Identity Politics and Young-Adult Malaysian Muslims

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Abstract: *A rivalry between political parties has meant that the position of religion in Malaysia is very much tied in with nationalistic politics. Having been in power since the country's independence, the United Malays Nationalist Organisation (UMNO) of the Barisan Nasional (National Front) has attempted, through use of several national ideologies and discourses, to propagate a Malay Muslim hegemony within a multiethnic framework. The most obvious result of this is the categorization of the Malaysian population by ethnicity in all facets of their lives. Another consequence is the precarious position of young adults in Malaysia: the government expects much of Malaysian youth, especially Muslim youth, yet ironically, their inadequate representation and vulnerability to authoritative depictions has left them a marginalized group. This article looks at the discourses concerning young-adult Malaysian Muslims, and, through in-depth interviews with a small sample of urban youth, attempts to uncover what discourses young-adult Malaysian Muslims are actually using in their everyday lives. My findings point to a transcendence of religion over race amongst most young Muslims, with there being much discomfort over assuming the ethnic identity marker of 'Malay'*.

In the Southeast Asian country of Malaysia, the position of Islam in public life is very much linked with national politics. The United Malays Nationalist Organisation (UMNO), the Malay race-based and largest party in the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), or National Front coalition, has, for decades now, been locked in a rivalry with the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) over command of the Muslim-Malay electorate. This rivalry has seen the use of an increasingly Islamic rhetoric, contributing to a blurring of the distinction between ethnicity and religion. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi confirmed this when he said that 'the Malays, UMNO and Islam in this country cannot be separated'.[1]

To the rest of the world, Malaysia projects itself as a role model for other Muslim countries.[2] In 2004, Badawi declared that 'Malaysia can be a showcase of what it is to be a successful, modern Muslim country'.[3] The Badawi administration developed *Islam Hadhari* (Civilisational Islam) which Badawa explains as being UMNO's Islamized 'understanding of the concept of development'.[4] However, this is not the first time a discourse of nation-building has been adopted by UMNO, nor the first time that religion has been employed in such a discourse – the national ideology of *Rukun Negara*, or national principles, also had a religious theme.

Young people in Malaysia are frequently targeted in these discourses, with government discourses framing them as 'an invaluable asset with tremendous potential'.[5] However, Maila Stivens has suggested that the interest concerning young people is because 'the nature of Muslim and "Asian" family life have become central to cultural contests about being "modern" in contemporary Malaysia'.[6] In other words, Malaysian youth, and especially Muslim youth, have become scapegoats for modernity-related anxieties.[7] There is now constant scrutiny of young people, and much discussion is carried out with regards to what they can do for Malaysia. As it is with most discourses in Malaysia, the role of youth has become intertwined with the role of religion, as 'the task of moulding the youth has also been seen as closely involving Islam in producing an ethical vision of economic development'.[8]

Throughout its rivalry with PAS, UMNO indeed looked like it had the upper hand, although PAS continued to act as a thorn in UMNO's side. The 2004 elections, in

particular, were seen as a major victory for UMNO, after the BN coalition managed to wrest back control of the state government of Terengganu from PAS.[9] However, the 2008 elections saw the BN coalition lose its two thirds majority in Parliament for only the second time since Malaysia's independence. In the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, in particular, BN had a poor showing, winning only one of the eleven parliamentary seats available.[10] The reaction of BN coalition leaders to this 'defeat' was one of surprise; clearly, there was a lack of knowledge on their part on what the electorate was thinking.[11]

Indeed, what young people have to say for themselves on the role of religion in their identities, lives, and in Malaysia as a whole, remains largely unknown, not least because of the marginalization of young people and scant attention paid to them in scholarly work.[12] This article hopes to begin to rectify this situation by first, examining more closely what expectations there are of young-adult Malaysian Muslims as outlined in recent political rhetoric; and second, by investigating how urban young-adult Malaysian Muslims construct discourses through which they live their lives. The latter is done by an analysis of research data collected through one-on-one interviews with eight young-adult participants who identified themselves as being both Malaysian and Muslim.

Young People and a National Ideology

The ethnic mix in 1957 Malaya, a federation of nine states located in the Malay peninsular, made the newly-independent country stand out amongst its Southeast Asian

neighbours. Nowhere else in the region was there such a high proportion of ethnic diasporic communities – Chinese and Indians in Malaya's case – in the population, almost equal in numbers to the ethnic Malays and indigenous tribes.[13] The viability of Malaya depended on the division of power between these ethnic groups, as per the pre-independence 'bargain'.[14] While non-Malays were allowed Malayan citizenship, Malays (who were officially synonymous with being Muslims) were accorded special status in Malaya's constitution, and certain economic advantages. It should be noted here that the discourse of Malay indigeneity was often the 'main basis for legitimizing political power and the economic redistribution of wealth', with the economic dominance of non-Malays often being the justification for the existence of economic advantages.[15]

The 'bargain' was still in effect with the formation of Malaysia, but this power sharing arrangement, however, appeared to fail to please everyone.[16] The 1969 general elections saw the Alliance (a coalition of mainly racially-grouped component parties composed of UMNO, the Malayan Chinese Association or MCA, and the Malayan Indian Congress or MIC), which had formed the government since 1957, lose its two-thirds majority in Parliament.

