Othering the Malay in Malaysia: A Planned Consequence of Politics?

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

This paper examines the rise in the politicisation of Islam in Malaysia and links it to the othering of the Malaysian Malay. It is my argument that both were "conquering" tools of Malaysia's "Father of Modernisation", Mahathir Mohamad, devised to win the support of the Malay Muslim majority in Malaysia. The many awards bestowed on Mahathir obscure the fact that he was instrumental in the systematic erosion of the power and roles of state institutions, especially at the Federal government level. This includes the significant loss of the independence of the Malaysian judiciary. Whilst per capita income in Malaysia may well have increased eight times under his 22-year leadership, this paper asks why is it that the majority of the Malays remain the largest number among the poor and the more disenfranchised of ethnicities in the country? Why have Malay and Muslim women suffered such a rapid decreasing ability to access justice? This paper examines existing research on the social and political changes Malaysia has experienced with Islamisation and under Mahathir's rule, as well as studies on Malayness, Malay nationalism and Muslim Malay identity formation. The paper elaborates the othering of a majority people, the Malays in Malaysia, and how this othering has brought forth a fast-growing political power in the name of a supremacist Islam, a puritanical Sunni and Malay Islam. Specific events in the rise and rule of Mahathir as Malaysia's then Prime Minister are reviewed, such as the banning of *The Malay Dilemma*, and the split in the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1987. Also examined is the varying emphasis between Muslim and race, and how during Mahathir's rule, that strong misogynist and patriarchal attitudes took hold in Malay Muslim consciousness, a colonising consciousness that is othering the perceived cultural and genetic "impurities" within the Malay.

Keywords: othering, Malay, muslim identity, Islamisation, Mahathir, Malayness, political science, identity politics, social identity.

Introduction

The othering of the Malay Muslims in Malaysia has to be understood through the lens of identity politics and the preservation of their political dominance, underpinned by discrimination within a race based on class and phenotypical distinction (for examples of these forms of discrimination, see Lian 2006: 223-228; also Wain 2009: 6). Constitutionally, a Malaysian who is ethnically Malay but who is not Muslim is not considered a Malay. "Malay" and "Muslim" are synonymous (Gullick 1988: 139), and to undergo conversion in Islam in Malaysia is in fact to *masuk Melayu* or "to become Malay" (Roff 1980: 67).[1] Islam has therefore always been central to the identity of the politically dominant Malay Muslims in Malaysia, and in fact, it was the rise of Islamic consciousness that historically propelled the political consciousness and dominance of the Malay Muslims pre-independent Malaya (Riaz 2008: 22-23).

In today's Malaysia, what has transpired are efforts to consolidate the political will and power of the Malay Muslim majority population and conditionally channel them through its "political" leaders, which includes both political and religious Malay Muslim elite. Othering is entrenched in Malaysian politics through the ethnic-based dominant political parties (Hussin 1990; Hwang 2003). The accepted narrative is that, this othering is positioned as the Malays othering the non-Malays, the latter constantly politically positioned as *pendatang* (immigrants). Such a narrative, however, fails to consider the risks of alienation for the Malay.

The purposeful process to secure the Malay Muslim identity, in particular "to repair and assert Muslim identity" (Riaz 2008: 1-2), and the Malay Muslims' political supremacy became that much more apparent in the Islamic resurgence since the 1970s (see for example, the work of Kessler 1978; Nagata 1984; Zainah 1987; Hussin 1990; Verma 2002) and in a similar but more systemic parallel process of "othering of the Malays" by the Malay Muslim ruling elite (Hoffstaedter 2011: 27). Both embody relationships of "protector-subservient" with their political and religious leaders, sharing characteristics of a feudalistic system (Chandra 1979: 7-12). The two processes of othering inevitably met and intersected with each other, gaining institutionalised impetus with Mahathir's successful wooing of Anwar Ibrahim into joining the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1982. This impetus gained incredible strength in Mahathir's political system "dominated by one". The question then is, did Mahathir other the Malays, a race that he identified with so strongly? Foucault's work suggests that this is possible.

