MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS IN MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE AND BRUNEI: IN QUEST OF A COMMON VISION

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> By the year 2020, Malaysia can be a united nation, with a confident Malaysian society, infused by strong moral and ethical values, living in a society that is democratic, liberal and tolerant, caring, economically just and equitable, progressive and prosperous, and in full possession of an economy that is competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.[1]

With the above words, Dr Mahatir Mohamad, Malaysian Prime Minister since 1981, announced his government's vision for the future in an address to the inaugural meeting of the Malaysian Business Council on 28 February 1991. This speech has come to represent the blueprint for the Mahatir government in its Vision 2020 project. This project aims for Malaysia to achieve developed country status by the year 2020, based on 'a correct balance between material and spiritual development'.[2] In this enterprise, Malaysia seeks to engage with the modern world, but in a way which consolidates, rather than sacrifices, the spiritual identity of the nation.

But given that Malaysia is a broadly pluralistic society, consisting of many faiths and ethnicities, we may well ask how fidelity to the dominant Islamic spiritual identity of the country is to be achieved without excluding the spiritual identities of religious

1 Paragraph 5 from *Malaysia: The Way Forward*, working paper presented by Dr Mahatir Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia, at the inaugural meeting of the Malaysian Business Council, 28 February 1991, in Shamsul, A B, *Malaysia's Vision 2020: Old Ideas in a New Package*, Development Studies Centre, Monash University, Melbourne, Working Paper 92-4, no date.

2 Majid, Abu Bakar Abdul, 'Citizenry in 2020—The View From The 'Mahatir Window'', *Jurnal IKIM* 5/1, January/June 1997, p. 37.

minorities? Prime Minister Mahatir addresses such questions by stating that the overriding goal is to create '… a matured, liberal and tolerant society in which Malaysians of all colours and creeds are free to practice and profess their customs, cultures and religious beliefs and yet feeling that they belong to one nation.'[3]

In this task, Malaysia could be said to be at the very cutting edge of Islam's engagement with modern pluralist thinking. It would be valuable to explore Malaysia's progress along this path, with cross reference to the other regional Commonwealth states of Singapore and Brunei, and to seek to identify successes, pitfalls and remaining challenges to be surmounted in achieving the quest of 'a matured, liberal and tolerant society.'

A cross-section of religious adherence

Malaysia's population of around twenty-three million is divided among a kaleidoscopic variety of faiths. Government census figures suggest that 59 percent of the total population is Muslim, 18 percent Buddhist, 8 percent Christian, and 6 percent Hindu. The remainder of the population follows a variety of spiritualities, including traditional/primal religions among tribespeople in Sarawak and Sabah, and other religions originating in China, such as Confucianism and Taoism.

The distribution of these faiths is far from even, given Malaysia's diverse geography. Muslims are in a clear majority in peninsular Malaya, but in the states of Sarawak and Sabah the situation is different. In Sarawak, adherents of tribal religions constitute the largest group of the population at 35 percent, Buddhists and Confucianists represent 24 percent, while Muslims and Christians are represented by 20 percent and 16 percent of the population respectively. In Sabah Muslims are represented by 38 percent of the population, Christians 17 percent, and other faiths 45 percent.[4]

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[3] Paragraph 11 from *Malaysia: The Way Forward, op. cit.*

[4] Statistics of religious adherence are drawn from the Adherents.com website. Statistical records vary to some degree according to which primary source is consulted. However, for our purposes the percentages cited for religious groups at both national and regional level can be considered as broadly accurate.

In this context, consideration of government policy is compelled to take account of contemporary ideas on pluralism, and this is a driving force behind the Malaysian government's Vision 2020 Project. But there are other forces at work as well, not least of which is the situation in Malaysia's neighbourhood.

Muslims and Christians similarly rub shoulders in most surrounding states. In Singapore and Brunei, religious plurality is also a fact. Singapore's population of just under three million is made up of 41 percent Buddhists, 18 percent Christians, 17 percent Muslims, 17 percent secularists, and 5 percent Hindus. Brunei, on the other hand, sees Muslims in a majority position at 63 percent, Buddhism at 14 percent, Christian at 8 percent, and other belief systems at 15 percent.

In the two other neighbouring states where the majority of the population is broadly of Malay stock, Indonesia's massive population of 220,000,000 is 88 percent Muslim, with Christians representing a minority of 8 percent, while in the Philippines the situation is almost a mirror image, with the principal religious statistics among the population of 81,000,000 being 91 percent Christian and 5 percent Muslim.

Thus Muslims and Christians cannot ignore each other's presence in the countries of the Southeast Asian region. However, of all the countries mentioned, the key is arguably Malaysia, as it is within its borders that religious minorities are most pronounced in terms of percentages. This situation forces the government of that country to engage with some of the most pressing and challenging areas of contemporary political and social thinking.

The coming of the world faiths to the region

Statistics provide a useful overview of particular communities, but they do not help us to see the human face of the communities concerned. In order for this to occur, we need to consider factors such as interaction between communities through trade, the clash of empires, and the movement of people groups through migration. We will therefore turn our attention to the factors which brought the

world faiths to the Southeast Asian region, resulting in the multi-faith communities which exist today.

Traditional religion in that part of Southeast Asia which eventually played host to Islam and Christianity was focused upon tribal belief. These belief patterns, characteristic of traditional or primal religions, revolved around celebrations and rituals honouring spirits which were significant to the particular community. These traditional belief patterns predominated throughout the Malay world[5] until approximately the 1st century AD, and varieties can still be found today among certain tribal groups mentioned above in Sarawak and Sabah. But from that time on, dramatic changes were to affect the religious landscape of the Malay world with the arrival of the great world faiths. This occurred in three stages.

The first universalistic religion to reach the Southeast Asian region was Hinduism, brought from India via traders and cultural ambassadors. This route was to establish a pattern for future centuries and for the transmission of other religious traditions. The early centuries of the first millennium AD also witnessed the arrival of Buddhism in the Malay world, again originating in the Indian subcontinent and transmitted to Southeast Asia as part of the broader influx of Indian trade and culture to the region.

This development heralded the transition from small local power bases to the emergence of great Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms in the area. The greatest of these kingdoms during the first millennium AD was that of Srivijaya, centred in South Sumatra. Its power extended far beyond its immediate vicinity to encompass parts of the Malay peninsula and east Java, as well as islands located between Malaya, Sumatra and Java.

It is important to underline the complementary nature of Buddhism and Hinduism in the Malay world. The two religious traditions were gradually assimilated to the point where local courts drew on a synthesis of Buddhist and Hindu rituals. Once established, Hinduism and Buddhism, and indeed Islam at a later date, were to

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[5] I use the term 'the Malay World' to refer to that area which is primarily populated by people of Malay stock and which comprises the modern-day countries of Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines. I distinguish this from 'Malaya', which is used to refer specifically to the Malay peninsular.

assume distinctly Southeast Asian characteristics which distinguished them from their South and West Asian counterparts.

Evidence of Islam's first arrival in the region is provided by archaeological, documentary and epigraphical data. The Malay state of Kedah was the site of the discovery of three coins minted during the rule of the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 861), one of which was dated to 848 AD.[6] Early Muslim contacts with the Far East referred to in Chinese court records provide us with an important point of reference for the Malay peninsula and its associated archipelago, which straddled the trade and travel routes between the Arab world and China. Travellers of necessity stopped off in Sumatra or the Malay peninsula en route to China.

The earliest Muslim monument in Southeast Asia is a gravestone at Leran (Gresik) in East Java, dating from 1082 AD. It may have been the grave of the wife of a merchant.[7] Such evidence is significant in pointing to the presence of Muslim individuals and groups in Southeast Asia, though it does not necessarily signal the establishment of whole Muslim communities as such.