Immediately after the 1969 elections, racial riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur. These riots were officially reported as having occurred spontaneously. The spectre of these riots continues to hang over Malaysian society, with politicians often warning they can happen again 'when the status quo is shaken'[17], with the government linking the occurrence of the riots to the socio-economic disadvantages faced by the Malays, which

was noted to be a legacy of Malaysia's colonial past.[18] However, some contend that the riots 'were carefully planned and organized and that they were an excuse for the new regime to declare an emergency to effect the regime change'.[19]

After the riots, Parliament was suspended for two years, and when it reconvened the Alliance, later renamed the Barisan Nasional, had been strengthened by several opposition parties choosing to join its ranks.[20] UMNO continued to dominate the coalition. Citing the need to pre-empt incidences like the riots in order to stop them from occurring again, measures – popularly known as 'special privileges' – were soon put in place. One such policy was the New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP would help to 'create the socioeconomic conditions for national unity through reducing poverty and interethnic economic disparities', especially between *Bumiputeras* and non-*Bumiputeras*.[21]

However, the NEP would still need a national discourse within which to exist and claim legitimacy. The socioeconomic restructuring of society necessary to achieving unity would also involve the promotion of a national ideology.[22] This new ideology, or *Rukun Negara*,[23] was announced on *Merdeka* (Independence) Day in 1970. Despite the stated intention for it to be a national ideology, there appears to be much confusion about it at the official level. Roughly translated, *Rukun Negara* means national principles, and an article in the BN-owned newspaper, *New Sunday Times* insisted that the *Rukun Negara* 'was not a state ideology as in Indonesia, but more a guideline for citizens to live by'.[24]

However, there can be no denying the official legitimacy of the *Rukun Negara*. Students recite the *Rukun Negara* in school, and in 2005, the Ministry of Information announced that the *Rukun Negara* was to be recited at all official functions and assemblies of government departments and agencies.[25] In 2008, former Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi attacked the 'slanders and lies spread through blogs and YouTube', remonstrating that they constituted a blatant disregard for the *Rukun Negara* principles.[26]

There are five principles in the *Rukun Negara*. In fact, it is the first principle – belief in God – that paved the way for the promotion of religious-based ideology in politics. Malaysian historian Khoo Kay Kim, who sat on the committee that drew up the *Rukun Negara*, explained: 'The first principle of belief in God does not mean we have to have a faith but since the majority of Malaysians are religious believers, it was only fair to make it the main tenet of the *Rukun Negara*'.[27]

As mentioned previously, for legal and administrative purposes, all Malays are also legally Muslim. The fact that this is clearly defined in the constitution is a clear result of the Malay-Muslim identity formation and reformation process that began taking place in the 19th century.[28] This was a partial consequence of the battering of the Malay self-esteem by Western colonial rule, and modern colonialism came to be seen as an obstacle to the advancement of the Malays. The would-be reformers, borrowing from reformist and revivalist movements in global Islamic thought at the time, then came to see pagan pre-Islamic Malay traditions as being the other obstacle. The experiences of

being 'Malay' and 'Muslim' have been linked ever since, although there has always been tension in the relationship between the two.[29]

Patricia Martinez discussed a belief amongst some non-Malays that 'Islam is yet another way of continuing Malay hegemony',[30] especially since the lines between ethnicity and religion are not very distinct in Malaysia.[31] Despite the aims of the *Rukun Negara* to create unity, it was clear that politics, and indeed Malaysia as a whole, was remaining 'quintessentially ethnic'.[32]

Indeed, UMNO continued to remain concerned over the potential of Malay voters to swing to PAS. This was perceived as more and more voters wanting to live in an Islamic state.[33] UMNO has often reacted by employing an increasingly Islamic discourse.[34]

The race between UMNO and PAS thus helped trigger another wave of an Islamization of Malay identity beginning in the 1960s, marked by the emergence of student groups such as *Darul Arqam*, the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) once led by the former Deputy Prime Minister and current leader of the Opposition, Anwar Ibrahim, and the National Association of Malaysian Muslim Students (PKPIM). There was increasing criticism of the UMNO-led government's friendly relations with the Western world, and in the 1970s, signs of popular Islamic resurgence began appearing 'in the form of Islamic dress, social norms, modes of communication and Islamic literature.'[35] The Muslim identity tag became more and more prominent, with PAS continuing to position itself as a Muslim-based party as opposed to an ethnic-based one.

However, in spite of this increasing Islamization, it was only in recent years that Badawi, the holder of a university degree in Islamic studies and member of a family of religious scholars, formally introduced the concept of a 'progressive' Islam into the political trajectory, despite the idea of such having been a recurring feature since the 1970s. In the run-up to the 2004 general elections, when Badawi promoted an ideology of *Islam Hadhari* PAS found it hard to respond to his religious rhetoric and background.[36] When the BN coalition won the elections by a landslide, *Islam Hadhari* was viewed as a significant contributor to the electoral success, and Badawi made several speeches on the matter.