Othering is a key element in the work of Foucault on those excluded from power. Othering has everything to do with knowledge, and power acting through knowledge to achieve a political agenda in its goal of domination. The political driven agenda for Malay Muslim supremacy and so, Malay Muslim political dominance, is understandable when juxtaposed with the fear of being "outsiders in their own country" and the risk of no longer belonging to *Tanah Melayu* (Malay Land). The othering of Malay Muslims by a fellow Malay Muslim is made that much more

[1] For the purposes of this paper, the terms "Malay" and "Malay Muslim" are used interchangeably to mean the same.

possible because the definition of the Malay Muslim identity in Malaysia is not narrowly understood to distinguishable elements of their identity—skin colour, ethnicity or religion. Instead, they embody their relationships as a people to their rulers (the sultanate); their leaders (religious and political); to their Malay language and customs; and finally, to their religion, Islam and Allah (see for example, the work of Chandra 1979: 7-12; Nagata 1984: 2; Milner 1995: 282-284).

Othering Mahathir, Othering the Malay Muslim

It is crucial to understand that "the fact that only little more than half of the country's population are ethnically Malay and Muslim, has at least since Malaysia's independence in 1957, been a matter of concern to the political leadership of the Malays" (Marcinkowski 2008; see also Abdul Rahman 2001: 59; Barr & Govindasamy 2010: 293; Malay Mail 2005). The precarious position of possibly becoming a minority existed before Malaya's independence from the British in 1957. The 1931 population census for example, reported 39 per cent Chinese to 44.7 per cent Malays (Verma 2002: 60). Although other ethnicities have existed in Malaya at least since 1871 as shown by Hirschman in his study of the ethnic classifications of the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States (1987: 571), it was allegedly the rise in the number of immigrants, specifically the Chinese, that brought fears among some of the Malay Muslims to the surface and fuelled the political birth of UMNO and *ketuanan Melayu* or Malay (Muslim) supremacy[2] (Mahathir 1981: 25).

Historically, Malay Muslim supremacy has been secured through Malay Muslim leaders and others who follow (for example, see Musa 2003). The need to remain distinct, "to be set apart from the others" within Malaysia (Heidegger 1962, cited in Hoffstaedter 2011: 3) is strongly linked to the fear of becoming outsiders and a minority in their own country. The insistence on self-othering becomes more evident when viewed in conjunction with the rights and special privileges of the Malay Muslims that are protected within the Constitution, such as the Malay Muslim land reservations and the government's existing pro-Malay Muslim affirmative action policies, programmes and practices (for more information on these policies, see Cheong, Nagaraj & Lee 2009: 41-44).

When Mahathir first became Prime Minister in 1981, he was not seen as ethnically Malay by some quarters and his approach to politics too was considered "un-Malay" (Hussin 1990: 168).[3] Constitutionally, however, Mahathir is Malay, his lineage often officially traced through his mother, with a possible reference to his father as "mixed

[2] According to Kua Kia Soong, the term "ketuanan Melayu" cannot be found in the 1957 Federal Constitution nor in the post-May 13 amendments to the constitution. Translated as "Malay dominance" and oftentimes by others as "Malay supremacy", Kua contends that the term came into prominence after Abdullah Ahmad made his infamous assertions at the Institute of International Affairs in Singapore on 30 August 1986 (Kua 2013). Chandra (2011), however, contends that "ketuanan Melayu" is best translated as "Malay sovereignty", for which the proper translation in the Malay language is "kedaulatan Melayu".

[3] One example is Mahathir's public affront to the authority of the sultans in Malaysia and the institution of the Monarchy in general, during the 1983–1984 constitutional crisis (Cheah 2002: 208–210; Hussin 1990: 167–168). The Malay culture had always historically and traditionally aligned with the Malay sultanates, a deference that he had praised in *The Malay Dilemma*.

Malay and South Indian" descent.[4] Unlike his three predecessors, however, Mahathir's otherness was inherited through his father who was of darker skin and who had no aristocratic ties (Wain 2009: 6; Mahathir 2011; for more information on phenotypical-based discrimination at the time, see Ong 1995: 159; Lian 2006: 223-228).[5] Within the Malay race, Mahathir is not seen as a "pure-bred" Malay and he is frequently othered for his Indian-ness (Wain 2009: 4 & 6–7; see too Lian's discussion on race and racialisation in Malaysia 2006: 219-228). To-date, many personal blogs continue to derogatorily refer to Mahathir as *mamak kutty*.

