
The Malaysian State Turns 50—and the Nation?

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When Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, declared "*Merdeka!*" (Freedom!) for his country in August 1957, it was with pride, certainty, and more than a dose of ambiguity. Independence in Malaysia was achieved comparatively easily, but setting parameters for citizenship was a notably fraught process. That the anxieties at the heart of those debates have never been fully resolved has implications not only for conceptions of Malaysian national identity, but for domestic and foreign policies and postures as well.

With the Malaysian state now on the cusp of turning 50, it is worth revisiting the question of who and what "Malaysia" represents. Even as the country touts itself as "Truly Asia" to exotica-seeking tourists, tensions percolate internally over who represents what is "truly Malaysia." What has changed now from the 1950s—apart from the fact that the dominator to be avoided is no longer just Britain, but "the West" writ large—is that the dimensions of difference are ever more complex, and the debate ever less free. Malaysian pluralism has long been semi-officially defined in terms of "Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Other," with the first of these groups possessing special constitutional status. While these divisions have hardly crumbled, the Muslim/non-Muslim axis has been fortified at the same time, contributing to the complication of political alignments.

It is a well-documented fact of Malaysian life that ethnicity is omnipresent and politicized. At the time of independence, ethnic Chinese comprised around half the population; now, Malays—whom the constitution defines as Muslim—comprise nearly two-thirds. Conventional wisdom

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holds dear an implicit “bargain” among Malay and Chinese Malaysians: Malays will dominate political life, while Chinese focus on the economy. Nor does conventional wisdom blink at Malaysia’s sequence of race-based affirmative action schemes, synecdochically lumped as the New Economic Policy (NEP), though actually extending far before and beyond that 1971–1990 program. Increasingly, analysts have focused on the multiracialism

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of Malaysia’s growing middle class, such that a shared “developmentalist” orientation may increasingly upstage more narrow ethnic approaches.¹ Still, the unabated persistence of preferential policies—preserved with only superficial modifications in Malaysia’s latest development plan, the Ninth Malaysia

Plan for 2006–2010—speaks to the continuing salience of racial, and racist, politics. Most recently, Trade Minister Rafidah Aziz offered the United States a “big fat no” to rolling back affirmative action policies as part of negotiations for a free trade agreement, signaling the government’s continued commitment to race-based policies.² But the primary concern is not ethnicity here—because, in fact, this much-discussed facet of Malaysian character is only one element of a half-century-old identity crisis, a crisis made most evident today not by tired debates on race, but by the dialectics in Malaysia’s attempt to style itself as a model, moderate, Muslim state.

MALAYSIA AS AN “ISLAMIC STATE,” PERHAPS

Malaysia’s aspirations or pretensions to Islamic statehood are motivated primarily by domestic preferences and contests, but also carry significant implications for the country’s external posture and commitments. Particularly since the increased post-9/11 global concern with radical Islam heralded by those and other terrorist attacks, Malaysia has touted its stance as a “model” Muslim state. This positioning is not mere rhetoric, however. It is the external redirection of a contest that has been waged internally for decades. Not least since the principal opposition party and orientation among the Malay-Muslim majority is an Islamist one, the ruling National Front (Barisan Nasional, BN), dominated by the United Malays’ National Organisation (UMNO), has tried at least since the early 1980s to portray itself as also-Islamist. UMNO is the standard bearer of the Malay ethnic cause, joined in coalition by designated Chinese, Indian, and other parties. With Islamic resurgence among Malays since the 1970s and the availability

of an alternative political vehicle to carry forward Islamist political aspirations, UMNO has co-opted prominent Muslim leaders, created its own channels (and curtailed others) for Islamic renewal and proselytization (*da-kwah*), strengthened state-provided Islamic education, mandated Islamic rituals and discourse in public life, and bolstered Islamic institutions of all sorts, from banks to universities. The contest between UMNO and its rivals for the Malay vote has increasingly come to revolve around which party will do the most to advance Islam as a way of life and a political program. Against that backdrop, political debate among Malays has become ever more constrained within parameters of Islamist versus infidel (*kafir*). Since Malays dominate the polity, this debate has intruded ever more on the discursive and practical political space available to non-Muslim non-Malays as well. For instance, complaints against Malay political privileges are disparaged as critiques of Islam; discussions of topics such as women's rights cannot be presented as ever fully secular; and restrictions on food, dress, or behavior in public spaces—from the lunches children bring to school to the rights of couples to hold hands in public—inordinately defer to Muslim sensibilities.