Whilst speaking on *Islam Hadhari*, Badawi would often reaffirm his position as the Premier of a multireligious nation, stating, 'I am a Muslim, but I am also a leader of all Malaysians – regardless of their faith'.[37] He would reassure audiences that *Islam Hadhari* 'does not threaten the rights of non-Muslims', saying that his administration had no tolerance for prejudice or discrimination.[38]

Still, *Islam Hadhari* as a concept was often addressed to Malays, and often with overtones of predestination, as exemplified by the following case which he made for the necessity and importance of *Islam Hadhari*:

> By the year 2020, in line with our objective of becoming a developed nation, the Malays must be a people who possess the positive qualities

> that can enable them to be the prime movers of a developed nation. In 2020, the Malays must be a people who are respected, highly educated, skilled, and a people who can stand tall with others. Let us therefore make this our pledge. Arise my people! Go forth and become Malays of strong character, enlightened Malays, skilled Malays, independent Malays, successful Malays, be it as farmer, teacher or poet, trader or businessman, writer or producer, administrator or manager. Arise my people! ... Remember, my people, we must not lose the battle, we must win the war. We seek guidance and enlightenment from Allah in directing us down the path that has received His blessings.[39]

Furthermore, Badawi had more specific ideas about who was to execute *Islam Hadhari* and win this 'war' for the Malays. In his very first speech on *Islam Hadhari* at the UMNO General Assembly of 2004, Badawi also discussed the role that Malaysian youth, in particular Malay Muslim youth, had to play. He discussed the necessity of developing an education system that could mould not only a young progressive adult, but a God-fearing one too. In a remark that sounded reminiscent of the first principle of *Rukun Negara*, Badawi said that 'the young Malaysian must be taught to believe in God, to be of good morally upright character, to uphold family values and to be confident and patriotic'.[40] He further continued, in a speech on *Islam Hadhari*, clearly aimed with Malay Muslim youth in mind:

> The youth… are an invaluable asset with tremendous potential. Their views are very important in formulating national policies. They must be consulted and brought into our discussions at both the planning and implementation levels. They are influential and are crucial to our success. Therefore, we must never sideline or marginalize them when formulating policies for the country. We must include them in all aspects to ensure they understand and involve themselves in our struggle. We must also empathise with their ideals and their aspirations. All parties must be resolute, unwavering and committed in ensuring the success of the agenda to strengthen the Malay race.[41]

Young people, Badawi seems to be saying here, are key to the success of the Malay race. The ethnicised message of *Islam Hadhari* undoubtedly reflects the quintessential ethnicity of Malaysian politics; that is, that *Islam Hadhari* appears to be more about maintaining Malay hegemony, and thus supposedly giving UMNO the upper hand in its rivalry with PAS. For this purpose, the government have clearly targeted the youth, in particular Malay Muslim youth.

Stivens emphasises this in her article on 'moral panics', stating that '"gossip" alleged that the main focus of the moral panic as it unfolded was "Muslim youth"'.[42] It is clear, then, that Muslim youth not only bear the brunt of others' anxieties regarding the consequences of the direction young people take with their lives, but youth also

represent the hopes of those in power, especially evidenced by the special role carved out them by Badawi.

Young people in Malaysia are clearly at a precarious point. As noted earlier, when the results of the March 2008 elections were announced, the BN government expressed surprise, indicating a clear lack of knowledge as to what the electorate was thinking. Young people, as a group which is inadequately represented by the authorities and in scholarly work, are likely to be an important category of Malaysians who may have been misapprehended by UMNO, and therefore, the government as well. The following section seeks to unearth what discourses young-adult Malaysian Muslims are employing in their daily lives, and to describe shifts in ethnic and religious identities, especially in light of the government's efforts to ensure a continuing place for the Malay Muslim identity.

Discourses of Young-Adult Malaysian Muslims

As briefly discussed above, the Malaysian government has, since independence, attempted to govern a multiethnic country and to determine what the roles of young people are in this. Here, I examine the views of some self-identified young-adult Malaysian Muslims, in order to examine how this group of people manage their identities, and what role, if any, they see themselves playing in a Malaysian context.[43] In this section, the interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms that they chose for themselves.

When asked how they would like to be identified, all of the eight interviewees agreed that they would call themselves young adults. All but one interviewee (Natasha) preferred also to be publicly identiied as Muslim. All of the interviewees also said that they identified themselves as Malaysian, for reasons such as the fact they were born here, and/or grew up here, and/or happened to have Malaysian citizenship. Only two interviewees (Roger and Jim) called themselves Malay, although this was more because they tended to look at it as something they had been born into.

Many of the interviewees saw a distinction between race and religion in Malaysia, and were critical of the association between being Malay and Muslim. Indeed, all of them were critical of the Malaysian government, with most of the interviewees arguing that some of the actions undertaken by the Malaysian government that they found fault with were, in fact, against certain tenets of Islam. There was also a consensus established that young people were indeed marginalized in Malaysia.

The interviewees also frequently employed an Islamic discourse when discussing his or her stand on various issues, thus demonstrating the continuing relevance of the faith in their lives. They felt that there was an array of challenges facing young Muslims in both Malaysia and the world today, with all of them feeling that the main challenge is not to fall prey to authoritative depictions and societal expectations – lending support to the idea that the Malaysian government's efforts at nation-building and promoting a national ideology have not been successful, at least as far as urban youth go.

