Malaysia is a multiracial and multireligious country of twenty-nine million people. In terms of racial background, Malays and other bumiputera (literally, sons of the soil) make up the majority at 62 percent, followed by Chinese (22 percent) and Indians (7 percent). But this multiracial composition only tells a little about Malaysia's ethnic diversity. In East Malaysia—Sabah and Sarawak—the racial composition is more complex. The Kadazandusun and other indigenous people account for 37 percent of Sabah's 3.2 million population, followed by the Bajau, at 14 percent. In Sarawak, Iban comprise 29 percent of the population, followed by the Chinese and Malays (around 23 percent each), and the Bidayuh (14 percent).

Malaysia's multifaith society is also distinctive. Sixty-one percent of Malaysia's total population profess Islam, followed by Buddhism (20 percent), Christianity (9 percent), Hinduism (6 percent), and adherents to other religious beliefs (3 percent). Despite Islam's predominance in Peninsular Malaysia, Christianity is the largest religion in Sarawak and the second largest in Sabah. Of Sarawak's 2.4 million population, 43 percent are Christians, compared with 32 percent Muslims and 14 percent Buddhists. In Sabah, bumiputera Muslims account for 65 percent of the total population, followed by Christians (27 percent) and Buddhists (6 percent).

Due to Malaysia's unique character, issues of race and religion have always been a focal point of debate. An ongoing dispute over who may use the term 'Allah', for instance, discussed below, has tested Malaysia's race relations, recalling the dark episode of 13 May 1969, of ethnic riots primarily between the politically dominant Malays and the economically dominant Chinese. The political conflict between the Alliance Party and the opposition then quickly turned into a serious ethno-religious issue, raising concerns about the prospects for race relations in Malaysia. Decades on, ethnic-religious conflict once again threatens peace and harmony in the country. Even though the Allah issue has been described by many people as a contest for power between UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), the manner in which the issue has been debated has caused animosity between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The role of religion in politics is also often complicated by the ethnic factor. Political parties in Malaysia have typically formed along racial lines, to represent the interests of their respective ethnic communities. UMNO, for instance, was formed to protect the interests of
Christian political consciousness

the majority Malays, while the MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and the MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) were established to fight for the rights of the Chinese and Indians, respectively. In Sabah and Sarawak, most political parties are also communal. However, compared with Peninsular Malaysia, the contest for political power in Sabah and Sarawak sometimes happens not at the inter-ethnic, but the intra-ethnic level. Furthermore, race and religious issues do not feature prominently in Sabah and Sarawak’s electoral politics. The electorate in East Malaysia is more interested in raising regional issues such as state rights and autonomy (Chin and Puyok 2011: 219–35). Politics in East Malaysia is also dominated by the contest for power among different elite groups, who are driven by the desire more to control state resources than to pursue ethno-religious issues.

After the 2008 general election, racial and religious issues polarised Malaysian society. In 2008, the ruling BN (Barisan Nasional or National Front) failed to retain its customary two-thirds majority in parliament. It also lost a substantial share of votes from the Malays and Chinese. In the 2013 general election, a similar trend emerged: BN once again failed to win with a two-thirds majority and substantially lost Chinese electoral support. Regardless, BN, through UMNO, continued to assert its dominance in Malay-Muslim majority rural areas. Due to increasing Malay support for UMNO, the party maintained its hard-line stance at the expense of Prime Minister Najib Razak’s ‘1Malaysia’ policy and his calls for moderation. The issues raised in the subsequent UMNO General Assembly indicated that UMNO would continue with its conservative outlook, regardless of the reaction of non-Muslims.

The intensification of race and religious debates is further precipitated by the role of NGOs (non-governmental associations) such as Perkasa (Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia or Malaysian Indigenous Empowerment Organisation) and ISMA (Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia, Malaysian Muslim Solidarity) – accused by many of helping UMNO to roil Malay sentiment. UMNO’s growing dominance and the raising of ethno-religious issues by various Islamic NGOs met with strong opposition from non-Muslims. After the 2008 and 2013 elections, non-Muslims have become more critical in expressing their views. The Allah issue, UMNO dominance and the institutionalisation of the Islamic faith have all contributed to the rise of Christian political consciousness in Malaysia.

