Malaysia

Majority Supremacy and Ethnic Tensions

Pranav Kumar

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Malaysia consists of thirteen states and the three federal territories of peninsular Malaysia. The population of Malaysia (2010 census) 28,250,500 is socially divided on two bases. The racial and religious divides are the most prominent divisions in Malaysia's plural society. The three big racial groups of Asia are present in Malaysia (Chinese, Indians and Malays). In 2010 (The Department of Statistics, 2010), the Malays were 51 per cent, Chinese 22.9 percent, and the Indians 6.8 percent of the total population. Various other ethnic groups, such as different indigenous population mostly situated in the Borneo region and Eurasian and migrant workers make up the remaining of population.

On the basis of ethnicity, Malays with some other indigenous groups (11%) make the privileged bumiputera (son of soil) population (61 percent). The Population and Housing Census 2010 figures show approximately: 61.3 percent are Muslims, 19.8 percent are Buddhists, 9.2 percent are Christians, 6.3 percent are Hindus and 1.3 percent follows Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions.

In Malaysia the ethnic and religious affiliations are overlapping. Almost all the Malays are Muslims, most of the Chinese are Buddhists, and most of the Indians are Hindus. But there is a growing penetration of Christianity among indigenous tribes and Chinese people. One can safely assume that for all intents and purposes being a Muslim remains an essential condition for being Malay.

I
THE HISTORY OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DIVIDE

Islam, the dominant religion of Malaysia, was brought to Malay Peninsula by Guajarati traders after 12th century (Marshal Cavendish Corporation, 2008:1177). Islam absorbed the existing beliefs in coastal areas and by 15th century it became the dominant religion in Malay Peninsula. The large scale migration of Chinese and Indian population is a feature of British era in Malay Peninsula. The colonial powers brought Indian and Chinese labourers to work on various plantations and tin mines. Gradually their number increased and they settled in Malay Peninsula (Hooker, 2003: 13-33).

Till the mid twentieth century, there were negligible ethnic and religious tensions between Malays (bumiputeras) and other migrant groups. There are two important reasons behind this: one, generally migrant settlements were in cities and close to mines and plantations. So there was less direct interaction between these groups. Two, the British did not interfere in the religious and cultural matters of Malays. Hence, Malays were left with a perception of dominance in their own land. The Malay scene started changing with the

Second World War. When the British returned in 1946 (after the Second World War) they organized the colony into Malay Union. This brought a sense of fear among Malay elites about losing their privileged position in Malay union as equal rights were provided to Chinese and Indian subjects. In the wake of these events the United Malay National organization (UMNO) was established in May 1946, to fight for Malay rights and privileges.

The Malaysian independence in 1957 also brought the question 'what type of state Malaysia wants to be'? The Malaysian constitution recognized Islam as an official religion of Malaysia, but nowhere had it tried to make the federation of Malay a theocratic state. The constitution provides every religion the right to establish and maintain its own institutions (Art.12). At the same time the Malay dominance was ensured through various constitutional and legal measures.

The 1969 riots emboldened the Malay efforts to secure benefits for Malays through various government policies (New Economic Policy, New Cultural Policy, and New Education Policy). The riots not only exposed the existing fissures within Malaysian society but it also set the tone for future acrimony between the ethnic-religious groups.

II
EMERGENCE OF ISLAMIC MOVEMENT

In the early years after independence the government never made any serious attempt or pursued any well-built plan to make the state 'Islamic'. However the Islamic tradition was deep rooted in the social set up. The currents of Islamic activism, which were present in society, came to the surface as the process of Islamic resurgence in 1970s. Nasr, V. Seyyed (Seyyed, 2001: 82) observes: "the 1970s witnessed an intense ideological

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battle over Malay identity between Islam as conceived of in the new wave of Islamic activism-nationalism and traditional conception of the Malay community tied with sultans and rooted in language and custom (adat). The Islamic resurgence during that decade was rooted in the race riots of 1969, which ignited interested in Islam as an important distinguishing dimension of Malay identity in Malaysia's polyglot society. The relationship of patronage between the state and the Malay community reinforced Malay identity just as it distinguished between Malays and non-Malays'."

During the 1970s, there were rapid social changes, creating new social cleavages and concretizing the old ones. In the meantime, the Malay middle class was disappointed with its position and situation in modern society. The Chinese dominance in economy was detrimental for Malay-Muslim interest. Socially, uprooted from their traditional villages, the city culture was a mirage to the Malay Muslim class.