The interviewees discussed with me their thoughts on identity issues, religious, political and social issues in Malaysia, and what role they saw for their individual selves in a Malaysian and global context. Although there were some similarities in their patterns of thought, there was a variety of opinions offered, reflecting the different extent of the use of religious discourses in their everyday lives. It was apparent that the interviewees saw themselves as having dissenting views, and, to one degree or another, saw themselves as being more progressive in that they were generally pushing for greater openness.

Two of the interviewees, Roger, a 26-year-old who runs a tuition centre, and Jim, a 23-year-old medical student at a public university, said being Malay was a part of their identity, but they both considered it more of a technicality than anything else (in fact, for all of the interviewees, matters of ethnicity were almost completely technical in some way or another). Said Jim when explaining his identity as Malay:

> Being Malay is quite difficult to define… But I guess I was raised as a Malay, in Malay custom, like, with people who eat Malay food, practiced Malay styles of living. We practiced Islam. I'm neither Chinese nor Indian, so I guess I would define myself as a Malay.

When asked if being Malay was an important marker of identity to him, Jim replied: 'Not really. Being a true Muslim is more important, to me.'

There were several interviewees for whom ethnicity was not an issue with regards to their identity. Ayu, a 21-year-old design student in a private college, Danny, a 27-year-old photographer, Lara, a 26-year-old housewife, Mahmud, a 23-year-old business student at a private university, Natasha, a 25-year-old graduate who is planning on embarking on a medical degree in Australia, and Sarah, a 21-year-old law student at a public university, did not consider being Malay as an identity marker, although reasons for this differed between individuals.

For instance, for some, this was because matters relating to their ethnicity were not so clear-cut:

> When I say I'm Malaysian and I'm Muslim, people typically think I'm Malay. But I'm not. I'm actually from two ethnic groups in Sabah. My father is Kadazan, and his family was made up more of free-thinkers or Catholics. My mother is Bajau, and they were more Muslim. I get offended when people say I'm Malay – they don't get you could be Chinese but still Muslim. (Ayu)

> I don't fully see myself as just Malay, because I'm not. My Mum is from the States, my Dad is from Pahang (a state in Malaysia). So I'm half-Caucasian. I see myself as Malay or Caucasian depending on the situation. ...Sometimes, it doesn't even occur to me that I'm one or the other. (Danny)

> My father's parents came from Indonesia. My mother has Thai and Chinese blood. So I don't consider myself Malay' (Lara)

Mahmud, meanwhile, said he did not like to think of himself as Malay because he saw a lot of negative associations with being Malay, at one point stating rather artlessly that 'the Malays suck ass':

> Well, I don't want to stereotype, but a lot of people think Malays are lazy… I feel bad saying this. But yeah, a lot of Malays, they stick to their own race. I'm talking about the majority of Malays. They're not punctual. And lazy, maybe. (Mahmud)

Mahmud was not the only interviewee to voice such critical opinions of Malays; there were several interviewees who said there were aspects of being Malay they did not like, echoing attempts to 'supplant forever the emasculated, fatalistic and negligent Malay of the colonial 'lazy native' discourse'[44] and contribute unsuccessfully to the rewriting of the *Melayu baru*, or New Malay.

> It's so politicized – you know, politics shapes your society. Malay culture is very clannish… I blame it on the politicians. I think it's because of UMNO. They're so worried about losing their grip on the Malays, so one of their strategies is fear-mongering.' – Roger

> Malays tend to take things for granted… Especially with the special privileges around. (Jim)

> I find, when I hang out with Malays, that they tend to look down on other races, and make disparaging remarks about their lifestyle choices, the way they dress. (Ayu)

This demonstrates that the association of several negative characteristics with being Malay contributed to interviewees' decisions not to see themselves as Malay. Because of the Malay identity being either unimportant or problematic for them, Malay nationalism did not appear to hold any appeal for them either.

What appeared to be the more important marker of identity for most interviewees, though, was their Islamic faith. Even though some of the interviewees stated that they did not faithfully follow Islamic teachings, all of the interviewees mostly saw being a Muslim in a positive light.

> I don't really live like a Muslim. I drink, I do drugs, I sin. I don't pray. During *Ramadan*, I don't fast the full thirty days. But I still call myself a Muslim. Because I do believe in God. But it's tough because I'm young, and I want to do stuff, and in Islam, there are so many restrictions on what you can do. But if I wasn't a Muslim, I'd probably be a worse person

> than I am now. Because, you know, I don't lie, or hurt other people. (Mahmud)

> Being a Muslim for me is about believing in God, the Prophet, and His teachings… In Islam, you can't drink; you're supposed to fast, and pray five times a day, and I don't. But I believe Islam's more than that. It's more personal, it's between you and God. If I want to be a good person, it doesn't mean I have to abstain from drinking. (Sarah)

The other interviewees also continued with the theme of religion being personal. Furthermore, the importance of the need for an individual to reach out and learn about the religion by themselves was emphasised by many:

> For me, being a Muslim means total submission to God… I decided to learn more about Islam at the beginning of the year, after my brother passed away, so I'm practically quite new. I wasn't a practicing Muslim. I had actually declared myself to not be one, I said I'm not going to be a hypocrite, I don't practice it. But then I wanted to find out more, so I started by reading the Quran… My mother wanted me to see an *ustaz*[45], but I said no, this is my personal journey, I don't want a mediator to tell me what's right and what's wrong, I want to find out myself. I'm trying to be a Muslim now; I started wearing the headscarf recently, after reading the Quran, finding out a few more things. (Lara)

> I define myself as Muslim because I do try to follow the five pillars of Islam, and what I think are correct Islamic principles. I'm always trying to improve my religious knowledge… By reading the Quran, attending talks, and consulting with scholars. As a Muslim, I feel I have a purpose and an objective in life. (Jim)

> I'm beginning to learn that being a Muslim is not so constricting. I feel more liberated than how I was before. When I was in secondary school, the Islam I learn about through the government-approved syllabus at school appeared very bland and boring. It seemed too difficult. But when I got older and more mature, I really wanted to find out more about my identity, so I started to actually learn about the religion. I did look at other religions, but I wanted to give Islam a chance. Plus, I was more exposed to Islamic literature, and started learning. And I suppose I didn't have to look any further because it made sense. (Roger)

Natasha, despite wearing a headscarf and stating that she is a practicing Muslim, was the only interviewee who said she would not publicly identify herself as being a Muslim.

> Most of the time, it (being a Muslim) doesn't become an issue, because people have their own preferences. If it becomes an issue, like if someone were to ask me, then yes, I am a Muslim, but because I see the

> world as we are all entitled to our own opinions and beliefs, that doesn't strike me as something that I need spelt out in my identity. But for me personally, I know I am. (Natasha)

These excerpts demonstrate that although most of the interviewees found the Malay identity marker stifling or irrelevant, their faith was viewed as being of continuing relevance and even empowering. Even Mahmud, who admitted he sometimes found practicing Islam difficult in a modern setting, stated that without his faith, he would be worse off.

When it comes to constructing their identities, the mindset of the interviewees appears to reflect a shift in Malaysian politics and society. UMNO has often worried that it is losing its grip on the Malay vote. This sample of young people, legally classified as Malays, would once have been considered part of the UMNO's electoral constituency. Their revelation that often they either do not consider themselves Malay or, if they do, do not place much emphasis on it, and in fact say that there are many things about being Malay they dislike, provides evidence to partially explain the surprising defeat of the BN coalition in the March 2008 elections.

In fact, further evidence is uncovered relating to political and social issues. Amongst the young people in my survey, there was a consensus that the government was not handling current issues in Malaysia well, with most of the interviewees saying it is time for a change, either in government or within BN, in particular UMNO. When asked to

explain how they justify these views, the interviewees often made use of religious discourse.

The 'bargain', and the special privileges for the Malays, was deemed inappropriate and unnecessary by all of the interviewees:

> As a Muslim, I disagree with the notion of special privileges for the Malays. It's purely on racially-drawn lines, and that's always a step backwards, not forwards…. It doesn't encourage people to compete, to think, and I would say, yes, it's opposed to what, I would say, Prophet Muhammad would have recommended. (Danny)

> I think there's hypocrisy in a person who can call themselves a Muslim but justify that you can have special privileges because you're from a certain group of people. (Lara)

Asked for their opinions on Badawi's *Islam Hadhari* initiative, Ayu and Mahmud said they had never heard of the term. Sarah said she had heard of the ideology, but did not know what it meant. The remainder of the interviewees, however, revealed that they were suspicious, at the very least, of the ideology:

> 'I can appreciate that Badawi might have had good intentions. But I don't see it being particularly effective, or anything new. And anyway, Muslims should strive for excellence without policies. (Jim)

> 'It's rubbish. It's Pak Lah's [the name Badawi is informally known by] way of making a name for himself. I suppose he wanted to bring a moderate and correct image of Islam, but to me, if you follow the principles of Islam, minus the Malay culture, it's moderate enough. (Roger)

All of the interviewees acknowledged some frustration at being, as they felt, inadequately represented and heard in the political process, with Sarah complaining about what she called the 'oppressiveness' of the University & University Colleges Act (UUCA).[46] She noted that she felt it restricted her ability to contribute to Malaysia – which is almost ironic when considering that the Malaysian government very much wants young people to contribute to the country.

> Politicians don't listen to youth… Youth don't think anyone's going to listen, anyway, so they just want to get a degree, start working, take care of their own life, and be done with politicians. So you could also blame youth for not taking enough action, but they probably just think that way because the education system here taught them to think so. (Danny)

> Are young people represented at an official level? You mean besides Khairy Jamaluddin?[47] No! But I'm starting to see young opposition Members of Parliament (MP), like Nik Nazmi,[48] and I like that. (Lara)

These extracts demonstrate that the interviewees were mostly frustrated by the political process in Malaysia, and felt there was little opportunity for dialogue with BN. Nevertheless, most plan to remain residents of Malaysia for the foreseeable future, and believe they will be able to contribute, in some way or another, to Malaysia.

