

Reconfiguring Malay and Islam in Contemporary Malaysia

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A plural, multi-religious society is living perpetually on the brink of catastrophe. Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims must be governed by moral and ethical considerations.¹

Campaigning in the Malaysian general election of November 1999 emphasised once again that in Malaysian politics, Islam is an emotive and powerful topic. The ruling National Front (Barisan Nasional) led by Prime Minister (PM) Dr Mahathir claimed it had a long record of religious tolerance but accused its strongest rival, *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS), of fanaticism. For the first time at a general election, the National Front faced an opposition coalition which brought together PAS, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the National Justice Party (Keadilan), the latter led by Datin Dr Wan Azizah, wife of former Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Anwar Ibrahim. The opposition coalition called itself the 'Alternative Front' and used the gaoling of Anwar as a prime example of the National Front's corrupt and autocratic behaviour. The Alternative Front campaigned on a platform of social justice for all races and received public support from prominent Chinese and Indian intellectuals and activists, as well as from PAS leaders. In an attempt to subvert the appeal of the Alternative Front to non-Muslim voters (Chinese and Indians), the National Front warned that votes for the opposition would be votes against religious freedom. The Alternative Front was quick to respond with a statement from Anwar (read out by Wan Azizah) accusing the National Front of trying to create a culture of fear. Anwar urged Chinese and Indian voters not to be "easily scared or deceived by the slanders and lies of the National Front" and assured them there would not be riots and Islamic extremism if Dr Mahathir were to be voted out of office.²

The politicised references to Islam throughout the campaign drew attention to the fact that racial and ethnic difference (Malay/Chinese/Indian) in Malaysia has formed the main sub-text for political maneuvering since Independence. The bottom line is now, as it was then, that the Malays (whose religion is Islam) are the numerically and politically dominant race, while economic power lies with the Chinese (whose religion is rarely Islam). Nationalist activity in Malaysia has always been led by the Malays who have

ensured that Malay language and religion (Islam) are paramount in the nation-state as stipulated in Article 3 of the Federal Constitution, where Islam is recognised as the official religion of the Federation.

If there were any doubt about the special position of Malays in Malaysia, most analysts would cite the race riots of May 1969 as evidence of Malay sensitivity about their position in ‘their own land’. During the riots Malay youths rampaged through Kuala Lumpur in reaction to unexpected gains by Chinese parties in the general election of that year. The government responded to Malay feelings of insecurity by introducing in 1971 the New Economic Policy (NEP). This was a 20-year development plan designed to give Malays a greater share of the country’s wealth through special terms for generous loans, positive discrimination in the commercial sector, and a large number of scholarships for tertiary education.³ When the NEP was reviewed in 1990, it was believed that a better balance had been achieved between race and economic leverage and that the time was ripe for a broader and more nationally oriented ideology and economic programme. It was in this context that Dr Mahathir’s Vision 2020 was formulated to achieve greater national unity, increased economic growth and to create a nation-state that was “truly modern and progressive, an industrialised society which is just, moral and rational, with a robust and lively economy as well as its own social and cultural characteristics”.⁴ The NEP’s focus on Malays was replaced by a more embracing vision of ‘society’ (*masyarakat*)—all the races who are citizens of Malaysia. As an ideology of national unity Vision 2020 makes no specific reference to Islam but calls for the whole of society to be ethical and moral, tolerant, liberal in outlook and compassionate.⁵ This is in fact an elaboration of Dr Mahathir’s often stated philosophy that modernisation and progress must be based on values such as industry, efficiency, honesty and discipline.

While Vision 2020 was an ideology which addressed all Malaysians, the prime minister remained concerned about what he viewed as conservative interpretations of Islam and the danger this posed for the economic advancement of the Malays. In his book *The Challenge*, written in the mid-1980s, he addressed the link between Islam and modernisation in these terms:

One of the saddest ironies of recent times is that Islam, the faith that once made its followers progressive and powerful, is being invoked to promote retrogression which will bring in its wake weakness and eventual collapse....

Misinterpretation of Islam is only one of the many forms of confusion threatening the Malays today. The challenge is tremendous—the stake survival itself.⁶

To avoid decline, he believed, Malays must choose to adopt and then practice ‘good values’ and, he stresses, their destiny is theirs to shape.⁷ In the

context of Islamic beliefs the preservation of spiritual and religious values can be achieved without “abstaining from the mastery and use of modern ways which can safeguard the position and security of Muslims”.⁸ Thus in 1986 the prime minister made quite clear his belief that Malays needed to adopt a system of ‘good values’ and these values were to be found in Islam.

Ten years after *The Challenge* was published, DPM Anwar Ibrahim produced his own book entitled *The Asian Renaissance*. Received with acclaim, one of the themes running through the collection of essays is that religious identity is a distinctive feature of Asian cultures (“the Asian Man at heart is *persona religiosa*”). However, Anwar warns, the practice of religion, in its role as the moral bastion of society has not been consistent. He believes that although Asians “take pride in their religiosity” the failure to live out its ethical dimensions has resulted in “the erosion of the social fabric through widespread permissiveness and corruption”.⁹ Reading Anwar’s views with the benefit of hindsight, it is particularly ironic that just two years after the publication of his book he would stand trial for corruption and sexual deviancy. In 1999, despite international criticism of the conduct of his trial, he was found guilty of the former charges and imprisoned for six years. Then in August 2000, after a second trial (the conduct of which aroused even greater international outrage), he received a further nine years’ imprisonment for sodomy. Many Malaysians were particularly concerned that Anwar had been assaulted while held in custody by the Inspector General of Police himself. Besides the serious concerns about the state of the Malaysian judiciary, the evidence of police corruption, and the suspicion that Anwar was being imprisoned for political reasons, for many ordinary Malays the charges of sexual misconduct and sodomy against Anwar were considered to be in particularly bad taste and totally deplorable.¹⁰ After all, they remembered him as the first leader of the Malaysian Muslim Youth movement (*Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, ABIM*), knew that he was the most prominent government spokesperson on Islamic matters and held positions such as President (Chancellor) of Malaysia’s International Islamic University, and that he was regarded as a Muslim intellectual in his own right. They perceived Dr Mahathir’s removal of Anwar as an attack not only on him but on the kind of Islam he had espoused, a kind of Islam which the prime minister had formerly seemed to support.

