

Racism towards the Chinese Minority in Malaysia: Political Islam and Institutional Barriers

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Abstract

Politics in Malaysia revolves around the tensions between the three major ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese and Indians. After the 1969 ethnic riots, the country adopted an affirmative action programme widely regarded as racist towards the non-Malays. The rise of political Islam in recent times has added a religious layer to institutional racism. This article looks at contemporary racism towards the Malaysian Chinese community and argues that things will get worse in the future owing to the omnipresence of the Malay Islamic supremacy ideology.

Keywords: Malaysia, Malays, Chinese, Indians, institutional racism, political Islam, identity politics

Introduction

MALAYSIA IS A country well known for long-term tensions between the Malays and non-Malays. Despite this, the country has been remarkably stable since independence from the United Kingdom in 1957. In fact, the first change of government only occurred in 2018.

The political stability in Malaysia came about despite what many would consider to be institutionalised racism towards the non-Malays, principally the ethnic Chinese and Indians. While anti-Indian racism undoubtedly exists, this article focusses on anti-Chinese racism and covers the main drivers of racism towards the Chinese community in Malaysia. In the main, racism towards the Chinese in Malaysia is driven by Malay identity politics and the rise of political Islam. This article is in three parts: the first covers the history of Malaysia and the 1969 racial riots; the second covers the economic and constitutional aspects of racial discrimination and the justifications used by the perpetrators; and the third part lays out the rise of political Islam, how this has created a new layer of racial discrimination, and prospects for change.

Brief history

The Portuguese were the first of the European colonial powers to establish themselves on the

Malay Peninsula, capturing Malacca in 1511. The Dutch replaced the Portuguese in 1641, followed by the British who cemented their takeover of the Peninsula after the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, which divided Southeast Asia under their control into British and the Dutch East Indies (modern day Indonesia). Once this was secured, the British systematically brought in Chinese and Indian workers to exploit the country in order to meet the needs of a colonial economy. Consistent with the practice in other parts of the world, the British colonial administrators followed the 'divide and rule' system, whereby the imported labour had little or no contact with the local indigenous population so that they would not be a threat to the colonial authorities. These foreign workers were never meant to be permanent residents; they were intended to return to their home countries on completion of their contract.¹

The Second World War, the independence of India in 1947 and the fall of China into communist hands in 1949 meant any plans to send these workers back to their country of origin was no longer feasible for Malaya. In 1957,

¹J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, New York, New York University Press, 1956 [1948].

the British granted independence to Malaya and in 1963, the British helped to establish the federation of Malaysia. This new federation consisted of Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo colonies of North Borneo (now Sabah) and Sarawak. Singapore left the federation two years later. In this article, when I refer to Malaysia, I am referring to peninsular Malaysia. The political dynamics in the Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah are completely different.

Singapore left the federation when Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of Singapore, fell out politically with Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister. In the main, Lee could not accept Tunku's insistence that Malaysian politics must be based on the 'Malay nation-state', while Lee was pushing for 'Malaysian Malaysia'.² For the Chinese community, Lee's exit meant there was no other Chinese leader of Lee's seniority who could challenge Malay hegemony.³ Contrary to public perception, Singapore's exit did not happen suddenly, but was negotiated by Lee and Tunku for over a year. Singapore's exit did not really alter the fundamental ethnic balance, but did increase the percentage of the Malay population from about 51 per cent to 53 per cent. Although Singapore was Chinese majority, their number was small compared to the combined native population of North Borneo and Sarawak. These native populations were counted as part of the overall Malay population. Thus, when Singapore left the federation, there was only a slight increase in the overall Malay population and a small fall in the overall Chinese population. In any case, the racial arithmetic only became all important after the racial riots in 1969.

Under a deal brokered by the British prior to 1957, the Chinese and Indian workers were granted citizenship in Malaya, despite some opposition from native Malays. In 1957, the 6.2 million population of Malaya consisted of 3.12 million Malays/Indigenous, 2.33 million Chinese, 696,000 Indians and 123,000 others. The Chinese made up about a third of the

population. All in all, the non-Malays made up close to half of the population.

