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The Pluralism Project  
Research Report

“In these past years of nation-building, we have not become less Malay, less Indian, or less Chinese but we have all become more Malaysian”  
(Ling Liong Sik, Malaysian Chinese Association, Secretary-General’s Report 1993:9)

### **Malaysia, Truly Asia?** **Religious Pluralism in Malaysia**

The slogan “Malaysia, Truly Asia” is commonly heard across the world as part of a large and expensive advertising campaign sponsored by the Malaysian government. It is an attempt to attract foreign visitors to this country of 22 million people which boasts of a highly diverse ethnic and religious composition (Embong 2001, p.59).<sup>1</sup> 51 percent of the population is Malay, all of whom are Muslim.<sup>2</sup> Chinese make up 26 percent of the population; most of whom are Buddhists combining Taoist and Confucian practices while a small number identify as Christian. Indians comprise 7 percent of the population of whom most are Hindu with a small minority of Sikhs, Muslims and Christians. Various ethnic groups, such as different indigenous groups mostly situated in the Borneo region, and Eurasians and migrant workers, most of whom are Indonesians, make up the remaining 16 percent of the population (Peletz 2005, p.243).

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<sup>1</sup> The campaign has been a tremendous success in terms of its wide coverage and response. Billboards promoting tourism in Malaysia can be seen in soccer stadiums in England, and on highways in Australia and the United Kingdom. The campaign also uses the newspaper and the television to promote tourism. This advertising drive prompted *The Hindustan Times*, one of India’s largest newspapers to write, “Malaysia is all set to cash in on its multi-ethnic culture by featuring several Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Sikh and Buddhist houses of worship as the country’s premier ‘spiritual tourism’ destinations” (Press Trust of India 2006).

<sup>2</sup> All ethnic Malays are Muslims. This is a unique position in comparison with other Muslim-dominated regions. For example, not all Arabs are Muslims. The converging of ethnicity and religion in Malaysia’s case can be a thorny issue as we shall see later.

Despite the Muslim majority, Malaysia is not an Islamic state.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Malaysia is considered to be a “Malay dominated plural society” and the freedom of practicing other religions is granted to everyone (Shamsul 1998, p.29). This conception of Malay hegemonic rule is a result of the political bargaining between the major ethnic political groups of Malaysia, UMNO (United Malays National Organization), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) during the formation of post-colonial Malaysia (at that time called Malaya) in 1957. As a result of the bargaining, non-Malay ethnic groups such as the Chinese and Indians were granted citizenship and their “legitimate interests (economic rights), their rights of citizenship...and residence as well as their...freedom to preserve, practice and propagate their religion, culture and language” were recognized (Ibrahim, p.128).

In return, Malays “retained their major symbols of their nation, that is, their sultans, their special position, their language (as the official language), and their religion (Islam as their religion)” (Ibrahim, p.128). In addition, special rights were granted to protect the Malays. This is enshrined in the controversial and often quoted Article 153 in the constitution of Malaysia. According to this article, those who “profess the religion of Islam, habitually speak the Malay language, and conform to Malay customs” are entitled for special reservation of quotas in three specific areas: public services, education, and business licenses, without harming the rights of other ethnic groups. Thus it is important to emphasize that Malaysia is founded “not on individual rights but on what political

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<sup>3</sup> The question of whether Malaysia is an Islamic state remains highly contentious and ambiguous. The former prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad stated explicitly that Malaysia is an Islamic state on September 29, 2001. This was seen as a political move to detract supporters from the rising Islamic resurgence in Malaysia. Mahathir’s statement provoked an outrage from the Chinese and Indian communities who claimed that Malaysia is not an Islamic state under the Federal Constitution.

theorists have come to refer to as ‘ethnically differentiated citizenship’” (Hefner 2001, p.29).<sup>4</sup>

The state of religious pluralism in Malaysia firmly hinges upon understanding the importance of Article 153. According to Zawawi Ibrahim, the article “remains as the most important legal charter and document, which spell[s] out the essential guidelines for the nation-state to manage its ethnicity and national identity, and could only be amended via constitutional amendments, which have to be passed by the Parliament” (Ibrahim, p.128). The Article was conceived as part of an “ethnic bargain” that was achieved through the spirit of mutual tolerance and respect. It is also an attempt to protect the unique ethnic and racial diversity of Malaysia from being destroyed by violence that is so often seen in other countries with different ethnic groups.<sup>5</sup> The mutual tolerance and respect among different ethnic groups exemplified in the creation of Article 153 is firmly rooted within the pluralistic history of Malaysia. A deeper understanding of Malaysia’s pre and post-colonial history is necessary to understand the state of religious and racial pluralism in Malaysia.

### **Pre-colonial Pluralism and Colonial Pluralism in Malaysia**

The land of Malaysia has been the center of trade and commerce since the tenth century AD when ancient Malay kingdoms were discovered in the northern peninsular region of Malaysia. Most of these kingdoms were under Buddhist or Hindu influence.

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<sup>4</sup> Although Malaysia was founded on a basis of “differentiated citizenship” for its different ethnic groups, it is important to highlight the fact that this move may have triggered Malaysia’s economic growth and helped to avoid the forms of racial violence that have plagued countries such as Indonesia which is built on an equal form of citizenship (Hefner 2001, 28).

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘ethnic’ (*bangsa*) and ‘racial’ (*kaum*) is used interchangeably in this paper due to Malaysia’s multicultural circumstances. Malays (or any other ethnic groups) can therefore be considered as either an ethnic group or racial group.

During that time, the region was highly coveted due to its geographical position situated in between the Chinese and Indian civilizations.

Islam was believed to have arrived in Malaysia around the 14<sup>th</sup> century through Arab traders from the Middle-East. However, it was not until the establishment of the Sultanate of Malacca in the 15<sup>th</sup> century that Islam became the dominant religion in the Southeast Asian region. During this era, Malacca became the main trading port of Asia where European merchants wanted to obtain the valuable commodity of spices that were readily available in Asia but not in Europe. On the other hand, Asian traders came to seek foreign goods in return for theirs. The strategic position of Malacca, sheltered by the adjacent Sumatran land, provided protection from the harsh monsoon winds for the traveling merchants. These traders would spend months in Malacca waiting for the wind directions to change in order to have the right conditions to sail home. Malacca quickly became one of the busiest cosmopolitan cities in Asia resulting in it being dubbed “the Venice of the East.”

The first ruler of Malacca, Parameswara, converted to Islam after his marriage to the princess Malik Ul Salih of Pasai.<sup>6</sup> It was during this period that Islam spread to all the territories of the sultanate including the majority of modern day Peninsular Malaysia, Sumatra in Indonesia and northern Thailand. During this period, laypeople and traders alike embraced Islam because of the advantages which came with identifying oneself with the ruler’s religion. Despite being the predominant religion in the kingdom of Malacca, Islam was not imposed upon its people and foreign traders, allowing people

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<sup>6</sup> It was believed that Parameswara was a descendant of Alexander the Great. Parameswara was previously a Hindu and after his conversion to Islam, he assumed the name of Sultan Megat Iskandar Shah.

with different religions to co-exist together. This was one of the first recorded instances of ethnic and religious pluralism in Malaysia.

