and cultural space for non-Muslims. It would be unreasonable, not to mention ill-informed, to assume that the Malay-Muslim community is monolithic and marching in tandem to the beat of the drums of provocative ethno-nationalist Malay groups bent on pressing an exclusive majoritarian view. Consider, for instance, the fact that the prominence of religious identity among Malay-Muslims today has invariably amplified the voice of the opposition Islamist PAS, even if the Islamization strategies put in place by the Mahathir administration was precisely aimed at diluting the PAS challenge. What is striking, in this respect, is that certain key quarters within the PAS party leadership have staked a position against the imposition of Islamic norms on non-Muslims.⁷⁹

Indeed, during the *Kalimah Allah* controversy, the party even openly supported the right of Christians to use the term *Allah*, on grounds that according to Islamic history the term predated the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad.⁸⁰ Moreover, a progressive segment of the PAS

⁷⁸ See “Malaysian Christians and Religious Freedom in the Name of ‘Allah,’” *Charisma News*, March 11, 2014. Available www.charismanews.com/world/43081-malaysian-christians-and-religious-freedom-in-the-name-of-allah.

⁷⁹ The question of the extent to which PAS should push the Islamist agenda in tandem with UMNO, however, has emerged as a major point of contention within the party itself. See Joseph Chinyong Liow, “Islamist Ambitions, Political Change, and the Price of Power: Recent Success and Challenges for the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3, September 2011.

⁸⁰ The party’s position on the *Allah* issue, for instance, only came about after an intense three-hour internal leadership discussion, and leaders who disagreed with the position have been allowed to publicly voice their contrarian views. See PAS TPJP, “Penjelasan oleh Ustz Taib Azzamuddin ttg kalimah Allah,” PAS Taman Paya Jaras Permai, January 4, 2010. Available <http://pastpjp.blogspot.com/2010/01/penjelasan-oleh-ustz-taib-azzamuddin.html>; Roziyah Mahamad, “Guna Kalimah Allah: Bidang Kuasa

leadership, some of whom have since parted ways with the Islamist party, have worked closely with allies in the opposition coalition to purportedly present an alternative to UMNO's vision by articulating a Malaysian nation not built on Malay dominance but *Ketuanan Rakyat*, the supremacy of the people.⁸¹ In so doing, this perspective has demonstrated that Islam can provide an alternative conception of nationhood which can accommodate religious minority identities in a way the prevailing UMNO narrative, based on the conception of *Ketuanan Melayu* as the cornerstone of national identity, is reluctant or unable to.

Other non-partisan voices have also emerged to demonstrate that the conservative ethno-religious nationalism associated with the Malay-Muslim establishment and its civil society allies do not entirely dominate the discursive landscape. As but one example, twenty-five prominent former Malay senior civil servants – some of them with strong ties to UMNO – lent their names to a controversial letter published in the press on December 8, 2014, that called for a more measured and inclusive approach to discussions on religion and its place in Malaysian society, and which derided right-wing ethno-religious nationalist groups as: “Groups (which) clearly have low standards, poorly educated, intellectually challenged, incapable of seeing their own racism, intolerant, blindly obedient, and are destroying the fabric of our country's society.”⁸² Even UMNO itself is not entirely bereft of alternative voices that have attempted to ameliorate the over-bearing connotations of *Ketuanan Melayu*.

But these attempts to voice alternative conceptions of Malay and Muslim nationhood are, at best, fitful. The arid reality remains that more measured voices are often drowned out by the entrenched right wing and an overbearing Islamic religious establishment transfixed by inchoate fears yet presuming to claim the moral high ground (i.e., that Islam is under threat and they are protecting the faith). JAKIM, self-appointed adjudicators of what is permissible and not permissible in Malaysian Islam, frequently brings its Malay-Islamic nationalist zeal to bear on any, including senior officials and elected representatives, who dare to question its exercise of religious authority by invoking the threat of sedition, thereby drawing attention yet again to the profundity of the contradiction between supremacy and insecurity inherent in Malay-Islamic nationalism. Meanwhile, a nervously wavering political leadership, whose

Mahkamah Tak Jelas – Taib Azamuddin,” Era Pakatan, January 3, 2010. Available www.erapakatan.com/berita/guna_kalimah_allah_bidang_kuasa_mahkamah_tak_jelas_-_taib_azamuddin/.