In the first decade after independence, the country was stable and the ruling coalition, the Malayan Alliance (renamed Malaysian Alliance after 1963), for the most part, did represent the three major ethnic groups. The Malayan Alliance consisted of three parties: United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). As their name suggests, UMNO represented the Malays, while the MCA and MIC represented the Chinese and Indians respectively. The best way to describe this period is consociationalism, where power was shared between the Malays (who held political power) and the Chinese (who held economic power). This power-sharing formula worked fairly well until 1969, when the arrangement fell apart. After the largely Chinese-based opposition made major gains against the Malayan Alliance in the 1969 general elections, racial riots broke out in all the major cities in peninsular Malaysia. Parliament was suspended and the country placed under emergency rule. When the emergency was lifted in 1971, the Malay elite decided that the old formula was no longer feasible: a new political framework based on Malay political supremacy was the only way forward.⁴ The riots were a watershed moment in Malaysian history and laid the foundation for the anti-Chinese racism seen in the country today.

The economic and constitutional context

The starting point for understanding anti-Chinese racism and racial attitudes in Malaysia is the 13 May 1969 riots. In response, the whole country was placed under emergency rule and Parliament was suspended. A new executive body, the National Operations Council (NOC), was established to rule the country. The official reason given for the riots was economic disparity between the Malays and Chinese. This disparity fed into the insecurities within the Malay community and stoked fears that they were being

²C. Boon Kheng, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002.

³A. Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement*, Singapore, Times Academic, 1998.

⁴H. Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1996.

overwhelmed by Chinese economic power. According to the official figures, the Malay community, despite comprising just above 50 per cent of the population, owned only 2.4 per cent of the corporate wealth. To right this 'historical wrong', the New Economic Policy (NEP) was promulgated in 1971, currently the world's longest social engineering programme. In the main, the NEP was to bring Malay, officially termed *bumiputera* (Sanskrit term meaning 'sons of the soil'), share of all economic and social spheres to 30 per cent via a quota system. In reality, ethnic Malay account for 90 per cent of the indigenous population, thus in Malaysia the term *bumiputera* and Malay are synonymous: the Malay quota was based solely on racial criteria. More unusual, the NEP was for the majority ethnic group, not the minority. The *bumiputera* quota was applied to all institutions in the country—from intake to universities, to government procurement, to listing requirements on the stock exchange. A company wishing to list on the Malaysian stock exchange must have at least a 30 per cent Malay shareholding. All Malays and other indigenous groups were eligible for the 'bumi quota', regardless of personal circumstances. A child from a millionaire Malay family could access the *bumiputera*-only scholarship on the same basis as the children of a Malay farmer. Since the NEP touched on every facet of Malaysian life, soon it became openly acceptable to discriminate racially in any activity, even if it was outside the remit of the original NEP plans; anything set aside for the Malay and *bumiputera* community was simply justified on the basis of the NEP. One such anomaly is the discount for new houses. In Malaysia, it is 'normal' for developers to give 5–12 per cent discount for Malay buyers in order to ensure that their housing project meets the quota that 30 per cent of buyers must be *bumiputera*.⁵ In some non-Malay companies, senior positions had to be created and filled by Malays to meet job quotas. The reverse, however, was not a problem; it is possible to have an all-Malay management or board without a single minority person. This system was not

publicly questioned, as it would have been seen as an attack on 'Malay rights'.

