

The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in Malaysia

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Introduction

THE objective of the paper is to describe a situation in today's Malaysia where people of diverse religions are co-existing seemingly in relative peace, mutual respect and understanding, but remain institutionally separate, a situation which has been described as religious pluralism. Like many terms in the social sciences, the term "religious pluralism" has been used in many senses by its users. In its widest and most common usage, it has been defined as religious diversity or heterogeneity, which means a simple recognition of the fact that there are many different religious groups active in any given geo-political space under consideration and that there is a condition of harmonious co-existence between followers of different religions. The term has also been used to mean a form of ecumenism where individuals of different religions dialogue and learn from each other without attempting to convince each other of the correctness of their individual set of beliefs. The third sense in the use of the term is that pluralism means accepting the beliefs taught by religions other than one's own as valid, but not necessarily true. Its usage in the third sense often gives rise to one controversy or another.

For the purpose of this paper, the term religious pluralism is used in the first and second senses, to mean the existence of religious heterogeneity and attempts at promoting understanding through inter-faith dialogues. Pluralism in the third sense calls for a totally different approach and methodology which is beyond the ken of the present writer.

The paper begins with a description of the current situation and the historical context of religious pluralism in Malaysia and ends with a discussion of the challenges Malaysia faced in managing its religious pluralism.

Malaysia's Religious Pluralism

The results of 2010 population census of Malaysia are yet to be released. But the estimates of 2009 put Malaysia's population at around 27 million, made up of people from diverse ethnic groups, the three biggest being Malay, Chinese and Indian. Smaller ethnic groups consisted of Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Kelabit, Kedayan, Kadazan, Murut, Dusun, Biasaya and Bajau, among others. These were the indigenous groups of Sabah and Sarawak. Malay formed the largest group, constituting about 57% of the population, Chinese about 24%, and Indian about 7%. Malays together with the indigenous groups of Sabah and Sarawak and Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia made up a group collectively named *Bumiputera*, literally means "the sons and daughters of the soil" or the "original people of the land". As *Bumiputera*, the group enjoyed certain rights as enshrined in the Constitution, negotiated at independence. Taken together, *Bumiputera* groups constituted slightly more than 60% of the total population.

Each of the ethnic groups retains its identity in term of culture, tradition, language and religion, making the country not only multiethnic, but multicultural as well as multi-religious. All the major religions of the world are represented in the country: Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Animism and other folk religions are also represented in the country. According to 2000 Population Census, 60% of Malaysians were Muslims, 19% Buddhists, 9.1% Christians, 6.3% Hindus, and 2.6% Confucians, Taoist and other traditional Chinese religions. The remainder 3% were of other religious affiliations, including Sikhism and various forms of animism.

In most instances, religious divisions tend to coincide with ethnicity. Malays, by definition, are Muslims. Islam has been perceived as a source of identity that has shaped Malay life and worldview. However, Islam as practiced by Malays has also accommodated some elements of pre-Islamic Malay *adat*. Most Chinese are Buddhists. Buddhism as practiced by them is of Mahayana school and is deeply infused with Confucianism, Taoism, and other folk beliefs and ancestor worship. Many Chinese are Christians, and some are Muslims. Majority of Indians are Hindus, though there are Christians and Muslims among them. Majority of *Bumiputera* groups in Sabah and Sarawak are Christians, though there are also Muslims as well as animists among them. Orang Asli of peninsula Malaysia practiced some forms of animism, though a growing number of them have been converted to either Islam or Christianity in more recent time.

In most instances in the past, these religious communities ‘lived side by side but remained institutionally and culturally separate’. Malays lived in villages known as *kampong*, engaging in agriculture, fishing and handicraft and a host of other peasant activities. There were Malays in towns and urban centers. However, their number was not significant. Mostly urban Malays worked in the government sector. There were the occasional ‘resident stranger’ of Chinese origin in Malay villages who acted as middlemen linking Malay peasants in the village and the markets in towns. But mostly, Chinese lived in towns, engaging in trading activities, or near the tin mines. There were also Chinese villages, mainly squatting on state land. Most Indians lived in rubber estates, but some lived in towns and engaged in services and trading activities. Inter-ethnic interactions rarely took place, and were restricted mainly to market places. There were even separate schools for the children of each of these communities.

