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Contents

المقالة العربية

- 1-23 الحقوق الاجتماعية لليتيم في التشريع الإسلامي ومقارنتها بواقع المجتمع الأفغاني
رحمت الله عظيمي (Rahmatullah Azimi) وأعمر فطان (Amar Fettane)

English Articles

- Religious Tolerance in Southeast Asia: Issues and Challenges** 24-53
Zubaidi Wahyono, Alizaman D. Gamon, and Maulana Akbar Shah
- The Classification of Knowledge in Islam: A Descriptive Analysis** 54-74
Kabuye Uthman Sulaiman
- Navigating the Challenges of Islamic Legal Institutions in A Secular Context:
The Philippine Experience** 75-105
Alizaman D. Gamon and Mariam Saidona Tagoranao
- Exploring Communal Harmony of Malaysia's Culturally and Religiously
Diverse Society** 106-121
Min Keqin and Mai Jianjun



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EXPLORING COMMUNAL HARMONY OF MALAYSIA’S CULTURALLY AND RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE SOCIETY

Min Keqin and Mai Jianjun***

Abstract: This paper explores the communal harmony of Malaysia’s culturally and religiously diverse society including various ethnic groups with different religious and cultural backgrounds. It aims to investigate the role of Malaysia’s leadership in promoting such harmony and what are the right approaches to granting adequate management and sustainability. Contemporary Malaysia’s diverse community composition allows the Malaysian government to interact with Muslim and non-Muslim communities consisting of Malay, Chinese, and Indian races, for fostering social harmony in the country. This study is crucial as it discusses essential values that have contributed to the communal harmony between the adherents of various religious communities in Malaysia. Descriptive and analytical methods are used in the entire research. The focus of the discussion is on, the political setting of Malaysia, its cultural and educational diversity, inter-faith dialogue efforts in Malaysia, political endeavour in fostering social harmony, and social constructive moral values. The findings of this study conclude that communal harmony in Malaysia’s multiethnic, multireligious, multicultural, multiracial, and multilingual community, is promoted by the double-sided efforts of both Malaysia’s leaders and people by contributing to the future of the country’s development.

Keywords: Communal Harmony, Diverse Society, Malaysia, Inter-Faith Dialogue, Politics.

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Introduction

Building long-term harmony among members of different religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds is certainly one of paramount importance in its governance. While Malaysia for most of its modern history can serve as an admirable example of communal harmony amid religious diversity, this harmony is sometimes severely disrupted by political ambitions. Not only has there been a brief period of tension between religious and cultural communities, but there also has been an incidence of bloody conflict between Malays and Chinese on 13th May 1969. Chinese and Indians are emphasized because they are among non-Muslim communities comprising an overwhelming majority of non-Muslim Malaysians. Meanwhile, the important values that have contributed to the communal harmony between those diverse communities in the country are also analyzed. Expectedly, a diverse Malaysia with multiethnic, multireligious, and multilingual communities, whose members are living side by side in peace and together contributing to the national development should be presented to the consciousness of our respected reader.

A community characterized by ethnic and religious diversity; communal harmony is among the first concerns of politicians. Malaysia is one of those countries consisting of Malays as adherents of Islam, Chinese as adherents of Confucianism and Buddhism, Indians and adherents of Hinduism, and many other minor ethnics who believe in religions like Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism, and even animism. Albeit this diversity, Malaysia has excelled in maintaining communal harmony and national peace for seven decades. This alone is a remarkable political achievement that should be praised and publicized worldwide. To the humble observation of the researchers, this harmony is achieved through wise political designs, the eminence of insightful leaders, mutual understanding of education, and practical moral values, which are discussed in the following passages.

This study uses qualitative methodology where data from the written materials, i.e., books and journal articles, as well as webpages, are collected, described, and analyzed to understand the wisdom of Malaysia's leadership in maintaining communal harmony among its diverse society. Hence, this paper attempts to provide a brief contour of politics, the community composition, and diverse religions in contemporary Malaysia, focusing on how the Malaysian government interacts with Muslim and non-Muslim communities, especially Chinese and Indians, to foster social harmony in the country. This study attempts to discuss relevant issues related to the political setting of Malaysia, its cultural and educational diversity, inter-faith dialogue efforts in Malaysia, political endeavour in fostering social harmony, and social constructive moral values.