The Malaysian constitution is also problematic. Being ethnic 'Malay' in Malaysia is constitutionally defined. Under Article 160 of the Federal Constitution, if you are officially defined as a 'Malay', you are someone 'who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay custom'. Thus, legally, a Malaysian Malay cannot renounce Islam or convert out of Islam. The law also prohibits anyone from proselytising to a Muslim person, so being a Malay automatically means one is also a Muslim; both identities are synonymous in Malaysia. The constitutional status of Islam as a religion is also problematic. Article 3 (1) of the Federal Constitution (Malaysia) currently states that 'Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions can be practised safely and peacefully in all parts of the Federation'. The wording has led all in the Malay establishment, including Malay politicians, the bureaucracy and Malay political parties, to interpret Islam to be the official religion of Malaysia. Although Malaysia as an Islamic country has been disputed by many legal scholars, in practice, the Malay establishment run the state as if Islam is the official religion.⁶ Thus, unlike many other countries, the political identity for the Malay community must include Islam, making Islam part of the Malay political identity.

From past injustice to 'social contract'

How does the state justify anti-Chinese discrimination? The most common justification is that such policies are meant to redress past injustices, correct imbalances, promote political stability and avoid another 'May 13'. It argues that during the colonial period, the British authorities did not do anything to help the Malays participate in the modern economy. When the British expanded the Malayan economy, opportunities were only given to British businesses. Moreover, the British capitalists simply imported large numbers of Chinese

⁵J. Chin, 'The Malaysian Chinese dilemma: the never-ending policy (NEP)', *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, vol. 3, 2009, pp. 168–183; J. Chin, 'Affirmative action at 50 in Malaysia', *Tablet*, 26 May 2021.

⁶J. M. Fernando, 'The position of Islam in the constitution of Malaysia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2006, pp. 249–266.

and Indian temporary workers instead of hiring and training the local Malays. Over time, many of these Chinese workers branched out into small businesses and became an essential part of the Malayan economy. After the war, the British left the Chinese and Indians, now comprising more than 40 per cent of the population, in the newly independent country by ensuring they were given citizenship. In 1970, the Malay share of equity stood at 2 per cent, while the Chinese held ten times as much (22.8 per cent), with the rest largely in British hands. Thus, programmes such as NEP should not be seen as racial discrimination, but affirmative action policies to help indigenous Malays 'catch up'. Furthermore, they promote political stability, as the majority Malays are given a meaningful stake in the economy. This contrasts with the 1998 anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia, where the economic dominance of minority Chinese business over *Pribumi* (native Indonesian) business played a major role. If the Malays held a significant stake, then there would be less animosity towards the Chinese. It is not uncommon for UMNO leaders to say openly that NEP has prevented another 'May 13' and it is the 'small price' that the Chinese pay for communal peace.

Another common justification relates to Article 153 of the Federal Constitution and the granting of 'inalienable Malay birthrights', whereby the king is specifically endowed with wide-ranging economic and social powers to defend Malay interests:

to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives ... to ensure the reservation for Malays and natives ... as [the king] may deem reasonable of positions in the public service (other than the public service of a State) and of scholarships, exhibitions and other similar educational or training privileges or special facilities given or accorded by the Federal Government and, when any permit or licence for the operation of any trade or business is required by federal law, then, subject to the provisions of that law and this Article, of such permits and licences...

For many Malays, Article 153 confirms their 'special' status and reinforces the ideology of *Ketuanan Melayu* or Malay Supremacy. This asserts that Malay people are the *Tuan* (masters) of Malaysia and that the country belongs to them, entitling them to 'special rights' over

all other ethnic groups in the country. They also like to refer to colonial times when the British recognised the sovereignty of the Malay sultans and supported the notion that Malaya belongs to the Malays. There is some truth to this, as the British colonial authorities explicitly recognised the Malay Sultans as rulers and in the colonial civil service, aristocratic Malays were often recruited to help the British to rule over Malaya. Non-Malays, no matter how long they had lived in Malaysia, are *pendatang* (recent immigrants) and therefore should consider themselves as 'guests'. In contemporary Malaysia, it is common for Malay right-wing politicians to refer to the Chinese as *pendatang*, a term widely seen by the Chinese (and Indians) as highly insulting.

