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A curious trajectory of interracial relations: the transformation of cosmopolitan Malay port polities into the multiethnic divisions of modern Malaysia

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This article aims to examine several interrelated issues pertaining to the historical development of pluralism in areas forming today's Malaysia. Firstly, it intends to analyze the transformation of the formerly cosmopolitan populations of Malay port polities into the highly 'racialized' society of modern Malaysia. It also seeks to clarify the roots of ethnicity-based issues and relations in the country. Lastly, it attempts to challenge the very concept of Malaysia as a society primarily consisting of three ethnic pillars, dominated by the Malays, and 'complemented' by the Chinese and the Indians. I argue that the main driving force behind these tensions is the segregational colonial policies and the postcolonial arrangements of the Malay ethnocentrist governments, rather than ethnic and cultural factors as the ruling politicians tend to stress. I also contend that religious issues, especially those stemming from the dakwah movement, are gradually becoming an increasingly important factor in interracial strife.

Keywords: acculturation; racialization; ethnicization; ethnic paradigm; flexible ethnicity; *bumiputera*; *mestizo* culture; *Peranakan*; ethnonationalism; Islamization

Introduction

Modern Malaysia represents a unique multiethnic and multicultural society, which is a result of historical processes that (have) created conditions favorable for great ethnic and linguistic plurality, resulting in ethnic mixing, accompanied by intense acculturation or even cultural hybridization. Throughout this interaction, facilitated primarily but not solely by maritime trade, numerous communities have gradually adopted new identities, which has in the long run enabled the evolution of new, *mestizo* cultures and subcultures. This characteristic feature has become one of the hallmarks of Malaysian society. However, due to a range of factors including policies implemented by the British colonial masters and postcolonial ethnocentrist governments, a complex process of intense ethnicization and later politicization of race has determined the ethnic paradigm in Malay(sia), deeply entrenched in the political system to this day. It is a well-known and much-analyzed fact that this paradigm, based on several constitutional articles, which prioritize the Malays and other indigenous peoples, has had a rather negative influence on the overall state of interethnic relations in the country. Furthermore, these racial policies affect negatively the position and future development of some communities of hybrid ancestry and/or multiple identities, which

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endangers the cultural diversity of Malaysia. It may also be argued that the existing racial policies represent a major hindrance to the country's social and economic progress for one of its consequences is a continual brain drain, which has seen hundreds of thousands of skilled and educated non-*bumiputera* Malaysians leave the country in the 30 past years in search for more equal opportunities.¹

On the other hand, despite evident drawbacks of those policies, modern Malaysia has simultaneously achieved a degree of interethnic harmony. What is specifically meant by the word 'harmony' here is not a perfect society but one that allows for viable, nonviolent coexistence of various ethnic groups largely because the Malaysian state is in many ways functional, politically stable and economically prosperous. It also needs to be acknowledged that the largest non-Malay communities – the ethnic Chinese and Indians – are provided with a great autonomy in the educational sector, particularly in the form of vernacular schools, and generally, by being able to realize their cultural aspirations, in spite of being politically discriminated against. In other words, Malaysia has succeeded in avoiding large-scale ethnic conflicts that have been plaguing Indonesia, Myanmar and other neighboring countries. This may be viewed as a major achievement but the voice of numerous nongovernmental media, transethnic oppositional political parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) presents a contrary picture – one showing dissatisfaction with the official race paradigm, calling for a departure from it, while promoting 'non-racialized politics' and 'trans-ethnic solidarity' (cf. Milner, Embong, and Yean, 2014). That is why I argue that some groups' insistence on the 'racial interests' in a country where virtually everyone is to some degree of mixed ancestry is irrelevant, backward and counterproductive in terms of creating a viable, truly multicultural and just Malaysia.

In line with this, one of the aims of this article is to analyze why, how and under what circumstances have once spontaneously cosmopolitan populations of Malay port polities transformed into the highly 'racialized' and religion-divided society that constitutes modern-day Malaysia. What I am trying to pursue in this article is to present an attempt, perhaps somewhat bold, at the macro-history of the ethnic interaction in the Malay World. I shall seek, by probes into the long span of Malaysian history, to clarify the roots of current ethnicity-based issues and relations in this country. Lastly, I will also try to challenge the oft-promoted concept of Malaysia as a society consisting primarily of three major ethnic pillars, dominated by the Malays, and 'complemented' by the Chinese and the Indians, for it is partially ignorant not only of some minor, albeit officially 'acknowledged' ethnic groups but especially of liminal communities existing on the fringes or 'in-between'.²

Background

It is commonly contended that, thanks to their strategic position along the major trade routes, the coasts and ports of Southeast Asia have been exposed for millennia to the influx of intense waves of foreign cultures, technologies, religions, philosophical concepts and languages. This is arguably even more valid with regard to the 'heartland' of the region – the Malay peninsula and the adjacent areas of Sumatra across the Malacca strait, which, as a result, was to become one of the cultural and ethnolinguistic crossroads of the Eastern hemisphere. This development naturally gave rise to highly cosmopolitan mercantile port polities,³ such as Kedah, Melaka, Patani, Tenasserim, Mergui, Penang and Tumasik (now Singapore) on or near the Peninsula, as well as Makassar, Banten, Kutaraja

(today's Banda Aceh), Palembang and Brunei elsewhere in the archipelago, sites where seafarers from dozens of countries would gather to exchange goods and ideas. Many of them settled temporarily or permanently, intermarrying with local women, thus adding to the cultural and ethnolinguistic mosaic and creating new identities.

However, this initial, precolonial plurality of the Peninsula – Zawawi defines it as 'precolonial pluralism'⁴ – was not solely preconditioned by external/extraregional factors. This long stretch of land pointing South would still have been ethnically highly pluralistic, given the diversity of its original populations since it had been inhabited by a great variety of ethnolinguistic groups from time immemorial: the indigenous *orang asli*,⁵ themselves quite diverse genetically and ethnolinguistically, Hinduized early 'Malays', the sea-oriented *orang laut*⁶ (also speaking a Malayic language), the Mons in Tenasserim, numerous groups of settlers from the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, and, from the twelfth century onwards, the Thais, who pushed in from the north.⁷

The first migrants from outside the region to enrich the indigenous populations were merchants, princes, religious proselytizers and itinerant students from the Indian subcontinent and China. Settlers from areas of modern-day India sparked the much-debated process, which is frequently referred to as the 'Indianization' or 'Hinduization' of Southeast Asia. Not only did they introduce attractive goods and sophisticated technology, but also novel and appealing cosmological concepts encapsulated in the form of Indic religions, namely Brahmanism, as well as Hinduism and Buddhism during later periods. At that time, the Chinese influence was mainly present in the form of trade and a degree of political hegemony that China enjoyed over the *Nanyang* or the 'Southern Ocean', which involved a sort of tributary system, thus securing stability within the sea lanes to emporia-type thalassocracies such as Sriwijaya, heavily reliant on sea trade.

Later on, waves of Arabs, Persians, Tamils, Gujeratis and Bengalis followed, bringing a new, more egalitarian religion – Islam, which gradually found great appeal among the commerce-oriented communities of the harbor principalities, in both the Peninsula and the whole Malay-Indonesian archipelago. While, as a rule, major seaports around the world tend to be cosmopolitan, the coastal mercantile centers of the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, being the crossroads of the Maritime Silk Road, showed an exceptional degree of plurality. The trading, cultural and ethnolinguistic exchange of all Asian maritime 'ethnies' from a wide stretch of the Asian continent between the Middle East and East Asia, numbering almost one hundred, created an interactive multicultural foundation in the littoral of modern-day Malaysia, Southern Thailand and Western Indonesia.