In the light of Anwar’s high profile as a representative of mainstream Islam in Malaysia, it is revealing to return to the period before his expulsion from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and to analyse some of his statements about religion and the Malays. At this time, in 1996, both Anwar and Prime Minister Mahathir had seemed united in their views on the crucial importance of religion as the ethical basis of society. Towards the end of the year and into the early months of 1997, they were both making public statements which were openly critical of the way Malays were failing to

implement the principles of Islam in their daily lives. They also repeated their ideas about Islam as a religion which supported modernisation.

The press was quick to pick up these statements and give them frontpage status. They were newsworthy items on several counts because they concerned the politically-sensitive areas of religion and the Malays, they had implications for non-Muslims, and they were delivered by the two most powerful figures in the nation. Although the mainstream press in Malaysia regularly carries articles, special features and letters about Islamic matters, the Mahathir and Anwar comments were given special prominence.¹¹ The leaders' comments focussed on two issues: Malays and social ills, and Islam and development. They were reported in three of Malaysia's most prominent dailies, *The Star*, *The New Straits Times*, and *Utusan Malaysia*. Both *The Star* and *The New Straits Times* are widely read English language dailies while *Utusan Malaysia* is the leading Malay language daily. Each is influential and all are owned by groups close to the ruling coalition (Barisan Nasional). Although this means that anti-Government news is rare, as one observer has noted, the papers often present "different factions and interests within the ruling groups".¹² My purpose in focussing on these reports is to analyse the views of Anwar and Mahathir on the relationship between Islam and the Malays, and to see what messages they were giving Malaysians about the Government's attitude to Islam in the context of the nation-state. We begin with the issue of Malays and what Dr Mahathir referred to as 'social problems'.

Reporting on Malays and Social Ills

The issue was covered for about a week in the English and the Malay language press. It appeared first in *The Star* on 31 January 1997, in an article describing the prime minister breaking the fast with students at a university near his home town in the north of Peninsular Malaysia. The headline, on the second page of the paper read: "Seek ways to overcome weaknesses, Malays urged". The article continued that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohammad said today that the Malays should be prepared to admit their weaknesses and shortcomings and should be determined to seek ways to overcome them. He said the Malay community appeared to be facing more social problems than the other races in the country although the environment was the same for all races. Many Malays "were involved in unhealthy activities like corruption, loafing, incest and child abuse". A recent study, he said, revealed that 67 per cent of criminal cases involved Malays. "Development may have brought with it some negative elements. Previously there were not so many nightclubs and men and women did not mingle so freely." In conclusion he said Malays should not be ashamed to admit their weaknesses and shortcomings because "for as long as

they fail to do so they could not find the solutions to the social problems they were facing to attain progress”.

The following day (Saturday 1 February 1997) a report appeared on the second page of the Malay language daily *Utusan Malaysia* under the headline: “Gagal hayati agama punca gejala sosial” (Failure to live out religion is at the root of social ills). The article was reporting the comments of DPM Anwar Ibrahim’s after the Friday service in a Penang mosque, where he had delivered the *khutbah* (sermon). To paraphrase the report: the DPM said that social problems which are increasingly serious in Malay society are caused by Malays failing to implement, obey and live out the teachings of Islam. Although they are educated and trained in all kinds of religious teachings at home and at school, compared with other religious communities the teachings have no effect because of their own attitude not to fully implement them in their lives. This is strange, he said, because religion is compulsory only for Muslims, but our data suggests that social problems are more connected with the Islamic community. Society should not be blaming its young people, because social problems indicated weaknesses in social institutions including the family, mosque officials, educational institutions, and political and government bodies. The DPM continued by telling Muslims to use Ramadan (the fasting month) to strengthen the discipline of the Muslim community.¹³

The third report on the same topic is again from *The Star*, Thursday 6 February 1997, which carried the large front page headline: “Let’s Face It: Find ways to deal with social ills, Dr M tells Malays”. The second page of the paper continued the report under the headline: “Non-Malays seem better at facing social ills”. On this occasion the context was an official public meeting to discuss social problems among Muslims attended by the PM, the DPM (in his capacity as Chairman of the Cabinet Committee on Social Problems), Muslim cabinet ministers, officials from the Department of Islamic Affairs, senior government officials and principals of institutions of higher education. The front page subheading sets the tone of the report. “Kuala Lumpur: Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told Malays yesterday they must first admit that they are the worst off in terms of social problems compared with other races before remedial steps can be taken”. The prime minister said Malays must first face their problems and then find ways of dealing with them. He noted that in a breakdown of Malaysia’s population figures Malays constituted 54–55 per cent, Chinese 26 per cent and Indians 10 per cent. He continued, “But when comparing social problems, the Malays involved make up 67 per cent while the Chinese involvement in merely 16 per cent”. From statistics, he said, it seems that non-Malays were more able and capable to face social ills than Malays. “We read the newspapers everyday and we can’t help see cases of child-abuse—some battered to death—incest, *bohsia*,¹⁴ and the spread of AIDS and HIV. Who are involved? Aren’t most of them Malays?” One of the things

lacking among Malay youth he said, is the “‘inner defence’ to stop themselves being influenced”. A solution had to be found to the problem, he stressed. Comparing Malays with Chinese, the PM noted that although exposed to the same circumstances as Malays, Chinese had not succumbed to social problems.

