

A “secular” Malaysia? Toward an alternative democratic ethos

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Abstract: This article intervenes in the discourse that calls for the establishment of a secular state in Malaysia. Proponents argue that a secular state, with its principle of state neutrality in religious matters, would be most suited to oversee society’s democratic exchanges. The article traces the proposal’s affinities to theoretical debates on issues concerning pluralism, and argues that a secular regime may not be as neutral as proponents would make it to be, even if it transpires in a deontological form. The mistake with such work of reform lies in its preoccupation with kick-starting its efforts by making strong philosophical claims, which may well stifle, rather than further the interests of the plural society. The article argues that a more modest work of reform is possible, by way of exploring what existing infrastructures can do to help foster productive democratic exchanges, without having to foreclose the terms of engagements. The article concludes with a call for the cultivation of a novel set of civic virtues that would create positive democratic ethos.

Keywords: Civic virtues; democratic ethos; liberalism; pluralism; secularism.

Abstrak: Artikel ini mengkritik panggilan untuk penubuhanan sebuah negara sekular di Malaysia. Pendokong-pendokong pendapat terhadapnya menyokong negara sekular dengan berprinsipkan negara berkecuali, supaya ia lebih bermakna demi melihat masyarakat berubah secara demokratik. Artikel ini turut menjejaki cadangan persamaannya dengan perdebatan secara teoretikal terhadap isu-isu yang berkaitan dengan pluralisme. Artikel ini juga turut membahaskan bahawa rejim sekular mungkin tidak berkecuali sebagai pendokong yang berasas, walaupun ia terkemuka dalam bentuk deontologinya.

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Kesilapan hasil kerja pembaharuan tersebut terletak dalam keasyikan usaha awalan dalam pembikinan tuntutan yang kuat terhadap falsafah yang mungkin melumpuhkannya berbanding dengan pemajuan tumpuan terhadap masyarakat majmuk. Artikel ini juga turut membincangkan tentang kemungkinan kerja-kerja pembaharuan yang serdahana dengan mempolopori infrastruktur-infrastruktur yang sedia ada bagi membantu perkembangan pertukaran demokrasi yang produktif tanpa menutup terma-terma perjanjian. Akhirnya, artikel ini menyeru terhadap penanaman kebajikan sivik yang baru supaya dapat membentuk semangat kejiwaan demokrasi yang positif.

Kata kunci: Kebajikan sivik; demokratik etos; liberalisme; pluralisme; sekularisme.

Is Malaysia a secular state? This is a question that has prompted a multitude of responses from the country's various political stakeholders. From the opinionated pieces of journalistic editorials to the partisan appeals of political parties, to the (most often) legal and technical responses of academics (Faruqi, 2012), and the responses of public commentators speaking from within their different political, creedal or partisan persuasions, the Malaysian public sphere is treated to animated exchange of ideas.

The debates surrounding this question highlight the juncture at which Malaysia's democracy has arrived. That is to say, the stakes that the question points to are high. By articulating their standpoints in response to the question, Malaysians are playing their parts in a process of renewal, of their country's democratic practices. It is no surprise, then, to trace, within these particular responses, strong normative posturing, which appeals towards political projects seen as necessary to carry the country forward. For example, when the veteran opposition politician Lim Kit Siang, argued that Malaysia *is* a secular state ("Lim reveals Tunku had said," 2012), the normative implication of his statement was one that called for a defence of secular values and governance in Malaysia, a position that has long occupied a fundamental place in the Democratic Action Party (DAP)'s political struggle. Such voices stating the vitality of secular reforms have been making themselves heard to the Malaysian public from within the civil society as well (Ahmad Farouk, 2012). If, in the 1990s, the terrain of contestation consisted of political actors who were trying to out-Islamise one another (Zainah, 2001, pp. 242-243) – culminating in the declaration by Malaysia's fourth Prime

Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, that Malaysia was an Islamic state (Farish, 2004, p. 13; Martinez, 2001) – the present discourse is in turn sparked by misgivings against the mark that this 90s legacy has left the country, which is a status quo of a form of governance with what Saravanamuttu calls a “statist nuance” of Muslim politics (Saravanamuttu, 2010, p. 286), on top of the ethnic-based politics that has been in place since the founding of the country in 1957.

