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The Malaysian General Elections of 2013: The Last Attempt at Secular-inclusive Nation-building?

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Abstract: This paper looks at the Malaysian General Election campaign of 2013, and focuses primarily on the 1Malaysia project that was foregrounded by the administration of Prime Minister Najib Razak. It compares the 1Malaysia project with other projects aimed at nation-building, such as the Wawasan 2020 project of former Prime Minister Mahathir and the Islam Hadari project of former Prime Minister Badawi; and asks if 1Malaysia was truly an attempt at building a sense of Malaysian nationhood based on universal citizenship regardless of race or religion; and it also considers the response to the 1Malaysia project that came from the opposition parties of the country. Malaysia has experienced a steady process of islamisation that dates back to the Mahathir era, and the question of whether the political domain of Malaysia has been overcome by religious-communitarian markers and values will be raised in the paper as well.

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1 Setting the Context: Islam as the Master Signifier in Malaysian Politics from 1981 to 2008

In the wake of the 13th general elections in Malaysia in May 2013, numerous controversies have erupted which suggest that the elections were, in one way or another, influenced by religious and/or ethnic concerns. In October 2013, the appeals court declared that Catholic newspaper *The Herald* would no longer be allowed to use the word 'Allah' to denote God in its articles written in vernacular Malay, prompting Christians across the country to complain of double-standards and restrictions placed on their freedom of religion. Meanwhile, a host of Malay-Muslim NGOs and lobby groups have been goading the government of Malaysia to extend the ban on the use of the word to East Malaysia as well, where thousands of Malaysian Christians of Kadazan, Dusun, Iban and other ethnic groups have been using the word for a century or more. Malaysia has also witnessed the rise of religiously influenced communitarian politics for a decade now, and in recent years the country also went through a spate of church-burnings that upset the sensibilities of the religious minorities in the country.

This paper will look at the role that religion has played in Malaysia's postcolonial politics, and ask whether the 1Malaysia project that was pioneered by Prime Minister Najib Razak was an attempt to reassert the idea of universal citizenship as the primary marker of Malaysian identity. It will also consider whether the results of the 13th general elections have made it virtually impossible for Malaysian politics to ever be truly secular and non-communitarian. The paper begins with a general overview of the 'islamisation race' of the 1980s and 1990s, and looks at the role that religion has played as a political marker during the tenures of Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. It will then address the way in which the Najib administration attempted to foreground the concept of 1Malaysia between the years 2005 to 2013, and consider how and why the 1Malaysia concept failed to gain traction among the wider Malaysian electorate at the recent elections.

Numerous scholars have noted the saliency of Islam as the master signifier in Malaysian politics from the early 1980s to the 2000s. Nair (1997) looked at how Islamic values and ideas impacted upon Malaysia's foreign policy in the 1980s and 1990s, where the Malaysian government presented itself as a defender of Muslim concerns in the international arena; the author also highlighted pressing issues such as the conflicts in Afghanistan and Bosnia, and championing the rights of Palestinians and Muslims elsewhere. Noor (2003b, 2004, 2008, 2011), Müller (2010, 2013, 2014) and Liow (2009)

also looked at how Islam came to permeate all levels of Malaysian society, and how Islamic symbols, values and norms eventually penetrated almost all aspects of Malaysian social life, from economics and politics to personal relations and popular culture.

Islam's rise as the master signifier in Malaysian politics and society has been due to a host of inter-related internal and external variable factors, as follows:

Internally, it has to be noted that from the late 1970s onwards the struggle to win popular support and to capture the state in Malaysia was reduced to a hotly divisive contest between two main Malay-Muslim political parties, where both stood to gain from utilising Islam, and Islamic symbols and markers, in their attempts to shore up the popular Malay-Muslim vote: The two biggest parties of the country, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, PAS), were cognisant of the shifting demographics of the country where the Malay-Muslim vote bank would become the biggest vote bank in the country, and as such no attempt at state capture – via democratic and constitutional means – would ever succeed unless the Malay-Muslim support base had been accounted for (Noor 2004). The fact that UMNO and PAS presented themselves as defenders of both Malay ethno-nationalist and Muslim communitarian interests meant that Islam would invariably be brought into the political contestation between them as well, and that neither side would be able to discard Islamic ideas or symbols in their attempt to present themselves as being 'more Islamic than the other;' a 'contest' that was dubbed by Noor (2004) as the 'islamisation race' of Malaysia.