The most sophisticated justification for Malay hegemony, and thus racism towards the non-Malays, is to invoke the philosophy of 'social contract'. This term first appeared in a 1986 speech by Abdullah Ahmad, a UMNO Member of Parliament, who stated plainly that:

Let us make no mistake—the political system in Malaysia is founded on Malay dominance. That is the premise from which we should start ... [It] was born out of a sacrosanct social contract which preceded national independence. There have been moves to question, to set aside and to violate, this contract that have threatened the stability of the system ... The May 1969 riots arose out of the challenge to the system agreed upon, out of the non-fulfilment of the substance of the contract...⁷

In the Malay political mindset, the social contract is taken to mean a *quid pro quo* agreement that provides non-Malays with citizenship in return for their recognition of *Ketuanan Melayu*. Since then, many Malay leaders, including the Prime Minister, have used the supposed 'social contract' to stop debate on discrimination against the Chinese, arguing that what was 'agreed' at the time of independence is sacrosanct.

All these arguments are of course self-serving when properly scrutinised. They are meant to justify a form of racism. The first argument makes little historical sense, since it

⁷K. Das, *Malay Dominance? The Abdullah Rubric*, Kuala Lumpur, K. Das Ink, 1987.

was British policy not to bring the Malays into the modern economy, and to ask the Chinese to pay the price for British colonial policy is not just. The British gave the Malays the upper hand in politics in order to help the British to rule. The bias shown by the British towards the Malays is also evidenced by the British acceptance of Article 153 in the constitution of the newly independent state. Indeed, the British played a key role in the drafting of the constitution.

As for the 'social contract' argument: it came about after nearly three decades of independence. In other words, it is a modern-day justification for racially based differential treatment. In any case, the core argument that the Malays have special status because they are the indigenous people is also suspect, since there is sufficient anthropological evidence that the Malays themselves are migrants as well—just that they migrated to Malaya much, much earlier than the Chinese and Indians.

The drivers of Malay-Islamic supremacy

Given that being Malay and Islam were synonymous, as described above, the *Ketuanan Melayu* ideology has metamorphosed into *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* (Malay-Islamic supremacy) in the past two decades. This process took off after the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the worldwide revival in Islam which followed. In the 2000s, Islam became a political tool and became the most effective political mobilisation tool among the Muslim polity in Malaysia. This had a major impact on racism towards the Chinese community, as all the mainstream Malay/Muslim political parties came to adopt a 'Muslim (us) vs non-Muslim (them)' political worldview among Malaysian Muslims. In other words, identity politics among the Malay population took on a religious identity as well. Two factors were crucial: UMNO's competition with PAS and the bureaucratisation of Islam.

In 1951, a political party which aimed to turn Malaysia into an Islamic state was established. There was no ambiguity about its name and purpose: Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS or Islamic Party of Malaysia). For the first few decades, PAS was a minor party with very limited electoral support among the Malay

community; it only became more mainstream in the 1990s. PAS attitudes towards non-Muslims (read Chinese and Indians) can only be described as loathing and fear. Hadi Awang, PAS's president, is famous for claiming that it was a sin for a Muslim to vote for a non-Muslim—even if the Muslim candidate was corrupt—because true Muslims cannot live under the rule of a non-Muslim.

Over time, chasing the Malay vote became chasing the 'Islamic vote'. Both UMNO and PAS vied to be the more 'Islamic', pushing each other into taking increasingly hard-line positions on Islam. As with global trends among Muslims in the 1980s and 1990s, the Malay population became more conservative and its politics more 'Islamic' and the UMNO government adopted an Islamist position. Under then Prime Minister Mahathir, Islamic values became 'universal values'. Islamic banking and several Islamic universities were established. Islamic studies were offered in all public universities and Islamic civilisation courses became compulsory for all university students. Thousands of Malay students were sent to the Middle East, India and Pakistan to study Islam, and many of them returned and began to spread the more conservative forms of Islam being taught in these countries. Some established private Islamic (*Tahfiz*) schools where religious instruction was the mainstay of the education. Their worldview was that all non-Muslims are enemies of Islam and seek to undermine Islam. Many of these preachers supported PAS and the quest to turn Malaysia into an Islamic state, but close to 40 per cent of the country's population was non-Muslim and the non-Muslims (Chinese and Indians) were reluctant to convert to Islam. About 10 per cent of Malaysia's population was Christian. Thus, by the early 2000s the only political game in the Malay community was which party—UMNO or PAS—was more Islamic, would champion Islam and could dominate the non-Muslims so that they would not be a 'threat' to Islam. In the Malaysian context, where Islam is tied to Malay identity, this meant the outer group that is deemed an enemy of Islam consists of the non-Malays, principally the Chinese and Indians. The institutional racism imposed by the NEP reinforced the view that all non-Malays are members of the 'out group'.