Political Setting of Malaysia

Malaysia is an Asia country, located in southeast Asia, one of the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It comprises the Malay Peninsula (west Malaysia) and Sabah and Sarawak states in the Borneo Island. The north of the west Malaysia shares the border with Thailand while its south with Singapore. Indonesia is located further south. Malaysia practices democratic politics, it comprises multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious communities, it is a truly plural society and a unique country. It adopts a constitutional monarchical system, headed by the Supreme Ruler (Yang di-Pertuan Agong in Malay language). The recently elected Agong is His Majesty Ibrahim Iskandar¹ from the state of Johor, a state adjacent to the city-state, the Republic of Singapore. Malaysia comprises thirteen (13) states and three (3) Federal territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan, and Putrajaya, and the last one Putrajaya is a newly established administrative capital for the Federal government of Malaysia, while Kuala Lumpur still retains the locus of Parliament and its commercial and financial centre.

Malaysia adopts a parliamentary system, run by the government which operates in the name of the Head of the State, Yang di-Pertuan Agong. The government is headed by the Prime Minister, the real head, who is elected, together with parliament members (all together 222 members), every five years, and then ceremonially appointed as such by the supreme ruler (Yang di Pertuan Agong).² Malaysia has a multiparty political system, with now close to thirty (30) political parties, which are further coalited to four major coalitions: Barisan National (BN),³ Pakatan Harapan (PH),⁴ Perikatan Nasional (PN),⁵ Gerakan Tanah Air (GTA),⁶ and other miner state-based coalitions like Gabungan Party Sarawak⁷ (GPS,

¹ His majesty is elected as Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the 17th, on 26th, October 2023, sworn in at the National Palace on 31st, January, 2024. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_of_Malaysia. (accessed 2nd, Jun. 2024).

² Abdul Rashid Moten, ed. *Government and Politics in Malaysia*, 2nd edition (Cengage Learning Asia Pte Ltd, 2013), pp. 1-28.

³ Barisan National, or National Front, was formed in the aftermath 1969 general election and 13th May incident. Since the beginning comprised the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and later includes more than a dozen of political parties.

⁴ Pakatan Harapan or Alliance of Hope, now the ruling political body, was formed in 2015 to succeed the Pakatan Rakyat Coalition (People's Alliance, formed in 2008). The coalition consists of four member parties: the Democratic Action Party (DAP), People's Justice Party (PKR), National Trust Party (AMANAH), and United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO).

⁵ Perikatan Nasional or National Alliance was formed in 2020, comprising five parties (Malaysia United Indigenous Party, Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party, Malaysia People's Movement Party, Sabah Progressive Party, and Malaysia Indian People's Party).

⁶ Gerakan Tanah Air (GTA), or Homeland Party, was newly formed in 2022 by the former prime minister Mahathir Muhamad, which includes none of non-Muslim representatives.

⁷ A Sarawak based political party, established in 2018, then as a member party of BN, and now as a member party of Malaysia Unity Government, the ruling political body.

Sarawak Parties Coalition) comprising four locally formed parties; Gabungan Rakyat Sabah⁸ (GRS, Sabah People's Coalition), and more.⁹ Those political parties are established based on either language, race, or religion. All of them have been functioning in Malaysian politics. Islam is declared in the Constitution as the official religion of the federation.¹⁰ However, other religions are allowed to practice peace and harmony in any part of the federation. Malaysia, since its independence is free from any major ethnic conflict. The only conflict incident that took place on 13th May 1969¹¹ is constantly remembered by Malaysians with pain and caution for their political move thereafter.

Malaysia's Cultural Diversity

The cultural diversity is one of the most salient characteristics of Malaysian society. It is a multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic society, with Malay, Chinese, and Indians living side by side in peace. Malays are Muslims, Islam is their religion, while Chinese believe in Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism and Christianity; and most Indians believe in Hinduism. Malays practice Malay culture, Chinese stick to the Chinese culture, and Indians follow the Hindu culture. The studies on Malaysian society by Syed Husin Ali, Kamarulzaman, Virginia Hooker, Abdul Rashid Moten, and Lim Teck Ghee, among others, all emphasized this diversity. In terms of the composition of population, Malays are the largest group, comprising over 58% of the total population of thirty-four million. Chinese are the second largest, comprising about 22.6% of the total population. Indians are a

⁸ A Sabah based political party, established on 12th, Sept. 2020, then as a member party of BN, and now as member party of Malaysia Unity Government, the ruling political body.

⁹ For more information on Malaysia political parties, see Moten, *Government*, 224-246, *passim*; also https://www.indexmundi.com/Malaysia/political_parties_and_leaders.html (accessed 22, Sept. 2024)

¹⁰ See article 3, Federal Constitution, [https://lom.agc.gov.my/ilims/upload/portal/akta/LOM/EN/Federal Constitution \(Reprint 2020\).pdf](https://lom.agc.gov.my/ilims/upload/portal/akta/LOM/EN/Federal_Constitution_(Reprint_2020).pdf) (accessed 22, Sept. 2024); Moten, *Government*, 109.

