The Culture and Practice of Pluralism in Post-Independence Malaysia

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Abstract

For many decades, especially in post-independence nation-building and market-making in Malaysia, the issue of pluralism has confronted Malaysian policy makers, intellectuals, cultural mediators as well as market players in policy debates and bargaining, at times openly, while at other times, behind-the-scene. Besides debates among the country's elites, the everyday discourses of pluralism at the grassroots have also been important. It is both the elite and the everyday discourses that have influenced the strengthening, or conversely, the weakening of the basis of pluralism. Often times, it is the elite level discourses, especially among contending political elites who vie for political mileage and power, which often become blatant especially during election periods, that have caused ruptures or tension in inter-ethnic relations at the grassroots. Based mainly on the findings of a field study conducted in 1999, this paper attempts to address the question whether pluralism can serve as social resources for civility and participation in Malaysia and whether pluralism has become, or not become, such resources. This paper shows that thirty years after the May 13, 1969 ethnic riots, the potential for such social resources exemplified by tendencies towards convergence and new solidarities is promising – a trend facilitated by the growth and expansion of a multi-ethnic middle class. But the old divides, constant contestation and tension along ethnic and religious lines keep on resurfacing, serving as brakes to such developments.

Budaya dan Amalan Pluralisme di Malaysia pada Zaman Pasca Merdeka

Abstrak

Selama beberapa dasawarsa, khususnya dalam usaha pembinaan bangsa dan pembentukan sistem pasaran di Malaysia pada zaman pasca-merdeka, isu pluralisme telah cuba ditangani oleh pembuat dasar, intelektual, pejuang budaya, dan juga pemain di pasaran. Ini dilakukan dalam perdebatan mengenai polisi dan proses tawar menawar, yang ada kalanya berlaku secara terbuka, dan ada pula secara tertutup. Selain perdebatan di kalangan kelompok elit di Malaysia, wacana hari-hari mengenai pluralisme di kalangan kelompok akar umbi juga memang penting. Kedua-dua jenis wacana ini telah mempengaruhi usaha mengukuhkan, ataupun sebaliknya, melemahkan asas pluralisme. Sering kali, wacana di kalangan kelompok elit, terutamanya di kalangan mereka yang berhempas pulas merebut pengaruh dan kuasa berubah menjadi kasar dan tegang khususnya semasa pilihan

raya sehingga mencetuskan keretakan ataupun ketegangan di kalangan akar umbi. Berdasarkan terutamanya pada penemuan daripada satu kajian lapangan yang dijalankan pada 1999, makalah ini berusaha membicarakan persoalan sama ada pluralisme mampu berperanan sebagai sumber kemasyarakatan bagi kehidupan sivil dan penyertaan di Malaysia, dan sama ada ia telahpun menjadi sumber sedemikian ataupun sebaliknya. Makalah ini menunjukkan bahawa 30 tahun selepas rusuhan kaum pada 13 Mei 1969, potensi bagi perkembangan sumber kemasyarakatan sedemikian adalah baik, seperti terbukti dengan kecenderungan ke arah konvergen dan setiakawan baru — satu kecenderungan yang dimungkinkan oleh pertumbuhan dan perkembangan kelas menengah berbilang etnik di Malaysia. Akan tetapi, garis pemisah yang lama, pertarungan dan ketegangan yang kerap berlaku menurut garis kaum dan agama, masih muncul dan menjadi penghalang kepada perkembangan sedemikian.

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Introduction

Thanks to Furnivall (1956), the problem of pluralism in Malaysia has attracted keen interest and debates among scholars and commentators from this country as well as from outside the region. The importance of the problem can be gleaned from the ethnic mix in the Malaysian population, which in 1998, numbered 22.2 million (including 1.6 million non-citizens) (Malaysia 1999: 96-97). Of this total population, the majority is made up of the Bumiputera (literally, sons of the soil) who constitute 57.8 per cent (Malays 49.0 per cent and other Bumiputera 8.8 per cent), followed by Chinese with 24.9 per cent, Indians 7.0 per cent, Others 3.1 per cent, while non-citizens (mostly Indonesian migrant workers) constitute a significant proportion of 7.2 per cent. The Malays and other Bumiputera groups are considered the indigenous people of the country, while the non-Bumiputera who migrated to Malaysia mostly since the second half of the 19th century have since become an integral part of Malaysian society and contributed significantly to Malaysia's development. While the fertility rates of all ethnic groups in recent years have generally been on the decline, their annual fertility rates differ quite significantly, with the Bumiputera registering a 3.7 per cent growth, but the fertility rates for the Chinese and Indians are considerably lower, at 2.5 per cent and 2.6 per cent respectively. This trend of the Bumiputera proportion growing faster than the other ethnic groups will most likely alter Malaysia's future ethnic map.

As can be seen from the figures, migration, especially transnational migration during the colonial era and in recent decades, has been a major contributory factor in the making of modern pluralism in this country.[1] Malaysian pluralism in the various spheres — ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, and others – shaped mainly during the colonial period, has impacted post-independence nation-building and market-making in many ways. Ethnic pluralism in contemporary Malaysia is not only characterized by the existence of the various ethnic groups – Malays, Chinese, Indians,

Iban, Kadazan, and ethnic minorities such as the Orang Asli and the Siamese — but also of Indonesian migrants (some of whom are recent) who play an important role in shaping Malaysian history and social participation in citizen-making. Reflecting the contradictory processes of convergence and divergence, Malaysian pluralism has no doubt been a source of tension and conflict in the society. This fact, especially the on-going processes of transnational migration, has a deep impact upon society's formation, showing that the society is still in a state of flux, whose constituents and perimeters are constantly being redefined by various forces, including those operating beyond nation-state borders. Be that as it may, it should be acknowledged that Malaysia has a long history of cosmopolitanism, and that pluralism in Malaysia is ancient, predating colonialism. Having its sources in major Asian civilisations and great world religions that had interacted with each other since the beginning of history in the Malay Archipelago, Malaysian pluralism has also been a source of the country's strength, vitality and uniqueness, which contributes towards the evolution of multi-ethnic understanding and co-operation, a trend that can be garnered fruitfully to soften extremism and increase pluralist tolerance, civility and social participation.

For many decades, especially in post-independence nation-building and market-making, the issue of pluralism has confronted Malaysian policy makers, intellectuals, cultural mediators as well as market players in policy debates and bargaining, at times openly, while at other times, behind-the-scene. Besides debates among the country's elites, the everyday discourses of pluralism at the grassroots have also been important. It is both the elite and the everyday discourses that have influenced the strengthening, or conversely, the weakening of the basis of pluralism. Often times, it is the elite level discourses, especially among contending political elites who vie for political mileage and power, which often become blatant especially during election periods, that have caused ruptures or tension in inter-ethnic relations at the grassroots.

The key questions which have both academic and policy implications are: Can pluralism serve as social resources for civility and participation in Malaysia in the twenty first century? How has pluralism become, or not become, such resources? Thirty years after the May 13, 1969 ethnic riots, the potential for such social resources exemplified by tendencies towards convergence and new solidarities to serve as the basis for civility and participation in Malaysia's further evolution is promising. But the constant contestation and even tension are also there. It is the forms

these convergence, contestation, and tension take, the spaces in which they operate, and the principles and strategies used to resolve them are especially important, in the light of the new developments that have shaped Malaysia's transformation in the last three decades.

