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Democracy and Religious Pluralism in Southeast Asia: Indonesia and Malaysia Compared

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Introduction

It is an intuitive expectation that democracy will accompany – and reinforce – pluralistic attitudes and mutual respect for all members of a society, regardless of their sub-national, ethnic, and religious identity and affiliation. The noted political scientist Alfred Stepan, for example, propounds the concept of "twin tolerations" – that is, mutual respect between and within state and religious institutions – in fostering a modern liberal democracy. According to this thesis, two specific conditions have to be met in order to guarantee open competition over values, views, and goals that citizens want to advance. One is toleration of religious citizens and communities towards the state, and the other is toleration of the state authorities towards religious citizens and communities (Stepan 2007). However, such conditions are not readily fulfilled in deeply divided societies. Southeast Asian nations are well known for being "plural societies" with a high degree of ethnic and religious heterogeneity (Furnivall 1944). For various regimes and ruling elites in those nations, the accommodation of various collective identities to build a common national identity, modern nationhood, and citizenry has not always been easy or peaceful. It remains a great challenge today, as witnessed recently in a range of communal violence and

anti-minority movements in Burma and Indonesia (Bertrand and Laliberte 2010). Moreover, growing piety and assertive religious activism in civil society since the past few decades have further complicated the process of nation-building in those divided societies (Hefner and Horvatich 1997). Against the backdrop of traditionally influential religious authorities and organized – and politicized – religion, we have seen religion serving as a collective identity, social movement, and political ideology, and occasionally contributing to inter- and intra-religious competition and fanaticism. This current of religious activism on a national and global scale, which some scholars aptly call the "God's Century" (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011), thus poses an additional challenge to the construction of religious pluralism in state and society. In particular, the individual and collective rights of religious minorities and the fair and equal treatment of all religious communities, majority and minority alike, are among the most challenging question in divided democracies.

In Southeast Asia, the emerging Muslim-majority democracies of Indonesia and Malaysia have been grappling with those challenges.[1] Since the mid-2000s, those two nations have witnessed the conspicuous growth of ultra-conservative Islamism and anti-minority movement at a time when both nations are striving to establish and develop democratic rule. What factors contribute to this upsurge of anti-minority movements, and what are the effects of such movements on inter- and intra-religious relations in divided societies such as Indonesia and Malaysia? Are political democratization and pro-democracy movement in civil society adequate to foster pluralistic and mutually respectable relations between and within majority and minority religious communities?

I borrow the typology proposed by Daniel Levine to define religious pluralism as the construction of rules and norms of the game that incorporate religious actors and voices as legitimate participants in an open social process. The concept in qualitative terms differs from "plurality," which simply uses quantitative terms to denote the growing number of groups, activists, churches, denominations, media, public spaces and the like (Levine 2009, 407). A close and comparative analysis of those two Southeast Asian cases will be beneficial for gaining a better understanding of the possibilities and limitations of religious pluralism, since ultra-conservative anti-minority movements and activities have increased in both societies at approximately the same time, despite different political and socio-economic conditions. Moreover, the trend has taken place in a distinctive manner, thereby offering empirically intriguing cases wherein the mechanisms of anti-minority mobilization as well as the impacts of such movements on the living conditions of religious communities could be observed.

In order to address those questions, the pages below will be focused on the historical institutionalization of state relations with the majority religion, Islam, after independence. In particular, I will assess the ways in which largely secular political elites in those two nations have sought to deal with religious heterogeneity and treat religious communities, both majority and minority, in the process of regime formation and nation-building. I will also evaluate the impacts of the varying patterns of regime formation and nation-

[1] Approximately 87 percent of the Indonesian population is registered as Muslim, 7 percent Protestant, 3 percent Roman Catholic, and 1.5 percent Hindu. 61 percent of the Malaysian population is Muslim, 20 percent Buddhist, 9 percent Christian, and 6 percent Hindu.

building on the conditions of religious minorities after the onset of democratization in an effort to find answers to the issues of religious pluralism and the possibilities of pluralistic co-existence in divided societies.