Today, the separation is no longer that complete. There has been a certain degree of integration. In towns and cities, the population is mixed, though in varying degrees. We will visit this point a little later. For now let us focus our attention to the historical context of Malaysia’s religious pluralism.

Historical Context

Religious diversity had been a characteristic of Malaysia since early in its history. Hinduism and Buddhism made their presence felt around the 3rd century BC. By the beginning of 1st century AD the two religions were well established in Malay Peninsula, only to fade away with the wane of Srivijaya in the 14th century, which coincided with the rise of Malacca and also of Islam. Islam became a very strong force in Malay life since then and continued into the present. Christianity came together with the conquest of Malacca by the Portuguese in 1511, and other Europeans later. Sikhism came centuries later.

But religious heterogeneity up to the end of 17th century was not pronounced. The country—as was represented by a number of Malay sultanates that emerged following the fall of Malacca—was mutely Islamic. Other religious communities were small in terms of their strength. More importantly, they did not participate in power sharing. Their major concern then was the creation of wealth. But with British economic activities in Malay Peninsula in the 18th century, the scenario began to undergo radical changes. Though English traders had been present in Malay waters since the 17th century, it was only towards the end of 18th

century that the British East India Company, which was based in India, developed a serious economic interest in the affairs of Malay states. They acquired Penang in 1876, and Singapore in 1819. Civil disturbances in Malay states of late 1870s that spilled into Penang provided the British with the excuse to directly intervene in the affairs of Malay states. During its rule, the British turned Malay Peninsula into a huge economic enterprise. British traders exploited Peninsula's tin and gold mines. Soon after, they experimented with tropical plantation crops like tapioca, gambier, pepper and coffee. In 1877, rubber was introduced, and soon it became the country's major export, stimulated by demand from European industry. Later, palm oil joined rubber as an export earner.

But the new capitalistic industry required a large labor force. The British did not regard Malays as reliable workers. They preferred Malays to keep to their traditional peasant agriculture and fishing. The British instead imported workers from India to work in the plantations. They also brought in Sri Lankan Tamil to work as clerks, supervisors and technicians. The British also encouraged large scale Chinese immigration to work the mines, mills and docks. Soon, towns like Singapore, Penang and Ipoh were majority Chinese. Kuala Lumpur, which was founded as a mining centre in 1857, also had Chinese majority. By 1891, when the country's first census was taken, the states of Perak and Selangor had Chinese majority. By early 1920s, Chinese outnumbered Malays in the Peninsula. In 1930s, Chinese formed 64% of population in the Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan.

At first, these migrants were nearly all males. Most had intended to return home when or after they had made their fortunes. Many did go home. But many more stayed. At first they married local women. But soon, they began importing brides from their respective countries of origin. They began to establish permanent communities, with structures and organizations which included schools, community halls and temples, making them self-contained enclaves devoid of reasons or need to maintain close contacts with local populations, enabling them to live institutionally and culturally separate lives.

Thus, what started in its early years as heterogeneity, or 'initial pluralism' as stated by Zawawi Ibrahim (2003), was transformed into full blown plurality by the economic forces of colonialism and capitalism in its later history. By the time of independence, pluralism was deeply entrenched.