The rise of political Islam was aided by the bureaucratisation of Islam by UMNO.⁸ To demonstrate its Islamic credentials, the UMNO-led government created the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) in the Prime Minister's office in the mid-1990s. JAKIM introduced compulsory radical teaching of Islamic theology in all government schools. The teaching espouses a theology derived from the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, and rather than teaching inclusiveness and tolerance of other faiths, the curriculum promotes an exclusivist view of Islam, Islamic supremacist attitudes and rejection of the non-Muslim in Malaysia. Since the Chinese constitute the largest non-Muslim segment, much of JAKIM's anti-Muslim worldview was targeted at them, especially Chinese Christians. JAKIM's efforts to demonise the non-Muslims in Malaysia as a threat to Islam and Islamic supremacy was aided by the rapid growth of *Tahfiz* and private Islamic schools from the 1990s.⁹ Many of these schools teach an even more exclusivist view of Islam and Muslim and see non-Muslim as *dhimmi*—a protected minority with restricted rights and who should pay a special tax in exchange for protection. In practice, this meant that the non-Malays would be second class citizens.

Racism in contemporary Malaysia

The rise of Malay-Islamic identity tied with the rise of political Islam has fuelled racism against non-Muslims. Since non-Muslims by law are non-Malays, this meant the brunt of the hate speech was directed at the Chinese and Indians. They constitute the biggest blocs among the non-Malay: 24 and 7 per cent of the population respectively. The 'us (Muslims) *vs* others (non-Muslims)' attitude was evident from the social media posts of right-wing Malay groups, speeches by influential *ulema*, and Malay politicians hoping to capitalise for political gain. These groups are bolder in their

attacks on the Chinese community, regularly calling them *pendatang* (newcomers), *Kafir* (non-believers/infidel), *Balik Cina* or *Balik Tong-san* (go back to China) and *Cina-Babi* (Chinese Pigs). The main Chinese-based political party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) was called DAPig and supporters were regularly painted as 'anti-Islam' and part of a wider Christian conspiracy to undermine Malay Muslims.

The widespread use of social media has compounded the problem, as many of these Islamic right-wing groups use it to amplify their hate speech towards the non-Malays. Social media allows them to organise into online groups—not only to spread their message, but more importantly, to allow them to organise coordinated attacks on groups and individuals challenging the *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* narrative. This can be seen clearly on Facebook and Twitter, where users who criticise *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* can expect a deluge of comments, including death threats, from these right-wing groups.

In many cases, the government does not take action against hate speech directed toward non-Muslims. To add insult to injury, the government gave permanent residency to Zakir Abdul Karim Naik, the infamous Indian Islamic televangelist and preacher wanted in India for charges of terror financing, hate speech and inciting communal hatred. In Malaysia, Naik was embroiled in several hate speech incidents against the Malaysian Hindu community and Christians. Despite several appeals from the Hindu and Christian groups that his speeches had inflamed ethnic relations, the government refused to take any action against him. Zakir Naik was banned from entering the UK and Canada in 2010 and his Peace TV's satellite channel is banned in several countries, including the UK, although the material can be accessed openly via YouTube.