Badawi's grand hopes for young-adult Malaysian Muslims – as articulated in his speeches on *Islam Hadhari* – were clearly not fully subscribed to by the interviewees. Whilst all but one (Ayu) did indeed envision playing a role in the development of the country, for the most part, the focus of the interviewees was on charity, education and advocacy for change rather than on facilitating the advancement and protection of a Malay hegemony. In fact, their ideal roles revolve around making small contributions to bringing about change to a political system that was generally, if not universally, perceived as discriminatory and oppressive.

Overall, the interview data indicates a trend towards transcendence of religion over race amongst young-adult Malaysian Muslims. As noted earlier, none of the interviewees comfortably and unproblematically embraced Malay identity yet all of them did indicate that Islam was still an important part of their lives despite several admissions of an only partial adoption of Islamic practices.[49] Furthermore, the data demonstrates that the

Muslim identity marker is becoming more autonomous of being a Malay. Of particular interest, however, was the way in which the interviewees used an Islamic discourse combined with elements of particularism to reject the Malaysian political framework. Even the way that Islam was propagated by the Malaysian government (for instance, in schools) was criticised using an Islamic discourse. Islam, it was held by the interviewees, is a religion of tolerance and openness. Many of the interviewees put an emphasis on a personal relationship with God rather than rely on 'official' interpretations of Islam; the religious studies module taught in public schools in Malaysia, and the general way religious affairs were dealt with, were for many of the interviewees not reflective of the Islam they practiced.

In 1992 Ernest Gellner wrote of 'an ideology of self-rectification, of purification, of recovery' which he believed had swept over the Muslim world.[50] Evidence that this is continuing is reflected in the data collected, which provides evidence of 'self-rectification' in the very subjective nature of faith expressed by several interviewees. The 'purification' of their faith is reflected in the emphasis on the practice of Islam being about an individual journey and private relationship with God, and the 'recovery' is the use of the Islamic discourse in denouncing what several saw as injustices in Malaysia. Gellner concluded that:

> The world of Islam demonstrates that it is possible to run a modern, or at any rate modernizing, economy, reasonably permeated by the appropriate

> technological, strong, organization principles, *and* combine it with a strong, pervasive, powerfully internalized Muslim conviction and identification.[51]

The responses of the interviewees back this assertion of the continued relevance of Islam; they certainly do not see their Muslim identity as being an obstruction to reconciliation with democracy and modernization in Malaysia.

Conclusion

While this study of the discourses of young-adult urban Malaysian Muslims, taken within the context of political discourses relating to them, is not claimed to be exhaustive or representative, it does indicate that further research is warranted if we are to fully understand the relationship between young-adult Malaysian Muslims and the society in which they live.

From an analysis of the discourses targeting Malay Muslim youth, particularly relating to dissenting views regarding Malay nationalism, it is evident that gaining the support of Malay Muslim youth is viewed as essential to advancing Malay hegemony in Malaysia. The Malay Muslim hegemony which UMNO seeks to expound can only be maintained and advanced through the use of several discourses. These discourses have included the establishment and maintenance of ethnicity as a marker of an individual, and national ideologies such as the *Rukun Negara* and *Islam Hadhari*. However, according to my sample of urban young-adult Malaysian Muslims, the UMNO and others' efforts have been largely unsuccessful. Thus the fluid and often complicated notion of ethnicity

in Malaysia that has been propagated since the country's independence has, may in fact be floundering, in favour of a religious discourse. My limited sample of young-adult Malaysian Muslims are anxious about their allocation to any particular identity label. More specifically, a trend towards rejection of the identity of 'Malay Muslim' was clearly evident, with all of the interviewees finding the identity marker of 'Malay' problematic and instead preferring to focus on a 'Muslim' identity.

Due to the presence of such strong players as UMNO, PAS, ABIM and PKPIM, there is little sign that the Islamization process in Malaysia will slow down. What remains to be seen is if and how and UMNO will find relevancy to urban youth in an arena where those who are feeding an Islamic insurgency insist race does not matter.

Equally important are concerns regarding the manner in which urban youth will respond to the Islamic insurgency itself. Although the interviewees here did hold that religious identity was more important than ethnic identity, they were not uniform in their views on Islamic practice. This is not in line with the contemporary Islamic discourse that is increasingly affecting everyday life in the larger Malaysian society, thus demonstrating that active attempts by urban youth to renegotiatiate ideas of of identity are at play. This itself constitutes evidence that urban Malaysian youth are opposed to playing out the roles that the various political groups would prefer them to take up.[52]

[1] Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, *Islam Hadhari: A Model Approach For Development and Progress*, MPH Group Publishing Sdn Bhd, Kuala Lumpur, 2006, p. 6.

[2] Swee-Hock Saw, 'Population Trends and Patterns in Multiracial Malaysia' in S. H. Saw and K. Kesavapany (eds.), *Malaysia: Recent Trends and Challenges*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2006, p. 19.

[3] Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, *Islam Hadhari*, p. 45,

[4] Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, *Islam Hadhari*, p. 1,

[5] Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, *Islam Hadhari*, p. 28,

[6] Maila Stivens, 'The Hope of the Nation: Moral Panics and the Construction of Teenagerhood in Contemporary Malaysia' in L. Manderson and P. Liamputtong (eds.), *Coming of Age in South and Southeast Asia: Youth, Courtship and Sexuality*, Curzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, 2002, p. 193.

