Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia:
An Islamic Response to
Non-Muslim Concerns

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Abstract

This paper briefly reviews some of the causes, manifestations, and effects of the growing Islamic revivalism in Malaysia. It also examines the non-Muslim minorities' concerns about this rising Islamic consciousness and provides an Islamic response. Finally, the extent to which the events of 9/11 changed the dynamics between ethno-religious minorities and the government is briefly assessed.

Introduction

Islamic revivalism (*al-tajdīd al-Islāmī*) has been defined by a twentieth-century Muslim scholar as the "cleansing of 'Islam' as practiced of all un-Godly elements" in an effort to return Islam to its original pure form.[1] Islamic revivalist movements have been a reccurring phenomena throughout Islamic history and have generated great interest among both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. In the last few decades, Muslim revivalist groups in Southeast Asia have challenged the existing political power structures. For example, in multireligious Malaysia,[2] the relationship between state and religion has become increasingly interconnected and intertwined,

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largely due to the pressure of Islamic movements and opposition groups that have attempted to influence the government in order to shape and transform society in a manner that corresponds to Islamic ideals and values.[3] This has led to an increased Islamicity on the part of the government and growing concerns by some ethno-religious minorities about how far the government's Islamization will go.

Nature and Manifestation

Although Malaysia is not officially an Islamic state, Islam is the official religion. According to the 1957 Constitution of Independence (*Merdeka*), Islam is the religion of the Federation of Malaysia, and the sultans are the heads of religion in their respective states. Article 11(1) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution grants all citizens the freedom to profess, practice, and propagate their own faiths. However, this last freedom is subject to Article 11(4), which "control[s] and restrict[s] the propagation of any religious doctrine among persons professing the religion of Islam."[4]

Until the mid-1970s, the ruling Malay Nationalist Party's (UMNO) commitment to Islam was largely symbolic and often in response to its rivals – the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PAS). Although the government built mosques, upgraded the annual international Qur'anic recitation contests, broadcast the *adhān* (call for prayer) over the radio and television, and maintained a high public profile at Islamic activities and festivals,[5] its policies tended to promote Islam as a component of Malay identity and were intended to further the interests of Malays vis-à-vis non-Malays.[6] For the most part, non-Muslims were not directly affected by such activities.[7] In fact, the extent of Islamic influence became increasingly apparent only in the later part of the 1970s. Since that time, there has been a noticeable consciousness-raising among Malays, who have been searching for the *true* Islam and attempting to cleanse their culture of non-Islamic elements. Furthermore "from the 1970s onward, religious revivalism and the role of Islamic movements [has] become a major force in Muslim politics."[8]

The causes and manifestations of the Islamic resurgence have been well documented by John L. Esposito, Fred R. von der Mehden, Hussein Mutalib, Chandra Muzaffar, and others. Some have attributed the rise in Islamic consciousness among Malay youth as part and parcel of the growing global Islamic resurgence; others have attributed it as a Malay strategy of reinforcing their ethnic identity in the face of a large urban non-Malay population.[9] Moreover, social scientists have suggested that its causes are

due to "widespread feelings of failure and loss of identity in many Muslim societies [including Malaysia], as well as failed political systems and economies."[10]

While the causes of Islamization have been diverse, its manifestations have been even more multifarious. On an individual level, there has been an increased consciousness among Islamic resurgents regarding matters of personal morality, such as sex, liquor, gambling, and clothes.[11] For example, some observers have noted "the drastically increased number of female students wearing the *tudung* (headscarf) and male students wearing the *kopiah* (skullcap)" at government universities.[12]

On the societal level, the media has provided more time for religious television programs, from prayer to Qur'anic reading contests to Islamic educational programs, designed to educate both Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam's ideals.[13] At the same time, von der Mehden writes that there has been a growth in *da`wah* (Islamic propagation) organizations that emphasize the understanding of Islam among the faithful and increased proselytization among non-Muslims,[14] although these organizations have focused primarily on "making Muslims better believers."

Raymond L. M. Lee argues that the government perceived the growing popularity of *da`wah* movements as a threat to its authority and sought to control them through direct competition. Consequently, state-sponsored religious activities became a routine feature of Islamic practices.[15] Muslim holidays became more national in scope, and politicians began to stress Islamic issues more frequently. The government continued to subsidize and systematize the construction of mosques and prayer halls, Islamic studies were incorporated into government school curricula, and all Muslim students were required to study Islam as a regular academic subject.[16] In addition, an Islamic banking system and Islamic insurance companies were established, as well as private Islamic schools, colleges, and an international Islamic university. Official *ḥalāl* (permissible) food certificates were required by all food-outlets and restaurants patronized by Muslims, regardless of whether the owner was Muslim or not.

On the global level, international conferences, seminars, meetings, symposiums, and other socioreligious activities attended by Muslims from around the world became regular events, and greater consideration was shown toward such international Islamic causes as Afghanistan, Palestine, Kashmir, Iraq, Chechnya, and Bosnia. For example, in 2003 Malaysia hosted the "10th Session of the Islamic Summit Conference," during which contemporary issues facing the ummah were discussed.