The conversion of rulers marked the significant turning point in the history of Islam in the Malay world, and this represents the second stage in the changing religious landscape of the region. This development appears to have first occurred in the latter half of the 13th century in North Sumatra. Chinese court records of 1282 refer to envoys from the north Sumatran port city of Samudra-Pasai who bore Muslim names. Marco Polo touched on north Sumatra in his travels some ten years later and recorded that the state of Perlak was undergoing a process of Islamisation:

> We shall begin with the kingdom of Felech … Its inhabitants are for the most part idolaters, but many of those who dwell in the seaport towns have been converted to the religion of Mahomet, by the Saracen merchants who constantly frequent them.[8]

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6 Awang, O B, 'The Trengganu Inscription as the Earliest Known Evidence of the Finalisation of the Jawi Script', *Federation Museums Journal*, 25, 1980, p. 44.

7 Marrison, G E, 'The Coming of Islam to the East Indies', *Journal of the Malay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XXIV (1), 1951, p. 28.

8 Wright, Thomas, *The Travels of Marco Polo The Venetian*, Henry G Bohn, London, 1854, p. 366.

The conversion of Malik al-Saleh, the Ruler of Samudra-Pasai, in 1297 is recorded by the great Malay classic *Hikayat Raja Pasai* ('Chronicles of the Kings of Pasai'). This conversion is supported by epigraphical data, in the form of a gravestone of this ruler dated to 1297. It is on the basis of such evidence that scholars now generally agree on a period of late 13th century for the initial establishment of Islam in the Malay world, with the port city of Samudra-Pasai being regarded as the cradle of Islam in that region.

The most significant archaeological discovery which provides persuasive evidence of the existence of Muslim communities in the Malay peninsula is represented by the Terengganu inscription, found on the north-east coast of the peninsula in the early 1920s. This is a four-sided stone inscription which carries a body of text with the date clearly written as Friday 4th Rajab 702 AH/Friday 22nd February 1303 AD. The text is devoted to the promulgation of certain Islamic legal provisions, suggesting that it was designed to be used by a local Islamic community. It is an important signpost pointing to the consolidation of Islam on the Malay peninsula around the same time that this was happening in the northern states of the island of Sumatra.

With the arrival and establishment of Islam in the Malay world, a series of powerful and regionally significant states developed throughout the island archipelago and the Malay peninsular. The first of these on the peninsula was Malacca, with the conversion of its ruler to Islam in the early 15th century being attributed to a dream which he had. This is described in the classic work of traditional Malay literature, *Sejarah Melayu* ('The Malay Annals'):

> … a ship arrived from Juddah and proceeded to anchor. And from this ship a Makhdum disembarked, Saiyid 'Abdu'l-'Aziz by name, and then prayed on the shore. And all who saw him were astonished at his behaviour and said, 'What means this bobbing up and down?' And there was a general scramble to see him, the people crowding together so thickly that there was not a space between one man and another and there was such a disturbance that the noise of it came to the ears of the Raja inside the royal apartments of the palace. And straightaway the Raja set forth on his elephant escorted

> by his chiefs and he perceived that the Makhdum's behaviour in saying his prayers was exactly as in his dream. And he said to the Bendahara and the chiefs, 'That is exactly how it happened in my dream!'
> And when Makhdum Saiyid 'Abdu'l-'Aziz had finished his prayers, the Raja made his elephant kneel and he mounted the Makhdum on the elephant and took him to the palace. And the Bendahara and the chiefs embraced Islam; and every citizen of Malaka, whether of high or low degree, was commanded by the Raja to do likewise. As for the Raja himself, he received instruction in the Faith from Makhdum Saiyid 'Abdu'l-'Aziz, and he took the title of Sultan Muhammad Shah.[9]

This account provides an important window into the nature of conversion to Islam by both the nobility and the masses in the Malay world during this period, even if the precise detail of this reported conversion might be open to question. The greatness of the Muslim Sultanate of Malacca, and that of its successor Johor, is the stuff of which legends are made, and provides fuel for a normative view among Malays today that Islam is the key component of their glorious past heritage.

What of the story of Christianity in the region? It represents the third stage in the coming of the great world religions to Malaya. The initial chapter in the account of Malayan Christianity goes back some considerable distance in time. Persian Christian traders established themselves in Barus, in western Sumatra, and on the west coast of Malaya, around the 7th century.[10] The role of traders in the initial introduction of Christianity to Malaya is a direct parallel of the Islamic case discussed previously. This community, which early Persian Christian documents record as established in Kalah (either modern day Klang or Kedah), merged over time with other local communities. In the process, the Christian faith brought by these traders disappeared.

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9 Brown, C C, '*Sejarah Melayu* or "Malay Annals"', *Journal of the Malay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XXV (2 and 3), 1952, pp. 53-54.

10 Colless, Brian, 'The Traders of the Pearl. The Mercantile and Missionary Activities of Persian and Armenian Christians in South-East Asia. II: The Malay Peninsula', *Abr-Nahrain* IX, 1969-70, pp. 105ff.

For the next chapter in the local Christian story we must turn to the great state of Malacca, so crucial to the development of Malay Islam. The *Sejarah Melayu* not only describes the story of the Malaccan ruler's conversion to Islam, but also paints a detailed portrait of this most cosmopolitan of cities in the 15th century. With Malacca's strategic location on the trade routes between Europe, the Near East and China, Catholic emissaries travelled through the city en route to China in this early period.

The Christian presence in the city assumed a more permanent face with Malacca's fall to the Portuguese in 1511. The conquerors brought with them members of the Dominican and Franciscan orders who were committed to establishing a firm Christian presence in the city. Sixteenth century Malacca represented a real melting pot of faiths, with a Chinese temple dating from the Ming dynasty[11] cohabiting with mosques and churches established by the Portuguese. In 1641, the Catholic community stood at 20,000, with 20 churches having been established.[12] Nevertheless, at this time it was essentially expatriate, drawing on both European and some other non-Malay groups; owing to lack of personnel and other political and pastoral factors, the Portuguese did not achieve the same degree of success in evangelising the majority Malay community around them as did the Spanish in the adjacent Philippine islands.

In 1639, the European newcomers to the scene, the Dutch, drew up an agreement with the Sultan of Johor, under which each party agreed not to interfere in the faith of the other. Two years later, the Dutch captured Malacca from the Portuguese. During the period of Dutch control of Malacca, from 1641 to 1824, Christianity was consolidated to some degree, but the focus of the Protestant Dutch fell more on making inroads into the Catholic community and other non-Malay communities than in evangelising the Malays. With the departure of the Portuguese, the French were to become the most active missionaries for Catholic Christianity in Malaya.[13] But overall, Christianity remained an essentially expatriate faith during the Dutch

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[11] C P Fitzgerald, *A Concise History of East Asia*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1966, p. 249

[12] Ruck, Anne, *Sejarah Gereja Asia*, Gunung Mulia, Jakarta, 1997, p. 216.

[13] Roxborough, J, 'Early nineteenth century foundations of Christianity in Malaysia', *Asia Journal of Theology* 6/1, 1992, p. 54.

period, while Islam was firmly established as the faith of the majority Malay inhabitants of the peninsular.

The next chapter in the story of Malay Christianity occurs under the watchful eye of the British. Between 1786 and 1824 the British crown gained control over Penang, Singapore and Malacca, with these three locations becoming directly governed English colonies, known as the Straits Settlements. In 1841 the Sultan of Brunei ceded the territory of Sarawak to James Brooke, a British citizen, in return for his assistance with suppressing piracy in the region. In 1874 the Pangkor Treaty brought four peninsular Malay states into the British orbit, with British Residents advising the Sultans, but leaving matters pertaining to the Islamic faith of the Malays entirely under the jurisdiction of the Sultans. Between 1886-88 North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei were placed under official British protection. By 1914 the remaining five peninsular Malay states were also within the British sphere of influence.

Missionary activities in Malaya flourished during this period. Catholic priests from Thailand established a Seminary in Penang in 1810, and the London Missionary Society established itself in Malacca and Penang from 1815. Though mission interest in the Malay peninsula fell away after the opening of China in 1842, a new surge in Christian activity accompanied the immigration of large numbers of Chinese and Indians.