On top of this, there were waves of migrants from across the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, who continually enriched the already colorful mosaic in the Malay Peninsula. Migrants of Javanese, Minangkabau, Mandailing, Acehnese, Bawean and Bugis origin not only became the ancestors of today's Malaysians in general, but their descendants have over time amalgamated into what is called *bangsa Melayu* (the Malay nation-race), the ethnically and politically dominant ethnic group/race in Malaysia, thus making the complexity of Malay/Malaysian identity even greater.⁸

Although it is not the intention of this article to focus on the issue of Malay identity per se but rather on the diachronic trajectory of ethnic plurality and interracial relations in the Malay world and most specifically in Malaysia, it makes sense to touch on the curious evolution of the multiple hybrid nature of some segments of Malaysian society, including the Malays themselves. Zawawi Ibrahim explains that cultural plurality in both the indigenous and nonindigenous communities in the region was 'accentuated by the layering of the great traditions of Hinduism⁹ and Islam on the region's initial animistic base'.¹⁰

As Zawawi further points out, this kind of plurality was ‘fluid and evolving’.¹¹ The cultural and ethnolinguistic situation in the Malay Peninsula itself, nowadays divided between three modern states, is so complex that this stretch of land has been labeled a ‘plural peninsula’ by various scholars.¹²

Similarly ‘fluid’, ‘elusive’, ‘flexible’ and ‘evolving’ was and to this day is the very concept of *Melayu*. Being *Melayu* or Malay evolved to be a broad cultural space for negotiating ethnic identity in the areas along both shores of the Straits of Melaka. The term most probably owes its origin to the kingdom of Malayu in Southeastern Sumatra, which was later annexed by the mighty Sriwijaya. Also, as an ethnonym, Malayu referred to its inhabitants and people living in its vicinity, including Sriwijaya, where the Malay language was spoken. As the Malays of Eastern Sumatra were one of the most influential among the early communities with a shared ethnolinguistic identity in the Straits, due to their prominent role in the international trade, ethnicization of other groups followed. The Malays gradually settled along both coasts of the straits. From the fifteenth century onwards, this ethnonym became to be used for the populations on the Malay Peninsula of Sumatran *Melayu* ancestry.¹³ Before that, the people of Peninsular Malaysia would typically refer to themselves in local terms meaning ‘human’, ‘man’ or ‘person’ or by emphasizing their place of residence, such as *orang bukit* (people of the hill), *orang laut* (people of the sea) or *orang Krau* (people of Krau).¹⁴ Most of these communities mixed with the Malay and Minangkabau migrants from Sumatra, gradually creating the foundation of what is now termed in *bangsa Melayu* (the Malay nation-race). Leonard Andaya explains that the name *Melayu* (in his version *Malayu*) itself has been associated with a language, a culture, a regional group, a polity and a local community.¹⁵ As we shall see from later historical development clarified in the following, due to the strong association of Malayness with Islam, we should add that since the fifteenth century onwards it also has stood for a socioreligious identity.

Today, it is generally acknowledged that the Malays belong to native populations of five Southeast Asian countries: in addition to Malaysia and Indonesia (Sumatra, Kalimantan) they also form the populace of Brunei Darussalam, Singapore and Southern Thailand. Altogether the Malay-speaking lands of these states form a cultural area known as the Malay World or *Alam Melayu*. It may be argued that Malayness in some form or other has become the ‘core culture’ of three countries of the Malay World – Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam. It is typically seen as a cultural complex centered in the language called *Melayu*. This is at least the language all the three modern states chose as their national language, whose respective forms (*bahasa Malaysia*, *bahasa Indonesia*, *bahasa Melayu*)¹⁶ have become almost the sole medium of education, and ‘thereby the social cement intended to hold their respective societies together’.¹⁷

However, only in contemporary Malaysia the term *bangsa Melayu* is applied, whereas in the other countries the Malays are categorized as an ethnic group – e.g. in Indonesia the Malays are regarded as *suku bangsa* (ethnic group), not a nation or a nation-race (*bangsa*) with an officially entrenched position, as is the case in Malaysia.

A location resp. polity supremely connected with Malay identity was the Melaka Sultanate. This oft-cited example of a mercantile harbor principality was at the height of its power during the fifteenth century until the Portuguese takeover in 1511. At that time, the port city of Melaka was host to traders and seafarers who allegedly spoke 84 languages of Asian, Middle Eastern and East African origin.¹⁸ They took to the seas in order to conduct trade there, attracted by the favorable conditions created by the sultanate. Many of the merchants and sailors settled there for a period of time (awaiting the right monsoon winds to carry them back home) or decided to stay on. A number of those who

chose Melaka as their new homeland continued conducting trade or became important administrators of the port or even governmental officials, marrying Malay and other local women and integrating into the local society, in the process introducing cultural, religious and linguistic inputs of their own. These mixed marriages were absolutely necessary for the foreigners for several reasons – first, naturally, for the sake of starting a family since there were virtually no female settlers from their original country, and, secondly, to gain a foothold in the recipient society.

When the Portuguese gained control of Melaka in 1511, their chronicler Tomé Pires recorded how the sultanate's *kerajaan*¹⁹ classified foreigners in the harbor city into four categories, each reporting to their particular *syahbandar* (harbormaster):

- (1) Gujeratis
- (2) South Indians, Pegu, Pasai
- (3) Javanese, Malukans, Banda, Palembang, Tanjungpura, Luzon
- (4) Chinese, Ryukyu, Chancho and Champa.²⁰

As is evident from this division, these communities originated from both outside and inside the archipelago, but the *Malayos*, as the Portuguese termed the Malays, were not listed in this categorization, which suggests that 'they were not regarded as a category outside Melaka itself'.²¹ The Iberians did, however, use the term to describe merchants conducting trade in more distant places such as China or the Maluku, by which they meant traders connected to the ruling class of Melaka.²² As hinted earlier, many *Malayos* of Melaka were not solely Malays originating from the Peninsula. Given the location and history of Melaka, it is apparent that many were descendants of settlers from the whole adjacent archipelago, including former Majapahit Javanese, who had become the Javanese of Melaka (a sub-ethnic group in its own right), or of mixed Malay-Javanese origin. To use the words of the fabled Malay navigator and warrior, Hang Tuah, 'the Melaka people seem to be bastardised Malays [*Melayu kacokan*], mixed with the Javanese from Majapahit'.²³ While today such an expression would be considered as politically incorrect and even racist, he allegedly used it to appease people from the Sumatran area called Kampar who felt inferior before him because they were not 'real Malays', and by saying this, he also demonstrated that 'racial purity' was not an issue in Melaka. As a matter of fact, one of the most important principles holding together the society of the Melaka Sultanate and other Malay kingdoms was loyalty (*kesetiaan*) of the people – *rakyat* – to the ruler, not their ancestry. It is a well-known fact that within the *kerajaan* system, the subjects whether indigenous or foreign ancestry were seen as equal and equally valuable.²⁴

This was, however, only one part of the assimilative processes in the Sultanate of Melaka at that time, which were both complex and multifaceted. The intense trading and ethnic interaction associated with the harbor city and other coastal principalities, some of which resulted from intermarriage, included merchants from outside the region, and this brought about a higher degree of cultural hybridization than, say, in communities of Malay-Javanese origin. Such exchanges naturally led to the rise of completely new cultural forms, some of which were later to become typical features of these new, *mestizo* communities. The usual pattern was that foreign males married local spouses, of Malay or other Malayo-Indonesian ancestry, and later the daughters from these mixed marriages. The most notable representatives of such communities were the *Jawi Peranakan*²⁵ (people of mixed Malay and Punjabi/Bengali/Arab/Persian or Afghani descent) and the *Babas* (also known as *Baba Nyonya*), a highly Malayized Chinese community of Melaka and Penang.

