



Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

Hamayotsu, Kikue (2013), Towards a More Democratic Regime and Society? The Politics of Faith and Ethnicity in a Transitional Multi-Ethnic Malaysia, in: *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 32, 2, 61–88.

ISSN: 1868-4882 (online), ISSN: 1868-1034 (print)

The online version of this article can be found at:

www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org

Published by

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and Hamburg University Press.

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Towards a More Democratic Regime and Society? The Politics of Faith and Ethnicity in a Transitional Multi-Ethnic Malaysia

Kikue Hamayotsu

Abstract: The rising antagonistic attitudes and tension between the Malay majority and ethnic and religious minorities in Malaysia since 2007 is intriguing because it has occurred when society experienced an unprecedentedly large-scale and assertive multi-ethnic pro-democracy movement. This article argues that precisely these assertive and confident civil and political societies – and their emphasis on equal rights and equitable development for all Malaysians – have put the traditional Malay and religious elites on the defensive. The pro-democracy movement and the prospects of regime change have threatened not only the party-dominant regime but also – and more importantly – the constitutional and institutional foundations of ethnic exclusivism and privileges. Moreover, two Malay-based parties, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), are viewed as giving too many political concessions to the non-Malay communities to gain an electoral advantage, making the traditional Malay and religious elites even more defensive of their position and power. As a result, religious issues are excessively politicised, further deteriorating the already complicated inter-ethnic relations of the country. The prospects for achieving a democratic regime and society appear grim, although hopes have run high since the electoral rise of the multi-ethnic opposition.

■ Manuscript received 25 October 2013; accepted 12 December 2013

Keywords: Malaysia, regime change, elections, ethnicity, religion

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Introduction

The party-dominant regime of Malaysia has been considered one of the most enduring authoritarian regimes among scholars of comparative politics, generating debates about the prospects and potential trajectories of the regime in the context of post-Arab Spring political transformations elsewhere in the Muslim world.¹ However, the electoral ascendancy of an alternative multi-ethnic opposition coalition since 2008 has threatened the dominance of the ruling coalition and the Malay–Muslim-based United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in particular. This ascendancy has heightened optimism among scholars and observers over the prospect of a democratic transition. This upbeat political outlook was combined with an unprecedentedly assertive civil society and street protests in the urban sectors during which protestors demanded drastic institutional reforms to make the political system more democratic, open and fair.

In contrast to such expectations, growing ethnic and religious tensions and conflict since 2007 reveal fundamental contradictions and dilemmas regarding the constitutional and formal institutional frameworks which need to be revisited to pursue a more democratic regime. Why have ethnic and religious tensions arisen at a time when the Malaysian society has grown more urban and modern? Why have more conflicts and instability occurred when the multi-ethnic opposition and civil society are more assertive than ever before? What are the major contradictions and dilemmas that the pro-democracy movement needs to address and resolve to achieve a peaceful transition to a democratic regime and polity?

This article² investigates the forces and institutions of religion and ethnicity that have acted during the process of democratic transitions unfolding in Malaysia since the late-2000s. In particular, it examines the effect of pro-democracy movements on the political allegiance in various ethnic communities, particularly the majority Malay community. This article advances the argument that the rising electoral prominence of the People's Alliance (Pa-

1 Scholars debate the type of regimes and adopt various concepts to categorise the Malaysian regime's type, ranging from 'competitive authoritarianism' (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2006) to 'quasi-democracy' or 'semi-democracy' (Case 1996, 2004; Crouch 1993). This article uses 'undemocratic' or 'authoritarian' in a broad sense of the terms to indicate that Malaysia has not achieved a democratic transition.

2 I would like to thank Choong Pui Yee, Terence Gomez, Clive Kessler, Norani Othman and Meredith Weiss for their insightful comments and assistance during my fieldwork and/or during the preparing of this article. Mohd Nai'm Mokhtar assisted in setting up valuable interviews with Syariah and religious officials in Kelantan. Any errors and misinterpretations are my own.

katan Rakyat or PR), a multi-ethnic opposition, and a more assertive and unprecedentedly large-scale pro-democracy civil society activism since 2007 have posed a serious threat, not only to the party-dominant undemocratic regime but also and more importantly to the traditional Malay and religious institutions which have accumulated massive power and authority as a result of the post-NEP pro-Malay policies and state institutionalisation of religion. These religious and cultural institutions, including sultans and state religious authorities, are highly defensive because they perceive political and civil societies' demands for a democracy – and, in particular, equal rights – as attempts to undermine their power and authority. Moreover, UMNO elites have chosen to capitalise on the fear that special rights for Malays and their religious superiority are under threat to mobilise ethnic and religious sentiments to gain Malay votes (Kessler 2013a). This electoral strategy was effective in their core – predominantly Malay – rural constituencies and, when combined with unusually hostile reactions from traditional Malay and religious elites, has further contributed to religious tensions in the multi-ethnic society.

From the perspective of the traditional Malay and Islamic elites, the pro-democracy demands and programs will inevitably challenge and alter the fundamental rules of the game in the Malaysian polity in favour of non-Malay communities and at the expense of the Muslim majority. Indeed, this zero-sum game scenario and perception is a constraint for Malaysian pro-democracy movements through whatever channels they chose to express their demands: media, courts or street protests. As witnessed painfully in the case of political turbulence in neighbouring Thailand, traditional and cultural institutions could be a powerful force to both facilitate and destabilise a democratic transition and consolidation depending on their relations with the state and society. The pro-democracy movement may want to believe that religious and ethnic identities are parochial and should diminish over time as a result of social and political change, rather than mapping a strategy to deal with them politically. As subsequently shown, these cultural identities and sentiments are not just intangible ideas or feelings but have deep historical institutional foundations embedded in the state. As scholars of ethnic conflict widely acknowledge, political elites and entrepreneurs could readily exploit such identities to mobilise civil society along communal lines during a transition or contentious elections (e.g., Snyder 2000; Wilkinson 2004). In fact, religious and ethnic identities and sentiments, and potential sources of conflict, may grow even greater as the pro-democracy movement becomes more assertive about their democratic and equal rights, possibly delaying a more democratic and pluralistic society in the long term.