Finding their present bad and future worse the Malay middle class saw religion as the last resort. The great force of social unrest turned the wheels of Islamic resurgence or

revivalism with both positive and negative features. Here the golden Islamic past was seen as the only solution to current problems. So, the challenge was to revive the golden Islamic past. The emergence of numerous 'dakwah' organizations have been identified as "The most significant feature of the Islamic revivalism in Malaysia. According to John Funston (Funston, 1981:165) although 'dakwah' (means- to call or invite) is loosely translated as missionary activities in the Malaysian context this refers to the task of making Muslims better Muslims than converting the non-believer.

All dakwah activities in Malaysia had mainly two aims- to make Muslims more vigilant in the observance of their faith and to do social work in Malay society. Although the dakwah activity emerged soon after independence to emphasize the importance of Islam in Malay life, the Islamic resurgence added a new dimension to these activities. Moreover the dakwah organizations were now working with a new vigour and vitality. UMNO (United Malay National Organization) and the government had encouraged it as the means of spreading Islam in Borneo, especially through PERKIM, whose population was counted as bumiputras to bolster the number of the Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese and Indians. The number and

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the scope of the dakwah activity, however, expanded significantly in the 1970s and moreover, involved students (Seyyed, 2001:82).

Greg Barton (Barton, 2002: 99-102) identifies "three categories of the Islamic movement in Malaysia, the first is called 'dakwah' or missionary movement including group as Jamat-Tabligh and Darul-Arquam. The second category includes the activist organizations that reach into the university campuses and involves university graduates. The most prominent organisation here is ABIM (Angktan Belia Islam Malaysia; the Malaysian Islamic youth movement). Finally there is category of political parties in which PAS, the Islamic Party of Malaysia is the single most important example".

These organizations are in a way, the epicenter of the Islamic movement in Malaysia. They follow a dual strategy, one, they take any issue and derive their connection from the ummah (Islamic brotherhood) and two, sometimes they become nationalistic. Amongst the dakwah groups the degree of assertion varies from one organization to another. Some of the important dakwah and other organization involved in the movement are: Jamat Tabligh, Darul Arquam, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, or ABIM, and Parti Islam se Malaysia or PAS. Even the mainstream political party UMNO tends to cater to the sectional interests of Malay-Muslim community.

Faced with a tough competition from the PAS, the UMNO involves itself in an Islamization drive. After independence, the UMNO became the most dominant political party and in a way it has a monopoly over the political power in Malaysia. In an ethnically and religiously divided society, where the political parties mainly represent the group interest, UMNO is basically a Malay political party. However,

UMNO is not a communal party like PAS. But in response to PAS's communal political strategies, it too had shown some tendencies towards adopting group-oriented policies. Especially after 1982 there started a kind of "race" between UMNO and PAS to win over Malay-Muslims through their intense Islamization policies and programs. In this process, UMNO itself became an important player in the Islamic movement. Now it not only reacted to PAS' policies but also adopted a pro-active approach towards Islamization. The "islamization race" is an important study to understand the Islamic movement, because the so-called race is both a cause and product of the movement.

Between 1977 and 1982, the UMNO and PAS competed over ABIM's support. In 1982, UMNO came out victorious. In that year Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad persuaded Anwar to join UMNO. At that time Anwar was the most important leader of ABIM. Anwar resigned from ABIM and along with many of its leaders, joined the ruling party and various state institutions. Both Mahathir and Anwar tried to transform the nature of the Malaysian state without transforming Malaysia in to an Arabic Islamic state. But the process was not so simple and there were other important players in the game, which made the issue very complex. "Unfortunately however this led to a kind of "arms race" or "islamicity race" between UMNO and its opponents with each trying to prove themselves more Islamic than the other. Ultimately, PAS was outflanked and could only retreat to a claim for itself the distinction of greater ideological purity and an unparalleled track record of supporting the interest of Islam" (Barton, 2002:119).

The PAS opposes the government polices criticizing it as un-Islamic. It finds nationalism and secularism of UMNO against the interest of Islam. It labels

In the face of this PAS challenge, the UMNO has realized that previous policies that "domesticated" Islam and did not intermingled in politics had to change. Under Mahathir, Islam was brought to the forefront of UMNO and Malaysian politics. UMNO has adopted a two pronged strategy to counter the PAS.

UMNO leaders as infidels. PAS leaders have been unyielding in their belief that the Islamic state is both a viable and necessary alternative to the UMNO- dominated secular state, and this is enshrined in their party manifesto. In a direct challenge to UMNO's script for Malay supremacy PAS has criticized the new economic policy and constantly stressed Islam's recognition of equality among races.