Making of the United Nation of Indonesia and Nascent Religious Pluralism

Indonesian political elites from the beginning were obsessed with creation of one united nation – the Indonesian national identity – as a prerequisite for building a modern independent state. The founding fathers of the Republic of Indonesia, especially the first president Sukarno, believed that the national identity should not differentiate or privilege a majority religion over other religious and cultural minorities and formally constituted the multi-religious civil ideology *Pancasila*[2] that embodied their aspiration of modern nation-building in the founding constitution. This vision and mode of nation-building aspired by secular political elites at the formative years after independence (1945) has significantly conditioned the constitutional definitions of religious communities and freedom as well as the place of the majority religion, Islam, in the state to this day. In short, Indonesia had a reasonably good head start when it came to the institutional foundations of pluralistic nation-building.

The geopolitical and socio-economic conditions under which Indonesian elites attempted to create this united nation were complex, as historians have amply recorded (Cribb 1999; Elson 2013; Reid 2010). During the preparation and revision of the constitution, one of the most contentious questions held by national elites was whether the state should be based on Islam, the majority religion, as desired by Islamist elites. The following oft-cited assertion by Sukarno in 1953 may well capture the spirit of nascent religious pluralism and secularist desire for collective liberation from a particularistic ascriptive attachment based on religion:

> If we establish a state based on Islam, many areas whose population is not Islamic, such as the Moluccas, Bali, Flores, Timor, the Kai islands, and Sulawesi, will secede. And West Irian, which has not yet become part of the territory of Indonesia, will not want to be part of the Republic (Feith and Castles 1970, 164).

Sukarno was also committed to protecting and accommodating non-Muslim minority communities as equal members of the nation he was about to build, which is evident in the following statement:

> As I repeatedly said, I am not prohibiting any person from propagating his ideology. But, remember, absolute unity, absolute unity, absolute unity, put the emphasis on unity. Do not throw it into jeopardy. I am thinking of the Christians, the Christians group. Not one, not three, nor a hundred, but thousands of Christians died in the struggle to defend freedom… Should we not value their sacrifices, too? Their hope is to be with all of us members of a united and free Indonesian people. Do not use

[2] Pancasila consists of five principles; belief in the one and only God, just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, democracy and social justice.

the term "minorities," no! The Christians do not want to be called a minority (Feith and Castles 1970, 169).

"The vision of the Indonesian nation crafted by the nationalist, mostly secularist leaders, gave rise to fierce reactions from their Islamic rivals both in modernis and traditionalist circles."

Anthony Reid argues that the strong commitment of Indonesian elites to a single homogeneous nation, and the ideal of "a single, equal, and unqualified citizenship for all" in particular is the result of a political revolution through which Indonesia achieved independence from the colonial regime and its aggression (Reid 2010).

The vision of the Indonesian nation crafted by the nationalist, mostly secularist leaders, gave rise to fierce reactions from their Islamist rivals both in modernist and traditionalist circles. Islamist elites, mostly ulama, religious teachers and intellectuals who ran religious boarding schools (*pesantren*) in rural Java and/or led prominent Islamic movements such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), insisted that a newly independent Indonesian state and nation should be based on Islam (Formichi 2012). As Robert Elson's accounts on the constitutional debates on Islam attest, the Islamist elites perceived that the rival political elites, especially Sukarno, were deeply suspicious of, and opposed to, their Islamist ideal and the philosophy forming the core ideological foundation of the modern nation, leading to the state's unfair treatment of Islam and the Muslim community. They perceived Pancasila with suspicion as a doctrinal tool devised by secular elites in order to dash the Islamist's dream of constructing an Indonesian state and nation guided by shariʿa (Islamic law) (Elson 2009, 2010, 2013) and ultimately to secularize the state to reduce political prominence of religious elites in public affairs.