An economic revolution took place in Malaya, especially in the period 1900-1920, as the region prospered from tin and rubber production. Chinese and Indian labourers were imported in large numbers. Between 1928-37 approximately 5,000,000 foreigners landed in the Malay peninsular,[14] a majority of whom were imported labourers. Although approximately 4,500,000 left in the same period, the massive turnover meant a rich field for harvest among Christian workers, who were not permitted to evangelise the local Malay population. But the growth of Christianity among expatriates during this period was not only due to mission outreach. Tamil migrants to Malaya included Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Methodists. Chinese Christians sometimes migrated as whole communities, as occurred in the case

[14] For detailed statistics on immigration to Malaya in this period, cf. Robequain, C, *Malaya, Indonesia, Borneo, and the Philippines*, Longmans, London, 2nd ed. 1958, pp. 119ff.

of the Methodist Foochows to Perak. This phenomenon repeated itself in the British Borneo territories, where there was substantial Chinese immigration, with Foochow Methodists establishing themselves in Sarawak and Basel Mission Hakkas migrating to British North Borneo (Sabah).

It should be noted in passing that the migration of large numbers of Chinese and Indians also brought about a significant increase in the numbers of people in Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo territories adhering to Hinduism and Buddhism. Thus in Singapore today, the majority faith of its predominantly Chinese population is Buddhism, as we have seen. This situation represents an echo of the past, as these were the very faiths which had preceded both Islam and Christianity to the region and which had been the predominant faiths in the area for over a millennium.

We have thus established a historical context for our study of the present day, which will form the focus of the remainder of this chapter. This historical survey has shown us that the region represented by modern Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei has a long social history of multi-faith pluralism, and that the quest of some community leaders today for interreligious partnership is merely another chapter in a lengthy search by the inhabitants of the area.

The early actors on the post-war Muslim-Christian stage in Malaysia

Both Islamic and Christian communities have become increasingly organised in Malaysia since the Second World War. This is to be expected, given the transition from colonial status to full independence. In the process, there has been a distinct move away from local parochialism towards a greater focus on national issues, organisations and debates. This has been reflected in the establishment of national and ecumenical bodies.

On the Muslim side, a watershed event was the founding of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) on 11 May 1946. The formation of UMNO represented a reaction against the Malayan Union proposal put forward by the British colonial authority as a blueprint for a future independent Malaya. The Malayan Union

proposal was scrapped under UMNO pressure, and the Federation of the Malay states which came into being in 1948 preserved a privileged position for the Malays in various ways. From this point on UMNO functioned as the catalyst of an increased sense of national identity, leading up to full independence for the Federation of Malaya on 31 August 1957. As it has evolved since its inception, UMNO has adopted modernist approaches to its primary Islamic identity, and it has been the senior partner in every government since independence.

Many would see the *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS—The Islamic Party of Malaysia) as being the antithesis of UMNO among Malay Muslims. It was formed on 24 November 1951, with the aim of lobbying for Islam to be made the official religion of an independent Malaya and for its government to be built upon Islamic structures and institutions. In the words of the Barisan Alternatif political alliance of which it is a member, 'PAS adopts a formal-legalistic approach to Islam'.[15] It is conservative and traditionalist in its ideological leanings, and has come to represent the principal opposition to the UMNO-led government.

Much more will be said about Muslim bodies in the following paragraphs. Let us now turn our attention to the Christian community, which has moved increasingly towards interdenominational and ecumenical co-operation since the Second World War.

The Malaysian denominational landscape is a mosaic, reflecting the multiple mission inputs by different Christian groups in previous periods. Catholicism represents the oldest surviving church, dating back to the arrival of the Portuguese in Malacca in 1511. It was joined by a variety of Protestant denominations in subsequent centuries, resulting in a diversity among Christian groups in Malaysia which can serve as both a weakness and a strength.

The most useful focus in exploring issues of Muslim-Christian interaction from a Christian perspective is at the ecumenical level, rather than the denominational level. This is because the most substantial contacts occur between Malaysian Islamic authorities and Christian umbrella groups, rather than individual churches or denominations.

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[15] Barisan Alternatif Media Statement, 13 July 2000, http://www.barisanalternatif.org/archive/2000/biro/20000713_perpaduane.html

In January 1948 the Malayan Christian Council (MCC) was founded. It brought together local Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, the Orthodox Syrian Church, the Lutheran Church, the Salvation Army, and the YMCA. From its inception it was presented with what it saw as an important opportunity, as the Communist Emergency which broke out in the same year led to the creation of over four hundred New Villages by the government to cut off communist insurgents from their base of support among local Chinese communities. Missionaries from various agencies under MCC auspices were very active in working among the New Villages, and they were supported by an influx of missionaries from other areas, especially China, with the expulsion of foreign missionaries after the Communist Chinese victory in 1949. These events provided a great stimulus to both the growth of the church and to denominational variety, with the missionaries involved coming from wide ranging denominations. Another phase of church growth occurred in the British Borneo territories in the post-war years, where there was a mass conversion movement among some of the animist tribespeople.

With the establishment of Malaysia in 1963, the MCC underwent a metamorphosis, becoming the Council of Churches of Malaysia and Singapore in 1967 and then the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) in 1975. Both the CCM and its predecessors suffered from internal disunity. Problems of language worked against ecumenical effectiveness, as many churches were ethnically based and used the language of the main group in the particular church for worship purposes, thus tending to exclude Christians from other ethnic groups. Realising the problems inherent in this situation, the CCM has from the outset promoted the use of the national language in church life, with mixed success. But as Walters comments crucially, 'The real integration of ecumenism into the life of Malaysian churches had to wait until there were Malaysian issues which proved beyond doubt the value of this sort of co-operation.'[16]

[16] Walters, A. S. *Contemporary Presentations of the Trinity in an Islamic Context: A Malaysian Case Study*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1999, p. 50.

Constitutional issues

The 1957 Constitution of the independent Federation of Malaya overtly equated Malay and Muslim in the following terms:

> Malay means a person who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay customs.[17]

This inter-connectedness between Malay and Muslim is clearly explained by the prominent Malay scholar Chandra Muzaffar, who writes that '… Islam defines the Malay … Islamic forms and rituals provide convenient channels for distinguishing the Malay from the non-Malay within the Malaysian milieu.'[18]

In order to cement the Malays, and their Islamic faith, at the very hub of the new state, the 1957 Constitution declared Islam to be the official religion of the State, though it accorded freedom of worship to other faiths. Only a Muslim could be Prime Minister, and while there was no restriction placed on Muslims propagating their beliefs to adherents of other faiths, the reverse was strictly prohibited under the Constitution. With the establishment of the Federation of Malaysia in August 1963, the above provisions were retained in the revised Constitution, as follows:

> 'Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation … State law and … federal law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam.'[19]

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[17] Cited in Von Der Mehden, F, 'Malaysia: Islam and Multi-Ethnic Politics', J Esposito (ed), *Islam in Asia: Religion, Politics and Society*, OUP, 1987, p. 179.

[18] Muzaffar, C, 'Islam in Malaysia: Resurgence and Response', *Islamic Perspective*, 2 (1), 1985, p. 15.

[19] Schumann, Olaf, 'Christians and Muslims in Search of Common Ground in Malaysia', *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations*, 2/2, December 1991, pp. 244-245.

In spite of some inevitable inter-ethnic problems, the initial twelve years of independence for Malaya (and from 1963 the enlarged Malaysia) were remarkably stable politically. The country was ruled by the Alliance consisting of UMNO, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). Matters relating to Islam were primarily the preserve of State authorities; the Federal government concerned itself with national affairs such as economic growth, political stability and internal security in the face of threats from a communist insurrection and a belligerent neighbour, Sukarno's Indonesia.