Reporting on Islam and Development

We move now to several reports of the leaders’ comments on Islam and progress or development. The context of the reports was the occasion of the 39th National Qur’an Recital Competition which was held on 1 November 1996 in the Malaysian state of Perak. *The New Straits Times* presented its report on page seven of the national news section, under the headline “Dr M: Muslims should learn to be self-reliant”. In his speech to the participants and audience the prime minister is reported to have said the following: “it is important that Muslims learn to be self-reliant in order that they not be humiliated and oppressed”. He is reported as saying that Muslim countries are backward and at the mercy of developed nations. There is a need for Muslims to see that development is important and can be achieved by Muslims, but some of them did not believe in the importance of development in this world. In the age of information technology, Islam can protect against “unhealthy information” which could destroy the people’s moral and cultural values.

A report on the same event was also carried on 1 November in *The Star* which ran its article closer to the front of the paper with the headline “Dr M: Religion can see us through”. *The Star*’s order of presentation of the PM’s speech differed from that of *The New Straits Times*. It began with the PM’s statement that religion can help shield people from the negative influences of the information explosion and continues with his words that the emergence of a “strong Islamic community could help in overcoming the perception that Islam was an obstacle to development”. However, he continued, “there are some Muslims who think that there is no need to pursue progress because, to them, progress for Muslims is not the same as that pursued by non-Muslims. Such thinking enforces the belief of some Muslims that they do not have to progress but also that it is impossible to progress in this world”. In his view, it is such thinking which made Islamic countries weak and “forced to seek protection from developed countries”. In a section not reported in *The New Straits Times*, *The Star* added the PM’s words addressed to all young people: “the country wanted not only a highly educated generation but one which could balance spiritual development with material and physical progress”.

Analysis of reportage: the players

The prominence which the press gives to statements by the PM and DPM gives the impression that it is they who are setting the agenda for Islam in Malaysia rather than the traditional leaders of Islam, the Muslim religious scholars. The impression is given that it is the PM and his deputy who decide what kind of Islam is appropriate for Malaysia as it approaches the new millennium. When other opinions about Islam are reported, such as interviews with religious authorities or academics, those opinions are presented as reactions to the statements of the PM and the DPM. The impression that the press conveys is that only these two political leaders take initiatives with regard to the role of Islam in the nation-state.

Analysis of reportage: the contexts

The statements on both issues were delivered in Islamic contexts, that is, at the breaking of the fast in mosques, at a meeting of a committee to examine social ills among Muslims, and at a Qur'anic recitation competition. However, rather than praising Islam, each of the statements was critical of the contemporary practice of Islam both within and outside of Malaysia. As well, because they were reported by the leading dailies, they received almost maximum publicity in Malaysia itself.¹⁵ Theoretically, then, these rather provocative statements about Islam could have reached any literate person in Malaysia and conveyed to them the government's attitude to Islam. The 'ubiquitous' influence of the media on "stimulating, corrupting, influencing, shaping and challenging" the public and in particular its role in informing about Islam has been widely discussed.¹⁶ It is unlikely however, that all newspaper readers in Malaysia would be equally interested in the reports. But several sectors in society keep a watching brief on public statements on religion. Firstly, because the administration of Islam in Malaysia is a matter for each of the individual states (rather than the Federal government), state religious and political leaders pay careful attention to pronouncements coming from the central government to check whether it is overstepping its jurisdiction. The PM would be well aware of their interest. Secondly, a considerable proportion of the newspapers readers (especially of the English language dailies) would be non-Malays and it is likely that the PM and his deputy intended to reassure them that the government was not protecting any anti-social behaviour by Malays, but was addressing and trying to tackle such behaviour.

Analysis of reportage: the issues

The two issues of Malays and social ills, and of Islam and development seem to be very different from each other. In the first, Malays are singled out as being

involved in far greater numbers than other races in Malaysia in particularly abhorrent crimes such as child abuse and incest. The implications of the second issue are more complex. Countries whose populations are mainly Muslim, the reports argue, remain under-developed and this is linked to a hostile attitude to material progress. If, however, Muslims were to embrace progress, Islam could be used as a protection against the undesirable effects of development. While these issues appear to be so different, on closer examination, the projected role of Islam is the same. In both contexts, Islam is presented as a source of moral values. In each case, Muslims are described as inferior to non-Muslims but there is an assurance that if Islam were to be implemented as a system of values for individual guidance, then Muslims would be able to participate fully in the modern world.

The sub-text of the Prime Ministerial statements on Islam is critical not of Islam as a religion, but of Islam as it is currently practised both in Malaysia and beyond. This could be changed, according to the statements as they are reported, if Muslims would adopt and implement the moral and ethical guidance Islamic teachings offer. If this were to be done Malays and all Muslims would be better citizens in the modern world.

Analysis of reportage: the language

If we examine all the reports of both issues (whether in Malay or English), it is striking that both the PM and the DPM speak about Islam and Islamic values without using any Islamic terminology. The only specifically Muslim vocabulary occurs at the most general level with generic references such as 'Islam', 'Islamic' and 'Muslim' (or 'agama Islam' and 'orang Islam'). There seems to be no difference between the rhetoric of both leaders. Each discusses Islam in a non-religious or secular idiom. This is particularly worthy of notice in the light of recent research which highlights the fact that "Islam provides a language for political participation and competition. It also provides a language for debating values in public life and for defining the respective authority of individuals, civil society and the state".¹⁷ Although the Islamic terminology is available for precisely the type of discussion the Malaysian leaders are promoting, they do not draw on it but choose instead the terminology of the secular sphere.