Foreigners easily integrated themselves into the local Malay culture. Many foreign traders such as the Europeans and the Chinese familiarized themselves with the Malay customs and learned to speak the Malay language. Cross-cultural marriages between traders and the people of Malacca were common during this period. The marriage of the sixth ruler of Malacca, Sultan Mansur Syah, to a Chinese princess, Hang Li Po, further encouraged cross-cultural marriages.<sup>7</sup> The legacy of these marriages can be seen today in the *Peranakan* culture where they are a group of ethnic Chinese who practice a syncretic blend of Malay and Chinese culture by speaking the Malay language while maintaining the Buddhist tradition.

The establishment of the Sultanate of Malacca and the earlier Malay kingdoms highlights a form of cultural pluralism that already existed not just in pre-colonial Malaysia but also around Southeast Asia due to the remarkable growth of its coastal ports. This form of pluralism engendered a mindset of respect and tolerance amongst the locals and the traders. The Malaysia historian Wang Gungwu explains, "...the tradition of coastal pluralism evolved in island Southeast Asia, including the various states that became Malaysia, from earliest times...The port towns were conspicuous examples of cultural pluralism in the traditional milieu and were open to new and alien influences" (Ibrahim, p.117). He also added that this form of cultural pluralism became "an integral part of a local reality" (Ibrahim, p.117). This "local reality" would prepare the locals for the impending reign of colonial pluralism.

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<sup>7</sup> Hang Li Po's conversion to Islam was one of the many conversions which took place during that time.

The rule of the Sultanate of Malacca would last for a century until it was conquered by the Portuguese in 1511. The fall of Malacca at the hands of the Portuguese represents the beginning of foreign colonization of Malaysia. Malacca prospered for another century until the invasion of Malacca by the Dutch. This was followed by the intervention of the British during the late eighteenth century which subsequently led to the colonization of Malacca and ultimately the whole of peninsular and Borneo Malaysia. This period of colonization lasted for almost two centuries until independence was granted to Malaysia in 1957.<sup>8</sup>

The coming of the British transformed the history of Malaysia forever. It has been argued that British colonial rule altered the shape of ethnic and religious pluralism in Malaysia. The Malaysian social anthropologist, Zawawi Ibrahim, contends that “it was the subsequent elaborations by colonialism upon this “initial pluralism” [pre-colonial pluralism] which gave rise to the ethnicism and competing ethnicities currently inherited by the modern Malaysian nation-state” (Ibrahim, p.116). Ibrahim’s assertion is accurate if one were to look at the colonialists’ policies during their rule in Malaysia. The British had the acumen to symbolically acknowledge the sultans’ sovereignty over each state, whose rule encompassed matters relating to the Malay tradition such as the customs (*adat*), the language (*bahasa*), and Islam. The sultans were also provided with “bureaucratic and legal machinery to implement their directives in a more systematic and invasive manner than ever before in Malay history” (Hefner 2001, p.16). In spite of these moves, the colonialists were primarily responsible for the running of the colonized Malay states because “it [the British move of giving symbolic powers to the Sultan] divorced the

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<sup>8</sup> Due to the focus of this paper, this work will not explain the historical issue of how British came to colonize Malaysia but instead, it will focus on what the British did during colonization which affected the state of religious pluralism in Malaysia.

traditional ruling class from the economic affairs of the modern colonial system by dismantling their ‘feudal’ rights of surplus appropriation over the subject class” (Ibrahim, p.120).<sup>9</sup>

The British imported many Chinese and Indian workers into Malaysia to fulfill the labor shortage. Early nineteenth century Malaysia represented a period when it was covered with “vast forest expanses and [a] relatively small Malay population who were mostly situated in the peninsula’s few fertile rice growing regions” (Hefner 2001, p.18). Most of the population was concentrated in the Straits Settlements comprised of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore which were busy cosmopolitan cities. Though short in labor to uncover the vast riches of Malaysia’s natural resources through mining and plantations, the British were unwilling to teach these skills to the Malays because “the political costs of such a strategy would have been high” (Hefner 2001, p.18). The teaching of these skills would mean that the Malays would learn to master the trade and might revolt against their colonial masters. In order to prevent this from happening, the British imported a large amount of skilled Chinese and Indians into Malaysia which inevitably heralded the coming of “colonial pluralism.”

During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Malaysia became the largest tin producer in the world and the Chinese people were needed to share their expertise in this field. The British invited the Indians because of the need for labor in the plantation sector, especially in the rubber industry which was a boon for the British.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This is unlike what happened to the monarchy in Indonesia. The Dutch removed the power from the monarchy and this caused the loss of their sovereignty. This is a crucial difference between Malaysia and Indonesia because the removal of power from the Indonesian monarchy symbolized the loss of the monarch’s control over Islam.

<sup>10</sup> The Indians who migrated to Malaysia were primarily South Indians from the surrounding regions of Madras (now called Chennai). They were encouraged to migrate by the British rulers in India.

The coming of the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups inevitably altered the ethno-pluralistic setting of Malaysia. Due to the influx, the Chinese outnumbered the Malays in peninsular Malaysia by the early 1920s.<sup>11</sup> A decade later, the Chinese population in the four federated states (Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang) that were subject to the direct rule of the British comprised 64 percent of the population. In other states that were not under direct British rule, the Chinese comprised only 27 percent (Hefner 2001, p.18). This imbalance of the ethnic composition presented an obvious problem to the socio-economic stability of the country which was further compounded by the ‘divide and rule’ policy of the British. Under colonialism, different ethnic groups were not allowed to intermingle with each other, instead they existed mainly within their own ethnic spheres. The Malays were primarily in the rural areas doing agricultural work while most of the educated Malays were hired as government servants. Chinese people dominated the trade industry while Indians remained in the plantation sector.

This period of colonialism in Malaysia fits the mold of J. S. Furnivall’s theory of pluralism. Furnivall was largely responsible for coining and introducing the term “pluralism” to the European world. He derived his theory from his experience of colonial economies in Burma and Indonesia. Hefner summarizes Furnivall’s definition of pluralism:

According to Furnivall, “a plural society is a society that comprises ‘two or more elements of social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit.’ As with Chinese, Indians, and Malays in British Malaya, this combination of geographical propinquity and social segregation, Furnivall argued, is accompanied by a caste-like division of labor, in which ethno-religious groups play different economic roles.

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<sup>11</sup> This large migration of Chinese into the country represented the second wave of migration since the time of the Sultanate of Malacca. Most of them were Han Chinese, an ethnic term which originated from the Han Dynasty, 206 BC-AD 221 (Heng 1998, 52).

This social segregation in turn gives rise to what Furnivall regarded as these societies' most unsettling political trait: their lack of a common social will" (Hefner 2001, p.4).<sup>12</sup>

The policy of 'divide and rule' certainly worked for the colonialists in terms of gaining capital. However, in the process, they created a society that was only symbolically plural. During this period of "colonial pluralism," the lack of interaction between these different ethnic groups resulted in each ethnic group's lack of knowledge of each other. The lack of interaction also caused each ethnic group to identify itself more with its motherland rather than Malaysia.