Ascendancy of an Alternative Multi-ethnic Opposition and Pro-Democracy Civil Society

Since the electoral rise of the opposition and the loss of a two-third parliamentary majority in the 2008 elections (which came to be known as ‘Malaysia’s Political Tsunami’) of the National Front (Barisan Nasional, BN), the ruling coalition, a pro-democracy movement has gained unprecedented momentum (*The Economist* 2008). Since 2006, pro-democracy civil society actors have come together to form the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections – popularly known as Bersih – and have mobilised unprecedentedly large street demonstrations to demand a cleaner and more accountable government and fair electoral system.³ By mobilising street rallies of more than 100,000 people and including as many as 84 non-governmental organisations, these pro-democracy movements have also pressured the governing elites, particularly UMNO politicians (*BBC News Asia-Pacific* 2012).

Some observers suggested that the pro-democracy movement is multi-ethnic, moderate and universalistic in its outlook and demand, enabling it to gain currency among not only urban-based Chinese and Indian ethnic minorities but also the Malay–Muslim community (Welsh 2011, 2012). Moreover, ethnic/religious-based opposition parties, most notably the Islamic Party of Malaysia (Parti Islam se-Malaysia, PAS) have set aside their exclusive religious and ethnic agendas to work and stay together with their other partners, namely the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the People’s Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR). In joining the coalition, PAS made an effort to promote a group of more moderate, reform-oriented and urban-based young Muslim elites in the party structure to move the party, which is led by conservative *ulama*, to the ideological centre. By doing so, the party elites also intended to expand their support base outside their stronghold of north eastern rural states. The pro-democracy movement is expected to be an engine to transcend parochial sentiments and boundaries based on traditional communal identities in an increasingly modern and urban Malaysian society.

The effect of pro-democracy movements on political allegiance in various ethnic communities, particularly the Malay community, remains an unanswered question and probably the most contentious and important element to explain the prospect of democratic transition in a deeply divided plural society such as Malaysia. That a pro-democracy movement involving a wide array of civil and political society actors is united by a common goal of

3 See the official website (<www.bersih.org/>) for the origin, development and activities of Bersih as a movement.

ending the UMNO-dominant regime to steer the political system towards a more democratic course may be true. However, such optimistic views about the regime transition need to be carefully scrutinised in light of increasing ethnic and religious tensions and instability.

Since 2007, ethnic and religious tensions and conflicts have been increasing, generating anxiety and concern by the public and observers. The trend is particularly intriguing because it has occurred when the UMNO elites, particularly the Prime Ministers Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003–2009) and Najib Razak (2009–present), adopted a more accommodative and integrative approach to balance out various ethnic interests. Moreover, such conflicts include not only new and small ultra-conservatives in civil society such as Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia (so-called Perkasa) but also mainstream Islamist groups such as the Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, ABIM) and traditional Malay and religious elites within the state.⁴ The heightening tensions between Malay–Muslim elites and non-Muslim communities generated additional pressure on more moderate and progressive Malay elites to take a conservative position regarding ethnic and religious matters; otherwise, their loyalty to the Malay community and Islam would be questioned (*The Malaysian Insider* 2013a; *The Malaysian Insider* 2013i; *The Malaysian Insider* 2013b). In contrast, non-Malays believe that they are not treated with respect and are alienated in their own country (*BBC News* 2011).

One of the most prominent cases includes violence and hostility that has occurred against Christians regarding the use of the word ‘Allah’. Tension has heightened since the High Court ruled in December 2009 to overturn the government ban on the Catholic newspaper, *The Herald*, for using the word as a translation for God in the Malay language. The government claims that ‘Allah’, an Arabic word, is exclusive to the Islamic faith and – by extension – to the Malays, and that its use by non-Muslims offends Muslims. Such a view raised the threat that *The Herald* would have its license revoked should the Catholic paper continue to use the word, leading to a lawsuit against the government (*BBC News* 2007). After the court ruling, at least three churches in Kuala Lumpur were attacked with firebombs that caused extensive damage to one, and Muslims pledged and preached to prevent Christians from using the word. In the following weeks, nine more churches, a convent and a Sikh temple were attacked across the country (*Economist.com* 2010). The dispute has not yet been settled and has kept communal tensions high (e.g., *BBC News* 2009; *CBS News* 2010; *The Malaysian Insider* 2013d).

4 A growing conservative trend in Islamic organisations, particularly ABIM (see Abdul Hamid Ahmad Fauzi 2008).

Another dispute regards conversion of non-Malays out of Islam, a so-called apostasy case as seen in the most recent court case involving a Hindu-Indian woman and her Indian husband who converted to Islam and attempted to convert their children in Syariah court. The case was contentious because it dealt not only with the conversion of non-Malay couples but also with the custody and conversion of children whose parent converted to Islam (*The Malaysian Insider* 2013e).

Conflicts such as apostasy and conversion cases involving non-Malays are always sensitive in Malaysian society because they are viewed as challenging the ethnic and religious boundaries that are tightly guarded by each community. These issues are not new or unusual in Malaysia's dual legal systems, in which civil and Syariah courts preside independently and sometimes compete with one another over the jurisdiction of conversion and apostasy cases (Hamayotsu 2012). In general, the conflicts tend to take place in the courts and media and hardly turn into physical violence even if taken to the streets. However, the issues have become exceedingly political and antagonistic because of the mobilisation of ultra-right Malay/Muslim organisations and pro-regime and pro-Malay media in the context of an increasingly assertive pro-democracy movement and non-Muslim minority rights groups (*Utusan Online* 2013).

Importantly, the UMNO ruling elites are not the only or primarily the ones taking an antagonistic stance to assert the supremacy of the Malay race and the Islamic faith, particularly after the latest elections. Religious (primarily Islamic) organisations and officials, along with traditional Muslim-Malay elites, are attempting to bolster their authority in an unusually provocative and antagonistic manner. On the surface, Prime Minister Najib and his government are attempting to balance contradicting demands and pressures that emanate from Muslim and non-Muslim communities to achieve his political survival (*The Star* 2011c; *The Malaysian Insider* 2013b; *The Malay Mail Online* 2013a). For example, before the appeal case regarding the use of the term 'Allah' was heard in court, the federal Islamic authorities, Jabatan Kemajuan Agama Islam (JAKIM), openly condemned their Christian opponents for challenging the use of the term and called on Muslims to unite in a *jihad* (holy struggle) against enemies of the faith (*The Malay Mail Online* 2013b).