To other includes a mode of thinking that leads to people being regarded as different and inferior. In a number of ways, Mahathir's own views of the Malay race differentiated himself from them, describing their "lack of knowledge of even petty trading as 'pitiful'" (Wain 2009: 8) and them as having ". . . low average intelligence quotient" (Wain 2009: 13). In *The Malay Dilemma*, Mahathir (1981) pointed to heredity, as one of two causes for the Malays' economic disadvantage, a "pure-bred" heredity that he does not share (Mahathir 1981: 2 & 29; see also Lian 2006: 222-223). Yet, Mahathir identifies as Malay.

Mahathir speaks of how he resents his successes as attributable only to his Indian origin and his failures only to his Malay origin (Wain 2009: 6; Mahathir 2011). Hardly any attribution is made to his mother for his business savvy and entrepreneurial skills. Even though this speaks of the problems of the masculinist biases of a patriarchal system where ancestry is traced only through the father, and power and success identified only as male and masculine traits, Mahathir did not identify this as an issue that needed address. Instead, armed with a fervent interest in politics, he politicised his identity as Malay by joining UMNO and through his leading involvement in the 13th May 1969 racial riots, aligned himself with two elites—his predecessor, Abdul Razak Hussein and Harun Idris, a prominent proponent of Malay supremacy. Through his penning of *The Malay Dilemma* in 1970, which remained banned until he became Prime Minister in 1981, Mahathir successfully set himself up as a "Malay ultra", an ultimate defender of Malay rights and supremacy.

Many of the ideas for the New Economic Policy (NEP) implemented since 1971 during Abdul Razak's administration were derived from *The Malay Dilemma* (1981: 103–153). The policy deployed affirmative action programmes and measures that favoured the Malays or the "sons of the soil" to eradicate poverty by 1990 (for more information on the NEP, see Lim 1985; Loh 2000). The NEP is still implemented, but as the National Development Plan since 1991 (Jayasankaran 1999). When Mahathir retired in 2003 after 22 years in public office, the persistence of poverty remained a

[4] The definition of the Malaysian Malay is enshrined in Article 160(2) of the Constitution of Malaysia, which specifies that a Malay is a "person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to the Malay custom [*adat*]" (Legal Research Board 2003).

[5] Both marriage and birth (as in Mahathir's case) are determining factors, especially for Malay Muslim women. In the eyes of the Malay Muslim society, who a Malay Muslim woman marries determines which rung of the social hierarchy she occupies. This view and "treatment" of Malay Muslim women is further exacerbated by "the discourses of the Islamic resurgents who depict Malay Muslim women as both the bearers of racial difference and the embodied markers of boundaries that ideally guard against the intrusions of other races" (Ong 1995: 159).

serious issue among rural Malays, a community whom Mahathir had earlier identified as "pure-bred" Malays from in-breeding, but who had long provided staunch support to UMNO. When Mahathir's leadership and presidency in UMNO was opposed in the 1987 Annual General Assembly and triennial party election by his fomer Finance Minister, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah whose "team" included the then Deputy Prime Minister, Musa Hitam, they argued on the failure of the NEP in benefitting the Malays and Mahathir's unilateral leadership style and lack of consultation with the other leaders. By the mid-1990s, Malays in Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Perlis, Pahang and northern Perak had begun to question why affirmative action had not helped them (Gomez 2006: 75). During his last years in office, Mahathir continued to differentiate himself from the Malays. In 2001, Mahathir lamented that he did not manage to "change the culture of the Malays" and acknowledged that he had overdone the affirmative action programme in favour of the Malays, resulting in a "people who are rather laid-back and not willing to make efforts" (2002: 186).

Mahathir believes in the power and rule of the Malay Muslim majority in Malaysia, a dominant group to which he belongs and into which he firmly believes that his father completely assimilated himself (New Straits Times 2011; see also Annuar 2011: 6). He also believed, despite his authoritarian leadership style, he needed the support of the majority if he were to remain in power. In Mahathir's words, "I care about what people think. If not, I won't get anywhere" (Wong 2012). This belief is located within the preservation of the political dominance of Malay Muslims in Malaysia, "the true owners of Malaya".