This policy of "divide and rule" further destabilized the ethnic stability of the country because ethnic groups like the Chinese were perceived as being wealthier than others. Due to the widespread business influence of the Chinese which ranged from the production of tin and rubber to the transportation sector, the Chinese community was seen as monopolizing the economy and as a result, the migrant community especially the Chinese was perceived as a threat to the Malays. Hefner explains, "Inasmuch as Chinese and Indians figured in this formulation (of ethnic pluralism), they did so largely negatively –as foreigners who threatened to marginalize Malays in their homeland" (Hefner 2001, p.24). This misperception against the Chinese community built a silent wall of tension between the different ethnic groups of Malaysia. Unbeknownst to the Malays and Indians, most of the riches were in the hands of the British.<sup>13</sup> The fact was that a "large majority of Chinese were lowly-paid wage-earners employed in tin mines,

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<sup>12</sup> Furnivall believes that plural societies are inherently flawed because they are "unable to cope with the problem of piecing their societal puzzle into a unified whole" (Siddique 2000, p.167). These flaws are due to two reasons. Firstly, Furnivall argues that the people in these societies are using their creative energies to maintain boundaries rather than eradicating them. Secondly, the people's preoccupation with the plural economy serves as a distraction for interaction with other communities.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding the financial control of the British, Heng writes, "As late as 1970, 13 years after independence, British capital still dominated the Malaysian economy: foreign (mainly British) ownership of corporate equity in Peninsular Malaysia was 63.3 percent, the non-Malay (mainly Chinese) was 32.3 percent, and the Malay share was 2.4 percent (Heng. 1998, p.55).

rubber plantations and unskilled urban sector jobs. A minority were self-employed small proprietors and ever fewer were affluent capitalists” (Heng 1998, p.54).

The “divide and rule” policy also meant that religion was not a contentious issue between different ethnic groups. The lack of interaction between these groups meant that they could practice their religion freely without fearing any reprisal from other groups. There was also a distinct separation between religion and the British-governed state during this period of colonial pluralism. As the symbolic rulers of the Malay states and the protectors of the Islamic faith, the sultans played their role to ensure that the Malay culture and their religion of Islam were not denigrated in the midst of this influx of other religions. However, no socio-economic protective measures were introduced to help the Malays to compete with the thriving Chinese-dominated merchant community who had already established a network of capital and credit through their connections with different Chinese associations and chambers of commerce which were already established as early as 1906 (Heng 1998, p.55).<sup>14</sup>

The colonialists’ policy of indifference towards the socio-economic development of these ethnic groups, especially with the Malays, highlighted their role in creating a society that not only “lacked a common social will” but more seriously, one that was separated into different economic positions based upon ethno-religious background. Ibrahim argues, “...colonialism condemned the Malay peasantry, who were the majority of the Malay masses, to a marginal position of economic and educational backwardness-a situation, which for a long time contributed to the “ethnicization” of the poverty question

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<sup>14</sup> These associations and chambers of commerce were mostly clan-based or had religious connections. These clans originated from different Chinese ethnic groups who spoke different dialects such as Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese. Most of these associations were linked to various Buddhist temples creating a vast network of Chinese community.

and the discourse in post-colonial Malaysia” (Ibrahim, p.121). In spite of this, the colonialists must not be blamed entirely for this “ethnicization” of the economy. The Malay rulers must also take a share of the blame for not being able to protect the economic rights of the Malay people. These socio-economic failures of both the colonialists and the Malay rulers would pose a serious problem to Malaysia when it was granted independence from the British in 1957.

### **Pluralism after Malaysia’s Independence**

Malaysia was granted independence during the de-colonization period in the middle of the twentieth century. Colonial countries in Asia such as India and Indonesia gained independence from their colonial masters and Malaysia’s turn was to follow when the British could no longer sustain their colonizing position after the Second World War.

After nearly two centuries of colonial rule, Malaysia finally became a sovereign nation state. The first general election in the country in 1955 was won by the Alliance (*Parti Perikatan*) that was led by Malaysia’s Father of Independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman.<sup>15</sup> The Alliance consisted of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the main political party of the Malays, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the party for the Chinese and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), which represented the Indian community. One of the major controversial issues in this young nation state was the question of citizenship among different ethnic groups. While the Malays were acknowledged as the rightful owners of the land along with the indigenous people, the

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<sup>15</sup> The Alliance is the predecessor to *Barisan Nasional* or National Front which is the current ruling coalition group in Malaysia.

rights to citizenship of the Chinese and Indians were questioned.<sup>16</sup> When the British tried to establish the Malayan Union in 1949 which gave equal citizenship to all Malaysians regardless of their ethnicity, the proposal triggered widespread protests from the Malays. The sultans were united in their protest and refused to co-operate in this effort. Due to the fierce protests, the plan had to be abandoned by the British. This example highlights the sensitivity of the issue of non-Malay citizenship for Malays.

A concession was finally achieved between UMNO, MCA and MIC regarding the issue of citizenship and special rights for Malays. As explained in the introduction to this paper, this concession was enshrined in the Malaysian constitution under Article 153 which entitles citizenship to non-Malays and in return, grants Malays special rights in the field of education, in public services and in commerce. Non-Malay communities obtained Malaysian citizenship but it was not an equal citizenship. In Robert Hefner's words, this form of citizenship was a "differentiated citizenship" (Hefner 2001, p.29).

This concession must be analyzed carefully due to the sensitivity of the issue. UMNO were unwilling to grant equal citizenship to the non-Malay communities because they feared that the Chinese and Indians might overtake them socio-economically and inevitably result in the loss of their own sovereign rights. However, UMNO, which held the majority of the Malay votes, needed the support from the Chinese and Indians to appear as a politically united front in order to rule the country. Additionally, UMNO needed the economic support and knowledge from the wealthy Chinese community in the early years of the new nation to help the rural Malays to break the barriers of poverty. On the other hand, the Chinese and Indian communities had no choice but to concede to the

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<sup>16</sup> The Malays and the indigenous people of Malaysia are called "*bumiputera*" or translated literally as the "princes of the soil" or "sons of the soil".

request of the Malays in terms of the “differentiated citizenship” because it was politically impossible for the Malay rulers to grant equal citizenship to them after the strong reaction against the idea of a Malayan Union.

The independence of Malaysia did not improve the economic situation of the poor. According to Ibrahim, “The average income of the bottom 10 percent of all households decreased by 31 percent, from \$49 to \$33 per month, between 1957-1970...income equality worsened for the total population as well as within each community, with the Malays taking the lead” (Ibrahim, p.130). This highlighted the problem of massive economic inequality between the rich and the poor during the early years of the nation. Ethnicity played a vital role in this inequality; while a significant part of the Chinese and British communities continued to prosper, Malays and Indians remained entrenched in their poverty. Unemployment rates were also high in the cities and this primarily affected the Chinese and the growing number of Malay migrants. The failure of the ruling party to create a viable Malay capitalist class was perceived as the source of unemployment amongst the growing numbers of Malay in the cities (Ibrahim, p.131).