Ultra-right Perkasa has attracted significant attention and has caused irritation and apprehension by insisting on the supremacy of the Malay culture and identity and the Islamic faith to the extreme. They have also adopted discriminatory and violent approaches to ethnic/religious minorities. Ibrahim Ali, a former UMNO politician from Kelantan, founded Perkasa after the 2008 general elections. The group is known for its informal linkage with

the UMNO and is seen as a proxy outside the formal party structure that advocates Malay supremacy. The group is small and minor, and is unattractive among more urban and cosmopolitan segments of civil society, both non-Malay and Malay. However, the ultra-nationalistic views advocated by the group seem to be winning much more sympathy and backing among the traditional Malay and political elites and the ordinary Malay communities than the pro-democracy movement and opposition leaders wish to acknowledge (Kessler 2013a; Merdeka Center 2010). Even former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has begun asserting an exclusivist position to advocate for Malay special rights and privileges and to become the advisor for Perkasa. Given his popularity and enduring influence in the UMNO and Malaysian society in general, his view should not be disregarded merely as extreme and personal (*The Malaysian Insider* 2013c). In their view, the current UMNO elites have become too lenient with the non-Malay communities and have given up too much to them at the expense of the Malay community. Malay elites and ordinary people seem to believe that Perkasa and Mahathir are just doing the job that Malay politicians should be doing (but are not adequately carrying out).⁵

Electoral Trends since the *Reformasi*

To understand the rising tide of ultra-nationalistic claims and religious and ethnic conflict involving traditional Malay–Muslim elites, first looking at broader voting patterns since the onset of the 1998 *reformasi* movement and the changing power balance among the opposition parties in particular is helpful.

As Table 1 shows, PR, the opposition coalition, collectively won significant support in terms of number of votes and parliamentary seats, particularly in the last two general elections of 2008 and 2013. In 2008, the ruling coalition lost a two-thirds majority in parliament and suffered the worst electoral results in 2013 since 1969 when it lost more votes than the opposition.

5 During my interviews and personal communications with government elites – both secular and religious – at the federal administrative capital of Putrajaya in June 2013, almost all of them in public service implicitly and explicitly indicated that the government (UMNO elites) has grown too soft on non-Malay communities and neglected to protect special Malay rights that are, in their view, constitutional.

Table 1: The Percentage of Votes and Seats Won by BN and PR in Parliamentary Elections in 1999–2013

	BN			PR			Total
	Seats	Seats (%)	Votes (%)	Seats	Seats (%)	Votes (%)	
1999	148	76.68	56.50	45	23.32	43.50	193
2004	198	90.41	63.90	21	9.59	36.10	219
2008	140	62.61	52.20	82	36.93	47.80	222
2013	133	59.91	47.38	89	40.09	50.87	222

Source: The Election Commission of Malaysia; *The Star Online*: 13th Malaysian General Election; the author's own data.

The expanded support for the PR and its ability to forge and sustain a multi-ethnic coalition against the BN, combined with the unprecedentedly assertive civil society, have generated an expectation that a much-awaited regime transition may no longer be unrealistic. Such an expectation is reasonable because the PR managed this time to win more votes (50.87 per cent of the total valid votes) than the BN (47.38 per cent) despite the BN's abundant political and financial resources and access to state apparatus and patronage, as well as the electoral system and rules being skewed excessively in favour of incumbent candidates from the BN. This result confirmed the conventional view within the anti-regime movement that the skewed electoral system is keeping the BN in power. According to this view, revising the electoral system makes imminent a regime transition (Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman 2013; Puthuchearu and Norani Othman 2005).

Additionally, the BN as a whole, particularly the Chinese-based Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Indian-based Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), are undeniably losing their tight grip over their non-Malay electorates and are more vulnerable than before to accusations of corruption, money politics, lack of transparency and an unfair electoral system (Merdeka Center 2009, 2010). However, the performances of the opposition parties and intra-coalition and intra-party dynamics need to be more carefully scrutinised to better understand the prospect of a pro-democracy movement and democratic transition. Explaining why some segments of the Muslim–Malay community are becoming more hostile, particularly the traditional elites, is also helpful. An important realisation is that a regime transition in a prototypical plural society such as Malaysia is not only about electoral reforms and clean and accountable governance but also about other institutions connected to traditional powers and ethnic and cultural identities.

Table 2 indicates the number of parliamentary seats that the component parties of the opposition coalition respectively contested and won in peninsular Malaysia (excluding Sabah and Sarawak) since the 10th general

elections in 1999. The opposition coalition, PR, is comprised of three major parties, namely the PKR, the DAP and the PAS. Although the PKR is predominantly Muslim–Malay, it is multi-ethnic in principle and was born after the political crisis following the dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim from the UMNO and the government.

Table 2: Number of Parliamentary Seats Contested and Won by the Opposition Parties in PR in 1999–2013

	PKR*		DAP	
	Contest	Win	Contest	Win
GE10 (1999)	42	5 12%	37	10 27%
GE11 (2004)	47	1 2%	38	11 28%
GE12 (2008)	63	31 49%	35	26 74%
GE13 (2013)	64	26 41%	36	31 81%
	PAS		PRM	
	Contest	Win	Contest	Win
GE10 (1999)	60	27 45%	4	0 0
GE11 (2004)	83	7 8%		
GE12 (2008)	65	23 35%		
GE13 (2013)	66	21 33%		

Note: PKR* = Keadilan + PRM.

Source: Author's own calculation based on the results available from <<http://elections.the-star.com.my/>>.

The DAP is a secular and urban-based party dominated by non-Malays, particularly Chinese. The PKR has a social democratic ideological orientation and fights for equal rights for all Malaysians, particularly those of ethnic minorities. The PAS is a Muslim-based Islamist party keen to expand religious values and ways of life. Because of the racialised nature of Malaysian politics and elections, the coalition was intended to forge an electoral pact to maximise their chance of winning as many districts (and parliamentary seats) as possible. According to this multi-ethnic formula, DAP candidates likely compete against non-Malay (thus, non-UMNO) candidates in urban districts whereas the PAS and to a lesser extent the PKR compete against Malay (UMNO) candidates in predominantly Malay rural and semi-rural districts. Traditionally, both the PR and the BN adopted this electoral strategy to gain

the maximum number of ethnic votes. Consequently, campaign strategies could be parochial and intended to fuel ethnic and religious sentiments. According to Clive Kessler, this electoral strategy was precisely the one adopted by the UMNO in the 2013 general election (GE13) to their advantage; as subsequently discussed, the UMNO targeted the hard-core Malay-dominant rural constituencies to capitalise on the fear of eroding Malay special rights and privileges (Kessler 2013a). This situation contrasted starkly with the PR's strategy that focused more on 'multi-culturalism' and equal rights for all citizens to attract more cosmopolitan, young and socio-economically affluent (and independent) urban constituencies.