Malaysia's Experience with Pluralism and the Challenges it Posed

It has been more than 50 years since Malaysia became an independent nation. Comparatively speaking, it can be said that Malaysia has been quite free of strife commonly associated with power and wealth sharing of a plural society. Much of the success can be attributed to the compromise made at the point of independence. As has been pointed out earlier, non-Malays were given equal citizenship and in return tacitly recognized the special and 'primacy' position of Malays. Malays, on the other hand, were assured of their special position as the indigenous and 'original' inhabitants of the country but had to yield something by agreeing to full citizenship to Chinese and Indians. Fenton (2003) is of the opinion that the compromise and the symbolic dominance of Malays partnered by Chinese and Indian elite appeared to solve the 'problem of political authority' and seemed to be working well. It did, for twelve years, until 1969.

In 1969 a race riot broke out in the capital city Kuala Lumpur. The riot—which came to be known as "May 13 Crisis"—took place following the general elections of that year which saw parties supported by Chinese opposition made electoral gains and appeared to have enhanced their political prospects. This caused Malays to feel threatened, especially after watching several nights of victory parades and celebrations by hoards of opposition supporters yelling words of derision telling Malays to return to their respective villages, now that 'Kuala Lumpur is ours'. May 13 forever remain a grim reminder of how fragile pluralism in Malaysia is, and as noted by Fenton, 'ever since has presented an image of the possibilities of ethnic conflict' in the country.

Following the crisis, the government declared a state of national emergency. Constitution and Parliament were suspended and the country was put under the National Operation Council (NOC), headed by the then Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein. Under Emergency rule, which lasted nearly two years, Abdul Razak was selected as prime minister. NOC devised a strategy to reduce ethnic conflict by incorporating new principles into the Constitution that would remove certain issues from political contestation. It was based on the argument that when the country gained independence there was an agreement on a national compact produced by leaders of all ethnic communities through interethnic bargaining and that this compact provided the basis for ethnic harmony and collaboration in political affairs. NOC decided that 'before democratic institutions could be restored, constitutional changes

were required to enshrine certain principles as non-negotiable and to remove “sensitive issues” from political debate’. To that end the government formulated a “national ideology”, *Rukun Negara* that called for all citizens to be sensitive to the views and concerns of other communities and to be tolerant and respectful of religious diversity, while also upholding the “legitimate interests” and privileges of other communities” (Means, 2009: 83). When Parliament was reconvened in February 1971, it passed amendments to the Sedition Act by defining as ‘criminal offence any discussion or questioning of the powers and status of the Malay rulers, citizenship rights of non-Malays, Malay special rights and privileges, the status of Islam, and the status of Malay as the sole national language’.

During its short rule, NOC also formulated the blueprint of a strategy to raise the economic position of Malays and other Bumiputeras through ‘affirmative action’ programs designed to promote their participation in the modern and advance sectors of the economy. It was based on the argument that the violence of May 13 was the result of relative depravation of Malays in comparison to non-Malays, and that to avoid further ethnic violence, economic disparities based on ethnicity had to be addressed with radical policies. A more detailed version of the blueprint was incorporated into the Second Malaysia Plan and came to be known as the New Economic Policy (NEP).

The NEP had as its objectives the reduction of poverty irrespective of race and the restructuring of society by gradually eliminating ethnic identification with economic functions. It was envisaged that NEP was to be in operation for 20 years, from 1971 to 1990 and to form what was later termed as the First Outline Perspective Plan. NEP was an “affirmative action plan” that was said to be Malay biased. NEP was replaced by the more inclusive National Development Policy (NDP) which lasted ten years, dubbed as the Second Outline Perspective Plan. Development strategies after the year 2000 came to be under the purview of National Vision Plan, which ended in 2010. It formed the Third Outline Perspective Plan. Beginning of 2011 saw Malaysia implementing the New Economic Model, which formed the core of the 10th Malaysia Plan, the same way NEP became the core of 2nd Malaysia Plan 40 years earlier.

These development plans, despite several inherent and implementation weaknesses, have managed to bring Malaysia to a certain level of economic development. More importantly, it brought about some restructuring in the economy and society. One of the obvious changes had been the enlargement of the size of middle classes, including Malay middle class. The development took place following developments in

other areas. For example, the wider participation of Bumiputera in higher education that opened avenues for better paying jobs for them, and their increasing participation in the modern sector of the economy. More importantly, there has not been a repeat of May 13. While on the subject of May 13, it is worthwhile to note that its cause was more racial in nature, rather than religious.