Proponents of the secular solution cite the stifling effects that this “nationalised” form of Islamic politics has had on progressive politics in Malaysia. They include, among others, the increasing marginalisation of non-Islamic faiths and other corporate identities, the suppression of the rights of minority and emergent identities in public policy processes, the exclusion of interpretations of the different aspects and dimensions of Islamic faith that are seen as being at odds with state-approved interpretations from the registers of recognition, as well as the justification of political practices that are publicly perceived as corrupt or unjust. These examples bring to the fore a particular theme, which is *pluralism*. The contestation between the secular and status quo solutions is defined by competing accounts of how socio-political and democratic engagements between the different groups, defined along the diverse and possibly endless lines such as faith, creed, language, race, and so on, could be politically managed.

This article begins with the assumption that there is a pressing need to reform and reinvigorate democratic practices in Malaysia. Of particular interest here, are the potential implications of the political project of the side that is offering the country an alternative political vision. Notwithstanding the complexities of arguments about the nature of Malaysian democracy in the country’s ever-expanding public spaces, a position that defends a political system that is based on some kind of state-neutrality, which is claimed to be a cornerstone of secular governance (Pathma, 2012), has emerged to contest the hegemony of the status quo political arrangement.¹ This particular position claims to be able to secure the rights of the plural society in a far better way than the country has hitherto experienced. This article examines, on a theoretical level, the adequacy of positing an alternative vision for democratic politics that begins from strong philosophical claims, which in turn are projected as the comprehensive solution to society’s present problems, such as that which is offered in this Malaysian case-in-point.

This article traces the affinities of the Malaysian dilemma with present-day debates in political theory along similar concerns. By deploying theoretical innovations from the poststructuralist strand of political theory, particularly from the work William E. Connolly, it argues that an effort for reform would do well if it invests its energy to exploit already existing democratic infrastructures, by way of inculcating a new ethos of democratic exchanges amongst constituencies, rather than foreclosing the terms of exchanges from the onset. Ultimately, this article demonstrates the importance of the often neglected ethical concerns in present day political thinking, which could prove decisive in shaping society's future.

Political secularism and the secular liberal imaginary

It is essential to present, first, a discussion of political secularism in context with its present culmination. It is not necessary to narrate a full historical account of the idea of secularism and its different dimensions which has been adequately covered by authors such as Talal Asad (2003), Charles Taylor (2007) and Syed Naquib al-Attas (1993). Instead, it is necessary to highlight an account of the shifts the society has experienced with regard to political secularism, culminating into its present "deontological" form. We argue that calls towards the establishment of secular political systems today mirror the theoretical underpinnings of deontological liberalism, the Malaysian discourse included.

As a political doctrine, secularism traces its inception within the European historical trajectory. The achievements of secularism, including that of its political facet, are not to be understated. What has culminated in recent times, particularly in the West, is a taken-for-granted attitude as to what the term secularism itself means, when applied to politics. For many, it is taken as a mundane fact of life. That the political framework of the society is one which is based on the presupposition that the affairs of the state, including those that relate to constitutional, legal and policy matters, should not be interfered by "religious" doctrines or beliefs, is taken as a matter of fact. This narrative is part of what Taylor (2007, pp. 26-29) calls "subtraction stories" in characterising the modern age.

Is a state/religion distinction a phenomenon unique to modern Europe? Not necessarily. Even before the advent of modernity and the Enlightenment, the Latin term *saeculum* was already in use, as

a way to contrast between worldly life and eternal life with God by early Christian thinkers. For example, the fourth century thinker, St. Augustine (1962), in responding to the pagan accusation of the role that Christianity played in the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410CE, developed a distinction between what he calls the City of God and the City of Man. The latter represents secular political authority, which is devoid of any sense of the love of God. In contrast to the secular life that is motivated by the love of the self, Christians, whose lives are directed towards the worship of God alone, inhabit the former, which is represented by the Church. Augustine's distinction between the two cities was meant to emphasise the importance of the spiritual dimension that the Christian selves possessed during trying times such as the event in Rome, through which they were able to look beyond only worldly affairs (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, & VanAntwerpen, 2011, p. 12). Religion was the strength that carried the Christians through, as opposed to the earthly worldview of the pagan Romans.

The concern that carried through within the Christian thinking, which informed the European Middle-Age milieu, was related to how Christianity could connect with the affairs of the state and politics. This then culminated in the emergence of the Church and the Pope as a power which stood equal to the princes and monarchs of Europe complete with territories and apparatuses to rule them. This prompted Marsilius of Padua to write his *Defensor Pacis (The Defender of the Peace)* as a critique of Papal powers (Marsilius of Padua, 2005), particularly during the rule of Pope Boniface, in which Marsilius called for the reversal of the Pope's earthly powers. Later, the Protestant Reformation challenged the ecclesiastical structure of the Catholic Church, which led to the religious wars in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, which were halted with the signing of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Through this peace, the foundations for the modern nation-states were laid.