Politics and religion

The role of religion in politics is significant because it ‘serves to create group solidarity, strengthening the ties between individuals and their society’ (Driskell et al. 2008: 295). The Church, for instance, plays a role of ‘instigator’ ‘for both political and social movements such as the civil rights movement’ (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006, cited in Driskell et al. 2008: 296). Moreover, church leaders can send messages politically to influence their followers’ electoral decisions (Guth et al. 2003, cited in Driskell et al. 2008: 296). In sum, ‘religion provides ideological and organisational instruments by which affected communities can express their class interests’ (Hamayotsu 2008: 181). For instance, the Republican Party in the US has long relied on evangelical movements for its successive electoral victories. The Catholic Church in the Philippines is so influential that former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo had to abandon the government’s family planning programmes due to lack of support from the church leaders. In Peru, the role of Protestant Christians was crucial in elevating Alberto Fujimori to the presidency in 1992. In Brazil, the Catholic Church has played an important role in the country’s transition to democracy since the 1970s (Hamayotsu 2008). Religion ‘without doubt continues to make its presence felt in the realm of politics across the globe’ (Gill 2001: 118)
and the role of religion in politics will remain an important subject of inquiry in the social sciences.

In the context of Malaysia, religion and politics are intertwined. As the largest ethnic group in Malaysia, the Malays identify themselves closely with Islam — the official religion of the federation. Article 160 of the Federal Constitution defines a Malay as ‘a Muslim who habitually speaks Malay and follows Malay customs’ (Syed Husin 2008: 2). So a Muslim Chinese, Muslim Indian or Muslim Kadazandusun is technically recognised as Malay even though many Muslim indigenous people in East Malaysia prefer to retain their unique cultural identities. Given the close connection of the Malay identity with Islam, UMNO, the largest component party in BN, regards it as its duty to protect the rights of the Malays and sanctity of Islam. Some UMNO leaders even suggest that non-Muslims should recognise the dominance of the Malays and the supremacy of Islam. In the 1970s in Sabah, Mustapha Harun of the Malay-Muslim dominated United Sabah National Organization (USNO) snubbed Sabah’s multiracial and multifaith make-up by allowing Islamisation to take place through the works of USIA (United Sabah Islamic Association) and MUIS (Majlis Ugama Islam Sabah or Sabah Islamic Council). With support of the federal government, Mustapha launched his massive Islamisation programme throughout Sabah (Luping 1994). Mustapha believed that Sabah could be developed only under one culture (Malay), one language (Malay) and one religion (Islam) (Luping 1994).

However, the flagrant manipulation of religion in politics does not sit well with religious minorities, who claim that UMNO is misusing government machinery to promote Islam in order to strengthen its position among Malays. A case in point is enactments barring Christians from using ‘Allah’ and other Arabic words deemed exclusive to Muslims. Even though the government has argued that legislation pertaining to Islam will not affect Christians’ religious freedom, the banning of words which can also be found in Christian scriptures has raised concerns about Islam’s overriding influence over non-Muslims’ religious practices.

In Malaysia, numerous studies have been conducted into the role of religion in politics. However, most focus on the role of Islam in the country’s political development (for instance, Kessler 1978, or Liow and Afi, this volume). Few studies have examined the role other religious institutions, such as the Christian Church, have played in Malaysian politics. Examining the role of the Church and Christians’ participation in the political process is crucial as Christianity accounts for 9 percent of Malaysia’s total population and is the most populous religion in East Malaysia. Such a study is also critical as since 2008, Christians as a whole have been very vocal in airing their views publicly. The decision of church leaders to bring the Allah issue to court is an example of Christianity’s growing influence in Malaysia’s political landscape. Despite the ban on the word ‘Allah’ and Islamic religious groups’ warning to Christians to stop raising the issue, Christian leaders continue to press the government to allow Christians to practise their religious beliefs freely. Church leaders are not the only ‘instigators’ responsible for raising sentiment against Islam’s growing influence; Christian leaders from both sides of the political divide are equally responsible for encouraging Christians to engage proactively with the state. But within Malaysian churches, clergy, pastors, elders and lay leaders teach their followers to exercise their democratic rights dutifully and to speak against misuse of power. ‘New religious ideas and interpretations of religious texts and doctrines’ (Hamayotsu 2008: 194) have changed the way most Christians think about politics and their role as citizens in a democratic country. But before one can have a deeper understanding of the impact of Christianity in Malaysia’s political development, it is necessary to briefly examine the factors contributing to the rise of Christian political consciousness.
Christian political consciousness

