The great transformation
Urbanisation and urbanism in Malaysia

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The census exercise of 2010 reported that the population of Malaysia stands at 28.3 million, an increase from 23.3 million in 2000. About 80 percent of the population currently resides in Peninsular Malaysia and the rest in the East Malaysian territories of Labuan, Sabah and Sarawak. The average growth rate of 2 percent for the period 2000–10 was lower than that of the previous censal period (1991–2000) of 2.6 percent, and indicates an overall decline in fertility and international migration rates. The age structure of the population also points toward an ageing population. Per the present trajectory, it is projected that by 2021, the population aged 65 years and over will have reached 7.1 percent, an increase of 2.1 percent from the 2010 level. This points to a trend faced by many developed nations, of the working age (15–64 years) population’s having to support an increasing old-age population.

The share of urban population has continued to increase as well, reaching 71 percent in 2010, compared with 62 percent in 2000 and 50.7 percent in 1991. The federal territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya both recorded 100 percent urbanisation. States with high levels of urbanisation include Selangor (91.4 percent), Pulau Pinang (90.8 percent) and Melaka (86.5 percent). Conversely, low urbanisation levels are found in Kelantan (42.4 percent), Pahang (50.5 percent) and Perlis (51.4 percent). Selangor continues to be the most populated state, with 5.4 million residents (19.3 percent of the country’s population), followed by Johor with 3.3 million and Sabah at 3.2 million. Putrajaya had the highest population growth, increasing by 17.8 percent between 2000 and 2010.

These demographic shifts reflect and drive changing patterns of settlement, with attendant political, social and cultural implications. While urban development in Malaysia is a comparatively recent phenomenon, it has not been monochromatic or unidirectional. This chapter considers both the evolution of forms of urban settlement in Malaysia and the policies and programmes that have most shaped life within.

Urbanisation in British Malaya

As elsewhere in the former outposts of European empires in Southeast Asia, the genesis of Malaysia’s long road to modernist urbanisation can be traced back to the advent of British colonial rule (e.g. Evers and Korff 2000; Rimmer and Dick 2009). Human settlements in the
pre-colonial milieu were predominantly coastal, riverine or port cities, of which the most prominent was Melaka (Malacca) during the Age of Commerce (Reid 1988). Swamps, dense tropical vegetation and the diverse variety of parasites these landscapes harbour were inhospitable to the forging of large settlements in the interior.

As British administrators progressively expanded their hold into the hinterland, they reconfigured indigenous land tenure practices in order to facilitate the opening up of ‘empty land’ for food cultivation and cash crop plantations (Jackson 1968; Lim 1977; Wong 1975) and large-scale tin mining. For these varied enterprises, a liberal migration policy was crafted in tandem to attract waves of cheap and skilled labour as well as an array of entrepreneurs and petty capitalists to support wealth extraction. These diverse migrants originated largely from various regions and provinces of China, India and Indonesia, and contributed to laying the demographic template for what colonial scholar-administrator John Furnivall has famously characterised as a ‘plural society’, premised on putative racial differences.

The British administrators also built an infrastructural network of transportation links, both rail and roads, to facilitate the creation of trading and commercial centres that were skewed along the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Kaur 1985; Lim 1978). The poly-chromatic ‘plural society’ described by Furnivall was most salient in large towns where various material, social and cultural imprints of Western modernity – like urban planning, architecture, education, entertainment, dressing, and so forth – took root and produced diasporic varieties of cosmopolitan aesthetics and sensibilities. In most cases, these thriving urban centres were demographically and commercially dominated by the Chinese, Indians and British, while the overwhelming majority of local and migrant Malays, as well as indigenous peoples (collectively grouped as the ‘Orang Asli’ by the British) resided in rural smallholdings and forested areas (see Kahn 2006). In places where these two modes of settlement co-existed spatially, royal centres, personified by sultans, were weakened, if not displaced by an emergent modernist urbanism. Before the advent of World War II, many of these towns were already thriving because of a buoyant trade in tin, rubber and other agricultural commodities; however, the ravages of war saw a significant temporary depopulation of many towns, as residents fled to the jungle, plantations and countryside for refuge and to escape Japanese atrocities.