Analysis of reportage: islam and national identity

Dr Mahathir's official agenda for the future of Malaysia is to establish a united and technologised nation by the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century as defined in his Vision 2020 statement. To achieve this, there is considerable emphasis in contemporary Malaysian government rhetoric on

fusing religious identity with national identity, particularly through government moves to bring Islam into the “the heart of all economic and non-economic life”.¹⁸ The government’s advocacy of ‘Islam’ is however, focussed specifically on an expression of Islam which will support and complement its political aims of an industrialised and unified nation. Malaysian sociologist, Shamsul A. B., has traced the main expressions and groupings of Islamic modernising and revivalist movements in Malaysia since the race riots in 1969. He is able to show that the views of the ‘moderate’ Muslim grouping (in contrast to more extremist, that is, more literalist groupings) who emphasise ‘the spiritual and moral foundations’ required for modernisation, are the views which the government have incorporated into their Vision 2020 framework.¹⁹ It may well be that the statements on Islamic values delivered by the PM and his deputy during Ramadan 1996–97 were framed in terms deliberately chosen to resonate with the views of followers of ‘moderate Islam’. But how can religious and national identity be fused in a nation whose citizens do not all follow the same religion?

Since the race riots of 1969, the dominant position of the Malays as the major ethnic group in Peninsular Malaysia has been at the heart of affirmative political and economic policies. A recent study of the concept ‘Melayu’ expressed the Malay position in these terms:

The ruling class of the nation state of Malaysia maintains a hegemonic Malay identity based on difference between supposedly indigenous Islamic Malays and ‘outsiders’, namely Chinese and Indians. This identity is regarded as a natural ethnic base of the state.²⁰

The Prime Ministerial statements about Malays and social evils which we examined above, suggest there may be a shift in the attitude of political leaders, if not the ‘ruling class’. To publicly criticise Malays as being the worst offenders in crimes of a social nature compared with non-Malays is not maintaining ‘a hegemonic Malay identity’. Both the PM and DPM criticised not only Malays for their ‘weaknesses’ but also Islamic leaders for not making the teachings of Islam more relevant to the lives of Malay, particularly young Malays. In view of these critical comments about Malays let us check the Constitutional definition of this “natural ethnic base of the state”.

‘Malay’ means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and—was before Merdeka Day born in the Federation or in Singapore or born of parents one of whom was born in the Federation or in Singapore, or is on that day domiciled in the Federation or in Singapore; or is the issue of such a person.²¹

This residence requirement which applies concomitantly with the stipulations concerning Malay religion, language and custom is rarely included in discussions about the constitutional definition of a ‘Malay’. It does, however, become very important in the context of Indonesian immigration (legal or illegal) into Malaysia, because although many Indonesians meet the

religion, language and custom definitions, they do not meet the residence requirements. Similarly, any other migrant taking up residence in Malaysia after 31 August 1957, unless one or both of their parents were born in Singapore or the Federation of Malaya, even if they meet the other conditions, would not be legally eligible to be regarded as a Malay (although they might be eligible for citizenship).

On the other hand, there are an increasing number of ‘Malays’ who meet the residence requirements of the Constitution, but are losing their ability to speak the Malay language (as English becomes their working language), and are out of touch with Malay custom. These are educated Malays who as part of the post-1969 affirmative action policies for Malays received a tertiary education (often abroad) and were offered special financial advantages to boost the number in the business sector. This is the group the government refers to as the ‘new Malays’ (*Melayu baru*) whom it is nurturing to spearhead the implementation of Vision 2020 and to be the future leaders of Malaysia. These ‘new Malays’ however, with their Westernised outlook and global points of reference, do not habitually speak Malay nor conform with Malay custom. The markers of their ethnicity are their place of birth and their profession of Islam.²² Of these, Islam is the active constituent in their official identity as Malays. Yet, the PM is openly questioning the degree to which Islam does influence the lives of these ‘new Malay’ Malays. Here the PM treads a fine line between exhorting Malays to become more Islamic (and thus driving them into what he would consider more extreme expressions of that religion) and motivating them to implement the positive values Islam so that they do not fall prey to ‘social ills’. He is in fact exhorting them to be better Muslims so that they can be better citizens of Malaysia. In this way national identity and Islam are interlocked, but in a way which not only promotes civic values but also highlights individual standards of morality.

If we look closely at the comments by the two leaders which urged Malays to implement the teachings of Islam and to live out the values of their religion, we see that they are expressed in language which is more secular than Islamic and we may argue that there are parallels with elements of ‘civil religion’. Take for example the description of the way religion (in this case Christianity) has been practised in America since last century. It is characterised as being predominantly activist, moralistic and socially-oriented, rather than being contemplative, theological and innerly spiritual.²³ The Malaysian leaders’ calls for Malays to actively apply the teachings of Islam as a solution to social problems are calls for Muslims to use their religion as a moral guide in this world. There are no references to Islam as a means to salvation in the next world—the focus is on what Islam can do for its followers here and now. A strong case can be made for claiming that in their statements

Mahathir and Anwar were preparing the way for Islam to become a civil religion in Malaysia.