Externally, it has to be borne in mind that the tone and tenor of Muslim politics worldwide had shifted from the nationalist to the revolutionary-Islamist by the late 1970s the failure of many postcolonial nationalist elites in other Muslim countries, such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Iran, meant that a new generation of more Islamist-inclined Muslims had come to the fore to present radical alternatives to the capital-driven, market-oriented development model that had been the template for postcolonial development since the 1960s (Funston 1978; Hiro 1988). Pakistan's declaration of itself as the world's first Islamic republic was soon followed by the Iranian revolution, which toppled the Western-backed regime of the Shah and led to the rise of the revolutionary Islamist government. This government declared the country to be an Islamic state as well, and was bent on exporting its brand of Islamist revolutionary politics worldwide. Malaysia, as a predominantly Muslim nation with connections to other Muslim societies worldwide thanks to the communicative infrastructure that developed through the process of globalisation, was not able to insulate itself from these develop-

ments, and was thus forced to deal with the reality of living in a globalised world where political Islam – which also presented itself in revolutionary, and sometimes radical, hues – was now present as a counter-hegemonic alternative for Muslims to choose. While Communism could be rejected and exteriorized as an 'alien' ideology, Islam was a part of Malaysian history and society, particularly among the Malay-Muslims of the country. It was thus impossible to deny the fact that political Islam had an appeal among some Malaysian Muslims, more so than Communism.

The combination of these internal and external factors meant that by the 1980s the struggle for the hearts and minds of Malaysia's Malay-Muslim majority community was at its peak: The Malaysian Islamic party had, since its inception in 1951, declared that it wanted to win control of the state apparatus and turn Malaysia into an Islamic state. The UMNO-led government, where UMNO was the dominant party in a broad coalition that included non-Malay and non-Muslim parties, had to balance the needs and aspirations of the Muslims of the country with the anxieties of the non-Muslim minorities.

The 1980s witnessed the further radicalisation of PAS, as the party's leaders began to take on the revolutionary discourse and vocabulary of other more revolutionary Islamist regimes elsewhere, notably Iran: in time, the leaders of PAS began claiming that theirs was the only 'true' Islam, while the UMNO government's brand of Islam was contaminated by ideas and values borrowed from the West (Noor 2003a). The mid-1980s witnessed the first instances of violent confrontation between the state's security forces and the radical Islamists in the country, such as the Memali incident in the state of Kedah, in which PAS leaders and members were killed for inciting revolution among their followers, and for defying the order to surrender themselves to the authorities.

The 1980s also witnessed the rise of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who led Malaysia's drive towards becoming a fully developed industrial economy by the 2000s (Teik 1995). Dr Mahathir chose to negate the growing influence of the Islamist radicals in Malaysia by turning to Islam as a discourse of progress and economic development, arguing that Islam is not incompatible with Modernity. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Malaysian government hosted and promoted a number of Islamic initiatives, such as Islamic banking, Islamic development, and a range of Islamic universities, colleges and think-tanks, such as the International Islamic University (IIU) of Malaysia and the Malaysian Islamic Research Institute, IKIM. These were top-down, state-sponsored projects aimed at catering to the rising level of expectations among the younger generation of highly educated Malay-Muslims in the country, with the intention of creating spaces for the next

generation of upwardly mobile Malay-Muslim professionals, entrepreneurs and technocrats who would make up the future Malay-Muslim middle-classes.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the UMNO-led Malaysian government's adroit use of Islamic symbols and markers proved to be effective enough for the ruling coalition to maintain power at the elections of 1982, 1986, 1990, 1995 and 1999. Despite PAS's constant attempts to paint the UMNO-led government as un-Islamic and secular, PAS's incendiary rhetoric, though popular, did not translate into votes in favour of the Islamist party. And even after the beginning of the East-Asian financial crisis of 1998, which brought low the economies of Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, the ruling coalition still managed to retain its hold on the governmental apparatus at the elections of 1999 – though the Islamists were able to gain control of two state assemblies (Kelantan and Trengganu), and managed to make gains in two other states.