Alongside the development of the modern state, Europe saw the decline of the powers of the Church as an independent political force, which had splintered into different sectarian groups. The state co-opted some of these splintered groups to become official state churches. New political doctrines developed, which were free-standing, and essentially secular. Most important amongst them was the doctrine of nationalism, which put the nation-state above all others, as a focal point for citizens' loyalty.

The emergence of modern political secularism, then, is closely connected to the rise of the modern nation-state (Asad, 2003, p. 2). Different national contexts underwent particular secularising developments. France, for example, with the French Revolution in 1789, fought to “un-church” the state (Calhoun et al., 2011, p. 15), which serves as the foundation of its infamous doctrine of *laïcité* today, whereby the absence of religious involvement in politics is spelled out by law. The Nordic countries maintain the visibility of Lutheran churches within their societies. The visibility of the church is maintained in England too, where the Anglican Church maintains its position as the official church of the state. The monarch professes his or her allegiance to the Anglican faith. However, as a result of the development of political secularism, even within contexts where state churches still exist such as in England, the evocation of “religious” values in politics and policy-making is very much frowned upon. The state, governed by elected political leaders, avoids mentioning God and religion in public affairs. Thus, the category of “secular” has emerged as a “central modern category” to denote something other than “religion” (Casanova, 2011, p. 54). This, a consequence of the long process of secularisation in Europe, has created a kind of consciousness – that it is imperative to keep religious discourse out of public affairs. Additionally, there developed different ideas regarding politics and governance, which channel the focal point of sovereignty towards the people or citizens. Representative amongst them would be Thomas Hobbes’ (1985) idea of absolute monarchy as willed by the people, John Locke’s (1963) constitutional government, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1993) idea of the general will. In contrast, pre-modern political ideas placed the divine authority of God as the legitimiser of political power, even if a particular political authority was considered “secular”.

The central concern amongst these modern secular political ideas is the issue of creating a model for political consensus within a particular society, where citizens could come together and live under a specific legal and constitutional framework, within which they can exercise their positions as the bearers of sovereignty. This thinking, as new ideas keep developing, is enveloped in the anxiety not to see a repeat of the religious wars that we have alluded to above. What emerged were new ideas of state-craft, which took secularism as a point of departure in their founding and development. In this sense, political secularism is

not denoting an explicit “-ism”, such as one that is pursued as a political programme. Rather, what we are referring to is how the secular condition has allowed for secularism to function, as Casanova puts it, as a taken-for-granted assumption that constitutes the reigning epistemic *doxa* or unthought (Casanova, 2011, p. 66). It is assumed that it is possible to imagine a society that is tied together by living within a framework of government that dispenses political power “impartially” and “neutrally” as opposed to how the Church-run or Church-influenced states were run in the past. Alongside this logic, liberal ideas developed and were refined. In a more practical sense, political secularism here refers to models of liberal statecraft or governance, where the concern is to ensure that the different aspects of liberty and equality are secured for all, free from religious considerations.

This taken-for-granted assumption of secularism has consequently allowed for the possibility of imagining a “secular society” which denotes a supposed majority of citizens that live life from the perspective of the secular experience. This is also the sense in which Alasdair MacIntyre defines secularism, i.e., as the “transition from beliefs and activities and institutions of an atheistic kind” (MacIntyre, 1967, pp. 7-8). This secular “society” is taken as the representative symbol of what the “mainstream” citizens of a modern liberal democratic state would be, as opposed to a presupposed existence of others who have not taken on board the experience of secularisation, i.e., “religious” people who hold to “religious” values. In this regard, we are not simply talking about an ideological dismissal of religion and religious citizens as “irrational”, “archaic” human beings. Rather, it is just simply assumed – albeit tacitly – that the secular takes precedence over opposing values. “The phenomenological experience of being “secular”, writes Casanova (2011, p. 67), “is not tied anymore to one of the units of a dyadic pair, “religious/secular”, but is constituted as a self-enclosed reality.” “Religion”, then, becomes subservient, and is at the mercy of the “secular” society, if it wishes to be heard publicly.

The argument presented above is not intended to simply dismiss political secularism as a “mistaken” ideology to be rejected by Malaysians. After all, Malaysia has never been through religious wars, nor has it ever been Christian. To engage in such polemics is clichéd and banal. After all, it is worth noting that the call for a secular state in Malaysia is not one where religion is confined to the privacy of

people's homes. Rather, it is a call to de-politicise religion, particularly Islam, for the sake of securing the rights of other groups that inhabit the Malaysian public sphere. One vocal advocate, Ahmad Farouk Musa of the Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF), following the Emory law Professor, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, stresses on the importance of establishing state *neutrality*, through which not only would the rights of the multiracial and multireligious citizens be secured, but also Muslims could experience "true freedom" (Ahmad Farouk, 2012). An-Na'im's argument is that religious convictions can take a *public* character, but not a *political* one (An-Na'im, 2008).