What has been Malaysia's formula in its successful handling of meeting the challenges of religious pluralism? The question can be examined at two levels. First, to take a look at what the state or authority does or had done to promote goodwill among followers of the many religions in Malaysia. Secondly, to examine what the civil societies do or had done in their efforts to foster goodwill and understanding between the many and varied religious groups.

At the first level, as had been often repeated, Islam has been made the official religion of Malaysia and freedom of worship is guaranteed by the Constitution. Thus, as mentioned in the opening remarks, other religions are visibly practiced everywhere in Malaysia. The state in general supports Islamic religious establishments and its official policy of infusing 'Islamic values' into the administration of the country. These efforts are executed through the Department of Islamic Development (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, or JAKIM for short) at federal level; and the Council for Islamic Religious Affairs and Malay Customs (Majlis Agama Islam dan Adat Istiadat Melayu) at state level. Perhaps, it is worth noting that in Malaysia, since the time of British administration, the official week-end for most states in Malaysia had always been Sunday, which was the Christian traditional holiday. To Muslims, Friday would be more appropriate as a day of rest. The authority could have changed the practice, but had chosen to retain Sunday as the official week-end. Only three states—Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah—have their week-end on Friday. Johore and Perlis too used to have their holiday on Friday, but changed it to Sunday in the middle of 1990s. This gesture, though often over-looked, contributed significantly towards maintaining goodwill among the general population. At the very least, it did not disturb status quo.

Another effort by the authority aimed at promoting goodwill and understanding between the people of diverse religious backgrounds was the conscious attempt at giving national significance of religious celebrations, so that these were celebrated not only by the adherents of a particular religion, but also by the rest of the populations. Apart from making these occasions public holidays, the government within the last ten years or so started to organize 'open house' at national and state lev-

els to celebrate these events. Thus, Idl-fitri is celebrated by not only Muslim, but by people of other religions as well. In the same way, Chinese New Year is celebrated not by Chinese only. Other Malaysians are free to join in the merry-making. So is Deepavali, Christmas, and Wesak. Each of these are celebrated not only by Hindus, Christians and Buddhists respectively. Other Malaysian are free to participate as well. These 'open houses' are attended by national and state leaders who, without fail, always remind the people of the need celebrate and embrace religious diversity as a way of life.

As far as the efforts by civil societies aimed at fostering goodwill among the plural population of Malaysia, many religious societies and organizations are playing their roles. These include the Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM), The Islamic Economic Development Foundation of Malaysia (YPEIM), Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA), Hindu Sangam, Council of Churches and many more. As far back as 1956, an exploratory inter-religious meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur. Out of that meeting, emerged the Malayan Council for Interfaith Cooperation, which later evolved into Malaysian Inter-religious Organisation (MIRO). In later years other groups emerged. These include Aliran Kesedaran Negara, or Aliran for short; Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS); and Interfaith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF). These organizations all strive to foster national well-being through the promotion of religious harmony by providing platforms and means for people of different faiths to come together to promote common principles contained in all religions. Dialogues between the organizations and the authority, and also between themselves, are being held from time to time. Lest we forget, individuals too—and there are too many of them to mention—have played their respective roles in promoting goodwill and understanding among people of diverse religious groups.