This state of affairs came to an abrupt halt in 2003 when then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Mahathir, decided to step down from office, and hand over the reins of power to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. From 2004 to 2008, Malaysia under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi underwent yet another top-down, state-sponsored nation-building experiment, this time under the heading of the 'Islam Hadari' project. Badawi's Islam Hadari project was another attempt at re-presenting Islam as a belief-system that was compatible with development and modernisation, and could be summed up as an attempt by the state to foreground Islam as a discursive and ideological project to inculcate the values of modernity among the country's Muslims (Noor 2013). The parameters of the Islam Hadari project were vague, and aimed at reminding Muslims that Islam did not prevent them from engaging with Modernity, pluralism, diversity, and the challenges of the modern age. But Malaysian politics being bifurcated as it was between the aspirations of UMNO and PAS, the Islamists of PAS wasted little time before they condemned the Islam Hadari project as an aberration, a concession to secularism, and something that had no precedent in Islam. Notwithstanding Prime Minister Badawi's attempts to promote a brand of Islam that was moderate and modern, Islam Hadari was soon politicised as a result of the contestation between the country's two Malay-Muslim parties.

By 2008, Malaysia had thus undergone almost three decades of top-down and bottom-up islamisation, thanks largely to the manner in which both UMNO and PAS had used the ideas, markers and values of Islam in their respective political campaigns against each other. Central to this contestation was the fact that Islam, as a discourse and a repertoire of ideas and symbols, had been used as a discourse of *both* legitimation and de-legitimat-

ion by both parties. As neither side would relent in their sustained attempts to de-legitimise the other (on religious grounds), and since neither side could abandon Islam as part of their own discourse of legitimation, Islam remained at the center of the conflict between UMNO and PAS. The impasse was not broken until the elections of March 2008, which witnessed the near-catastrophic performance of the UMNO-led ruling coalition at the polls, and marked the end of Badawi's political career. Shortly after the election results were announced, Badawi publicly accepted responsibility for the government's poor showing, and withdrew from politics. The mantle of governance was then passed to Najib Razak, who took the country on an altogether new political path, and ushered in the era of the 1Malaysia project.

2   Malaysia in the Short-lived Era of 1Malaysia: The Last Attempt at Inclusive Non-religious Nation-building?

From 2008 to 2013, Malaysia embarked on yet another complex episode in its postcolonial history, and there were major developments for the two Malay-Muslim parties in the country.

The dominant UMNO party then came under the leadership of Prime Minister Najib Razak,[1] who was faced with the prospect of a weakened UMNO-led ruling coalition where the non-Malay and non-Muslim component parties (the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and Gerakan) were struggling to stay afloat. Interestingly, the non-Malay parties in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak

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1   Notwithstanding the elite composition of the new UMNO leadership, the Najib administration set out on a rather new path as far as UMNO-led Malaysian politics was concerned. For starters, Najib Razak seemed less inclined to present himself as a religious scholar or man of excessive public piety. Compared to some of the other, more conservative leaders of UMNO, Najib's career had been that of a technocrat's, and he was less disposed to take part in the holier-than-thou polemics that had for so long characterised the competition between UMNO and PAS. Having received his early education at St John's Institution, Kuala Lumpur, and later graduated from the University of Nottingham, Najib cut a figure that harked back to the era of the Tunku and Tun Razak, when Malay-Muslim leaders were less apologetic about wearing bespoke suits and were quite at ease when it came to discussing matters of state in the comfortable surroundings of the club. Yet Najib was no *dilettante*: he was, in fact, one of the most veteran leaders of UMNO then, and had been in the party since his twenties – and given his first ministerial post at the age of 32. He had served as Minister of Education and Minister of Defence before becoming the Deputy Prime Minister, and was one of the few senior UMNO politicians who had traveled widely and was able to carry himself confidently abroad.

fared better, and once again proved to be the life-savers for the embattled BN coalition at the 2013 elections. Crucially, the intense rivalry between UMNO and PAS, and the foregrounding of Malay-Muslim concerns on the national political stage, had meant that the non-Malay and non-Muslim parties were losing ground and relevance in the eyes of many Malaysian voters, particularly among the non-Muslims in the country – with the exception of the states of Sabah and Sarawak, which have a higher representation of non-Muslims in their respective populations.