¹¹ The 13th, May incident was a best example of social disharmony and racial conflict between Malay and Chinese. It took place in the previous capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, on 13th May 1969. The incident was set on the stage after the Malaysia general election on 10th May 1969 when opposition parties especially the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Malaysian People's Movement Party (PGRM), both then newly formed parties based on mostly Chinese race, made gains at the expense of the ruling coalition, the Alliance. In the following two days, the winning parties held street demonstrations, celebrating their political triumphs, while dissatisfied Malays also assembled in the nearby street. The demonstrators clashed, attacking each other with knives and rods, resulting in 196 people dead and 409 people injured, with most of the victims being ethnic Chinese. This incident was very serious, it led the King-Yang di-Pertuan Agong, then the Sultan Ismail Nasiruddin Shah from Terengganu, to declare a state of national emergency, resulting in the suspension of Parliament. A special committee, National Operation Council (NOC) was established to temporarily govern the country, which lasted until 1971. For more information on this racial conflict, see Julian C. H. Lee, *Islamization and Activism in Malaysia* (Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 2010), pp. 40-43; Moten, *Government*, 3; Jonathan Rigg, *Southeast Asia: A Region in Transition* (Unwin Hyman, 1991), pp. 115-116.

comparatively smaller group, comprising about 6.6%. The rest are Aborigines residing mostly in Sabah and Sarawak, East Malaysia, comprising 12.8 of the total population.¹²

Cultural diversity is also reflected in the amalgamation of multilingual people, different religions, and many types of music, cuisines, festivals, and holidays related to different ethnicities. As to the language, Malays speak Bahasa Melayu, which is the national language;¹³ Chinese speak, besides Bahasa Melayu, various dialects, like Hokkien, Hakka, Hainanese, and Cantonese, while Indians mostly speak the Tamil language. As to the proportion of religious practitioners, 61.3% of the population practice Islam; 19.8% of them practice Buddhism; 9.2% of them follow Christianity; 6.3% of them are Hinds; and 2.7% follow other religions or no religion, including animism, folk religion, Sikhism and Bahai faith.¹⁴ On the level of music and its instruments, Malays, especially in northern states like Kelantan, Terengganu, and Perlis are famous for their *gendang* (drums), *rebab* (a bowed string instrument), *serunai* (a double reed oboe-like instrument), *seruling* (flute), and trumpets; while Chinese are famous with their lion dancing, drums, gongs, flutes, *erhu*, etc., while for Indian dramas are openly aired in several TV stations. Malay popular music is often a combination of styles from all ethnicities in the country.¹⁵ Malaysian cuisines bear very strong influence from Chinese, Indian, Javanese, Thai, and Sumatran cuisines. Almost all Malay Muslim restaurants offer Chinese dishes like noodles, *doufu*, and more, typically of Chinese origin, while Indian Muslim cuisines are very popular among Malay consumers.

On the level of festivals and holidays, Malaysians enjoy several of them throughout the year. The main holidays of each major ethnic group are declared as public holidays. For instance, Muslims' *Eid al-Fitri* and *Eid al-Adha* are public holidays for all Malaysians; Chinese New Year as well as Indian Deepavali (the festival of light), Thaipusam (a Tamil Hindu celebration) and Wesak (Budha's birthday) are enjoyed by all races. In addition, Muslims celebrate *Maulidur Rasul* (the Prophet's birthday) and *Awal Muharram* (The new year in the Islamic calendar), while the Chinese enjoy other holidays typically for them, like 15th August (in Chinese traditional calendar). Christians observe their religious festivals like Christmas (also a public holiday) and Easter.¹⁶ Concerning the diversities in press media, there are daily papers published in different languages, such as English, Malay, Chinese, and

¹² https://storage.dosm.gov.my/demography/demography_2024-q1.pdf.

¹³ See article 152 (1), *Federal Constitution*, wherein it reads: "The national language shall be Malay language..." [https://lom.agc.gov.my/ilims/upload/portal/akta/LOM/EN/FederalConstitution\(Reprint2020\).pdf](https://lom.agc.gov.my/ilims/upload/portal/akta/LOM/EN/FederalConstitution(Reprint2020).pdf).

¹⁴ https://www.indexmundi.com/malaysia/demographics_profile.html (accessed 1st Sept. 2024).