The economic inequality triggered the eruption of the worst ethnic violence ever seen in the country on May 13, 1969. What started out as a victory celebration in Kuala Lumpur for the Chinese opposition party, DAP (Democratic Action Party) who won a significant number of seats during the general election of that year, ended up provoking the Malay community in the city. This resulted in counter demonstrations which ultimately resulted in several days of ethnic riots between the Malays and the Chinese. It was estimated that about 6,000 residents of Kuala Lumpur, most of them Chinese, lost their homes and property. 178 people, mostly Chinese, were killed during the riots. Non-

governmental sources challenged the accuracy of these figures and claimed that the death tolls were higher (Heng 1998, p.65). This event highlighted the crisis which plagued the young nation-state as she struggled to discover her identity and seek the “common social will” in the midst of the multi-cultural setting of Malaysia.<sup>17</sup>

The May 13 riots changed the socio-economic setting of Malaysia and Malaysians altogether. The new Malay-dominated rightist government, under the helm of Tun Abdul Razak, introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP), an affirmative action based policy as a measure to eradicate poverty amongst the Malays.<sup>18</sup> Michael Peletz, an anthropologist who is an expert in Southeast Asian issues contends that the NEP was a measure to “restructure society by undermining the material and symbolic connections between ethnic categories on the one hand and economic standing and function on the other” (Peletz 2005, p.245).<sup>19</sup> This policy of restructuring the society involved ethnic and racial politics where special allocations were granted to Malays. Peletz explains:

By pursuing policies to help the predominantly rural and agricultural Malays “catch up” economically with Chinese and Indians, the government has placed tremendous emphasis on “race” (on being a Malay and a non-Malay) as a criterion in allocating government

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<sup>17</sup> The May 13 riots still remain a taboo in Malaysia. Discussions about the riots are avoided because of its highly controversial nature. A recent controversy erupted over a university textbook for a class on Ethnic Relations which blamed the racial riots solely on DAP. This book was highly controversial because of the way the incident was interpreted and led to the immediate withdrawal of the textbook by Prime Minister Badawi. In withdrawing the book, he said, “This book must be seen as an important book because it is a reference for our students, and we need to take into account matters that are sensitive to all the races...I feel that while historical facts should not be changed, we must bear in mind that our interpretation of history is also important, that we should not raise matters that can create unhealthy situations” (*The Star*, July 20, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Malaysia’s Father of Independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman lost his political power as a result of the May 13 incident. This represented the political shift to a more virulent form of racial politics under Tun Abdul Razak.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to emphasize that despite NEP’s strong bias toward the Malays, it also aimed to improve the conditions of non-Malays as well. Heng explains, “Through the NEP the nation was committed to an ambitious 20-year policy of not only reducing the level of (Malay) poverty, but more significantly, to increasing the Malay share of the national wealth while integrating the Malays into the urban economic sector. The success of the policy was to be measured chiefly in terms of numerical targets set for Malay and non-Malay ownership of corporate equity: between 1970 and 1990, the Malay share was to increase from 2.4 percent to 30 percent., the non-Malay (mainly Chinese) share from 32.3 percent to 40 percent, and the foreign share to drop from 63.3 percent to 30 percent” (Heng 1998, p.67).

loans and subsidies and other scarce resources (university scholarships, contractors' licenses, start-up funds for businesses, etc.). These policies have heightened the awareness of distinctions between Malays and non-Malays and made them all the more politically and economically salient (Peletz 2005, p.245).

This restructuring of the socio-economic fabric of Malaysia through affirmative action became an attempt to incorporate Malays into the Malaysian economy and to produce more middle-class Malays. This policy initially drew outrage from the Chinese community but they were forced to silently acquiesce to the demands of NEP due to their lack of political power. As a result, Chinese businessmen learned to adapt to the policy by working with the Malays to produce a successful and healthy working relationship. This relationship has been nicknamed as "Ali-Baba partnerships" and has served both ethnic groups well. For the Malays, they can learn to master the tools of the trade from Chinese businessmen while Chinese businessmen can take advantage of this partnership to further their businesses.

The NEP was successful in producing a new generation of middle-class Malays while eradicating poverty at the same time. The level of education among the Malays also improved tremendously. It was reported that between the early 1970s and 1993, middle-class Malays burgeoned from 18 percent to 28 percent of the population. Additionally, the Malay agricultural population decreased significantly from 65.2 percent to 33.5 percent (Hefner 2001, p.30). Despite the apparent success of the NEP, many Malays remained unhappy about this policy because of the widely held perception that the policy helped only some Malays and not all, resulting in the creation of two distinct classes of Malays; those who have benefited from the NEP and those who have not. Thus, some Malays became rich and affluent while the rest of them remained entrenched in their

poverty. The dissatisfaction with the NEP also originated from the widespread corruption and cronyism that was taking place during the implementation of this policy.

Many scholars have argued quite rightly that the Malays' discontent towards the NEP fueled the Islamic resurgence movement in Malaysia during the 1970s. This resurgence is a continuation of the early Islamic revivalism in Malaysia which occurred during the 1920s and 1930s as a tool to promote Islamic nationalism and reform. It is no accident that this resurgence coincided with the Islamic revivalist movements in countries like Indonesia, Egypt, Libya and Pakistan. One of the groups which spearheaded this resurgence was ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia or Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) led by the young Anwar Ibrahim who would later become Malaysia's Finance Minister and Deputy Minister and who was acrimoniously sacked and jailed for six years following his spectacular fall-out with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad during the Asian financial crisis in 1997. Another group which yielded immense influence was (PAS) Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Party), an Islamic political party that fought for the establishment of Malaysia as an Islamic state.

Scholars have viewed the Islamic resurgence movement or the *dakwah* movement in Malaysia as “a powerful vehicle for the articulation of moral opposition to government development policies, traditional as well as emergent class structures, other ethnic groups, or some combination of these or related phenomena” (Peletz 2005, p.246). This movement seeks to “revitalize or reactualize (local) Islam and the (local) Muslim community by encouraging stronger commitment to the teachings of the Qur'an and the *hadith*, in order to effect a more Islamic way of life (*din*)” (Peletz 2005, p.246). Apart from being perceived as a movement caused by the Malays' disenchantment with the

NEP, the resurgence was also a resistance against the capitalistic path of Malaysia that mimicked the West. Hence, this movement grew as a call to the Malaysian government and the growing Muslim middle class to return to the Islamic path.

This Islamic resurgence exacerbated the growing hostility between Malays and non-Malays ever since the implementation of the NEP. Non-Malays felt that not only was their socio-economic position under threat but their right to practice their religion was challenged as well. Robert Hefner explains:

...the Islamic resurgence and state set-asides have fortified the Malay versus non-Malay divide. The fact that a major stream in the Islamic resurgence has been colored by ethnic chauvinism has “inhibited interethnic and inter religious relations and widened social distance between communities (Hefner 2001, p.51).