In a political system dominated by conflict between large Chinese and Indian minorities and the Malays as the "definitive people" majority (comprising a little over 50 per cent of the total population), it was only logical that Mahathir politically committed to Malay interests, and then to a Malay Islam—both of which have puritanical trends in Malaysia. For more than Malay, Mahathir identifies as Muslim, strongly evident in the way he constantly praised the Malay Muslims in *The Malay Dilemma* as "good Muslims", "courteous" or "good mannered", "full of nobility" and "self-effacing" (Mahathir 1981: 116); in the way he described himself in his memoirs, "I was born a Muslim and I was raised as a Muslim child" (Mahathir 2011: 477); in how he describes the Malays as more Muslim than the Arabs or any other race that embrace Islam (Mahathir's speech in 1997, translated version in Hng 1998), as well as through his international politics and his Islamisation policy which he spearheaded soon after he became Prime Minister in 1981.

Throughout his 22-years as Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir's Indian ancestry was in all likelihood never forgotten among the Malays, even if he may have been popular as "one of the very few Malay doctors"—a qualification he consciously pursued knowing that it would lend to his political credentials (Wain 2009: 4 & 10). If political popularity and political credentials have such significance for Mahathir, it may explain why he championed more pro-Malay policies than those advocated by his predecessors.

It is during Mahathir's rule that Islamisation, in the form of a supremacist Islam, became a tool for colonising the mind and spirit of the Malays. This othering set reasonably well within the self-othering of Malaysia's politically dominant group. However, arrogant, patriarchal, misogynist and puritanical attitudes of Malay Muslims (Riaz 2008: 49–54 & 286–287) have since manifested to other the perceived cultural and genetic "impurities" within the Malay, to "perfect the Muslim within [the Malays]" or to "Islamise" their Malayness (Norshahril 2012; see also Farish 2003: 197-198; Hooker 2004; Kuppusamy 2007). The fact is that this specific form of Islamic consciousness, a purist Sunni and Malay Islam, not only gained traction during the Mahathir regime, his Islamisation policy helped to further embed and institutionalise it within Malaysia (see Appendix 1 for a brief chronology of key developments that created and strengthened a large Islamic bureaucracy which undoubtedly has a vested interest in maintaining the comparatively fast-paced Islamisation process of Malaysia; see also elaborations on these developments by Liow 2007: 169; Riaz, 2008: 23). Mahathir after all held the view that, "Islam must be upheld and even further propagated if success is to be assured [for Malay progress]" (Mahathir 1981: 104–105), a view he held since he first wrote and published *The Malay Dilemma* in 1970.

The Malay Dilemma: Assimilation and Othering

Hussin (1990) contends that "[t]he Malays have never fully come to terms with this 'balance of power' between the two major reference points of their identity. More often than not, the Malays have tended to perceive the issue as one and the same instead of being dialectical in nature" (1990: 2; see also Funston 1980). The experiences of the *Orang Asli* (Malaysia's indigenous peoples) who have converted to Islam attest to this phenomenon. Once they embrace Islam and inter-marry with the Malay Muslims, the "culture" and "race" of the *Orang Asli* are presumed non-existent (Means 1985: 638 & 647; Nah 2003; Endicott & Dentan 2004: 24, 29 & 30; also, Aiken & Leigh 2011; Nah 2006; Nah 2008).

Intra-religious pluralism was something entirely foreign to the Malaysian Malay Muslims until they began to meet Muslims of ethnic Chinese and Indian origins (Osman 2003: 129; see also Riaz 2008: 22). At the same time, Islamic consciousness within Malay Muslims began to grow more prominent in their identity politics at every level of their public lives.[6] The idea of a universal Islam, perpetuated through the Malaysian Youths Movement (ABIM) in the 1970s, became irreconcilable with the identity politics of a Malay Islam, and so there grew a Malay hegemony of "owners of Islam in Malaysia" (Hoffstaedter 2011: 56). For example, Chinese Muslims have been disallowed to build Chinese mosques in some Malaysian states (Hoffstaedter 2011: 54-56), and the practice of a more puritanical Sunni Islam

[6] The rise of Islamic consciousness in Malayan society in fact began around the turn of the twentieth century, resulting in two distinctive movements known as Kaum Muda (the Young Group) and Kaum Tua (the Old Group) (Riaz 2008: 22-23). These distinctive movements which came about before the independence of Malaya gave rise to the political dominance of Malay Muslims through UMNO formed in 1946, and the Islamic party, *Parti al-Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS) the breakaway faction of UMNO which was formed in 1951. Both political parties have persevered until today. Between the two, UMNO has been in power since Malaysia's independence in 1957 and PAS remains one of the main opposition political parties.

surfaced in Malaysia under the influence of Saudi Arabian-funded salafabism (Riaz 2008: 49–54 & 286–287).