¹⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/place/malaysia/daily-life-and-social-customs.html> (accessed 22nd Sept. 2024).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Tamil. Chinese papers like *China Press* (Zhongguobao 中国报, already extinct in China but still actively operating in Malaysia). Other Chinese papers like *Sin Chew Daily* (Xingzhouribao 星洲日报), *Oriental Daily News* (Dongfang Ribao 东方日报), *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* (Guanghua Ribao 光华日报), *Nanyang Siang Pau* (Nanyang Shangbao 南洋商报), *Guangming Daily* (Guangming Ribao 光明日报), and numerous magazines in Chinese language, which are freely circulating by million copies among Chinese population in Malaysia. The newspapers in the Malay language are *Harian Metro* (Daily Metro), *Utusan Malaysia* (Malaysian Messenger), *Berita Harian* (Daily News), *Kosmo* (Cosmo), *Malay Mail*, *Sinar Harian* (Daily Rays), *Borneo Post*, *Harakan* (The Movement). Others in the Tamil language are *Vanakkam Malaysia* (Hello Malaysia), *Malaysia Nanban* (Friend of Malaysia), and *Tamil Nesan* (Tamil Nation). The newspapers in the English language are *The Sun*, *The Star Malaysia*, *Daily Express* (a trilingual paper, in English, Malay, and Kadazan), *Edge*, and *International Time*, among others. TV news is channeled daily in all major languages. The news portals offer daily news in English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil.¹⁷

It is remarked from the above discussion that Malaysians truly enjoy the freedom of expression. This, however, is not to say that one can do anything as he/she wishes. There are rules and regulations to abide by all Malaysians, which are made public through government websites, TV channels, publications, and other social media. The offenders will be sued in court, by whoever administers the law. For instance, freedom of religion is enshrined in the constitution of Malaysia, but at the same time, there are prohibitions and restrictions. For instance, a Malay, in the constitution, is a Muslim, who is not allowed to convert to any other religion, although there are sometimes cases of the conversion of a Malay Muslim to other religions, especially Christianity. Muslims practice their religion according to Islamic law (al-Sharī'ah), the Religious Department of *Sharī'ah* Court can take action against a Muslim who does not fast or refuses to pray. Some Muslim conservatives do not consider Malaysia as a secular state and always emphasize that Islam is the state religion of the country. Nevertheless, individuals with no religious affiliation (atheist and other irreligious life) are viewed by Malaysians with strange eyes.

Largely due to the fact of historical circumstances, atheism is not welcomed by Malays, thus atheists are seriously checked by the Malaysian government, especially the department in charge of Islamic affairs under the Prime Minister's Department. "Atheism is against the Constitution and basic human rights", said Shahidan Kassim, the minister in the

¹⁷ <https://www.w3newspapers.com/malaysia/> (accessed 21st Dec. 2024).

Prime Minister's Department in 2017, during his tenure as the minister. His deputy, Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, also expressed similar concern, while saying that the group Atheist Republic will be investigated.¹⁸ Cultural or religious practices sometimes pose a challenge to community-minded individuals. Muslim's *Azan* (call to prayer) especially in the early morning is often blamed by Chinese and Indian neighbors, saying it should be controlled by regulations. Chinese funeral processions are often un-tolerated by their Muslim neighbors. Such and such, we can enlist hundreds of similar cases, which reveal unpleasant feelings from one ethnic group to the other. When the opposition coalition won the general election of 2018, one of the member parties of the coalition, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) tried to win support in the parliament to implement the Islamic Law nationwide. In February 2020, dozens of Chinese altars were torn down by local government enforcement officers, on the pretext that those altars were built illegally on the government-owned land.¹⁹ Incidence such as this creates tensions between Muslim Malays and non-Muslim Chinese and Indian communities. Such cases take place when the political balance tilts to one side.

Malaysia's Educational Diversity

Just as cultural diversities, Malaysian education is also diverse. Two types of primary schools are in operation: a national primary school in the medium of Malay language and a national-type primary school in the medium of other languages, being it English, Chinese, or Tamil. For the secondary level, only the national secondary schools in the medium of Malay are in operation and fully funded by the government. No national secondary school in the medium of other languages is running. However, some independent Chinese schools have been in operation since 1962 until today. Those schools are not funded by any state government, and they do not comply with the government's educational objectives.²⁰

In educational terms, the national schools in the medium of Chinese are grouped as Chinese National-Type Primary Schools [Malay: Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina), or SJK (C) in short], they are arranged according to states. As of June 2021, there are 1,302 Chinese primary schools with a total of 495,386 students. In those schools, the Chinese language (Putonghua) is the medium of instruction, teachers including the headmaster or principal

¹⁸ Teh Athira Yusof, "Atheism is against Federal Constitution", *New Straits Times*, Aug. 8, 2017. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2017/08/265485> (accessed 28, Sept. 2024).

¹⁹ Azdee Amir, "Devotees Upset over Selayang Shrine Removal", *New Straits Times*, February 6, 2020. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/02/563138> (accessed 28, Sept. 2024).