While ancestors of many of the original Melaka Chinese were typical maritime traders of the time, a great number of the crew from Admiral Zheng He's²⁶ massive fleets also added to the diverse mosaic of Melaka's population. Despite the semi-legendary nature of some of the China-Melaka histories, such as the marriage of the Sultan Mansur Shah (1459–1477) to the Chinese princess Hang Li Po,²⁷ it is more than clear that the Chinese represented a strong presence in the Malay-Indonesian waters as well as in the Indian Ocean. They also contributed to the process of Islamization of Southeast Asia, notably Melaka and the north coast of Java, since many of the Chinese sailors, including Zheng He himself, were Muslims.²⁸ As the Indonesian scholar of Islamic histories in Southeast Asia, Hamka, concludes, 'The development of Islam in Indonesia and Malaya is intimately related to a Chinese Muslim, Admiral Zheng He.'²⁹ However, this statement needs to be regarded with a certain caution, for, on the one hand, many Indonesian and Malaysian historians tend to downplay the contribution of Chinese Islam in Nusantara, clearly underlining the Middle Eastern connection, while on the other, some Western and Chinese (including Malaysian Chinese³⁰) academics are in favor of the Zheng He theory. Be that as it may, apparently only a part but not a majority of the early Chinese migrants who settled in Malaya including Melaka were Muslims. It is therefore likely that the not-so-large community of Chinese Muslim settlers gradually assimilated into the Malay Muslim majority. But this is certainly not true about the *Babas* and *Nyonyas* of Melaka and Penang, who despite becoming Malayized to a degree, including the loss of the command of the Chinese language, never became Muslims and Malays, retaining distinctive Chinese cultural and religious elements.

The complexity of this cultural and ethnic blending goes even further as many of the Javanese and 'Luzons' of Melaka also appear 'to have been partly descended from the Chinese' who arrived at the time of Zheng He's fleets.³¹ In addition, a number of Arabs, Persians, (Persianate) Gujeratis, Tamils and other South Indians, as well as minor groups such as the Chams and Ryukyuan, after 1511 followed by the Portuguese, all made their substantial contributions to the culture and gene pool of the Malay World. Thus, unsurprisingly, the massive degree of racial assimilation and integration that took place especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries laid a powerful foundation for the modern state of Malaysia, being both a salad bowl and a melting pot for nations and ethnic groups from vast littoral areas spanning from West Asia to the Far East.

This colorful mix of peoples was at first perceived as the people of Melaka – i.e. people loyal to the sultan of Melaka, not only Malays per se, although the idiom *cara Melayu* usually meant the 'ways of Melaka'³² at that time. It is apparent, however, that over the following decades the term *Melaka* gradually became interchangeable with *Melayu*. On the other hand, while Melaka was connected with a particular place, *Melayu* acquired a much broader and more flexible connotation, which was, paradoxically, a partial consequence of a rather tragic event affecting the heart of the Malay world – the Portuguese conquest of Melaka in 1511.

Uncomfortable with the changed conditions and attitudes imposed by the new Catholic masters of the harbor city, most of the Muslim inhabitants and traders including half-caste Javanese, Bugis, Chinese, Indians, Persians and Malays decided to leave this major Asian trading hub and disperse across the archipelago. Thus, while Melaka saw a degree of decline with the onset of the Portuguese era, those who left it brought a new level of prestige and prosperity to a number of ports, stretching from Kutaraja (Banda Aceh) to Palembang to Banten to Makassar. Speaking Malay either as their first or second language and having embraced Islam, they simply became Malays,³³ whatever their real ethnic origins had been. This statement may be clarified by the fact that conversion to

Islam usually represented not only a religious shift but also an adoption of a complex sociocultural identity. This pattern is well-known by the age-old idiom *masuk Melayu* (literally ‘entering Malayness’), which in other words meant that by having converted to Islam one also embraced distinctive customs of the ‘Malays’ including diet, clothing style, leisure, architecture etc.

This religio-cultural change became evident as these mobile Malay-speaking Muslim cosmopolitans moved around the archipelago upon their dispersion from Melaka. As they were moving from the Melaka ‘metropolis’ to the ‘periphery’ of the Malay World, they also helped spread the court and trading culture of Melaka to places such as Siak, Riau, Kampar, Indragiri, Sukadana, Banjarmasin and even Bima in distant Sumbawa. By doing so, they contributed to the rise of Malay-Melaka type sultanates where Malay would be used as the official language of the court as well as the contact trading language. Nevertheless, it needs to be emphasized that their identity typically continued to be hybrid or crossbred, or, more precisely, multiple – they were Malays in the eyes of the locals or on specific occasions, while still retaining their bonds of solidarity with and preserving specific aspects of their original ethnic community. Inspired by their wealth and style, great portions of the local populations of these sultanates followed suit.

In sum, in the period after the fall of Melaka, the notion of Malayness developed in a two-fold manner: to claim lines of lineage of kingship or descent from Sriwijaya and Melaka; secondly, to refer to the pluralistic diaspora across Nusantara that retained and further spread Melaka-Malay language, customs and trade practices.³⁴ Again, this demonstrates the open, fluid and flexible nature of the oft-discussed category known as Malayness, which no longer referred solely to ethnicity or ancestry but has become a sociocultural construct, which served as a marker of someone who was Muslim, habitually spoke Malay and followed Malay customs whatever his or her origin.³⁵

In line with that, the *Peranakan* or other ‘Malayized’ communities were thus simultaneously Chinese and Malay, or Arab and Malay, or Indian and Malay, or Bugis and Malay, since they, almost a rule, ‘easily straddled ethno-linguistic-cultural boundaries’.³⁶ Such was the essence of the initial, precolonial, pluralism of the Malay world, one that facilitated the existence of such crossbred, hybrid entities. This was a clear projection of what the historian Wang Gungwu called ‘coastal pluralism’, typical of the port towns across Maritime Southeast Asia of that era, which engendered a mind-set of respect and tolerance amongst both locals and traders.³⁷

This relaxed fluidity of ethnic and other boundaries is also well reflected in the apt term coined by Hefner, i.e. ‘flexible ethnicity’.³⁸ As has been widely described and analyzed, this social pattern worked well for several centuries in Southeast Asia, continuing throughout the ‘Age of Commerce’.³⁹ Nevertheless, it was to change drastically with the onset of British colonial rule. When reflecting on the intense interaction between different races, ethnic groups, religions and languages in the western parts of the Malay World, Robert Hefner also proposes the term ‘canopied pluralism’, mirroring the pluralistic situation in which ‘rather than being harshly opposed, ethnic identities appear to have been ‘canopied’ by a trans-ethnic sense of the Malayo-Indonesian civilization’.⁴⁰ Ethnicity among the Malayo-Indonesian peoples was thus changeable and fluid while other Asians and early Europeans seem to have integrated easily into local society.⁴¹ As already clarified earlier, this process gave rise to numerous hybrid identities and *mestizo* cultures, ranging from the *Peranakan* Chinese, to the *Peranakan Jawi* and *Mamak* (Indian Muslim), to the Catholic Portuguese-speaking Eurasian *Kristang* people, to the mixed Siamese-Malay communities of Kedah, and to the politically influential Bugis-Malay, to name only the most significant groups. This hybridity was mainly the result of mixed

marriage alliances, which might at times have served pragmatically to create kinship ties or even as a means of spreading one's religion, language and culture, as was the main motive of the Portuguese.

Furthermore, these wedding alliances contributed not only to the spread of Islam among the Malays and other Malayo-Indonesian peoples but also as in the case of conquered areas (e. g. Kedah, then a tributary state of Siam) where noble daughters were offered as brides to the royals in the dependencies, to a strengthening of the bonds between the suzerain and the vassals, thus unifying ethnic diversity in the region. However, one must not assume, despite the willingness to cross ethnic borders, that no notion of ethnocentrism existed at all. The belief in the superiority of one's own people and culture was apparently present in the Malay World, too, although it did not rule out 'the absorption of subject peoples'⁴² and immigrants in general.