Against a backdrop of continually needing to secure Sunni Malay Muslim political dominance, intolerance for other forms of Islam resulted in incidents like the 1985 Memali Incident (see for example, Analysis Malaysia 2002; New Straits Times 2002), the crackdown on Ayah Pin and his Sky Kingdom (BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific 2005; The Economist 2005; New Straits Times 2005; Rosli & Singh 2005; Rosli, Singh & Zarina 2005) and the raids by the Islamic religious departments on Shi'ite gatherings in Malaysia (Syed Mu'az 2010, Ng 2011, Lee 2012).[7] Some have described this struggle against hybridity and in establishing an "authentic" and "pure" Muslim identity (in Malaysia's case, a Sunni Malay Islam) as an echo of the global rise in fundamentalist Islamic movements (Riaz 2008: 99-100; see also Hussin 1990: 158; Hoffstaedter 2011). I argue that this struggle is quite distinct and locally rooted.

The quintessential characteristic of the Malay Muslim identity suffers a discord when "the other" within their identity is alienated, differentiated and reduced to inferiority—deprived of visibility, uniqueness and subjectivity (Riggins 1997; Lister 2004). In the othering of the Malay in Malaysia, "the Muslim" has been alleviated to "subject" and "the Malay" perceived as object "lacking in complexity, motivation, rationality and capabilities and who serve as the carriers of what is undesirable" in themselves (Kristeva 1991 and Pickering 2001, cited in Krumer-Nevo 2012:186). The dialectical coalescence of the Malay Muslim begun to surface when Malay Muslims became more consciously aware of the "onslaught of hybridity" among them. The subtext here is one of disciplining and perfecting, rather than an outright rejection.

Mahathir (1981) justified the complete assimilation of the other Malaysian races on the grounds that the Malays, not the *Orang Asli* (indigenous peoples), are the true *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) and so, "are the rightful owners of Malaya" (1981: 126). Mahathir is also convinced that his father, Mohamad Iskandar, had completely assimilated himself into the Malay race (Mahathir 2011), which others like Wain (2009: 5) questions. In *The Malay Dilemma*, Mahathir (1981) had conflated the concepts of "sons of the soil" (1981: 94) with "indigenous" (1981: 69 & 133) and "dominant" in the way he further contended that, "[t]o be truly indigenous one must belong to no other race but that truly identified with a given country" (Mahathir 1981: 133). To support his claim, he compares the assimilation of immigrant races in the USA and Australia where apparently "immigrants were forced to adopt the language and culture of the dominant group".

The assimilation of the other races into learning and using the Malay language (the official language of Malaysia) and into Malay culture—systemically through conversion to Islam—has consequently brought to the surface insecurities in the identity politics of the Malay Muslims (Nagata 1980: 409; Nagata 1984: 234; Zainah

[7] In 1996, the National Fatwa Council declared that Malaysian Muslims must only subscribe to Sunni teachings. The original text of the fatwa can be found at http://www.e-fatwa.gov.my/fatwa-kebangsaan/syiah-di-malaysia.

1987). These insecurities have deep historical roots that are projected through different versions of history around Malay political participation and the political participation of the other immigrant races, Malaysia's independence as well as the writing of the Federal Constitution. The different versions of Malaya's political history suggest that a process of othering (Said 1978) has occurred in the documentation of Malaysia's official history. "Knowledge" of what transpired between the races in Malaysia's history that has since been transmitted and inculcated among Malaysians, and propagated through mainstream institutional channels, is expressed through a singular world-view and a Malay Muslim supremacist discourse. A non-official version such as Fahmi Reza's 2007 research-based documentary, *Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* ("Ten Years before Independence"), depicted people from all quarters of society—the Malays, Chinese and Indians, as well as the youth, women and trade unions working together to propose "The Peoples Constitution" to the British, which guaranteed equal citizenship to all immigrant Chinese and Indians in the new Malaya. According to Fahmi's documentary, there was no issue for even the more successful and powerful Chinese in Malaya at that time against being a *Melayu* national under the new Malaya (see also Kua 2011). However, Khoo (2009), Mahathir (1981: 4-5) and Shamsul (2001: 364) disagree.