The government promotes racism towards the non-Malays through the National Civics Bureau (*Biro Tata Negara*—BTN) and the Special Affairs Unit (JASA), agencies which conduct training for selected civil servants and university students. Participants were indoctrinated with the *Ketuanan Melayu* ideology and how the non-Malays constitute a threat to the Malays and Islam. After a series of exposures by social media, the government shut both down in 2018, but in 2021, JASA was

⁸T. Moustafa, *Constituting Religion: Islam, Liberal Rights, and the Malaysian State*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

⁹F. Fathil and W. Oktasari, 'Religious education and containment of radical elements: the case of Pondok schools in Malaysia', *UMRAN—International Journal of Islamic and Civilizational Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1–1, 2017.

revived by the new government and took on many of the indoctrination programmes previously run by BTN.

Far more dangerous is JAKIM's control over the Friday sermons, read out in every mosque in the country every Friday. In many instances, JAKIM's official sermons contain the 'us *vs* others' elements, with an emphasis on Malay-Muslim unity against 'enemies of Islam'. In the Malaysian context this can only mean the Chinese and Indians.¹⁰ These speeches have reinforced anti-Chinese attitudes among the ordinary Muslim population.

Outside religion, the racist attitude towards the Chinese is explicitly reinforced in the political arena. Malaysian politics and political parties are mobilised along racial lines, reinforcing racial identity at every level. Those parties that seek support from the Malay electorate will also adopt the Islamic identity. All political parties, even those claiming to be multiracial, have a core ethnic base, whether Malay, Chinese or Indian. For the first six decades after independence, the country was ruled by the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, seemingly a multiracial, multireligious coalition on the surface. At its height of influence, BN membership consisted of fourteen political parties representing all ethnic groups in the country. In practice, however, the BN was dominated by the UMNO, the party of Malays. UMNO was first among equals and held all the key government posts, including that of the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. In addition to being the champion of *Ketuanan Melayu Islam*, UMNO's hostile attitude towards the Chinese is in part driven by the belief that the Chinese do not want to assimilate. Assimilation means converting to Islam, adopting Malay culture and calling oneself Malay. Instead, the Chinese, according to UMNO, are always challenging the 'social contract' and the 'special rights' of the Malays and Islam. For UMNO, questioning Islam's status and Article 153 means challenging the core feature of Malay identity. They see this as an attack on their birthright as the indigenous

people of Malaya. UMNO's attitude towards the Chinese can be seen as indicative of mainstream Malay attitudes, since the majority of the Malay polity supported UMNO. UMNO, in its six decades of power, has created an environment where open racism towards the Chinese has become normalised—something the Chinese feel very strongly in everyday life.¹¹

The contemporary anti-Chinese attitude is best illustrated by recent political history. In 2018, Malaysia underwent its first regime change when Pakatan Harapan (PH or Alliance of Hope) won the fourteenth general election. The PH coalition consisted of four parties: Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM), Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah). PPBM and PKR were Malay-Islamic nationalist parties, DAP was Chinese-based and had secular ideology, and Amanah stood for moderate Islam. Many Malaysians hoped that regime change would finally put the country on a path to less racial politics. But in less than two years, the PH government dissolved when PPBM suddenly pulled out of the PH government and formed a new coalition. The main reason for the government split was because of Malay political pressure. After it lost the 2018 general election, UMNO formed a political pact with PAS and both parties began a simple narrative against the PH government. The simple narrative was the Chinese (read DAP) controlled the PH administration and *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* was under threat.¹² Examples used against the PH administration were the appointment of an ethnic Chinese as Minister of Finance and a Christian as Chief Justice. The narrative that the PH government was dominated by the Chinese led directly to PPBM calculating that it would lose Malay support in the next general election, and thus it was better to abandon its non-Malay allies.

In March 2020, PPBM established a new government and a new ruling coalition, Perikatan Nasional (PN or National Alliance).