Before independence in 1957, the largest urban population growth rate occurred between 1947 and 1957, when the government forcibly resettled around 600,000 persons – comprising mostly Chinese peasants – into hastily built, perimeter-fenced settlements situated close to existing towns in order to cut off the supply chain to an insurgent Communist Party intent on wresting control from the British through armed guerrilla conflict. Euphemistically called ‘New Villages’, these settlements, initiated under the Briggs Plan, resulted in a significant numerical jump in urban centres, then defined as gazetted localities with a population of 1,000 persons or more. A related effect was the migration of several thousand others to small towns to escape these securitised hamlets. Finding insufficient or unsuitable lodgings for their families, many turned to residing in existing or new squatter settlements on vacant private and public lands in and around town centres. Until recently, these illegitimate ‘squatter kampung’ or ‘urban villages’ have been an enduring feature of the Malaysian city/townscape.

Post-colonial urbanism and national development

Since independence in 1957, this residual colonial legacy of the geography, morphology and demographic growth of towns and villages has remained largely intact. In particular, the
spatial duality engendered between Malay and non-Malay citizens, and the socio-economic inequities this disparity embodies, has been a recurring narrative for post-colonial corrective social engineering.

In particular, two watershed policies have transformed the demographic and social fabric of urban centres in Malaysia. The first arose in the aftermath of the traumatic events of the ‘race riots’ of 13 May 1969, which erupted largely in various parts of Kuala Lumpur. In line with the interventionist ‘growth with distribution’ thrust of the New Economy Policy (NEP, 1971–90) and periodic Outline Perspective Plans (OPPs), the government exponentially stepped up its involvement in restructuring and managing the country’s economy, with the express purpose of increasing Malay economic and corporate interests, especially in the areas of private sector employment, business, mining and manufacturing. Moreover, Malays were encouraged to ‘modernise’ by seeking out better education, employment and business opportunities offered in the towns and cities, especially in the Klang Valley encompassing Kuala Lumpur. This push accelerated a rural–urban migratory pattern that had already begun since 1957 (Aitken and Leigh 1975: 548; see also Rimmer and Cho 1981).

The second watershed policy was promulgated after the formal end of the New Economic Policy in 1991. Although affirmative action policies for ethnic Malays and other bumiputera were not discarded, as NEP targets had not yet been realised, what was additionally introduced was an enticing trans-ethnic imaginary. With the catchphrase of Wawasan 2020 (‘Vision 2020’), Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad outlined a grand narrative of arriving at the status of a ‘fully developed’ and self-sufficient industrialised nation by the year 2020, via an intensification of key economic and social activities. For this collective goal to be achieved, Mahathir counselled the need for a more convivial inter-ethnic (and even trans-ethnic) cohesiveness, as suggested in the moniker ‘Bangsa Malaysia’ (Malaysian race), to address deteriorating inter-ethnic relations. At various urban centres, particularly in and around Kuala Lumpur, these disparate initiatives manifested themselves through several major infrastructural and mega-construction projects as well as populist appropriations of these slogans in local marketing strategies and everyday discourse.

Other trends have also impinged on the social and political character of contemporary urbanism in Malaysia. Beside flows of Western cultural forms, the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism in the oil-rich Middle East has tracked the rapid urbanisation of Malay-Muslims. That development has contributed to innovation in Islamic beliefs and practices, not all of them perceived to be theologically orthodox by state authorities. Many of the resultant sects and movements have been found in urban or semi-urban settings, and essentially seek to alleviate, if not provide alternatives to, the alienation of a putative secularised developmental path promoted by the state. The unsettling potential of some of these sects was recognised early by state authorities. Over the years, both repression and various counter-measures have been adopted. In particular, during the long tenure of Prime Minister Mahathir (1981–2003), a number of interlocking policy initiatives were developed to ‘Islamise government machinery’ as well as ‘Islamise Malaysian society’, through the establishment of an integrated network of legal, judiciary, financial and educational institutions operating in towns and cities throughout the country. Mahathir essentially believed that an Islamic modernism in the mould of Sunni orthodoxy was possible, and that returning to a ‘correctly understood Islam’, devoid of superstition and fatalism, would help Malay-Muslims address dilemmas of poverty and political subjugation (Schottmann 2013; cf. Peletz 2002).