As the relationship between state and religion has become more interconnected and intertwined, non-Muslims and some Muslims have raised concerns about how far the government's Islamization process will go. For many Muslims in Malaysia, the freedom to practice one's faith is an all-encompassing affair that includes the freedom to set up Islamic legal and economic systems and to establish an Islamic state (although there is little consensus pertaining to the form such a state would take). Muzaffar confirms that for many of Malaysia's students, academics, politicians, and religious elites, "... especially those outside the establishment, the ultimate goal is an Islamic State."[17] Concerns about this actually happening were particularly heightened in 1999, when the Islamic opposition party PAS managed to form the state governments in both Terengganu and Kelantan, both of which are located on the northeast coast. However, during the 2004 national election, Terengganu was brought under the government control, while Kelantan continued under the Islamic party.

Such scholars as Mutalib are uncertain about the prospects of realizing an Islamic state in Malaysia. He argues that due to the particularistic, ethnic, and insular orientation of Islamic policies adopted by successive governments, it would be difficult for an Islamic social order to emerge. He further asserts that due to the government's preoccupation with protecting and preserving the Malays' interests in multiracial Malaysia vis-à-vis other ethnic communities, Islam's wider philosophical dimensions and principles (e.g., its universality and emphasis on equity and justice) have been sidelined.[18]

In recent years, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad declared that Malaysia is, in fact, an Islamic state (*Negara Islam*), since "the Malaysian government's policies abide with the fundamental teachings of Islam."[19] In reality, the government imposes Islamic religious law on Muslims only in some matters and does not impose it on non-Muslims. However, there is little doubt that non-Muslim communities "regard the possibility of Islamic law throughout Malaysia with deep dismay."[20]

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the current Malaysian prime minister, continues to maintain that Islam is the country's official religion. He asserts that Malaysia had shown that Islam is not an impediment to tolerance and mutual respect across religions, cultures, and ethnic groups; instead, "Islam in Malaysia does not advocate a clash of civilisations but a feast and a celebration of civilisations."[21]

The Effects of Revivalism

Depending on one's point of view, revivalism or Islamization has had both positive and negative effects on Malaysia's non-Muslim minorities. These will be detailed and addressed one by one.

First, local Islamic revivalism has made religion a major component of inter-ethnic assertion. Accordingly, non-Muslims have become more conscious of their own particular ethno-religious identity vis-à-vis Muslims.[22] This heightened awareness and consciousness has manifested itself via a religious and cultural revivalism of sorts. Dormant and even old customs and practices are being resurrected to emphasize the uniqueness and distinctiveness of various non-Muslim religions and cultures. Wesak, a Buddhist festival held to honor Gautama Buddha, attracted minimal attention in the 1960s; at the turn of the twenty-first century, it suddenly became an immensely popular event. Such Hindu rituals and festivals as Thaipusam, which went out of vogue 20 years ago, are back in fashion.[23] Lee and others have attempted to explain this current culturo-religious revival among non-Muslims as a reaction to Malay religious nationalism.[24] In an attempt to strengthen their feeling of identity, non-Muslims are returning to religious symbols and rites that had become rather marginal.[25]

Is this increased consciousness and awareness of one's communal identity a positive or a negative development in a multireligious, multiethnic, and mutlilinguistic society? Certainly, pessimists are plentiful. R. S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy argue that due to the particularistic orientation of the present Islamization process, in the sense that it has been strongly identified as a key ingredient of Malay cultural identity, Islamization has acted vigorously to maintain ethnic boundaries,[26] since it has accentuated the divisions between Malaysia's Muslim and non-Muslim populations.

Similarly, Muzaffar argues that Islamization has brought about a greater dichotomization and polarization of society. He cites the following example as proof of this fact:

> Resurgents would also be very wary about eating in the homes of their non-Muslim friends, even when all the conventional Muslim dietary rules have been taken into account. Consequently, there has been a noticeable decline in inter-religious socializing of that kind.[27]

Such a sentiment is confirmed by A. Vaithilingam, president of the Malaysian Hindu Sangam, who states that at one time government offices used to have joint celebrations of Deepavali (a Hindu festival), Hari Raya

(a Muslim festival), Christmas, and Chinese New Year. However, since the 1970s, when religious *ustazs* (traditional Muslim scholars) were invited to give talks to all government departments, schools, and institutions, such interreligious gatherings have been abolished.[28] Mutalib also confirms such observations:

> The greater the Islamic consciousness, the more non-Muslims are driven to emphasize their own ethnic and religious distinctiveness. Consequently there has been a noticeable decrease in social interaction amongst the country's ethno-religious plural polity and the prospect of bridging it appears rather daunting.[29]

In contrast, Robert Winzeler argues that,

> ... restrictions on eating together and intermarriage, while strongly limiting the integration of Malays and non-Muslim Chinese and Thais, do not necessarily make enemies of them. It is not necessarily the case that extensive or complete social mixing would have taken place even if commercial and marital barriers hadn't been present. No restrictions on intermarriage or commonality between Thais and Chinese [in Kelantan] exist, yet such marriages are not common.[30]

Furthermore, Winzeler adds that just because separate ethnic communities of sufficient size remain separate and do not merge does not mean that "such tendencies are not compatible with passively or even actively, harmonious inter-ethnic relations, given an absence of other reasons for hostility."[31]

Ultimately, the question of whether communal assertion inherently leads to the polarization of society depends on how it is nurtured and manifests itself. If the assertion of an individual's identity or communal identity (e.g., religious, ethnic, and linguistic) is accompanied by respect and tolerance for those with different values, customs, and traditions, then it can be positive, since an individual's identity is strengthened by being, first, part of a smaller community and then a member of the larger society. Consequently, the individual is able to interact within the larger society from a position of self-confidence about his/her identity.