Rise of political Islam

Political Islam is loosely referred to as the promotion of Islam and Islamic symbolism by political leaders and the institutionalisation of Islamic religious beliefs to justify the right of the Malay-Muslim population to power and dominance. Islam’s influence in Malaysia can be traced to the twelfth century, when Muslim traders made their first contact with local inhabitants. At Malaya’s independence in 1957, Islam was made the official religion of the federation. The decision was part of the concession given to UMNO by its partners in the Alliance coalition – MCA and MIC – as a symbolic recognition of the status of the majority Malays. However, it was not the intention of the Alliance leaders to turn Malaysia into an Islamic state and to deny the religious rights of non-Muslims. Rather, citing former Lord President Mohamed Suffi an Hashim, Fernando (2006: 250) postulates that making Islam the official religion was ‘primarily for ceremonial purposes, to enable prayers to be offered in the Islamic way on official public occasions, such as the installation or birthday of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (King of Malaysia), independence day and similar occasions’.

Other prominent legal fi gures argued that ‘the term Islam in Article 3(1) [in the Federal Constitution] meant only such acts as relate to rituals and ceremonies’ (cited in Fernando 2006: 250).

Despite the assurance Malaysia’s founding fathers gave that Islam’s official status would have no ‘practical effect’ on non-Muslims due to the secular nature of the Federal Constitution, political leaders from UMNO and PAS were quick to capitalise on the elevation of Islam to state religion for their own gains (Kessler 1978). When Malaysia’s fourth prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, assumed power, Islam was further embedded in the political system. Facing stiff competition from PAS, which accused UMNO of lacking the religious zeal to protect the interest of Muslims, Mahathir worked to strengthen the role of Islamic religious institutions such as the Federal Religious Council, the Offi ce of Islamic Affairs and the Islamic Missionary Foundation. These institutions were used to accelerate a ‘dakwah movement to harness the legitimising power of Islamic symbolism and discourse’ (Moustafa 2013a: 10).

As part of Mahathir’s attempt to deepen the role of Islam in the national political scene and arguably to increase his popularity among the Malays, the government ordered the banning of the Indonesian-language Alkitab (Bible) in 1981. Wielding the Internal Security Act (ISA), the government argued that the open sale and distribution of the Bible could lead to public disorder. In 1982, the ban was lifted after the intervention of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM). In 1987, Operasi Lalang was launched to detain people deemed a threat to national security, including those who proselytised to Muslims. Among those arrested was Jamaluddin Othman, a Christian convert accused of propagating Christianity to Muslims. His right to convert was upheld on 6 October 1988 by the High Court, which ruled ‘that Jamaluddin was free to follow his conscience and practice his newfound religion’ (Walters 2007: 76).

The institutionalisation of Islamic religious beliefs intensified with the amendment of the Federal Constitution. The amendment involved the insertion of Clause (1A) into Article 121, which says that ‘the High Courts of the Federation shall have no jurisdiction in any respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of the Syariah Courts’ (Moustafa 2013b: 778). With the amendment, ‘all matters pertaining to Islam should be handled by the Shariah Court’ (Walters 2007: 77). Mahathir argued that the amendment was necessary ‘to protect the jurisdiction of the Shariah courts vis-à-vis the federal civil courts’ (Moustafa 2013b: 778). The amendment would later create far-reaching legal complications and dilemmas. For
instance, Muslims who want to convert to other religions must first seek approval from the Syariah Court. A case in point is Lina Joy, who wanted to change her religious status from Islam to Christianity on her identity card. The National Registration Department (NRD) refused to grant her request, stating that changing religion is not the jurisdiction of the NRD, but of Islamic religious authorities. When Lina Joy brought her case to the court, the court concurred with the NRD, claiming that as a Muslim, she must first seek redress in the Syariah Court (Walters 2007).