Race riots and Islamic revivalism

In the elections of 1969 the Alliance government retained power but with a significantly reduced majority, an event which triggered race riots in May of that year and led to a substantial reordering of the Malaysian political stage. A state of emergency was declared, and was only lifted in 1971. The elections had shown the critical danger posed by communal sectarianism if allowed to translate to the political arena.

A National Consultative Council was set up in 1969 in the aftermath of the riots, and it undertook a wide-ranging consultative process between the various ethnic groups, including Christian representation via the CCM. Output of this Consultative Council included the *Rukunegara* (Pillars of State), articulated as a measure to build national unity and to enunciate a common vision. The five pillars are belief in God; loyalty to the King and the country; upholding the constitution; rule of law; and good behaviour and morality.

In this way, the Malaysian government, as well as the representatives of the various ethnic communities, committed themselves to a framework for a common vision, based on the key ingredients of a civil society.

At the same time, the riots had demonstrated the necessity of Malay political unity, as far as it was achievable, and that Islam was a critical factor in maintaining this unity. Subsequent governments were to place much greater emphasis on developing Islamic institutions and consciousness, both to appeal to voters and to develop a more united Malay electorate.

The lifting of the state of emergency in 1971 led to the formulation of a new alliance, called the *Barisan Nasional* (the National Front), consisting of the three member organisations of the former Alliance (UMNO, MCA, MIC) as well as the Chinese opposition party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the Islamic opposition party, PAS. This de facto government of national unity did not last, as PAS was forced to withdraw in 1977 owing to internal dissension in the National Front ranks. The DAP also later withdrew.

The social instability reflected in the events of 1969 occurred simultaneous to momentous events taking place on the world Muslim stage, reflected in a worldwide resurgence in Islamic identity. This resurgence translated itself to the Malaysian setting and was triggered by a number of factors. First, ethnicity played a significant part, with a rapid urbanisation of previously rural Malay communities placing the participants in largely non-Muslim environments such as west coast cities on peninsular Malaysia. This had the effect of encouraging the Malays concerned to seek traditional points of reference, such as their faith, in order to assert their identity in their new surroundings. Moreover, the ongoing influence of Western approaches and attitudes on the ruling elite in Malaysia encouraged an anti-Western Islamic resurgence amongst opponents of the government. This was in keeping with such developments in other parts of the Muslim world around the same time. Third, the increasing proficiency of non-Malays in the Malay language, resulting from the decision to promote Malay in the education system, forced Malays themselves to seek alternative symbols of affirmation of their ethnic identity to replace that of language which had hitherto served as an effective point of separation between the Malays and the non-Malays.[20] Finally, an important internal development which promoted an increase in resistance to authority in a religious guise was the passing of the Universities Act in 1971, which banned student political participation. The net result of this development was to encourage students to become active in religious rather than political groups, leading to an increasing politicisation of Islamic religious groups.

A range of external factors wielded a significant influence upon the rise and consolidation of *da'wa* resurgence in Malaysia. The

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[20] Muzaffar, *op. cit.*, p. 14-17.

oil boom of the early 1970s proved to be a financial windfall for many Muslim nations. There was also the Iranian revolution of 1979 which represented a watershed in the rise of political Islam, and was accompanied by increasingly strident criticism by Muslims of the West and Western-influenced governments in the Third World.[21]

Many observers of Islamic events in post-independence Malaysia stress the unique aspects of Malaysia's Islamic resurgence, and discount any claims that it is merely a clone of Islamic revivals occurring in other parts of the Muslim world. The importance of the ethnic factor is one of the key elements to set the Malaysian resurgence apart. Schumann expresses this notion clearly in stating that '… the 'revivalist' camp … compares strangely with other Islamic revivalist movements which usually have a universal outlook, for here there is a strong feeling of Malay particularity.'[22]

The outward signs of Islamic resurgence within Malaysian society in the late 20th century were quite varied. Many were gender-related. They included more widespread use of the *hijab*, the modest female attire identified with Islamic consciousness. The PAS newspaper *Harakah* reported proudly in January 1999 that over 80 percent of women in Kelantan wore the *hijab*,[23] after almost a decade of PAS rule in the state. Furthermore, a limiting of intermingling between the sexes was noticeable, especially in PAS-dominated areas, where there was also a tendency for women to adopt less public roles.

In addition, an increased observance of Islamic dietary restrictions was quite pronounced, as was the rising popularity of literature and cassettes with Islamic themes, such as mosque sermons. Attention to content in the public media often translated to vocal opposition to elements considered unIslamic; for example, in early 2001 the national Conference of Muftis lobbied the government to limit broadcasting of Indian-made Hindi movies because they contained references to Hindu beliefs which could supposedly influence young Muslims in undesirable ways, and because they included passionate scenes between young men and women.[24]

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[21] Nash, M, 'Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia and Indonesia', in Marty, M, *Fundamentalisms Observed*, Univ. of Chicago, 1991, pp. 706-707.

[22] Schumann, *op. cit.* p. 246.

[23] *Harakah Internet Edition*, 25 January 2001.

[24] 'Malaysian clerics rant against Bollywood', *The Times of India Online*, 16 February 2001.

The federal government response to Islamic revivalism

In responding to the rising mood of Islamic revivalism, the government sought to marginalise Islamic radicals by launching their own Islamisation drive. Political speeches became more embellished with Qur'anic quotations, and there was an observable increase in programs with Islamic content on the government-controlled television and radio stations during the 1980s.

Education was identified as a key target. The government undertook reforms to the educational system as part of its Islamization program. In 1975 the Ministry of Education under Education Minister Mahatir approved M$22 million for training of teachers of Islamic Studies. In the 1980s a compulsory course at university in 'Islamic civilisation' was introduced for all Muslim students, and on 24 June 1997 the Islamic Affairs Development Committee/Islamic Consultative Body joint meeting announced that this course was to be compulsory for all students of all religions.[25] In 1983 an International Islamic University was established; this was in part seen as a strategy to attract some of the thousands of Malaysian students who seek their Islamic education in Arabic-language institutions in the Middle East, principally Cairo.[26]

The government devoted considerable public expenditure to the establishment of various Islamic institutions. In 1974 *Pusat Islam* (The Centre for Islam) was established as the co-ordinating body for the government Islamisation program. Further funding for its expansion was allocated ten years later. In 1983 the Bank Islam Malaysia and *Syarikat Takaful* were established as alternative Islamic banks and insurance bodies respectively.[27] Also established during the 1980s was an Islamic Economic Foundation and an Islamic foundation for social welfare.

A crucial part of the government-driven Islamisation program was the establishment on 3 July 1992 of the Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM), inaugurated by Prime Minister Mahatir.

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[25] Hiebert, Murray, 'Required Lessons', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 160/29, July 17, 1997, p. 22.

[26] *Asiaweek,* 19 July 1996.

[27] *Utusan Malaysia*, 20 June 1996.

The IKIM website states IKIM's mission in the following terms:

> Striving to uplift the understanding of Islam among Muslims and non-Muslims by highlighting its universal values and all-encompassing principles which are realistic and relevant to our daily lives … The Malaysian society which is fast changing in the economic, political, social and cultural domains demands a greater role of Islam as a source of inspiration, orientation and strength. The legitimacy of this is enshrined in the collective aspiration of Malaysia—to be a developed society in a holistic manner, a balanced quest for the material, socio-cultural and spiritual aspects. This is Malaysia's mould of development and Islam is central to this process of change. It is the role of IKIM to conceptualise, design and provide the required inputs of Islam in the process.[28]

State government responses to Islamic revivalism

It is important also to examine the responses of the governments in some of Malaysia's thirteen states to the Islamic resurgence. This level shows UMNO-PAS rivalry in some detail, and it also provides key insights into the dynamics of the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Malaysia.

PAS achieved a significant milestone in 1990 when it won the state elections in Kelantan, the northernmost state on the east coast of peninsular Malaysia. That victory gave it the opportunity to turn its Islamising rhetoric into active policy in the areas of state political jurisdiction.