This long-lasting phase of fluid, flexible ethnicities and cross-cultural hybridization was to alter significantly in the latter half of the nineteenth century due to several reasons. One cause seems to have been that the new generation of Chinese, Indian, Arab and European immigrants, who were arriving in even larger numbers than had previously been the case and who began to dominate major commercial activities, made less of an attempt 'to assimilate to local culture'.⁴³ The other reason for change was that the pattern of migration to Malaya had also changed substantially. The spontaneous settlements of the premodern and early modern eras, which had been the product of long-standing maritime trade, were now replaced by large-scale economically driven immigration to fulfill the needs of the colonial-state's capitalist machinery. It is a well-known fact that it was the British who brought or invited thousands of Chinese and Indians to the then emerging British Malaya in the late nineteenth century in order to solve shortages in the workforce, especially in the hinterland of the Peninsula. The aim was for these migrants to work in tin mines and rubber plantations. Before that, in the early nineteenth century, the relatively small Malay population was mostly situated in the few fertile rice-growing regions of the peninsula,⁴⁴ while the majority of the population was concentrated in the highly cosmopolitan harbor cities of Penang, Melaka and Singapore, administered as the Straits Settlements.

However, the relative labor shortage was not the only reason behind the colonial-state-sponsored migration to Malaya, as the British could have theoretically used at least some of the native population to open up the vast stretches of a land plentiful in natural resources. As Christopher Yeoh explains, the British decided on a different option, being unwilling to teach the necessary skills to the Malays,⁴⁵ for 'the political costs of these skills would have been high', the less expensive solution being 'to import hundreds of thousands of Indian and Chinese nationals in support of the colonial enterprise'.⁴⁶ Yeoh adds that the British feared that the 'Malays would learn to master the trade and might revolt against their colonial masters'.⁴⁷ Simply put, it was both a bid to control the local population and to stimulate capitalist enterprises.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, it is both widely claimed and accepted that this great wave of Chinese and Indian immigration to the Malay Peninsula thoroughly altered the nature of the Malayan/Malaysian ethnocultural landscape. Although it is correct in the demographic sense, this notion sometimes creates the impression that cultural, religious and ethnolinguistic pluralism in the Peninsula only commenced with the onset of British colonial expansion, which is the very opposite of the truth, as has been explained above. Yet, it was indeed the British whose actions initiated a new epoch, which Yeoh and Zawawi identically define as 'colonial pluralism',⁴⁹ a term inspired by John Furnivall's notion of 'plural societies' when referring to the experience of colonial empires at their apex.

The main reason for such a shift was that the situation and attitude of the Chinese and Indians who came to British Malaya in the latter half of the nineteenth century also differed substantially from the previous settlers. Those born on the Peninsula (*peranakan*) naturally considered Malaya to be their homeland and showed a degree of assimilation into the local Malay community, often choosing not to speak Chinese but rather a Malay patois (Baba Malay). These new *gastarbeiters* from China and India, however, regarded themselves as 'transients' or 'birds of passage'⁵⁰ and had no intention of assimilating.⁵¹ They were 'aliens' with no or few plans to make Malaya their new home, primarily aiming to make a substantial amount of money and return to their native lands. That is why, as Tregonning points out, 'they felt little necessity to adapt themselves in any way to their temporary environment, and conscious of their difference they kept apart from their fellow inhabitants of the peninsula'.⁵² This a priori non-assimilative attitude among most migrants is one of the crucial factors leading to later tensions and conflicts along ethnic lines for '[it] would not have mattered had they left the Malay Peninsula but an increasing number stayed on and by settling they contributed to the interracial problem'.⁵³ They themselves created and/or were made to create their 'enclave communities'⁵⁴ in accordance with their own customs, thus discouraging assimilation. This strategy was not only approved of but also actively promoted by the British. In addition, the respective ethnic-based migrant communities were assigned to work in different milieus – the Chinese, as a rule, in the tin mines, while the Indians were engaged on the rubber estates, leaving rice production to the Malays, thus almost completely preventing the previous intense levels of interracial interaction, a hallmark of the cosmopolitan harbor cities and adjacent coastal areas.

This is, however, a rather conventional view, based on the idea that 'assimilation between the indigenous Malay population and the descendants of immigrants from China and India was always a remote possibility'.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, in Hwang's view the much-discussed 'remote possibility' of integration was further enhanced by other crucial factors, namely a number of 'fundamental socio-cultural differences' between the ethnic groups, especially the Malays and the Chinese. One major obstacle to assimilation was language. For reasons explained earlier, the immigrant communities retained their respective mother tongues, which naturally hindered integration. In addition, there was a high degree of diversity among immigrants originating from the same country, which created a complex web of subcommunities, which tended to 'continue to speak the language or dialect of their original provinces in China and India'⁵⁶ such as Hakka, Hokkien, Cantonese, or Tamil, Punjabi, Urdu or Sindhi, respectively. This posed another challenge to the wider-scale implementation of linguistic assimilation. Thus, unsurprisingly, the census of 1957 revealed that only 3% of Chinese aged 10 and over and only 5% of Indians in the same age category were capable of writing in the Malay language, while only 46% of the Malays were literate in Malay.⁵⁷

Sociocultural and religious differences became another major obstacle to assimilation. Religion posed and still represents a great cultural and legal barrier between particular communities, especially as some interpretation of Islam do not allow Muslims to marry non-Muslims, which makes assimilation for Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian Chinese virtually impossible. At the same time, Taoism and Confucianism in particular tend to be rather Sinocentric, which seems to present a similar, yet reverse hindrance to integration.

The previous immigration waves had not faced this type of problem since the nature of Islam in the Malay world in the fifteenth century was, apparently, less restrictive than, say, from the nineteenth century onwards, and also, hardly all local population of the

Peninsula and the Archipelago had converted to Islam by then, so there was still abundance of non-Muslim brides.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the ethnoreligious ties during the early years of commercial activity tended not to be as strong as they would become during the ensuing centuries, which saw ethnoreligious associations (particularly in the late colonial and postcolonial era) become more intense and pronounced. In other words, in the late colonial period, when the ethnoreligious differences began to play a greater role in the plural colonial society, religious identity brought about other, secondary problems including the dietary restrictions of the respective creeds. As a result, mutual antipathies were not uncommon since the Chinese were consumers of pork while for Muslim Malays this was not only *haram*, and therefore forbidden, but actually viewed as a disgusting practice. By the same token, Indian Hindus do not eat beef, while the Chinese have practically no food taboos.

Furthermore, it was also the leading role of the so-called secret societies (*kongsi*), which was to reduce the chance of Chinese integration into Malay society. *Kongsi* were illegal or semi-legal, closed or semi-closed in nature, and mostly organized along dialect and/or origin lines, which prevented further interaction with other ethnic groups except in the marketplace. Important, too, were the early secret society and commercial rivalries, the language and dialect distinctions, the China-born and the local-born differences, the divisions according to education, the disagreements about political ideologies and, more recently, the differences in political party affiliations. All these divisions have been important at one time or another and have all contributed to Malayan Chinese political ideas.

However, the deeply established and widespread notion of the supposedly inevitable frictions between ethnic communities as being the main cause of Malaya's 'race problem' was to be challenged and countered, *inter alia*, by the American sociologist Charles Hirschman, whose seminal essay of 1986 has since become a much-cited text on pluralism and the roots of the racial problem in Malaya /Malaysia. Firstly, he argued that 'a constant – the primordial bond of ethnicity – cannot serve to explain a variable'.⁵⁹ Instead, he claimed that the twentieth-century structure of 'race-relations' of Peninsular Malaysia was 'largely a product of social forces engendered by the expansion of British colonialism of the late nineteenth century'.⁶⁰ His analysis takes into consideration both the unstable demographic balance among populations of divergent cultures caused by the British unrestricted immigration policy in Malaya and their *divide et impera* style of governance that 'sowed mistrust among the Malays, Chinese and Indian populations'.⁶¹

Although Hirschman does acknowledge the existence of ethnic divisions and stereotypes prior to the high colonial era, he confirms the patterns of acculturation, and even assimilation, before the onset of the direct European political impact on the politics of Malaya, i.e. the introduction of European 'racism', which drastically diminished, though not completely ended, ethnic mixing and cultural hybridization. He even goes as far as to compare the top-down instigated, or at least artificially enhanced, segregation of Malays, Chinese and Indians to the situation in the United States, where 'racial categories were a cultural byproduct of the coercive labor system of early American plantations'.⁶² Though the development and milieu of Southeast Asian societies was very different from the North American experience, I would agree with Hirschman that different skin colors, cultural elements and creeds were of 'lesser importance than the exploitative institutional framework'.⁶³ In Malaya's case, it was a political-economic one, and it may be argued that it had a pivotal impact on how the notions of 'race' and ethnicity were (newly) defined and exploited.