At the same time, serious discussion of what “Muslim” does, should, or could mean as a political identity, or of how those of that identity should interact with otherwise identified co-nationals, has been limited. When such topics come up—even when raised by reasonably devout Muslims—they are lambasted loudly as culturally insensitive or anti-Islam by self-appointed defenders of the faith, generally linked with one or another political party. The most recent manifestation of this trend has been in protests over a series of public forums on freedom of religion and interfaith dialogue by an alliance of civil societal groups called Article 11, after the constitutional proviso on religious freedom. Article 11 has highlighted cases of prohibiting Muslims' leaving the faith, conversion of underage children by one parent without the other's consent, persecution of “deviant” sects within Islam, and restrictions on non-Muslims' places of worship, among others. For being seen to promote apostasy and non-Muslims' (or inadequately-trained Muslims') meddling in Islamic affairs, the coalition has been highly controversial. Most notably, a Malay mob successfully disrupted an Article 11 forum in Penang in mid-May 2006, and was more lauded than penalized by government leaders for its vigilantism.³ By now, it is the government itself that has firmly cut off debate. Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in calling a halt to such tense interchanges after a series of controversial court cases and Article 11's campaign, urged: “I hope all of us can understand that if we play with sensitive issues like religion, it will create

an uneasy situation [and] may force the government to take action.”⁴ Such developments bode poorly for thoughtful debate and discussion.

Two factors in particular bear deeper consideration. The first factor is how religious differences either intersect with or parallel divisions of ethnicity and class in terms of public policy, and the policy implications of recent religio-political resurgence. For instance, former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad’s well-known “Malay dilemma,” or his insistence that Malays deserve special protection and preference on account of historical and inherent disadvantage, must be retooled for a nation defined in Muslim/non-Muslim rather than Malay/non-Malay terms. The second factor is who sets the timbre and priorities of political culture, and who may be a party to those deliberations. At present, there is no real debate: those participants with official or unofficial coercive power cut off discussions they do not want to hear, so it is not clear *who* is determining the parameters of (in)sensitivity or the apparently invariable political dimensions of Malay-Muslim identity. Meanwhile, the virulent marginalization of non-Malay views—including reasonable fears regarding their lack of civil liberties and legal recourse as non-Muslims—hearkens back to the citizenship debates of 60 years ago: non-Malays are full citizens and may be tolerated in Malaysia, but they should not ask too much or aggravate their “hosts.” Most incendiary of late have been disputes over the relative jurisdictions of the *syariah* (Islamic law) and civil courts, as well as rules requiring non-Muslim women to don headscarves for certain police and university func-

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..... These internal dialectics occur simultaneously with Malaysia’s shifting international posture. Malaysia occupies three primary strategic orientations. First, Malaysia is a founding, active member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its various offshoot organizations (such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Free Trade Area, et al.). Second, the occasional diatribe or sudden crisis-induced policy reversal notwithstanding, Malaysia is an avid participant in a global capitalist regime. The country’s free-trade zones lure western corporate investors; Malaysian industrialists spread their own wings across Asia, Africa, and

elsewhere; Malaysia signed on to the World Trade Organization at its founding in 1995; and the country is currently in negotiations for, or a signatory to, several bilateral free trade agreements. Third, Malaysia has increasingly and ostentatiously aligned itself with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Muslim world. Reinforcing Malaysia's formal organizational links with this community are its position as a global leader in Islamic banking and finance, its growing popularity as a Muslim tourist destination, and perhaps its reliance on petrodollars as a linchpin of the economy. An ironic example, given Malay nationalists' longtime suspicion of communist China, is the fact that the first-ever Islamic bond issue for a Chinese state-owned power company is being developed now by Kuwait Finance House Malaysia, for issuance probably in a Malaysian free-trade zone.⁵ It is largely domestic exigencies that drive these seemingly disparate identities. Seeing domestic pressures as refracted through the lens of Malaysia's external environment offers clues on how to interpret and define contemporary Malaysian national identity.