The failure of the Islamist efforts to establish constitutional privileges for Islam and adopting the Islamic law for Muslims in particular left a number of Islamist elites with a deep sense of disappointment, frustration, and betrayal. Some of them contended that the Muslim community was reduced to the political status of a small minority, despite the fact that they are the nation's largest demographic group (Elson 2013, 384). They were granted some official presence in the state thanks to the establishment of the Department (later Ministry) of Religious Affairs. However, in contrast to Malaysia's state religious bureaucracies which were exclusively tasked with administration and the promotion of Islam, Indonesia's religious bureaucracy is comprised of multiple administrative divisions categorized by the "official religions" the state now sanctions; the list increased from its initial four (Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Hinduism) to six, including Buddhism and Confucianism. These arrangements mirrored the multi-religious principle of Indonesia's national ideology, which respect all religions, majority and minority alike.[3]

[3] In reality, the Islam section and divisions related to Muslim affairs (e.g., management of Haj) are by far the largest in the ministry (http://itjen.kemenag.go.id/web/). The ministry has grown among the largest ministries in the government since it administers a range of programs and provides massive patronage and financial assistance to the Muslim communities (Emmerson 1978).

The deep sense of suspicion and animosity towards Islam among the political elites, especially armed officials, has grown even further throughout the 1950s and 1960s because of Islamist rebellions and persistent struggles to elevate the official status of Islam and Muslim community in parliament (Boland 1982). One of the most prominent Islamic parties, Masyumi, was outlawed in 1960 in the midst of growing authoritarianism under Sukarno and his increasingly close relations with the Communist Party (PKI). Although a number of Islamist elites did not completely give up their aspirations to build an Islamic state and society, the subsequent regime transition and advent of military-dominant autocratic rule obsessed with economic growth and political stability in 1966 resulted in dwindling Islamist political prominence in the state.

The consolidation of authoritarian rule under General Suharto, the so-called New Order, in the following decades was achieved through the elimination and alienation of potential political and ideological opposition, especially political Islam or Islamist elites from the corridors of state power. In stark contrast to Zia's Pakistan and Mahathir's Malaysia, who sought to incorporate or support Islamist aspirations and elements in the regime and state, Suharto's Indonesia in the first few decades of its inception adopted a range of policies seen largely as "anti-Islam" among Islamic organizations and elites. One of the most important measures in this regard was the *Asas Tunggal* (sole ideology) policy that obliged all social and religious organizations to adopt and be loyal to Pancasila as their sole ideological base. This policy effectively allowed the authoritarian state to criminalize other forms of ideological and religious allegiance among citizens.

The regime's hostile attitudes to Islamism and the latter's political decline had at least two far-reaching consequences on the socio-cultural conditions of religious communities, and inter-and intra-religious relations in many decades to come. First, Suharto's brutal anti-communist purge at the onset of his ascent to power and the widespread fear among a large number of secular/non-orthodox Indonesians that they could be suspected as "communist" contributed to a dramatic increase of religious conversion and affiliation with the state-sanctioned official religions. According to scholars, conversion to Christianity was most significant in Java, although Islam also benefitted from the development (Hefner 1987; Ricklefs 2013). This socio-cultural transformation facilitated further a defensive attitude among the Muslim communities that Islam was under threat because of massive "Christianization," thereby fueling already deep-seated suspicion and potential sources of conflict between – and within – Muslim and non-Muslim communities (Crouch 2014, chap.2).

Second, the regime's suppression and exclusion of political Islam from the corridors of state power further reinforced secular elite dominance in the powerful state, thriving economy, and modernizing society. On the other hand, Islamic organizations and elites, both modernist Muhammadiyah and traditionalist NU, steadily rechanneled their energies and resources into intellectual, cultural and social activism in civil society against the backdrop of the emerging

"This policy effectively allowed the authoritarian state to criminalize other forms of ideological and religious allegiance among citizens."

self-consciously Islamic Muslim middle-class. Some of those elites were dedicated to the development of political theologies and pedagogies as well as intellectual debates to promote pluralistic and democratic values and tolerant attitudes based on Islamic principles (Barton 1994; Feener 2007; Hefner 2000; Ramage 1995).

Suharto's attempt to co-opt Islamic elites and organizations from the early 1990s onwards was primarily intended to safeguard the political survival of his increasingly personalistic regime, but was also the result of societal transformations (Hefner 1993; Liddle 1996). The regime's new pro-Islam position resulted in the redistribution of considerable state patronage and resources for Muslim communities, thereby helping somewhat to appease Muslim aspirations and ambitions to attain social mobility as well as political influence (Sidel 1998). However, the essentially secular nature and dominance of the state apparatus – and the subordinate position allowed to Islam – have largely remained the same.