The Islamic party PAS, on the other hand, was now in a coalition with non-Islamist parties that included the predominantly Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP) (Parti Tindakan Demokratik) and the multi-ethnic People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR). (Also allied to the opposition People's Coalition (Pakatan Rakyat, PR) was the much smaller Malaysian Socialist Party (Parti Sosialis Malaysia, PSM).) In the same way that UMNO could not continue foregrounding Islamic concerns without weakening the standing of its non-Muslim allies, PAS was unable to foreground its demand for an Islamic state in Malaysia without weakening the opposition PR coalition.[2] Both UMNO and PAS seemed to have reached an impasse, though neither party could afford to abandon Islam altogether as a political marker of identity.

It was at this stage of Malaysian political history that the administration of Najib Razak attempted something that had not been done by his predecessor, Abdullah Badawi. Soon after assuming leadership of the UMNO party and the federal government, Najib and his close circle of party-political advisors presented the Malaysian public with a new discourse of nation-building: the 1Malaysia project.

Malaysia has, of course, borne witness to the development of long-term nation-building plans in the past. One is reminded of the Vision 2020 (*Wawasan 2020*) development plan of the Mahathir era, which was couched in broad inclusive terms and which was not ethnically or religiously specific in terms of its target audience. Likewise, the 1Malaysia project was essentially a

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2   Prior to the formation of the Pakatan Rakyat coalition, there had been several attempts by the opposition parties in Malaysia to work together. At the elections of 2004, the Islamists of PAS formed a loose coalition with the PKR and the DAP, called the Alternative Front (Barisan Alternatif). However, this project floundered as a result of PAS's insistence on maintaining its stated goal of turning Malaysia into an Islamic state if it were to come to power: a move that irked its allies in DAP and which soured relations between the parties. Compounding matters further was PAS's open support for the Taliban during the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, which upset not only the members of the DAP but also many moderate Muslims in the country. Shortly after the elections of 2004, the BA coalition fell apart as the DAP withdrew itself from it.

nation-building exercise that was presented in terms of a broadly nationalist discourse that was inclusive and non-sectarian, attempting to bring Malaysians of all ethnic and religious backgrounds closer together in the spirit of a single nation premised on the idea of universal citizenship. But while the Mahathir and Badawi eras witnessed the rise of Islam as a marker of national identity and politics, the first administration of Prime Minister Najib (2009–2013) did not foreground Islam (or religion in general) as part of its discourse of legitimation.

1Malaysia was relatively more open and inclusive, in the sense that it was not targeted towards the needs and interests of a specific faith community, and was meant to heal the ethnic-religious divisions that had been present in Malaysian society up to the elections of 2008. Few analysts have noted the significance of the 1Malaysia project and what it entailed for the wider domain of Malaysian public political discourse. As noted earlier, for a period of almost three decades (1981–2008) the contest between UMNO and PAS in Malaysia revolved primarily around the theme of religion, religious identity and the needs of a particular religious community. The shift to 1Malaysia was significant in the sense that this was the first time that Malaysia's national political arena was being reconfigured according to a nation-building narrative that did not bear any traces of religious communitarianism.