According to such logic, political secularism would take a purely adjudicative character, without claiming to impose any form of values and moralities that are alien to the citizens that it is dealing with. That is to say, citizens will not be expected to behave any differently in public just because the state is a secular one, bar respecting the laws of the state. What is being proposed, then, is not a hard-line, ideological form of secular governance, one that would police the presence of religious rituals and symbols in public life, but one that assures us of its non-intrusive presence.

Such an aspiration is not unique. In fact, it sits rather comfortably within the theoretical sphere of what is known today as "deontological" – specifically defined as "not teleological", as having an end-purpose (Maffettone, 2010, pp. 36-38) – or "political" liberalism. It should be noted that despite occupying a rather special position in European societies, secular expectations of the domestication of religious values into the private realms did not materialise. Rather, in the past three decades, European democracies have witnessed a proliferation and surge in religious demands that are not only public, but also political. Partly a result of migration, which points towards the presence of newly-arrived Muslim communities within these contexts, voices from within communities who hold long-standing Christian beliefs have also been politically vocal. Such experience has affected a shift in secular thinking, one whose effects are still with us, whose grammars have even been exported to the spaces of Malaysian democracy. As a result of the existential crisis that the surge of religious demands has brought before it, ideologues of secular liberalism worked towards "emptying" the ideology from its "metaphysical" requirements. What is left, then, it is argued by those at the forefront of the project – most notably

John Rawls – is a form of liberalism that depends on the “overlapping consensus” of its political stakeholders in order for it to function. This way, however multicultural or multireligious a society may be, every group’s public participation can be ensured, because they can all lay claims as signatories of the founding of the country’s constitution. To put it simply, one does not have to be a liberal to be considered a worthy individual in such a state. What is more, every conviction, be they religious or philosophical, is seen as having equal worth in the society. The point is for everyone to agree on a workable arrangement to live in a peaceful coexistence. The state would be neutral in its conduct. However, this reason falls short of its promise to deliver the plural society, because of its insistence on the primacy of secular values. The self-enclosed reality of the secular, to echo Casanova again, renders it impossible for even the most ambitious post-foundational project attempted in the literature not to return to key presuppositions of its philosophical heritage.

“Political, not metaphysical”: A secular safeguard against exclusion?

A major argument of this article is that a reform project that begins from a strong philosophical assertion is neither desirable, nor is it workable. For such a re-modelling of the society to take place, what must be expected on the ground is a readily available human capital that is eager, or at least willing to allow, for shifts and transformations of their present existential sensibilities and beliefs (Connolly, 2011, p. 85). Such resources are not readily available, not especially in this late-modern era, where most often groups are constantly readily-vigilant against efforts to co-opt aspects of their faiths or culture into a particular universalist discourse. Such a postmodern sensibility (Lyotard, 1984) is evident in the workings of democratic exchanges in different societies in the world today, Malaysia included. This is evident in present-day tussles over religious identities in the Malaysian public space. Conflicts over religious conversions of children (Whiting, 2010), as well as over the use of the term “Allah” that have been dominating news headlines, demonstrate the anxieties that the contending parties have over not only the possible erosion of important hallmarks of their identities should they lose the battle, but also over the fact that whatever they lose shall possibly strengthen the “winning” side’s claim to universalism or hegemony. Consider also the reactions and furore from within the

Malaysian public sphere over the Bukit Gelugor DAP MP Karpal Singh's call for race and religion-based parties to be de-registered (Chua, 2013). Karpal's comments, which is related to the on-going episode on the usage of the term Allah, were met with disapproval, most notably from his party's own coalition partner, the *Parti Islam SeMalaysia*, or the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) (Syed Umar & Lai, 2013).

So, when an all-inclusive political project is offered to democratic constituents under the pretence that the old order (or other alternatives) is obsolete, it may yet become a farce its predecessor once was, at the expense of society's own flourishing. In this sense, while secularism is offered as a more universal alternative to the present way of doing politics in Malaysia or to the competing universalist claim of an even more full-on Islamic theocracy, it could itself be a source of harsh exclusion (Connolly, 2006, p. 75), should it be allowed to dictate the society's democratic exchanges. This can be demonstrated with a theoretical engagement with political liberalism.