All factors held equal, the most important finding from these results is that the DAP gained the most from the anti-regime movement and significantly expanded its support base. As the sole minority-based party in the multi-ethnic coalition, the party constantly contests in 35–38 electoral districts whereas the other two predominantly Malay–Muslim partners – the PKR and the PAS – each have contested between 63–66 districts since 2008. Among the three coalition partners, the DAP's growth in popularity is by far the most conspicuous; it won only 10 seats (27 per cent) out of the 37 seats contested in 1999 in the aftermath of the political crisis derived from the sacking and detention of Anwar Ibrahim, currently leader of the opposition. However, in 2013, the DAP achieved an overwhelming victory, winning as many as 31 seats (81 per cent) out of the 36 seats that it contested. In short, the DAP proved its ability to defeat their BN rivals under the same adverse institutional and political conditions, although undoubtedly the DAP could not have achieved this result on its own; the PR as a multi-ethnic pact worked to defeat the BN in largely multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan urban constituencies. Confirming that non-Malay (primarily Chinese) voters in urban constituencies in which most of the DAP members are likely to contest have shifted their political allegiance to the opposition from the BN is reasonable. This result also concurs with the broad trend found in opinion polls and public surveys conducted by the Merdeka Center since the late 2000s (Merdeka Center 2009b, 2010a, 2010b).

In contrast, the performances of the other two partners are less flattering. The results suggest that the same coalition formula worked differently to reward some parties more than the others. The PKR, predominantly Muslim–Malay and led by Anwar Ibrahim, the charismatic and popular icon of the opposition movement, only managed to win less than a half the constituencies they contested (49 per cent in 2008 and 41 per cent in 2013). The growth of the PAS in the post-*reformasi* era remains modest despite the growing anti-regime movement. In the 2013 elections, the party won only 21 (33 per cent) of the 66 seats it contested. Among the 21 seats that it won,

nine seats are in Kelantan, the location of much of their support base before the advent of the anti-regime movement.

The limited expansion of the PAS may be even more perplexing if one remembers that it was the most viable alternative opposition party to the UMNO before the onset of the political crisis. The PAS consistently won 7–15 per cent of the popular vote throughout the 1980s and 1990s and maintained strong support in the Malay-dominant states of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu. Except for the period between 1977 and 1990, the PAS has continued to govern the Kelantan state (Liew 2004: 4–7).

As seen in Table 2, in 1999, the PAS contested and won the largest number of seats (45 per cent) among the opposition parties, confirming that the PAS was the sole viable alternative to the UMNO when the Malay electorates voted against the ruling party. However, in the following elections in 2004, the PAS insisted on contesting as many as 83 seats and ended up losing more than 90 per cent of those seats (76), resulting in a BN landslide victory. In both 2008 and 2013, the PAS' contribution to the opposition's victories remained modest and obviously less than the DAP's despite the fact that disproportionately more Malay-majority electoral districts exist that PAS (and PKR) are likely to contest.⁶

An interesting question to ask is why the multi-ethnic coalition worked better in some areas (in other words, urban) than others (rural), and the possible implications of such results for inter-party relations in the PR, its future position as the sole alternative to the ruling regime and, more generally, the process of democratic transition. Although a more thorough analysis of district-level data may be wanted and helpful, stating that the electoral success of the opposition coalition has much to do with their ability to appeal to more urban, cosmopolitan and largely middle-class constituencies who are likely more affluent and independent socio-economically should suffice (*The Straits Times* 2013). As widely discussed elsewhere, the BN (and, in particular, the UMNO) has not lost as much support in primarily Malay-dominant rural constituencies as its non-Malay BN partners have in their non-Muslim constituencies (*The Malaysian Insider* 2013f). According to one estimate, 11 out of the 22 swing parliamentary seats that the PR won from the BN are Chinese majority seats, whereas all 15 swing seats that the BN won from the PR were Malay majority seats (*Malaysia Today* 2013).

Now, the undeniable fact is that the DAP is the largest party in the PR whereas the PAS finds itself becoming a minor partner in a Muslim–Malay

6 In Malaysia's pro-Malay electoral regime, the government has literally used delimitation of the electoral districts to keep the UMNO in power. As a result, the rural weightage is disproportionately high to create more electoral districts (and seats) in Malay-dominant areas. See Lim 2005 and Ong and Welsh 2005.

dominant state and society. In contrast, the UMNO is more dominant in the BN and the government than ever before. Not surprisingly, the PAS suffers somewhat from a sense of defeat, uncertainty and urgency in reconsidering its position in the coalition, despite the overall encouragingly strong performance of the opposition. The party (and the PR) not only lost the Kedah state government, which the PAS-led opposition ruled since 2008, but – more importantly – it saw its rising young pro-reform leaders such as Dzulkefly Ahmad, Husam Musa and Salahuddin Ayub defeated in the Malay-dominant urban/semi-urban districts in Selangor, the Federal Territory of Putrajaya and Johor, respectively. To make the already disappointing situation worse, another prominent pro-reform leader, Mohamad Sabu, currently deputy president of the party, was also defeated in a rural district of Kedah (*Malaysian Chronicle Online* 2013; *The Star* 2013b). Clearly, the PAS and its moderate and reformist leaders in particular are not gaining as much ground in the urban constituencies as they hoped, despite their efforts to alter the old ultra-conservative outlooks and religious visions of the Islamist party.

Obviously, the election results have contributed to some tension and confusion in the Islamist party. After the elections, the more conservative religious elites such as former Deputy President Nasharuddin Mat Isa were said to be regaining more force within the party, although they were pushed aside as a result of their resistance against the new direction of the party (*The Malay Mail* 2013). In contrast, after May 2013, pro-reform leaders such as Husam Musa, once a rising star from Kelantan, and their close allies were quickly and quietly dismissed within the party structure in Kelantan.⁷ The PAS is not gaining as much support and rewards from their participation in the PR and pro-democracy movement as they desired, although that the PAS could not have won as many seats as it has without participating in the coalition is also true. Worth remembering is that, historically, the PAS was defeated badly whenever it pushed for its extreme religious vision – particularly *hudud* (Islamic criminal codes) – on its own, although the same vision worked well to attract its traditional supporters in Kelantan (Buehler 2009; Mohamed 1994). Now, the question is whether the PAS remains committed to the PR or opts to reverse its new ideological outlook to fight for the pro-Malay and Islamic agendas to appease the mounting conservative pressures within the party and the Malay community. Also uncertain is whether and for how long the PAS elites remain content with their secondary position in the coalition. The good news for the pro-democracy movement and Malay-

7 Confidential interview with a member of the PAS elite, Kota Bharu, 15 August 2013. See also *The Star Online* 2013.

sia's democratic future is that, for now, the PAS seems to remain committed to the PR and its multi-cultural direction while searching for a way to reconcile cultural and ideological divides and political contentions within the party (*Malaysiakini* 2013a, 2013b, 2013c).