Though not an ostensibly secular discourse, 1Malaysia was interesting in the sense that it placed more emphasis on values such as integrity and meritocracy, which happened to be universal in scope and blind to ethnic and religious particularities. This may account for how and why it was initially warmly received by a wide section of the Malaysian public, notably among the non-Muslims of Malaysia who had, by then, lived through an islamisation race that had lasted more than three decades. Under the rubric of the 1Malaysia project, a host of state-sponsored ventures and programs were launched, which ranged from the 1Malaysia Housing Scheme to the 1Malaysia Peoples Financial Aid (Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia, BR1M). The Najib administration was keen to ensure that the state was on hand to help the urban poor and the young, in particular, and many of these state-funded projects were targeted specifically to new urban settlers, young university graduates, first-time house- and car-buyers, etc. In short, 1Malaysia was an attempt to plug the leak of the urban youth vote that had sprung during the 2008 election campaign. Widening the potential appeal of 1Malaysia among the young even more were the other promises that the Najib administration made to the Malaysian public; some of which were of an unprecedented nature. To the consternation of the conservatives in his own party, Prime Minister Najib vowed to repeal the Internal Security Act (ISA) that had been the bane of the civil liberties movement in Malaysia since the 1960s. Also to

be repealed or amended were the Printing Presses and Publications Act and the Restricted Residence Act; and the government also promised to deliver a new Freedom of Assembly Act that would allow Malaysians to organise rallies with less difficulty (*New Straits Times* 2011; *Berita Harian* 2011).

The promotion of 1Malaysia as the new discursive battleground for the hearts and minds of Malaysians occasioned a change of tactics and approach on the part of almost all the major actors and agents on the Malaysian political scene. Here, it has to be noted that Najib's promotion of the 1Malaysia concept came at a time when there was an evidently growing sense of communal anxiety, particularly among the Malay-Muslims of the country: the multiple challenges of rapid globalisation, foreign capital penetration into the economy, and the opening up of the Malaysian market – which was aided by the economic reform measures that were also being put in place by the Najib administration – all meant that for some sections of the Malay-Muslim community in the country there was a growing apprehension that the economic and political standing of the community was under threat. As a result of this sense of mass communal panic, a range of new ethno-nationalist NGOs, lobby groups and special-interest groups emerged to occupy the already-overcrowded arena of the Malaysian public domain. Many of these groups – led by communitarian-minded Malay leaders – expressed their concern that the liberalising gestures of the Najib administration would spell the end of Malay dominance in Malaysia.[3]

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3   The strongest reaction to Najib's 1Malaysia project came not from the ranks of the opposition parties, but rather from a host of NGOs and pressure groups that were aligned to the ruling BN administration, which was made up of Malay-Muslim groups that felt that their standing and status in the country was in danger of being diluted thanks to Najib's appeasement of the non-Malay and non-Muslim minorities in the country. These included groups like Perkasa, and the Ulama-supported ISMA movement. For the more conservative ethno-nationalist elements of Malay society at the time, a sense of communal panic and anxiety had set in, which was reminiscent of the communitarian sentiments that held sway among many Malays in the 1970s. But UMNO under Prime Minister Najib was then embarking on a national reconciliation program that came in the form of his 1Malaysia project. For the more stalwart defenders of the Malay-Muslim position, the time seemed right for the creation of a Malay-Muslim bloc that would defend the Malay position, even if UMNO was no longer inclined to do so: by then, the country was bearing witness to the rise of a new sort of communal-based public activism and social networking, which came in the form of a range of new ethno-nationalist NGOs and lobby groups that were making their entrance into the public domain. These included the Malay-Muslim ethno-nationalist NGO and lobby group Perkasa, which was formed in 2009 and led by the independent member of parliament Ibrahim Ali; who in 1987 was among those detained under the ISA.

Herein lay one of the most evident weaknesses of the 1Malaysia project, which was seen and billed as a 'Najib idea' by its supporters, as well as its critics. Unlike the *Wawasan 2020* project, which had the support of a more compliant Malaysian state apparatus and bureaucracy, Najib's 1Malaysia project was adapted to suit the needs of Najib's more presidential approach to leadership and governance. While Mahathir's *Wawasan 2020* was taken up by a range of academics, technocrats, bureaucrats and the business community; Najib's 1Malaysia concept did not seem to have the same level of widespread support among his cabinet colleagues and his own party. At one point, even Deputy Prime Minister Muhyuddin Yasin flatly and plainly stated that he considered himself an ethnic Malay first, and a Malaysian second – a statement that flew in the face of Najib's broad exhortations for national unity based on universal citizenship. Former Prime Minister Mahathir had been able to hegemonise his vision of *Wawasan 2020* as a result of his strong hold on his own UMNO party, but by the time Najib had assumed power, the rank and file of UMNO was more divided and willing to challenge its own leaders. Prime Minister Najib was thus in a difficult situation, where he had to push the 1Malaysia agenda before not only his own party, but also the wider electorate, while at the same time using it to blunt the advances of the opposition parties.