Here we will confine ourselves to only six of these macro-developments in order to provide the backdrop for the micro-analysis that follows in the second part of the paper. First, Malaysia's post-independence development and transformation has brought about new actors on the historical stage — the modern classes, especially the middle class (Abdul Rahman 1999, 1996, 1995). These actors operate through economic, political, social, cultural and religious spaces, acting as 'brokers' or cultural mediators in the multiethnic society. Although rudiments of these classes were already in existence about a hundred years ago under British colonialism, their rapid expansion is a recent phenomenon. This is closely tied up with the drive towards industrialization and modernization in post-independence Malaysia, spurred by rapid capitalist development and expansion of a strong developmentalist state. Unlike the earlier Malay middle class, which largely consisted of a small group of administrators and school teachers, a new Malay middle class, consisting of managers and professionals working in both private and state sectors, has emerged and expanded in the last thirty years, and demonstrated their presence in Malaysian cities and towns. The affirmative action programmes of the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1991-1990) in favour of the Bumiputera had produced three sets of responses from the non-Bumiputera, especially the Chinese. They ranged from open resentment expressed in the form of flight of Chinese capital, and out-migration of many Chinese professionals especially in late seventies and eighties, to one of silent acquiescence and grudgingly carrying on as usual, or of pragmatic adjustments to benefit indirectly from the policy. Since the state has generally been market-friendly, and has in fact been actively involved in market-expansion even when implementing the NEP's action programmes, the latter have not prevented the growth of the capitalist and middle classes among other Malaysians. The rapid growth of capitalism did provide the economically stronger Chinese community, opportunities to produce their own new middle class too. Economic growth and the state's liberalization of its education and cultural policies since the late 1980s and more so since the early 1990s have dissipated non-Malay resentment, leading to the return of many professionals who had migrated earlier and to a new mood of co-operation and acquiescence.

Unlike the pre-1970s period, when the new middle class in Malaysia was largely Chinese, the contemporary new Malaysian middle class is multi-ethnic in composition, with the new Malay middle class constituting a major component. The new middle class – a new social formation especially conspicuous in urban settings brought about by social change – has a dynamics of its own, which has produced a myriad of cultural forms including a complex array of adaptations, innovations, resistance and changes.

Second, industrialization and rapidly changing market processes driven by state-led modernization over the last few decades have resulted in both material and ideational changes, which have far-reaching consequences for pluralism. These processes have opened up geographical, economic and cultural spaces, leading to greater interaction between people of various ethnic groups, who mingle with one another at work and in residential areas as well as in associations and other social activities, especially in highly urbanized regions. People from the peninsular East Coast and even from Sabah and Sarawak, for example, have moved to the Klang Valley and other metropolitan centres, seeking for jobs or business opportunities, or higher education. These changes have opened greater opportunities for social mobility for the young of various ethnic groups, achieved mainly through education, and have also changed age-old parents' attitudes and perceptions. The older generation has come to accept change, and agree that in today's world, it is the children's right to choose what they want to do and where they want to go. Such rather liberal attitudes facilitate social change and mobility and help open wider spaces for the younger generation of various ethnic groups.

Third, economic growth, rapid market expansion, and the growth of the capitalist and new middle classes have impacted on personal values and practices. A 'developmentalist' ideology has developed among these classes, an ideology which on the one hand de-emphasizes ethnicity for the sake of development and growth, and on the other, pushes individuals into consumerism, with the effect of distancing them from politics, especially that which is critical of the state. This developmentalist ideology has been responsible for the continued support for the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) in recent years, especially from the non-Malays. As will be shown in the subsequent sections, although the developmentalist ideology has not really extinguished ethnicity — for it has merely made it privatized (i.e. articulated mostly in private circles, and sometimes openly) — this does not mean that new forms of civility and participation among various ethnic groups have not emerged, or that consumerism has prevented them from becoming politically active and mobilized. In fact, we do see the expansion of economic enterprises and organizations — some mono-ethnic, while others multi-ethnic – with many operating in the local and national arenas, while not a few have gone multinational and even transnational, with representatives from the capitalist and middle classes involved in them. While rivalries between the capitalist and middle class elements of the different ethnic groups have expressed themselves through these organizations, cross-ethnic or multi-ethnic economic and social partnerships have also been formed.

Fourth, despite the politics of development and the developmentalist ideology, articulate elements among the new middle class have come forward not only with new forms of association, self-expression, and initiative, but also with new ideas regarding the proper balance between state, market and civil society, thus creating a new kind of political culture in Malaysia. The expansion of a multiethnic middle class has been accompanied by a proliferation of civil society or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (political, economic, social, cultural and also religious) and various types of media, including the Internet – the latter experiencing a phenomenal growth since September 1998 following the expulsion of ex-Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, the heir-apparent of Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. These organizations and media respond in various ways to the strengthening of the state and market expansion. The struggles they unfold include demands for greater democratic space, respect for human rights, rights for women, children, the elderly and the minorities, consumer rights, environmental protection, and so on. The emergence of these civic organizations together with democratic political parties and public intellectuals have contributed towards the opening up of democratic space, and the growth of an incipient civil society, giving rise to new solidarities which cross ethnic and religious lines. The state – sometimes described by analysts as 'neither authoritarian nor democratic' (Crouch 1996) — takes an ambivalent attitude towards these developments, supporting certain NGOs on the one hand, while taking a hostile stance towards some others.

Fifth, in linguistic, cultural and artistic spheres, pluralist spaces have developed significantly. In educational institutions, one can witness, for instance, Malaysian children of various ethnic and religious backgrounds studying side by side in national schools using one common language, viz.

Malay, while an increasing number of non-Chinese children (currently over 65,000) are attending Chinese schools. At the same time, alongside the growth of public tertiary institutions which use Malay as the medium of instruction, private tertiary institutions have also sprouted during the last one decade, using English as the medium of instruction and taking in mostly students (the majority of whom are non-Malays) who cannot find places in the limited number of public institutions. On the cultural front, there is the growth of ethnic cultural expressions be they in the form of dances, songs, and other artistic expressions (for example, poetry, theatre, short stories), or in the form of material cultural products, a development partially influenced by the state's drive in promoting tourism.