In 1991, the government reiterated its stance on banning the word ‘Allah’ and other Arabic words deemed exclusive to Muslims. This decision caused discontentment among, and a huge setback for, Bahasa Malaysia-speaking Christians, especially in Sabah and Sarawak, who translate the English word ‘God’ to ‘Allah’. Christians’ fear of Islam’s growing dominance was further compounded when Mahathir announced Malaysia as an Islamic state on 29 September 2001. The state interpreted Mahathir’s support for an Islamic state as an endorsement of the use of the state apparatus to promote Islamic influence throughout the country. This included the inculcation of Islamic religious values and education in schools and higher learning institutions (Moustafa 2013a). Compounding restrictions in Christians’ religious practices were allegations that Christians were being discriminated against in securing permits for places of worship and distribution of land for religious purposes (Walters 2007).

When Abdullah assumed power in 2002, he promised to reform the country through various reform initiatives, including promoting the concept of ‘Islam Hadhari’. This concept represented Abdullah’s attempt to promote a brand of Islam that ‘is peaceful, moderate and just, and embraces all races and creeds’ (cited in Walters 2007: 73), in contrast with Mahathir’s ‘inimical’ form of Islam. Abdullah’s Islam Hadhari also aimed at gaining back non-Muslims’ support for the BN. The strategy worked. Abdullah won the 2004 general election with a resounding victory, sealing his popularity as a reform-minded leader, well liked by Malaysians of all races and religions.

Despite Abdullah’s promising leadership, the country continued to be marred by ethnic-religious fissures. The trouble started when the Home Ministry banned the distribution of the Iban-language Bible, containing the words ‘Allah Taala’ – translated as ‘God Almighty’. The Home Ministry argued that the word ‘Allah’ is exclusive to Muslims and its usage among non-Muslims could lead to confusion among Muslims. The Abdullah administration was also criticised for failing to act decisively in the demolition of churches by local authorities in the state of Johor. In this case, Orang Asli (indigenous people) clashed with local authorities over a piece of land on which the Orang Asli had built a church. The authorities charged that the church was illegally built on state land. Various Christian organisations voiced their disappointment with the manner in which the issue was handled. The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) said the issue could have been solved amicably, had the authorities initiated dialogue and consultation with the Orang Asli community.

The change in leadership in 2008 provided little hope that Christians would be able to practise their religious rights freely. Like Abdullah’s, Najib Razak’s moderate approach was not wholly supported even by most UMNO members. The Allah issue once again came into the picture. This time, the government refused to allow the Herald bulletin to use the word ‘Allah’, on grounds of public order and national security, suggesting that Christians who have a different theological interpretation of Allah could mislead Muslims. The government reiterated its stance that the Arabic term ‘Allah’ is sacred to Islam and, in particular, to the Malays in Malaysia (Keyes 1996). The Catholic Church that published the bulletin defended the use
of the word ‘Allah’, as the bulletin was only meant for its Bahasa Malaysia-speaking congregation.

The Catholic Church filed suit against the government and won in the High Court. The presiding judge, Lau Bee Lan, argued that the Home Ministry’s ban was ‘illegal, null and void . . . adding that all Malaysians had the right to use the word under the constitution which guarantees freedom of expression and religion’ (Al Jazeera 2010). While waiting for the government to appeal the court’s decision, Najib introduced a ten-point solution to address the confiscation and distribution of the aforementioned Bibles, as well as usage of the word ‘Allah’ by non-Muslims. The ten-point solution was introduced just before the 2011 Sarawak state election. One of its main tenets was that Christians are permitted ‘to print and/or import the Alkitab (Bible) freely without any restriction or conditions’ (NECF 2011).