The opposition Islamist party PAS, on the other hand, was in a new situation where Islam – which had long since been its main clarion-call and rallying-point – was no longer the central idea in the public register. As noted earlier, Badawi's attempt to promote his vision of a moderate Islam via the concept of Islam Hadari had been met with scorn and derision by PAS leaders, who argued that the project was fundamentally un-Islamic. But in the case of 1Malaysia, PAS was forced to deal with a new and very different kind of state-legitimation discourse that was inclusive, non-sectarian and non-particular. To state that 1Malaysia was not an Islamic concept would have been self-evident, for the discourse of 1Malaysia did not present itself as a religious discourse in any sense of the word. However, the all-embracing nature of the 1Malaysia project was politically correct to the utmost degree, and could hardly be faulted for being inclusive, tolerant and open to all. PAS was therefore forced to leave its comfort zone of Islamic discourse, and this was something that it had not done since the 1980s.

As a result of Najib's promotion of 1Malaysia – which was widespread and saturated almost all aspects of Malaysian public life, from advertising to government slogans, from state welfare benefit schemes to housing loans – a new discursive domain had been opened up in Malaysia. This also paved the way for the reformists of the Malaysian Islamic party to come to the fore to project their own alternative, which was framed as was called the 'Islamic

Welfare State' (*Negara Kebajikan Islam*) concept.[4] As Malaysia's political parties prepared for the country's elections in May 2013, it is interesting to note that neither PAS nor UMNO resorted to their old tactic of denouncing each other on the grounds of being 'un-Islamic' or 'not Islamic enough.' It seemed, momentarily at least, that the age-old 'holier than thou' confrontational politics of the 1980s and 1990s had come to an end.

The May 2013 election was one of the few election campaigns in recent Malaysian history in which Islam was not such a visible election issue; though many of the more prominent leaders of PAS – particularly among the moderate faction – were accused of being *Shias*, or under the influence of Shia ideology. Another noteworthy aspect of the campaign was the manner in which the three main parties of the opposition coalition had come to rely and depend on one another. The DAP and PAS had attempted to make in-roads in the southern state of Johor, which had always been regarded as the bastion of UMNO. At most of the rallies organised in Johor, the Malaysian-Chinese supporters of the DAP were seen carrying flags, banners and posters of PAS as well. In the course of our fieldwork in Johor during the election campaign (25 April–5 May 2013), we noted that PAS and DAP members were co-operating closely, organising rallies and public forums together, and collecting donations from a wide range of local donors, which included both Malays and Chinese. It was estimated that a vote swing of more than 85 per cent among the Malaysian-Chinese voters would have

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4   PAS's promotion of the Islamic Welfare State *(Negara Kebajikan Islam)* concept was really the result of the articulation of one particular segment of the Islamist party, namely the so-called 'professionals' or 'technocrats' of PAS, which was made up of the younger generation of PAS leaders, who had entered the party in the 1980s when PAS had openly invited young Malay-Muslim university graduates to join the Islamist movement. Many of these younger members had been educated abroad in countries like the United States, Britain and Australia, and were therefore schooled in the hard sciences and/or the humanities and social sciences. The included those trained in medicine, such as Dr Hatta Ramli and Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad, as well as those who were technocratically inclined, like Dr Kamaruddin Jaffar. They also included long-time PAS veterans such as Mahfuz Omar and Mohamad Sabu, who were known PAS leaders that had long since championed the cause of the rural poor, the urban underclasses and the students on campus. These members of PAS were then given the opportunity to re-orient the party in a direction similar to some of the more pragmatic Islamist parties in the world today, such as the AKP of Turkey – which likewise enjoys the support of Muslim professionals, businessmen and technocrats – the Nadah movement of Tunisia, and the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, Justice and Prosperity Party (PKS) of Indonesia. It was well known that the reformers of PAS saw themselves as the Malaysian equivalent of the Islamist democrats of Indonesia, Tunisia, Egypt and Turkey; and it was for this reason that this group was referred to as the 'Erdogan' faction within PAS.