To sum up, the British redefined the terms of pluralism in Malaya by taking cognizance of ethnic divisions and assigning the various ethnic groups to specialized (and therefore often isolated) positions in society.⁶⁴ Speaking of the British, in addition to their intense commercial, political and social engineering activities, they also took a deep academic interest in the cultural and ethnic situation in Malaya, and the production of colonial knowledge may still serve as a valuable source of information about the circumstances in the country in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, although this is intended rather as a small anecdotal detour, some findings of the 'racial science' might actually cause a deep shock to Malay ethnonationalist politicians of today. That is to say, early colonial British scholars such as John Leyden and William Marsden differentiated *non-autochthonous* Muslim Malays, inhabiting mostly the coastal areas, from the *autochthonous* non-Muslim populations, living in the hinterland (*orang asli*). In other words, Leyden and Marsden identically regarded Malays as nonindigenous⁶⁵ – or *non-bumiputera*, to use the idiom so cherished by Malay ethnocentrists. As many of them were of Sumatran, Javanese or other archipelagic ancestry, the scholars might have had a point there.

Back to ethnic rivalries of the late nineteenth century, it is important to note that these rivalries did not always work along ethnic lines, which was well reflected, *inter alia*, in the so-called tin wars of the 1870s in the Malayan 'tin states', such as Perak, where one Malay party, along with their Chinese allies (Cantonese Ghee Hin), fought another Malay faction, supported by a different Chinese society (Hakka Hai San).⁶⁶ This forced the British to intervene, a step which they had previously tried to avoid as they were primarily focused on trade carried out in the lucrative coastal hubs. Starting with the Pangkor Agreement and Chinese Engagement,⁶⁷ the British not only ended the strife, but, more specifically, instigated effective control over three West-coast Malay states. Despite a series of uprisings, the colonizers soon consolidated their positions and retained control of Perak, Selangor and Sungai Ujong, later adding Pahang. This left the Malay sultans and rajas as mere figureheads.

The race problem was to become more tangible not only because of (enforced) segregation, but also due to the capitalist drive of the British entrepreneurial colonialists, who, in search of profit, increased immigration from China (and also South Asia). Consequently, the states under direct British control, later known as the Federated Malay States (Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan⁶⁸), both prospered and suffered as a result of excessive immigration since they accepted very high numbers of Chinese immigrants, leaving the Malays as the minority group in many areas. Unsurprisingly, by the early twentieth century, the Chinese comprised as much as 64% of the British subjects in Federated Malay States (FMS), compared to only 27% in the unfederated Malay states.⁶⁹ Altogether, overall immigration from India, China and elsewhere in the formative years from 1850 to 1930 reduced the Malays in all of Malaya to slight majority status.

What further complicated relations between the Malays and non-native Asians in Malaya, in addition to the segregationist policies and the sheer number of immigrants, who now outnumbered the locals, was, paradoxically, the protective paternalistic approach of the British toward the native Malays.⁷⁰ It is often claimed that the British adopted a protective attitude toward the Malays, whom they stereotypically perceived as a 'less economically competitive race', especially in comparison with the dynamic and penetrative Chinese immigrants and/or their descendants. By doing so – i.e. by assigning them basically to the rural sector and administrative positions in the colonial service, the Malays probably lost some of the competitiveness in the business sector they had previously

enjoyed; originally, they had not been completely ignorant of business affairs. This decision also enhanced the commercial possibilities of the Chinese, who managed to prosper due to their business acumen. The Malay xenophobic attitude toward the Chinese, however, was not solely caused by their envy of Chinese prosperity. Nevertheless, this stereotypical economic envy, bordering as it did on hatred, was not completely fair. The notion that the Chinese and Indians were simply foreigners, attempting 'to marginalize the Malays in their homeland',⁷¹ was based on misinformation, since most of the riches remained in British hands.⁷² The reality was that 'a large majority of Chinese were lowly-paid wage earners in tin mines, rubber plantations and unskilled urban sector jobs. A minority were self-employed small proprietors and ever fewer were affluent capitalists'.⁷³ Nevertheless, at the same time, it is true that most Malays did indeed live in poverty and Yeoh explains that not only the colonialists but also the Malay rulers were to blame for not being able to protect the economic rights of their people.⁷⁴ This shared failure to increase the prosperity of the Malays would later become a grave interethnic problem once Malaya /Malaysia gained independence.

In addition, the British totally disregarded the Chinese and the long-time existence of their community in Malaya, not allowing them to participate in the colonial service. In this way, they basically fostered a general attitude among the Malays that the Chinese did not fully belong to the local society.⁷⁵ This was a novelty, in a way, and an invention of the British colonizers since the Malay sultans usually welcomed the leaders of the Chinese communities as members of their (respective) State Councils and paid great attention to their opinions. According to George Maxwell, who spent 35 years in Malaya, the Malay aristocrats never voiced the idea of excluding the non-Malays from the Councils.⁷⁶ As a result, the exclusion of the Chinese from the administration of Malaya, as well as their wealth, gradually created an almost impenetrable barrier between the two ethnic groups.

Another problematic aspect of integration was the education sector, since most children and young people attended vernacular schools, which were ethnically homogeneous. Only a few English schools provided an opportunity for a degree of more intense ethnic interaction. All this combined, the British managed to aggravate the cleavages in society, which have remained rooted in Malaysian society to this day.

In other words, one of the hallmarks of British Malaya at its apex was segregation and a lack of integration. This is exactly why colonial pluralism, introduced and enforced by the British between the 1870s and 1930s, might be characterized as 'inflexible ethnicity', which stood in stark contrast to the 'flexible ethnicity' typical of the Malay world in the premodern era. Simply put, where there had previously been no or little divide between the individual ethnic groups, the colonial era left behind a deeply divided country: 'Nowhere in the colonial world are the lines of caste drawn more rigidly: in clubs, residential areas, public accommodation ...'.⁷⁷

The segregationist policies, introduced and developed by the British, did not disappear even after Malaya became independent. In 1946, as part of a gradual decolonization process, the British proposed a unitary Malayan Union scheme, which involved placing all nine Malay states, as well as the Straits Settlements of Penang and Malacca, under one rule.⁷⁸ They also planned to change the racial structure, ending segregation and providing more ethnic equality and integration.

Malay nationalists, however, strongly opposed the idea, renouncing it as a British trick to abolish the Malay sultanates. Personally, I am convinced that the perception was accurate since the Malayan Union did in fact seek to 'reduce the political status of the feudal' rulers.⁷⁹ Therefore, on 11 May 1946, Malay aristocrats and their supporters formed the UMNO (United Malays National Organization), a party which has dominated

Malaysian politics ever since and whose purpose was to oppose the Union's objectives. They also rejected new policies aimed at providing all Malaysians with citizenship and equal political rights, irrespective of race, as long as they professed loyalty to Malaya and regarded it as their home.⁸⁰ This was also to become one of the major controversial issues facing the young nation at its inception.

Under intense Malay pressure, the Malayan Union project was halted and replaced by the Federation of Malaya scheme. This concept was introduced to appease the frustrated Malays since it preserved the role of the Malay rulers, but also dismissed the novel idea of equality for non-Malays in terms of citizenship. In this way, the British reasserted the notion of 'Malay dominance' (*ketuanan Melayu*), which implied reaffirming the rights of the Malay rulers and 'the special position of the Malays' in return for the protection of the 'legitimate interests of other communities'.⁸¹ However, while the legitimate interests of the other communities were safeguarded and they were guaranteed Malaysian citizenship, the latter was not on equal terms. To use Robert Hefner's words, the form of citizenship the Indians and Chinese acquired was a 'differentiated citizenship'.⁸² Thus, Malay ethnocentrism gained a new, official dimension, acknowledged by the colonial masters.