The new government quickly moved to implement its policies. Manifestations of PAS Islamic legislation in Kelantan during the 1990s related to the banning of gambling, discotheques, karaoke lounges and unisex hair salons, as well as prohibiting the sale of alcohol

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[28] http:/www.ikim.gov.my/s301-1.htm, copied June 2001.

to Muslims. Furthermore, the PAS government legislated that official permission should be obtained in order to organise carnivals, theatre performances, dances, beauty pageants and song festivals. In addition, the PAS state government legislated for gender-based checkout counters in supermarkets.[29]

With regard to punishments, the PAS government in Kelantan passed a bill in November 1993 instituting *Hudud*, or Islamic penal codes, in that state. It encountered strong opposition from UMNO-inclined Muslims, both within Kelantan and without. In response, the PAS Council of Theologians declared Muslims opposing the introduction of Islamic penal codes as apostates.[30] The government also ran into considerable opposition from non-Muslims, as it was committed to applying the Islamic penal codes to all residents of the state, regardless of faith. Here we see a clear example of non-Muslims being caught in the crossfire of intra-Muslim conflict, a feature which has repeated itself many times in Malaysia's recent history.

PAS success at the state level was repeated when it won the State of Terengganu for the first time in late 1999. In the same election PAS made major inroads into UMNO dominance in the states of Kedah and Perlis. Within days of the electoral victory, the new Chief Minister of Terengganu, Haji Abdul Hadi Awang, announced that his government would ban gambling outlets, the sale of alcoholic drinks, and entertainment centres.[31] From 1 January 2000 hotels in Terengganu were prohibited from selling alcohol. In addition, the new government introduced a dress code for Muslim women in the state, whereby they were to cover their heads 'and their dress should not reveal the 'aurat' or parts of the anatomy deemed alluring under Islam.'[32] Pressure was placed on local supermarkets by government officials to separate males and females into different queues at cash registers,[33] and the PAS authorities also announced soon after the

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29 *Asiaweek*, 6 June 1996.

30 *Should Islamic Law Be Introduced in Malaysia?*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism, no date, 1, citing *The Star*, 12 May 1992.

31 *The Star Online*, 2 December 1999.

32 *Bernama*, 20 March 2000. This requirement was not applied to non-Terengganu women visiting the state.

33 Harrison, Francis, 'Malaysian state swaps tourism for morality', *The Guardian*, 21 April 2000.

elections that they would level the old Islamic tax of *kharaj* on non-Muslim run businesses, though it quickly adapted this announcement to the effect that these businesses could choose to pay a land tax in lieu of *kharaj*.[34] These moves represented an echo of policies tried and tested by the PAS state government over the northern border in Kelantan. In another parallel, Chief Minister Abdul Hadi Awang announced plans to introduce Islamic *hudud* punishments in Terengganu.[35]

These measures caused widespread concern among non-Muslims in Terengganu, as had occurred in Kelantan. In order to address this, and realising that minority support was vital if PAS was ever to displace UMNO and gain power at the national level, PAS simultaneously set out to woo non-Muslim minorities in the states it controlled. The new PAS government in Terengganu announced it would allow the rearing of pigs in designated locations by non-Muslims, a practice banned by the previous UMNO-led Terengganu state government. Furthermore, the PAS government in Terengganu offered over $260,000 to ten Chinese schools for development according to the schools' priorities, without state government strings attached. Similarly in Kelantan Malay reserve land was approved for the expansion of Chinese temples and schools.[36]

PAS policies in the states they controlled have pushed the stakes ever higher in the Islamisation contest between itself and UMNO. In response, UMNO governments at the state level have been pressured to adopt an increasing body of more overtly Islamic legislation in order to maintain its predominant position among the majority Malays. Several cases will suffice to illustrate this point.

In July 1997, three beauty contestants in the UMNO-dominated state of Selangor were charged with indecency for taking part in a swimsuit parade.[37] They were each fined $153. In Perlis, the UMNO state government passed a bill specifying that apostates from

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[34] *The Australian*, 7 December 1999; *Utusan Malaysia*, 16 December 1999.

[35] *The Straits Times*, 14 January 2001.

[36] Cordingly, Peter, 'Mahatir's Dilemma', *Asiweek* 27/3, 26 January 2001.

[37] Matthew Chance, 'Islam's Grip Tightens as Malaysia's Boom Ends', *The Independent*, 22 September 1997; Ahmad Faiz bin Abdul Rahman, 'Islam's Grip Tightens as Malaysia's Boom Ends? How Ignorant Can Some People Get?', http://www.iol.ie/~afifi/BICNews/Afaiz/afaiz1.htm, copied June 2001.

Islam should be sent to rehabilitation centres.[38] Furthermore, the states of Penang, Selangor and Kedah gave consideration to amending the criminal code to forbid *khalwat* (a man and woman not married together being in 'close proximity') for non-Muslims.[39]

It would be wrong to suggest that such developments proceeded with unanimous support among the Malays. Voices of concern were heard from some quarters, including certain state Sultans. The Sultan of Selangor expressed a spirit of openness and compassion towards the rights of non-Muslims in commenting as follows after travelling through Selangor: 'I was very happy to see many mosques and suraus throughout the state, including Shah Alam. But I am very unhappy to see that there is not a single place of worship in Shah Alam for the non-Muslims … I am also aware that portions of land have been identified for non-muslims' place of worship but its [*sic*] conversion has been stopped, perhaps by the state government or Selangor State Development Corporations (PKNS)'[40]

Nevertheless, the developments outlined above reflect what has been described as an 'escalating spiral of Islamization' resulting from UMNO-PAS rivalry to win over the Malay populace. As Roff states succinctly, '… UMNO-dominated governments have increasingly striven to match or outflank [PAS] rhetoric through national implementation of Islamizing policies.'[41] In the process, Christians and other non-Muslim groups have felt increasingly marginalised in terms of social policy and government priorities.

What is the situation in the states of East Malaysia? Both Sabah and Sarawak have retained a greater degree of regional autonomy since Malaysia's formation than the states in peninsular Malaysia. The environment in these states is quite different from that in peninsular Malaysia, as almost 90 percent of Malaysia's Christians live in the Borneo states, and constitute substantial populations in both areas.

Whereas in peninsular Malaysia the chief ministers of the various states are invariably Muslim, in East Malaysian states chief

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38 'Creeping Radicalism', *Asiaweek* 27/3, 26 January 2001

39 Batumalai, S, *Islamic Resurgence and Islamization in Malaysia*, Charles Grenier, Ipoh, 1996, p. 272.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 273.

41 Roff, W, 'Patterns of Islamization in Malaysia: 1890s-1990s: Exemplars, Institutions, and Vectors', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 9/2, 1998, p. 218.

ministers have at times been non-Muslim. This is particularly the case in Sabah, where the first Chief Minister, Donald Stephens, was a Christian during his first tenure of this post, though he later converted to Islam, which opened the way for him to serve as Malaysian Ambassador to Australia. Furthermore, Dato' Joseph Pairin Kittingan, the Catholic leader of Parti Bersatu Sabah (United Sabah Party), served as Chief Minister of Sabah from 1985 for almost a decade. Since its formulation the state constitution of Sabah has stipulated that when the Chief Minister was from the majority Kadazan (non-Muslim) ethnic group, the ceremonial Head of State would be a Muslim. Thus inbuilt within the political power structures of Sabah is an interreligious balance which is quite unique for Malaysia.

This has not prevented the drive towards Islamisation from influencing events in Sabah. The second chief minister, Mustapha Harun, introduced a number of measures designed to Islamise the state. Under his leadership, the Sabah State Constitution was amended to make Islam the official religion reflecting the situation federally. Furthermore Mustapha sought to extend his base of support to include the large communities of South Filipino Moro refugees and Indonesian immigrants in Sabah, and even targeted the large Muslim population in the southern Philippines.[42]

When UMNO entered the Sabah political scene to contest elections in the early 1990s, a revolutionary step was taken, which again sets Sabah apart from its west Malaysian state counterparts. Membership of UMNO, and the definition of Malayness, in Sabah was extended to include non-Muslim indigenous *bumiputeras* ('sons of the land'), such as the large Kadazan community.

