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Islamist Civilizationism in Malaysia
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Abstract

Malaysia is known to have a diverse population across the racial and religious spectrums. However, a majority of the population identifies as Malays, and, thus, legally, as Muslims too. Although the development of the Malay identity had begun immediately after World War II, the stark division between Muslims and non-Muslims came out of the 1971 New Economic Policy that prioritized the Malay population in the name of reducing poverty and stabilizing the country. With the Malay-nationalist party United Malay National Organization (UMNO) being in power for six decades, the position of the Malays became undisputed. At the same time, international and domestic development such as the Islamic revival of the 1970s, the Global War on Terror and the splitting of Malay votes in the 2000s further pushed UMNO and, later, the Islamist PAS to redefine Malay identity as part of the larger Muslim ummah under the framework of 'civilizational populism'. By conflating ethnicity and religion, Islamist and Malay nationalist parties together with their leaders used populist discourses to ensure the people's continued support, even at the expense of non-Muslim Malaysian citizens. Using process tracing, this article shows that civilizationism is effective to unite the majority Muslim population in a divided country such as Malaysia when policies in place failed to engender unity. As a result, Malay-Muslims sought a community beyond its borders, and with the rise of Islamist politics around the world, it has become much easier for the Malay-Muslims to highlight the plight of Muslims over that of their own co-nationalists for the benefit of domestic politics. © 2023 by the author.

Author Keywords

ethno-nationalism; inter-ethnic; Islamist populism; Malay identity; Malaysia

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