[7] Maila Stivens, 'The Hope of the Nation', p. 190.

[8] Maila Stivens, 'The Hope of the Nation', p. 195.

[9] Edmund Terence Gomez, 'The 2004 Malaysia General Elections: Economic Development, Electoral Trends, and the Decline of the Opposition' in S. H. Saw and K. Kesavapany (eds.), *Malaysia: Recent Trends and Challenges*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2006, p. 85.

[10] Graham K. Brown, 'Federal and state elections in Malaysia', *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4, March 2008, p. 742.

[11] Lorien Holland, 'Malaysia's Political Tsunami', *Newsweek.com*, at:http://www.newsweek.com/id/120325, Accessed 14 November 2008.

[12] Maila Stivens, 'The Hope of the Nation', p. 190.

[13] Robert Stephen Milne, ''National Ideology' and Nation-Building in Malaysia', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 10, No. 7, July 1970, p. 564; Alice M. Nah, 'Negotiating Indigenous Identity in Postcolonial Malaysia: Beyond Being Not quite/Not Malay', *Social Identities*, Vol. 9, No. 4, December 2003, p. 513.

[14] The 'bargain', which is also known as the 'social contract', is, however, not clearly defined; as Mavis Puthucheary notes, 'all we have is the Constitution which itself is ambiguous and has been amended numerous times'. There is a lot of public discourse regarding the 'social contract', 'central to the narrative… is the power-sharing arrangement in which the leaders of the political parties of t he Alliance government set out the rules for the sharing of the nation'. However, after 1969, there was a clear shift in the balance of power from a previously 'more or less equal' position to one that favoured UMNO (the Malay nationalist component party of the BN coalition). UMNO politicians, however, remain vague on the details of the 'bargain', hoping to appeal to both the Malay and the non-Malay electorate. Mavis Puthucheary, 'Malaysia's Social Contract – Exposing the Myth Behind The Slogan', *Project Malaysia*, at:http://www.projectmalaysia.org/2008/09/malaysias-social-contract-exposing-the-myth-behind-the-slogan/all/1/, accessed 14 November 2008.

[15] Alice M. Nah, 'Negotiating Indigenous Identity in Postcolonial Malaysia', p. 513.

[16] Malaysia was formed in 1963, and consisted of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo (today known as Sabah). The Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman had earlier rejected a merger between Malaya and Singapore over concerns that Malays would end up outnumbered by non-Malays;

but the inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak in any merger meant that 'Malays and the "indigenous" races would predominate', the country would expand territorially, and there would be access to valuable economic and natural resources. Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2002, p. 94-95. Relations between UMNO and Singapore ruling People's Action Party (PAP) deteriorated, especially after the PAP's criticism of Malay dominance in Malaysia, and in 1965, Singapore left the Federation of Malaysia. Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia*, p. 54.

[17] Kua Kia Soong, *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969*, Suaram Komunikasi, Petaling Jaya, 2007, p. 1.

[18] Graham K. Brown, 'Making ethnic citizens: The politics and practice of education in Malaysia', *International Journal of Educational Development*, Vol. 27, May 2007, p. 320.

[19] Kua Kia Soong, *May 13*, p. 85.

[20] Graham K. Brown, 'Making ethnic citizens', p. 320.

[21] Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 'Whither Malaysia's New Economic Policy?', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 4, Winter 1990-91, p. 469

[22] Robert Stephen Milne, ''National Ideology' and Nation-Building in Malaysia', p. 563

[23] The pledge of the *Rukun Negara*, in English, is as follows: 'Our Nation, Malaysia is dedicated to: Achieving a greater unity for all her people; maintaining a democratic way of life; creating a just society in which the wealth of the nation shall be equitably distributed; ensuring a liberal approach to her rich and diverse cultural tradition, and building a progressive society which shall be oriented to modern science and technology. 'We, the people of Malaysia, pledge our united efforts, guided by these principles: Belief in God; Loyalty to King and Country; Upholding the Constitution; Sovereignty of the Law, and Good Behaviour and Morality'. myGovernment, 'Rukunegara', *myGovernment: The Malaysia Government's Official Portal*, at:http://www.gov.my/MYGOV/BI/Directory/Government/AboutMsianGov/GovRukunegara, accessed 14 November 2008.

[24] Wan Hamidi Hamid, 'Khoo Kay Kim – The 'lonely bridge builder'', *New Sunday Times*, 19 February 2006.

[25] Tan Yi Liang, 'Oath-speakers proud to speak before dignitaries and nation', *the Sun*, 29 August 2008; Bernama, 'Reciting of Rukun Negara Now A Must At Official Functions', *Malaysian National News Agency: Bernama*, at:http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v3/news.php?id=169573, accessed 14 November 2008.

[26] Bernama, 'PM: Attempts To Creative Negative Perceptions In People Is Treachery', *Malaysian National News Agency: Bernama*, at:http://www.bernama.com/bernama/v3/news.php?id=344389, accessed 14 November 2008.

[27] Wan Hamidi Hamid, 'Khoo Kay Kim – The 'lonely bridge builder''

[28] Farish Noor, 'The One-Dimensional Malay: The Homogenization of Malay Identity in the Revisionist Writing of History in Malaysia', paper presented at the Third Annual Malaysian Studies Conference, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor, 7-8 August 2001.