Expressing differences in a positive, healthy manner can lead to the overall enrichment of one's society. The acknowledgement and respect for culturo-religious diversity has been one of the keys to Islamic civilization's strength and longevity. As Mutalib argues:

> A plural society is not necessarily an obstacle to the achievement of harmonious inter-ethnic relations. From the standpoint of Islam too, plural-

ism is actually a deliberate act of God, aimed at encouraging people from
different backgrounds to know each other. However, pluralism becomes
an invidious factor when it takes the form of communalism.[32]

This community-based approach contrasts starkly with the melting pot
model, which frequently submerges minority cultures under the majority's
cultural domination for the sake of national identity and integration. Since
such a model has little room for cultural and/or religious differences, which
are at variance with those of the majority tradition, minority groups fre-
quently lose their sense of identity. Today, this model has gone global, for
tastes, attitudes, and values are being transformed to suit the westernization
of the world. Those that refuse to submit to such a model or have alterna-
tive worldviews are often portrayed negatively, as being incapable of com-
ing to grips with modernity.

To return to our original question, if increased community awareness
and assertion is accompanied by intolerance and a feeling of superiority
over others, then such a development can become a tremendous evil with-
in society. This is why communal assertion must be continuously nurtured
within the framework of an overall spirit of tolerance and respect for the
differences of others.

According to former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim:

> A plural, multi-religious society is living perpetually on the brink of cat-
> astrophe. Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims must be gov-
> erned by moral and ethical considerations. The seeds of militancy are
> everywhere and each community must ensure that they will not germinate
> and multiply through discontent and alienation.[33]

Second, Islamic revivalism has made the Malaysian government reaf-
firm the non-Muslims' constitutional right to religious freedom. In this
regard, Suzan E. Ackerman and Raymond L. M. Lee contend that non-
Muslim groups within the same religious tradition or between different
traditions are similarly endorsed by the Malaysian government through
registration under various legal statutes, without any evaluation of doctri-
nal orthodoxy or deviance.[34] Ironically, Lee asserts that non-Muslims are
comparatively "freer" than Muslims, since they have greater opportunities
and choice to sample new religious ideologies and practices, as well as to
move between and within the non-Muslim religions, unlike their Muslim
compatriots.[35] He argues that since all Malays are legally Muslim by birth,
they have no religious choice. They are publicly compelled to profess and

practice their faith within the Sunni tradition, without the comparative availability of other religions or even "Islamic alternatives such as Shi'ism."[36]

Moreover, Lee adds that the behavior of non-Muslims is not always held up to public account in the same way that Muslim behavior is constantly subjected to the Shari'ah and government pressure "to conform publicly to puritanical or demagized norms of religious behavior." In fact, many of the laws that restrict religious talks in mosques, curtail freedom of the press, and detain opposition religious figures are targeted specifically at Muslims. This is confirmed by a *New Straits Times* (Malaysian daily newspaper) report that states "while the heavy hand of the law falls hard on Islamic militancy, a much larger agenda is necessary to sweep away the undesirables."[38]

Third, there is a fine line in any multireligious state between affirming one's religious identity and respecting the religious identity of others, and overstepping such boundaries. Malaysia has not been immune from overzealous individuals. For example, during the 1970s, Datuk Tun Mustapha bin Harun, chief minister of Sabah at the time, made great efforts to increase the numbers of Muslims, especially among Sabah's non-Muslim *bumiputra* (sons of the soil) population. Opponents charged that he was employing improper political and economic pressure to gain converts, including the refusal to reissue work permits to Catholic priests, and that he exaggerated his successes. Supporters, including former Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, argued that Tun Mustapha did more to bring converts to Islam than any other entity in Malaysia, claiming 96,400 new Muslims.[39] Although the percentage of Muslims increased to about 47 percent, Tun Mustapha eventually lost the federal government's support and was defeated in the 1976 state election.

In 1980, another step toward Islamization took place in Sabah. This happened after the "Conference on *Da'wah* in Southeast Asia and the Pacific," which took place in Kuala Lumpur in January 1980. Eastern Malaysia and Indonesia were declared the main targets in a strategy of *da'wah* sponsored and supported by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. After a mass rally was held in Kudat (Sabah state), the daily newspapers reported that about 4,000 people converted to Islam and were "rewarded" with 100 Malaysian *ringgit* (approximately US$ 25). It seems that the suspect practices of certain Christian groups were being imitated.[40]

While Muslims are obligated to tell others about Islam, Qur'an 2:256 emphatically states that "there is no compulsion in religion." Certainly, any

Muslim engaged in *da`wah* work should understand the sociocultural realities and sensitivities of his/her environment. At the same time, Islam should "sell" its message of One God and high ideals for societal transformation, rather than resorting to bribery or other unscrupulous means. Since Muslims often criticize the underhanded means used by other religious groups to spread their religion, they should not seek to emulate such groups, no matter how "successful" they appear to be.