In the face of this PAS challenge, the UMNO has realized that previous policies that "domesticated" Islam and did not intermingled in politics had to change. Under Mahathir, Islam was brought to the forefront of UMNO and Malaysian politics. UMNO has adopted a two pronged strategy to counter the PAS. One, portraying themselves as the progressive and moderate protectors of correct Islam, as opposed to the Islamic opposition who are conservative, radical and even deviationist proponents of wrong Islam. Second, the UMNO has tried to champion the Islamic cause through the government policies and programs. Due to the preponderant majority of UMNO the policies and programs of UMNO get translated into government policies. In Mahathir era this trend is more palpable. So, from another angle the state is getting actively involved in the islamizaton process.

III
MALAY-MUSLIM ASSERTION

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation. The tourism promotion campaign of Malaysia government depicts Malaysia as 'Truly Asia.' In a way Malaysia is 'Asia in microcosm' as it contains the three most important races and religions of Asia. One of the distinctive features of the Malaysian social system is the close link between Islam and Malay culture and politics. Ever since it was introduced some 700 years ago, the religion has served as core element of Malaysia culture. One can safely conclude that for all intent and purposes being Malay is being Muslim.

However the Malay is not a truly homogenous group. The ethnic label Malays, covers a range of people from Middle-Eastern descent to Indonesian peoples such as Achene's, Boyanese, Bugis, Javanese, Minarg Kabau, Rawa and Mandailing, and Muslims who trace their roots to the Indian subcontinent. "The Malaysian constitution defines Malays as Muslims who follow Malays customs (adat) and speak the Malaysia language. Islam is the most important factor in the Malays identity as a source of solidarity among members of the community and a form of ethnic differentiation from non-Malaysia" (Gomes, 1999:81).

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Islam, from the colonial period remains the potent force in every aspect of Malays life. After independence, together with nationalism, Islam became a critical element in Malaysian cultural identity and a potent organizing force in the country. Thus when Islamic resurgence swept across most of the Muslim world in the 1960s, it was no small surprise to find Malaysia also participating in the process. In contrast to other Muslim countries, Islamic resurgence in Malaysia was an ethno-religious phenomenon, in the sense that it was largely the Malays who was actively engaged in raising and revitalizing the people's interest in Islam, its teachings, laws and values.

By 1980s, there were clear signs of resurgence; even this was visible in people's daily life. The spread of hejab among Muslim women in the country's urban centers; the segregation of sexes; the tremendous proliferation of Islamic literature and cassette tapes; the renewed interest in the pure Islamic way according to the Quran and Sunnah; the ever-growing presence of religious organizations, the Islamic form of greetings and Quotations embellished speeches of leaders; etc. These were some clear and palpable signals in society about the reach of the resurgence.

During the last two decades, both the Malay dominated state structure and Malay majority society has tried to impose its will on minority communities. There are various incidences and controversies which have led to further rise in religious and ethnic tensions in Malaysia. These have also deepened the fear among minorities about the intention of the majority community.

In 2006, the Malaysian government started a nationwide campaign to demolish

unregistered Hindu temples (Asia Times, 2006). Starting in 2006, many temples were demolished. On April 21, 2006, the Malaimel Sri Selva Kaliamma temple in Kualalumpur was reduced to rubble. According to the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), these demolitions are unlawful and an atrocity on the underprivileged and powerless Hindus of Malaysia. HINDRAF have organized a number of demonstrations in response to increasing atrocities against the Hindu community. However, the Malaysian government and the Malay majority have tried to suppress and curb the demands of the Hindu minority. Hence, the minorities feel powerless and frustrated which further deepens the divide in Malaysian society.

In 2007, the Malaysian authorities banned a weekly catholic newspaper (The Catholic Herald, n.d.) due to its use of the word Allah. According to the authorities, the word Allah can exclusively be used only by Muslims. The ban was later challenged and overturned in a court of law. However, the court's decision was followed by widespread protests supported by majority groups and political party. The protests further escalated in to attacks on churches and other religious places. Even many leading Muslim clerics, UMNO leaders and government ministers questioned the soundness of court's judgment. The non-Muslims in the Malaysian society fearfully watch the reaction of Muslims in such cases. The reaction of Muslim groups, leaders and individuals sends signals of growing extremism in Malaysian society.

There are regular controversies regarding religious conversion in Malaysia. The laws related to conversion in Malaysia are tilted in favour of Islam. For example a non-Muslim person who wishes to marry a Muslim person must convert to Islam before the marriage. Only then the

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marriage can be recognized as legally valid (Malaysia Government Official Portal, 2011). Further, it is very difficult both legally and socially to convert from Islam to any other religion. The legal process of conversion is also unclear, and it all depends on sharia court to give permission. Hence, in practice it is almost impossible for Muslims to change their religion legally. The cases of Lina Joy, Revathi Massosai, T. Saravanan and Chang Ah Mee are some of the controversial famous cases regarding the conversion problem in Malaysia.

