Interfaith relations in Malaysia
Moving beyond Muslims versus ‘others’

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Due to its favourable location on trade routes stretching across Asia, Peninsular Malaysia has long been a point of contact among civilisations and belief systems. Since the height of the Srivijaya empire, from the seventh to thirteenth centuries, the region has served as an entrepôt, or an international trade centre, where peoples from diverse religious and cultural traditions have met.

The presence of Muslim traders, and Melaka’s first sultan’s embrace of Islam in the fourteenth century, quickly led to the adoption of Islam by most ethnic Malays inhabiting the peninsula (López 2001). While Chinese and Indians have travelled to the Malayan peninsula throughout its history, their numbers increased greatly under British rule, profoundly changing the demographic makeup in the region (Table 26.1). The British brought thousands of Chinese immigrants to work in commerce, tin mines and commercial agriculture, while Indians came to labour on estates and rubber plantations, with others serving in the colonial government.

Fifty-nine years later, demographic data from the 2010 census indicated that the total population of Malaysia had reached 28.3 million, of whom 67.4 percent are Malays, 24.6 percent Chinese, 7.3 percent Indians and 0.7 percent ‘others’ (Table 26.2). These figures show an 18 percent increase since independence in the percentage of Malays comprising the total population, with a corresponding 13.8 percent decrease among Chinese, a 3.3 percent decrease among Indians and a 0.7 percent decrease in those categorised as ‘others’.

Table 26.1 Ethnic breakdown in Malaya, 1951

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population in Malaya – 1951</th>
<th>Population of Malaysia 5,317,222</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>49.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
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<td>Other</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
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In terms of religion, Malays are required by law to be Muslim, while ethnic Indians, Chinese and others are free to choose their religion, and to convert to a different religion if they so desire. The 2010 Census reports that 61.3 percent of the population identified themselves as Muslim, 19.8 percent as Buddhist, 9.2 percent Christian and 6.3 percent Hindu; another 1.3 percent fall into the category of ‘Confucianists, Taoists, or practitioners of other traditional Chinese religions’, 1 percent are of unknown religions, 0.7 percent are listed as non-believers and 0.4 percent are followers of ‘other religions’, a category that includes small numbers of Sikhs, Baha’i and Animists, among others (Table 26.3).

The present chapter examines interfaith relations in Malaysia and the often undiscussed structural factors which underpin inter-ethnic and interfaith relations in the country. It ends with the author’s musings about the great potential Malaysia has to become an example of positive interfaith relations for multicultural societies around the world.

The legal regime and its possible impacts on interfaith relations

Article 3 of the Federal Constitution establishes Islam as the religion of the federation, while allowing other religions to be practised ‘in peace and harmony’ in all parts of the federation. This legal proclamation grants Islam the central position within the structures of the nation, implicitly placing other faith traditions at the margins of state power.

Constitutional Article 11(1) grants all people the right to profess and practise their religion, while Clause 4 declares that any religion other than Islam should not be propagated among Muslims. Article 153 grants Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak, collectively known as bumiputera, a ‘special position’, with quotas giving Malays privileged access to
federal public service positions, to federal scholarships and support, to trade or business licences, and to enrolment in public tertiary education.

Article 160 of the Malaysian constitution defines ‘a Malay’ as ‘a Malaysian citizen born to a Malaysian citizen who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and is domiciled in Malaysia’. People fitting this description are accorded the privileges granted to Malays and other bumiputera under Article 153 above, instated through the New Economic Policy (NEP), then National Development Policy (NDP) (see Hwok-Aun Lee, this volume). A Malay who converts out of Islam is no longer considered a Malay; therefore, his or her privileges granted under these affirmative action policies are revoked. Conversely, a non-Malay citizen of Malaysia who converts to Islam can claim bumiputera privileges.

It is noteworthy that the constitutional definition of ‘a Malay’ is based entirely on cultural constructs – which can be adopted by others. Nakamura (2012) writes that this open and non-racialised definition allows for others to masuk Melayu (become Malay), effectively increasing the numbers of ‘Malay’ Muslim citizens vis-à-vis those labelled as non-Malay and/or non-Muslim. That said, the construct ‘Malay’ has come to carry increasing weight within the Malaysian polity.