MALAYSIAN IDENTITY, FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

While conventional wisdom still defines Malaysian pluralism largely in ethnic terms—with Malays rightfully exerting political dominance over disproportionately wealthy Chinese and generally marginal Indians—Malaysia's strategic posturing hints at the depth and entrenchment of more varied axes of difference. Room to maneuver domestically is tightly limited; in Malaysian politics it is not politically correct for leaders to applaud the United States, for instance, or to prioritize Asian neighbors over Muslim brothers and sisters. The outside world offers a far wider stage. Whatever their words at home, their actions on that stage reveal in distinct ways whom Malaysian leaders feel compelled to appease, how they balance ideological and practical priorities, and how they juggle threats and opportunities.

First, Malaysia identifies clearly with ASEAN, as well as with a broader Asian community. In some ways, this affiliation meshes well with Malaysian racialism and reflects the significance of the indigeneity (or at least, the near-indigeneity) of Malays in Malaysian politics and the pre-independence arguments for Southeast Asian solidarity built upon arguments of racial allegiance, particularly among ethnic Malays of several countries. At the same time, China, India, and other neighbors, like Malaysian Chinese or Indians, and others within Malaysia, are acknowledged to be cousins once removed—they are part of the family, but not of its nuclear core. Furthermore, ASEAN is a convenient community with which Malaysia

may align. However illiberal Malaysia's government may seem at times, its predations pale in comparison with those of some of its neighbors. Moreover, regional norms of noninterference—however shakily upheld at present, not least given Malaysia's frustration with the Burmese junta—sit well with a government that loathes to countenance criticism itself. At the same time, a pilgrimage to China by Malaysian government leaders is a sure sign that an election is on the horizon: overtures to China double as overtures to Malaysian Chinese, connections that might be lucrative and geopolitically strategic for non-Chinese Malaysian leaders as well. Whatever other motivations the Malaysian government may have, then, for aligning with ASEAN and Asia as a political community, racialized domestic pressures also play a role and are mirrored in these transactions. Formalized connections particularly with Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Thailand resonate with the Malay majority. Meanwhile, the Chinese minority can find solace not just in an institutional link to Singapore via ASEAN, but also in the "ASEAN plus" framework: China/Chinese may be on the periphery, but they are not out of the picture altogether.

Second, Malaysia is part of the world of global capitalism. This particular affiliation speaks more to class than to ethnic or religious divisions in Malaysian society. Since at least the late colonial period, a subset of Malaysians has been deeply suspicious of capitalism and inclined to various degrees toward the Left. Communism and socialism are generally associated in the Malaysian popular imagination with the ethnic Chinese community; but in fact, the Malay Left has been no less a committed and ideological, if perhaps a comparatively smaller, subset of the ethnic whole.⁶ Early challenges to the specific course of the British handover of power to an independent Malaya came not least from left-leaning students and others of all communities, who saw the interests of European capitalists overly represented in those arrangements.⁷ At the same time, an elite, generally Western-educated, Anglophone subset of each ethnic group supported these arrangements. Among this category were the founding members of the racially defined political parties that formed the first independent government, and at least the core of every subsequent government.