Sixth, in the religious sphere, the last thirty years has seen the growth of religious movements among the major religious adherents – Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Taoists, etc., (Chandra 1987; Zainah 1987; Ackerman & Lee 1988; Shamsul 1994; Sharifah Zaleha 1997; Jeffrey 1999), some of which were clearly reacting to westernising modernization and globalization (Beyer 1994). These movements, especially the Islamic movement, have made significant impacts upon state policies and struggles for state power, on people's everyday lives, as well as on inter-ethnic relations. In fact, some Islamist groups have worked out alternatives in the name of Islam, setting up their own educational institutions (from nursery to tertiary level), medical centres and other outfits. The ruling BN — especially its dominant partner, the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) — under the leadership of Dr. Mahathir, responded to the Islamic upsurge by repositioning themselves on Islam. Calling themselves 'moderates' and 'Islamic modernists', they instituted their Islamisation policy, and in the process introduced a number of measures such as Islamic banking, streamlining of Islamic administration, and setting up of a number of other institutions with Islamic credentials (one of the most important being the International Islamic University) – all of which led to the increasing power and roles of the religious authority over the state and society. On the political front, the co-optation in 1982 of the charismatic leader of the Islamic youth movement, Anwar Ibrahim, into UMNO and the BN government – considered by many observers as a major political coup — was an attempt to resist the tide of Islamic resurgence led by UMNO's opponent, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) or PAS which espouses the setting up of an Islamic state. However, Anwar's sacking on September 2, 1998 and the subsequent growth of the *reformasi* movement participated by all the

major Opposition parties and many NGOs, has turned the Islamic tide against UMNO. This gave a great fillip to PAS which made massive inroads into the Malay heartland — Kelantan, Trengganu, Kedah and Perlis — and in several other states in Peninsular Malaysia as witnessed in the results of the November 29, 1999 general election in which PAS succeeded in retaining its control in Kelantan, capturing Trengganu, and more than trebled its representation in the current 193-seat Malaysian Parliament — from eight to 27 MPs (Members of Parliament). With PAS being the major opposition party, Malaysia for the first time in its political history, has both a Malay-dominated government and opposition.[2]

These developments create a complex situation for pluralism in Malaysia, opening up spaces for both cooperation and tolerance, as well as contestation and struggles between different groups in society. While some members of the middle class have used diversities in ethnicity, religion, language, culture, and so on to sharpen social divisions, others are developing pluralist values and organizations – some devising new formulae for pluralist tolerance. This paper attempts to analyze the complex interplay of these multifaceted convergence, contestation and tension as well as their implications for civility and participation in contemporary Malaysia as it enters the twenty first century and the new millenium. The data for this paper is extracted from the in-depth interviews conducted in the first half of 1999 among 74 informants (four-fifths males) from the economic, religious, social and political sectors, consisting of 37 Malays,[3] 11 Chinese of various dialect groups, 11 Indians, one Singhalese, one Orang Asli from the Temuan group, one of mixed Asian parentage, two Siamese, one Bidayuh, one Kelabit, and six Kadazan-Dusun. In terms of region, the vast majority are from the metropolitan Klang Valley and the surrounding areas, but those from the outlying regions were also interviewed to reflect experiences and views from the non-metropolitan areas. For example, from the predominantly Malay belt, that is, the PAS-ruled Kelantan on the north-east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, seven informants from three ethnic groups were interviewed, while to reflect the experiences and views from east Malaysia, sixteen informants – eight each from Sarawak (mainly from Kuching) and Sabah (mainly from Kota Kinabalu) — were also interviewed. By age and experience, the informants range from those of the older generation — the oldest being in their seventies — to a few young activists in their mid-twenties. These individuals are regarded as 'landmarks' or 'signposts' to reflect the experiences, sentiments and idealism of their respective generations.

New Alignments in the Economic, Social and Ethno-religious Domains

Economic development and market expansion

Economic development and market expansion constitute the economic basis of the new nation. While there are contestation and the language of exclusion, there have also developed convergence and the attendant new language of participation, dubbed as 'smart partnership', highlighted mostly in the business sector. We should take note of the emerging evidence which shows that relations between many Malay and non-Malay business groups are going through a process of complementarity, through synergies or smart partnership, replacing the old-style 'Ali-Baba' syndrome[4] of the 1960s and 1970s. This is exemplified particularly by those who form inter-ethnic partnerships with other Malaysians. While one should not romanticise such developments and ignore the underlying problems and even conflicts and tension (this will be discussed later), one cannot deny the fact that they have come to play an important role today, providing opportunities for the expansion of social resources for civility and participation.

At the national level, this emerging trend has been institutionalised with the setting up in 1995 of the Council for the Promotion of Genuine Joint Ventures (Majlis Galakan Usahasama Tulen – MGUT) whose function is to promote close interaction and co-operation between Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera business groups to share experience, knowledge and expertise in business activities. The MGUT comprises representatives from the Malaysian Malay Chamber of Commerce (DPMM), the Malaysian Associated Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCIM), the Malaysian Associated Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MAICCI), the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development, and a consortium of 20 banks. As at December 1998, there were 53 such joint ventures, mostly between Malays and Chinese from the small and medium industries (SMIs) — especially those involved in the manufacturing sector — have been set up (Laporan Tahunan 1998: 34-35). These joint ventures do not include those formed or initiated by businessmen on their own at some stages in their business career.

However, the language of participation is not confined to only the officially state-sanctioned entities mentioned above. It is fairly widespread within the business community. Several Malay businessmen interviewed in this study show how they have synergised their business enterprises with Chinese partners to benefit from each other's strengths. There are Malay businessmen with construction work experience who have teamed up with Chinese engineering firms to become property developers. There is the case of a prominent Malay businessman who is chairman of several companies listed on the Second Board of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (KLSE) who works closely with his Chinese partners not only through times of prosperity but also through the 1997-98 economic crisis and the subsequent recovery.

The view that Malay and non-Malay businesses should co-operate and be involved in synergies is shared by Chinese and Indian businessmen too. A Chinese businessman in Kuala Lumpur who is also an active member in a Buddhist association likens his relationship with his Malay business partners as "a healthy marriage... (in which) we are actually helping each other" and that the 'Ali-Baba type' of relationship should no longer be allowed. However, he feels that genuine partnerships should not be forced, but should evolve naturally, through which one "should know the other as friends first, before entering into joint business ventures." This view is shared by a prominent Chinese businessman in Sarawak who regards his business partnership with the Malay/Bumiputera as a relationship with potentials for greater capital and project expansion, and that he has no problem with his company's Bumiputera directors since "they are experienced." Echoing similar sentiments, the chairman of the Malaysian Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry reveals that he and others work closely with members of both the Malay and Chinese chambers of commerce, and that he would like to see the amalgamation of the three chambers into a unified national body in the future.

Such partnerships are not isolated instances; other informants in this and other studies testify to this development. A Malay entrepreneur, an UMNO member with government connections, and who also has some business experience, feels happy about the joint venture he has set up with his Chinese partner. As he puts it, "(The partnership) is formed on the basis of his (Chinese partner) experience, his background in business which is long established... (and) with my connections... the combination of our business works." Among those who do not form such business partnerships, they would join Chinese business associations as shown in the case of a Malay entrepreneur in catering services. Unlike many others who rely heavily on political connections, this businessman (an ex-army officer) started his business after leaving the army, and made use of his

business networks with the Chinese to expand his enterprise. As he puts it, "(Although I am a Malay) I join the Chinese wholesalers' association, because if I don't, I won't gain the knowledge (and experience)... And they accept me (as a member of the association) ". He feels that co-operation with Chinese business can be sincere; "If we have conducted business (with them) for some time, and (have begun to) understand each other, we can tell the Chinese businessmen that we need to prosper too. (I tend to feel that) Chinese businessmen prefer Malays, because they have the perception that Malays don't cheat."