Mahathir insists that the complete assimilation of the other Malaysian races through the language and culture of the "definitive people", the Malays, is the solution to the formation of one nation and identity for Malaysia. "Culture" for Mahathir takes on an overt religious character, Islam (Mahathir 1981: 23; see too Nagata 1980: 409).[8] However, there are signs that indicate the more vocal and purist of the Malay Muslim leaders, political and religious, are not ready for this assimilation. Wang Ma (2005), who studied the Chinese Muslims (Muslims from birth) in Malaysia and their "swift acculturation and assimilation" among Malay Muslims during British Malaya (2005: 95–96), paradoxically speaks of the perceived notions of impurity within Chinese Muslim converts by the Malay Muslim community, who associate "eating pork", drinking alcohol and gambling as inherently Chinese (2005: 103).

There are other tell-tale signs of rejection of a complete assimilation of other Malaysian races. In referring to the *dakwah* movement[9] in the 1970s, Nagata (1984) asserts that, "it continues to be in large measure, a closing of ranks against the non-Malays . . . a nativistic affirmation of Malayness in a new form" (1984: 234). Zainah (1987) made a similar assertion, that Malay Muslim students seek ethnic validation through Islamic revivalism.

The insecurities of an eroding Malay Muslim identity is further fanned by alarmist-type claims and dissertations such as that of Nur Suriya (2008), who "warned" that apostasy among Muslims is rising in Malaysia even though the numbers recorded by

8 In *The Malay Dilemma*, Mahathir refers to the days of the Malacca Sultanate and says, "[e]ven when the Chinese adopted the language, dress and part of the customs of the Malays [possibly referring to the *Baba Nonya*, a Chinese-Malay sub-culture that is now nearly extinct], they were not acceptable because of religious differences. Inter-marriage between Malays and Chinese was extremely rare" (Mahathir 1981: 23).

9 Islamic resurgence, where the term *dakwah* literally means "to call" or "to respond to the call".

Islamic religious officials are small over a period of five years or more, and most were originally Muslim converts. This fear of apostasy where apostates have been equated to gangrene to the Malay Muslim community, is continuously inflamed by Islamic religious authorities like the Perak Mufti, Harussani Zakaria, by claims that Christians are converting Malay Muslims (New Straits Times 2006; see also Anis 2006). This fear of apostasy begins to make sense when juxtaposed against the simple majority of the Malay Muslims and their fear of losing political dominance within Malaysia.

The Unilateral Road Travelled from Secular to Islamic

To understand the position of Islam in Malaysia, it is important to return to the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. Many Malay Muslims see Islam as having a special place, as "the religion of the Federation". Prior to the adoption of the constitution of Malaysia, making Islam the official religion of the Federation was particularly seen as trying to usurp the power of the sultans and Malay rulers (see Osman 2003: 130-131 138-139 for a further elaboration). For this reason, Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman consistently asserted the secular character of Malaysia, with only a ceremonial role for Islam as the official state religion. On independence from the British, an ethno-religious communal system of political representation was adopted by the young nation.

Mahathir, however, unilaterally declared Malaysia an Islamic State in September 2001 (Hoffstaedter 2011: 19; Osman 2003: 134). "Malaysia is not a moderate Islamic state but an Islamic fundamentalist state as its policy is to abide by the fundamental teachings of Islam.... Malaysia [is] not only an Islamic state as acknowledged by other countries but also a model Islamic state" (Ooi 2006; Riaz 2008). While Malaysia may have a majority Muslim population of 61 per cent, the 39 per cent who are non-Muslims can hardly be considered a negligible minority (EIU ViewsWire 2011). At the international level, Mahathir's declaration went unquestioned. It not only secured Malaysia's Islamic status and image internationally, Mahathir's declaration located the country that much more strongly within the powerful economic and political Islamic bloc, Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC). In one singular intentional act, Mahathir undermined the secular character of Malaysia.