Challenges for Malay Political Survival: Electoral Incentives, the Rise of Ultra-Nationalistic Movement and Malay–Muslim Traditional Elites

Against this political and electoral backdrop, a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about its privileged positions is on the rise within the Muslim–Malay community, particularly traditional Malay and religious elites. Assertive pro-democracy civil and political societies are perceived as a movement dominated by Chinese and Indians to undermine the institutional foundations of the traditional Malay elites even if the movement does not specifically demand a reduction in the privileges and special rights of the Malays. Moreover, the pro-democracy movement and unprecedentedly large street demonstrations are seen as a threat to the cultural, religious and political dominance of the Malays in Malaysian society.

The fear that the Malays are losing powers and influence results from various factors. One among them is the perception that both the UMNO and the PAS are conceding too much to the non-Malay communities and elites and are weakening organisationally and politically.⁸ Because both parties are traditionally expected to fight for the Malay and Muslim cause within the Malay community, when they start talking more about the interests of other communities, even a small change can send a potentially misleading signal that they are neglecting to protect the special rights of Muslim–Malays unless clearly communicated. Moreover, the minority communities and groups are indeed becoming more assertive about their rights and interests even if the pro-democracy movement, in particular the PR elites, do not formally frame their demands in ethnic terms, as subsequently discussed. For example, traditional Chinese school movements intensified their lobbying to the government to demand and secure larger state financial allocation for Chinese-medium schools.⁹ Likewise, Chinese businesses are lobbying the

8 Confidential interviews with both civil and religious Malay high-ranking officials in the federal administrative capital, Putrajaya, June 2013.

9 Interview with a special staff member for the deputy prime minister/minister of education, Putrajaya, 13 June 2013. According to a DAP politician and member of parliament, the DAP has distanced itself from the traditional Chinese school movements in recent years (interview, Subang Jaya, 14 June 2013). The pro-Chinese

government elites to accommodate their interests and give them the share in the economy that they think they deserve. However, whether and to what extent they are willing to participate in the Malay (*bumiputera*)-dominant sectors to cooperate with Malay businesses is still questionable (*The Star* 2010a, 2010b). Overall, minority groups and communities in general have become more confident in demanding more resources and greater rights since the governing UMNO elites – particularly the prime minister – have been under significant pressure to regain the popular support they lost, particularly in non-Muslim communities.¹⁰ Certainly, the advent of well-organised pro-democracy movements has opened up a political opportunity for minority groups to voice their grievances and demands without fear of state reprisal.

Reactions from UMNO Elites: Accommodating and Balancing Ethnic Interests

Realising that challenges facing Malay–Muslim elites are different between elected and unelected officials and that they condition their incentives, strategies and approaches, is important. As elected officials, the UMNO elites and the prime minister in particular must deal deftly with the pressures and demands from non-Muslim communities because they depend on non-Malay votes in politically and economically important urban business and middle-class constituencies, such as the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The trend of UMNO reliance on Chinese businesses and votes started long before the expansion of the pro-democracy movement but has become more conspicuous, particularly because the non-Malay coalition partners in the BN lost the ability to command and represent their respective communities.¹¹ The UMNO elites must accommodate the interests of non-Malay communities without upsetting the Malay constituencies because its political legitimacy still depends on its role as a Malay party that protects the interests of the Malay community. The party elites' most signifi-

educational movements may be seen as too ultra-nationalistic and ethnocentric for current DAP leadership, who is attempting to refurbish its traditional pro-Chinese outlook and image into a more multi-cultural and open party to expand its support base with urban and young constituencies.

- 10 Confidential interviews with special staff for the deputy prime minister (currently the minister of education), Kuala Lumpur, 17 December 2009; Putrajaya, 13 June 2013. See also *The Star* 2013a; *The Malaysian Insider* 2013g.
- 11 Regarding the changing relations between UMNO and Chinese communities, particularly business, see Gomez 1993, 1996a, 1996b.

cant challenge is to balance incompatible pressures and demands from the two competing communities.

The government's '1 Malaysia' concept introduced by Najib in 2010 should be understood as a policy instrument to achieve a balance between competing communal interests and to build a more inclusive society. When the concept was introduced, Najib faced intense pressure from ultra-nationalist Malay groups, particularly Perkasa, who demanded that Najib ensure that the concept was based on Malay privileges. However, Najib ignored the discriminatory demands and, instead, emphasised that inclusiveness and fair and just policies be enshrined in the '1 Malaysia' concept. He reiterated that

being inclusive means we have to ensure our policies benefit all Malaysians. We have to ensure that systems are fair, and that every single Malaysian can recognise his or her own value (*The Malaysian Insider* 2010).

The government introduced various economic programs based on the same concept, such as the Government Transformation Program, the Economic Transformation Program and the New Economic Model (NEM). All of these programs are intended to facilitate cooperation by Malay and non-Malay businesses to upgrade the Malaysian economy.¹²

Without a doubt, the ultimate purpose of the '1 Malaysia' concept and the massive campaigns and programs that the government launched to realise the concept nationwide are to achieve Najib's political survival. Under the auspices of the concept, the government introduced a cash hand-out program called BR1M (Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia, 1 Malaysia People's Aid) in the run-up to the general elections. The distribution has been made twice since February 2013 to all eligible Malaysians before the elections. In the second round, a payment of 500 MYR (approximately 150 USD) was given to households earning less than 3,000 MYR (900 USD) per month. Moreover, the government pledged that the payment would be an annual affair, with the amount increased to 1,200 MYR (360 USD) for eligible households and 600 MYR (180 USD) for singles aged 21 and older earning less than 2,000 MYR (600 USD) per month if the BN returns to power. Additionally, the government promised to increase the 1 Malaysia Book Vouchers to 300 MYR (90 USD) from 250 MYR (75 USD), and schooling aid to 150 MYR (45 USD) from 100 MYR (30 USD) per child. These promises represented only a few of the benefits included in the BN election manifesto titled 'Peo-

12 For programs connected to '1 Malaysia', see the prime minister's official website, <www.pmo.gov.my>. For reactions from Chinese businesses, see *The Star* (2010b).

ple First'.¹³ All Malaysians regardless of their ethnic backgrounds have benefited from the programs.