These clashing priorities persist. Malaysia is home to the well-known Third World Network⁸ and other vocal, networked opponents of neoliberal economic policies and globalization—both organizations and individuals—in civil society as well as in political parties. It was a longtime member and chair from 2003 to 2006 of the Non-Aligned Movement, which is likewise chary of hegemonic trends in the world economy and global governance. At the same time, Malaysia participates avidly in international

markets, craves “fully developed” status,⁹ and enjoys thriving trade with the arch-bogey, the United States. It also recently established a free trade agreement with Japan, and negotiations are underway for similar agreements with several other trade partners. Domestic critics of these policies echo international counterparts in enumerating the risks of free trade, not least in Malaysia, and the potential negative impacts for the mass of Malay farmers,¹⁰ who usually constitute the bedrock of racialized support for the dominant party. These dangers have presented a rare point of convergence between the notoriously bumptious, long-time prime minister Mahathir Mohamad and left-wing activists. They agree that reduced tariffs disadvantage Malaysian producers, since Malaysia’s cars and other manufactured goods cannot compete without protection, and agricultural products in which the country does have a comparative advantage are relatively low value. Mahathir also foretold the American insistence on ending preferential policies, and argued that scrapping these policy options would leave the Malaysian government no effective lever with which to help Malays “catch up” with the Malaysian Chinese—a price he insists Malaysia should not accept.¹¹ Ultimately, though, as the fact that Mahathir’s successor and his cabinet are still pursuing trade agreements attests, ethnically defined mass interests may be overridden by class-determined policy priorities—specifically, the upper crust’s desire to see Malaysia flourish as a midsize, up-and-coming neoliberal player—that transcend racial divisions.

Finally, Malaysia’s third world is that of Islam. It is in this world that the domestic impetus for the country’s external posturing is most obvious. Since the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, PAS) splintered from UMNO in the late 1950s and especially since an Islamic resurgence gained force in the 1970s, Islam has been at the core of differentiating characteristics between the rival Malay-based parties. Each strives to prove its Islamist credentials in order to woo supporters. The international arena has increasingly broadened the stage for that drama. UMNO has sought to prove to voters its commitment to Islam not only by declaring Malaysia an “Islamic state” in 2001 (a claim too contentious to sustain: it was soon withdrawn, after anxious wrangling about the meaning of that concept for both Muslims and non-Muslims under National Front rule),¹² or by trotting out policies in government and administration for “absorption of Islamic values” in the early 1980s and “civilizational Islam” more recently.¹³ Increasingly, the party has reiterated its commitment to Islam by making Malaysia an active member and leader of the OIC and energetically cultivating bilateral trade, educational, and other links with Muslim countries of the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere. Malaysia’s recent large-scale

forays into international Islamic banking and finance, for instance, clearly appeal to the Muslim majority, without unduly alienating or excluding the non-Muslim minority.

These initiatives are eminently practical: Malaysian—especially Malay-Muslim—investors stand to gain much from these new markets, tourists, students, and investors. At the same time, these efforts have an obvious populist edge. Anti-Western grandstanding has a ready audience among the Malaysian mass public, especially among those disadvantaged by the neoliberal initiatives described above. It also resonates easily with the anti-U.S./Israel discourse of this cluster of states, strengthening the sense of a Muslim bloc with Malaysia as a prominent partner and mouthpiece, united against a common foe. Moreover, as a full-fledged participant in the Muslim world, Malaysia's UMNO-dominated coalition government may be presumed sincere enough in its Islamism for Malay voters not to bother voting for PAS.

Finally, Malaysia's specific position within this community of nations speaks to the country's "*Malaysia boleh!*" (Malaysia can!) spirit, embodied in a startlingly extensive list of superlatives and world records. Malaysia has positioned itself to be *the* model, moderate Muslim country, poised as a helpful intermediary between squabbling states, or as, ironically enough, an example to the United States of how non-threatening Muslims really are. This Islamist internationalism undoubtedly appeals to voters—but only to Malay voters—on the basis of a religious, but not specifically ethnic, identity. The fact that Malaysia today gives so much attention to the Muslim dimensions of its foreign policy reflects just how important this domestic identity category is to Malaysian politicians, and how willing they are to ignore countervailing interests in their rush to cater to their Muslim constituency.