In sum, the figure or persona of the ‘New Malay’ has been given particular traction since the advent of Wawasan 2020 (see Barker et al. 2014). At least two generations of urbanised Malay-Muslims of different social classes imbibing and articulating new ‘structures of feeling’
(Williams 1981) have emerged and are distinctively different from their rural and semi-urban forebears (e.g. Abdul Rahman 2001; Hoffstaedter 2011; cf. Thompson 2007). For some, however, especially non-Malay-Muslims, these varied but interlocking policies and trends have been perceived as supporting an ideology of triumphalist Malay-Muslim exceptionalism. They have also engendered, in response, a heightened sense of defensive or alternative cosmopolitan identity politics, especially salient in urban settings (e.g. DeBernardi 2004; Lee and Ackerman 1997; Mandal 2004; Willford 2006; Yeoh 2009).

**Wawasan 2020 and socio-spatial planning**

Since 1991, the constant refrain of achieving the coveted ‘fully developed’ nation status by the year 2020 has infused all subsequent Malaysia Plans. This discourse runs alongside older nation-building aspirations of balancing social and economic development across states and regions, and raising the standard of living and quality of life of citizens.

Even as recently as the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP, 2006–10), however, it was conceded that while all states had recorded economic growth and there was material improvement in both rural and urban areas, little headway had been made in achieving this objective. Regional disparities had, in fact, widened further. As a corrective, the strategy of developing trans-border areas across states was emphasised, in addition to giving attention to existing growth centres within states. These growth centres included not only specified urban conurbations, but also rural growth centres.

Consequently, the overall rate of urbanisation throughout Malaysia proceeded at a rapid pace, albeit unequally, in the first decade of the new millennium (Table 20.1). The Central Region – comprising the states of Melaka, Negri Sembilan, Selangor and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur – has generally experienced the highest rates. Discounting Kuala Lumpur, which has been fully urbanised since much earlier, the adjoining state of Selangor has drawn in the largest numbers of local migrants – including foreign workers – because of spillover opportunities derived from its proximity to the capital city of Malaysia (e.g. Azizah 2011). The contiguity of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor also accounts for the metropolitan sprawl extending in all directions from the former (e.g. Lee 1997; Brookfield 1994; Brookfield et al. 1991). In the Northern Region, Pulau Pinang continues to be the most urbanised state while the other states of Kedah, Perak, and Perlis lag far behind. The only state in the Southern Region, Johor, is expected to experience an acceleration of urbanisation with the ongoing development of the extensive Iskandar Malaysia (see below). Although the Federal Territory of Labuan in Sabah has a comparatively high rate of urbanisation, its land area and population are small. The island has attracted significant in-migration largely because of deep-sea gas and oil economic-based activities.

As noted above, by 2010, already 71 percent of the total population of Malaysia were estimated to reside in urban centres. Cognisant of this trend, the Eighth Malaysia Plan (8MP, 2001–05) had mooted the formulation of a comprehensive urbanisation policy. This proposal was reiterated in the 9MP. Subsequently, the National Urbanisation Policy (NUP) for Peninsular Malaysia was launched in 2006. Essentially, the NUP – and the broader, five-yearly National Physical Plan (NPP) launched the previous year – adopts a socio-spatial planning perspective, premised on the proposition that cities and urban centres play an optimal role as engines of economic growth in an era of capitalist globalisation (Sassen 1994; cf. Lefebvre 1991). It provides a basic framework for all subsequent development plans, enumerating six key thrusts and thirty policies covering various aspects of planning development, urban governance and management of townships. The key thrusts identified are:
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- an efficient and sustainable urban development;
- development of an urban economy that is resilient, dynamic and competitive;
- an integrated and efficient urban transportation system;
- provision of quality urban services, infrastructure and utilities;
- creation of a conducive liveable urban environment with identity; and
- effective urban governance.

The NUP also advocates for a rational urban hierarchy, so that the provision and distribution of facilities and infrastructure will be more efficient, with minimal wastage of national resources. The urban hierarchy comprises five distinct levels that correlate with current population sizes, zones extending beyond existing city/town administrative boundaries, and commuting times, with growth patterns over the past decade, namely, a National Growth Conurbation (Kuala Lumpur), three Regional Growth Conurbations (Georgetown, Johore and Kuantan), Sub-regional Growth Conurbations (Ipoh, Seremban), State Growth Conurbations and District Growth Conurbations.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 20.1</th>
<th>Population and urbanisation rate by state, 2000–10</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Population(a) (million)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Northern region</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kedah</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perak</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perlis</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulau Pinang</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Central region</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melaka</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negeri Sembilan</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selangor(^b)</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Southern region</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johor</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eastern region</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pahang</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terengganu</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabah</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilayah Persekutuan Labuan</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarawak</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Malaysia</strong></td>
<td><strong>23.49</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ninth Malaysian Plan, Table 17–5 (data from Economic Planning Unit and Department of Statistics).