The mutual agreement was then enshrined in the Malaysian constitution under Article 153, which literally guarantees the Malays special rights in the education sector, public administration and the commercial sector. Discussing, criticizing and opposing the bill was prohibited under the Criminal Code. This unequal relationship between the privileged *bumiputeras*⁸³ and the *non-bumiputera* Malaysians became the hallmark of the postindependence period and may have been the cause of the escalation of tension leading to the notorious riots of 13 May 1969, which represented the worst interethnic violence in the country's history. This bloody conflict between the Malays and the Chinese laid bare the depth of the crisis of the young postcolonial state, which was suffering from the lack of a 'common social will'.⁸⁴

These brutal events changed both the course of Malaysian politics and the general environment, since the reaction was a complex amalgamation of socioeconomic, political and security measures, introduced by the right-wing Malay dominated government of Tun Abdul Razak (1970–1976). The most notable socioeconomic feature of this was the much-discussed New Economic Policy (1971–1990). The NEP's objective was not solely to eradicate poverty in general but included an implicit agenda to empower the impoverished Malays by incorporating them more intensively into the Malaysian economy, to produce more Malay entrepreneurs and, on the whole, to address the grievances of economic imbalance between the Malays and the more prosperous Chinese. On another level, the master plan was also to transform the whole country into an industrialized economy, which did actually bear fruit.⁸⁵ Yeoh also believes that the NEP succeeded 'in producing a new generation of middle-class Malays while eradicating poverty at the same time'.⁸⁶ On the other hand, many critical voices dismissed the plan and its results since, in their view, it mainly enriched the Malay oligarchic elite while leaving most ordinary Malays just as poor as before.

The policy also caused a backlash from the Chinese population for, in the end, 'they were forced to acquiesce to the demands of NEP due to their lack of political power'.⁸⁷ In his view, the positive side of it was that both communities were forced to find a sensible and 'healthy working relationship'. This relationship was nicknamed the Ali-Baba partnership and its main attribute was that Malays had a better chance 'to master the tools of the trade from the Chinese businessmen'⁸⁸ while Chinese businessmen could use this tie as an opportunity to expand their enterprises.

The politico-security aspect of this solution to the ethnic crisis included introducing some of the more controversial measures of authoritarian Malaysian democracy,⁸⁹ such as the National Security Council Act (NSCA) and the Universities and University Colleges Act, which hinder many generally accepted civic liberties. In the latter period of the Mahathir era, leaders of the opposition *Reformasi* movement against the then incumbent Prime Minister, as well as those involved with ‘militant Islam’ (such as *Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia*) were easily detained without trial under the Internal Security Act,⁹⁰ which preceded the NSCA.

A parallel to the economic strategies of ‘ethnic management’ was embodied in the National Cultural Policy, formulated in 1971, more or less at the same time as the NEP. According to Zawawi Ibrahim, the NCP represented the first official attempt to ‘regulate the unregulated multiculturalism’ in the country, which was considered to be at the very root of the May 13th Riots.⁹¹

This policy defined ‘Malaysian culture’, stating that it must be based on the culture of the indigenous peoples of Malaysia, it might incorporate suitable elements from other cultures, and that Islam must play a part in Malaysian culture. It also promoted the Malay language above others.⁹² This imposed top-down intervention in cultural affairs caused resentment among the non-*bumiputera* and even non-Malay *bumiputera* who (rightly) felt their cultural freedom was going to be curtailed. This exaggerated ethnocentrist emphasis on ‘compulsory’ Malay elements in ‘Malaysian culture’ was toned down as being no longer appropriate in the era of globalization during the early 1990s and altered into a new more multicultural vision of ‘Malaysian Malaysia’ in the form of the modern ‘*bangsa Malaysia*’, voiced by the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohammad, in his famous *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020), whose aim was to create a self-sufficient industrialized nation. It needs to be added here that neither the term *bangsa Malaysia* nor ‘Malaysian Malaysia’ were complete innovations of Mahathir but both, and especially the latter, have a long and rather dramatic history, which escalated in 1963–1965, when Singapore briefly joined and consequently left the Federation under rather explosive circumstances.

The tangible economic development and prosperity, which became the hallmark of the 1980s and especially the 1990s under Mahathir’s rule, helped overcome much of the interracial tensions that Indonesia had witnessed at the end of Suharto era in 1998, i.e. as a consequence of the Asian financial crisis. The explanation for the absence of such brutal pogroms in Malaysia may lie in the degree of sophistication or culturedness adopted in response to race relations in Malaysia, however tense they became, as well as in the successful results of the planned economy. This masterplan has literally put Malaysia on the world map, and Malaysia’s steersman, Mahathir, achieved this by successfully incorporating Malays into the economic modernization program, while simultaneously providing more opportunities to non-Malays.

Furthermore, this novel showcasing of Malaysia’s multiculturalism has become fashionable among both the state institutions and tourism agencies. Various cultures, customs, ethnicities and religious festivals have been utilized as one of the precious assets of Malaysia’s economy. With the slogan ‘*Malaysia. Truly Asia*’, reflecting the colorful ethnic structure and cultural richness of Malaysia, the state-driven campaign to popularize Malaysia as a tourist destination has proved to be one of the most successful campaigns in this section of the global tourist industry. This was supported by the enlivened principles of national harmony, as represented in the state ideology known as *Rukunegara*. Zawawi also points out that the field of arts and popular culture has been witnessing the beginning of multicultural synergies taking place beyond the usual ‘marketplace’, conceptualized in Furnivall’s notion of a colonial plural, but in fact segregated,

society, one which in a way returns to the cosmopolitan precolonial 'initial pluralism', where hybridity and flexible ethnicity exists and intense interactions take place.

In spite of these seemingly pro-pluralist tendencies, the country has remained and even become more divided by another barrier – religion. And, as a result of the ever-intensifying Islamization process, which started four decades ago with the *dakwah*⁹³ (proselytization) movement in the late 1970s, this rift has continued to widen. Theoretically, ethnicity is flexible within one's own religion, with one most obvious example being Islam. Within Islam, ethnic flexibility is nothing new or unusual in Malaysia since Muslims of Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, Arab or other Middle Eastern descent have been able, upon marrying a Malay, to become 'Malays' quite easily, thus obtaining the *bumiputera* status. Conversely, Chinese Malaysians who have converted to Islam can never become Malays (and *bumiputeras*), being regarded as *muallaf* ('converts') or *saudara baru* ('new brothers') all their life. The *bumiputera* status is also denied to other Chinese and Indian Malaysians, whose ancestors settled in the country generations ago, except for several small groups such as the *Babas* of Melaka and Penang-based *Jawi Peranakan*.

In addition, the increasing social pressure to be a 'proper' Muslim implies an increase in attention being paid to Islamic issues such as *halal*⁹⁴ (an object or action permissible to use or engage in, according to Islamic law), *khalwat* (physical proximity between an unmarried couple) or *tudung* (the Islamic veil), which creates an ever-growing barrier between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia. These developments are also related to a growing level of urban middle-class Muslim modernism, its hallmark being an emphasis on external Islamic attributes (usually referred to as neo-fundamentalism). Finally, controversial campaigns by Islamic institutions such as the JAKIM (*Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*⁹⁵), as well as the law that forbids inter-faith marriages, along with the laws on Muslim apostasy, have also contributed to deepening ethnoreligious tensions. As a result, some observers have opined that religious issues are now beginning to take over from racial problems, for race 'no longer polarizes the society in Malaysia' because religion has become an extremely useful and efficient tool for electorate mobilization, to which some political figures have recently turned.