If the Malaysian leaders were seeking sources of moral values and models of the qualities they considered necessary for 'good citizens' they could also find them in abundance in the traditional customs which are described under the term '*adat Melayu*'. These values were highlighted, for example, in a front page story carried by *The New Straits Times* on 17 March 1997. Under the headline "Villagers help social worker relocate house the old-fashioned way" and with a feature photograph of a group of Malay men lifting a Malay village house to a new location, the report stressed the fact that 200 villagers came together to "shoulder a burden" and work cooperatively for the good of a fellow villager. Somewhat ironically, the photograph of the house relocation shared the front page with a banner headline which read "Reigniting a scientific culture, Anwar: Time for Muslim world to get off sidelines, engage in innovation and ideas". The juxtaposition of the two reports suggested that the traditional Malay values of voluntary cooperative labour were suitable only for rural village life and were now so rare as to be worthy items for front page reporting. In theory, however, the values of group cooperation and support are qualities Dr Mahathir and Anwar might have used in the fight against 'social ills'. But this was not the case. In the press reports during the period under study, Malay traditional values were not chosen by the Malaysian leaders as the cure for Malay social problems. Instead, Islam is highlighted as the vehicle for moral reform.

There are several possible reasons for the federal leaders' attention to Islam. Firstly, as I have already mentioned, it is the most basic and nonnegotiable aspect of Malay ethnicity and in that context it can be, and has been, viewed as an impediment to racial harmony within the nation. Islam, in short, could be represented as a threat to national unity. However, by reconfiguring Islam and representing it as a source of 'moral values', and as an ethical code, it can still be acknowledged as the religion of the Malays and at the same time be presented in a manner which non-Malays (nonMuslims) might find more understandable and therefore less threatening.

Secondly, presented as a 'moral code' Islam could serve as the basis for a civil religion which could unite rather than divide Malaysia. It has been noted elsewhere that in modern societies, it is quite common to subordinate the spiritual (religion) to social and civic purposes.²⁴ In the Malaysian context we can see it operating on two levels. On one level Islam (the spiritual) is being 'used' to control Malay 'social ills' (a social purpose). On another level, it is being presented as a civil religion in an effort to effect national unity (a civic purpose).

Conclusion: Islam, Malay, Malaysian

When Anwar Ibrahim agreed to write an article on Islam in Southeast Asia for *Time* magazine in September 1996, he chose to stress that tolerance is the “hallmark of Southeast Asian Islam”. He wrote that because “the seeds of militancy are everywhere” then “each community must ensure that they do not germinate and multiply through discontent and alienation”. Tolerance, he argued, cannot be demanded from only one community, but “must be mutual”.

The article was reprinted as one of the chapters in Anwar’s book *The Asian Renaissance* and frankly acknowledges the fragility of racial and religious coexistence.²⁵ It is this fragility which seems also to be addressed in the aims of Vision 2020, where it is the fashioning of a *Bangsa Malaysia* which is stressed. This term ‘*Bangsa Malaysia*’ is a critical one for understanding what the prime minister is trying to achieve. Most dictionaries of Malay translate the word ‘*bangsa*’ as ‘race’ and it is in this sense that it is used to describe the *Bangsa Melayu*, the Malay race. In the phrase *Bangsa Malaysia*, however, there seems to be a new element in the meaning of *bangsa* the adding of a sense of ‘nation’ to that of ‘race’. This fusion could achieve a positive reorientation in focus from a defensive, exclusive attention to the ethno-centric concerns of the individual races, to a more outward and inclusive concern with national unity. The creation of a ‘*Bangsa Malaysia*’ a new race/nation calls for equal commitment and dedication from each of the races who have been resident in Malaysia since Independence or Federation.²⁶

In the context of national racial unity, the aims of Vision 2020 are much more ambitious than the older aims of the 1970 Articles of Faith of the State (*Rukunegara*), which declared it was dedicated to “achieving a greater unity of all [Malaysia’s] peoples”. In Vision 2020 these ‘peoples’ are actually re-named. No longer Malays, Indians and Chinese, Vision 2020 creates a new race/nation will be “free, steadfast and with spirit; with selfconfidence and respected by other races”.²⁷ Vision 2020 shifts the focus from *Rukunegara*’s harmony among the three races in Malaysia, to a new racial unity represented by the ‘*Bangsa Malaysia*’. In the terms of Vision 2020, the Malays (*bangsa Melayu*) are no longer the pivotal race in Malaysia, the race from whose perspective ‘others’ are characterised. In the terms of Vision 2020 the Chinese and Indians are no longer the outsiders, the ‘other’ in Malaysia. Some Malaysian analysts view this new articulation of unity through the fusion of race/nation as the final step in overcoming the divisions inflicted on Malaya by the plural society fostered by British colonial practice.²⁸

The rhetoric of Vision 2020 has yet to be proved in practice. It will require an enormous effort to replace the difference-driven discourse of *Melayu* with a new kind of rhetoric which constructs and sustains commonalities so that the concept of the Malaysian race/nation gains credibility and becomes a

focus for national loyalty. Until now, most groups representative of Malay interests have been unable to “transform their concept of Malay nationalism (which was used to struggle for independence) into Malaysian nationalism”.²⁹ Dr Mahathir has acknowledged this by admitting that the greatest political challenge facing the nation is the creation of a *Bangsa Malaysia* “in which the different ethnic groups should be able to share a common ‘national identity’”.³⁰ This statement was made in 1991 when Malaysia’s economic growth was at an all time high (8.7 per cent) to be followed by three years of growth above 8 per cent.³¹ Perhaps to capitalise on a time of prosperity for the nation, the prime minister seized the opportunity to launch his *Bangsa Malaysia* vision. The social changes and new attitudes which the policy required of all Malaysia’s citizens called for real concessions of status from the Malays, concessions which were most easily given during a period of economic growth. The two leaders’ statements on the need for Malays to modernise and at the same time to use Islam as a source of moral values, could be interpreted as presenting Malays to the two other racial groups in Malaysia as closer to them in outlook and ethics.