While Mahathir took the stance that Islamic laws are for Muslims and meant for their personal laws, he signaled to the Malay Muslim majority that the civil laws of the nation "can be used as long as they do not come into conflict with Islamic principles" (Osman 2003: 134). This has had significant impact on how increasingly influential Islamic institutions and Islamic religious authorities in the country are over the policies, procedures and practices of Ministries and State machineries, as well as the civil legal system. For example, the cases of Malaysian Indians, Revathi Masoosai and S. Shamala, have shown how difficult it has become in obtaining justice through the civil courts for ethnically non-Malays.[10] Mahathir's Islamisation policy and

[10] Revathi Masoosai is ethnically Indian and was forcibly separated from her Hindu husband and 15-month-old baby girl on the grounds that she was born to Muslim parents though she professes Hinduism as her religion. In S. Shamala's case, her husband converted to Islam and secretly converted their children to Islam, which surfaced racial and religious conflicts on the issues of custody and the conversion of minors.

expansion of the powers of the syariah legal system while simultaneously weakening the independence of federal institutions and the Malaysian judiciary, have in effect, institutionally secured the political dominance of Malay Muslims dispensing with the need to rely on being elected into power. There are already hints to this development. For example, after the general elections in 2008, there were arguments against the appointment of a non-Malay Muslim woman member of Parliament to head the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development on the basis that the Minister's portfolio would include matters pertaining to Muslim women, children and families. Currently, the Prime Minister himself is Minister for this ministry (Malaysia Chronicle 2012). Today, in Malaysia, due to the changes instituted by Mahathir Mohamad, there is no separation of power between the executive and the judiciary and Parliament, and key positions of power are secured for the Malay Muslims through the Islamic institutional establishments.

Where do these developments leave Malay Muslim women? Riaz's "Inside Muslim Minds" (2008) which included a survey of 804 respondents from Malaysia, describes the strong emphasis and widespread support for exclusionary practices with regard to women. "Women are viewed as sexually driven and lustful species and a potent source of *fitnah*[11] (civil disorder, trial, upheaval) and hence need to be segregated so that men can be protected from temptation" (Riaz 2008: 171). Yet, Prophet Muhammad during his time had introduced wide-ranging legal and religious enactments to improve the position and status of women in Arabian society and to protect them from male excesses, while recognising the equality of women to men (Riaz 2008: 172-173; and Fazlur 1966: 38, cited in Riaz 2008). The work of Sisters in Islam, a non-governmental organisation in Malaysia, shows that women whose husbands marry another wife without their permission—the conditions to practice polygamy were relaxed in 2003[12]—or who have chosen to divorce them, face a number of frustrating obstacles with the syariah courts in accessing justice (Sisters in Islam 2011).

Even if Mahathir was vastly different to his predecessors as a vocal advocate for women's equal opportunities in education and employment or entrepreneurship, the equality and rights Malay Muslim women enjoyed begun to deteriorate with his Islamisation policy and the expansion of the power of the syariah law and courts under Mahathir's rule (for a further elaboration on the measures taken to secure the position of the syariah law and courts, see Hamayotsu 2003: 59-62). The underlying values and principles that influence Malaysia's socio-political climate and governance during Mahathir's tenure to this day remain very much rooted in patriarchy and a masculinist bias.

Conclusion

[11] *Fitnah* means to wrongly accuse/ to slander and hence, can lead to civil disorder, personal trials and upheavals.

[12] See for example the presentation on the Islamic Family Law in Malaysia and the effect of its amendments on Muslim women in the country, by Ratna Osman, Executive Director of Sisters in Islam, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3fLXSQNIKY accessed on 28 March 2013.

Mahathir's shrewdness as a politician and a statesman is well-recognised (Cheah 2002: 185-228), and Islam may have been what he saw as the only stable "unifying" element in his "otheredness" as a Malay. His unilateral decision to declare Malaysia an Islamic State in 2001 sealed the support of a Malay Muslim majority who were at the same time seeking a validation in their identity politics through Islam, successfully ignited by Anwar Ibrahim as the then leader of ABIM , who is also not a "pure-bred" Malay. Mahathir reminded them of their weaknesses, first as Malays in *The Malay Dilemma* and then as Muslims in his definition of *Melayu Baru*—weaknesses which he felt he did not share as he saw himself as "learned", "courageous in facing challenges" and "whose faith in Islam is unflinching" (Singh 2000: 1) or one who "hold[s] strongly to Islam" (New Straits Times 2000: 12; see also Osman 2003: 14; Mauzy & Kline 1983; Norhashimah 1996).