**Policy shift in the wake of the 1969 race riots**

In the 1969 general election, parties opposing bumiputera privilege gained enough seats for the ruling Alliance to lose its two-thirds majority in parliament. After the election, they organised a victory celebration during which they allegedly hurled insults at the Malay community. In response, UMNO youth held a parade which turned into inter-ethnic rioting in which scores of people were killed or injured (Kua 2007).

Shortly thereafter, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman resigned his post, after which Tun Abdul Razak assumed the premiership. One of Abdul Razak’s first acts was to enact the NEP (1971–90), which aimed to ensure that a 30 percent share of the economy was in the hands of ethnic Malays. Although the NDP succeeded the NEP in 1991, privileges granted to Malays through the NEP remained largely intact. The NDP granted further privileges aimed at helping Malays become successful entrepreneurs. Among these was the stipulation that all publicly listed companies must have 30 percent Malay equity. Additional privileges include discounts on purchases of automobiles and housing. In addition, government bids are to be given to Malay-owned businesses. In this last case, it is often the Malays who are primary owners in a company, while their Chinese associates are the ones with the means and the business acumen to ensure that contracts received are successfully fulfilled (see also Varkkey, this volume).

In short, particularly since the introduction of the NEP in 1970, Malaysia’s legal and policy framework has reified a long-standing ‘special position’ for bumiputera. While operationalised initially largely in economic terms, that position has developed along cultural and religious lines, as well.

**Racialisation and ‘othering’ as the backdrop to interfaith relations in Malaysia**

While science shows that there is no physiological basis for the notion of ‘race’, in Malaysia it is a socially constructed ‘reality’ into which the country’s citizens are socialised from the time they are born. The existing legal regime places bumiputera – specifically Malays – as the default
‘race’, creating a juxtaposition of ‘us’ and ‘other’ in which non-Malay Malaysian citizens constitute ‘others’. Since Malays are constitutionally defined as Muslims, Islam becomes the default religion, with all other faith traditions juxtaposed as ‘others’. Boundaries constructed between an ‘us’ and a collective ‘other’ set the foundation for tensions and potential conflict if the default group fears that ‘others’ desire a larger share of the collective pie or may ask for constitutional and legal equality as citizens. The socially constructed narrative of a default Malay ‘race’ whose religion is Islam provides a powerful tool for political and economic interests to use at will. Just as these notions are embedded in the country’s legal structures, they are also deeply imprinted within both the individual and the collective Malaysian psyche. This socio-political arrangement must be pointed out if the reader is to make sense of interfaith relations in the country.

To illustrate, Nur Farhana and Khadijah state:

it cannot be denied that there are a number of examples of tolerance from believers of other religions towards Muslims and vice-versa. Without tolerance, the common relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims will complicate the effort in building a harmonious life in Malaysia.

(Nur Farhana and Khadijah 2013: 87)

The authors then surmise that problems among Malaysia’s religions arise due to ‘deep rooted prejudice between two sides; Muslims and Non-Muslims’ (Nur Farhana and Khadijah 2013: 88; emphasis added). The analysis first categorises all of Malaysia’s non-Muslims as a monolithic ‘other’. It then purports to examine how this ‘other’ relates with the Muslim population. So instead of a multi-sided approach to dialogue among citizens of different faith traditions, the thinking is that of ‘us’ vis-à-vis a monolithic ‘other’. These authors are academics involved in interreligious dialogue, yet it is unlikely that the operational assumptions illustrated here will lead to an understanding of the many traditions lumped into the collective ‘other’ designation, as multiple differences are rendered invisible by the mode of thought applied by the analysts.

Within the broader context discussed above, the following section examines some of the more salient incidents of interfaith conflict which have occurred since the May 1969 riots.

Recent incidents of interfaith conflict

For the sake of brevity, the ensuing summaries of both conflicts and efforts at collaboration constitute simple snapshots when, in reality, each incident mentioned involves complex dynamics and contestation, with moments of collaboration found within the conflicts, and vice versa.