However, despite efforts at maintaining peaceful inter-religious coexistence by both the authority and civil societies and private individuals, the harmony had been breached from time to time. Three recent 'incidents' can be quoted for the purpose of this paper. The first was the series of attacks on places of worship that took place some two years ago. Though, as mentioned by Martinez (2001), there were some incidents earlier in 2001, attacks that took place towards the end of 2009 and early 2010 posed serious threat to security of the country. These attacks were related to events that took place earlier. On December 10, 2007, the Malaysian government banned the Malay language section of a Catholic weekly, *The Catholic Herald*, for using the word 'Allah' as a

Malay translation for God. The authorities' reasoning was that the use of the word 'Allah' would confuse Muslims. Following a warning that the authorities would revoke its permit if it continued using the word 'Allah' in the Malay language section of its newspaper, *The Catholic Herald* filed a suit challenging the warning. Three points were raised in the law suit. The court made its decision on 31 December 2009 over those issues: that the government's action in prohibiting *The Catholic Herald* from using the word 'Allah' is illegal, null and void; that the Archbishop as publisher of *The Catholic Herald* is entitled to use the word 'Allah'; and lastly, that the word 'Allah' is not exclusive to the religion of Islam.

The decision by the court caused some disconcerts among Malay Muslim population, majority of whom shared the view that the word 'Allah' was exclusively Islamic. The over-zealous among them went a step further when they attacked some churches in some parts of the country. Three churches in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya were attacked during the night of 8 January 2010, and another in Petaling Jaya on 9 January. On 10 January, four more places of worship were attacked: three churches and one mosque. Between 11 to 16 January five more places of worship were attacked: three churches—two in Negeri Sembilan and one in Johore; one *gurdwara* in Kuala Lumpur; and one mosque in Sarawak. These attacks on places of worship further heightened an already tensed situation. There was a fear that these incidents might escalate into a full scale religious strife.

Of the attacks on churches, one, the Metro Tabernacle Assembly of God, in Desa Melawati, Kuala Lumpur, suffered considerable damage. Witnesses reportedly saw two individuals throwing something looking like a petrol bomb. The attack raised concern and was condemned by most political parties, ruling and opposition alike, and organizations. Prime Minister Najib condemned the attack and directed police to increase security at all places of worship and called for unity amongst Malaysian people. Najib visited the Metro Tabernacle Church and promised a grant of RM500,000 to assist in its reconstruction. A foundation, CIMB Foundation, donated an additional RM100,000. In a statement issued on 20 January, the Malaysian Police reported that eight suspects had been arrested. Three men were charged in court in July 2010. One was acquitted due to lack of evidence. The other two, brothers aged 24 and 22, were convicted. It was reported that as of August 17, 2010 the brothers had not been sentenced but faced a maximum of 20 years in prison. The persons who were responsible for the attacks on the two mosques in Johore were never identified and nobody was charged in court.

The second 'incident' involved the question of religious freedom. The issue was hotly debated in the last decade of the last century that spilled over into the new millenium, especially in the light of rumors about a large number of Muslims wanting to leave Islam and also in the light of the existence of cults that were deemed to be contrary to Islamic orthodoxy and the measures considered by the government to deal with the situation, which was 'The Faith Restoration Bill'. Conversions from Islam to other religions have been few and far between. But there had been cases of such conversion. Among the recent cases was that of Lina Joy. She was born Azalina Jailani in 1964, to Muslim parents of Javanese descent. She converted to Christianity at age 26. She changed her name to Lina Joy. In 1997, she applied to the National Registration Department to have her name and religious identity changed. The application was rejected. But in 1998, the department allowed the name change but not her religious status. Joy appealed against this decision in the High Court which ruled that she could not change her religious identity, because Malays are defined as Muslims under the Constitution. Joy then took her case to Court of Appeal. She was not successful. Then she further appealed to the Federal Court of Malaysia, the highest court and the court of last resort in Malaysia. On May 30, 2007, the Federal Court dismissed Joy's appeal. The Court ruled that only the Syariah Court had the power to allow Joy to remove her religious designation of Islam from her national identity card. Joy wanted all this done because she wanted to live openly as a Christian and marry her Christian fiancé, which she could not do so long as she is regarded a Muslim. The only other way she can marry a non-Muslim was to leave the country like what Nur'aishah Bokhari did. Nur'aishah had since her conversion to Christianity left the country and married her Roman Catholic boyfriend. Most of other cases of conversions involved those who embraced Islam, usually upon marrying a Muslim, and wishing to revert to their former religion after the marriage failed.