WHY IDENTITY MATTERS

But where does all this maneuvering leave Malaysian identity? Malaysia presents many faces to the outside world, defined in terms of very different axes of inclusion and exclusion: from the primacy of Southeast Asians but gracious inclusion of other Asians, to the ascendancy of non-ethnicist capitalists, to the reification of Islamism in charting a multi-religious nation's course. There is nothing inherently wrong with such changeability; it may as well represent flexibility as political dysphoria. No firm bedrock of Malaysian identity underlies and binds these varying representations—but a bit of ambiguity may not be such a bad thing.

Debates on identity and nationhood are not “fluffy” side issues, but may have critical policy impacts. As just detailed, how the Malaysian government defines the nation it represents and serves—as a Malay-based nation, a Muslim nation, or as a generically ambitious nation just trying to get ahead like all its peers—may have tremendous impacts for foreign policy orientations and objectives. Whether Malaysia eschews free trade to protect Malay farmers or negotiates brazenly to end tariffs and open borders, applauds fellow Muslims in Iran and Palestine for standing up to U.S. dominance or sides with the U.S. in its “war on terror” in hopes of a fair payback, or celebrates Chavez and Castro or Howard and Blair is determined as much by domestic as by external exigencies. Diplomacy and long-term strategy are important, but the domestic reception of strategic decisions by those Malaysians who see their interests best represented and who most need to be courted at the moment is key. And those calculations are not consistent or stable, but change with the political tides.

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Domestic policy, too, may be held hostage to competing definitions, not so much anymore of legal citizenship, but of full membership in the nation. Education policy is a case in point. In large part to “prove” that a Malay nation is at the heart of a Malaysian one and thus appease disgruntled Malay nationalists, the government forced through rapid changes in the language of instruction for higher education in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The government also bolstered policies on preferential admission for Malay students. Not surprisingly, most non-Malays were not terribly pleased with these policies and the manner in which they were enacted. The former set of policies on language of instruction showed little regard for those not enrolled in Malay-medium schools through the secondary level (i.e., the majority of non-Malays at the time), while the latter left non-Malays disproportionately barred from public universities. Mounting evidence of the declining quality and reputation of Malaysian universities and of too many graduates’ unemployability has by now inspired the government to backtrack and pursue (again, with impractical haste) a return both to English-medium education and to merit-based admissions. Such a shift implicitly acknowledges a broader nation than just Malays: that nation includes the full range of ambitious denizens or unspecified human resources, eager to get ahead in a globalized world.

Even more to the point is the ongoing dispute over Article 11, men-

tioned above, and the issues motivating that coalition. While on the one hand, the government touts “a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny,”¹⁴ it also sees and styles Malaysia increasingly as a Muslim nation. Previously, Malaysia was defined constitutionally, as well as in popular discourse, as a Malay-based nation. That ethnic definition admits the possibility of other identities in a way that a Muslim nation, guided by Islamic laws, *may* not. In that *may* lies the rub. Even as the constitution claims full respect for all religions, and as government leaders decry the roiling of religious sensitivities in so precariously plural a state as Malaysia, non-Muslims and dissenting Muslims alike are disallowed from

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voicing their concerns. For instance, non-Muslims, who have no *locus standi* before *syariah* (Islamic law) courts, sometimes become subject to the decisions of those courts, as has occurred in recent cases of spouses’ secret conversion to Islam. These non-Muslims are blasted as troublemakers simply for pointing out the obvious fact that the Islamization of courts and governance, and the impossibility of civil debate on the issues at stake, leaves certain citizens without full legal rights and voice. These complainants may be citizens, but they are not full-fledged members of a Malaysian nation as it is increasingly, albeit inconsistently, defined. Even as a Malay-Muslim lawyer defending a convert from Islam in court faces death threats,¹⁵ the government, unwilling to challenge the newly exclusive nation it might champion, is either powerless or unwilling to address mounting bigotry and polarization with more than platitudes and admonitions.