Malaysian society has so far been able to overcome this rift due to two major factors: (a) the afore-mentioned developmentalism that has brought a degree of prosperity to the whole society and which has helped to reduce sociopolitical and ethnoreligious tensions and (b) the cautiousness with which most Malaysians of all creeds deal with ethnoreligious issues, indicating their awareness of the fragility of the functional yet tense coexistence. Therefore, there is a widespread tendency to avoid public discussions concerning related issues and to save them for the private realm in order not to endanger the fragile multicultural modus operandi. Simply put, this approach is, of course, much better than open violence but the overall situation barely resembles the relatively smooth, spontaneous cosmopolitanism that harbor principalities such as Melaka enjoyed in earlier centuries. In any case, a degree of self-censorship exists and reminds, as one Singaporean informant has put it, of the Singapore-style in-built auto-policeman that cautiously guides every citizen in the neighboring city-state when it comes to expressing themselves in public.

There is one notable exception to this pattern – a core of staunchly ethnonationalist Malay politicians such as Hishammuddin Hussein and their allies, the Malay nationalist vigilante grouping PERKASA, who are both masters of rhetoric violence and even threaten to use physical violence if the 'superiority of the Malays' is 'challenged'. How come this is possible when many Malaysians do not wish to cross a certain line? Perhaps

because these nationalist battle cries may not only fuel but actually resonate with widespread xenophobic and racist sentiments observable among large segments of the Malay population. This is a very interesting paradox that speaks volumes about the Malay and Malaysian society – many individuals seem to be aware of their own xenophobia and racism but, unlike some politicians and groupings, do not wish to foment conflict, which such appeals could easily trigger. In other words, their caution, at least in public, serves to maintain the society's equilibrium.

A more comprehensive analysis of this issue is beyond the scope of this article since there is a vast array of forces at play here. However, I will still attempt to provide a brief clarification in the form of a number of concluding remarks. The federal government strives, or pretends to strive, to build a viable multiethnic society by promoting national unity and efficient governance. Yet, at the same time, it continues to favor the Muslim population, especially the Malays, by intensively implementing its 'affirmative' policies. It has also been attempting to Islamize the *orang asli* and the indigenous groups of Borneo, basically as part of its efforts to enlarge the Malay-Muslim community.⁹⁶ This trend is mainly favored by the middle and older generations of Malays, typical UMNO supporters, while the younger generations of Malays continue to long for change, which they had hoped might materialize as a result of the 2013 general election. Younger Malays, Chinese and Indians now tend to be more openly in favor of cooperation and this trend is, *inter alia*, discernible in the existence of multiracial parties such as the *Parti Keadilan Rakyat*⁹⁷ or coalitions such as *Pakatan Rakyat*⁹⁸ or, more recently, *Pakatan Harapan*.⁹⁹

However, the result of the 13th General Election (GE 13) in 2013 was very disappointing for those who had anticipated change. In spite of experiencing the closest-fought election since independence in 1957, with the ruling *Barisan Nasional* (BN)¹⁰⁰ losing in terms of the popular vote, the BN managed to retain (due in part to the introduction of gerrymandered constituencies) a comfortable parliamentary majority, winning 60% of the 222 seats and executive power not only at the national level but also in 10 of the 13 states forming the Malaysian Federation. With such a renewed mandate, the ruling coalition could afford to partially give up the previously promoted vision aimed at creating a more multicultural Malaysia, returning to more pronounced race-based policies instead. On the one hand, it is true the some of the BN policies are only a reflection of the obsession with racial categorization and division/distinction that continues to linger throughout all strata of Malaysian society, where many people seem to exist 'in cocoons of their own'. On the other hand, multiethnic coexistence and cooperation is viable in many ways, but, as some critics would argue, Prime Minister Najib Razak now plays the ethnic and religious card for his own political survival, trying to divert attention from a range of problems, including the low-performing economy and the recent corruption scandal, known as 1MDB. According to analysts and opposition figures, including Anwar Ibrahim (now in prison for the third time and facing yet another sodomy indictment), these ethnonationalist supremacist policies pose a grave danger to the national economy because they slow down economic advancement and also reduce competitiveness as a result of a brain drain from a country where unqualified people receive influential jobs simply because of their ethno-political status.

Conclusion

In spite of the aforementioned flaws in the racial policies of consecutive Malaysian governments, we may conclude that they have succeeded in achieving one very important

thing – the creation of a single multicultural state.¹⁰² The main worry, however, lies in the fragility of the system. While a degree of common ground exists among the groups, especially in relation to shared goals such as prosperity, educational progress and general pride in being Malaysian, growing levels of internal homogeneity and uniformity have also been witnessed within the three main communities, described by some as ‘hyper-ethnicization’. Such a situation, inevitably, is not conducive for smooth interethnic relations and also goes against the *melange* character of Malaysian society and culture.

Moreover, the trend toward hyper-ethnicization seems just as absurd as the maintenance of anachronistic concepts such as *ketuanan Melayu*, *bumiputera/non-bumiputera*, and other similar race-based policies, in a country where practically everyone is, to a degree, *rojak* (‘mixed’), *peranakan* (‘locally born’) or *kacukan* (‘of mixed origin’). This is especially valid for a country where over 100 ethnic groups, whose ancestry stems from many parts of Asia, the Middle East and even Europe, are willing to coexist, interact, cooperate and prosper alongside each other. Given the insistence on the part of some powerful groups that they should retain their privileges, it is unlikely that radically inclusive changes will take place soon. On the other hand, tendencies for departure from the official race paradigm and toward transethnic solidarity are becoming increasingly stronger across the whole Malaysian society. Only time will tell as to which trend will prevail and whether Malaysia manages to tackle the exaggerated ethnicization as well as the growing religious divide.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. <https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs181/projects/2010–11/BrainDrain/Malaysia.html>.
2. Noor, *What Your Teacher Didn't Tell You*, 78.
3. J. C. van Leur (1955) referred to them as ‘harbor principalities’ (as quoted by Wolf and Eriksen 2010, 56), economically based on ‘sea trade and international traffic’, as opposed to inland (agrarian) kingdoms such as the Khmer Empire or Pagan, based on ‘hydraulic agriculture’ (as quoted by King and Wilder, *The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia*, 10).
4. Zawawi, ‘Globalization and National Identity,’ 117.
5. Literally ‘the original people’, a term commonly used for the native tribal communities of West Malaysia.
6. Literally ‘sea people’; they were maritime communities, often living on boats, whose subsistence oscillated between fishing, piracy, maritime trade, collection of other sea

- 'products' and patrolling the straits for the contemporaneous ruler (Sriwijaya, Melaka, Johor etc.).
7. Reid, in Montesano and Jory, *Thai South and Malay North*.
 8. The issue of Malay identity per se has been the subject of numerous high-profile monographs and studies by acclaimed scholars and is not the primary subject of this study. For a deeper analysis of Malayness, cf. Reid, "Understanding Melayu (Malay)," or Kahn, *Other Malays. Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern*.
 9. The legacy of Buddhism, especially of the Mahayana type, then widespread in Sumatra, also needs to be taken into account.
 10. See note 3.
 11. Zawawi, "Globalization and National Identity," 117.
 12. Cf. Montesano and Jory, *Thai South and Malay North*, 2008.
 13. Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree*, 14.
 14. Nah, "Negotiation Indigenous Identity," 514
 15. See note 13.
 16. *Bahasa Melayu* has also become, due to historical reasons, the national language of Singapore but it is not the main medium of education and general public communication.
 17. Reid in Barnard, *Contesting Malayness*, 3.
 18. Cortesao, as quoted by Milner, *The Malays*, 84.
 19. *Kerajaan* is a term derived from *raja* (king) and it carries several interrelated meanings, (a) a kingdom, (b) the state of having king as one's ruler, (c) the kingdom's government, in which sense it also used in Malaysia. Here it also refers to government.
 20. Barnard et al., *Contesting Malayness*, 5.
 21. *Ibid.*, 6.
 22. See note 10.
 23. *Ibid.*
 24. Cf. Milner, 2008.
 25. In Singapore they are better known as *Jawi Pekan*. Interestingly, those in Penang have gradually become so firmly integrated in the local 'Malay' community that they play an important role in local politics, while their Singaporean counterparts have rather alienated themselves from their Malay-Muslim fellow countrymen, allegedly by embracing more radical modernist ideas of Islam, looking to their Muslim-Indian homeland as a source of inspiration.
 26. Admiral Zheng He (1371–1433/1335) was the commander of six large naval expeditions, sent to Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia and East Africa by the emperors of the Ming Dynasty, which took place between the years 1405 and 1433.
 27. Along with the princess, some 500 Chinese handmaidens were sent as brides to Melakan court officials, whose descendants had the privilege of using the prefix *Wan* (a rather high-ranking aristocratic title).
 28. <http://www.islamhk.com/en/?p=12&a=view&r=43>.
 29. Hamka, as quoted by Wang Ma, "Chinese Muslims in Malaysia."
 30. Cf. Tan Ta Sen, 2009.
 31. See note 19.
 32. Milner, *The Malays*, 87; Barnard et al., *Contesting Malayness*, 7.
 33. Barnard et al. *Contesting Malayness*, 7.
 34. Cf. Reid in Barnard 2004; and Salleh Yaapar 2005.
 35. Cf. Barnard 2006; Milner, *The Malays*; and Kahn, *Other Malays*.
 36. See note 2.
 37. Yeoh, *Malaysia, Truly Asia?* 5.
 38. Hefner, *The Politics of Multiculturalism*, 15.
 39. Cf. Reid 1988.
 40. See note 37.
 41. Zaleha, "Pluralism and National Identity in Malaysia," 2.
 42. Hirschmann, "The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya," 337.
 43. *Ibid.*
 44. See note 37.
 45. See note 36.
 46. See note 37.
 47. See note 10.