delivered the parliament into the hands of the opposition. That the DAP and PAS were working together in Johor is particularly striking to the historian, for, as noted earlier, it was in Johor that several PAS leaders had denounced the Malaysian-Chinese community in toto after the 1999 elections.

In the end, the long-awaited victory of PAS did not materialise, though the opposition as a whole did make very significant gains: a significant swing of 4.12 per cent was made in favour of the opposition, earning the PR 50.8 per cent of the popular vote nationwide. PAS had contested in 73 parliamentary seats and 236 state assembly seats, and had fielded its candidates in all states across the Malaysian Federation. But, as expected, the UMNO-led coalition did manage to hold on to power, though with evident losses among the non-Malay parties of the ruling coalition. The MCA's share of parliamentary seats dropped to seven, while Gerakan's dropped to one; the MIC managed to gain four parliamentary seats. In total, the UMNO-led coalition won 133 parliamentary seats, and thus registered a drop not only in popular votes but also parliamentary representation. It seemed as if all the effort that had been put into the 1Malaysia project had come to naught.

PAS's leaders and members were not entirely happy with the results they received either. For although the PR coalition had increased its number of parliamentary seats from 82 to 89, it was PAS that suffered the highest net loss. PAS won 1,633,199 (14.7 per cent) of the total votes cast, but its share of parliamentary seats had dropped from 23 to 21. Significantly, some of the PAS leaders associated with the progressive faction had also failed to retain their parliamentary and state assembly seats, despite their evident popularity on the internet and their visibility in cyberspace. Mohamad Sabu had lost at Pendang, Husam Musa had lost at Putrajaya, Salahudin Ayub had lost at Pulai and Nusajaya, and Dzulkefly Ahmad had lost at Kuala Selangor (Iskandar 2013). Notwithstanding this setback, it has to be noted that for the second time in a row (after the 2008 elections), PAS had managed to win seats across the country in mixed constituencies where non-Malays and non-Muslims were important voters, lending weight to the notion that voting patterns in Malaysia have changed and no longer correspond to ethnic loyalties as they did in the past.

3   Post-election 2013: A Return to Religious and Ethno-nationalist Communitarianism

The outcome of the 13th general elections in Malaysia – which was baffling to some – has been the subject of intense debate and speculation among many Malaysian scholars and local political commentators. Apart from deepening the ethnic divide in the country, which has now become more

apparent, with almost all the non-Malay parliamentarians sitting on the opposition benches in parliament, it has also led to the clawing-back of the earlier reforms that were introduced by the Najib administration between 2009 and 2013. Among the burning questions that have been raised, and which still need to be answered is: Why did the 1Malaysia project fail to win the support of a wider range of Malaysian voters, and what does this mean for the future of secular (non-religious communitarian) politics in the country?

As noted earlier, the 1Malaysia project was unique in the sense that it was the first attempt at non-communitarian nation-building in almost three decades, and it was clear that the project was meant to involve all Malaysians, regardless of their ethnic or religious background. The targeted communities were the urban youth, the educated professional classes, and the urban middle-class. Yet despite the many attempts by the Najib administration to woo non-Malay/Muslim support – which culminated in perhaps the most self-effacing appeals by any Malaysian leader to date during the Chinese New Year celebrations of 2013 – Prime Minister Najib failed to win over the Malaysian-Chinese electorate at the crucial moment. One of the factors that could have contributed to this dismal performance was the increasingly vocal and belligerent stance taken by Malay-Muslim NGOs and lobby groups, who were clearly unimpressed by the Prime Minister's appeal to the Malaysian electorate as a whole, and who insisted that, as leader of the UMNO party, he ought to have prioritised the Malay-Muslim community who were, and remain, UMNO's main vote base. The other main weakness of the 1Malaysia project, as noted earlier, was the fact that it was seen – from the outset – as an idea that was associated primarily with Prime Minister Najib only, and that it did not seem to have the support of his cabinet and party colleagues.