Over the years, state governments in Sabah have provided financial assistance from public funds to both Christian and Muslim activities, whereas at federal level such funding support has only been provided for Muslim activities. For example, public funds in Sabah have been given to support the construction of a state mosque, a Catholic cathedral, an Anglican cathedral, and a range of other churches.[43]

Thus the responses of state governments to the Islamic

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[42] Puthucheary, Mavis, 'Sabah electoral history', *Saksi*, 4, March 1999.

[43] Goddard, Hugh, 'Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria and Malaysia', Ridgeon, Lloyd, (ed.) *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, Curzon, Richmond, 2001, p. 240.

revival have varied from state to state, according to which party was in power.

The Christian response to Islamisation

> One aspect of this Islamization drive, which was to have a significant impact on race relations, was the central and state governments' attempts to bring their administrations in line with religious requirements … [Non-Muslims] entered the fray by activating their own organizations, mobilizing their members, or forming their own societies in order the champion the cause of their co-religionists in the face of the Islamists' challenge.[44]

The response of the diverse Christian community of Malaysia to the increasing Islamisation around it can be summarised in terms of seeking safety in numbers. The decade of the 1980s witnessed the formation of several new umbrella groups designed to strengthen the Christian voice in its discussions with the predominantly Muslim authorities of Malaysia.

In May 1983 the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) was formed. This brought together a large group of Protestant evangelical churches, including the Assemblies of God, Baptist churches, Brethren groups, Full Gospel Churches, the Evangelical Free Church, the Full Gospel Assembly, Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian evangelical churches, the Sidang Injil Borneo churches in Sarawak and Sabah, and a number of other groups. The NECF joined the World Evangelical Fellowship, the worldwide grouping of evangelical churches.

Three years later the two largest umbrella groupings of Christian churches, the NECF and the previously mentioned Council of Churches of Malaysia, came together with the oldest church in the

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[44] Bakar, M A, 'Islam, Civil Society, and Ethnic Relations in Malaysia' Mitsuo, N, Siddique, S, and Bajunid, O F (eds), *Islam & Civil Society in Southeast Asia*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2001, pp. 69-70.

region, the Catholic Church of Malaysia, to found the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM). Its establishment in 1986 occurred as the federal government-driven Islamisation program was picking up steam. The CFM is a broad-based Christian alliance, including almost all Christian denominations and representing approximately 90 percent of the Christian population of Malaysia, thus demonstrating a commitment to broad ecumenism which can serve as a model for other Christian communities elsewhere. The third of the stated aims and objectives of the CFM constitution strikes loud bells in terms of the dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations in Malaysia. It commits the CFM 'to look after the interests of the Christian community as a whole with particular reference to religious freedom and rights enshrined in the Federal Constitution.'[45]

Furthermore, reflecting the commitment of Malaysian Christians to joining with like-minded groups to address the challenges posed by Islamisation, the CFM, and its constituent groups joined an even larger umbrella body, the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS), which was founded in 1983. This body has been at the forefront in advocating for the rights of religious minorities when they have felt pressured or threatened by the Islamisation process taking place at federal and state levels.

Malaysian voices on Muslim-Christian relations

The UMNO-led Malaysian government has long been intractably opposed to any 'throwback' approach of returning to an ancient pristine society. It accuses PAS of having this as its core goal. UMNO has thus vigorously resisted the frequent calls by PAS leaders for the institution of Islamic Law at both federal and state levels. But in expressing its opposition to PAS policies, UMNO employs Islamic terminology wherever possible, in order to avoid any semblance of being opposed to Islam *per se*. The anti-PAS vitriol by UMNO is strong, as is the reverse. Prime Minister Mahatir has accused PAS of being a

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[45] http://www.ccmalaysia.org/ie/images/together.htm, copied July 2001.

traitor to the Malay heritage and to Islam because of its downgrading of academic excellence, commenting 'Such people are the reason why Muslim countries are always left behind in development.'[46]

The stakes rose dramatically in late 1999 when the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional Coalition government lost ground in federal and state elections. The principal opposition parties—PAS, the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party, and two small reformist parties, the Parti Keadilan and Parti Rakyat Malaysia, formed a multi-ethnic alliance, calling themselves the Barisan Alternatif, to oppose Barisan Nasional. A little over half of all Malay voters in peninsular Malaysia supported the governing alliance, compared with over 70 percent in previous elections.[47] Much, if not most of the loss of support, is attributable to the campaign of the government against the popular former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, who was dismissed from his post in 1998, arrested, tried and found guilty on charges of indecent behaviour.

Lim Kit Siang, the former head of the Democratic Action Party, the principal Chinese opposition, said after the 1999 elections there was a danger that 'parliament in the next five years will principally become the battleground between UMNO and PAS for the hearts and minds of the Malays in the Malay heartland, resulting in a spiral of Islamisation policies.'[48]

This takes us back to the starting point of this chapter, with Prime Minister Mahatir's Vision 2020 Project which aims to create '… a matured, liberal and tolerant society in which Malaysians of all colours and creeds are free to practice and profess their customs, cultures and religious beliefs and yet feeling that they belong to one nation.'

There would seem to be an in-built tension between striving for a 'matured, liberal and tolerant' society on the one hand, and pursuing policies which entrench advantage and empower one religious group over other religious groups within that same society. It would be useful to listen to the voices of some of the main actors on the Malaysian Muslim-Christian stage to see if they can help resolve this tension.

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[46] *The Star*, 24 June 2001.

[47] Jayasankaran, S, 'Mahatir Reaches Out', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1 February 2001.

[48] Reuters, 2 December, 1999.

Prime Minister Mahatir, who has for so long pondered on the dilemma posed by Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, accounted for the emergence of this multi-ethnicity in the following terms in one of his public speeches: 'the last two centuries of the country's history saw the arrival of Chinese and Indians who were recruited into the economic enclaves created by the colonial government. Then in 1957 Chinese and Indians were bestowed citizenship. This transformed Malaya, and later Malaysia, into a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society. The reason for such magnanimity on the part of the indigenous Malay-Muslim population is that their value system is inclined towards tolerance and accommodation.'[49]

Here the key words are 'tolerance and accommodation': tolerance of the presence of other ethnicities and other faiths, and accommodation to the extent that they are free to pursue their own cultural conventions and to practice their own faiths. This is indeed tolerant and accommodating, but it is not sharing a common vision to the extent that all contribute on equal terms to the formulation of such a vision. To do the latter would be to run the risk of alienating some of Malaysia's majority Muslim population and to drive it into the arms of PAS, which adopts policies *vis-à-vis* religious minorities reminiscent of the classical Islamic concept of dhimmitude.

Criticism of the PAS approach was implicit in an interview given by Anwar Ibrahim in happier days, prior to his eviction from government and jailing. He justified government policies in the following way in 1993: 'There cannot be an Islamic agenda devoid of and oblivious to the realities of a multi-racial society ... you cannot afford to be unjust to Muslims and non-Muslims. You should allow for freedom of worship for Muslims and non-Muslims. You should allow for the development of other language and culture. It is affirmative action in a constructive sense. To my mind it is a very Islamic position.'[50]

The successor to Anwar Ibrahim in the position of Deputy Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, also expressed concern at the possible damage resulting from a spiral of Islamisation resulting from competition between the government and PAS: 'We must check the tendency towards any kind of extremism. And we should not

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[49] http://www.ikim.gov.my/s301-civilization.htm, copied June 2001.