IV
IMPACT ON MALAYSIAN SOCIETY

In Malaysia, religion is very closely identified with ethnic background. Some 98.8 per cent of Malays are Muslims, almost 100 percent of Chinese are adherents of the Chinese religions and about 99.0 percent of Indians are Hindus. "Islamic faith has always been identified as a Malay religion in that the two are quite synonymous with each other, although, doctrinally, race, still more racism, is anathema to Islam. Hence Islam has always been perceived as benefiting only one group of Malaysian society, namely

Malaysia" (Mutalib, 1994:119).

In the initial period of resurgence, the effort of Islamists (like ABIM, PAS) was to bridge the ethnic divide through Islam, to restructure Malaysian Society. They projected Islam as an all-encompassing and non-racial religion that provides solutions to all the problems. The initial response of non-Muslims, non-Malays were also not hostile towards their activities. ABIM's talks were attended by non-Muslims. Even there was some participation of Chinese in PAS's Ceramah (talks). "Nevertheless, after some time, the non-Muslim Chinese and Indians who were originally responsive to the Islamist's call and who lent their ears to their exhortations began to evince greater racial consciousness. Apparently, the logic used by the dakwah activists to explain the wisdom of embracing Islamic cause did not appeal to them" (Abu Bakar, 2001:70).

It can be argued that the minority religious groups started feeling a kind of fear from the activities of Islamic groups. Incidentally, this fear perception was not baseless. 'Islam first, Malay Second' has been ABIM's motto since its inception. Although, its leaders talked about Inter-Civilizational dialogue, but the Common Cadres was not so liberal and tolerant. In

Government's many initiatives, such as the Islamic Bank, Islamic University, Islamic pownshop and Islamic economic foundations, imply that non-Malays, Chinese in particular need to double up and become more competitive. These are the parts of 'Malay first' policy of NEP.

1989, some states declared that Khalawat laws (laws regulating the closeness and mingling between persons of the opposite sex) and morality issues in general are to Include-non-Muslims too. There were extremist's actions, such as the desecration of a Hindu temple in 1979, the attack on a police post in Batu Pahat in 1980, and an attempt by PAS government in Kelantan to implement sharia for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. These laws advocated cutting off the limbs of thieves, and the stoning of adulterers.

At times, the government's decisions and polices also created apprehension in the minds of non-Muslims. The government's Islamization Campaign not only limits the legal rights of 'deviant' Muslims, but it also encourages negative social attitudes toward non-Muslims. Government's many initiatives, such as the Islamic Bank, Islamic University, Islamic pawnshop and Islamic economic foundations imply that non-Malays, Chinese in particular need to double up their efforts and become more competitive. These are the parts of 'Malay first' policy of NEP, which puts Malaysia Muslim interest above all others. Since 1980s the Islamic assertion has even complicated the economic redistribution process.

Some strict conservatives in the Islamist party PAS have criticized 'Malay – first programme' as un-Islamic, because it is based on racialism which is antithetical to Islam. But here we must remember that being Malay means being a Muslim. PAS's stand on this point seems contradictory. Because when it advocates the establishment of Islamic state it commits itself to the conservative notion of citizenship. According to this principle, the citizen's rights in a Muslim dominated state should be differentiated by religion. Among other things this means that as "protected minorities" (dhimni), non-Muslims must accept Muslim dominance

or face persecution as enemies of Islam "However most of these theoretical notions have little direct appeal among the Malaysian public, deflection with UMNO and prime Minister Mahathir, not least of all after the sacking of the popular vice-premier Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, may continue to wind in PAS's sails, giving it a political influence disproportionate to its ideological resonance less society. The Recent events have boosted the influence of ideologically conservative Islamic organizations" (Hefner, 2001:52).

With the growing clout of these Islamist forces their influence is now felt in every aspect of life. The debate about the vision of Islamic state is now taking place not only between political leaders and political parties; but in every day political discourse; it comes up in newspapers and magazines, people talk about it in forums and there is more discussion about it. The probability and possibility of actualizing this vision is felt inimical by the religious minorities. Malaysia, where there is a multiplicity of religions and ethnic groups, the growing assertiveness of one religious group is bound to have an immediate impact on other religious communities and when Malaysia Muslims demand an Islamic State, this leads to a corresponding increase in religiosity on part of the Christians and Hindus and Buddhists. In reaction to the perceived Islamic threat, "many of them entered the fray by activating their own organizations, mobilizing their members, or forming their own societies in order to champion the cause of their co-religionists in the face of the Islamist's challenge. For some, it was time to regroup in order to propagate their various religious and cultural ideals" (Abu Bakar, 2001:69).