In the meantime, the Home Ministry appealed to strike out the High Court’s decision to allow the Catholic Church to use the word ‘Allah’ in its bulletin. As expected, the government won the appeal, on the grounds that ‘Allah was not integral to the Christian faith’ (Malaysian Insider 2014b). At the time of writing, the Catholic Church and the Home Ministry await the final decision of the Court of Appeal. Not long after the court’s decision, the Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor (Selangor Islamic Religious Department, JAIS) raided the Bible Society of Malaysia and confiscated more than 300 Bibles, causing further unhappiness among Christians, who accused the government of reneging on its promise to uphold the ten-point solution. The raid was conducted after JAIS received a complaint that the Bibles contained the word ‘Allah’ and other prohibited Arabic words. In justifying its action, JAIS said that it was merely carrying out its duty in accordance with a state enactment preventing the propagation of Christianity to Muslims (Star 2014).

As ethno-religious tension threatened to destabilise inter-ethnic harmony, a Christian family in Pitas – a remote area in the district of Kudat, Sabah – claimed they had been duped into converting to Islam by a Muslim group from Kuala Lumpur (Daily Express 2014). The alleged conversion of the indigenous people of Sabah to Islam is symptomatic of a bigger problem among Sabahans with Malay names. Many Sabahans complain that instead of seeking clarification, the NRD arbitrarily classifies Sabahans with Muslim names or those carrying ‘bin’ (son of) or ‘binti’ (daughter of) as Malay bumi putera Muslims. When they want to change the religious identity on their identification card, they have to go through numerous bureaucratic hurdles (Malaysian Insider 2012).

Christian response

Christians in Malaysia are generally politically apathetic. Church leaders are mostly conservative in their views of Christians’ participation in politics. Most church leaders teach their followers to respect the rule of law and authority, based on their reading of Romans 13:1–2:

\[
\text{everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.}
\]

But younger and progressive Christian leaders interpret Romans 13:1–2 differently, stating that the verses should be read together with complementary verses that talk about Christians’ duty to initiate godly change.
A well-known Christian leader who was a former church elder and now serves as Sarawak Parti Keadilan Rakyat chief, Baru Bian, for instance, evoked the popular verses of 2 Timothy 1:7–8 which states that:

for God did not give us the spirit of timidity but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the Gospel, by the power of God.

Christians are also encouraged ‘to challenge the abuse of power and seek a level playing field in terms of power relations for the good of all’ (Yapp 2011), and to be proactive in defending their religious rights. The president of the largest indigenous church in East Malaysia, the SIB (Sidang Injil Borneo or Borneo Evangelical Mission), Jerry Dusing, was quoted as saying that Christians are ‘compelled to speak against . . . attempt[s] to undermine their religious freedom’ (*Free Malaysia Today* 2013).

Apart from the role of church and Christian leaders, Christian political consciousness also rose rapidly after the 2008 election. The rise of participatory democracy and new media, coupled with rising educational attainment, contributed to Christians’ increasing level of political awareness. Even though most church leaders did not declare their political affiliation publicly, they often talked about democracy, transparency and reforms in governance. They also encouraged their followers to support political leaders and parties sincerely committed to transforming the country and to ensuring that Malaysians are treated not according to their race or religion, but their constitutional rights. Coincidently, the message of change promoted by church leaders was identical to the one contained in the opposition parties’ election manifesto. This reinforced the allegation that some church leaders were supporting the opposition covertly, with the aim of toppling the ruling party.

Another factor contributing to Christians’ increasing participation in the political process is changes in the country’s political climate since 2003, particularly after the end of the Mahathir era. Under the Mahathir regime, ‘sensitive’ issues of race and religion could not be discussed, let alone debated publicly. Those who disregarded this order were detained under the ISA. While rule of law was a hallmark of the Mahathir administration, the rights of communities on the periphery were often ignored. The lack of open and constructive dialogue during Mahathir’s twenty-two years in power partly contributed to deepening mistrust among the different races in Malaysia.

Abdullah came to power with the promise of institutional reform and of greater freedom. His tolerant attitude towards open dialogue and direct criticism provided an opportunity for Christians to speak up and to demand greater religious freedom. However, Abdullah’s policy of openness backfired due to his inability to accommodate the conflicting demands of Islamic religious groups and proponents for non-Muslims’ religious rights. Christians’ critical voices continued to fluster the Najib administration, which promised to transform Malaysia into a progressive nation through the implementation of the Government Transformation Plan (GTP) and the Economic Transformation Plan (ETP). Najib’s decision to abolish the ISA and other repressive laws encouraged more Christians to take part in political activism without fear of retribution.