²⁰ Lim Teck Ghee, *et al*, eds., *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future* (Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2009), p. 214.

appointed by the Department of Education are normally Malaysian Chinese, with a few exceptions. In recent years, those schools witnessed a remarkable increase of non-Chinese students, especially Indians and Malays who register to whose schools nationwide, perhaps a fast response to China's rapid economic development in the past forty years during its enforcement of the "open door policy". And of course, there are also Tamil schools, grouped as National Type Tamil Schools [in Malay: Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Tamil)], numbering 529, with 84,779 students and 8,997 teachers nationwide. There are 60 independent Chinese High Schools, including the renowned Foon Yew High School, which is the largest secondary school in the country with over 10,000 students. These independent Chinese high schools play a significant role in providing education to the Chinese-speaking community in Malaysia. In the Malaysian cultural milieu, those schools are also called vernacular schools, in which Chinese or Tamil language are used as the medium of instruction.²¹

Inter-Faith Dialogue Efforts in Malaysia

Imtiyaz Yusuf from Shenandoah University of USA observed that "Inter-faith dialogue is a modern-age phenomenon."²² In Malaysia, the first inter-faith dialogue was officially held in 1995, in the form of the international seminar on civilizational dialogue between Islam and Confucianism, held at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur on 13-15 March 1995, which had never taken place in the native place of Confucianism since Islam's commencement in China. One of main objectives of the seminar was "to foster a greater mutual understanding among the world major civilizations in general and between the Chinese and Islamic cultures and civilizations in particular."²³ The opening ceremony was officiated by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, then the Deputy Prime Minister. The seminar sparked the zeal of research on Islam and Confucianism locally and internationally. Regrettably the strength of this zeal could not be maintained for long. The further advancement of the dialogue was stalled due to the drastic change of politics in Malaysia. Whereas the official inter-faith discourse was interrupted by political change, NGOs in Malaysia earnestly carried it on, although their influence among people was very much limited. Those NGOs held and still hold regular

²¹ Recently a legal case relating to the existence and constitutional rights of vernacular schools to use Chinese and Tamil as the medium of instruction has officially concluded, with vernacular schools securing the final victory. For details, see Zakiah Koya and Allison Lai, "A timely win for vernacular schools in Malaysia", *The Star*, 21 Feb. 2024. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/> (accessed 28, Seop. 2024).

²² Yusuf, Imtiyaz, "Mahmoud Ayoub and Christian-Muslim Relations". Published online 21st Aug. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.1181>

²³ Osman Bakar, ed., *Islam and Confucianism: A Civilizational Dialogue* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC-IIUM Publications, 2019), 16.

weekly talks, participated by the audience from various religious adherents. For example, in April 2002, Suhakam, the Human Rights Commission held an interfaith dialogue aimed at promoting better understanding and respect among the country's different religious groups. Representatives from government establishments such as the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), the Malaysian Ulama Association (PUM), and the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Taoism participated in the discourse, showing that the peaceful dialogue between different religious adherents is a better means to resolve differences between diverse religious groups.²⁴

Those dialogues, however, are not always peaceful, sometimes, as the one held in 2015, stirred much debate on some sensitive issues such as the conversion of a Muslim to another faith, which, under the provision of *al-Sharī'ah* Law, is deemed as apostasy in Malaysia, because the said dialogue was participated by some academics and lawyers from deferent religious background. Inter-faith dialogue entails the acceptance and recognition of other faiths as equal footing to the state religion, treating them with respect and tolerance. A religious-oriented dialogue is an interactive process, involving presentations, listening and understanding, but not coercion. This approach is not tolerated by some radical religiously inspired community members, who would use “terror” rather than a pen to reach their political goal. Very fortunately, Malaysia has been able to stem the rise of militancy within its border and has not experienced any serious challenges from within. It has enjoyed continuous economic development without major interruption, like social disorder, civil war, or even natural disasters. However, we cannot take this forever for granted. Challenges to this harmonious setting are always around the corner. As we know that Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) endeavours to implement *al-Sharī'ah* Law in Malaysia, that is to supplant the current civil laws with Islamic law, a law that has been casted off by “Young Turks” in 1922 in modern Turkey. In the vision of this Islamic party, as one of its objectives states, that the government “fulfils its responsibilities in accordance with the *Qur'ān* and *Ḥadīth*, the masses are obliged to obey and provide assistance;”²⁵ implying that PAS if it wins the majority seats in the parliament, will implement forcefully the Islamic law in the country although nearly half of its population are not Muslims. That is a dangerous move, it could lead to religious coercion, even religious persecution of other religious adherents,

²⁴ Lee, op. cit., pp. 57-58.