Rawls' theory of political liberalism is examined very closely here, for an important reason. Rawls' dominance in the realm of political thinking is not to be doubted.² Narrowed to the scope of discussing secularism vis-à-vis the plural society, the importance of Rawls' work becomes very visible. It can be argued that a simple reason why Rawls has attained prominence in such topic is because he was the first to have reflected on the issue of pluralism in the back of the "given cultural understanding" (Freedon, 2005, p. 19) of late twentieth-century. Within a broader realm of secular and liberal thinking, Rawls' ideas reside in proposals put forward by authors working within the field of toleration and multiculturalism, in different and diverse ways. Susan Mendus, for example, a leading figure in the field of toleration in Britain, hails Rawls' political liberalism as the solution to the contemporary need for a renewed vision of a plural democratic society. The all-embracing language in Rawls' project, for Mendus, represents the solution as to how public life can be configured in modern societies, which marked the diversity of cultures and identities (Horton & Mendus, 1999; Mendus, 1999).

The Canadian multicultural theorist, Will Kymlicka (1989, 1995), develops a theory of liberal multiculturalism that attempts to accommodate a diversity of cultural groups, by theorising a liberal state

that takes proactive measures in protecting the interests of minority groups within its borders. This includes helping them establish their own education systems and protecting the land rights of cultural groups. Such measures, according to Kymlicka, are covered within the framework of Rawls' political liberalism, secured by fundamental notions like individual autonomy, the respect for human dignity, and basic principles of justice. Chandran Kukathas (2003), the British political theorist, adopts the Rawlsian notion of "voluntary participation" in developing his multicultural theory, through which he argues that the participation of any cultural or religious groups in the liberal state should be seen as a matter of choice for groups and individuals.

Rawls' theory of political liberalism begins with the following question: What is the most appropriate conception of justice in a democratic society, namely, what is the most appropriate conception of justice for specifying the fair terms of social cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal, as fully cooperating members of society over a complete life, from one generation to the next (Rawls, 2005, p. 3)? Rawls would like to face the challenge that "the fact of pluralism" brings to the modern society.

In order to answer this question, Rawls attempts to "empty" liberalism from having a metaphysical or philosophical content. The task is to formulate a viable theory, within which a stable "working relationship" or a "social cooperation" could be established amongst the various of what he calls *reasonable* comprehensive doctrines, without having to compromise the dignity and autonomy of the various groups and individual citizens. This would be the kind of impetus that prompted proponents of political secularism in Malaysia to formulate a democratic imaginary, whereby the state can take a purely instrumental role in politics, without having to be partial to any doctrine or belief (Ahmad Fuad, 2012). The public integrity of competing groups is maintained, it is argued, without having to shove them to the private realms.

Rawls would advise such aspirants to undertake a process of constitutional building, which relies on the deliberation and agreement of all the respective groups within the state before a constitution is written. This agreement takes the form of an "overlapping consensus" (Rawls, 1987; Rawls, 2005, lecture 5), whereby all parties will arrive at an agreement as to the content of the constitution through their

particular religious or cultural frameworks. The state's character is one that is *neutral*, which, according to Malaysian public intellectual and proponent of the secular state Ahmad Fuad Rahmat, would be the necessary means to secure justice (Ahmad Fuad, 2012). "Political power," notes Rawls (2005, p. 136), "is ultimately the power of the public, that is, the power of free and equal citizens as a collective body."

Though Rawls' argument is very persuasive, there are several nagging questions that deserve serious scrutiny: Who will be let in? Who decides who gets in? You are acknowledged as a stakeholder and a candidate to join the society *if* you are seen as being *reasonable* enough when you invoke your comprehensive doctrine in your exchanges with others. How is reasonable defined? The answer lies in what Rawls wants to avoid. He admits that the point of establishing the overlapping consensus is to ensure that the secular liberal state could avoid having "comprehensive doctrines" appear in their substantial forms. For Rawls, his secular liberal project tries to "bypass religion and philosophy's profoundest controversies" (Rawls, 2005, p. 152). "Faced with the fact of reasonable pluralism, a liberal view removes from the political agenda the most divisive issues, serious contention about which must undermine the bases of social cooperation", claims Rawls (Rawls, 2005, p. 157). This is only *reasonable* to expect, Rawls would argue. But this also means that many sections of the society can be left out of the democratic process in an arbitrary manner.