Of all the factors above, however, the single most important issue which motivated Christians to participate actively in the political process is the rise of political Islam. The institutionalisation of Islam which started during the Mahathir era and the spreading of Islamic religious values through various government apparatuses ‘had [encouraged] Christians to [activate] their own organisations, mobilising their members, or forming their own
Christian political consciousness


This Christian response to the rise of political Islam is noticeable in electoral politics. In the 2011 Sibu by-election, the banning of the word ‘Allah’ in spite of Najib’s ‘1Malaysia’ assurance of tolerance proved decisive in causing BN component Sarawak United Peoples’ Party (SUPP) to lose to the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) by 398 votes (Wong 2012: 142–43). Despite attempts by Sarawak BN to convince Christians in Sibu that religious freedom would be upheld, voters were given the impression that BN, and in particular UMNO, would continue to protect the interests of Malays and Islam at the expense of the rights of minorities in Sabah and Sarawak. As noted above, religious issues do not usually feature prominently in East Malaysia, but in the Sibu by-election, opposition leaders managed to play out the issue of religious freedom, to their advantage.

Another glaring example of religion’s role in electoral politics is evident in the remote area of Ba’ Kelalan constituency, where 90 percent of the electorate are staunch Christians. Ba’ Kelalan was a ‘hot seat’ in the 2006 and 2011 state elections. Religion, along with land and development issues, had been key in shaping voting patterns there. In the 2006 by-election, BN promoted the issue of development, while the opposition promoted social justice and religious faith. BN’s main challenger, Baru Bian, publicly proclaimed: ‘our faith and principles must influence our politics and not politics influencing our faith and principles’ (Puyok 2006: 212–28). Baru’s religious credentials and close association with the SIB church earned him the respect and admiration of the Lun Bawang – the majority group in Ba’ Kelalan. Despite losing in the Ba’ Kelalan constituency, Baru managed to obtain a substantial number of votes, indicating his popularity among the Lun Bawang community.

Using the same strategy of raising religious sentiments, coupled with a marked improvement in his election strategies, Baru finally managed to defeat BN in the 2011 Sarawak state election, by 428 votes. Once again, religion played a central role. Baru knew how to mobilise SIB’s vast rural networks to spread his campaign messages. Among his main campaign points was not accepting the government’s ten-point solution, deeming it a political gimmick to pacify the Christian community. Even though Baru was not directly involved in the dissemination of text messages throughout the campaigning period, the short messages had a profound impact on the attitude of Ba’ Kelalan voters towards the ruling party. One of the messages read:

today the Council of Churches Malaysia has rejected the government’s 10-point solution on the Alkitab. Vote against BN is a vote for Jesus. BN is an anti-christ agent. Christians are being discriminated and rights in constitution denied. Don’t vote for BN. If you are a true Christian, send this message to all other Christians.

Opposition leaders also used the Allah issue in Kadazandusun-majority areas during the 2013 Sabah general election. For instance, in the remote area of Kota Marudu, opposition campaigners reminded voters that there would be no religious freedom in Malaysia if BN retained power, citing the banning of the word ‘Allah’ and confiscation of Christian publications as examples of restrictions in Christians’ religious practices (Puyok 2014). In the also remote area of Keningau, supporters of the highly popular Kadazandusun and Christian leader, Jeffrey Kitingan, blamed BN and UMNO for the erosion of Kadazandusun and Christians’ constitutional rights (Puyok 2014). The consequences of the Allah issue and
restrictions on Christians’ religious freedom were significant: of seventeen Kadazandusun-majority constituencies, five went to the opposition – which was significant, given the opposition’s lack of resources and BN’s well-oiled campaign machinery (Puyok 2014). There was also a marked decline in the popular votes obtained by BN Kadazandusun leaders.