Non-Muslim Concerns

Some of the non-Muslim minorities' concerns will be discussed and analyzed, as follows: First, several writers, particularly those with a negative orientation toward Islam, have argued that the Islamic revival is a threat to non-Muslims. There is a general fear among non-Muslims that their religious freedom cannot be guaranteed under a situation of Islamic competition and expansionism. Some fear that the democratic system of government will eventually give way to a theocratic one, in which state and religion are one and indivisible, and that Malaysia, as a secular state, will cease to exist.[41]

However, is such a concern based on pure speculation or grounded in actual fact? Is there a correlation between a secular form of government and religious freedom, and an Islamic state or form of government and a consequent lack of freedom? Contrary to popular opinion, such a correlation does not exist.[42] A secular state guarantees religious freedom to the extent that its secularist nature is not compromised. It allows individual freedom of religion, but has no room for groups of a more collectivist orientation. It has no mechanism for coping with religious diversity, other than smothering it into one big melting pot and atrophying religious traditions until they fit its own particular definition of religious freedom. Individuals are free to practice their religion as long as it remains a personal, private matter without any public manifestations.

In contrast to secular states, Islamic states historically identified individuals by their religion and gave them complete freedom to adhere their religion in all of its manifestations, as long as they did not mock God's supremacy. Rather than perceiving religion as something personal or an individual spiritual matter, the Islamic state considered religion a very important part of one's identity. Accordingly, Islamic societies from the time of the Prophet onward were always composed of diverse religious and ethnic communities whose religious freedom was upheld as sacrosanct.[43] While European countries, at least up until the eighteenth century, were

reknown for their religious intolerance and persecution, the Islamic state always had a duty to defend its religious minorities from persecution.

Second, non-Muslims are concerned that Islamization is little more than a guise for Malay political-cultural-social dominance. This perception is held, despite the fact that there are millions of Chinese Muslims in the world and that, in theory, Islam fundamentally abhors any form of racism or communal sectarianism.[44]

While the intention behind linking Islam with being Malay may have been sincere in terms of strengthening Malay identity in the face of internal and external threats, as well as somewhat unifying the Malays, this particularistic approach to Islam has done a tremendous disservice to Islam's high ideals. For one, non-Muslims have felt alienated from the entire Islamization process and, consequently, it has tended to evoke negative and even hostile reactions among them. Any endeavor to establish an Islamic state is regarded as another attempt to impose Malay power.[45] This negative perception is reinforced further by the foreign media, although the local media have made some attempts to counteract such misperceptions.

With respect to the religious freedom of various ethno-religious communities, it has been noted that many individuals are looking for greater meaning in their life. Interestingly, while many non-Muslim minorities experiment with different religious forms, few non-Malays (particularly the Chinese) consider Islam as an alternative. Undoubtedly, this is due to the particularistic way Islam is packaged and presented in Malaysia. Even if a non-Muslim subscribes to Islamic ideals, conversion entails not only a change of religion, but also a change of ethnic identity. One needs only to look at the popular term for Muslim converts, *masuk melayu*, which literally means "to enter Malaydom or the Malay community," as proof of this fact.[46]

Ackerman and Lee confirm the above by asserting that,

> ... difficulties in converting to Islam are experienced by non-Malays who are not Muslims by birth, because they face ostracism from their families and respective communities, or because they are not easily accepted into exclusivist Islamic organizations and movements. There is a greater tendency for non-Malays to experiment with non-Islamic alternatives.[47]

Of course there are groups and individuals who have severely criticized such a particularistic approach and argued that there is no reason for a convert to change his or her culture or accept another culture as being superior. Islam merely requires modification in those areas that are contrary to its

ideals. Those aspects of culture that do not contradict Islamic ideals can be maintained and developed. This is why one encounters tremendous cultural diversity throughout the Muslim world, all of which is united by a common belief in One God.

Ridzuan Abdullah Wu, a Singaporean Chinese convert, emphasizes that Allah has no intention of making all people uniform in ethnicity, language, or culture. Accordingly, there is absolutely no reason for Muslims to attempt to forge a common culture when Allah, in His infinite wisdom, has chosen not to do so. A common Islamic culture is a framework of principles. The more Muslims are able to show that they are sincere in not seeking cultural domination through Islamic *da`wah*, the more receptive non-Muslims will be toward the message of Islam, without harboring suspicions that cloud their appreciation of the message.[48]

Instead of particularizing Islam, Malaysia should place greater stress on its universal principles, such as the one expressed in *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* (49:13).[49] According to Muhammad Abdul Rauf:

> Islam promotes decency, decent dress, sobriety and honor. Public expo-
> sure of female bodies, places of open gambling houses should not be
> encouraged to spread in a country whose state religion is Islam. These
> practices could have a damaging effect, and are not in the best interests of
> any of the racial or religious groups in the country. Islam inspired neigh-
> borliness, sympathetic understanding and sentiments which promote val-
> ues, ideals, unity and co-operation, that should extend beyond the Muslim
> brotherhood to those who are brothers in humanity, especially those who
> share territorial boundaries with Muslims.[50]

In order to alleviate non-Muslim fears about Islamization being a cover for Malay dominance, government policies that continuously stress the religious diversity of Islamic societies and the freedom of individuals to believe and practice the religion of their choice should be highly commended. That being said, greater efforts must be made to distinguish conversion to Islam from *masuk melayu*. These two are not, and should not be, considered synonymous. Such an approach will enable non-Muslims to become confident that they have a place in an Islamic society, whether they choose to continue to adhere to their own religious traditions or to explore Islam and/or convert. In both cases, their ethnic and cultural identities will not be compromised, although, in the case of conversion to Islam, some modifications may have to be made to specific cultural aspects that contradict Islamic tenets.