A crucial part of such a transformation of image is the presentation of Islam as supportive of change. As one scholar of comparative religions has noted: “In the face of actual material and social transformation, an intransigent religion or ideological traditionalism” becomes less and less possible.³² Both the PM and the DPM in their statements about Islam as a code for Malay behaviour, seemed to be working to establish a public form of religion, a civil religion if you like, whose system of beliefs can form the basis of a shared system for the nation. Closely linked with this representation of Islam as a moral code is the appeal to the nation’s legal code as another commonality which can unify all Malaysians. On 2 February 1997, the Sunday edition of the Malay newspaper *Mingguan Malaysia* carried a report about Dr Mahathir’s views on the causes of ‘social ills’ among the Malays. He is quoted as saying: “In Malaysia we can live harmoniously and peacefully not only amongst Muslims but also between Muslims and non-Muslims because we obey laws and regulations.”³³

The statements by Dr Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim which have been analysed here were delivered only a few months before the onset of the economic crisis which began to affect the Southeast Asian region from mid-1997. The role of religion as an expression of identity in times of stress and disturbance is well known. It remains to be seen whether the foundations which the leaders have laid for Islam to function as a civil religion and as one of the commonalities for a *Bangsa Malaysia* can survive the economic and social pressures which Malaysian society is currently experiencing. Anwar’s challenge “to Muslims and the people of other confessions... to effectively articulate their moral vision and intensify the search for common

ethical ground” may be overtaken by the enormity of the economic crisis.³⁴ If that is the case, economic pressures may widen the racial divides in Malaysia as they did in Indonesia in the late 1990s. The challenge to Malaysian national leaders is to continue seeking and promoting the interracial commonalities which underpin Vision 2020.

We should not forget that it is the Federal Government which is setting the national agenda for the role of Islam in national unity, and that the power of the Federal Government does not extend to the conduct of Islamic affairs at the state level. Immediate challenges to this federal policy may come from the constituent states of the Federation, as well as from individual Muslim leaders who may resist the representation of Islam primarily as a code of ethical conduct. There may also be an ethno-nationalist reaction from many Malays to the attempt to reconfigure the nexus between Malay and Islam. If those Malays believe that the Malay sense of identity is threatened by a loosening of the linkage between *Melayu* and Islam, so that some Islamic values could be espoused by non-Malays, then it would be very difficult for Islam to be the basis for a civil religion and serve as a unifying element in the *Bangsa Malaysia*.

The question remains as to whether Dr Mahathir will be able to maintain the representation of Islam as reported in the 1996–97 statements. If the links between Malay and Islam cannot be reconfigured, and Islam is not accepted as the basis for a civil religion, the prime minister may have to turn to secular institutions as strategies for unity. Dr Mahathir has already indicated that recognition of the rule of civil law is an obligation which unites all who live in Malaysia. On the eve of the twenty-first century, however, faced with the severe internal and external pressures on the national cohesion caused by the international monetary crisis, the Government’s aim of a united *Bangsa Malaysia* becomes especially critical. Without the rhetoric of a shared revolutionary struggle, which Indonesia’s leaders draw on, Malaysian leaders have fewer strategies for national unity.

Attempts to unite the peoples of the region now known as Malaysia are not new. In the lead up to Independence following the Second World War, several political movements tried to forge a united front for all local inhabitants of Malaya. But as one historian has put it, “Mainstream Malays were uneasy about the idea of nationality as it would give citizenship rights and equality to non-Malays. *Bangsa Melayu* was central to their well-being and *tanah Melayu* was claimed as the exclusive property of the Malays”.³⁵ The impediment to an inclusive *bangsa* was that “the Malays in Malaya never conceded to the non-Malays the right to adopt the Malay states as their homeland”.³⁶ Although the Constitution establishes residence as the primary qualification for Malaysia citizenship, in popular understanding the concept of citizenship is not yet intertwined with the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*. It would appear that if Dr

Mahathir's vision of a *bangsa* Malaysia is to be realised the Malays will need to be convinced of at least two points. Firstly that Islam can function both as the religion of 'the Malays' as well as serving as a moral code and the basis of a civil religion; and secondly, that Chinese and Indians who settled in Malaysia before Independence (and in the case of East Malaysia before Federation) are entitled to regard Malaysia as their homeland. If Malaysia's leaders can persuade Malaysian citizens to link national identity with Islam as a civil religion and can persuade Malays to concede that non-Malay citizens have the right to call Malaysia their homeland, then the 'new Malay' as well as Indians and Chinese may indeed give their allegiance to a *Bangsa Malaysia*, and common grounds for real unity may be found. History nudges us here however, to remind us that almost inevitably there will be reactions by Muslims and non-Muslims alike to any agenda setting from the centre of power. It is the process of interaction between these forces which will result in new configurations of Malay and Islam. As one observer of the fluidity of the notion of 'Malayness' has written, "A discursive formation does not necessarily run along the lines a center wants it to run. There is always the challenge, the resistance."³⁷

Postscript

The leadership struggle within UMNO in 1998 which resulted in Anwar's dismissal from his ministerial positions, his expulsion from the party and the charges of corruption and sodomy overshadowed the issue of Islam's place in nation-building. The general election of November 1999, however, revived it and statements by both the National Front and the Alternative Front (now the opposition) indicate that the earlier attempts to promote Islam as a civil religion have been side-stepped. The centre may have wanted to reconfigure the Malay-Islam nexus but the Islamic party PAS, strongly supported in the conservative Muslim states of Kelantan and Trengganu, and strengthened by pro-Anwar sentiment, reasserted the links between Islam and Malay. After Anwar's arrest, conviction and sentencing to imprisonment, many Malays who had previously supported the UMNO gave their vote to PAS.