Mobilisation of Christian political consciousness

There are four main agents responsible for mobilising Christian political consciousness: Christian umbrella associations, individual Christian churches, Christian religious leaders and Christian political leaders. Each of these agents works independently but with the same message of protecting the religious rights of Christians in accordance with the Federal Constitution. The CFM formed in 1985 in reaction to the state’s rapid Islamisation. It represents 5,000 member churches, from most of the different Christian denominations in Malaysia (Walters 2007). The three main Christian groupings in CFM are Council of Churches of Malaysia (comprising mainly Protestant churches), National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (evangelicals) and Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia (Roman Catholic). The CFM came under the spotlight for supporting the editor of the Herald bulletin, Father Andrew, who defended the use of the word ‘Allah’ by Christians despite the government’s ban. As the CFM represents more than 90 percent of Christians in Malaysia, it represents a prominent voice for Christians to air their views on religious freedom.

The National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) was formed in 1983 amid the difficulties faced by Christians in exercising their religious freedom given laws limiting the distribution of Christian publications. Unlike the CFM, the NECF is more explicit in its desire to contribute to nation-building by urging its members to become ‘agents of transformation in the various places and sphere of influence that God has placed and called each one to be in’. The NECF also urges Christians to ‘engage in intentional mission for the purpose of transforming society and the nation’. One of the NECF’s strategies to engage with the state is through its ‘transforming the nation programmes’. The NECF also formed a nation-building committee to address current issues affecting Christians. Due to Sabah’s growing role in national politics, the NECF established the COSA (Commission of Sabah Affairs) on 2 April 2012. The COSA’s formation was significant given the large number of SIB followers from Sabah.

Like the CFM, the NECF is also critical of growing Islamisation in Malaysia. In responding to the raid on the Bible Society of Malaysia, the NECF said Islamic religious authorities have no jurisdiction over non-Muslims and therefore Christians can deny religious officials entry into the premises they use for worship and activities (NECF 2014). In the run-up to the 2013 election, the NECF organised prayer rallies throughout the country and published numerous publications urging Christians to participate actively in the country’s political process. For instance, one of NECF’s well-read booklets, Christians and the Ballot Box, stated:

the church today does not need to start from scratch. What needs to be done is to ensure that the governments correctly interpret and implement their constitutions . . . the least a Christian can do is to inform him or herself about the truth concerning his nation and his government and then vote with conscience.

(NECF 2012)

The research arm of the Council of Churches, Catholic Research Centre, even produced a YouTube video, titled ‘Responsible Stewardship and General Elections’, aimed at educating Christians about their rights to vote and to vote contentiously in the 2013 election.
Christian political consciousness

Individual churches from various denominations also play a crucial role in raising Christians’ political awareness. One of the fastest-growing and most influential churches is the SIB, which has more than 500,000 members in East Malaysia, ‘making it the largest Christian denomination in Malaysia next to the Roman Catholic Church’. The SIB has also set up numerous branches throughout Peninsular Malaysia to cater for the spiritual needs of a growing Christian population there. The SIB’s growing membership is due to its contemporary outlook and strategic missionary activities. It is one of the main litigants in the suit against the government over the Allah issue.

In rural East Malaysia, the SIB is part and parcel of the people’s social life. The pastor is a respected figure in the SIB church. He or she is normally ordained and trained in theology before he or she can be officially accepted to lead a church. The pastor is assisted by a church council (or Majlis Sidang) whose members comprise people with influence and good moral standing. During the formative years of the SIB, the pastor and members of the church were required to have some basic theological training, and focused their duties on helping with the spiritual growth of church members. But now, there are a growing number of SIB pastors who are not trained theologically prior to being ordained. Most church council members come from various professional backgrounds – accountants, medical doctors, lawyers, professors and so on. Apart from being influential figures within their church, the pastor and members of the church council are also respected outside of the church. The growing interest of professional people in the SIB’s vision and mission has gradually transformed the SIB from a conservative church, initially focused only on the spiritual aspect of its members, into a progressive church with influence in the political, economic and social spheres.