Notes:

\(^a\) Population data refer to mid-year population.
\(^b\) Includes Wilayah Persekutuan Putrajaya.
To address perennial concerns with narrowing the rural–urban divide and promoting balanced regional development, earlier, private sector-led initiatives for developing growth corridors, regions and triangles, transcending state and national boundaries, were continued. For the first time, the Ninth Malaysia Plan also enabled the setting up of Regional Development Authorities in Sabah and Sarawak.

To date, the single largest development venture since the construction of the new urban centres of Putrajaya and Cyberjaya (King 2008; Bunnell 2006), and the first of its kind in the country, is the Iskandar Malaysia project, situated at the southern tip of peninsular Malaysia and close to important shipping lanes. Launched during the 9MP, the planned metropolis comprises five flagship development zones having a total area three times the size of neighbouring Singapore. Iskandar Malaysia is anticipated to be significantly financed by the private sector and foreign investments, drawn in by the multi-faceted infrastructural and lifestyle features of a master plan implemented by a single coordinating authority. In years to come, the scale and scope of this project promise to reconfigure urbanisation and investment patterns in the country.

The marked entrepreneurial thrust discernible in the making of Iskandar Malaysia metropolis is similarly salient in the Tenth Malaysia Plan (10MP, 2011–15). Moreover, in comparison to previous Malaysia Plans, the neo-liberal, globalist and urbanist aura of the 10MP is quite distinctive. Indeed, in the foreword to the plan, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak proposes that a ‘new approach, new enthusiasm and a new determination driven by the 1Malaysia spirit’ is needed to take the country to the next stage of development (Government of Malaysia 2010a: iii). The trope of ‘transformation’ is given prominence in the New Economic Model (NEM), which warns that despite being economically successful in the past, Malaysia is at risk of being ‘caught in the middle-income trap’ and overtaken by other countries because of increased competition (Government of Malaysia 2010a: 5). To transition to high-income status, it is proposed that the structure of the country’s economy be substantially altered. This translates to developing far more investor-friendly policies and shifting away from ethnicity-based to merit-based affirmative action policies. The NEM has two interlocking prongs. The Government Transformation Programme (GTP) aims at morphing the Malaysian government into an efficient and rakyat (people)-centred institution, via the delivery of measurable outcomes in the shape of National Key Result Areas (NKRAs) – reducing crime, fighting inflation, improving urban public transport, improving student outcomes, and so forth. By comparison, the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) outlines a road map to double the current gross national income per capita, to around US$15,000 by 2020, largely through attracting US$444 billion in investments and creating 3.3 million new jobs. Repeatedly, the private sector has been identified as a major engine of growth for the national economy.

Greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley and urban complexity

As noted earlier, the 9MP created economic development corridors. An innovation under the 10MP was to channel more resources to specific clusters, like cities and towns within these corridors. In this futuristic scenario, Greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley (Greater KL/KV), covering ten municipalities, has been identified as being the only geographically specific National Key Economic Area (NKEA) of the ETP. The remaining eleven NKEAs are in the shape of sectors – namely, oil and gas, palm oil and related products, wholesale and retail sales, tourism, information and communications technology, education, electrical and electronics, business services, private healthcare, and agriculture. Greater KL/KV is geographically smaller than the Kuala Lumpur Conurbation identified in the NUP, as it concentrates on
high-density economic agglomerations, including important sites like the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. In 2010, it was estimated that Greater KL/KV comprised about 20 percent of the national population, generated 30 percent of the nation’s gross national income and contributed about eight times the gross domestic product of any other geographic cluster in the country (Figure 20.1).