In the general election, PAS increased its number of federal seats (from 13 to 27) and won a convincing majority of the seats in the less industrialised states of Kelantan and Trengganu. These are states which have a history of strong allegiance to Islam and fierce pride in Malay ethnicity. Unlike Prime Minister Mahathir, the PAS leaders did not berate Malays for their 'backwardness' nor for being lax in implementing the principles of Islam. Neither was there the constant suggestion of a dichotomy between Western technology and economic development, and 'traditional' (conservative) Islam. In fact, the leading figures in PAS provide examples of a new blend of 'traditional' Islamic values (simplicity, sincerity and piety) with a high use of

modern communication technology, including impressive websites. Their behaviour clearly indicates that Dr Mahathir's concept of modernity is not the only one operating in Malaysia. Muslim teachers and leaders in other parts of the world have also been showing that there are a variety of ways of being 'modern' and that "modernity itself is not a single force but rather the temporary conjunction of practices and ideologies that have diverse sources and divergent trajectories".³⁸

In the 1999 election, Dr Mahathir did not present Islam as a basis for national unity. Despite his statements in 1997 about Islam as a social ethic and his Vision 2020 philosophy with its emphasis on one *Bangsa Malaysia*, during the campaign he actually cited Islam as a divisive force in Malaysian society. By describing 'radical' or 'extreme' Islam as a threat to Malaysia's unity and progress, he effectively created two Islams. According to Dr Mahathir and the National Front, 'radical Islam' discriminates against non-Muslims, impedes technological development and creates racial discord. And according to the National Front, this is the kind of Islam practised and promoted by its political rival PAS. In contrast to this, Dr Mahathir claims that the 'moderate' Islam espoused by UMNO is tolerant, supportive of change and poses no threat to the rights and status of non-Muslims. The dangers of this claim that there are two forms of Islam are obvious. Firstly it undermines national unity by splitting Muslims into acceptable and nonacceptable groups. Secondly, it continues the discourse of the 'spectre of radical Islam'—rhetoric that is designed to make non-Muslims uneasy about being governed by a Muslim party. Thirdly, it forces Malays to question their allegiances and the expression of their ethnicity. Since the 1999 election, analysts have stated that "it was the non-Malays and nonMuslims who helped the *Barisan Nasional* [National Front] regain twothirds majority, and not the Malays".³⁹ The new Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, strongly tipped to succeed Dr Mahathir as Prime Minister, admitted that "there is a stronger demand by the Muslims and the younger Muslims that more should be done for Islam".⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the DPM Badawi maintained the 'two Islams' dichotomy stressing that "UMNO will not embrace Islamic radicalism to recapture parts of the Malay heartland it lost to PAS".⁴¹

The election results suggest that while some non-Muslims supported the National Front because they believed that it offered them more security and benefits than the Alternative Front, it is clear that many Malays shifted from UMNO and a large number of them voted for PAS. Among the factors which influenced them must be counted the relationship between Malay ethnicity and Islam, and a concern about the kind of Islam being promoted by the UMNO leaders. DPM Badawi has indicated that UMNO "would need to conduct an intense self-examination".⁴² High on the agenda for that 'self-examination' must be UMNO's attitude to the relationship between Islam and Malay. It will

also be crucial for the unity of Malaysia to see how Muslims and non-Muslims understand the terms 'Islamic radicalism' and 'religious extremism' and whether those terms will continue to be used in public rhetoric in a manner which is racially as well as politically divisive.

There are signs that the UMNO may be moving into a new phase of re-Islamisation to counter PAS claims that it is the true protector of Islam in Malaysia. In October 2000 draft legislation entitled the "Restoration of Faith Bill" (popularly referred to as the "Apostasy Bill") came before Federal Parliament. Its provisions include periods in 'rehabilitation centres' for Muslims who have renounced their faith.⁴³ While there has been widespread debate in Malaysia about the pros and cons of such a bill, and its final outcome is not clear at the time of writing, there seems general agreement as to why the bill has been introduced. It is widely believed that UMNO sponsorship of the bill is an attempt to prove to Malays (Muslims) that it can match PAS in its concern for the strength of Islam in Malaysia. The tone of the bill is not consistent with the PM's statements in 1997 and with the National Front's 1999 campaign platform of religious tolerance. It suggests that within the UMNO there is considerable pressure to move away from the Mahathir-Anwar promotion of Islamic values as one of the bases for a united Malaysia. During the comparatively prosperous period of the mid-1990s the PM could afford to discuss Islam in secular terms, and in this he was supported by Anwar Ibrahim, then his deputy. Since the economic downturn and the highly controversial removal of Anwar, the political and social context has altered radically. The PM has lost the credibility among many Muslims which Anwar's support delivered, faces an opposition alliance which for the first time since Independence has shown it has support from Malay voters which can rival that of UMNO, and faces a society which is very anxious about the economy. The appearance of the draft "Restoration of Faith Bill" is one indication that without the credibility of Anwar as an Islamic leader in the National Front new strategies are being developed to prove the UMNO's support for Islam.

As predicted earlier in this paper the individual states of the Federation of Malaysia are not blindly following the Federal Government's policies on Islam. Apart from the obvious examples of the PAS dominated states in the north, Perlis (not a PAS stronghold) has already implemented state legislation "to begin proceedings against Muslims whom they 'suspect' of intending to renounce their faith".⁴⁴ Here we have evidence not only of greater state control of religious matters and a more rigid attitude towards Islam, but also of 'the challenge, the resistance' by groups outside the centre to the discursive forms being promoted by the centre.