Banning and seizure of Alkitab

The Malay-language (Bahasa Melayu) version of the Bible, the Alkitab, has been used in Malaya since before the British colonial period, having been first published in 1612 (News.va 2013). In addition, Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian-language) translations are utilised mainly in Sabah and Sarawak, and by some Malay-speaking Christians on the peninsula. Use of the Bahasa Bible was first outlawed in independent Malaysia under the Internal Security Act (Prohibition of Publications, Number 4) in March 1982. Two other Bahasa-language versions of the New Testament were later banned in 1983, after being deemed prejudicial to the
national interest; however, the bans were generally not enforced until much later, apart from occasional confiscations. While seizure of the Christian Holy Book is not new, in 2010 Customs impounded 35,000 Bibles imported from Indonesia, which they released the following year. When Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak launched his Global Movement of Moderates in 2012, Christian groups urged him to revoke the outdated bans issued under the now defunct Internal Security Act, alleging that said prohibitions run counter to the image of religious ‘moderation’ which Malaysia desires for the world to see (Chong 2012).

The Kampung Medan incident

From 8 to 11 March 2001, violent clashes raged in Kampung Medan, in Petaling Jaya, Selangor between Malay-Muslims and ethnic Indians, mostly of the Hindu faith. The official death toll was six, with more than forty treated in hospital for injuries. The vast majority of the dead and injured were working-class Indians. Malays said they acted in retaliation when an irate Indian man kicked at wedding party chairs and tables placed under a tent blocking the street as the Malays prepared for a wedding *kenduri* (celebratory meal). The man was reportedly angry because the *kenduri* obstructed a Hindu funeral procession. Armed with machetes, sticks, swords and iron rods, Malay youths reportedly roamed the streets, setting upon Indians. A neighbourhood woman who prefers not to be named reports that she and others were prevented by the Malay-Muslim police from coming to the aid of an Indian man, Mr Muniratnem, who was beaten to death by a gang of enraged youths (Chandran 2002). Concerning official response to the incident, Prasana Chandran (2002) writes:

> The government has been accused of denying the racial dimension of the clashes, perhaps concerned over Malaysia’s international image as it might rattle investor confidence. Until today, despite numerous memoranda sent to the Prime Minister’s Department and the Human Rights Commission, there has not been a show of a response.

Lina Joy

Born in 1964, Azlina Jailani, the daughter of Javanese Muslim parents, converted to Christianity at the age of twenty-six. The Federal Court approved her request to change her name to Lina Joy; however, the application she submitted to have ‘Muslim’ taken off her identity card was rejected on the grounds that she was not authorised to renounce Islam. The three Muslim Federal Court judges presiding over her case were Tun Ahmad Fairuz, Sheikh Abdul Halim and Datuk Alauddin Mohd. Sheriff. They ruled that Lina Joy – now a Christian – must present her case before the *Shari’a* Court. Lina feared that in doing so, she would likely be sent to an Islamic rehabilitation centre, where she would be pressured to give up her new faith and re-embrace Islam. She appealed the Court’s decision, and in May 2007 the case was closed with the definitive rejection of her appeal. Given the angry responses to media reports of her conversion, Lina was forced to go into hiding.

Cow’s head

In July 2009, scores of Muslims marched with a bloodied cow’s head from a mosque to the Selangor chief minister’s office in protest against the state government’s authorisation for the construction of a Hindu temple in an area where Muslims reside. Some of the protestors...
stomped and spat on the head, while making angry speeches against the planned temple construction. These behaviours deeply offended the Hindus, since the cow is the most sacred animal in Hinduism. While twelve of the leaders of the protest were fined, the state government heeded their desire and chose a new site for building the temple. This incident served to highlight frustrations among non-Muslims about ongoing restrictions on non-Muslim places of worship. Some Hindu leaders considered the sentences very light, given the deep insult to their religion, adding that, had the Hindus been less mature in their response to the Muslims, these actions could have caused a riot (Fox News 2010).

The 2009 Allah ruling and subsequent attacks on places of worship

In 2009, the Federal Court ruled that Christians have the right to use the Arabic word Allah to refer to God in their church newspaper, in sacred scriptures and in worship. After the ruling, eleven attacks were reported on churches in the Klang Valley. Twice in 2010 and again in 2012, severed pig heads were placed outside mosques, causing deep offence to Muslims, who deem pigs unclean. No arrests have been made, leading many to question who the perpetrators are. Member of Parliament Chua Tian Chang declared these incidents to be politically motivated provocations which aimed to cause tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. He called for people ‘not to fall into the trap and to, instead, remain calm’ (Yow 2012). This issue has persisted up to the time of writing.