The increasing distance and tension between different ethnic communities plagued the pluralistic setting of Malaysia during the 1970s and 1980s. This tension highlights the continuous problem of multi-cultural Malaysia to adopt a “common social will” that is vital to the harmonious growth of a nation.

Under the new Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, elected in 1981, the government took measures to control the Islamic resurgence. One of the measures was using the government to espouse its own Islamicization programs to counter the resurgence. These programs championed the notion of moderate Islam in light of the multi-cultural setting of Malaysia. Additionally, the government also institutionalized Islam by “establishing an Islam[ic] banking system, streamlining the administration of Islam, and setting up the Islamic International University” (Embong 2001, p.64). Politically, parties such as ABIM were co-opted into UMNO resulting in the loss of a powerful ally to PAS. All these efforts, compounded with the stunning economic development of Malaysia under Mahathir during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the slow

but steady establishment of “a common social will” for Malaysians of all races and religions.

### **The State of Religious Pluralism in Malaysia Today**

The astounding economic development of Malaysia during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century under Mahathir has propelled Malaysia to become one of the richest Southeast Asian countries. The Asian economic crisis in 1997 dealt a crippling blow to the economy and consequently to the people’s well-being. However, what was remarkable during this crisis was the absence of ethnic violence that was experienced in neighboring Indonesia. This highlights the remarkable growth of the Malaysian society in terms of their understanding of and respect for each other’s ethnic and religious background.

While this growth can be attributed primarily to the economic success of the country, other notable factors must be taken into account to explain the molding of Malaysia into a cohesive and pluralistic society. The establishment of a strong middle-class, not just among Malays but also among non-Malays has created an educated and sophisticated society who can relate to and communicate with those who are not from their ethnic groups. New housing developments in cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Georgetown and Johor Bharu have integrated neighborhoods that are no longer confined to specific ethnic groups. This has enabled the creation of a new generation of Malaysians who experience multi-culturalism on a daily basis. Education policies that were reformed after the May 13 riots created a more literate society because schools were no longer a privilege for the rich but a social necessity. As a result, students from all

ethnic backgrounds were given the chance to intermingle with each other. The opening of the doors of Chinese and Indian schools allowed non-Chinese and non-Indian parents to send their children to these schools to learn an extra language or to take advantage of better educational opportunities offered in these schools. These factors have led to the creation of a new Malaysian society that is developing a “common social will” despite its ethnic barriers.

The retirement of Mahathir in 2003 after ruling the country for 22 years signified the end of an important era of Malaysian politics. The torch was passed to Abdullah Badawi who was Mahathir’s chosen successor. Mahathir’s retirement came during a time when the multi-religious setting of Malaysia was under threat from the growing global Islamic fundamentalist movement. The events of September 11, 2001 were significant because Malaysia was indirectly linked to fundamentalist movements like Al-Qaeda.

There were reports claiming that Malaysia became a “staging area” or “launching pad” where Al-Qaeda members met to plan their next attack (Peletz 2005, p.241). These reports were backed by evidence to support their claims. In November 2000, Yazid Sufaat was photographed hosting Nawak Alhazmi, Khalid al-Midhar and Zacarias Mousasaoui in his condominium in Malaysia. All three of them were directly connected to the September 11 events (Peletz 2005, p.241). The Southeast Asian based Islamic terrorist group, Jemaayah Islamiyah (JI) that was directly responsible for the three massive bombings in Indonesia: Bali in 2002, the Marriott Hotel Bombing in 2003 and the 2004 Australian Embassy Bombing, included Malaysians who were directly involved with the group’s activities. Azahari Husein, a doctorate holder from the University of

Reading in England was “the Demolition Man” while Nordin Mohamad Top was the bomb maker of the group.

As a result of this rise in Islamic fundamentalism in Malaysia, Badawi has introduced Islamization programs to counter the resurgence not just in Malaysia but also in other Islamic countries. One of his most remarkable moves is the introduction of the concept of *Islam Hadhari* (Civilised Islam) which is a ten-point set of canonical principles that calls for both physical and spiritual development by emphasizing economic, social and political progress. The ten points are,

1. Faith and piety in Allah
2. A just and trustworthy government
3. A free and independent people
4. Mastery of knowledge
5. Balanced and comprehensive development
6. A good quality of life
7. Protection of the rights of minority groups and women
8. Cultural and moral integrity
9. Protection of the environment
10. Strong defenses

Badawi explains that “*Islam Hadhari* is not a new religion or a new religious order but merely re-emphasises the centrality of Islam in the daily lives of its believers” (*The Star*, July 25, 2006). He asserts that *Islam Hadhari* “can help bring Muslims into the modern world and integrate them in the modern economy.” The term ‘integrate’ is important because *Islam Hadhari* wants the Islamic world to *integrate* and not *assimilate* into the modern economy. This careful integration into the global economy allows for the retaining of their cultural identity. Additionally, the concept also “promotes tolerance and understanding, moderation and peace, certainly enlightenment” (Badawi 2005). More importantly, Badawi believes that *Islam Hadhari* can help in preventing the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

Badawi has implemented these reforms in Malaysia with impressive results. The economy is currently recovering consistently from the Asian economic crisis and corruption is at an all-time low.<sup>20</sup> The International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) is fast becoming one of the major Islamic institutions in the world that is comparable with the esteemed Al-Azhar University of Egypt and attracts many students from Islamic countries. IIUM offers programs not only in Islamic studies but in science as well ranging from engineering to medicine.

The strong undercurrent of Islamization programs such as *Islam Hadhari* in Malaysia has created a subtle tension between Malays and non-Malays. Non-Malay communities are fearful that these programs might impinge on their own rights. Badawi has been quick to assuage the situation by claiming that *Islam Hadhari* is a concept that is only meant for Muslims and will not directly impinge on the non-Malays' right to practice their own religion.<sup>21</sup> This underlines the thin line that is constantly negotiated by Badawi and his government in light of the drive to promote themselves as a moderate Islamic government without forsaking the religious rights of other ethnic groups.

Despite proclaiming themselves as a moderate Islamic government, several religious controversies have challenged this notion. The issue of Malaysians' freedom of

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<sup>20</sup> In a speech given at the Developing Eight (D8) summit which was attended by the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmaddinejad, the Indonesian President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and others on May 13<sup>th</sup> 2006 in Bali, he said that "fighting corruption was one of the most fundamental issues pertaining to good governance...Corruption must be eradicated in the management of our respective economies as it only benefits a few at the expense of many. Corruption disrupts the entire governmental process, undermines morality and erodes ethical behavior." In this fight against corruption, Badawi also promoted *Islam Hadhari* "as a comprehensive approach for the development of mankind, society and country, based on the perspective of Islamic teachings and Islamic civilization" (Parkaran 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Badawi explains that the principle of *Islam Hadhari* extends to non-Muslims as well. He asserts, "As an approach to religion, we feel everyone should be comfortable with Islam Hadhari because it embodies principles which are universally familiar and accepted...Islam Hadhari is a progressive approach for all Malaysians whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims" (*The Star*, 2006). This highlights the ambiguous tone of Badawi's *Islam Hadhari* when it comes to other non-Islamic religions.

religion is questioned, especially when it comes to Islam.<sup>22</sup> The controversial case of the late M. Moorthy tested the waters of religious tolerance in Malaysia. Moorthy, originally a Hindu, was alleged to have converted to Islam by the *syariah* court before his untimely death.<sup>23</sup> Hence, he was buried in the traditional Islamic way. However, his wife, M. Kaliammal claimed that she had evidence proving that Moorthy was a Hindu before his death and sought to take the case to the Malaysian court system to have him buried according to traditional Hindu rites. Unfortunately, her case was rejected as it was deemed as not being under the powers of the civil court but the *syariah* court of Malaysia.<sup>24</sup> Kaliammal has launched another appeal and her case is awaiting hearing in September 2006.