Reactions from Unelected Malay Officials and Traditional Elites

In contrast, unelected Malay officials and traditional elites, such as Sultans, Mufti (religious jurist) and other state religious officials and secular civil servants, do not need to heed to the interests and pressures of non-Malay communities as much – or in the same ways – as elected officials. The Malaysian monarchies, locally known as sultans, are constitutionally not only the figureheads of each state but also are the guardians of the Malay culture and the Islamic faith. They are tasked to provide a sense of security and superiority to the Malay community (*bumiputera*, or the sons of the land) and to reassure them that their special rights and privileges are legitimate and secure. In theory, their role and relevance in a Malaysian society will not diminish as long as the Malay supremacy is kept intact constitutionally, politically and culturally.¹⁴

The rise of the anti-regime movement and the possibility of a regime change have threatened these fundamental premises of the Malay supremacy enshrined in the constitution and the traditional institutions which embody and enforce these principles. Moreover, as previously stressed, the UMNO was seen as becoming too lenient to the mounting pressures from non-Malay communities, both Chinese and Indian, making the Malay elites even more defensive and nervous about their position and power (*The Star* 2011a, 2011b, 2013c).

Anxiety and defensiveness among the traditional Malay and religious elites should be placed in a historical and institutional context of the state institutionalisation of ethnicity and religion. At independence, the Malay rulers or sultans were constitutionally instituted as the guardians of the Malay culture and traditions to safeguard the political dominance of the majority Malay community and, in particular, the Malay elites. Islam was chosen as

13 The 2013 national budget allocates for an extensive list of incidental welfare programs and services and subsidies such as medical and healthcare, education and public transportation. Civil servants are given additional bonuses and allowances (<www.pmo.gov.my/?menu=page&page=2038>).

14 In practice, some sultans are more political than others and at times strategically involved in political affairs to exert influence over policies and political changes, as seen in the case of the constitutional crisis in Perak after the 2008 election. Some sultans also express concern about the predicaments of non-Malays and are sympathetic with pro-democracy movements (Abdul Hamid and Ismail 2012).

the official religion of the Federation with the Malay rulers in each state acting as the ceremonial heads of the Islamic faith and religious affairs.¹⁵ In contrast, other largely immigrant minority ethnic communities, such as Chinese and Indian, were granted citizenship and the freedom to maintain and practice their language, faiths and other cultural traditions in return for accepting their minority – and inferior – status. Unlike other new, multi-ethnic post-colonial states, the Malaysian state was explicitly built on ethnic exclusivism and privileges without much consultation during the formative period, having henceforth hindered the formation of a society that cherishes a truly inclusive multi-cultural national vision.¹⁶

The establishment of a multi-cultural national identity and vision is widely known to have been delayed even further by the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which calls for aggressive state initiatives to implement a range of pro-Malay affirmative action programs in 1971. State budgets, bureaucracies, resources and patronage rapidly expanded to upgrade the socio-economic status of the Malay community and to make them more competitive in a market dominated by the more affluent urban minority communities, particularly the Chinese.

The ethnic-based distribution of state resources and patronage in the context of a booming economy, industrialisation and urbanisation coincided with the rise of political Islam and Islamic activism in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁷ UMNO elites in government, particularly then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, chose to accommodate and sponsor pro-Islam policies in a range of socio-economic, educational and legal areas, thereby expanding and strengthening the state religious apparatus at both federal (in other words, JAKIM) and state (Department of Religious Affairs, Council of Religious Affairs) levels. Note that the traditional Malay and religious elites were largely ceremonial and had limited resources before the federal government's aggressive 'Islamisation' initiatives. These traditional elites have benefitted handsomely from the state institutionalisation of religion (exclusively Islam) and expanded resources, formal powers and authority in running and controlling a wide range of religious affairs, including enforcement of Islamic laws (Hamayotsu 2006; Maznah Mohamad 2010). These religious officials

15 The Malaysian monarchy is comprised of the nine members of the Conference of Rulers who are hereditary Malay rulers of the states of Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, Perlis, Perak, Selangor and Terengganu. These nine rulers possess the right to elect and be elected as the reigning *Yang diPertuan Agong* (king) on a five-year rotational basis.

16 For some key issues and debates broadly related to nation-building and multiculturalism, see Othman, Puthucheary and Kessler 2008.

17 For the concept of 'Islamic activism', see Wiktorowicz 2004.

have developed a sense of entitlement under the powerful pro-Malay party dominant regime (*The Malay Mail Online* 2013c).

One of the most significant social and political consequences of the expanded function and authority of religious institutions is the entrenchment of ethnic- and religious-based Malay identity in state and society, further complicating the already delicate relations between the Malay community and the rest of the Malaysian population. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, ethnic and religious conflict rarely turned into collective violence given a booming economy that benefitted both the ethnic majority and minority groups. Also noteworthy is that UMNO elites did not forget to attend to the interests of non-Malay communities, particularly the Chinese, leading to Mahathir's 'Vision 2020' campaign to boost a nationalistic sentiment that cut across narrow ethnic identities and boundaries (Hamayotsu 2002). Together with his deputy, Anwar, Mahathir spent massive state resources and cultural capital and fought hard against conservative adversaries to bring competing communities together to achieve rapid growth and an integrated and modern society.

Despite (or probably because of) the absence of ethnic violence until 2007, the ruling elites have rarely questioned or seriously considered reducing the pro-Malay institutions and privileges. Instead, they have kept intact the ethnic-based constitutional and institutional frameworks, thereby reinforcing ethnic and religious collective identities in society. Thus, not at all surprisingly, social demands still tend to be expressed and asserted in communal and ethnic terms even after Malaysian society has become more urbanised, diverse and modern in many respects (Pepinsky 2011). Political civil society has learned to frame its demands in more universalistic terms to forge a pro-democracy movement. However, the pro-democracy movement has not managed to eliminate ethnic- and religious-based identities or interests.