[50] Jamal, M (Prod.). 'Islam and Pluralism', *Islamic Conversations*. Epicflow, London, 1993.

play a game of one-upmanship with the Islamic Party. There will be no end to that game.'[51]

Nevertheless, when writers and politicians in Malaysia speak of striving for a correct balance between material and spiritual priorities, the understanding of the term 'spiritual' at the level of policy-making rarely allows for alternative spiritualities to that of the predominant Islamic faith. Indeed, leading figures accept that a reinforcement of spiritual values will of necessity be equated with dissemination of Islam through different media. This is articulated by Dr Ismail Bin Ibrahim, Director General of IKIM, as follows: 'The government is also making a concerted attempt to introduce Islamic values of honesty and integrity, of justice and compassion, of diligence and discipline into the public services. Indeed, the Malaysian government's oft-repeated commitment to a fully moral and ethical society—as envisaged in its vision of the future, Vision 2020—is infused by an Islamic worldview.'[52]

As for PAS concerns, they typically resonate with issues drawn from Islamic jurisprudence. A key concern has been lobbying by PAS spokespeople for legislation relating to apostasy from Islam. After there were a number of reports of Muslims renouncing Islam in the mid-1990s, a bill was brought before federal Parliament in 1998 prescribing punishment for apostasy of up to three years' imprisonment or a maximum fine equivalent to about £900 or both.[53] This bill was proposed on two occasions by then PAS member for Marang Abdul Hadi Awang, who later became Chief Minister of Terengganu.[54] The UMNO-led government voted the bill down both times, stating on 4 August 1998 that apostates (*murtad*) would not face government punishment so long as they did not defame Islam after their conversion.[55] The PAS newspaper *Harakah* justified the PAS approach in the following terms:

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[51] Vatikiotis, Michael, 'Umno Suffering Isn't Over', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 December 2000.

[52] Ibrahim, Ismail Hj. 'The Image of Islam: An Insight', *Jurnal IKIM* 4/1, 1996, pp. 64-65.

[53] *Straits Times*, 17 April 1998.

[54] *Harakah Internet Edition*, 10 August 1998.

[55] 'US Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Malaysia', Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, Washington DC, 9 September 1999; 'Country Profile: Malaysia', Christian Solidarity Worldwide, http://www.csw.org.uk/malaysia.html.

> The Anti-*Murtad* law introduced by PAS is meant to create better understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims as the Non-Muslims might not be aware how sensitive the case of a *murtad* is for a Muslim. It is a well-known fact that nobody renounced Islam for finding another religion better than Islam, but only because they do not believe any religion and therefore it does not matter what their religion is. They change religion to suite [*sic*] their convenience and this is to make mockery of religion. This Islam takes seriously. The fight is against irreligion and sacrilege and not against the non-Muslims.[56]

What of Christian voices? They articulate a range of perspectives and issues regarding Muslim-Christian relations. A common message is one of concern with the Islamisation process, both federal-government driven and that of state governments.

Many Christians do not accept that inculcation of Islamic values should be the only mechanism for bringing about the spiritual reinforcement of Malaysian society. Paul Tan, Director of the Catholic Research Centre, argues as follows: 'If the intention of introducing the subject of Islamic Civilization [in universities] was that the non-Muslims would come to understand Muslims better through it, then for the same noble reason the government should introduce a subject of other major religious civilizations so as to help the Muslims to understand the non-Muslims.'[57]

Christian voices are often most clearly articulated within the framework of lobbying by the umbrella groups described earlier. The MCCBCHS has regularly lobbied the federal government about the religious rights of non-Muslims, in a range of issues including establishment of new burial grounds, obstacles to construction of places of worship, banning of Christian symbols, banning of the teaching of non-Muslim faiths in schools, exclusion of non-Muslim

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[56] Roslan, S M S, ' Islam phobia and the Extremist Preachers', *Harakah Internet Edition*, 17 August 1998.

[57] Basri, Ghazali *Christian Mission and Islamic Dakwah in Malaysia*, Nurin Enterprise, Kuala Lumpur, 1990, p. 32.

programming from the public media, and restriction imposed on the distribution of Bibles in hotels.

On a particularly sensitive matter, government legislation was drawn up forbidding non-Muslim faiths from making use of four terms (*Allah*, *Kaabah*, *Baitullah*, *Solat*) in any non-Islamic literature.[58] As the first of these terms was commonly used by Christians in Malaysia and Indonesia to refer to God, this legislation has left a lasting legacy of resentment.

The Malaysian Christian academic Albert Walters sees two main problems facing the Malaysian church. He points out that 'the challenge remains for the churches to relate themselves more fully to the soil of [Southeast Asia]—to get down to the rice-roots level of Asian civilisation.'[59] In making this observation, Walters is reminding us that Christianity, though it has had a presence in the Malay peninsula for 500 years, has essentially remained a non-indigenous phenomenon, projecting a profile of a foreign faith to Malaysian Muslims. This no doubt explains the observation by Ng that '… Muslim scholars are only interested in pursuing a dialogue with Western Christians rather than local Christians. After all, dialogue confers legitimacy and this is what Islamic scholars want *vis-à-vis* the West. However, dialogue with local Christians is avoided since it confers legitimacy on local movements.'[60]

The second problem identified by Walters relates to the mindset of Malaysian Christians. He asserts that they have tended to retreat into a ghetto mentality, resulting in a lack of commitment to engaging through their faith with the world around them. Walters calls on the church to strive to understand other religions around it, through study and contact of various forms.

The situation in neighbouring Commonwealth states

Malaysia is the key reference point for its smaller Commonwealth

[58] Batumalai, *op. cit.*, pp. 262, 270.

[59] Walters, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

[60] Ng, K W, 'Dialogue and Constructive Social Engagement: Problems and Prospects for the Malaysian Church', *Trinity Theological Journal*, vol. 4 (1995), p. 32.

neighbours, Brunei and Singapore. It would be useful at this juncture to turn our attention briefly to these two states, to see how Christian-Muslims relations have been played out in the context of developments taking place across the border in Malaysia.

The 1959 Constitution of Brunei echoes that of Malaysia in stating 'The religion of Brunei Darussalam shall be the Muslim religion according to the Shafeite sect of that religion: … all other religions may be practised in peace and harmony by the person professing them in any part of Brunei Darussalam.'[61]

In support of the Constitution, the Sultanate of Brunei proclaimed at independence in 1984 the National Philosophy of *Melayu Islam Beraja*, (MIB—Malay Islamic Monarchy), which gives clear priority to Islamic institutions and values. Special days in the Islamic calendar, such as the great feast days and the birthday of the prophet Muhammad, are observed publicly. During the fasting month of Ramadan working hours for government employees are reduced and sporting and entertainment activities are suspended. The Sultan publicly endorses daily Qur'an recitation prior to the commencement of the work day. The Brunei government website explains the purpose of the national philosophy in the following terms: 'The nation hopes that through the true adoption and practice of the MIB philosophy, the purity of Islam, the purity of the Malay race and the institution [of] Monarchy can be maintained and preserved as a lasting legacy for future generations.'[62]

A key instrument for the implementation of the MIB philosophy is the department of the State Mufti. On 1 April 1962, the first State Mufti was appointed by the Sultan of Brunei. With the crystallization of the national philosophy in 1984, steps were taken to more effectively empower the Mufti, and in November 1994 the State Mufti's Office was established separately under the Prime Minister's department. Its functions were threefold: to produce *fatwa*; to provide Muslims with irshad or guidance on Islamic laws; and to serve as a key reference centre for Islamic knowledge. In justifying

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[61] 'US Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Brunei', Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, Washington DC, 9 September 1999.