What gives hope that this exclusive vision of the nation is not yet all-dominant is Malaysia’s outside posture, which remains as schizophrenic—and ultimately, pragmatic, as ever. Yes, Malaysia wants official certification as a true Muslim state, both for the international kudos that standing would presumably convey and for the domestic electoral rewards it might yield. At the same time, the government has other interests to pursue and protect. Fifty years after independence, Malaysia has yet to solidify a coherent national identity. Even the cry “Malaysian Malaysia” is still regarded with suspicion by chauvinist Malays, who read in this slogan Chinese citizens’ unwarranted and impossible pretensions to full Malaysianhood. And yet, however daunting the specific instances of exclusivist elbowing

and ego-bruising, it is this lack of a single, coherent identity that grants Malaysia flexibility on the international stage and resilience on the domestic front—and that will most likely keep observers on their toes for the next fifty years to come. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 See, for instance, F. Loh K. W., "Towards a New Politics of Fragmentation and Contestation," in F. Loh K. W. and J. Saravanamuttu, eds., *New Politics in Malaysia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2003), 253-282.
- 2 "Malaysia Says 'Big, Fat No' to Dropping Discrimination System," *Agence France-Presse* newswire, August 14, 2006, <www.afp.com> (accessed November 13, 2006).
- 3 See the coverage in online news portal, *Malaysiakini* particularly May–July 2006, and including the five-part series that ran June 28, 2006 through July 3, 2006, <www.malaysiakini.com>.
- 4 "PM Warns of Action against Religious Debate," *Malaysiakini*, July 27, 2006, <www.malaysiakini.com/news/54541> (accessed November 13, 2006).
- 5 Cris Prystay, "Malaysia's Islamic Banking Boom," *Wall Street Journal Asia*, August 10, 2006.
- 6 See, for instance, T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), or consider the history and constituency of the Malaysian (Socialist) People's Party (Parti [Sosialis] Rakyat Malaysia).
- 7 One trenchant critique of foreign oligopoly, drafted by a local student and trade union activist during his imprisonment by the British in Singapore: J. J. Puthuchery, *Ownership and Control in the Malayan Economy: A Study of the Structure of Ownership and Control and its Effects on the Development of Secondary Industries and Economic Growth in Malaya and Singapore* (Singapore: Donald Moore for Eastern Universities Press, 1960).
- 8 See the organization's website for details: <www.twinside.org.sg/>.
- 9 Articulated most poignantly in Mahathir's "Vision 2020." Mahathir Mohamad, *Vision 2020* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Strategic and International Studies for Malaysian Business Council, 1991).
- 10 These various dangers are laid out, a tad alarmistly, in Consumers Association of Penang, "Trading Away Our Lives," *Utusan Konsumer* 36 (3) (2006): 1, 3-7.
- 11 For instance, "Malaysia's Mahathir Fears Planned FTA with U.S. Could Have 'Adverse' Consequences," *The Star* (Malaysia), March 22, 2006, <www.thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2006/3/22/apworld/20060322144938&sec=apworld> (accessed November 13, 2006).
- 12 For the document at the heart of the debate: Government of Malaysia, *Malaysia Adalah Sebuah Negara Islam* [Malaysia is an Islamic State], 2001 (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Information, 2001). For more on this incident and its backdrop: P. A. Martinez, "The Islamic State or the State of Islam in Malaysia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23 (3) (2001): 474–503.
- 13 For details, see M. L. Weiss, "The Changing Shape of Islamic Politics in Malaysia," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 4 (1) (2004): 139–173.
- 14 Mahathir, 2.
- 15 For instance, "Majlis Peguam Kecam Poster Ancam Bunuh Anggotanya [Bar Council Criticizes Poster Threatening to Kill Member]," *Malaysiakini*, August 22, 2006, <www.malaysiakini.com/news/55707> (accessed November 13, 2006).