⁸¹ It should be noted, however, that when he served in the Mahathir administration, Anwar was a chief proponent of Islamization and Malay supremacy. For instance, it was during his time as education minister that school syllabi were changed to reflect the theme of Malay supremacy more prominently.

⁸² Razak Ahmad, “Open Letter by 25 Sparks Debate,” *The Star*, December 17, 2014.

legitimacy depends precisely on the support of progenitors of narrow exclusivist Malay-Islamic nationalistic discourse, blanche when calls to defend Islam and the Malay race are directed at them. Perhaps most striking, and puzzling, about this state of affairs is that it is not so much that the purveyors of these exclusivist and obscurantist renditions of the primacy and “*ketuanan*” of the Malay race, ethnicity, and religion are large in numbers, but that they have been allowed to offer these views unchallenged in the corridors of power, and to articulate them with impunity.

In such testy discursive climes, it should hardly be a surprise that even alternative Malay-Muslim views would get – and have received – short shrift. Prospects for a discursive shift are at base imperiled by the fact that the Malay political class occupying state power, in league with religious authorities and vocal Malay-Islamic civil society groups, continues to perpetuate the siege mentality among the Malay-Muslim community by engaging in a discourse of threat, as typified by the following remarks articulated by a former cabinet minister that implicitly targeted at the Christian community: “The character and tradition of Islam, as well as its position as the official religion of Malaysia, has been challenged by various provocations with the intention of denting the pride of the religion.”⁸³ Indeed, the dual, and dueling, narratives of (explicit) Malay-Muslim dominance and (implicit) Malay-Muslim insecurity have penetrated far too deep into Malay society through the extension of UMNO-led state institutions and the exertions of its civil society allies, such that the discursive point of reference is no longer that of accommodation as it was in the past, but dominance – how to assert it and defend it.

There is a further dimension to how identity is conceptualized and articulated within the Malay-Muslim community, to the point of exclusion of other groups, which should be taken into account. A less visible but no less poignant outcome of the emergence of a discourse premised on a hegemonic and exclusivist Malay-Muslim identity in Malaysia outlined in this chapter has been the assertion of religious orthodoxy in defining for the Muslim community what it means to be Muslim. This has created tense conditions that prevail over the issue of who is legitimately a Muslim, and by extension, the legitimate proprietors of this Malay-Muslim identity, as defined by the state and its religious functionaries. Foremost among these fault lines is that which exists between the

⁸³ See “Ex-minister Sees Christian Bigots a Threat to Najib’s ‘Moderation,’” *The Malaysian Insider*, November 9, 2014. Available www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/christian-fanatics-abusing-moderation-for-themselves-says-ex-umno-minister.

dominant *Sunni* movement in Malaysian Islam, and a small but increasingly activist *Shi'a* community.