The current controversy surrounding the case of Lina Joy provides another example concerning the freedom of religion of an individual. Joy (her real name was Azlina Jalani) was once a Muslim but converted to Christianity. She wanted to drop Islam from her identification card as her religion but was not permitted to do so by the National Registry Department (NRD). Joy brought her case to the court of appeals and like Moorthy's case, the civil court dismissed her case based on the same argument that this matter was under the auspices of the *syariah* court. This controversy underlines the issue of one's religious freedom in Malaysia, especially when it comes to Malays. Adherents from other faiths can convert to other religions but not Muslims who can be deemed apostates and punished under the *syariah* court.

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<sup>22</sup> Article 11 in the Federal Constitution proclaims the freedom of religion to all Malaysians regardless of their ethnicity.

<sup>23</sup> Moorthy was one of the members of the first Malaysian team who successfully scaled Mount Everest in 1997.

<sup>24</sup> The Malaysian civil court does not have the power to nullify any decisions made by the Syariah Court (Ng 2006). The Malaysian judicial system is comprised of two different kinds of law: the civil law and *syariah* law. All Malaysians are bound by civil law, while practicing Muslims are bound by both civil and *syariah* law.

Apart from questions concerning an individual's freedom of religion in Malaysia, there is also a growing concern among Muslims, especially among clerics, that the increased pluralistic setting of Malaysia can erode Muslims' faith. During the recent 2006 Ulama Convention in the Perak state, the *mufti* from Perak, Harussani Zakaria warned against pluralism and liberalism in his keynote speech. He said, "If left unchecked, liberalism and pluralism will be difficult to control." He added that "Muslims, whether policymakers or ordinary people, should know that liberalism and pluralism were alien to the fundamentals of Islam" and warned against "the threats to Islam posed by these elements" (Mustafa 2006). As a result of this stance against pluralism and liberalism, activities which encourage multi-cultural unity were seen as a threat to Islam because they might erode Muslims' faith. Events such as "shared celebrations" (*kongsi raya*) which stands for open houses organized by the government to celebrate different ethnic groups' celebrations (such as Chinese New Year, Eid al-Adha and Deepavali) which fall around the same time were discouraged by the clerics. The clerics' statements were unpopular with the government and also with the people who strongly objected to the clerics' anti-pluralist stance. This incident reflected the underlying tension between the government and the Islamic religious leaders where one tries to be more moderate while the other is becoming more conservative in light of Malaysia's current economic growth in the era of globalization.

The question of religious pluralism was recently challenged during the planned demolition of unregistered Hindu temples in Kuala Lumpur, in order to make space for development. Local state councils who were responsible for these projects claim that these temples (most were built before Malaysia's independence in 1957) are illegal

because they are not registered. Additionally, most of these temples also reside on government land. These demolitions came with alleged police brutality against protesting Indians. Inevitably these actions infuriated not only Malaysian Indians, but also Indians around the world. Most Indians blamed the actions on the government's lack of intervention and insensitivity to the temple demolition exercise. One Malaysian opposition source noted, "The government is breaking down [Hindu] temples because they can afford to do it to the Indians...we have never heard of a mosque being broken down for development" (Bukhari 2006). Charles Santiago, head of the local organization, Monitoring Sustainability of Globalization, commented that the "breaking of Indians temples is dehumanizing to the Indian community" and added that "this could unleash a violent resistance that will have serious consequences" (Bukhari 2006). Both the government's and the local councils' insensitivity to this issue might prove to be the trigger to an already tense situation in Malaysia. The notion of respect for other religions is negated in the face of impending development but at what cost for the country and its inter-ethnic relations?<sup>25</sup>

The state of religious pluralism in Malaysia is one that is intrinsically connected to the question of ethnicity. The question of respect for each other's religion subsequently engenders a respect for one's ethnicity as well. Additionally, socio-economic and socio-political factors also play a crucial role in creating a harmonious and peaceful multicultural Malaysia. These are all factors which constantly need to be monitored in order to ensure that the rights of all Malaysians are secured. In order for this to happen, there need to be influential intellectuals and organizations which play the key role of addressing

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<sup>25</sup> *The Asia Times* (July 11, 2006) reports that the controversy around this issue has led to all demolition activities to be delayed until further notice from the state councils but reports have noted that the demolitions are still rife especially in the state of Selangor.

these issues concerning religious pluralism. This is important because these individuals and organizations seek to inform and educate the public about the necessity of maintaining respect for each other's religions, thus avoiding any eruption of ethnic violence that has been experienced in Malaysia's history.

### **Influential Malaysians and Malaysian organizations working on the Question of Religious Pluralism**

*Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi*

As the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Badawi has been credited for his uprightness in his leadership and his style of governance. Badawi was born into a highly influential religious and political family. He later obtained his degree in Islamic Studies from the University of Malaya in 1964. One of Badawi's most important contributions to the issue of religious pluralism in Malaysia is his notion of *Islam Hadhari* that was explained earlier in the paper. This notion addressed the ways where both Islam and development can work together to advance the Muslim community not just in Malaysia but also globally. Additionally, Islam Hadhari also encourages respect for other religions. The stunning electoral victory in 2004 was proof of Malaysians' approval of his campaign to moderate Islam and to eradicate corruption.

*Chandra Muzaffar and JUST*

Trained as a political scientist, Muzaffar is one of the leading intellectual voices of Malaysia. He was the first director of University of Malaya's Center for Civilizational Dialogue in March 1997. However, later he was removed from his post for his oppositional role during the Anwar political crisis in late 1997. Muzaffar is currently the president of JUST: International Movement for a JUST World which seeks to raise global awareness concerning issues of injustice and globalization. JUST is now an established international non-profit network whose advisory board boasts of intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky and Richard Falk. Muzaffar is a known critic of Israel's policy in the Middle-East and also the United States' foreign policy and more importantly, he is a critic of the Malaysian government. He is well-known for his stance on ethnic and religious equality in Malaysia.