Since the launch of the 10MP and ETP, there has been a discernible beehive of activities unleashed in the capital city. Most visible have been construction works on the public transportation system of the city (‘a rakyat-centric public transportation system’), in order to improve connectivity and mobility as well as reduce traffic congestion woes stemming from heavy private vehicular usage. An entity, ‘InvestKL’, has been created to focus specifically on attracting substantive foreign investment to transform the city into a financial services centre of global repute. Human capital is also seen as crucial to this venture. In competing for highly skilled foreign talent, the aesthetic discourse of a world-class, artistically vibrant and liveable city has increasingly been foregrounded. Tourism remains a significant source of revenue. Besides shopping, the usual itinerary includes visits to iconic sites in and around Kuala Lumpur. The logic of the tourist gaze and place marketing have seen hitherto ethnically mixed places in well-established parts of the city rebranded into easily recognisable heritage enclaves (see Yeoh 2009). Moreover, leveraging on a tourist marketing slogan popularised

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic clusters</th>
<th>USD million</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
<td>74,778</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johor</td>
<td>9,372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulau Pinang</td>
<td>8,871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuching</td>
<td>7,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ipoh</td>
<td>5,726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seremban</td>
<td>5,373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuantan</td>
<td>3,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kota Kinabalu</td>
<td>2,908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandakan</td>
<td>2,443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alor Setar</td>
<td>2,384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuala Terrengganu</td>
<td>2,038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kota Bharu</td>
<td>869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perlis</td>
<td>447</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 20.1  Kuala Lumpur contributes eight times the GDP of any other geographic cluster in Malaysia

Source: Tenth Malaysian Plan, Chart 3–19 (data from World Gazeteer, Department of Statistics Malaysia).

since 1999, a ‘Malaysia, Truly Asia Centre’ themed attraction park, controversially sited on one of the few remaining green spaces of the city, is being planned.8

Arguably, much of the aforementioned activity is an extension and consolidation of earlier spatial cleansing, beautification and gentrification initiatives during Mahathir’s premiership, with the large-scale clearance of long-established squatter kampong, the acquisition of private land for urban redevelopment and the construction of several impressive and iconic structures like the Bukit Jalil Sports Complex and the Petronas Twin Towers in order to position Kuala Lumpur (and by extension, Malaysia) prominently on the global map (Yeoh 2014a; cf. Roy and Ong 2011).9 Subsequently, smaller-scale versions of this urban planning discourse have been imitated and replicated in urban centres throughout the country. These ventures have been especially lauded by investors and property developers as desirable signs of ‘development’ and ‘progress’.

Like other Asian metropoles, Kuala Lumpur offers the promise of greater freedom and upward mobility. Nevertheless, for many, it is also a place where these hopes have not readily materialised and, instead, where social and economic inequities have further deepened. This is because, as is implicit in all the plans discussed, modernist urbanisation is essentially characterised by its residents being segregated and dispersed according to rationalised social relations of production and consumption, resulting in urban spaces being differentiated by a social and economic hierarchy (e.g. Lefebvre 1991). At an architectural level, this is reflected by the once comparatively bare Kuala Lumpur skyline increasingly being marked by monolithic, high-density skyscrapers priced on a graduated scale based on location, floor space, quality of design, construction materials and range of in-house services available. Consumption habits and shopping lifestyles have similarly morphed. Expansive shopping malls and precincts featuring foreign cuisine, chain stores, health spas and entertainment are the preferred leisure destinations for an expanding middle class (see also Abdul Rahman, this volume). Ironically, where they exist, local cuisines are rebranded in a nostalgic register in these complexes. The staff servicing the customers are typically foreign migrant workers hailing from the Southeast Asian and South Asian regions.

Among those who have had to make way for these structures or are not able to partake of these luxuries, feelings toward ‘development’ are understandably more ambivalent. For instance, demolishing long-established squatter kampong and relocating their residents into high-rise and cramped, public or private, low-cost housing has not automatically alleviated urban poverty. Instead, by contrast to middle-class and elite condominiums, the sub-standard construction quality and poor maintenance of many of these structures have meant that living conditions in them often approximate the ambience of vertical slums. Moreover, for a city that boasts of having ‘First World’ facilities, detractors also decry the ubiquitous sight of homeless people, many of whom are aged or have children, sleeping rough under elevated highways and on sidewalks. Several humanitarian civil society and religious groups have responded by setting up soup kitchens and night hostels to supplement the local government’s efforts. For underclass youths, the increasing costs of city life, lack of job opportunities, material deprivation and sense of discrimination have also inclined them to join gangs engaged in street crimes, burglaries, extortion, human trafficking and illegal money-lending. Although police statistics claim otherwise, reports of bag snatching, hold-ups and robberies of automated teller machines at banks have become staple everyday news.