An important practice related with business is philanthropy, which is made possible through business profits as well as charity by well-meaning members of the public. In the main, most philanthropic institutions tend to be confined within the same ethnic and/or religious boundaries, although there are exceptions to the rule especially in recent years. An interesting finding from this study is the philanthropic activities of a Malay businessman who has Chinese partners in his group of companies listed in the Second Board of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (KLSE). Over the last twenty years, he has donated about RM5 million from his profits to charitable causes of all ethnic groups, including the Chinese poor and the needy. According to him, "good fortunes come from God, so I must help all." When asked why he took pains to help the Chinese poor in his town, he explained that when he was a lowly lorry driver many years before he joined business, the Chinese there were very civil towards him, often treating him with nice food and drinks; "so it's a kind of expressing my gratitude for their good gesture." Although this might be an exceptional case, the fact that Malay philanthropy has crossed ethnic boundaries is an important development to note. These examples tend to show that although ethnicity has become privatised because of the developmentalist ideology, it does not necessarily prevent civility and participation between ethnic groups even in the economic sphere.

The language of participation and civility towards each other in business circles and philanthropy as expressed above provides some ethnographic evidence to support the view that in the 1990s, there is greater interdependence and integration between Chinese and Bumiputera capital, and Chinese capital is viewed to complement, rather than compete with state or Bumiputera capital. Unlike the situation in the 1980s which was characterized mainly by divergent paths of antagonists or of 'winners and losers' between the ethnic groups (Yoshihara 1989, Jesudason 1990), the 1990s can be said to present a more pluralistic

picture of convergence, although contestation and divergence remain important. Because of this development, some scholars suggest that "the degree of integration and mutual interdependence of Chinese and Malay business groups ... is likely to add new ballast in the amelioration of ethnic differences" (Searle 1999: 248).

However, does this "new ballast in the amelioration of ethnic differences" in the economic sector also find expression in other domains, namely social and ethno-religious? The following sections make a modest attempt at answering this question.

Social and ethno-religious domains

Evidence from the study shows that the civility and participation in the economic sector described above also find expression to a certain extent in the social and ethno-religious domains, more so in Malay-dominated smaller towns rather than in Chinese-dominated major metropolitan areas. There is greater interaction and cross-cultural penetration between ethnic groups despite their different cultures and religions in a number of smaller towns in ethnically diverse states such as Sarawak and also in certain parts of Peninsular Malaysia. An interesting case is a small town in Perak, in which Malays make up about two-thirds, and the rest are Chinese and some Indians. In this town, Malay businesses are thriving alongside Chinese businesses. Malay-owned supermarkets and restaurants have penetrated Chinese clientele. Here, as also in many other places, Malay cuisine is very popular among Chinese clients; in fact, Malay eating places there are heavily thronged, especially at night by Chinese who patronise them regularly to enjoy their favourite seafood and satay, which they consider as not only tasty, but also reasonably priced. On the part of the Malays who patronise Chinese sundry and other shops, they feel that they are given a fair deal, because the Chinese shopkeepers charge them the same price as they would charge their Chinese customers. Such interactions are not limited to the market place. Mutual visits during cultural festivals such as the Muslim *Hari Raya* and Chinese New Year by the old and the young are commonplace. Chinese guests who attend Malay weddings are generous with their presents (*angpows*), and they also give generous donations to Malay religious causes, such as for the local mosque or *surau* (Muslim prayer house smaller than the mosque). On the part of the Malays, they attend Chinese New Year festivals and help their Chinese friends to slaughter chicken and other animals the Muslim way and cook *halal*[5] dishes for Chinese

weddings and other functions so that Muslim guests can attend and enjoy the food with a clear religious conscience. Malay community leaders also attend such functions as the opening of Chinese or Hindu places of worship.

However, the classic case is, of course, Kelantan situated on the north-east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Kelantan is a predominantly Malay-Muslim state ruled by PAS for most of the post-independence period until today. In this state, the Chinese constitute only five per cent of the population. Although Kelantan has been a major bastion of Islamic resurgence, inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations in the state have been going on harmoniously. This fact is acknowledged by everyone of the informants (Malays and the ethnic minorities — Chinese and Siamese) interviewed in this study and also by other informants the researcher has interviewed for other studies.[6] The fact that many Kelantan Chinese are able to adapt to the Malay environment by learning Malay, mastering the local dialect and assimilating some aspects of Malay culture facilitate their integration with the Malays. This has been made relatively easier because Kelantan Malays do not perceive them as posing threats (political or economic) to them. On the contrary, they regard political differences among Malays based on party lines (between followers of PAS and UMNO) as constituting a more serious threat to unity than ethnic differences.

The following cases provide some insights into inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations in the state of Kelantan. Mr. Lee (not his real name), a 59-year old Chinese businessman – a first generation migrant from mainland China – came with his parents to Kelantan when he was seven and has since integrated himself with Kelantan Malays. His experience shows how a first generation Chinese migrant developed roots in a predominantly Malay community, learnt the Malay language, and adapted to the Malay/Muslim environment. Being a businessman, he uses Malay (Kelantan dialect) most of the time, while at home, he speaks Hokkien. Despite being a small minority in a predominantly Malay-Muslim belt, the Chinese in Kelantan, according to the informant's narratives, do not feel persecuted, or marginalised, even under the PAS government. According to him, "In Kelantan, Chinese-Malay relations are quite different from other states…. Before as a young boy, I stayed in the *kampung* (village), and I noticed that the villagers, be they Chinese or Malays, could live together. In fact, ethnic relations in Kelantan have been good since a long time ago." On inter-faith relations, the informant also feels that

there is no problem. "Everybody here respects each other's [religion]. They know what Muslims are, what Chinese are, and everybody respects each other. … There have never been conflicts [*gaduh-gaduh*] between Malays and Chinese, and between Buddhists and Muslims."

His views and experiences are supported by others, including those from the Siamese community. A leader from the Kelantan Siamese Association says: "In general, the Malays here (Kelantan) have accepted us. They regard us as the rightful people here. If there are fights, it is not because of race, but (due to) personal matters." The head of a Buddhist temple, a senior Siamese monk confirms his observation. He says that in terms of inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations, "there are no problems…. things are fine."

The above observations and experiences are also shared by Malays, including those from the other end of the spectrum – the more conservative and orthodox Muslim traditionalists. There is the case of a *Tok Guru*, head of a *pondok* (a traditional religious school) who — while disagreeing strongly with mixed marriages (even between Malays and Chinese converts) — nevertheless views inter-ethnic relations in Kelantan positively. He says that Malays, Chinese and Siamese interact very well in the market place. "They are good [to each other]. Malays buy from Chinese, Chinese buy from Malays. The Siamese also do the same… This was [the situation] before and it is the same today."

Summing up inter-ethnic relation in the state, a young Malay cultural activist puts it this way: "I feel the races in Kelantan are all fine. For example, the Chinese, they are nice people. We can make friends with them (because) they understand the Kelantan dialect. So, we can be friends, and can even go in and out of their homes." To the informants, the main issue which has plagued Kelantan for many years until today is not ethnic differences, but conflicts between the state and federal governments, and among the Malays themselves because of struggles over political power. The split among the Malays mirrors the fight between the dominant UMNO which holds the reins of power in the federal government with the PAS-led Kelantan state government as expressed clearly in the recent general election. It is a class issue as well as one of governance.