Though a Muslim himself, Muzaffar constantly fights for the rights of non-Malays. As such, he is directly opposed to the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia. He says, "Islamic resurgents...are completely trapped in an exclusive concept of Islam dominated by laws and rituals and symbols." He adds, "...this negative attitude of various Muslim groups exposes the real nature of their political struggle. It is just another way of preserving Malayism" (Riddell 2001, p.256). Recently, in the controversy surrounding the National Ulama Convention's attack on religious pluralism, he wrote a response article titled *What Pluralism Means to Islam* in Malaysia's widely read newspaper *The Star*. In the article he referred to various instances in Islamic history where Islam embraced pluralism. He contends that the anti-pluralism stance is one that is "narrow and exclusivist" especially in a country like Malaysia. In his conclusion, he writes,

There is no doubt at all that many Malaysian Muslims under the tutelage of the ulama subscribe to such interpretations of the religion. It is reflected in their blind adherence to certain aspects of the Fiqh (jurisprudential) tradition which have been discarded in other parts of the Muslim world.

If a narrow interpretation of text and tradition in order to bolster an exclusive notion of religious identity has tremendous pull among Malaysian Muslims, it is partly because of the country's delicate ethnic balance which reinforces the siege mentality on all sides (Muzaffar 2006).

The role of Chandra Muzaffar is best summarized by Peter Riddell where he writes, "Chandra has served for several decades as a type of public conscience, holding the leading actors on the Malaysian political and religious stage to account (Riddell 2001, p.258).

### *Zainah Anwar and Sisters in Islam*

Zainah Anwar is the founder of Malaysia's well-established Sisters in Islam who plays the important role of "pushing the boundaries of women's rights within Islam and within the framework of a country that is fast modernizing and relatively democratic" (Anwar 2001, p.227). Despite the modernization that has taken place in Malaysia, women are still trapped in the lower echelons of the patriarchal structure of Malaysian society. As a result of this, Sisters in Islam was created to address issues regarding the rights of Muslim women in Malaysia. Anwar has fought against the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia by advocating a closer reading of the Qur'anic text. In her reading with other members of Sisters in Islam, she discovers that the Qur'an advocates for the rights of women, but it is the male interpreters of the text who have taken away their rights. She writes:

Our reading opened a world of Islam that we could recognize, a world for women that was filled with love and mercy and with equality and justice. We need not look any farther to validate our struggle. Women's rights were rooted in our tradition, in our faith. We were more convinced than ever that it is not Islam that oppresses women, but

interpretations of the Qur'an influenced by the cultural practices and values of a patriarchal society (Anwar 2001, p.228).

As a result of their reading of the Qur'an, Anwar, through Sisters in Islam has demanded for the recognition of women's rights in Malaysia. They have campaigned intensely against the practice of polygamy in Malaysian Muslim households because many who practice it do not strictly adhere to the Qur'anic laws on polygamy. Anwar's courageous efforts have been recognized by the government when she was appointed to become a member of Malaysia's Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM) in 1999.

#### *Patricia Martinez*

Patricia Martinez was the first non-Muslim Malaysian to hold a doctorate in the field of Islamic Studies in Malaysia. Additionally, she also holds postgraduate degrees in the Comparative Study of Religion, Christian Theology and Women's Studies. Currently she is an associate professor at the University of Malaya's Asia-Europe Institute (AEI) and she is also a senior research fellow for Religion and Culture and is currently the Head of the Inter-cultural Research hub at AEI.

Martinez has been frequently invited to foreign universities to lecture on the topic of Islam in Southeast Asia. She also plays the important role of monitoring the government's actions in dealing with its multi-cultural identity. She is a frequent critic of the government's inability or refusal to allow people to talk about matters pertaining to their religion. She explains, "The [government and media] should create a sense that people should talk about their differences... Instead, there's been a sheer infantilizing of all of us to the point that we're unable to articulate ourselves on an issue that has become central to defining ourselves as Malaysians" (Gatsiounis 2005). However she refuses to

solely blame the government but instead put some of the blame on the people as well. According to her, “We self-censor ourselves more than government censors us. There's a reluctance [among Malaysians] to be offensive” (Gatsounis 2005). She emphasizes an important point here about the self-censoring nature of Malaysians. This tendency is derived from Malaysians’ unwillingness to instigate ethnic tensions, a fear which can be detrimental to the growth of the country.<sup>26</sup> While this highlights the tolerant and respectful nature of Malaysians, their inability or unwillingness to talk to others about their religion remains a handicap to the overall religious maturity of the country.

### *Anwar Ibrahim*

Anwar Ibrahim is most well known for his spectacular political fall-out with the then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. This fall-out resulted in his six-year imprisonment for the alleged trumped-up charges of sodomy and corruption. During his early days, he was a charismatic leader of ABIM, (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) and was known for his anti-government stance until he was co-opted into UMNO and subsequently the ruling government itself. Today, he is a distinguished visiting professor at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service.

Anwar is a fervent advocate for political reforms such as the weeding out of corruption not just in Malaysia but in other Islamic countries. He sees these reforms as a way to eradicate terrorism. Anwar is a strong supporter of the multi-cultural nature of Malaysia. In an interview he comments, “I agree that there is a role for religion in society,

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<sup>26</sup> Malaysians are discouraged from talking about inflammatory issues such as ethnicity and religion. Anyone caught inciting others on these issues can be punished under the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA) where people can be held in detention without any evidence of their wrongdoing.

and people should be given the choice of observing their own religious practices. The environment can be created to encourage tolerance on the issues of faith, spirituality and moral values, and I don't see this to be in juxtaposition or in contradiction of our views on governance, democracy and freedom” (Anwar 2006). Anwar is also concerned about Malaysians’ inability to mature themselves culturally. He says:

Malaysia has rich a heritage of being a multiracial, pluralistic society, and, at the same time, it has been relatively tolerant, although there have been instances in the past of racial riots, etc. We have demonstrated sustained economic growth for decades. Compared to most Muslim countries, Malaysia is a success story. My concern is that we are not moving forward; we are not maturing as a culture. We are not prepared to shift both the political philosophy and the economic policy. For example, look at freedom in the media; we are about the lowest in the world. Look at corruption; it is not being addressed. And corruption can be endemic and cancerous (Anwar 2006).

While the question of corruption is slowly being addressed by Prime Minister Badawi, the Malaysian media and Malaysians still have a long way to go before fully learning about how to exercise their rights to freedom of expression. The Malaysian government restricts this right to freedom of expression because questions of religion and ethnicity are extremely sensitive and might result in serious repercussions such as ethnic tensions if these matters are not discussed in a mature and respectful manner.

#### *Malaysian Interfaith Network (MIN)*

The Malaysian Interfaith Network (MIN) was founded on February 15, 2003 through the efforts of Anwar Fazal who gathered together organizations from all religious faiths to form this organization. There are about 30 participating organizations ranging from the Malaysian Consultative Council on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS), Sisters in Islam, the Council of Churches of Malaysia and many others. MIN was founded with the aim of promoting religious dialogue among faith organizations in Malaysia as well as trying to foster understanding on common issues of

concern amongst its participants. In spite of their efforts, MIN has kept a low-profile and has not been active in promoting inter-religious dialogue.

### **Conclusion: The Malaysian Dilemma**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century represents a period of great uncertainty about Malaysia's state of religious pluralism. It is a serious question which affects all Malaysians because the outcome of this uncertainty will determine Malaysia's socio-economic position globally. While Malaysians have learned to live with people from other ethnic backgrounds, they are now confronted with a problem which arises as a result of this achievement. The uncertainty lies in the question of how can Malaysians live with each other's religion in an age where all forms of religious fundamentalism are manifesting themselves globally.