That one of the major anti-regime movements after the 1998–99 *reformasi* movement began in 2007 among Indians – the most marginalised minority community – may not be coincidental. The movement was organised and mobilised by the ultra-nationalistic Hindu group, the Hindu Rights Action Force, or the so-called Hindraf. Committed to the preservation of Hindu communal interests and heritage, the Hindraf demanded more opportunities and better treatment for the Hindu Indian community. Because of the government's brutal treatment of the group, the movement ignited unprecedented anti-regime sentiments and collective action among the rest of the minority communities. The anti-regime movement has forged a strategically crucial coalition with the PR to expand further and grow more 'multi-ethnic' and 'universalistic' in its outlook and demand in the following

years. A number of Malay activists, youth and sympathisers have participated in the street demonstrations organised by the Bersih, the anti-regime front, to express their objections against the UMNO regime and demand reforms. Yet, that non-Malay communities in the urban areas dominated the anti-regime mobilisations as reflected in the election and survey results previously presented is equally true.

The Opposition, the Pro-democracy Movement and Citizens' Constitutional Rights

The ambiguity of the special rights of the Muslim–Malay community and the relationship between majority and minority communities among the pro-democracy movement, particularly the PR elites, has put the traditional Malay and religious elites on the defensive.¹⁸ A number of issues remain unanswered regarding the constitutional rights of the Malay–Muslim community and the pro-Malay institutional frameworks. Uncertainly remains over whether – and to what extent – the anti-regime movement and the opposition parties are willing to revisit and amend the fundamental constitutional and institutional frameworks that have sustained what the prominent colonial official Furnivall called a ‘plural society’ (Furnivall 1944) and the unequal rights of various ethnic communities over the decades. Will the desire for democratic and equal rights for all Malaysian people lead to a reduction in the special rights of the *bumiputera* guaranteed in the constitution? If not, how will they achieve a democratic regime and society?

In ‘the People’s Manifesto’ prepared in the run-up to the GE13, the opposition parties are rather vague on issues related to ethnic and religious identities, except for recognition of Islam as the official religion (Pakatan Rakyat 2013: 12). For them not to articulate their positions on communal interests and religious matters lest they need to answer the delicate question of how they would actually achieve equal rights for all Malaysian citizens under the current constitutional and political conditions is undoubtedly a strategic choice. Since 2008, the priority of the opposition parties is to sustain the coalition and promote the universalistic programs and values on which they now focus. To this end, the PR emphasises equitable opportunities, eradication of corruption and discrimination and the welfare of the people for all Malaysians regardless of ethnic background (Pakatan Rakyat 2013). The concepts and programs sound promising and ideal as a blueprint

18 For the ambiguity of the PR’s policy and electoral campaigns and its effects on the election results and their potential as the sole alternative to the regime, see (Kessler 2013b).

for a new democratic regime if the existing ethnic and religious-based constitution, institutions and interests are forgotten. Yet, the pro-democracy movement and the PR in particular threaten the traditional communal-based systems and principles which have maintained the pro-Malay regime precisely because of their emphasis on ‘equality’ and ‘equitability’ in all aspects of the socio-economic and political life of Malaysians.

Moreover, UMNO elites did not forget to mobilise to their advantage the ethnic and religious sentiments in hard-core traditional Malay rural constituencies during the run-up to the GE13, and still attempted to promote integrative national vision and programs. In fact, according to Kessler, the UMNO precisely targeted these rural Malay constituencies to make use of the situation and to imbue among Muslim–Malays the fear of eroding Malay special rights and religious superiority. They did so effectively by deploying the government-controlled pro-Malay media, *Utusan Malaysia*, and well-oiled party machines at the grassroots. In contrast to the ambiguous message signalled by the PR regarding questions related to religion and ethnicity, the UMNO’s campaign was simple and clear. Kessler’s succinct observation is worth quoting at length to gain a better sense of the socio-cultural context wherein the UMNO’s campaign was successfully fought to capture the hearts and minds of traditional Malay voters:

The UMNO campaign was simple: ‘all is at risk!’ There is no protection, it kept hammering away, for you and your family, for all Malays, for the Malay stake in the country, for Islam or for the Malay rulers who are the ultimate bastion of our Malay-Islamic identity and national primacy – other than us here in UMNO. It was a campaign that appealed to their sense of Malay identity and of Malay centrality to national life. It was a campaign that sought to suggest how tenuous the basis of Malay identity had now become in national life, how insecure the Malay grip upon the Malay stake in the nation had become. Everything that was distinctively Malay about Malaysia, it was suggested, was now under threat. It was a campaign that both cultivated and then also appealed to a Malay sense of political and cultural peril, even crisis. It was a campaign that consisted of a managed panic: that the Malays were now beleaguered in their own land, the *Tanah Melayu* [...] (Kessler 2013a).

The UMNO campaign was probably even more effective because the PAS, their primary competitors in the Malay heartlands, concentrated more on moderating their conservative and extreme religious outlook to expand their support base in their non-traditional urban and multi-cultural constituencies. This concentrated effort led to some confusion and anxiety among their

traditional Malay constituencies that strongly believed in the PAS's old religious visions including *budud* (Islamic criminal codes).¹⁹

Thus, the opposition's remarkable electoral performances, combined with the UMNO's grass-roots campaign, have contributed to unusually antagonistic and provocative reactions from not only ultra-nationalistic pro-Malay politicians but also traditional Malay and religious elites on every possible front. In particular, the politicisation of the Allah controversy has led to offensive statements and discriminatory attitudes from Malay elites eager to assert the supremacy of Islam over other faiths. For example, the Selangor Islamic Religious Council (Majlis Agama Islam Selangor, MAIS) affirmed Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah's strong position that non-Muslims are prohibited from using the word 'Allah' according to the 1988 non-Islamic Religious Enactment and that no dispute should occur over the issue. This firm position of the Selangor sultan contrasts strikingly with his relatively liberal position in other secular areas such as anti-corruption (Abdul Hamid and Ismail 2012: 932). The council also advised other state religious officials, including the Selangor Mufti, the legal advisor and non-governmental organisations, to abide by the Selangor Fatwa Council's decision to make the word 'Allah' exclusive to Muslims to preserve the Muslim faith (*The Star* 2010c). Remembering that the PR is dominant in the Selangor state both at the national and state levels, with the state governed by the opposition since 2008, may be helpful; a threat to the pro-democracy movement and its 'multicultural' agendas is most strongly felt there.