Similar views and experiences are expressed by informants from the religious sector, especially on the universality of religious teachings about humanity and that followers of different religions can live peacefully and work together. Interviews with various representatives from the Islamic,

Buddhist, Hindu and Christian faiths indicate that all regard their religions as inclusive and can form the basis of pluralist tolerance. Take the view and experiences of a Muslim modernist who heads a modern *pondok* in Tanjung Karang, Selangor as an example. Espousing Islam and ethno-religious pluralisms, he argues that to achieve his objectives of instilling religious values and morality among members of society, he needs to involve other ethnic groups, namely Chinese and Indians who are Muslims and non-Muslims. To him, "ethnic differences are not important, Muslims of various ethnic groups are the same in terms of their objectives." His *pondok* is prepared to accept Muslim students from Chinese, Indian and other origins. He agrees that while there must be one national language, i.e., Malay, Malays/Muslims should also learn other languages (Chinese, Tamil, etc.). He also agrees with ethnically mixed marriages, but the spouses must be Muslims or become Muslims. Citing the religious basis of co-operation between Muslims and non-Muslims, he argues that Islam namely the *sunnah* [practice of Prophet Muhamad) "has shown the way how it can be done." His *pondok* is ready to engage non-Muslim teachers to teach non-religious subjects such as Mathematics, English, and so on. Stressing that he is against religious bigotry among Muslims, he maintains that "people must understand that religion is a person's individual right" and they should forge "common grounds (between religions as well as) mutual understanding and respect between believers of different faiths."

Similar inclusive views are echoed by propagators of other religious beliefs. A Buddhist monk puts it this way: "(To Buddhists) all religions – be they Buddhism or Islam – are basically the same…. they all want people to be good. There are many ways to becoming good, but the ultimate is the same." The advisor of the Sri Satya Sai Baba Association is more explicit regarding the inclusiveness of religion. Espousing his pluralist values, he contends that to him, "all religions are one. I'm born a Hindu, but I respect all religions and I think all religions are great." To prove that values in all religions and cultures are the same, he quotes the principles in Hinduism about honouring one's parents and teacher as expressed in the phrase *matha, pitha, guru, deivam*, which means honour one's father, mother and *guru* (teacher). He also stresses that one of the Ten Commandments in Christianity is to honour one's father and mother. In Islam, he draws attention to Prophet Muhamad's saying that heaven is at the feet of the mother. He explains that the Sai Baba is basically an interfaith organization dedicated to service and human values. "(Its)

objective … is that the Hindu must become a better Hindu, a Muslim must become a better Muslim, and a Buddhist must become a better Buddhist. Only (in this way they can) work together for the benefit of society. (They) must do and practice human values."However, he contends that religious followers have betrayed "the trust of the religion", they have not gone to the ground and played their roles in improving society. His message is essentially the same as that of the *dakwah* movement — go down to the people, spread the message and educate them based on religious principles and values.

The language of inclusion and civility among ethno-religious groups has made a positive impact not only in ethno-religious circles but also in the political domain, and has created a new political culture in Malaysia. Our informant, the vice-president of ABIM, a leading Islamic youth movement in Malaysia, points out to the broad-based coalition that had emerged since late 1998 comprising more than a dozen organizations – political parties, religious groups (including ABIM) and other NGOs – under a multi-ethnic national body called GERAK to fight for justice and democracy. It should be noted that some months after the formation of GERAK, the four major opposition parties – PAS, DAP, Parti KeADILan Nasional (National Justice Party — KeADILan) and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) — formed the multi-ethnic Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front) to fight against the ruling BN. Noting the changed perceptions of non-Malays and non-Muslims towards Islamict groups such as ABIM, our informant explains that "Had we talked about Islam within narrow confines, they would probably be afraid of us. (But we have made efforts) to show that Islam is not an exclusive religion, fanatical or against co-operation and living in harmony with other (religious) groups. (We've shown that) Islam enshrines universal values (suited for) peaceful co-existence and that the principles of Islam are acceptable and practical to all communities, even for non-Muslims." He maintains that "ABIM's stand on human rights and democracy may have changed (the non-Muslim) perception towards us…. They now regard ABIM as more open and prepared to listen to various views, and that it is not exclusive to the Malays."

Echoes of Old Divides and Divergences

What has been discussed above reveals the widespread practice of pluralist tolerance among Malaysians as well as attempts at projecting the inclusiveness of various religions and how various religious groups try to

reach out to other believers. However, tolerance has yet to evolve into open espousal of full participation and integration among all ethnic groups and believers of various faiths, while attempts at reaching out have not yet gained widespread acceptance and momentum. As it is, there are still many contested domains and exclusions on both sides – Malays/Muslims and non-Malays/non-Muslims. For example, there are reservations about social mixing between ethnic groups, and more so mixed marriages. An informant, the head of a traditional Muslim *pondok* in Selangor, spells out the boundaries when he says that while he is "not against his children mixing with other races in schools, etc., they should be careful not follow their customs and religion … otherwise [their faith will be] *rosak* (ruined)." While mixed marriages may be on the increase in Malaysia, opposition or at least criticisms and skepticism of it are aplenty. Although many Malays/Muslims are tolerant of such marriages — provided the prospective non-Muslim partner becomes a Muslim — there are not a few Muslims who disapprove of it despite the conversion of the potential spouse into Islam. The same informant, for example, regards mixed marriages as "unsuitable because of cultural differences" and claims that "many such marriages have failed", while his counterpart, another *Tok Guru* (this time from Kelantan), says that mixed marriages "will (only) demean our own *bangsa* [race]." While one may be tempted to dismiss these views as the parochial sentiments of orthodox religionists of the older generation who attempt to resist the tide of change, we have to take note that such views are also found among 'modern' Muslims of the younger generation. When asked on this issue, one young Malay/Muslim informant, a professional from the economic sector, strongly disagrees with mixed marriages, arguing that "not many who enter into such marriage really adhere to the Islamic way of life after settling down." According to him, this would create serious problems if the Malay/Muslim partner in the marriage were to die first since the spouse of the deceased would have difficulties in sustaining the faith, and this in turn would affect the faith and identity of their off-springs.