The multi-religious setting of Malaysia is challenged by notions of religious relativism. How does one acknowledge the truths of his or her own religion without belittling or diminishing the truth(s) in other religions? This is a question that Malaysians have to deal with in their daily setting. Some have practiced a form of respect that is mixed with tolerance for other believers while most have remained silent and ignorant (if not indifferent) to this issue. The adage "ignorance is bliss" can be aptly used to describe the Malaysian society. Malaysians, in their educational and social upbringing are taught that religious discussions should not be held in public but instead should be kept in the private realm. This is advocated with the intention of being sensitive to people from other ethnic backgrounds. While the intention is good, the outcome is otherwise because it cultivates a paradox within many Malaysians; they remain a sophisticated society in

terms of their material growth but are constrained when it comes to the understanding of their multi-religiosity and multi-ethnicity.<sup>27</sup>

The paradoxical nature of Malaysians is also aided by Malaysia's economic boom in the last two decades that was interrupted by the Asian financial crisis in 1997. Due to effective governmental measures, Malaysia has almost certainly recovered from the crisis. As mentioned earlier, the Malaysians' ability to steer away from the ethnic violence seen in Indonesia is an indication of Malaysia's maturity as a country which espouses respect and tolerance for other ethnic groups. Inadvertently, the economic growth has created a Malaysian society that prefers to remain silent on matters pertaining to religion in order to avoid disrupting the continuous growth of the country.<sup>28</sup>

The government's role in promoting silence rather than discussion when it comes to the understanding of multi-religious of Malaysia does not help to improve the situation. Any religious issue deemed sensitive is often dealt with silence rather than with discussion. The media is discouraged from reporting on matters related to religion. Movies which touch on religion issues such as Mel Gibson's *The Passion* are banned due

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<sup>27</sup> While it has been mentioned earlier that the improved education system allowed students to become more literate and aware of their multi-religiosity, it must be emphasized that the improved education system has created a policy of silence when it comes to more controversial issues such as ethnicity and religion. In the Malaysian education system where students are allowed to intermingle freely, students are discouraged from talking about religion. There are no religious classes except for Malays who are required to attend a class on Islam. Non-Malays are required to attend a class titled "Moral Ethics."

<sup>28</sup> This attitude of indifference is succinctly summed up by Mark Heim, a Christian theologian who visited Kuala Lumpur in 2004, "The positive outlook [of Malaysians on religious and ethnic harmony] appears to be rooted in two factors. The first is a lively lack of complacency. Malaysians look around and know that the peace they enjoy is fragile. At independence in 1957, many predicted racial or religious civil war for the country, and a communist insurgency was put down only after a major struggle. The second factor is the Malaysian economic miracle. As one of the Asian "tigers" alongside Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, Malaysia has seen development lift all ethnic boats. And everyone understands that ethnic conflict could reverse that reality, driving off the foreign investment, tourism and multinational corporations that have been carefully courted" (Heim 2004).

to its religious content.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore books pertaining to the sensitive issues of religion were also banned by the civil court from being distributed in Malaysia. Recently, the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) reported that Malaysia has banned eighteen books on religion and Islam, including Karen Armstrong's *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (2001) and John Esposito's *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam* (2002). These books were banned under the Printing Presses and Publishing Act of 1984 which forbids the distribution of materials which can disrupt the country's peace. According to Sisters of Islam, the government has banned a total of 45 books. The organization comments:

We are particularly concerned over the increasing number of books on Islam and religion that are being banned...the space for discourse is narrowing and Malaysian readers are being deprived of ideas and debates by renowned scholars and writers, published by reputable institutions such as the Oxford University Press (IFEX 2006).

The banning of these books and movies certainly does not help to promote discussions about religion in Malaysia. Without the proper understanding of the religion of their neighbors, it is difficult, if not impossible for Malaysians to *truly* learn to live with their neighbors and be pluralistic. Consequently, without knowing how to live with their neighbors, Malaysians simply cannot begin to have a "common social will" that is so vital to the harmonious growth of the country.

The government's role in silencing inter-faith discussions is best exemplified by Badawi's recent banning of inter-faith forums on Article 11 in the Malaysian constitution which touches upon an individual's religious freedom in Malaysia. According to Badawi, these forums must be stopped because "they are deemed to cause tension in our multi-religious society" (Habib and Shari, 2006). He also said that "If the discussions are not

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<sup>29</sup> In an interesting twist, Christian churches were allowed to screen *The Passion* and only churchgoers were allowed to watch this movie.

kept in check or contained, they are bound to raise tension in our multi-religious society. Religious issues are even more sensitive than ethnic issues” (Habib and Shari, 2006).<sup>30</sup> This summarizes the Malaysian dilemma of today; how can Malaysians learn to co-exist peacefully without even learning who their neighbors are ethnically and religiously?

The question of religious pluralism is one which confronts all Malaysians and it necessitates a solution. While the solution is not easy and needs to endure different social experimentations, many different groups and individuals have sensed the urgency to create a viable solution to this issue. The need to create a Malaysian nation that is truly Asian, one which truly respects religious diversity, is more important than ever in this era of global terrorism because of Malaysia’s potential to become a shining example of an effective moderate Islamic majority country. In his visit to Malaysia to attend the World Council of Churches meeting in Kuala Lumpur, the Christian theologian Mark Heim wrote of Malaysia’s potential to become a role model to other Islamic countries:

Malaysia is a country rich in such juxtapositions [combining development with old Islamic traditions], sometimes jarring to sensibilities formed in other cultures. The juxtapositions suggest that historical processes rarely repeat themselves identically and that our familiar constellations of ideas and movements are not fixed. They are subject to reformulation. What is under way in Malaysia is one possible future for Islam. And with that Islamic future Christianity may, God willing, have a fruitful and a peaceful appointment (Heim, 2004).

While Malaysia aspires to become a role model to other countries, the solution to the Malaysian dilemma must first be confronted and solved. Thus, the first step to creating a

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<sup>30</sup> In February 2005, the Bar Council of Malaysia organized a forum consisting of different religious organizations to discuss about the creation of an Interfaith Commission (IFC) to promote a better understanding of the different religions in Malaysia. However, Islamic organizations refused to join because they feared that the commission might “weaken Islam”. Subsequently, the government stopped the forum because it was deemed unnecessary while at the same time paradoxically voicing the need for inter-faith dialogue (US Department of State, 2005). The Malaysian government’s encouragement of inter-faith dialogue can be observed in the World Council of Churches’ (WCC) meeting in Malaysia in 2004. It was the first time that the WCC held a meeting in a Muslim majority state. It can be argued that the Malaysian government can allow inter-faith dialogue to take place as long as it does not impinge on religious discussions which concerning Malaysians.

solution is to *know* the “Other” and this can only mean that all Malaysians *must* engage themselves in discussions concerning ethnic and religious pluralism for it is only then that Malaysia can be on the verge of becoming *truly* Asia, not just symbolically, but in practice as well.

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