Ethno-religious demographic shifts in Kuala Lumpur have altered the texture of cosmopolitan urbanism. Although Kuala Lumpur has been labelled as a ‘Chinese town’ ever since its genesis in the middle of the nineteenth century, the 2010 census indicates that Malays (44.7 percent) have now slightly overtaken Chinese (43.2 percent) as the majority ethnic group in
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the city. This has meant that more surau (Muslim prayer rooms) and mosques have been built to cater to Muslims’ religious and spiritual needs. The periodic azan (call to worship) now punctuates city soundscapes, even in religiously mixed areas. Conversely, there have been incidents of fractious debates (especially over the Internet) when Muslim residents have objected to ‘religious noise’ produced by non-Muslims during temple festivities held in mixed neighbourhoods. In accordance with Syariah laws, Islamic religious authorities have conducted regular moral policing raids to weed out Muslims suspected of practising haram (religiously not permissible) activities like consuming alcohol or being in close physical proximity with a person of the opposite sex who is not one’s spouse (khalwat) (e.g. Lee 2010). More recently, Muslims have also been advised by fatwa (learned opinions) from some ulama (religious teachers) not to observe Valentine’s Day or practise yoga because of the non-Muslim origins and putative hostility to Islam of both (e.g. Yeoh 2014b). The intensity of surveillance activities, however, does suggest that urbanised Malay-Muslims in Kuala Lumpur (and by extension, other major cities) are not a homogeneous or easily manageable political entity. This finding is corroborated by voting patterns in the general election of May 2013. Among other reasons, it is evident that the face-to-face experience of living in an ethno-religiously complex, cosmopolitan and globalised city space like Kuala Lumpur produces emergent Malay-Muslim subject positions.

Conclusion

Unlike for extant ancient cities in the Southeast Asian region, urbanisation in Malaysia is of comparatively recent vintage. The creation and maintenance of towns during the colonial period was premised on the political economy of wealth extraction for the metropolitan centre. In the post-colonial milieu, these same centres and their hinterlands have been re-mapped and recalibrated in terms of achieving a ‘balanced regional development’ for the sake of ‘national harmony’ and ‘progress’. In the context of deeper regional and global connectivity wrought by transnational capitalist expansion over the last three or four decades, however, these aspirations are being challenged and mediated by contemporary urbanisation (and urbanist) trends that are tightly tethered to trans-local forms, flows and processes. Rather than having to urbanise simply because of economic necessity, this pathway has been a deliberate choice and strategy pursued by visionary political leaders, supported by the captains of industry, desirous of raising the nation’s status onto a global stage. The opening up of the country in ways reminiscent of the entrepreneurialism of the colonial period will no doubt once again transfigure the spaces and sociality of its residents. Not surprisingly, these transformations will be felt most intensely in the network of large urban centres, old and new, that dot Malaysia.

Notes

1 All figures cited are from Department of Statistics 2011.
2 It was observed that British Malaya had an ‘unusual degree of urbanisation for a country where half the working population is engaged in agriculture and with very minor industrial development’ (Cooper 1951: 118). Between 1911 and 1970, urban growth in the peninsula outstripped the growth rate for the total population (Aiken and Leigh 1975: 546).
3 This definition was adjusted with the 1970 census to 10,000 persons and above, then again with the 1991 census to reflect a more realistic level of urbanisation. Inter alia, ‘urban areas’ are gazetted areas and their adjoining built-up areas have urban characteristics and a combined population of 10,000 persons or more.
4 For a recent critical evaluation of the achievements of the New Economic Policy, see the collection edited by Edmund Terence Gomez and Johan Saravanamuttu (2013).
Conurbations are demarcated according to travel times from employment centres of core cities. For main conurbations, this would be forty-five minutes and for other conurbations, thirty minutes. See http://pemandu.gov.my/gtp (accessed 3 October 2013).


8 Surveys conducted in the late 1960s and 1970s had revealed that up to one-third of Kuala Lumpur’s resident population was made up of ‘squatters’. While a more explicit ‘anti-squatter policy’ took gradual shape from the late 1970s, it was only during the economically buoyant 1990s that a ‘squatter-free city’ discourse became normalised, in line with aspirations for a ‘World Class city’.

Bibliography