Spitting out the host

In March 2010, Attorney-General Abdul Gani Patail dropped charges against two Al-Islam Magazine journalists who took Holy Communion in an attempted sting operation at a Catholic church they were investigating to see if Muslims were being converted to Christianity. Upon receiving Holy Communion, they spat out the host, photographed it and uploaded it to the magazine’s website. This caused deep offence among the Catholic community, with the archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, Rev. Tan Sri Murphy Pakiam, saying that the men had desecrated the church with their actions, and that he feared that the lack of charges appeared to legitimise their behaviour. Abdul Gani stood his ground, however, stating that the undercover journalists had unintentionally offended Catholics out of sheer ignorance. The journalists reported that they found no evidence of illegal conversion of Muslims at the church (BBC News 2012).

Johor Mufti’s Department and Ministry of Education seminar

With interreligious tensions on the increase, in March 2012, the Johor Mufti’s Department and state Department of Education sponsored an official seminar, originally titled ‘Strengthening the Faith, the Dangers of Liberalism and Pluralism and the Threat of Christianity towards Muslims. What Is the Role of Teachers?’ The name was eventually changed to ‘Strengthening the Faith: What Is the Role of Teachers?’ Nonetheless, the content taught was not modified to suit the new title. When asked, the director of the Johor Department of Education, Mohd. Nur Abdul Ghani, stated that the programme was aimed at strengthening the faith of Muslim teachers who will, in turn, teach the same to Muslim students. Here again, the situation is framed as ‘us’ – the Muslim community, which is faced with a purported threat – versus a Christian ‘other’, and the topic is used as a means of strengthening the faith of Muslims (Malaysia Chronicle 2012). To the author’s mind, this is a very telling example of the state of interfaith relations in Malaysia.
A commemoration requiring ritual sacrifice

During Hari Raya Qurban in October 2013, several schools were reported to have slaughtered cows on public school grounds during school hours. The deputy president of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) pointed out that cow-slaughtering is a sensitive issue, given the Hindu students present in the schools. The MIC president later added that cows could be slaughtered in mosques and surau, but that this activity on public school grounds was upsetting to non-Muslim students, particularly to those of the Hindu faith. No other actions were taken (Alyaa 2013).

Court overrules Christians’ right to use the name ‘Allah’

Shortly after the 2009 decision allowing Christians to use the name Allah, the Home Ministry filed an appeal to have the decision overturned. Six Islamic religious councils were allowed to join the appeal. On 14 October 2013, the three presiding (Muslim) judges ruled that non-Muslims in Malaysia will no longer be allowed to call God by His Arabic name, Allah (BBC News 2013). The editor of the Catholic Herald newspaper, Father Lawrence Andrew, responded that Christians would continue to worship Allah in their Bahasa services. In response, Subang UMNO President Datuk Zein Isma Ismail called for Fr. Lawrence to be charged with treason and stripped of his citizenship. At the time of writing, the inspector general of police had taken Fr. Lawrence in for questioning to decide whether he would be charged with sedition. Those against Fr. Lawrence argue that continuing to use the word Allah constitutes disrespect to the Malay sultans, who have symbolic authority over matters of the Islamic religion, while others argue that the Islamic authorities have no jurisdiction over non-Muslims. The outcome of the investigation has yet to be revealed.

JAIS raids Bible Society of Malaysia

On 2 January 2014, Selangor Islamic Religious Department (Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, JAIS) officers, accompanied by two policemen, raided the premises of the Bible Society of Malaysia (BSM), seizing 320 copies of the Bahasa-medium Bible and ten copies of the Iban Bible. BSM President Lee Min Choon and office manager Sinclair Wong were arrested and later released on bail. The Selangor state government has claimed that the raid was legal, and that no action will be taken against JAIS or the accompanying police officers. Others consider the raid illegal since JAIS should have no jurisdiction over non-Muslims. Furthermore, the officers had no search warrant, nor do they hold the right to seize items. As of this writing, it appears that no action will be taken against the raiding officers.