¹⁰M. Al Adib Samuri and P. Hopkins, 'Voices of Islamic authorities: Friday Khutba in Malaysian mosques', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2017, pp. 47–67; Malaysia, Pusat KOMAS, *Malaysia Racial Discrimination Report 2015*, 2019.

¹¹J. Chin, 'From Ketuanan Melayu to Ketuanan Islam: UMNO and the Malaysian Chinese', *The End of UMNO*, 2016, pp. 226–273; D. M. Nonini, *Getting By*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 2015.

¹²J. Chin, 'Malaysia: the 2020 putsch for Malay Islam supremacy', *The Round Table*, vol. 109, no. 3, 2020, pp. 288–297.

The political attacks from the Malay community immediately ceased. The reason for this was straightforward: PN consisted of only three parties, PPBM, UMNO and PAS—all of which were Malay-Islamic. It could not be clearer to the non-Malay population that the non-Malays would never be allowed to hold real political power in the country. While non-Malays can hold minor ministries, the core of the government must be Malay-Islamic, meaning that the non-Malays willing to serve in the government had to be willing to accept their inferior political position. The Malay polity could never accept them as full citizens—a point was reinforced a year later in August 2021 when the PN government nearly fell apart owing to disagreements between UMNO and PPBM. At this point, the largest party in parliament was the Chinese-based DAP and politically the most logical thing to do was to create a new coalition with the DAP. The political norm to exclude the Chinese was so strong that UMNO and PPBM decided to simply change the Prime Minister rather than include the Chinese in the coalition.

The hostile political climate against the Chinese formed in the past three decades is pushing the most talented Chinese to leave Malaysia in such large numbers that the World Bank has classified it as a brain drain. The World Bank identified 'social injustice', a politically neutral term for racial discrimination, as one of the main causes.¹³ Of the 1.7 million people who left Malaysia, 54 per cent simply went to Singapore, the neighbouring state, followed by Australia (15 per cent), the United Kingdom (5 per cent) and the United States (10 per cent). Singapore is controlled by the Chinese, but far more importantly, the People's Action Party (PAP), the ruling party there, is famous for promoting meritocracy and runs a super-efficient state largely devoid of institutionalised racism. One interesting side observation is that while many Chinese Malaysians accept that there is racial discrimination in the West, they are willing to accept it when compared to Malaysia's institutional racism combined with Islamic bigotry.

¹³Malaysia Economic Monitor, *Brain Drain*, World Bank, April 2011; <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/282391468050059744/pdf/614830WP0malay10Box358348B01PUBLIC1.pdf> (accessed 4 May 2022).

Will the politics change in Malaysia?

Many Chinese in Malaysia hope that racism towards them by the state will ease over the long term as the demography of the country changes. At the time of independence, the Chinese constituted slightly more than one third of the population, but the last census in 2020 showed a sharp decline to 23.2 per cent. This decline is mainly owing to migration and lower fertility rates. Many Chinese families have fewer children because they know the state will not offer any support. Contrast this with a Malay family, where they know that basics such as higher education, civil service jobs and other quotas are much easier to access because of the affirmative action policies. The thinking is that once the Chinese becomes a small minority, the Malay political class can no longer use them as the bogeyman, but this thinking is erroneous. First, the animosity towards the Chinese is based—in a large part—on religion, that is, Islam. There are no signs to indicate the mainstream Chinese are willing to convert to Islam. Since the Malay identity and Islam are inseparable, being non-Muslim in Malaysia counts as being a member of the 'out group'. Second, it is widely accepted that the Chinese will continue to dominate the private sector in Malaysia, no matter their share of the population. In Indonesia, a large part of the hatred towards the Indonesian Chinese is because of their domination of the Indonesian economy even though the Chinese constitute fewer than 5 per cent of the population (see Tanasaldy in this issue). It seems that the bottom line is that if the Malaysian Chinese want equal citizenship rights, they would have to convert to Islam and adopt Malay culture. This is unlikely to happen for generations to come and thus it is unlikely the Chinese will be accepted as equal citizens.