²⁵ Kamarulnizam Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam in Contemporary Malaysia*, (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia), p. 142.

which is against the Qur'anic principles of: “No coercion in religion.”²⁶ But it happens. In 2020, the coalition of Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance), whose main political ideology is Islamic and national conservatism, led by Muhyiddin Yassin, and later Ismail Sabri, who was appointed by Yang di-Pertuan Agong, as 8th Prime Minister of Malaysia. Largely due to political ideological conflict between the member parties of Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS) with Democratic Action Party (DAP), this coalition was short lived, lost majority support in the parliament soon after a year of governance. During the governing period by this coalition, it was notorious for political crisis and disputes, which caused to some extent social tension and instability among diverse ethnic communities, and even some excessive official enforcements such as the cases mentioned above.

Political Endeavour in Fostering Social Harmony

As a politically independent modern state, Malaysia, as it is now, was formed partially by the political endeavour of British colonizer. In 1824, the British formed the Strait Settlements comprising Singapore, Melaka and Pulau Penang. Later in 1896, they incorporated four Malay states of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang into the federated Malay states, while other five Malay states, Johor, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Terengganu remained as unfederated Malay states. After Japanese occupation (1942-1945) during the Second World War (1st, Sept.1939-2nd, Sept. 1945), the political milieu, locally and internationally, no longer allowed British to rule Malaya as a colony. Thus, in 1946, they came up with a political scheme named Malaya Union “to unite the then-British settlements with citizenship rights for all residents irrespective of ethnic group and a minimal rule for Malay Monarch;”²⁷ aimed at integrating “Chinese and Indian communities into Malayan polity with a sense of ‘Malayanese’”.²⁸ The Malaya Union comprises all the aforementioned three elements (the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States, and Unfederated Malay States), with Singapore as a separate entity. This scheme was strongly opposed by Malays, especially some sultans, who claimed that the scheme compromised Malay's rights. Thus, the scheme could not be put into practice and replaced by the Federation of Malaya (Persekutuan Tanah Melayu in Malay), with this name it achieved sovereignty on 31st Aug. 1957, with Tunku Abdul Rahman as the first prime minister, who negotiated with the British colonizer that

²⁶ The Quran, 2: 256. The verse is also translated as “There is no compulsion in religion...”

²⁷ Moten, *Government*, pp. 4-5; Arifin Omar, “The Struggle for Ethnic Unity in Malaya after the Second World War” in Lim Teck Ghee, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

²⁸ Omar, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

Singapore, Brunei and Sarawak be united with Malaya to form a federation. The idea was welcomed by all involved parties. On 16th Sept. 1963 a new nation named Federation of Malaysia was born. Of this new state, Brunei did not join initially, and Singapore seceded after 23 months' union with it. Thus, the Federation of Malaysia includes 11 states in the peninsula of Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak in the east. Aftermath of the abovementioned 13th May 1969 incidence, Barisan National or National Front (BN) pronounced National Principles (*Rukun Negara*), and later, in 1971, launched its New Economic Policy (NEP), which unequivocally favoured Malay ethnics economically. At the same time BN announced the prohibition of raising "sensitive issues" such as questioning of the power and status of the Malay rulers, the privileged position of Malays, the citizenship of non-Malays, the status of Islam as the official religion, and the status of Bahasa Melayu as the sole national language.²⁹ From that time on, a political coalition, Barisan National was in control of the government right way until 2018, when only it lost in the general election to opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan or the Alliance of Hope (PH) which comprises three parties: People's Justice Party, Democratic Action Party and Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party.

During long-ruling years by BN, the government retained its secular status: not allowing religious matters to interfere in politics; instead, the government, especially during the leadership of Mahathir Muhamad (premiership: 1981-2003; 2018-2020), focused on economic development and modernization of Malaysia. He, at the very beginning of his career as the Prime Minister defined Malaysia as economically back and left far behind, especially Western industrialized countries. He clearly stated that PAS's political claims were "backward-looking and traditional." He repeatedly appealed to Muslim Malays to replace their "old values" with "the ideas of entrepreneurship, an efficient work ethic, and working together under his leadership to create sustained economic growth."³⁰ He deeply believed that the backwardness of Malay Muslims is caused by their traditional religious ideas, thus they must undergo a "mental revolution and cultural transformation."³¹ Based on this belief he put forward in the Six Malaysia Plan in 1991 the vision 2020, planned for the nation to achieve a status of self-sufficient industrialized nation in the year 2020. The vision was bold and grandiose, but solely focused on the nation's economy and modernization, at the expense of moral values, thereby provoking opposition parties' criticism of the moral decadence of

²⁹ Lee, *Islamization*, p. 42; Moten, *Government*, p. 23.

³⁰ Amrita Malhi, "The PAS-BN Conflict in the 1990s: Islamism and Modernity," in *Malaysia: Islam, Society and Politics*, ed. Virginia Hooker and Norani Othman (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 2003), p. 243.