Interfaith collaboration: a sampling of civil society initiatives

The author believes that ordinary Malaysians of all ethnic backgrounds want to live in peace with one another. Day-by-day, relatively peaceful co-existence prevails in the country despite the actions of the few who seem to find inter-communal tensions to be desirable. While everyday acts of neighbourliness go undetected because they are the norm, the following section will focus on organised civil society initiatives aimed at nurturing positive interfaith relations in the country. The proliferation and continuity of interfaith organisations and activities suggest that the divisive attitudes and actions mentioned in the section above reflect the position of a minority, rather than of the majority of Malaysians.
Interfaith relations in Malaysia

Interfaith Spiritual Fellowship

The Interfaith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF) is one of the country’s oldest interfaith movements and is housed at the Hindu-run Pure Life Society. The idea for INSaF was first mooted by Swamiji Satyananda shortly after World War II. Having gained the approval of the Registrar of Societies, the organisation was officially launched as the Malaysian Council for Interfaith Cooperation (MCIC) on 3 November 1958, with Dato’ Zainal Abidin bin Haji Abas serving as its first president. Later, under the presidency of Sardar Singh, the MCIC took the name Interfaith Spiritual Fellowship, which it retains to this day. In 1999, Dr Amir Farid bin Dato’ Ishak assumed the presidency of INSaF – a position that he retains at the time of writing. INSaF welcomes members of all faith traditions to work together for the greater good of Malaysia and the world. Faith traditions represented include Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism and Christianity, among others. Activities promoted by INSaF include dialogue sessions aimed at helping people see the interests, values and concerns they share with others, such as raising children in today’s world, identifying common threads among sacred texts, promoting understanding among diverse communities, and organising activities for the greater common good.

Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism

Created in 1983, the Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST) acts as a liaison body for Malaysia’s non-Muslim faith communities as they strive for more open dialogue and collaboration among the faith traditions. At the time of its creation, the MCCBCHST invited representatives of Islam to become part of the council; however, the leaders of the day chose not to participate. Representatives of the non-Muslim faith traditions decided to form the organisation nonetheless.

Recently, the MCCBCHST has pointed out to government authorities that religious places and people who worship there have become targets of criminal attacks. They have asked for official intervention to ensure that worshippers of all faiths may come to and go from their places of worship in safety. In 2012, the MCCBCHST put forth an initiative requesting that the Ministry of Education allow all religions to teach their holy scriptures in national and government-aided schools to children from their respective traditions. They have requested permission for the authorities from each religion to prepare and grade exams which would be recognised by both the Ministry of Education and the Department of Education. At the time of writing, the official decision of the nation’s authorities is unknown to the author.

Taiping Peace Initiative

The city of Taiping, Perak is known as the City of Everlasting Peace. The Taiping Peace Initiative (TPI) was launched on 20 January 2001, pronouncing a vision of living in ‘internal peace, social peace and environmental peace’ on a daily basis. The TPI works with government agencies, the business sector and civil society with the aim of instilling these values. Its scope is local, national and global, and its partners include the University of Science Malaysia, UNICEF and the United Nations, among others. Examples of TPI activities include the ‘Interfaith Dialogue on Common Values and Common Actions’ and the ‘Taiping Interfaith
Dialogue Roundtable’. The Taiping Peace Initiative is a high-profile organisation, with locally famous Dato’ Dr Anwar Fazal as one of its founding members; furthermore, it enjoys links with the United Nations system. Around the time of writing, in early 2014, TPI was not seen as being very active.

Malaysian Interfaith Network

Toward the end of 2002, the Malaysian Interfaith Network (MIN) was launched as an offshoot of the Taiping Peace Initiative. Its aim is to bring concerned citizens of various faiths together to work toward a more harmonious and peaceful society. Its three focal areas include promoting dialogue among the faith communities found in Malaysia; fostering understanding of common concerns, values and areas of contention among the communities; and organising actions, sharing information and advocating for harmonious interfaith relations in the country. Its emphases include family values, action against extremism, environmental protection, human rights, interfaith understanding, multi-faith education and good governance. Its members include Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Taoist, Baha’i, Sai Baba and Brahma Kumari, as well as officially secular organisations advocating for civil society issues. The MIN acts as a platform for communication and collaboration among various organisations throughout Malaysia. While the MIN represents a broad base of faith traditions, it appears not to have been very active around the time of writing.

Nur Damai

Launched in 2007, Nur Damai (ND, ‘the light of peace’) is an interfaith organisation that works to foster peace by building community through collaborative action. Its mission is to promote peace for the benefit of the Earth and of all living beings. The members of ND ‘unite to bring the wisdom and values of different religious traditions to be shared for mutual understanding and respect across different faiths and religions’. It supports freedom of religion and belief, as well as the rights of all individuals, ‘in order to witness together the wondrous spirit of life which embraces all of our diversity’. ND supports a vision of love and protection of the Earth, reverence for life and harmony with all living beings.