Though apostasy or *murtad* is an offence in Islam, human right activists invoked Article 11 of the Federal Constitution, which guaranteed religious freedom. Earlier in 2000, the government proposed 'The Faith Restoration Bill', aimed at bringing back the recalcitrant Muslims on the 'correct path'. The bill was aimed at providing counsel individuals contemplating Islam and organizations or movements whose teachings and practices were deemed contrary to Islamic orthodoxy. But a series of protests by human rights activists forced the government to withdraw the bill 'for further study'.

As noted by several observers, Means among them, central issue in

these development was the question of whether the constitutional rights of religious liberty were only available to non-Muslim citizens, or whether Muslims could invoke constitutional rights of religious liberty when they renounce Islam or if they failed to comply with syariah law and fatwa regarding religious beliefs and obligations. Means observed that liberal Muslim organizations were defending more religious freedom for Muslims, while the more conservative Muslims were demanding sentences commensurate with the ‘crime against Islam’ (2009). It would be pertinent to note that the debate was not only confined to the liberal Muslims and conservative Muslim organizations, but also the non-Muslims and human rights organization who threw their support behind the liberal Muslims, and this caused some frictions.

The third ‘incident’ that had caused some anxiety among some Malaysians was the announcement in 2002, during Mahathir’s administration, that “Malaysia has fulfilled its requirements of an Islamic State”. The announcement was interpreted as “Malaysia is an Islamic state” and was met with some anxiety and discomfort by non-Muslim Malaysians. They responded by arguing that the announcement was unconstitutional, that though the Constitution named Islam as the official religion, that did not make Malaysia an Islamic state. The issue was settled with a declaration that the dispute was essentially semantic and did not change the legal rights of citizens. What prompted the move was that the government was anxious to win back Malay votes which UMNO or the United Malays National Organization, a senior member of the government, had lost to Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party or PAS in 1999 general elections. After the 1999 general elections, PAS came out strong in its goal to establish an Islamic State and to enforce *syariah* law. PAS argued that Islamic law would be the ultimate answer to eliminate social and political evils and to restore a true Islamic social and political order for Malaysia. The campaign had an impact on the National Front or Barisan Nasional which mounted its own Islamic-based counter campaign, which included the declaration that Malaysia was an Islamic state.

These are some examples of ‘incidents’ that can cause, and indeed have caused, frictions among people of diverse religious groups. However, the timely intervention by the state and its apparatus, prevented the escalation of a possible full scale religious strife.

Concluding Remarks

Benchmarked against itself, Malaysia today is doing quite well economically. Even benchmarked against countries in the region, Malaysia is

doing reasonably well. It is the third biggest economy in Southeast Asia. Its GDP had been impressive for the last 40 years or so, registering an average of 7% annually, except in 1973/74 when there was a sharp increase in the price of oil, in 1986 when there was a drop in major commodity prices including petroleum, natural rubber and palm oil, and during the East Asian financial crisis of 1998/99 and in 2001 during the IT recession. The current unemployment rate is around 3%. Strategies and policies implemented under the long term Outline Perspective Plan 1, 2 and 3, which spanned over a period of 40 years, among others, had brought about changes from low income country to middle income country. Built into the New Economic Model, the development plan to be implemented beginning of 2011, is the vision of moving into high income country. Is this going to be possible given the ethnic and religious plurality of its population? Is the population of the country are more Malaysian now than before? Or in terms of religion, have they embraced or developed a feeling that has gone beyond the stage of toleration and mutual understanding? Whether Malaysia has taken off to the next level is to subjected to close scrutiny and intense debate. But being there it must. Perhaps, Prime Minister Najib's 1People, 1Nation, 1Vision will take Malaysia there!

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