After the 2013 elections, inter-ethnic and religious tensions have intensified further primarily because of the Malay elites' more antagonistic attitudes against the constitutional rights and sentiments of religious minorities. As the hearing of the appeal case on the use of the word 'Allah' neared, prominent Malay politicians, such as Chief Minister Mukhriz Mahathir of Kedah, and Minister of Urban Well-being, Housing and Local Government Abdul Rahman Dahlan, supported Perkasa's inflammatory call to 'burn the Bible' by claiming that the use of the term 'Allah' in Bibles is merely a printing error. Moreover, the Kedah chief minister proposed to ban non-Muslims from using the word 'Allah' in his state, further alarming Christian leaders and non-Muslim religious organisations (*The Malaysian Insider* 2013h). JAKIM, the federal religious authorities, were even more combative and called for a *jihad* (holy struggle) among Muslims against non-Muslims. JAKIM used an official sermon read at mosques nationwide to assert that

19 Interview with PAS members and Kelantan state officials, Kota Bharu, 14–15 August 2013.

the term is exclusive to Muslims and for non-Muslims to challenge the supreme position of Islam is offensive (*The Malay Mail Online* 2013b).

The hostile attitudes of traditional Malay elites and growing inter-religious tensions have reminded non-Muslim religious groups that the constitutional rights of religious freedom are not automatic or secure. Moreover, that Islamic issues are off-limits in the debates of, and demands for, democratic rights and freedom also seems clear. In fact, Christian leaders suggest that inter-religious relations have worsened because of intimidations and discriminations by state religious officials, even in a state governed by the opposition such as Selangor, which has restrained their religious activities in recent years. They are also concerned that the judiciary may not be impartial to non-Muslims in cases concerning religious issues because of massive social pressure. From their perspective, Malaysian society has grown more restrictive as far as religious activities are concerned. Their freedom to live their spiritual and cultural life has significantly eroded despite the expansion of the pro-democracy movement.²⁰

Conclusion

This article argues that growing inter-ethnic and religious tensions, and ultra-nationalistic conservative pressures since 2007, are the result of the expansion of an assertive pro-democracy movement and multi-ethnic opposition. UMNO elites took advantage of the situation and ran effective grassroots political campaigns that were intended to fuel a sense of fear and crisis among traditional Muslim constituencies that their special rights and religious supremacy are under threat, thereby facilitating unusually hostile reactions from traditional Malay and religious elites. The anti-regime movement has gain unprecedented force within civil society, leading to the electoral rise of the PR in 2008 and 2013 and heightened expectations about a regime transition. The key debate for scholars of Malaysian politics and regime transition is the effect of pro-democracy movements in various ethnic communities, particularly Muslim–Malay. An increasing number of Malay urban middle-class has begun to sympathise with – and participate in – the pro-democracy movement. However, this article argues that the electoral results and public survey results indicate that the non-Malay communities still dominate the movement and are far more sympathetic to the opposition than the Malay community, whereas the Malay community is deeply divided.

20 Confidential interviews with leaders of a Christian organisation, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, 19 August 2013.

Overall, the Malay community is still apprehensive about how the regime change may potentially affect their special rights and privileges. The unprecedentedly assertive civil society, combined with the powerful multi-ethnic coalition committed to 'equality' and democratic rights of all citizens, has posed a grave threat not only to the party-dominant regime but also the supremacy and powerbase of the traditional Malay and religious elites and institutions. From the perspective of Malay elites and ordinary people, both the UMNO and the PAS have become too lenient and have made too many concessions to non-Muslim communities. They are worried that the special position of Malays and the supremacy of Islam have been compromised as a result.

Although the UMNO elites, particularly the prime minister, still have to attend to the interests of non-Malay communities whose votes are crucial for their survival, these unelected Malay and religious officials have no such electoral incentive and could afford to ignore the constitutional rights and sentiments of minorities to adopt provocative and discriminatory attitudes. To be fair, some Malay rulers and traditional elites exhibited pro-democratic attitudes towards and sympathy for minorities (Abdul Hamid and Ismail 2012). However, the point does not regard their general attitudes but, rather, specific positions that they take when their fundamental power base is at stake. The case in point is religious issues, such as the use of the word 'Allah', which non-Muslims view as overt challenges to Muslim supremacy and that are excessively politicised as a result, further deteriorating the already complicated inter-ethnic relations. According to non-Muslim religious communities and leaders, Malaysian society has become more restrictive as far as religious activities are concerned because of the unusually discriminatory and hostile attitudes of state religious (Islamic) officials, including those in Selangor, despite the expansion of the pro-democracy movement and opposition parties since 2007.

Given the UMNO's elites' traditional propensity to resort to mobilisation of religious and ethnic exclusivism, whether and how long they are willing to uphold their relatively moderate stance and integrative policies is uncertain, making many observers suspicious of their commitment. Similarly, whether and how long PAS could retain a moderate outlook and leadership in the coming years given their weakening position in PR remains questionable (Hamayotsu 2010). The PKR's commitment to the 'multi-cultural' national visions and constitutional equality is also not assuring given the relative silence of many party leaders on contentious religious issues such as the

Allah controversy or conversion.²¹ If their commitment to the PR and multi-ethnic frameworks is a temporary option to seek state power and primarily depends on the presence and leadership of Anwar, the PR's future contribution to regime transition and consolidation seems grim.

In short, the prospects for instability after democratisation loom large. Such prospects, according to Slater, are crucial to whether Malaysia will democratise at all because

authoritarianism is at its strongest when it is widely perceived as a necessary stabiliser, and authoritarian durability in both Malaysia and Singapore has always rested upon this *perception* (Slater 2012: 20, emphasis in original).

If this proposition is correct, the prospects for democratic transition and consolidation in Malaysia also seem grim. Is there a way out? The rising tensions and controversies over religious and ethnic issues suggest that the democratic transition in Malaysian society is not only about the termination of party dominance or institutional and political reforms in the conventional sense of the terms. The transition may require at least a democratic civil and political society that cuts across parochial communal boundaries and that is ready to debate and accept basic democratic values, principles and rules of the game, realising that constitutional equality – and democracy – are not achievable based on ethnic and religious exclusivism.

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21 Nurul Izzah Anwar, daughter of Anwar and deputy president of the party, is a prominent exception, taking a firm position to uphold 'freedom of religion'. See *Utusan Malaysia* 2012.

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