Non-Malays/non-Muslims also have apprehensions and criticisms of mixed marriages, albeit for different reasons. The President of the Kelantan Hokkien Association, for example, although advocating liberal views about inter-ethnic and inter-faith relations, is not in favour of mixed marriages. According to him, marriage is a serious affair and should be lasting. Although he does not mind if the couple can live together in the same family, he feels that such arrangement will not happen in mixed

marriages because of religious differences. Reflecting the views prevalent among the Chinese community, he says that when a member of the Chinese family marries someone from another ethnic group or religion, it will be a "loss" to the family. With regard to Chinese-Malay inter-marriage, he claims that when a Chinese girl marries a Malay and becomes a Muslim, she "will be gone from the family." Our informant, an enlightened Muslim *pendakwah* (missionary) from a mainstream Islamic welfare organization (Perkim) interviewed in this study disagrees with this perception on the part of non-Muslims. He explains that such a marriage "only involves change of religious beliefs, not a change of culture or one's parents," and stresses that "one's way of life and culture remain the same... including respect and love for one's parents and siblings." However, although such stance has helped in clarifying the confusion in recent years, it has not really put this apprehension to rest. This is because – as another informant, the Buddhist monk cited earlier, puts it — mixed marriages in Malaysia are a one-way thing; "It is OK for non-Muslims to become Muslims, but not the other way round," because the *syariah* law does not allow change of religion for the Muslims as this act would be considered *murtad* (apostasy). Given this delicate situation, the demand by some Islamic groups, namely PAS, for the imposition of the death penalty for apostates has only added more tension, and generated alarm not only among non-Muslims, but also among many Muslims themselves (see Zainah Anwar 1999). In the main, because of these problems, the informants prefer marriage to be confined within the same religion and ethnic group to avoid conflicts and break-ups. As two Christian pastors from Sabah put it, if there are ethnically mixed marriages, "they should be among followers of the same faith", in their case, Christians.

Besides disagreements on the issue of mixed marriages, resentment and suspicion still prevail among both Malays and non-Malays, more so among those residing in major cities and certain states where keen competition exists between the political elite and the middle classes of different ethnic groups for political, economic and cultural resources. This is expressed by many informants especially among Chinese and Indian activists in the Peninsula, and among the Kadazandusun in Sabah.

Criticisms of, and dissatisfaction with the New Economic Policy (NEP) continue to resonate. On the one hand, many informants – Malays and non-Malays – see the NEP as a major contributor to inter-ethnic peace. One Indian informant, a high-ranking official who is also advisor to a spiritual movement, regards the NEP as providing a stake to 'everybody'

to share the national wealth. "This is the most powerful factor for peace and stability in Malaysia ... because of the distribution of wealth." His comments on the situation in the late 1960s when the May 13 riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur, which killed many lives and destroyed property, are worth noting. He says, "You quote me on this. (In that incident), Chinese would have cried, one Indian would have cried, but not one Malay would do so. He (the Malay) may sympathize with others (those who suffer losses), but he wasn't crying because he did not own anything. But because of the New Economic Policy, if Kuala Lumpur burns today, everybody (Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Others) suffers. And that's is the most powerful factor for the country's stability."

On the other hand, there is antipathy among several groups – mainly Chinese and Indians – towards the NEP, which they regard as discriminatory with its exclusionary dichotomising of Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera, and also the Islamic resurgence movements which tend to inhibit inter-ethnic and inter-faith interactions. They agree that the worst episode for inter-ethnic relations was the May 13, 1969 tragedy, which everybody tries to put behind, but the 1980s constitute a bad period for ethnic relations, inflamed by certain politicians and over-zealous chauvinists. Although ethnic relations have improved in the 1990s, they feel that inter-ethnic interactions have not "returned to the free and relaxed atmosphere of yesteryear (1940s and 1950s)" when ethnic consciousness was not considered a major issue. One Chinese informant involved in human rights NGOs says: "Things are slightly better today than ten years ago, but the law and the policies (based on the NEP) (for example, towards Chinese mother tongue education) have not changed....The ideal of an equal society for all ethnic communities in which the poor are helped based on class rather than they are the indigenous people of this country" is still far off. An Indian lady pensioner who now works as a social worker criticises the NEP as being one-sided, "for the benefit of the Malays. That's why the Malays have come up (since) the education system is more for them rather than for us (Indians)." Based on this perception, she concludes that "ethnic relations are not close today...a lot of jealousy and prejudices towards one another (exist)." A Chinese businessman admits that in his company "there are more Chinese staff", but he is quick to explain that "it does not mean that we target these people", saying that it is because Bumiputera individuals "have better opportunity in government agencies or private sector companies."

Such divergent views are also expressed openly in Sabah especially by informants from the Kadazandusun ethnic group who constitute the most demographically dominant Bumiputera community in that state, but a minority indigenous group nationally. As beneficiaries of the NEP, they do not blame this policy for the rise in ethnic consciousness, but they point their finger to ethno-politics and religious revivalism. As with many informants in Peninsular Malaysia, many Sabah informants acknowledge that ethnicity was not a factor during their 'growing up years', but it is a hot issue today because it has been used in political mobilization. A 73 year-old informant, a Kadazandusun, who has been a prominent figure in public service sums up the issue this way: "In Sabah we are more cosmopolitan (in terms of ethnic composition) and everybody must learn to live with one another. In those days, ethnicity did not mean anything and I never saw it as a factor. (But) politics got dirty nowadays... highlighting racial issues .... and fragment(ing) people." This view is shared by another informant, a 44-year old Kadazandusun activist, who agrees that the situation was far better before "as the people were not polluted (politically)." While the first informant attributes the rise of ethnic consciousness to ethno-politics, the latter puts the blame on religious revivalism and over-zealous religious propagandists. According to him, "(in earlier times), people from various ethnic groups used to work together and eat together. Nowadays, it is different ... people are more polarised along religious lines and this makes it difficult for some people."

In the economic domain, despite the emerging trend of inter-ethnic convergence or complementarity noted earlier, there is also a trend of confining the activities only within the same ethnic group. Among many Malays, for example, they feel that despite the NEP and the 'smart partnership', they still have a long way to go, and one way to 'catch up' is not just to rely on the government, but to strive on their own. This is observable especially among members of the younger generation who are more aggressive, and they dare to take bold initiatives to uplift their lot to achieve what they call 'ethnic balance' by enlarging the Malay middle class. A 45-year old informant, for example, dedicates his company to that objective. Criticising the employee-mentality of many Malays, he argues that Malays must dare to be self-reliant, and that Malay upliftment cannot be left to individuals alone, but must be done through collective efforts such as through a company. He maintains that he is not being 'communal or ethnicist' by adopting such an approach; it is just that he wants to focus on the Malays to achieve 'the ethnic balance', and once

it is achieved, he would widen it to all Malaysians. A young Malay professional from the economic sector who grew up in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur which saw the May 13, 1969 riots, is also concerned about uplifting the economic lot of the Malays. Reflecting the sentiments of the generation who felt the trauma of the ethnic riots, he readily admits that he has suspicion towards other ethnic groups, namely Chinese. "We have been brought up that way because of May 13", he says. He maintains that "On the surface we can co-operate (with the Chinese in the economic sector) in the interest of the company.... But, there is the problem of fairness. If you're a Malay and your boss is a Chinese, you doubt whether he's going to upgrade you when it comes to end of year promotion."

Based on the analysis of both the new solidarities as well as the contestation and divergences above, many informants are not far off the mark in their stance that while they welcome the inter-ethnic peace and harmony prevailing in Malaysia today, they feel that Malaysians still have a long way to go in transforming themselves into *bangsa* Malaysia. As a young Malay social activist working in Pink Triangle in Kuala Lumpur candidly puts it, although there is harmony, it is founded on the basis of toleration, not so much on civility and mutual reciprocity. "People are taught to tolerate the system, and tolerate each other, but under our breath, we sometimes say racist remarks." This view finds resonance with that expressed by the President of the Pure Life Society who maintains that the unity Malaysia currently enjoys is born "out of necessity, ... unity for survival", unity which is "(instrumental), calculative and artificial", and not "unity of the heart."