To be sure, events in the Middle East and Pakistan have promoted sharp divisions between *Shi'a* and *Sunni*, and catalyzed violence between the two predominant Muslim creeds. Be that as it may, in Malaysia the *Sunni-Shi'a* divide has primarily been driven by local conditions which include not only religious orthodoxy, but also *Sunni* hegemony in how the Islamic state of Malaysia is conceived and understood. A 1989 Islamic law and a 1996 *fatwa* (legal opinion issued by Islamic scholars) issued by Malaysia's top Islamic clerics banned the practice and teachings of *Shi'a* Islam, labeling it a "deviant" sect. Meanwhile, as part of its practice of policing Islam, JAKIM frequently distributes sermons that explicitly condemn *Shi'a* Islam.⁸⁴ Once again, the discourse of security threats was evoked as the *Shi'a* are demonized as a danger to national security on the basis of a circuitous argument regarding their alleged propensity to divide the Malay-Muslim population by way of their very existence. Although the details are far too lengthy to elaborate here, this same logic has been applied to legislate against other smaller "deviant" Muslim groups such as the *Ahmadiyah* and al-Arqam. Indeed, the drive to stress Malay-Muslim unity, particularly in the wake of encroachment of non-Muslims on perceived Malay-Muslim dominance wrapped in the language of rights and privileges, hews closely to the assertion of a coherent, uniformed religious identity. Therein lies the "deviancy" of fringe Islamic groups: it is not only deviation from Malaysia's Islamic theological orthodoxy as proclaimed by the mainstream religious establishment, but equally so a threat to Malay-Muslim homogeneity, if not unity. This logic is summarized with precision by Chandra Muzaffar in the following remarks:

Establishment ulama in Malaysia have always seen themselves as the protector, the custodian of Islam and Muslims in the country. What this means is that they regard it as their right and responsibility to preserve the purity of not just Sunni Islam, but more specifically Sunni Islam of the Shafi'i legal school. Indeed, Shafi'i Sunni Islam is often perceived by the ulama and the Ummah as an essential attribute of Malay identity itself. And since protecting the community's identity is central to the national agenda, any 'deviant' tendency – especially if it has a religious orientation – will have to be suppressed.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Official mosques throughout Malaysia can only use sermons distributed weekly by JAKIM. These sermons regularly attack not only *Shi'a* Muslims, but Christians and Hindus as well.

⁸⁵ Chandra Muzaffar, "Foreword," in Karim D. Crow (ed.), *Facing One Qiblah: Legal and Doctrinal Aspects of Sunni and Shia Muslims*. Bethesda, MD.: Ibx Publishers, 2005, p. ix.

Conclusion

The emergence and deepening of a narrative of Malay-Islamic nationalism that turns on an exclusivist ethno-religious narrative centered on the primacy – indeed, supremacy – of Malay-Muslim identity promulgated by the Malaysian state, the Islamic religious establishment, and its civil society allies dominate the discursive terrain in Malaysia today. This has seen the Malaysian nation conceived of as a “Malay” nation, framed axiomatically by a narrative of Malay ethnic dominance captured in the highly controversial concept of *Ketuanan Melayu*.

One of the most polarizing concepts in Malaysian national discourse, *Ketuanan Melayu* has time and again been evoked by Malay ethno-religious nationalists to anchor their narratives of Malaysian nationhood and legitimize their claims of primacy and dominance. Yet for the most part, it is not the concept itself that has been contested, but what is ascribed to it, and how it has been interpreted and implemented. At the heart of the political conflicts that have been triggered by the assertion of this narrative is the matter of religion and confessional identity. In turn, these forces have been emboldened by an Islamization process that has gathered decisive pace in the last three decades. Apropos to this, questions of legitimacy and religious freedom loom large behind the clashes between narratives of nationhood promulgated by Malay ethno-religious nationalists, who comprise a major segment of the state, and religious minorities, particularly the Christian community but also the Hindu community as we have seen briefly, in Malaysia. Beneath the intemperate remarks and dynamics of conflict lie a profound paradox: a growing sense of insecurity among the Malay-Muslim majority that is juxtaposed against a narrative of dominance and supremacy that has overwhelmed any discussion or attempt to renegotiate the conception of the Malay(sian) nation away from this dominant narrative.

Indeed, given this historical, cultural, constitutional, and functional backdrop that codifies Malay dominance in Malaysia, it is evident that Malay-Muslim identity cannot but determine the shape, contours, and trajectories of the state of politics and the politics of the state in the country. It is in this manner that political Islam has taken center stage in the competing conceptions of nationhood in Malaysia, for the objective of “safeguarding” Malay rights invariably means preserving and defending the status of Islam, a core marker of Malay identity.