48. See note 40.
49. Yeoh, *Malaysia, Truly Asia?* 7; Zawawi, "Globalization and national identity," 133.
50. Hwang, *Personalized Politics*, 26.
51. In principle, this attitude is reminiscent of the so-called *trekkers* among the Dutch population in the Netherlands East Indies who, unlike the *blijvers* ('stayers'), i.e. Dutch settlers determined to remain for good, also considered their stay in the archipelago temporary, with a vision of making a fortune and returning to the metropolis on retirement. Due to this logic, the *trekkers* tended to assimilate themselves less than the *blijvers*, though the distinction might not have been as clear-cut, since many of them also cohabited with Indonesian women, taking on many of their habits, thus gradually creating the *melange* 'Indies style', another fine example of a hybrid culture.
52. Treggoning, as quoted by Hwang, *Personalized Politics*, 26.
53. See note 49.
54. See note 40.
55. See note 41.
56. See note 49.
57. See note 42.
58. There have been vivid and at times heated academic discussions regarding the origin of the spouses of non-Muslim, mainly Chinese settlers in Peninsular Malaya. For the sake of keeping to the main topic of the article, I will only briefly mention here in the footnote that according to most Malaysian Chinese authors most of them were probably 'pagan' women from the Batak areas of Sumatra and in fewer cases from Bali or the Chitty community (descendants of old Hindu families). The Batak and Balinese women were apparently slaves to be sold as servants or concubines, for whom marriage with Chinese was not only possible but might even have elevated their personal status. However, as Felix Chia writes, intermarriage of the early *Babas* stopped abruptly, as the next generation would take daughters from their own community as their spouses (endogamy) to perpetuate the community's identity (Chia, *The Babas*, 4; Lim, *Gateway to Peranakan Culture*, 10).
59. See note 41.
60. See note 10.
61. See note 42.
62. See note 10.
63. See note 42.
64. See note 40.
65. Manickam, *Taming the Wild*, 22.
66. Although the impossibility of cooperation between the Malays and non-Malays is ruled out here, it is also important to note that there was an open enmity or even hatred between different linguistic groups of Chinese origin such as the Cantonese and the Hakka, as was demonstrated on the tin wars.
67. While the Pangkor Agreement made the sultan of Perak the first Malay ruler to accept British residency, the Chinese Engagement was a treaty that effectively ended the warfare between Chinese secret societies; it included mutual disarmament, stockade destruction, prisoner exchange and guarantees not to break the peace, under the threat of a heavy fine. Stabilizing the situation in turn facilitated the resumption of tin mining and other economic activities.
68. Negeri Sembilan ('Nine Lands') was formed from a confederation of nine originally Minangkabau principalities, including Sungai Ujong, and as such it became part of the FMS upon their creation in 1895.
69. See note 36.
70. Milner, "Colonial Records History."
71. See note 37.
72. See note 36.
73. Heng, "Chinese Responses," 35.
74. See note 36.
75. See note 41.
76. Maxwell, as quoted by Hirschmann, "The Making of Race", 353.
77. Kennedy, as quoted by Hirschmann, "The Making of Race," 320.

78. Singapore and the other remaining Straits Settlements were to remain outside the Union.
79. See note 3.
80. Gomez, *Politics in Malaysia: The Malay Dimension*, 21.
81. See note 3.
82. See note 37.
83. *Bumiputera* (literally ‘sons/princes of the soil’) is an ethnopolitical and legal term introduced by the Malayan government upon gaining independence in the late 1950s with the aim to give a special status to the Malays. After the merger with Sabah and Sarawak in 1963 when Malaysia came into being, the *bumiputera* also started to include West Malaysia’s indigenous peoples and the native (Austronesian) peoples of East Malaysia such as the Iban or the Kadazandusun etc. Altogether the *bumiputera* comprise around 65 % of Malaysian population. They enjoy special rights and quotas, which were introduced as part of the New Economic Policy in order to secure improvement of the dire economic situation of the Malays after the riots of 1969. *Non-bumiputera* include Malaysian Chinese, Indians (including those born and raised in the country) and other ‘non-native’ groups as well as migrant workers such as Indonesians without a residential permit.
84. See note 36.
85. See note 40.
86. See note 36.
87. See note 10.
88. Ibid.
89. The hybrid Malaysian regime has been variously characterized as ‘quasi democracy’ (Zakaria 1989), ‘semi democracy’ (Case 1993) or ‘modified democracy’ (Crouch 1993) but probably the most apt definition describing Malaysia’s illiberal democracy was the concept of a ‘responsive and repressive regime’, coined by Harold Crouch (1996).
90. See note 3.
91. Ibid.
92. http://malaysiafactbook.com/Culture_of_Malaysia#_note-Papers.
93. *Dakwah* (from the Arabic *da’wa*) is usually interpreted as ‘summoning (Muslims) to the right path’ (of Islam).
94. The Arabo-Islamic term *halal* pertains to a wide range of objects and issues from diet, methods of animal slaughter, clothing, finance, travel etc.
95. Malaysian Department of Islamic Development. It is a governmental body of the federal level, which was set up to mobilize the development and progress of Muslims in Malaysia. One of its official tasks is to protect the purity of faith and the teachings of Islam in the country, where Islam is the official religion. Every state and federal territory in Malaysia such as Selangor or Kuala Lumpur has in turn its own autonomous Islamic Department, such as JAIS (*Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor*). Some of its activities and competencies include organizing pre-wedding and family courses, *halal* certification and supervision of religious schools in the state of Selangor.
96. Cf. Kumpoh and Az-Zahra, “Conversion to Islam.”
97. People’s Justice Party, also known as *KeADILan* (Justice). It is a centrist multiethnic party, which promotes the abolishing of the affirmative policies and replacing them with a non-ethnic approach ideology. It is also a party which seeks justice for its de facto leader Anwar Ibrahim.
98. *Pakatan Rakyat* (People’s Pact) was an opposition coalition, formed by *KeADILan*, *PAS* (*Parti Islam se-Malaysia*, Malaysian Islamic Party) and DAP (Democratic Action Party).
99. *Pakatan Harapan* or (Pact of Hope) succeeded *Pakatan Rakyat* as the main opposition coalition of center-left parties, namely *KeADILan*, DAP and *Parti Amanah Nasional* (National Trust Party). Formed in September 2015 to gear up political support before the GE 2018.
100. *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) is a broad ruling coalition, led by the UMNO and complemented by a dozen smaller parties.
101. Gudeman, “Multiculturalism in Malaysia,” 143.

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