³¹ *Ibid.*

officials and citizens, such as corruption and religious laxity. In response to the opposition party's criticism, the then-ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional, took a series of socio-political measures to resolve those social problems. First and foremost, BN supported establishing the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in 1983, and later established the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM) in 1992 and promoted the definition of Islamization. The then Prime Minister even announced on 29th, Sept. 2001 that Malaysia was already an Islamic State, which triggered the sparks of warm discussion. One of the main objectives of IKIM is to legitimize Mahadhir's announcement from Islamic perspective.³² The aim of all these political endeavors by the ruling coalition was ostensible, that the opposition party's criticism of BN's political policies is weak, thus has no appeals to the public. Nevertheless, besides BN's endeavor towards Islamization of the nation to some extent, Malaysia remains a secular state, because the common law which was practiced by the British colonizers is still prevalent, more frequently referred to by all citizens, Muslims or non-Muslims alike, although some leaders have declared it as an Islamic state.³³

The current prime minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is an active promoter of inter-faith dialogue. He is not only a promoter of the interfaith dialogue across various cultures, but also a very active participant in seminars and conferences tailored for the inter-faith dialogue. He believes that "indeed, through genial con-existence they (Islam and Confucianism) have contributed, both in the past and present, towards regional order and prosperity."³⁴ The inter-faith dialogue between Islam and Confucianism on an international level has already been held twice, once in 1995, at the University Malaya, and the other in 2019, at Penang. The main theme of these conferences is the same: to emphasize the common values and understand and accept differences, thereby maintaining peace and communal harmony in Malaysian society. Conferences organized by government sectors as well as NGOs are all set forth to promote a harmonious social atmosphere.

In Malaysia, no matter which coalition wins the election, their first concern is maintaining peace and communal harmony among citizens of diverse backgrounds. The experience of National Front ruling for 60 years shows that Malaysians, of any race or religion, must accept that Malaysia is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious nation. Recently, Sultan of Perak Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah in his royal address at the Regional Southeast

³² Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

³³ Moten, *Government*, p. 207.

³⁴ Osman Bakar and Cheng Gek Nai, eds. *Islam and Confucianism: A Civilizational Dialogue*, (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC-IIUM Publications, 2019), p. 25.

Asia Human Dignity Conference 2024³⁵ said “Malaysia has worked hard to promote the unity and togetherness of its diverse people, and it is recognised internationally for this.” He said that “Malaysia has been hailed as a multicultural success story, and that the country’s inclusivity, such as celebrating diversity, was integral to its continued prosperity.”³⁶ In the Seventh World Conference on Islamic Thought and Civilization held on 28-31, July 2024 at the University Sultan Azlan Shah in Perak, Prime Minister Anwar said that “such conferences are important for a better understanding of the Muslim community and for Muslims to understand other faith and cultures.” “That is why we encourage dialogues and conferences on Islamic matters, which are not relevant in Malaysia but also the region.”³⁷ Most recently, for the promotion of communal harmony, an exhibition of the cultural heritage of Islam and Chinese Buddhism, themed “Shared Values on Peace and Harmonious Co-Existence” was held at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) on the 8th, Sept. 2024. During this, the speakers from different cultural backgrounds voiced their volitions for peaceful and harmonious social co-existence in Malaysia.

Social Constructive Moral Values

After discussing Malaysia's politics, its cultural and educational diversities, and political endeavours by politicians and communal inter-faith efforts in fostering social harmony, now some moral values which contributed to this harmony must be appropriately lauded. There are many good examples of communal harmony in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural society that is very difficult to establish and maintain. Concerning Malaysia, a Malaysian social activist, Syed Husin Ali remarks, “inter-ethnic harmony lies at the very heart of its survival.”³⁸ Even the famous political theorist, Donald Horowitz, admits that “there are good systematic reasons why it is difficult to produce institutions conducive to the emergence of multi-ethnic democracy.”³⁹ He said even British colonizers thought that, upon the establishment of the Federation of Malaya, Ceylon would remain peaceful while Malaysia risked devastating Malay-

³⁵ This conference was hosted by the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) and the International Centre for Law and Religion Studies of Brigham Young University, on Aug. 6-7, 2024, at ACE Conference Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

³⁶ See “All have a place” in *The Star Malaysia*, Digital Newspaper, 7 Aug. 2024, p. 2.

³⁷ Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, “Engagement Essential in Defusing Islamophobia”, in *The Star Malaysia*, Digital Newspaper, 30 Jul. 2024, p. 2.

³⁸ Syed Husin Ali, *Ethnic Relations in Malaysia: Harmony & Conflict* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2015), p. 50.

³⁹ Donald L. Horowitz, “Democracy in Divided Societies”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (October 1993), p. 20.