Third, some non-Muslims are particularly concerned about perceived restrictions on new non-Muslim religious buildings and cemeteries, especially since 1983, when it was agreed at a Chief Minister's conference to instigate controls over the apparently indiscriminate building of shrines and temples. Many non-Muslims felt that the allocation of land for churches and temples has been declining in recent years. Ackerman and Lee argue that any proposal to regulate non-Muslim places of worship is likely to exacerbate tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims.[51]

R. Thiagaraja, Honorable Secretary General of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism (MCCBCHS), has argued that the problem of building new places of worship is often caused by non-Muslims themselves, since they frequently do not know and/or follow the proper procedures. For example, instead of obtaining permission from government authorities, they start building a place of worship and then find out later on that the land was not designated for that purpose. Thiagaraja states that, generally, state governments do allocate land to non-Muslims, if and when the right procedures are followed.[52]

In response to this concern, former Prime Minster Mahathir Mohamad stressed the great sensitivities involved:

> Kuala Lumpur for example, is the capital of a country that is officially an Islamic country ... But if you look at Kuala Lumpur you see churches and temples, and sometimes more churches than you see mosques. But we are not particularly concerned about that. I think they have a right to have their places of worship, so long as it doesn't in any way disturb other communities. I mean if you put up a church in a community that is 90% Muslims, I think that is not going to be very well tolerated. Similarly I don't think Muslims should go and build a mosque in the middle of a Hindu community.[53]

Allocating new land for religious institutions is, to some extent, controversial, due to the religious communities' differing perceptions. For Muslims, one mosque is sufficient to cover a particular geographical area; however, other religious traditions have many sects and denominations. If each of them were to establish its own branch or religious institution in every area, there would be more religious institutions than people to fill such buildings. Therefore, controls were promulgated to ensure that a certain number of members existed in a particular area before a building could be erected.

Religious tolerance and accommodation in a pluralistic society is a give-and-take situation. While Islam permits non-Muslims to build institutions for their adherents, it should not reach the point that there are more non-Muslim religious institutions than people to fill them. Such a situation may lead to deteriorating social relations between Muslims and their non-Muslim counterparts, since Muslims may fear that non-Muslims intend to convert them in order to fill their religious institutions.

While some may argue that such concerns are based on paranoia, one only has to look to neighboring Indonesia to confirm any doubts. Although Muslims in Indonesia comprise nearly 90 percent of the population, in many areas, including the capital city of Jakarta, churches are far more visible than mosques. Christians have been renowned for indiscriminately building churches in the middle of a Muslim community and then using various means (e.g., distributing and donating food and money) to encourage Muslims to attend church and, subsequently, become Christians. This has led to Christian-Muslim tension and social unrest in the past few decades.[54] While it is one thing to allow religious freedom for minorities, it is quite another to allow religious domination.

A fourth contentious issue, which flared up in 1989, was a government prohibition on the use of 42 Arabic-derived Malay words by non-Muslims. Some of these prohibitory words included such Islamic theological words as *Allāh* (God), *salāt* (liturgical prayer), *bayt Allāh* (house or place of God), *Ka'bah* (the holy shrine in Makkah), and others. Many non-Muslims felt slighted by this ruling, since the government had encouraged the use of Bahasa Malaysia. Yet when they started to use the language, they were prevented from properly expressing their faith in appropriate Malay wording.[55] Some argued that the ruling cut off many of their youth, who had been educated in Malay from their respective religious traditions. After much discussion between the MCCBCHS and the government, the Ministry of Education ultimately reduced the number of prohibited words to four.[56]

Another language issue was the printing of Bibles in Bahasa Malaysia. As a result, Malaysian Christians and their colleges were forbidden to use the Bibles and theological textbooks printed in Indonesia, because of the similarities between Indonesian and Malay.[57] Ultimately, this issue was resolved by allowing the sale of Bibles in Bahasa Malaysia from Christian bookstores only.

In March 2003, the Malaysian government banned the Iban-language Bible,[58] which uses the word *Allāh* for God, warning that religious books in Malaysia should not touch on the sensitivity of other religions, especially

Islam. Shortly after the ban, acting Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi lifted the government's decision, since this "would spark anger in the Christian community" of Malaysia.[59] The community welcomed the announcement and perceived the government's decision as a victory for religious freedom.

An individual unfamiliar with proselytizing techniques in Southeast Asia might wonder why the use of Islamic religious terms by non-Muslims raises such concern. Again, one needs only to look to Indonesia to understand the sensitivities involved. According to Deliar Noer, Christians in Indonesia have imitated traditional Muslim practices in an effort to mislead Muslims into participating in their activities. The use of Islamic terminology has also been copied by Christians in Indonesia, in a manner that makes their supplication sound similar to a Muslim *du`ā'* (supplication). A few examples include *Allāh* (for God), *al-kitāb* (for the Bible) *bayt Allāh* (for a church), and *mi`rāj* (for the ascension of Jesus Christ).[60]

While freedom of expression goes hand-in-hand with freedom of religion, appropriating words from one religious tradition in an effort to deceive people into accepting another tradition oversteps the boundaries of religious freedom and enters the area of surreptitiousness. Undoubtedly, the intentions of the majority of non-Muslims who desire to use Malay religious terminology is to enhance their own religious understanding and, in general, that of their own religious communities. Nevertheless, there are always a few exceptions to the rule, exceptions that have the potential for igniting hostilities between various religious groups. As a result, the government has preferred to take preemptive measures.