Related to this was a host of unresolved issues in terms of questions on ethnic and religious identity that were kept on the boil in the closing stages of the election campaign, which ranged from the right of non-Muslims to use the word 'Allah' in their vernacular Malay-language bibles, to the question of religious freedom for minorities. On almost all of these issues, the UMNO-led government was seen to defer to the interests and demands of the Malay-Muslim majority, which in turn dampened the support of the non-Malays and non-Muslims for the 1Malaysia project, which was seen as cosmetic and insincere. Najib's unwillingness to castigate and silence the louder communitarian voices among the Malay-Muslim community also reinforced the view – articulated time and again by the opposition – that the 1Malaysia project was merely a smokescreen intended to lull the minority communities into a state of complacency, while maintaining the political

dominance of the majority ethnic group. Regardless of whether these views were real or imagined, it cannot be denied that communal concerns and anxieties remained unchecked, and that, despite the inclusive rhetoric used by both coalitions in the lead-up to the polls, these insecurities remained among many.

In the wake of the UMNO-led coalition's poor showing at the elections (where the ruling coalition won even *less* parliamentary seats than it did at the elections of 2008), Najib has not shown any signs of retiring from politics. Instead, there has been a steady rolling-back of some of the reform measures that were undertaken in the previous five years. In the face of a pandemic of urban crime, the home minister has announced tougher policies on criminals, and called for a return to longer periods of detention for suspects. The mainstream vernacular press linked to the UMNO-led coalition has been quick to pin the blame on the non-Malays of the country, while Malay-Muslim communitarian NGOs and lobby groups have been calling for a reassertion of Malay-Muslim political dominance in Malaysia. As noted earlier, in October 2013 the appeals court ruled that the Catholic newspaper *The Herald* does not have the right to use the word 'Allah' in its vernacular publications, eliciting a surprised response even from Arab newspapers, which argued that Arab Christians have been using the same word for hundreds of years (Diab 2013).

At present, Malaysia seems to have returned to the oppositional dialectics of the 1980s and 1990s. In the wake of the 2013 elections, visibly less attention is being given to the concept of 1Malaysia, compared to the coverage that it was given in the lead-up to the campaign (though the 1Malaysia slogan and logo are still pervasive, and are seen on government posters, badges, billboards across the country). Since the elections, the Malaysian government has foregrounded yet another slogan, entitled 'Malaysia: Endless Possibilities'. As was the case with the 1Malaysia campaign, the Endless Possibilities campaign has been predictably met with cynicism and scorn by the opposition parties of the country, who labelled it another public relations exercise.

That Malaysia remains a land of 'endless possibilities' is a given fact, and as the period of 2009 to 2013 has shown, there can indeed be attempts by the ruling elite and political establishment to take the country on another path that diverges from the route taken in the past. The relative failure (if it can be called that) of the 1Malaysia campaign had less to do with the idea of 1Malaysia itself, and more to do with how such an idea, floated as it was on the already hotly contested and over-determined terrain of Malaysian political discourse, met with stiff opposition from both the opposition parties and a Malaysian electorate that may well be jaded with such slogans by now.

However, one thing is clear: the 1Malaysia experiment was a political venture from the outset, and indicates the extent to which the political elite of Malaysia are still grappling with the task of nation-building, albeit from a top-down perspective. The success or failure of such initiatives, now or in the future, will therefore depend partly on how well the political elite of the country navigate the choppy waters of Malaysian politics and society, and how well they can read the sentiments and sensibilities on the ground. Such slogans and campaigns may strike some academic observers as trite or superficial, but they nonetheless demonstrate the saliency of *ideas* in politics, and the fact that nations are – to quote Benedict Anderson's phrase – 'imagined communities' in which ideas shape the political realities we live in.

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