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1. Anwar Ibrahim, *The Asian Renaissance* (Singapore/Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International, 1996), p. 123.
2. *The Jakarta Post*, 27 November 1999, p. 12.
3. Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1996), pp. 25–27.
4. “Terbentuknya sebuah negara-bangsa Malaysia yang benar-benar moden dan maju, sebuah masyarakat industri yang adil, bermoral dan rasional, teguh dan tangkas ekonominya, selain mempunyai keperibadian sosial dan budayanya sendiri.” Rustam A. Sani, *Melayu Baru dan Bangsa Malaysia: Tradisi Cendekia dan Krisis Budaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications, 1993), p. 45.
5. Anonymous, *Penjelasan mengenai Wawasan 2020 oleh YAB Perdana Menteri di Seremban pada 26 Mei 1991* (location unknown: Kementerian Penerangan, Jabatan Percetakan Negara, 1991), p. 3.
6. Mahathir Mohamad, *The Challenge* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1986), Introduction.
7. Ibid.
8. Mahathir, *The Challenge*, p. 81.
9. Anwar Ibrahim, *The Asian Renaissance*, p. 19, 27.
10. For example, see Maznah Mohamad, “15 Years of solitude for Anwar ... And for Malaysia?” *Aliran*, 20, 6 (2000): 2–6
11. An indication of the range of articles on Islamic topics carried by the press can be gauged from the following list which I assembled after scanning Malaysian newspapers between November 1996 and February

- 1997: Islam and values; Islam and social problems; Islam and modernity; Islamic courts; polygamy; reports about activities during Ramadan (the month of daylight fasting). In addition, the papers carried regular features by Islamic scholars to inform readers about specific issues such as Islamic banking, insurance policies for Muslims, or to explain religious obligations such as the pilgrimage to Mecca.
12. Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, p. 87.
 13. “Masalah sosial yang semakin serius di kalangan masyarakat Melayu disebabkan mereka gagal mengamal, mematuhi dan menghayati ajaran agama Islam, kata Timbalan Perdana Menteri Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Katanya, walaupun mereka didedah dan dididik dengan pelbagai ajaran agama di rumah dan di sekolah berbanding masyarakat agama lain, ajaran itu tidak memberikan kesan kerana sikap mereka sendiri yang kurang menghayatinya. ‘Ini perkara yang aneh, kerana pendidikan agama di sekolah hanya diwajibkan kepada pelajar Islam, tetapi dari data yang kita perolehi menunjukkan pelbagai masalah sosial lebih menjurus kepada masalah masyarakat Islam...Masyarakat tidak seharusnya menyalahkan golongan muda... kerana masalah itu melambangkan kelemahan institusi masyarakat termasuk keluarga, anggota jawatankuasa kariah masjid, institusi pendidikan, badan politik dan jabatan kerajaan”.
 14. A term used to describe the behaviour of teenage girls who wait around public places hoping to be picked up by men.
 15. It is likely that television reporting may reach a wider audience than newspapers but the impact of television, because of its restricted duration and ephemeral form, may be less.
 16. Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. vii; Robert W. Hefner, “Introduction”, in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*, ed. R. Hefner and P. Horvath (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), p. 6.
 17. Barbara D. Metcalf, “Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia: History, Continuity, Morality”, in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*, pp. 318– 19.
 18. Shamsul A. B., “Identity Construction, Nation Formation, and Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia”, in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*, p. 210.
 19. Shamsul A. B., “Identity Construction”, p. 224.
 20. Adrian Vickers, “‘Malay Identity’: Modernity, Invented Tradition, and Forms of Knowledge”, *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 31, 1 (1997): 175.
 21. *Laws of Malaysia: Federal Constitution*, Article 160 (Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia, 1997), p. 152.
 22. Shamsul A. B., “Identity Construction”, p. 210.
 23. Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a PostTraditional World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 180.

24. Ruth McVey, *Redesigning the Cosmos: Belief Systems and State Power in Indonesia* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1995), p. 35, fn. 39.
25. Anwar Ibrahim, *The Asian Renaissance*, p. 123.
26. *Laws of Malaysia*, Part III, pp. 23–26.
27. “membentuk sebuah bangsa Malaysia yang bebas, teguh dan terbentuk jiwanya, yakin akan diri sendiri dan dihormati oleh semua bangsa lain”. Anonymous, *Penjelasan mengenai Wawasan 2020*, 3. 28. Rustam, *Melayu Baru dan Bangsa Malaysia*, pp. 49–50.
29. “...mentransformasikan fahaman nasionalisme Melayunya (yang telah memperjuangkan kemerdekaan negara ini) menjadi nasionalisme Malaysia”. Rustam, *Melayu Baru dan Bangsa Malaysia*, p. 50.
30. Shamsul A. B., “The Construction and Transformation of a Social Identity: Malayness and Bumiputeraness re-examined”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 52: 16.
31. Shamsul A. B., “The Construction and Transformation of a Social Identity”, p. 15.
32. Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, p. 69.
33. “Di Malaysia, kita boleh hidup rukun dan damai bukan saja di kalangan orang Islam tetapi juga antara orang Islam dan bukan Islam kerana kita mematuhi peraturan dan undang-undang”.
34. Anwar Ibrahim, *The Asian Renaissance*, 124.
35. Ariffin Omar, *Bangsa Melayu: Malay Concepts of Democracy and Community, 1945–1950* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 213.
36. Ariffin Omar, *Bangsa Melayu*, p. 214.
37. Henk Maier, “‘We Are Playing Relatives’—Riau: The Cradle of Reality and Hybridity”, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde*, 153, 4 (1997): 695.
38. Katherine Pratt Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 4; John Bowen, “Modern Intentions: Reshaping Subjectivities in an Indonesian Muslim Society”, in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States*.
39. *The Straits Times*, 1 Dec. 1999.
40. Ibid., p. 39.
41. Ibid., p. 1.
42. Ibid.
43. *The Australian*, 4 Oct 2000.
44. Ibid., p. 6.