A fifth non-Muslim concern is that non-Muslim religious instruction is not included in the school curriculum and can be held only outside school hours, while Islam is taught during school hours.[61] Instead of instruction in their own religion, non-Muslims are required to take a course on moral education.[62] Some non-Muslims have also expressed concern about what they perceive to be the increasing impact of the open or veiled introduction of Islamic content into compulsory subjects taught in public schools, while non-Islamic religions are completely neglected. The MCCBCHS recommends that all children, irrespective of their religion, be given religious instruction according to their own religion in all schools in the country.[63]

As far as the university level is concerned, in December 1990, the Ministry of Education proposed a course on Islamic civilization, culture, and morality. This course would be a compulsory subject in all educational institutions from kindergarten to universities. The proposal met stiff oppo-

sition from non-Muslims.⁶⁴ Tan Chee Khoon supported the idea, since he felt that it would be good for non-Muslims to know more about their country's official religion; however, he understood it to be a non-examination course. The problem was created when the course on Islamic civilization and morality was imposed as an examination course. It has already been introduced on that basis at the Universiti Kebangsaaan Malaysia (the National University in Malaysia).⁶⁵

In 1997, the Cabinet decided to introduce a new course in all public-sector institutions of higher learning called "Islamic and Asian Civilizations."⁶⁶ As far as the MCCBCHS was concerned, if the course were truly offered from a multi-civilizational perspective, then it would greatly assist in creating a better understanding of each religious community. Nevertheless council member Thiagaraja expressed concern that the Islamic civilizational aspect will include religious content, while the Asian civilizational content will not. The Council has also expressed concern that the course will be taught in a biased or dogmatic manner.⁶⁷

Sixth, some non-Muslims have expressed concern over amendments to the Penal and Criminal Codes, passed by the Malaysian Parliament in late 1982, which empowered the federal government to act against any religious group deemed to endanger public order. According to Ackerman and Lee, these amendments, which were intended to curb Islamic activities considered antagonistic to state interests, affect non-Muslims in the sense that legal changes were made within the context of the civil law.⁶⁸ This strengthens the government's hand in dealing with non-Muslim groups.

For example, the Internal Security Act (ISA) was used on October 27, 1987, when the government arrested more than 100 people on the charge of racial extremism.⁶⁹ In addition, it closed down three newspapers that had allegedly published articles contributing to racial tension. Those arrested included a broad spectrum of Malays and non-Malays: coalition and opposition politicians, academics, Chinese educators, church workers, and members of various public interest groups. The detainees were released over a 2-year period, and publication licenses were restored to the banned newspapers. The event that precipitated the arrests was an issue related to Chinese education, which inflamed Malay sentiments to a point almost matching those expressed on May 13, 1969.⁷⁰

For his part, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has made no secret of his use of the ISA to quell tension or hostile differences between religious groups:

We are very strict about people stirring up racial hatred in this country. If you stir up racial hatred, well, we have a weapon for that. We detain them. I think here we believe that it is for the general good of the many that counts, not the individual right to do what he likes. So you have to sacrifice your own freedom in the interest of the general good of the whole population. Therefore we don't allow people who like to stir up racial feeling in the country to do that freely.[1]

In the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the Malaysian government is quoted as saying that,

... multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual differences among Malaysians make open debate dangerous. The threat is from inside ... so we've got to be armed, so to speak. Not with guns, but with the necessary laws to make sure the country remains stable.[2]

Using the ISA has been a controversial policy instrument, one strongly criticized by both Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia, especially since it detains people without trial and can be abused.[3] The question that needs to be asked is where to draw the line? On the one hand, freedom of speech is a fundamental human right. But should it be an absolute human right? In a pluralistic society with different religions, ethnicities, languages, and cultures, the freedoms of speech and expression can be healthy, invigorating, and empowering, and can contribute to society's overall enrichment. However, they can become insolent, abusive, and offensive, and lead to the society's destruction if people overstep the boundaries. Often it is a judgement call or a question of perception: Do you give more freedom to the individual or to society at large? Due to the pluralistic nature of Malaysian society, the government prefers to maintain societal harmony at the expense of individual liberties. Conversely, many individuals may prefer to put their own personal liberty of speech before the harmony of the larger society.

Admittedly government control can be abused and misused and, at the same time, individual freedom may offend the sensitivities of other groups and disrupt a nation, as the Pauline Hanson case in Australia demonstrated.[4] Undoubtedly, the use of the ISA and the question of how to determine the delicate balance between individual freedom and that of the larger society will continue to be debated for some time to come, both in Malaysia and in many other countries.

Another concern raised by religious minorities relates to Islamic programming or influence in the national media, as well as media access time for their own religious programming. Olaf Schumann argues that the mass

media (e.g., television), which is more or less supervised by the government, is nearly void of any programs compiled by non-Muslim religious communities.[75]

As far as propagating non-Islamic religions via the national media is concerned, the Malaysian Federal Constitution clearly states that propagating non-Islamic religions is permissible, as long as it is not targeted at Muslims. Of course, non-Islamic religious programming on national broadcasting networks would be tantamount to proselytizing among Muslims and, as such, is unconstitutional. Accordingly, wide coverage is given to religious news and issues with a view of "enhancing unity and minimizing conflicts."[76]

It is noteworthy, however, that although non-Islamic *religious* programming is not permissible, Malaysian television is both multilingual and mutlicultural, offering a variety of movies, sitcoms, documentaries, and serials from the West and East in addition to locally produced programs that are primarily targeted at the indigenous Malay community. Anyone coming from North America, where there is continuous controversy surrounding a second language on the same broadcast station, can truly appreciate this effort at accommodating diverse tastes, languages, and cultures.