[29] In his paper, Noor notes the 1970-80s rewriting of Malay history by some scholars to one with a 'decidedly Islamist slant.' The Malay world pre-Islam was presented as a dark one in the midst of an 'intellectual crisis', and the arrival of Islam in the Malay world was backdated as much as possible. In trying to make Islam central to Malay identity, pagan Malayness was often called upon to serve as a counterpoint; 'it denies the Other while calling him back, just to have him dismissed again.' Farish Noor, 'The One-Dimensional Malay'.

[30] Patricia Martinez, 'The Islamic State or the State of Islam in Malaysia', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2001, p. 487.

[31] Another point in the Malay-Muslim identity confusion concerns members of the non-Malay ethnic groups who happen to be Muslim. Since the constitution states that a Malay is someone who is a Muslim, speaks Malay, adheres to Malay customs and is domiciled in Malaysia or Singapore, it is technically possible for a non-Malay who becomes a Muslim to *masuk Melayu*, or become Malay. Indeed, the current Chief Minister of the state of Malacca told a press conference in 1997 that it was 'easy to become Malay', demonstrating the fluid nature of the Malay identity marker. *Daily Express*, 'Easy to become a Malay, says MB', at:http://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news.cfm?NewsID=50538, accessed 30 September 2010.

[32] Graham K. Brown, 'Making ethnic citizens', p. 320.

[33] Patricia Martinez, 'The Islamic State or the State of Islam in Malaysia', p. 483.

[34] The UMNO response to the ability of PAS to appeal to the Malay electorate was not always one of concern; it was initially, in 1957, 'written off as a party of peasants, village elders and backward ulama', though it started to be taken a little more seriously after wins in the states of Kelantan and Terengganu in 1959. The 'Islamization race' started in the 1970s, with UMNO employing more and more Islamic discourse in order to out-Islamize PAS. The Islamization trend shows no sign of receding, since what is viewed as being at stake here is the ability to command the Malay electorate. However, this increased religiosity has often come up against the government's development agenda – hence the need for a discourse on 'progressive' Islam. Farish Noor, 'A Race for Islamization?', *Asiaweek.com*, at:http://www-cgi.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/magazine/2000/0331/nat.viewpoint.html, accessed 14 November 2008. .See also Terence Chong, 'The Emerging Politics of *Islam Hadhari*' in S. H. Saw and K. Kesavapany (eds.), *Malaysia: Recent Trends and Challenges*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2006, p. 35.

[35] Farish Noor, 'The One-Dimensional Malay'; Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, *Islam Hadhari*, p. ix-xi.

[36] Terence Chong, 'The Emerging Politics of *Islam Hadhari*', p. 39.

[37] Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, *Islam Hadhari*, p. 62.

[38] Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, *Islam Hadhari*, p. 61.

[39] Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, *Islam Hadhari*, p. 175-6.

[40] Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, *Islam Hadhari*, p. 28.

[41] Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, *Islam Hadhari*, p. 28.

[42] Maila Stivens, 'The Hope of the Nation', p. 190.

[43] All of the interviewees reside in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur, were between the ages of 21 and 27 at the time of the interview, are legally Bumiputeras (and therefore are eligible for Malay privileges), and have attended and completed or are attending universities, either in Malaysia or in other countries. The interviewees were recruited by sending a Call for Participants to the mailing lists of local Muslim youth groups.

[44] Maila Stivens, 'The Hope of the Nation', p. 192.

[45] Male religious teacher.

[46] The University & University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA) prohibits students from affiliating with any society, political party, trade union or organization without the written approval of the vice-chancellor. Students can be suspended should they go against any of these prohibitions. SUARAM, *Malaysia Human Rights Report 2006*, Suaram Komunikasi, Petaling Jaya, 2007, p. 76.

[47] Khairy Jamaluddin is deputy head of UMNO's Youth wing, and is also married to Badawi's only daughter; he has been accused of dubious behaviour in the past, with one accusation by Mahathir that Jamaluddin was meddling in cabinet affairs. Hannah Beech, 'Not the Retiring Type', *TIME Asia Magazine*, at:http://www.time.com/time/asia/covers/501061106/story.html, accessed 14 November 2008

[48] At 26 years of age, Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad was, at the time of the interview, the youngest Member of Parliament (MP) in Malaysia. Malaysiakini, '2008 polls – interesting facts', at:http://malaysiakini.com/news/79575, accessed 14 November 2008

[49] Even in the event that a young-adult Malaysian Muslim decided they would no longer be a Muslim, Malaysia's laws on apostasy and leaving Islam – and therefore Malayness – render such a decision unlikely to ever be legally recognised. In recent times, the case of Lina Joy has served as an example of this: Joy was born to Malay Muslim parents, but her application to have her conversion to Christianity legally recognized was denied. Joshua Neoh, 'Islamic State and the Common Law in Malaysia: A Case Study of Lina Joy', *Global Jurist*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2008.

[50] Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 20.

[51] Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, p. 22.

[52] This article is draws heavily from Dahlia Martin, *Religious Discourses of Young-Adult Malaysian Muslims*, Honours Thesis, Monash University, 2008.