[62] Cf. the official Brunei government website, http://www.brunei.gov.bn/government/mib.htm.

the establishment of the State Mufti's Office with funding from the public purse, the Sultan of Brunei issued the following statement on 24 January 1996: 'Experience taught us that when problems concerning Islam arise, it is very difficult if an Islamic nation, which has made the pure religion of Islam the official religion, does not have a scholar who is appointed strictly to be responsible for or concerned with the issuing of fatwa, the expounding of laws and injunctions (of Islam) for the betterment of the Brunei ummah and the country.'[63]

Thus while endorsing freedom of religion for the 37 percent non-Muslim minority of Brunei, the weight of government resources and support is given to the Islamic faith of the majority, with structures set in place to perpetuate this official support for the predominant position of Islam.

In terms of practical outworkings of these policies, friction between some among the Christian minority and the Islamic authorities has occurred. The Undesirable Publications Act has been used by the government to ban the importation of non-Muslim religious teaching materials or scriptures such as the Bible, and to censor magazine articles on other faiths, blacking out photographs of crucifixes and other Christian religious symbols. Government offices have also blocked requests to expand, repair, or build new churches, as well as places of worship of other non-Muslim faiths. The Brunei government has frequently clamped down on Christian ministry among Muslims.[64] However, it would be unfair to focus only upon such measures. Demonstrating openness to certain church activities, in February 1998, the Brunei government approved the establishment of the first Catholic apostolic prefecture in the country and the installation of Brunei's first apostolic prefect.

Singapore represents something of a contrast, which is not surprising given the vastly different religious structure of the island state. Its Constitution acknowledges ethnic Malays as the indigenous people of Singapore, which belies their minority status. The Constitution charges the government to give support to the political, educational, religious, and other interests of the Malay minority.

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[63] http://www.brunet.bn/gov/mufti/p_ingsrc.htm, copied July 2001.

[64] 'US Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Brunei', *op. cit.*

The Constitution of Singapore provides for freedom of religion, as do those of Malaysia and Brunei. However, unlike these latter two, in Singapore there is no official religion. All religious groups are free to preach their faith to adherents of their own and other faiths. Religions are required to register legally under the Societies Act. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act of 1990 bans inappropriate involvement of religious groups and officials in political affairs.[65]

The government of Singapore gives support to a special category of ethnic/communal organisations, in order to promote national goals and cohesion among the various communities. These bodies 'are monitored to ensure that their activities are not perceived to jeopardize the harmonious multi-ethnic, multi-religious model of tolerance, the perimeters of which are set by the state.'[66] The government provides some funding support, and insists upon strict accountability.

One of the key Muslim organisations in this context is MENDAKI (Council for the Development of Singapore Muslim Community), established in 1982 with the original purpose being 'to uplift the educational performance of the Muslim Community.'[67] Since then its activities have expanded to include social, cultural and economic development, though the primary focus still falls on educational development. It is registered in Singapore under the Charities Act.

In 1991, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) was established by a group of young professionals 'who felt that MENDAKI had not been sufficiently proactive in tackling the community problems.'[68] It too came into existence with the blessing and financial support of the Singapore government. The AMP has wide-ranging activities, covering early childhood programmes, operation of a student centre for older youth, family education and

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[65] 'US Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Singpapore', Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, Washington DC, 9 September 1999.

[66] Siddique, S, 'Islam and Civil Society: A Case Study from Singapore', Mitsuo, Siddique and Bajunid, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

[67] http://mendaki.org.sg/mendakiNew/about.htm, copied July 2001.

[68] Siddique, *op. cit.* 136.

support programmes, training of workers and research activities.[69] In the words of one of its most prominent members, 'The AMP views *Malay/Muslim Singaporeans* as a *dynamic community* within a *larger Singaporean society*—in other words, as a component of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society.' [70]

The Singaporean government also maintains links with the Muslim community via the Islamic Religious Council (MUIS) which was established as a government statutory body under the Administration of Muslim Law Act in 1968.[71] The body defines its vision on the government-hosted website as 'To fulfil its roles as the supreme Islamic authority of Singapore and to guide in the building of an exemplary Muslim community.'[72] The MUIS has an important advisory function, giving counsel to the government when appropriate on matters pertaining to the Muslim community. MUIS administers the Islamic Centre of Singapore (ICS) which hosts the offices of the Secretariat staff, meeting and conference rooms, a library, an audio-visual room, and a Syariah Court of Appeal.

In 1998, the Singapore Parliament passed the Administration of Muslim Law (Amendment) Bill, which amended the 1968 Act 'to confer concurrent jurisdiction on the civil courts and the Syariah Court in certain matters, to extend the functions of the Majlis Ugama Islam, Singapura, [MUIS] and to extend the powers of the Syariah Courts.'[73]

Furthermore, the government of Singapore provides some financial assistance for the construction and maintenance of mosques. Singapore's community of 372,000 Muslims has over 70 mosques. The MUIS prepares a standard sermon every week, which is distributed to all mosques in electronic form.[74]

One cannot fail but be impressed by the way that organisations such as MENDAKI, AMP and MUIS have facilitated the emergence of a new, dynamic, educated class among Singaporean Muslims, a community which had long been one of the most

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[69] http://www.amp.org.sg/about_us/index.html, copied July 2001.

[70] Siddique, *op. cit.* p. 138.

[71] A Hindu Advisory Board also functions as a statutory body under government auspices, providing further evidence of the government's determination not to privilege any particular faith community over others.

[72] http://www.muis.gov.sg/about/index.asp, copied July 2001.[73] *Al-Mahjar*, 3/2, December 1998, p. 3.

[74] 'Singapore mosques wire up to stay relevant', *Utusan Express*, 5 January 2001.

disadvantaged groups in Singapore in socio-economic terms. Government-supported efforts to improve the economic well-being of the Muslim Malay minority paid great dividends in the first 10 years following the launch of a range of new policies in the early 1980s. The 1990 Singapore Census recorded an increase in the average household income of Singaporean Malays from S$896 in 1980 to S$2246, 'a 150 percent improvement in 10 years'.[75] Thus much credit must go to the pluralistic, flexible policies of the government of Singapore, policies which promote a sense of shared formulation and ownership of national goals among the diverse ethnic and religious communities resident in the island state.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Vision 2020 project is an important pioneering experiment. Malaysia is at the cutting edge of thinking on pluralism within a majority Islamic context. As is succinctly stated by Dr Ismail Bin Ibrahim, 'Muslims in Southeast Asia … have shown how Islam can be a positive force in building just, harmonious, compassionate societies … [They] have a unique opportunity to blaze a new trail into the future—a trail which will light the skies for the whole of humanity.'[76]

In the process, an uneven playing field needs to be levelled. This situation can be traced right back in history, as although both Islam and Christianity have been established in the region of modern Malaysia for centuries, the paths they followed have been somewhat different. From the outset Islam threw down roots into indigenous Malay communities whereas Christianity has tended to focus largely on expatriate groups. The results are, first, that religion is often identified with ethnicity, which can be a volatile mix, and second that Christianity still tends to be regarded as a foreign faith, despite its 500-year presence in the region.

The articulation of the *Rukunegara* in 1969, after a national consultative process, provided key ingredients for the development

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[75] http://mendaki.org.sg/mendakiNew/about.htm, copied July 2001.

[76] Ibrahim, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.

of a common vision. But this has been somewhat undercut by the Islamisation process within Malaysian institutions and society which has been fuelled by rivalry between the two main political groups among the Malays.

The priority allocation of public resources to the establishment and support of Islamic institutions has led to a feeling of marginalisation among Malaysian Christians and other non-Muslim groups. This has been expressed in various forums. Malaysian governments have been very open to the expression of such views, which is consistent with the core principles of Vision 2020. This augurs well for Christian-Muslim relations in the future.

Malaysia's challenge is to take the exciting initiative which Vision 2020 represents and to forge a genuinely 'democratic, liberal and tolerant society' based on a common vision which is both articulated and owned by all faith communities. The infusion in society of wide-ranging faith values, including Islamic and Christian perspectives, will go a long way towards the development of such a common vision. In this the models of Singapore and Sabah can provide useful points of reference. If this is done, there is no reason that both Christianity and Islam, as well as the other faiths, could not jointly 'blaze a new trail into the future.'