The Logic of The Underprivileged Ethnic Minorities

Another important dimension of pluralism in Malaysia that requires further analysis is the problem of minority groups. In this section, we will focus on two such groups – the Orang Asli and the Siamese — who fight for their economic, political and cultural rights, especially the right to maintain their identity as they struggle against deprivation and marginalisation. With heightened consciousness, partly enhanced by globalization, these minority groups demand empowerment and civility as equal partners in nation-building and market expansion in the country. The voices expressed by these groups indicate clearly that it is very important to grasp the logic of the underprivileged ethnic minorities if pluralism is to serve as a social resource for civility and participation in future.

Orang Asli

The Orang Asli (literally, "the original people"), who currently number over 90,000 (Nicholas 2000) in Peninsular Malaysia, have suffered marginalisation for centuries, and they remain one of the poorest communities in the country. Many still live inside the jungle or on its fringes, without regular sources of income, although some have moved to towns to work in urban jobs, and a few have joined the ranks of the middle class. In terms of administration, the Orang Asli are under the purview of the Department of Orang Asli Affairs, set up since the British period, and is today placed under the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development. Conscious of the need for an organization as vehicle to champion their interests, a few leading elements in the community have set up the Peninsular Orang Asli Association (Persatuan Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia – POASM), which claims a current membership of over 16,000 individuals. POASM's main concern is how to get the Orang Asli, which is far behind the other ethnic groups, to eventually share equal opportunities with the latter. The community is represented by one senator (a nominated post) in the Parliament's Upper House. To draw attention to their plight, POASM has established network with other indigenous groups the world over in their common endeavour to share experiences, and work out common strategies to further their goals.

From the interview with POASM's president conducted for this study, one can clearly appreciate the logic of the underprivileged minority. To him, two major issues need immediate solution, i.e., land titles (at the moment most of them do not have individual land titles on the land they live), and education. Recognizing that higher education is the route to social mobility and that the Orang Asli are backward in education, he wants special consideration such as a quota system (akin to the one given to the Malays) be created for the Orang Asli to enable their children to enter the university. As he puts it, "If we have to wait for our children to get Grade One [in the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* or the Malaysian Certificate of Education examinations], they will never get a place in the university."

Expressing his people's frustrations, he says that "Since young, I wanted change, (for we don't want) to be like our parents, poor and illiterate. I want to be a knowledgeable person." But he claims that "since small, I noticed that nobody really cared for the problems of the Orang Asli"; and what is worse, he feels that the other communities

including the Malays, "look down upon the Orang Asli as low class." He claims that it is his consciousness of this problem that led to his involvement in POASM to change the state of affairs because "I don't want future generations to suffer the same way my generation did." He regards his work in POASM as having some results. "Within the organization we can exchange views, and inculcate the importance of education. Now, there is some awareness of it (among the community)." However, he regrets the perceived lack of support and understanding from the government and the other communities for his struggle. Without support from the government bureaucracy and from the other ethnic groups in Malaysia, "how can the Orang Asli progress?", he says. Reflecting his awareness of the need for full citizenship participation for minorities, he argues that the Orang Asli are disempowered for they do not have real and effective representation, what more participation at decision-making levels. As he puts it, "We do not have political representation, we don't have real power in the government." From his perspective, "only two ethnic groups enjoy the most benefits – the Chinese... who control the economy, and the Malays who control politics; and now Indians have begun to enjoy these benefits too."

As with various minorities, he is concerned with maintaining the Orang Asli identity. Thus, he agrees that while Malay and English should be studied and used, minority languages should be protected. He stresses the principle of mutual respect and tolerance between ethnic groups, and is against forced assimilation. Being animists, one of the main issues the Orang Asli have to contend with is religious conversion, and they have been the target of proselytizing activities from both Muslim and Christian missionaries. He is not happy with Orang Asli Islamisation, not so much because of Islam, but more so because of the practice of some of the *dakwah* people (Muslim missionaries) whom he regards as being mainly interested in getting converts, and not in their welfare.

Siamese community

The Siamese have lived in Malaysia for hundreds of years, although a few are more recent. The Siamese are a small group (numbering some 60,000), living mostly in the rural areas of the northern states (Kelantan, Perak, Kedah and Perlis) of Peninsular Malaysia, adjoining the Thai border. Unlike the Orang Asli, they are more advanced, with many of their young having gone to university and pursuing middle-class careers. The Siamese are mostly organised under the Malaysian Siamese

Association, with its headquarters in Kedah. The association is an effective lobby that takes up issues affecting their interests, and channels them to the government through the sole Thai senator in Parliament. The Malaysian Siamese Association has its local counterparts in the three states. One important local association is the Persatuan Masyarakat Siam Kelantan (Kelantan Siamese Association), whose secretary was interviewed in Kota Bharu in this study. From the interview, a number of issues pertaining to identity politics and interests of the community cropped up. These issues have been fought for by the Malaysian Siamese Association who have managed to resolve some of them with the state authorities.

According to our informant, the community used to be known as Thais, but it has been changed to Siamese, "because people here are confused, thinking that we are from Thailand, living in Malaysia." While this change has helped check the confusion, it still exists to some extent because members of the older generation are referred to as Thais in their identity card, while their children are known as Siamese. Conscious of their marginalisation, the association objected to the labeling by the authorities who place them under the 'Others' category in official forms, and demanded that they be referred to as *keturunan Siam* (of Siamese origin). This problem has recently been sorted out, for example, in application forms for university entrance.

Besides the problem with their community name, there is also the problem of their individual surname and first name. In Malaysia, some ethnic groups like the Chinese and Eurasians use surnames, while the Malays use first names separated by the word *bin* (son of) or *binti* (daughter of) before the name of the father in the birth certificate. The same procedure was also adopted for the Siamese, except that the word *bin* was replaced with *anak lelaki (a/l)* or *anak perempuan (a/p)*. The community, which traditionally used surnames, was unhappy with this practice and voiced their grievances in Parliament. Subsequently, the ruling was changed, and the Siamese could now use their surname when registering their children's birth, but this ruling is sometimes not adhered to at the local level.

Another problem, as narrated by our informant, relates to the issue of Bumiputera status. The term 'Bumiputera' was used after the formation of Malaysia in 1963, to include the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak. This term became more important with the implementation of the NEP, especially when it comes to certain schemes meant only for the Bumiputera. Because of their struggle, the Siamese community, although

not accorded the same status, can today participate in unit trust schemes run by Permodalan Nasional Berhad (National Equity Corporation), such as the Amanah Saham Nasional (ASN) and the Amanah Saham Bumiputera (ASB), which are solely reserved for the Bumiputera. At the same time, just as the non-Muslim Bumiputera in Sabah who can become UMNO members (UMNO has traditionally been a Malay party), the Siamese in Kedah and Perlis can also do the same. Strangely, this does not apply in Kelantan where UMNO has not opened its doors to the Kelantan Siamese. Although the latter can join the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Gerakan (acronym for Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia or the Malaysian People's Movement), many who contemplate joining political parties prefer to join UMNO because of its greater political leverage.