Chinese conflict.⁴⁰ The opposite was later proven to be true. Malaysia has enjoyed peace and development continuously while Ceylon was dragged by Tamil Tiger⁴¹ into an internal conflict for over 40 years. This precious peace and stable development were achieved through firstly adopting rational and swift political measures, but the observance of some ethical Islamic values by the majority population, i.e. Malay Muslims, also contributed a lot. If those values, such as tolerance, mercy, mutual respect, the admittance of differences and diversities, and the principle of freedom in religion, etc. which are stipulated in the *Qur'ān*, were not earnestly observed by the Malays, Malay Muslims would plead for their legal right to enforce a stricter Islamic law in the territory of Malaysia, as Islam is, by the constitutional provision, the official religion of the nation. That is what many modern states do within their sovereign territories. Malaysia, however, has maintained and still maintains a status of secular state, just for keeping social harmony between those ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse groups. Thus, those values are socially constructive, they are abundant in Islam, but here it suffices to mention only the most important ones.

For a multi-religious society like Malaysia, **the admittance of differences and diversities** is essential for all concerned communities. It is one of the fundamental principles for peace and harmony. The violation of this principle could lead to severe ethnic conflict. This principle is set *al-Qur'ān*: “O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another.” (*al-Qur'ān*, 49: 13). In another verse, it states:

“Say (O Muslims), ‘We believe in Allah and that which has been sent down to us and that which has been sent down to Ibrahim, Isma’il, Ishaq, Y‘aqub and to the offspring of twelve sons of Ya‘qub, and that which has been given to Musa and ‘Isa, and that which has been given to the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have submitted (in Islam).’” (*al-Qur'ān*, 2: 136)

Al-Qur'ān shows that the diversity of races, ethnicities, nations, and belief systems are part of human societies. God has sent His messengers to all races to guide them to one truth: there is only one God, and to that One God we are submitters. (*al-Qur'ān*, 6: 42; 16: 63; 29: 46). *Patience* (Sabr) with different faiths and cultures is another essential principle for multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual societies. This is also mentioned in *al-Qur'ān*: “So

⁴⁰ Donald L. Horowitz, “Incentives and Behaviour in the Ethnic Politics of Sri Lanka and Malaysia”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1989), p. 18.

⁴¹ The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as “Tamil Tiger” was a militant organization established in 1976, to fight for the independence of Tamil ethnic in the northeastern part of Sri Lanka. The fighting dragged the nation into a civil war since its establishment until 18th, May 2019, when only it was defeated by the Sri Lanka national army.

be patient, with a good patience.” (*al-Qur’ān*, 70: 5); “And be patient with what they say, keep away from them in a good way.” (*al-Qur’ān*, 73: 10). Hence, Muslims are not only instructed to be tolerant and patient with different cultures but also be *benevolent or merciful* (Rahmah) to them. Because “Our Lord, You comprehend all things in mercy and knowledge...” (*al-Qur’ān*, 40: 7) and “And we have sent you (O Muhammad) not but as a mercy for all worlds.” (*al-Qur’ān*, 21: 107). *Freedom of Religion* is another founding principle in Islam, which guarantees freedom from forced conversion and freedom of faith. It puts a check on Muslim zealots from forcing the followers of other faiths to convert to Islam.⁴² It is mentioned in *al-Qur’ān*: “There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the right path has become distinct from the wrong path.” (*al-Qur’ān*, 2: 256); and “To you be your religion, and to me my religion.” (*al-Qur’ān*, 109: 6)

Conclusion

Malaysia as a multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic country has maintained and still maintains communal harmony within its geo-political border. This precious harmony is highly if not exclusively attributed to *firstly* the political endeavors of successive open-minded leaders, *secondly* the social-religious values endowed with Islamic teachings, and *thirdly* the status of democratic and secular governance. Those elements are extremely essential in maintaining communal harmony. In case any one of these elements is disrupted by any means or any reason, this communal harmony might be severely interrupted. The change of political power in recent years already showed a sign of communal disharmony, during the brief governance of previous opposition parties who single-mindedly wanted to supersede the well-attested status of secular governance with Islamic law (al-Sharī‘ah), thereby led to political tensions between this short-lived government and non-Muslim communities, of especially Chinese. Unexpectedly, this opposing power in Malaysia is getting more and more influential, especially in the young generation of Malay Muslims, who would support the opposition party to win a general election in the future. If that becomes true, the current social harmony will be most likely disrupted. Conflicts and disputes between those different groups will take place, and gradually break up the current peace and communal harmony. This seems to be a major challenge for Malaysian politicians in the future, requiring a continuous stand-firm political as well as communal effort if they want to maintain the present communal harmony.

⁴² Yusuf, *op. cit.*, 10.

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