Schumman contends that in the past, non-Muslims had several opportunities to use educational, cultural, and other social institutions of their own choice that were free of particular Islamic characteristics. Accordingly, anyone who wanted to avoid being exposed to Islamic propaganda could easily find ways to do so. In his opinion, this openness has been considerably curtailed in recent years.[77]

What Schumann neglects to say, however, is that all religious communities cannot avoid being influenced by the western hegemony over mass media, especially due to the growing popularity of satellite television, and its subsequent role in transforming the tastes and attitudes of many people living in developing countries. He does not have a problem with people being exposed to illicit sex, excessive violence, the glamorization of drinking and drugs, or pop music singing about the pleasures of free love, since such programming is considered neutral and as having popular appeal. However, if the *adhān* (call to prayer) comes on for 30 seconds or a couple of 30-minute religious programs per week are on television, then that is cause for alarm. Secularism is the great "equalizer"; Islam is the tiger to be feared.

The question is: Does television, when devoid of religious content, truly promote equality or only the pretext of such? In neighboring Singapore, the

Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) attempts to be religiously neutral by not allowing any religious programming to be televised. However, in its intention to be fair, neutral, and just to all communities, programs that depict un-Islamic behavior, attitudes, and values are shown. Wu argues that while no religious teachings are propagated over television, existing religious values are frequently undermined by television programs promoting un-Islamic ideas. Furthermore, many foreign television networks are run mainly by non-Muslims who are unaware of, or insensitive to, the Muslim community's beliefs and aspirations. Their broadcasting often reflects a sense of bewilderment and contempt for the Islamic way of life.[78]

The argument that it is alright to be inundated with secular broadcasting, but not with programs adhering to religious values, is in itself a value-loaded judgment stemming from one's own particular worldview. In Malaysia, multireligious broadcasting is essentially a constitutional issue, derived as part of the "bargain" for non-Malay citizenship.[79] Having said that, constitutions are human documents that can always be changed.

Non-Muslims are also concerned about the restrictions placed on proselytization, particularly by non-Muslims to Muslims. In addition, some restrictions have been placed on missionaries and/or guest-speakers from overseas. While some particularly aggressive evangelical Christian groups (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses), may see this as a violation of their religious freedom, others (e.g., the Malaysian Hindu Sangam [MHS]) do not find such restrictions problematic at all. According to Thiagaraja, whenever the MHS wants to invite priests from overseas, they must first check the individual's background and then recommend his or her name to the immigration department. Overseas speakers are accepted on a case-by-case basis.[80]

While many accept the fact that Muslims cannot be proselytized, a more controversial question is whether Malays have the freedom to convert out of Islam. This question has taken on increased importance in recent years, in light of reports of increased Malay conversion to Christianity as a result of proselytization by Indonesian Christian immigrants. For the most part, however, Christian proselytization among Malaysia's Chinese and Indians communities continues to be more successful than that among Malays.[81]

Bert Breiner argues that a Malay's right to convert out of Islam was upheld by Malaysia's High Court on October 6, 1988, a high court judge Justice Anwar Bin Datuk Zainal Abdidin upheld an application for a *writ of habeus corpus* on behalf of Yeshua Jamaluddin, a Malay who converted to Christianity after studying at the Far Eastern Bible College in Singapore. Jamaluddin was arrested under the ISA even though it is not a crime for a

Malay to convert out of Islam under Malaysian law. The high court ruled that his arrest was inconsistent with Article 11 of the federal constitution (guaranteeing freedom of religion).[82]

According to Breiner, Malays who want to discard their Muslim identity are required to make a statutory statement to a *kadi* (a Muslim religious official) in order to free themselves of various Islamic obligations. He further argues that Malays are reluctant to convert for fear of losing their social and political privileges.[83] Historically, Breiner's latter argument does not hold true, for even prior to the implementation of special *bumiputra* rights and privileges (i.e., the colonial period), Malays were highly reluctant to convert out of Islam. As mentioned previously, Christian missionaries focused on the Indians and Chinese, simply because they were not having much success among the Malays.

Finally, many non-Muslims have called for establishing a department specifically devoted to non-Muslim affairs. While the government has not established a Department of Non-Muslim Affairs *per se*, it has enabled non-Muslims to have a greater say in the policy-making process via the establishment of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) on August 6, 1983. The council, which is run by volunteers and survives on donations, promotes understanding, mutual respect, and cooperation between people of different religions; studies and resolves problems affecting all interreligious relationships; and makes representations on religious matters, when necessary.[84]

In 1999, the government set up a Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) with the objective of promoting a better understanding and respect among different religious groups, as a well as an understanding of human rights in a multireligious society.[85]

After 9/11

On the one hand, it can be argued that non-Muslim fears of Malaysia becoming a constitutionally Islamic state have diminished somewhat since 9/11 and the more recent bombing in Bali (Indonesia) on October 12, 2002. This is largely because since these events, the Malaysian government has demonstrated its commitment to its own version of moderate Islam as well as preserving the current power structure by playing hardball with alleged Islamic militants and detaining suspects without trial under the ISA. In 2002 alone, the government detained more than 70 Islamic militants[86] suspected of belonging to the local Malaysian Mujahideen Group (KKM),

which has links to Jemaah Islamiah (JI or Islamic Assembly), an Indonesian group suspected of being involved in terrorism in Southeast Asia. To strengthen its political position even further, the Malaysian government has tried to associate the opposition party's (PAS) leadership with JI.[87] On an international level, it did not hesitate to extradite American terror suspect Ahmed Ibrahim Bilal to American authorities in October 2002. The American government's subsequent gratitude to Malaysia prompted its Malaysian counterpart to state that "9/11 has made the US see that it can learn a lot from Malaysia [in dealing] with terrorists."[88]