Political liberalism, that seeks democratic consensus amongst constituents, would justify the exclusion of some (if not many) on the basis of secular and Enlightenment morality. Exclusion here denotes confinement to a specific space within the society. An excluded identity is not simply ignored, but is labelled as being incompatible with the society's public norms, and is allotted a space in the secular private realm (Connolly, 1999, p. 20). Even in present-day secular contexts with established provisions of state "neutrality", public discourses are marked by contestations over their manifestations in practice. In Britain, for example, a series of court decisions over the permissibility of certain Christian practices in the public spaces, for example, wearing the crucifix to work, were taken in view of their conflicting nature with society's supposed "public norms". Even government ministers can be found fighting on behalf of the society's "mainstream" secular values, by going as far as determining if the practices under discussion do really

form the core requirements of the Christian belief (Barett, 2012). While it may be argued that the notion of reasonable here may just be one that denotes what is intuitive in every human being – for example, a person can be seen as reasonable if s/he supports a government policy to improve the state’s healthcare provisions, while another can be seen as unreasonable if s/he opposes it – the measure for acceptability and unacceptability must still be benchmarked against something. The “established unconscious” (Connolly, 2006, p. 75) of the secular, then, will have to return to dictate the terms of the democratic process. If you do not pass the reasonability test, then you may be deemed too controversial and divisive to inhabit the society’s secular liberal public space. Your illiberal conviction, then, shall be banished to the confines of secular privacy.

The civic virtues of pluralism

At the most basic level, the mistake that proponents of the secular state make, is to play the kind of game that their supposed “enemies” play. Curiously, they accuse others – the “Islamists!”, according to Ahmad Farouk – of having an agenda to hijack the Malaysian democratic terrain by foreclosing its terms of engagement once they garner enough strength to hegemonise the public space, but at the same time, it can be argued that the secularists are bent on doing the same thing. For they are pursuing two interests that are not necessarily in harmony, which are: secularism and pluralism. And believing that the latter can be *overcome* and *managed* by the former is gravely mistaken.

If debates on reforms continue over who has the best philosophical project, then what we are left with is a society that will keep on dreaming of the “what-ifs”. The way to go is not to provide ever-new accounts of “democracy” (Coles & Hauerwas, 2008, p. 9), which result would be ever-more production of new publications recounting things that *should be, must be, or ought to be done* in order to fulfil the pluralist promise for democracy. It is very much possible to pursue a more modest objective, one which is not waiting for the instalment of new moral and ethical infrastructures to be in place before it can get to work. For this, the strategy has to change from asking a question such as “what would be the framework within which democratic participation, marked by pluralism and diversity, can *properly* take place?”, to perhaps “what kind of *possibility* would a democratic public space marked by the

presence of a multitude of values and sources of inspiration bring to the make-up of the democratic society?"³ This opens up the space for what we can hope to be a dynamic, fluid, and ever-evolving picture of what democratic politics entails within a particular pluralist context. And this could well be a more productive pursuit than espousing abstract principles that promise a lot, but need time to deliver (and be delivered).

On a more general theoretical note, critical strands in political theory have invested their attention in issues that are more of what we can call ethical concerns. Rather than attempt to imagine ideal social models, "first principles" and "utopias" which are then offered to society as the all-encompassing remedies to their problems, it is thought that political theory could be approached as a "practical activity" (Tully, 2008). The aim, when studying a particular case, is not to develop theories as solutions to the problems that people face, such as a theory of equality, justice, or democracy. Rather, "it seeks to characterise the conditions of possibility of the problematic forms of governance in a redescription (often in a new vocabulary) that transforms the self-understanding of those subject to and struggling within it, enabling them to see its contingent conditions and the possibilities of governing themselves differently" (Tully, 2008, p. 16). Michel Foucault (1991) has also served us a reminder, especially to authors working from the Enlightenment perspective, of the need to re-engage with their own philosophical certainties, lest they have neglected the more unsavoury elements of their philosophical convictions, which, over the years – as Enlightenment values have hegemonised the way of doing things in many societies – could have excluded forces that they deem as incompatible with their beliefs.⁴

Coming back to plural and diverse Malaysia, what is to be done? To be sure, the country has been built with the intention of allowing its multicultural, multireligious character to enjoy quite extensive public visibility. Malaysians are exposed to the presence of a diversity of values and cultures. Linguistically the country is diverse, and public professions of religious rituals are not uncommon. However, curiously, as many commentators have observed, Malaysians have very little understanding about cultures that are not theirs. Their knowledge about the beliefs of the culture of their counterparts are thin, a result of the country's long-held practices of racial and ethnic segregation, despite their apparent visibility.