Ketuanan Melayu (Malay supremacy) which has been core to the politics in Malaya and then Malaysia, remains part of the Malaysian political system today, but has been recast within the framework of a Malay Islam, a puritanical Sunni Islam. I have shown that preserving this Malay Muslim supremacy and political dominance was effectively institutionalised during Mahathir's reign as Prime Minister, as effectively as he had othered the Malay Muslims as his followers to his authoritarian rule. The Malay Muslims remain the largest number among the poor and the more disenfranchised of ethnicities in the country. Malay Muslim women are increasingly burdened by the injustices they experience as a result of the rise of a misogynist, arrogant, patriarchal, supremacist, puritanical Sunni Islam, which benefitted tremendously from the institutional and constitutional strengthening of Islamic establishments within the State's machinery.

The complexities of a hybrid and pluralistic Malay Muslim community has brought about challenges to both the ideology of Malay Muslim supremacism and the identity politics of the Malay Muslims, as well as to their constitutional special privileges. It appears that it is under the banner of a "Malay Islam", a puritanical Sunni Islam, that the political hopes of the current Malay Muslim ruling elite lie in maintaining their Malay Muslim supremacy and political dominance. Through conversions to Islam, be these willing, forced or unknowing, and through the fear tactics deployed to discourage apostasy, the majority of the Malaysian population at a little over 60 per cent are Muslims though only a simple majority are *Malay* Muslims. The insistence on a "Malay Islam" will continue to mean a purging of the cultural and genetic "impurities" from within the Malay Muslims, a continued systemic othering of the Malay Muslims in Malaysia through Islamic institutions and mechanisms established and strengthened during Mahathir's rule.

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Appendix 1

Chronology of Key Developments in the Islamisation of Malaysia during Mahathir's Tenure as Prime Minister

Year	Events/Developments
1982	Mahathir's cooption of Anwar Ibrahim into joining UMNO, bringing the *dakwah* movements directly under its wings.
	An Islamic Centre, headed by a full-fledged Cabinet Minister, was set up inside the Prime Minister's Department to promote Islamic missionary activities.
1983	Establishment of the International Islamic University of Malaysia. Mahathir's public affront with the monarchy of Malaysia in 1983-1984 to undermine their constitutional power and to ensure that they could not be in a position to challenge the power of the Prime Minister or Parliament (Hussin 1990).
1984	Establishment of the Islamic Bank and Islamic banking within the Malaysian banking system.
1985	Establishment of the Islamic Development Foundation
1987	Split in UMNO where one faction opposed Mahathir's leadership and led to a failed lawsuit to declare the Annual General Assembly and the party elections null and void (for a further elaboration, see Means 1991). *Operasi Lalang* in October 1987 and the use of the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) which althought targetted all ethnicities (including members of other political particies and activists), it was believed to have meant to look even-handed but at the same time, to effectively strike considerable fear within UMNO (Hwang 2003: 143-208; Wain 2009: 66-69).
1988	A series of events perceived as challenging Mahathir's leadership and power, led to his submitting several constitutional amendments to Parliament which sealed the loss of an independent judiciary in Malaysia (Hwang, 2002; Milne & Mauzy, 1999; Salleh, 1989; Salleh & Das, 1989). The Federal Constitution was amended to divest the courts of the "judicial power of the Federation", granting them instead such judicial powers as Parliament might grant them.
1988	The Federal Constitution was amended in order to raise the status of the syariah courts. Article 121(1A) reads, "The [civil courts] shall have no jurisdiction in respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of the Syariah courts" (Legal Research Board 2003: 103; for a further discussion and elaboration on the stages of implementation, see Barr & Govindasamy 2010: 297–299). "This amendment in effect made the syariah courts

Year	Events/Developments
	parallel with, rather than being subordinate to, the civil courts" (Neoh 2008).
1997	Islam was emphasised by Mahathir in his speech at UMNO's 40th General Assembly as central to the Malay Muslim identity, describing Malays as more Muslim "than the Arabs or other races which embraced Islam" (translated version in Hng 1998).
2001	Mahathir unilaterally declared Malaysia an Islamic State in September 2001 (Hoffstaedter 2011: 19; Osman 2003: 134).

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