There are eight Christian government ministers in Najib’s present cabinet. Notable among them is Idris Jala – the architect of the ten-point agreement on the word ‘Allah’ and distribution of Christian Bibles. Even though the decision was criticised due to its lack of legal clout, it helped pacify Christian discontent in the wake of the 2011 Sarawak state election. Other vocal pro-government Christian leaders who defended the use of the word ‘Allah’ by Christians are Bernard Dompok, a former federal cabinet minister and UPKO (United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Organisation) president, and Sarawak’s minister of land development, PRS (Parti Rakyat Sarawak or Sarawak People’s Party) president, James Masing. Masing even went to the extent of reminding the federal government to honour the Malaysia Agreement of 1963, which promised to protect the religious rights of Christians in East Malaysia. On the other side of the political divide, leaders such as Teresa Kok, Ong Kian Ming and Baru Bian have consistently called for the government to respect the religious rights of Christians.

Conclusion

Religion and politics in Malaysia are closely intertwined. Political leaders use religion not only to win support but also to maintain their power. Religion’s role in Malaysian politics can be seen in the context of the rise of political Islam and the response of religious minority groups. The role of Islam in politics deepened during the reign of Mahathir, through the promotion of Islamic religious values and institutionalisation of Islam. Even after the end of the Mahathir era, Islam’s dominance in the country remained intact. Abdullah and Najib tried to promote an all-encompassing and all-embracing Islam to win the support of moderate Malays and non-Muslims, but without much success, due to strong opposition from conservative Islamic religious groups. While the rise of political Islam is not the only factor contributing to the rise of Christian political consciousness, it has motivated Christians from various
denominational backgrounds to assert their religious rights. Apart from a reaction to Islam’s dominance, Christians’ growing participation in the political process is also attributed to changes in the country’s political climate, particularly after the end of the Mahathir era. Abdullah and Najib led a more open government, which tolerated criticisms and allowed the exchange of views on sensitive matters. This approach provided the opportunity for Christians to voice their grievances without the fear experienced by Christians during the Mahathir era. The progressive interpretation of religious texts and doctrines has also played a role in the rise of Christian political consciousness. Conservative church leaders teach their followers to respect the rule of law and authority. But a new generation of church leaders has broken with tradition, urging church followers to become agents of transformation not only in the spiritual, but also in the political, economic and social realms. Umbrella Christian organisations, and Christian leaders from various denominations, have worked independently to affirm Christians’ rights to religious freedom. Their message to Christians is clear: it is high time for Christians to rise up and to protect their rights to freedom, as enshrined in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.

Notes

1   The Sanskrit term bumiputra is generally used to refer to the original inhabitants of Malaysia. In Peninsular Malaysia, the two main bumiputra groups are the Malays and the Orang Asli (indigenous people). In Sabah and Sarawak, bumiputra peoples are numerous. They include the majority Kadazandusun in Sabah and the Iban in Sarawak, as well as other sub-ethnic groups.

2   Sabah and Sarawak were former British colonial territories. They became part of Malaysia in 1963. Sabah and Sarawak were accorded a greater degree of autonomy in managing their own affairs than the other states in Malaysia as a pre-condition for joining the federation.

3   The Kadazandusun people comprise two distinct ethnic groups: the Kadazans and the Dusuns. Even though different in name, they share linguistic and cultural traits. In the 1980s, Kadazan and Dusun leaders agreed to combine their ethnic names – hence, the Kadazandusun.

4   Before the formation of Malaysia in 1963, non-Muslims outnumbered Muslims in Sabah. But in the 1970s, the number of Muslims grew as a result of Mustapha Harun’s rapid Islamisation policy and his government’s tolerant attitude towards an influx of Muslim Filipinos from the neighbouring Philippines.

5   The Non-Islamic Religions (Controls of Propagation Among Muslims) Enactment 1988 was enacted to prevent proselytisation among Muslims.

6   The Sibu by-election was held following the death of Robert Lau, the SUPP incumbent. Sibu is a Chinese-majority constituency with a sizeable number of Iban. It also has a strong Christian presence, mainly from the Anglican, Methodist and SIB denominations.

7   See the NECF Malaysia website at www.necf.org.my (accessed 7 May 2014).

8   This figure is obtained from the SIB Kuala Lumpur official website at www.sibkl.org.my (accessed 7 May 2014).

Bibliography


Christian political consciousness