There is great visibility of difference, yet there is very little interaction. Still, this is an invaluable infrastructure that could serve the purpose of pluralism. This, we argue is the site where a productive ethos of political engagement (Connolly, 2011, p. 83) can be fostered, which may well affect great changes with regard to how Malaysians relate to their democracy in the future. A work of reform should consider ways of sparking and enacting moments of intersubjective learning between constituents, not only for them to understand each other's concerns, anxieties and resentments about how things are being done, but also to query and challenge one another's expectations about how things should be done. This is an ethical dimension of politics that is forgotten when we are preoccupied with developing utopias and first principles, which often times promise to dilute society of its essentially *political* character. The *political*, according to Chantal Mouffe, is "the dimension of antagonism" which is "constitutive of human societies" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9). Many democratic projects prefer to ignore the presence of social antagonisms in plural and diverse societies, preferring instead to focus on establishing political orders that can establish a once-and-for-all consensus. But time and time again, we face eruptions of social antagonisms, most often directed against the way things are done. And time and time again, someone will try to devise a brand-new, all-encompassing consensus!

Is this paper suggesting that we allow antagonism to be the order of the day? No, but somehow the *political* should be allowed to find its way into our democratic exchanges, because if we agree that diversity and pluralism is an asset to democratic politics, then we must also agree that each identity may react *politically* to political issues. To think that Islam, or any other faith, could neglect its political dimension just because it can be controversial would simply not work. If anything, this would facilitate in such identity accumulating a sense of resentment towards the "neutral" order, which it sees as repressing its public potential, even when it thinks it is able to make valuable contributions. The point is to cultivate civic virtues that would accommodate democratic exchanges in a non-violent way. Antagonism, then, should be turned into *agonism*, by which constituents do not see others as "enemies to be destroyed", but as legitimate adversaries whom they have to engage politically and democratically (Mouffe, 1993). These civic virtues, agonistic respect and critical responsiveness, can be found in Connolly's theory of pluralism.

Central in Connolly's theory of pluralism is the search for a pluralist politics in which subjects are imbued with what he calls a "bicameral orientation", through which they would be able to publicise their sources of political inspiration, be they values, faiths, cultures or so on, while at the same time practice "presumptive receptivity" towards others. They open up to what others have got to say about particular issues, and allow others to challenge their own positions (Connolly, 2005, pp. 1-10). Connolly imagines a "politics of becoming", where the democratic terrain evolves as it encounters new issues and challenges. The politics of becoming is "that paradoxical politics by which new and unforeseen things surge into being", such as "a new source or moral inspiration, a new mode of civilisational warfare, a new cultural identity unsettling an existing constellation of established identities, a new collective good, or the placement of a new right on the existing register of recognised rights" (Connolly, 2005, p. 121). In the politics of becoming, subjects and citizens are brought together not based on "a central political idea or ethical principle which participants endorse together", (Howarth, 2009, p. 184), but by becoming a kind of majority that is "rhizomatic" – a concept referring to plants with root-like subterranean stem like the ginger (Patton, 2000) – whereby they are connected through multiple lines of connection (Connolly, 1995, pp. 93-97). This would allow for the constant and continuous process of redefining what the supposed "majority" actually means in the democratic society. In pursuit of this, Connolly identifies the importance of "micro-politics", where smaller scale exchanges at community levels, for example, could affect reforms and change in matters that concern the specific participants. In this regard, new possibilities could be fostered through micro-level exchanges, which could result in novel experiments with different ways of doing politics.

The first civic virtue, agonistic respect, would entail "a relation between interdependent partisans who have already attained a place on the register of cultural recognition" (Connolly, 2005, p. 123). They challenge and contest each other's demands, arguments or needs, and they also listen and learn about why certain demands are made by others. Agonistic respect is accompanied by the other civic virtue of pluralism, critical responsiveness, "which takes the form of *careful listening and presumptive generosity* to constituencies struggling to move from an obscure or degraded subsistence below the field of recognition, justice, obligation, rights, or legitimacy to a place on one or more of those registers" (Connolly, 2005, p. 126).

Through the inculcation of these civic virtues of pluralism, slowly the public sphere widens with ever more debates, demands, solicitations for recognition, and appeals for the creation of public infrastructures that would attend to particular needs, and so on.