Unlike the Orang Asli, the Siamese have the advantage of better education, and having the rich Thai tradition in Thailand to fall back on for cultural resources. As such, they are more sophisticated in their demands and methods of struggle than the former. However, a number of other problems remain. For example, a small number of Siamese, especially the illiterate members of the older generation who live in the interior in Kelantan still do not possess citizenship. At the same time, there is also the problem of land titles, because in Kelantan, land is mostly administered under the Malay Land Reservation Act, thus restricting other Malaysians, to own the land. These are among the issues which remain the bone of contention by the Siamese community with the state.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Malaysian pluralism has impacted post-independence nation-building and market-making in many ways. Although the historical resources for pluralism which had their roots in the country's cosmopolitanism are insufficient to ensure participation and civility in modern multi-ethnic Malaysia, they nevertheless constitute an important cultural repository crucial in promoting modern pluralism. They have been usefully garnered to provide historically-informed cultural meanings to the contemporary changes and transformation as well as in seeking commonalities between different ethno-religious groups in the making of the modern Malaysian nation. More importantly, the recent emergence of a multi-ethnic new middle class, together with its enlightened secular and religious intellectuals, have played a vital role in widening pluralist

spaces and promoting tolerance and participation in Malaysia today. As shown in this paper, while some sections of the capitalist and middle classes of the various ethnic groups are still engaged in exclusionary activities, maintaining the old divides, divergences and even tension, the rise of the more enlightened elements among the new middle class, including among the Malays/Muslims, who exude a new sense of confidence as well as a strong mood for multi-ethnic participation and change, is of historic significance. Based on our study, it is clear that the language of inclusion and civility advanced by the enlightened elements of the middle class, notably its intellectuals and pluralist mediators has emerged not only in the economic sphere or the domain of the market, but it is also growing in other domains – social, ethno-religious as well as political. The language of inclusion is making a positive contribution to the evolution of a new political culture which champions universal values such as human rights, democracy and inter-faith understanding and co-operation among Malaysians of all ethnic groups. In the religious domain in particular, a new thinking and practice of ethnic and religious tolerance and co-operation is emerging, championed by certain Islamic intellectuals, including a number in the established Islamic groups, such as PAS and ABIM. The major Islamic opposition party, PAS, for example, has of late become more open and inclusive towards non-Malays and non-Muslims, and has granted certain concessions to other ethnic communities especially in the two states (Kelantan and Trengganu) it now controls. Given the Malay/Muslim predominance in Malaysian ethno-politics, this new development can have far-reaching implications for the growth of Malaysian pluralism. Should the pro-pluralist elements within Islamic resurgence develop in strength, they can play a vital role in promoting social resources for civility and participation in the country.

However, as cautioned earlier, while this new development heralds a positive future for pluralism, one should not romanticise it, for there are serious shortcomings, obstacles and challenges along the way. Unlike some progressive Islamic movements in Indonesia such as Nahdatul Ulama, PAS — despite its progressive postures – is giving conflicting and even worrying signals, especially its exclusion of women from political leadership roles, and its insistence that its version of Islam is the only true one. Its brand of political Islam, namely its calls for the death penalty for apostasy, and the imposition of its version of *hudud* and the Islamic state in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia, have caused uneasiness and raised critical responses not only from many non-Malays/non-Muslims,

but also from Malays and Muslims, including their partners in the Barisan Alternatif, who collectively agreed to exclude the issue of *hudud* and the Islamic state from their 1999 joint election manifesto.

In the meanwhile, some sections in UMNO, in their attempt to reverse the serious setbacks the party has suffered among its Malay-Muslim constituencies, may try to 'out-Islamise' PAS – a move that could pave the way for a more volatile scenario in the religious domain. The intense political battle between UMNO and PAS, especially over the issue of who is the 'genuine standard-bearer of Islam' to win the hearts and minds of the Malay-Muslim grassroots has resulted in sharp schisms within the Malay-Muslim community. While the language of inclusion, civility and participation within the society may be growing, its progress will be very much influenced by the political twists and turns in the battle between the two parties, and also by the positioning the Chinese-based parties, particularly those within the ruling BN, decide to adopt in the face of Malay-Muslim splits.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] Recent transnational migration has in fact been on the increase. According to official statistics, non-citizens numbered 0.75 million or 4.3 per cent of the total Malaysian population in 1991, but their number increased to 1.61 million or 7.2 per cent in 1998 (Malaysia 1999: 96-97). However, other sources estimate the foreign migrant-worker population to be much higher, i.e., around two million (including a large number of unregistered or illegal foreign workers) (Ishak Shari & Abdul Rahman Embong 1998: 69).

[2] PAS president has now assumed the role of the Parliamentary Opposition Leader, a post previously held by the secretary-general of the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) for over two decades.

[3] Mostly Peninsular Malays, with several *Melayu-Minang*, two *Melayu-Jawa*, four *Melayu campuran*, and two *Melayu-Brunei*.

[4] The 'Ali-Baba' syndrome refers to the practice, common in the 1960s and 1970s, whereby a Chinese businessman would seek a Malay to be his partner because of the affirmative policy privileging the latter. In this relationship, Ali (a common Malay name) would become a sleeping partner, while Baba (meaning the Chinese businessman) would be the one running the show, being the *de facto* owner and manager of the enterprise.

[5] Performed in accordance with Islamic dietary prescriptions.

[6] In the November 29, 1999 election, PAS not only won in Malay areas in Kelantan, but also captured the Chinese-dominated constituency of Kota Bharu, the state capital. A few Chinese in Kota Bharu interviewed after the PAS victory feel that it is well-deserved. They regard the PAS candidate (a Chinese Muslim) for Kota Bahru is a "good man, who helped solve many long-standing problems the people had been facing since the time of the BN government." Many Chinese are impressed with the unassuming style of the Kelantan Menteri Besar (Chief Minister), Nik Aziz Nik Mat, who not only refused to move into his official residence but also took voluntary pay-cut since assuming office in 1990. To many Kelantan Malays and Chinese, he is a symbol of religious piety, honesty, humility, and benign tolerance, a person who is seen as corruption-free and does not discriminate people based on ethnic differences. This positive attitude towards PAS is also found among the Chinese in Trengganu. A Chinese informant, a small businessman in the state capital, Kuala Trengganu, whom the writer interviewed a few weeks after the general election, opines that many Chinese in the state can accept the newly-elected PAS government because "the Islam PAS is championing is quite different from the one before." At the same time, he draws attention to the promise of transparency and accountability made by the PAS government and the fact that it has granted a number of concessions to the Chinese community, including allowing the earlier-banned pig-rearing in the state, restoring the name of 'Kampung Cina' (literally, Chinese Village) to the

China-town quarter in the state capital, and appointing representatives of the Chinese community and the Chinese-based DAP into the *Majlis Syura Rakyat* (People's Consultative Council).

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