Nur Damai organises a variety of activities around social concerns and its members pay visits to sacred sites in order to learn about diverse religious traditions. In addition, ND co-sponsors events like the biannual Music and Dance Festival (MadFest), whose performers are youth groups performing music and dance from their respective traditions. People of all ages and all walks of life are welcome to come together and enjoy the beauty offered by each of the traditions. ‘Awakening to Oneness’ is another ND event in which participants come together to share sacred space and to learn from the wisdom of each other’s faith traditions.

Government programmes to construct unity

The discussion turns to a number of government-led initiatives designed to foster positive interfaith relations in order to explore how these official programmes and activities align with the aims and goals of civil society organisations and ordinary citizens discussed so far. The section considers what role these official programmes might play in solving – or possibly exacerbating – the tensions and conflicts mentioned above.
**Department of National Unity and Integration**

The Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN) was launched under the Prime Minister’s Office in July 1968 to enhance unity among Malaysia’s citizens. JPNIN runs community centres, known as *Rukun Tetangga*, in neighbourhoods throughout the country. It also has multi-ethnic pre-schools and kindergartens called *tabika*, where children interact with peers from diverse ethnic groups. JPNIN has offices in each of the thirteen states, including Sabah and Sarawak. Presently, the author’s Centre for Dialogue and Transformation has proposed conducting workshops on dialogue and conflict transformation in each of the JPNIN state offices, with the aim of providing their staff with tools for working toward peaceful conflict transformation. The department’s authorisation for the proposed workshops remains pending at the time of writing.

**Rukun Negara**

The *Rukun Negara* (RN) is the Malaysian national philosophy, which arose in response to the race riots of 13 May 1969. It was promulgated by royal decree on 31 August 1970 at the Merdeka (independence day) celebration. Its aim is to enhance harmony and unity among Malaysia’s ethnic groups. The RN is normally recited at the weekly assembly in public primary and secondary schools, and it can generally be found in the exercise books used by schoolchildren. It is sometimes read at official functions as well. The text of the RN (Jabatan Perpaduan Negara 2013) is:

Whereas our country, Malaysia nurtures the ambitions of:

- achieving a more perfect unity amongst the whole of her society;
- preserving a democratic way of life;
- creating a just society where the prosperity of the country can be enjoyed together in a fair and equitable manner;
- guaranteeing a liberal approach towards her rich and varied cultural traditions; and
- building a progressive society that will make use of science and modern technology.

Now therefore, we, the people of Malaysia, pledge to concentrate the whole of our energy and efforts to achieve these ambitions based on the following principles:

- Belief in God
- Loyalty to King and country
- Supremacy of the Constitution
- Rule of Law
- Courtesy and morality.

**Vision 2020 and Bangsa Malaysia**

In 1991, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad introduced the concept of Vision 2020, with the goal of ensuring that Malaysia would reach developed nation status by the year 2020. As a part of Vision 2020, the *Bangsa Malaysia* concept aimed to create an inclusive identity for all Malaysians. This framework replaced the earlier National Culture Policy, which asserted Malay identity as the central cultural norm into which all Malaysians should be assimilated.
The policy aimed to encourage all citizens to identify with the country, to speak Bahasa, and to accept the national constitution – which many non-Malays found challenging, due to Articles 3, 11, 153 and 160, discussed above. Critics of Bangsa Malaysia, like Johorian Malay nationalist Abdul Ghani Othman, oppose the concept, arguing that Malays must remain ‘the pivotal race’ of Malaysian identity.

Islam Hadhari
Islam Hadhari (IH, civilisational Islam) is a form of government based on Islamic principles expounded in the Qur’an. Through the IH concept, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003–09) put forth a notion of Islam that is compatible with economic growth and technological development. Specifically, IH sought to uphold morality and ethics, to protect minority and women’s rights, and to ensure a just system of government. The IH concept ceased to be promoted after Badawi stepped down from the prime minister’s post in June 2009. Had it been implemented, this proposed mode of governance would have been based on Islam as the ‘default’ religion, placing all other faith traditions on the margins as permanent ‘others’.