In the course of confrontation, they resort to forming bonds of solidarity to maintain their religious identity or revise their cultural heritage, or seeking a new spiritual embrace in their respective beliefs. Many Christian groups of various denominations, Buddhist organizations, and Hindu associations that had remained dormant before, were revived and sprang into action. Adherents of these non-Islamic faiths Congregate in large numbers especially in cities and towns to organize their activities. Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists have invested much energy and money into expanding their organizations partly to meet perceived threats stemming from growing Islamic activism. In orchestrating their campaign against the government's drive at greater Islamization, several of them formed a united front- the Malaysian consultative council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism- in 1984 and had petitioned the authority for its "un Malaysian" tendency. The Council condemned the efforts to Islamize the existing laws.

To summarize, "The most obvious political consequence of Islamic revivalism, and certainly the one given most prominence in the international press, is its implications for communal relations in Malaysia" (Funston, 1981:117).The increased dangers of communalism always outweigh the positive role of dakwah organization. The activities and counter-activities by religious groups are widening the already existing fissures in society. The growing menace of Islamic terrorism across the world shakes the confidence of minority religious groups in Malaysia. Today, the need of the hour is to build confidence among different groups in society. The hollow talks of democracy and secularism may not be beneficial for a traditional Malaysian society. The need is to search for a Malaysian solution for the Malaysian problems. Acknowledging the religious differences, the Social groups needs to come closer for a kind of "Civilizational dialogue", which was envisaged by Anwar Ibrahim. We must remember that fear starts in the minds of

the people and it must be countered at the outset. And the fight against communalism must be a combined effort. In this direction the efforts of Anwar Ibrahim must be acknowledged. Shamshul (Shamsul, 2001:221) observes:

"At the national level, Anwar promoted the concept of masyarakat madania, Muslim version of civil society). He argued that, not unlike the individual in the western civil notion, individuals have right in the eyes of Allah, as documented clearly in the Quran; these must be respected at all costs. Anwar also emphasized that the concept and practice of masyarakat madani are rooted in the notion of Social justice. Domestically and internationally, Anwar also encouraged what he Called 'inter civilization dialogue' as illustrated for example, in the Islam-Confucianism conference held in 1994. However with the fall of Anwar all these projects were stalled or slowed down. A Centre for civilizational dialogue was set up at the University of Malaysia in 1995 to serve, this intellectual interest with Prof. Chandra Muzaffar, a well-known Social activist and the bounder of ALIRAN, Anwar published his speeches and writings on these ideas in his Asia Renaissance."

VI
ETHNIC HARMONY FOR 'TRULY ASIA'

The ethnic harmony in Malaysia is based on a delicate balance between different communities. Sometimes, the majority community wants to impose its own way of nationalism, i.e. Malay-Muslim nationalism over Malaysian nationalism. In such dangerous times the society might become victim of sectarian contestations. Here, the political forces seem to fuel the fire of sectarianism and communalism. During the period of Islamic resurgence and assertion, there were pervasive effects

on society. But it would be rather harsh to say that the resurgence has overpowered the unique Malaysian way of life.

In the last three decades, the government has developed a unique way of Islamic capitalist development model. Interestingly today, this model is not only widely accepted in Malaysia, but also seen as a future model for other modern Muslim nations. Whether Malaysia can maintain its unique way of development and its native Muslim Malay culture against the onslaught of both the western and Middle Eastern influences is the most important question. If certain negative trends are not checked, for example, allowing ulema to gain power, if Malaysia becomes more exposed to ideas from countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, if it creates a more and more conservative society, a more de-politicized society then the prospects for having a working healthy democracy will diminish naturally. And this will go against the Muslim Malay ethos.

So Malaysia should take care that the Malay Muslim culture should not get submerged in the Muslim civilization by the fallouts of resurgence and assertion; and it must maintain its autonomous identity. That is, a Malaysia in which, even a non-Muslim, non-Malay can say that yes! 'We are fortunate to live in Malaysia'. Any plural society is not immune from social and political differences arising from communal lines. But the success lies in harmonizing those differences.

Along with the civil society the state also will have to play an important and impartial role. The cultural differences within society should be accepted and celebrated. Then only Malaysia can claim to be 'truly Asia'.

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