But what about changing the powers that be? Again, it is the question of priorities. If the core issue here is about making sure that the multitude of voices in the Malaysian democratic spheres are heard, then the challenge is more about making sure the ground is marked by exchanges and engagements that would help shape the future political discourse. Such real challenges on the ground would make any status quo rethink even its strongest of commitments, and reforms could be valorised through the existing infrastructures. Perhaps in the future, the country's bureaucratic and other non-elected apparatuses would be manned by those who have spent their lives participating in the kind of exchanges that we envision. But if the point is *really* about replacing the status quo way of doing things in total, then we will have the case of having to tell the plural society to play the waiting game, that reforms and change cannot come without the imposition of a new set of authority and rules, who will tell them *how* they should pursue their politics. It is a different *how*, but it is still another one, and it may yet be even more suffocating than what we already have. Shad Saleem Faruqi, the constitutional law scholar, argues that we should ground our cases on a realistic and pragmatic footing. For example, he articulates an argument on the nature of the Malaysian legal system, which is approximate to the case that we make in this article (Faruqi, 2011, p. 34):

On the issue of an Islamic versus a secular state, it can be stated categorically that the Malaysian legal system is neither fully secular nor fully theocratic. It is hybrid. It permits legal pluralism. It avoids the extremes of American style secularism or Saudi, Iranian and Taliban type of religious control over all aspects of life. It mirrors the rich diversity and pluralism of its population. It prefers pragmatism over ideological purity.

This paper takes a pragmatic and realistic perspective. However, even if the arguments offered in this paper are convincing, we can still hold on to a utopian ideal. It could be argued that while perhaps some utopias are too fantastical, others can be realistic. This, for example, is how Rawls categorise his utopia as examined above (Miller, 2008; Rawls,

1999, p. 11). Indeed, it is *unreasonable*, to use Rawls' term, to think that political beings should not have utopian aspirations. But it is not unreasonable either, to think that we can have a democratic utopia such that do not depend on a set of regulating principles that are so decisive, that society can function only in the way that it wants. Perhaps, a politics of becoming can become such realistic utopia.

Conclusion

This paper has scrutinised one particular response on the nature of Malaysian democracy, which we call the secular state response. This is the response that argues that Malaysia should be a secular state, because only through secular governance can the interests of the plural society be protected. This paper has intervened in this particular discourse, by way of tracing its affinities to a strand that is today hegemonic in political theory, with regard to issues surrounding pluralism and multiculturalism, which is deontological, or political liberalism. The main contention of the paper is that, pursuing reforms by way of starting with a philosophical assertion – that the state should be secular – stunts the initial search for a vibrant, dynamic and plural democratic exchanges. It is argued that it would be better if reforms are pursued via the cultivation of a productive ethos of democratic exchanges, flanked by the civic virtues of agonistic respect and critical responsiveness.

Admittedly, the proposals of this paper are highly theoretical, and are only a skeleton of what at the practical level promises to be a complex affair. The aim is to engage with works of reform and persuade them that a more grounded approach would be desirable, rather than one that takes philosophical rhetoric as its point of departure. Affecting change through the inculcation of a positive ethos of engagement in the country's democratic citizenry can be done by anyone, through various means and media. Is Malaysia a secular state? Does it matter?

Endnotes

1. It is vital to note that the "status quo" position is not seen as static and unmoved in the face the surge of critical voices against it. To make such an assumption is both hubristic and uncharitable. Indeed, especially since the appointment of Najib Razak as Prime Minister in 2009, his administration has adopted measures to project an image of governance that is inclusive and supportive of diversity. Najib himself has been at the forefront of the 1Malaysia

campaign, which founding supposedly marked the end of the "government knows best" days in Malaysia. He has been engaging with a broad and diverse number of people who come with a multitude of expectations, while at the same time trying to balance this embrace of pluralism with the right-wing aspirations of his own party, UMNO. It is also noted that there have been debates on the nature of the "status quo" in literature and scholarship. Shamsul (2001), for example, discusses the problems that come with treating the Malaysian public space as defined by a view of pluralism that is rooted in the colonial era framework, which is based on the "analytic framework" of ethnicity, religion and class." He points to what he sees as a change in the Malaysian political culture, which shifts the colonial-driven attention to a more "interest-based" framework which is "largely non-communal and non-ethnic in nature, driven by modernisation.

2. Robert Nozick (1974, p. 83), perhaps Rawls' harshest critic, describes Rawls' ideas as: "A fountain of illuminating ideas, integrated together into lovely whole. Political philosophers now must either work within Rawls' theory or explain why not. The considerations and distinctions we have developed are illuminated by, and help illuminate, Rawls' masterful presentation of an alternative conception. Even those who remain unconvinced after wrestling with Rawls' systematic vision will learn much from closely studying it."

3. Connolly (1995, p. xiii) makes a distinction between imagining a "possibility" and "probability", stating that the latter signifies "closure" that would be defeating to a pluralist imagination.

4. Foucault also mentions: "It seems to me, that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticise the workings of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticise them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them" (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006, p. 41).

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