1Malaysia
Unveiled on Malaysia Day, 16 September 2012, by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, the stated aims of 1Malaysia are to exhort members of the cabinet, government agencies and the civil service to prioritise ethnic harmony, national unity and efficient governance. The 1Malaysia programme aims to promote inter-ethnic tolerance and national unity, while also improving the performance of politicians and civil servants, of whom the vast majority are ethnic Malays. Polls have shown that many non-Malays view the 1Malaysia policy as a strategy for winning the non-Malay vote, while Malay groups such as Perkasa (Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia, Malaysian Indigenous Empowerment Organisation) reportedly fear that the policy could undermine Malay privileges, if all citizens are accorded the same rights (Boo 2010).

Interfaith Commission
In April 2002, the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) initiated a dialogue among groups such as the Malaysian Islamic Development Department, the Malaysian Ulama Association, and MCCBCHST. A plan was mooted to create an Interfaith Commission aimed at promoting understanding and respect among the country’s citizens. The proposal was opposed by certain quarters, such as Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) Member of Parliament Dzulkefly Ahmad, who believed that religious pluralism would relativise truth claims, thereby implying that Islam is the same as other religions. The proposal was shelved by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as a result of such concerns (Malik 2005).

The National Unity Consultative Council
The National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) was formed by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak in November 2013 after the fractious general election held in May of that year. Its goal is to promote national reconciliation amid rising inter-ethnic and interreligious tensions.
The NUCC is expected to produce a National Blueprint Plan on Unity before the end of 2015. Its members will organise unity dialogues in seventeen localities throughout the Peninsula and East Malaysia.

While these government initiatives strive to ensure peaceful inter-ethnic relations in the country, none of them examines, nor do they address, two core issues underlying and seemingly affecting intercommunal and interfaith relations: the privileged position of Islam vis-à-vis other religions practised in the country and the institutionalised privileges granted to a particular group of citizens based on ‘race’ and religion, to the distinct disadvantage of Malaysians from other religio-ethnic identity groups. Until these issues are addressed, they will undoubtedly continue to affect interfaith relations in the country.

The maturity of Malaysian civil society

At the time of writing, in February 2014, the country is steeped in interfaith tensions, especially between the Muslim and the Christian communities, largely because of the Allah issue. Why ‘the pot was stirred’ and the suit filed against the Catholic Herald over the use of the Arabic word for God is anyone’s guess. Could this be a tactic used to rally ‘Malays’ and Muslims around the government of the day, which hopes to paint itself as champion and protector of Malay ethnicity and Islamic piety?

National governments have been known to create a virtuous ‘us’ and an evil ‘other’ as a means of gaining the votes and support of their electorate. Yet in most cases that ‘other’ is a constructed ‘enemy’ found outside the national territory. With current interfaith tensions in Malaysia, virtuous ‘us’ and evil ‘other’ constructions are found within the country itself. Anyone exacerbating this situation for political gain would be putting each and every Malaysian citizen at risk. Recognising this danger, Malaysians from across faith communities have taken steps to defuse tensions, whatever their origin.

With reference to the 2 January 2014 JAIS raid on the Bible Society of Malaysia, opposition leaders such as PAS’s Dr Mujahid Yusof Rawa assert that the true motive behind both issues is political rather than religious. He and others remark that the latest stirrings may be a ploy to divert the attention of poor Malays from the rising cost of living as the country enters the new year (Mahavera 2014).

Threats by Perkasa and other Muslim groups to demonstrate outside churches caused trepidation among Christians as they attended Sunday services on 5 January 2014; however, those attending mass at Our Lady of Lourdes in Klang were met by some two hundred non-Christians, who showed up outside the church in solidarity with the Christian community. After mass ended, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir presented a bouquet of flowers to the officiating priest, Fr. Michael Chua. A solidarity event called ‘In the Name of Allah’ had been organised through a Facebook page created by one Siti Kasim, who wrote, ‘a true Muslim cannot hurt a Christian in any way’. She added, ‘I think it’s high time rightful thinking members of society gather together and prevent these people who are using the mask of “Islam” from creating dissention and intolerance.’ She ended by urging others to gather at the church ‘in solidarity with our Christian brothers and sisters’ (Lim 2014).

Other shows of solidarity among people of all traditions abound, for example in the writings of The Malaysian Insider journalist Azrul Mohd Khalib, who continually advocates for positive relations among the communities. Respected individuals like Dr Wan Zawawi Ibrahim and Marina Mahathir, too, constantly use their Facebook accounts to promote peace among the nation’s communities, as do many others. Given the deafening silence of top government leaders, it is heartening to see so many ordinary Malaysians standing up for peace and respect among all.
Note

Bibliography