In addition to cracking down on alleged domestic and international militants operating in Malaysia, the country is intent on establishing a regional anti-terrorism training center that will concentrate on capacity building for the war on terrorism.[89] Moreover, it has joined forces with Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Brunei to combat the Islamic threat to regional political stability. Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines have signed a counter-attack treaty in Kuala Lumpur that seeks to strengthen border controls and share security information.[90] At the international level, in April 2002 Malaysia hosted a conference of 53 Muslim nations that was devoted to devising a common stand on terrorist issues.[91]

Despite government assurances of their freedom and security, many non-Muslims in Malaysia remain uncertain about their future in an Islamic country. Many firmly believe that "it was the Muslims who destroyed the WTC of New York, and it was they who were responsible for all disasters in the world."[92] Non-Muslim fears have been heightened by the fact that the Indonesian-based Jemaah Islamiya was accused of plotting terrorist acts in Southeast Asia in order to establish an Islamic super-state across Malaysia, the southern Philippines, and Indonesia.

Most of their uneasiness, however, has been fuelled by the international media, which, despite government crackdowns, continues to give the impression that Malaysia is protecting terrorists who are allegedly connected to the 9/11 carnage or has a critical link to some international terrorist network. Muzaffar states that "these reports are part of some mischievous attempt to plant certain ideas in the public mind [including non-Muslim minorities] about Malaysia and terrorism."[93]

Other Muslims have also expressed concern about the continuous connection between Islam and terrorism.[94] Even former Prime Minister Mahathir stated that,

> ... we are given the impression that Muslims are natural terrorists, [and]
> that Islam advocates irrational acts of terror. But Islam is against the
> killing of innocent people, which is, in the final analysis, what terrorism
> is about.[95]

Conclusion

This paper briefly examined the causes and manifestations of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia, some of its positive and negative effects on non-Muslim minorities, and non-Muslim minority concerns about the growing Islamic resurgence. It also provided an Islamic response to such concerns.

In addition, I showed that Islamic revivalism has made all religious communities more conscious of their own religious identity, a development that has had both positive and negative effects on Malaysian society. A greater Islamic consciousness at the personal, societal, and governmental levels has indirectly resulted in non-Muslims having greater religious choice than Muslims, since the behavior of non-Muslims is not always monitored in public as is Muslim behavior.

At the same time, this increased Islamic consciousness has led some religious minorities to be concerned about land allocations for their religious institutions, the use of Malay language in non-Muslim religious literature, media access for non-Muslim religious programming, limits on proselytizing, as well as the perceived Islamization of the government educational curriculum. Moreover, many minorities have expressed underlying fears about the extent to which their rights will continue to be protected in the event that Malaysia becomes an Islamic state.

The validity of the above concerns often depends on one's point of view. However, one point that can be agreed upon is that managing cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity is one of the largest challenges facing many countries in the twenty-first century, Malaysia included. The question that begs to be posed, however, is what is the best method or system for ensuring that both majority and minority religious groups have the freedom to profess and publicly practice their faith, while at the same time ensuring that social cohesiveness and harmony are maintained? The answer often depends upon the values of the society in question and its perspective on diversity in general, and religion in particular.

In Malaysia, the government has given preference to maintaining societal harmony at the expense of individual liberties. Although its use of such policy instruments as the ISA has been criticized by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, it has succeeded in creating relative stability. While each

religious group maintains its own separate distinct identity, the country has not disintegrated; rather, it has become a working model of "unity in diversity." In this respect, Khoo Kay Kim attests that:

> People of various ethnic [indeed] sub-ethnic groups, often divided by religious differences too, have tended to live in separate localities; they have in general avoided assimilation. They have founded separate schools; each established its own institutions, published separate newspapers and celebrated, annually separate festivals. Yet there has been no real fragmentation of the society.[6]

Perhaps the best recipe for accommodating religious pluralism and diversity is cultivating mutual respect and tolerance among all individuals and communities. Having said that, such mutual tolerance and respect is a two-way process. While religious minorities have rights, they also have a responsibility to respect the majority's religion. Ultimately, only time will tell in which direction the political winds will blow for Malaysia's Muslims and non-Muslims. Undoubtedly, each group will remain vigilant about protecting any real or perceived encroachment on its rights.

Notes

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11. Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence*, 20.
12. Claudia Derichs, "Politicizing Islam in Malaysia," *ISIM Newsletter* (March 2001): 13.
13. Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence*, 5.
14. Fred R. von der Mehden, *Religion and Modernization in Southeast Asia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 107. Also see Siddiq Fadil, "Islamic Movements in the '90s: Vision and Strategy in Malaysia," in *Modern Islamic Movements: Models, Problems and Prospects*, ed. Muhammad Mumtaz Ali (Kuala Lumpur: A. S. Noordeen, 2000), 218; and, Badlihusham Mohd. Nasir, "Islamic Movements in Malaysia: A Change and Challenge in the Post Islamic Resurgence Period," *Hamdard Islamicus* (Pakistan) 22, no. 1, (Jan.-Mar. 1999): 27-33.
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