**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
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RSIS COMMENTARIES

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Religion and Identity in Malaysia

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The current controversy in Malaysia over the use of the term "Allah" by the Christian community once again raises the underlying tension between religion and identity in the country. What does this mean for Prime Minister Najib Razak's unifying cry for a 1Malaysia?

THE CHURCH burning incidents in Malaysia last week have dealt a potentially fatal blow to Prime Minister Najib Razak's vision of "1Malaysia". But tragic as they were, the events were not altogether surprising. Indeed, the events following the Malaysian High Court's decision to allow non-Muslims to use the term "Allah" were merely symptomatic of the nature of religious politics in Malaysia today.

To begin with, one should consider the etymological roots of the word "Allah" and consider its import for both Muslims and Christians. It is an Arabic word. But because Arabs are themselves culturally and religiously diverse, the term "Allah" is used by both Arab Muslims as well as Arab Christians. When the Copts of Egypt celebrate their Christmas mass, for example, the Coptic Pope begins his sermon with the phrase "Bismillah" and uses the word "Allah" throughout.

Historical Roots

The significance of this cannot be underemphasised: the word "Allah" is as important to Arab Christians as it is to Arab Muslims, for it stands for the concept of a singular, universal God. It literally means "The God", with a capital "G", denoting a singular deity, confirming the fact that both Christianity and Islam are monotheistic faiths.

Thus the reluctance on the part of some Christians in Malaysia to abandon "Allah" may stem from the fact that they are aware that "Tuhan" does not have the same connotation. What's more, "Tuhan" may appear in the plural form ("Tuhan-tuhan"), or "gods", a meaning more appropriate for polytheistic faiths.

Historically, we know that "Allah" has been used by Arab Christians and other Christians across Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, the term has been used by both Catholics and Protestants since the

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arrival of Christianity in the archipelago. Even now, at every Easter and Christmas celebration across Indonesia, Indonesian Christians sing the praises of Allah – the singular, universal God. They cannot understand what the fuss is about in Malaysia, and why Christians ought to use another word to denote the singular, universal God. Is it not the case that "Allah" means precisely that?

This common belief in a singular universal God binds Muslims and Christians together, as they come from the same Abrahamic tradition and believe in the same Prophets. Lest it be forgotten, the Prophet Adam was neither Muslim nor Christian, but simply a Prophet of Allah.

Islam and the Constitution

Though freedom of worship is constitutionally guaranteed in Malaysia, Islam is enshrined in the Constitution as the sole official religion of the country. In addition, the Constitution accords Shari'a law equal status with civil law in jurisprudential matters concerning the private lives of Muslims.

Islam assumes further salience by virtue of the fact that the chief criteria for the definition of "Malay" in the Constitution is that he or she must be Muslim. Such is the intimate relationship between ethnicity and religion that someone converting to Islam has become popularly known to have "masuk Melayu" (become a Malay).

The role of Islam at the core of Malay identity has gained greater prominence because two other pillars upon which that identity was once constructed – namely language and royalty – no longer have the same currency they did decades ago.

No doubt the Malay language remains politically important. But precisely because the state has implemented an education policy based on the primacy of Malay in the national curriculum, knowledge of the language is no longer the exclusive prerogative of Malays.

Similarly, Malaysian royalty today has a highly problematic relationship with the Malay ruling elite. The rulers are seen by the latter as competitors for legitimacy the eyes of the populace. Moreover, royalty have undermined their own legitimacy in the public eye because of a number of controversial episodes and scandals.

Religion and Ethnicity

The centrality of Islam has been further augmented by the state-orchestrated discourse of Malay primacy encapsulated in the concepts of *ketuanan melayu* (Malay primacy) and "bumiputra rights". Remarkably, even as the opposition Islamist party Parti Islam Se-Malaysia has gradually toned down its brand of religious politics, the ruling Umno has persisted in employing exclusivist racial and religious discourse. Indeed, though ethnicity has long been the primary identity marker for Malays in Malaysia, there may well be a shift from ethnicity towards religion, with Malays seeing themselves first as Muslim, rather than Malay.

The church burning incidents of the past few days and the government's seeming inability or reluctance to take resolute action against certain segments of the Malay-Muslim community, are sobering reminders of just how far the country is from the goal of national unity, as envisioned in the concept "1Malaysia". And of course, "1Malaysia" cannot materialise without the support of Malay-Muslims, who happen to be the vital constituency whose support Prime Minister Najib seems to be losing.

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