The big unknown is the rise of China. China's shadow in Southeast Asia cannot be under-estimated. It sees the region as its backyard and China has been Malaysia's biggest trading partner for most of the past decade. Officially, China regards the overseas Chinese as foreigners, but open hostility towards ethnic Chinese is bound to raise eyebrows in Beijing. The Malay elite knows this and thus far China has not officially raised the issue of racial discrimination with the Malay leadership. As long as there is no open hostility or

anti-Chinese rioting and members of the Malaysian Chinese community can run their businesses for the most part with minimum interference from the government, Beijing will probably regard the 'Malay quota' as an internal matter. There are no political gains for Beijing to offend the Malaysian government on this issue because China wants maintain friendly relations: unlike other countries in Southeast Asia, Malaysia's geographical position holds strategic importance to China. China is currently in dispute with major Western powers over the South China Sea and Malaysia is the only country that straddles both sides of the South China Sea. (Many people forget that Malaysia also consists of two states on Borneo Island.)

The rise of China may in fact bring positive benefits to Malaysia. The Malaysian Chinese businessmen are already acting as middlemen for many China-related deals in Malaysia. Over time, coupled with China's dominance of the world economy, the Malay elite will see the Malaysian Chinese as a valuable asset. This does not mean they will get rid of the discriminatory policies toward the Chinese, but it probably means they will think twice when it comes to imposing more restrictions on the Chinese community.

Conclusion

The Malaysia case demonstrate how an ideology, *Ketuanan Melayu*, can set the stage for creating the political institutional setting for racist policies under the guise of affirmative action policies. This is compounded by history: the Chinese were brought into the country during colonial times and were never intended to be permanent residents. Another driver has been the constitution which defined who is an ethnic Malay and the religion attached to being Malay. The adoption of the NEP after the 1969 racial riots signalled the setting up of nationalised racism across the entire political-social system and cemented *Ketuanan Melayu* rule. Over time, this became *Ketuanan Melayu Islam*, as Islam became a political tool to rally the Malays. The rise of political Islam is part of the wider trend in Muslim countries and plays an increasing role in setting the political agenda. In Malaysia this political Islam comes with an ethnic identity. This conservative, exclusivist worldview of Islam based on

Malay identity is supported by the state as a means to rally support amongst Malay Muslims and to dominate the non-Muslims.¹⁴ This construction, by default, promotes racism towards all non-Malays. The Chinese, being the dominant group among the non-Malay population, bear the brunt of this racism. This situation is made worse by the NEP affirmative action policy, which gives tangible economic benefits to someone who is defined as Malay. Thus, the Malay identity becomes even more exclusionary as one group, Malay, want to protect their economic benefits. This is made possible by holding on to political power at the expense of the non-Malays.

This situation is unlikely to change for the foreseeable future, even as the country modernises. The political ideology of *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* is so embedded in political structures that it will take a political crisis equal in magnitude to the 1969 racial riots before the Malay elite will re-examine this toxic ideology. The current ideology emphasising racial and religious superiority over the non-Malays has served them well for the past five decades. In fact, they would probably argue that this ideology has served Malaysia well, since the country has not experienced another racial riot since 1969. Malaysia's experience with racism towards its minorities is not unique, but it is notable that an ethnic domination has increasingly taken on a religious character. This may be part of a wider pattern across the world and clearly requires examination, but that is beyond the scope of this article.

Acknowledgements

Open access publishing facilitated by University of Tasmania, as part of the Wiley - University of Tasmania agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

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¹⁴J. Chin, 'Malaysia: pseudo-democracy and the making of a Malay-Islamic state', in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015, pp. 411–421; J. Chin, 'Malaysia: identity politics, the rise of political Islam and *Ketuanan Melayu Islam*', in M. Mathews and M. Tay, eds., *Religion and Identity Politics: Global Trends and Local Realities*, Singapore, World Scientific Publishing, 2021, pp. 75–95.