Democratic Consolidation and Declining Religious Freedom and Pluralism

The fall of Suharto rule in 1998 and the ensuing democratic transition brought about much-wanted opportunity and freedom for a wide spectrum of Islamist organizations and elites to assert their political ambitions and visions through democratic channels and formal legislative forums. However, the Islamist ambition to amend the constitution to upgrade the official status of Islam was dashed in the constitutional debates, since a large segment of Muslim communities, including newly established political parties connected with NU and Muhammadiyah, instead reaffirmed their commitment to Pancasila as the foundation of the state. They mostly had come to accept the state doctrine as an assurance of the national unity and multi-religious pluralism after Suharto's three-decade long autocratic rule. A politician from the National Awakening Party (PKB) closely identified with NU, for example argued that Pancasila should be maintained as "the mandate of the Republic's founders which must be fulfilled by all of us [Indonesians] as *a nation who hold in high esteem the commitment to unity and integrity in the plurality of cultures, religions, and ethnicities*" (emphasis added) (Elson 2013, 406).

The elites from the largest secular parties, especially Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P), were especially adamant in upholding the constitutional superiority of Pancasila so as to separate religion, especially Islam, from the state. Some of them insisted that "the state has no authority to interfere in the religious lives of members of society because the right of freedom of religion is a basic right of each person" and that there should be separation between the state and religious matters (Elson 2013, 410). They argued that adopting shari'a only for Muslims would lead to the introduction of an official religion. After all, parliamentary representation of Islamist parties who insisted on the superiority of Islam and elevation of Islamic law was very small from the beginning and has diminished rapidly (Hamayotsu 2011), confirming popular allegiance to the nation based on multi-religious identity.

However, whether consolidating democratic rule and expanding opportunities and freedom for civil society have reinforced truly pluralistic attitudes – and mutual respect – among religious communities as well as state institutions is still not entirely clear. In contrast to the popular observation that Indonesia is the textbook case of "twin-tolerations" as prescribed by Stepan, the country has suffered declining religious tolerance, pluralism, and freedom at the same time that it has mostly consolidated democratic rule. According to the Setara institute, a respected Jakarta-based pro-democracy human rights organization, the incidence of assaults and harassments against minority communities based on religious affiliation, belief, or religious practice has increased dramatically since the mid-2000s and persists today. In some cases, hardline Islamic groups incite mob attacks against other Muslim communities and activities, such as Ahmadiyah and Shia, which they deem contradictory to their version of stringent Islamic principles or "apostate". In other cases, hardline groups employ violence and intimidation to force Christian communities to close their houses of worships or discontinue religious activities. Although those incidents are concentrated in several provinces such as West Java, South Sulawesi and East Java, a national survey conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) confirms that intolerant and discriminatory attitudes among the public, both Muslim majority and non-Muslim minority, in relations to other religious communities have become common across the country (The Center for Strategic and International Studies 2012).

Most problematically, it is not only hardline religious groups, such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), but also state institutions and elites that advocate discriminatory actions and measures to instill intolerant attitudes among religious communities. In West Java, for example, twelve out of twenty-two regencies/cities have issued a local decree to ban religious activities within the Ahmadiyah community. Moreover, it is important to note that at the local level, religious leaders and members of generally moderate, mainstream Muslim organizations such as NU are also active participants in anti-minority movements in some localities such as Kuningan, West Java and Madura, East Java (Hamayotsu 2013).

These tendencies raise an important question about the extent to which the founding principles of the Republic, religious pluralism and freedom, are established and respected in reality. Without doubt, the political and religious elites' discriminatory actions via state agencies and semi-state religious authoritative bodies such as the Indonesia Ulama Council (MUI) have contributed to the deterioration of inter- and intra-religious relations. Among some religious elites, the view that Islam should deserve a superior position in the state and national identity seems to still resonate. The marginalization of Islamists in parliament and government in the context of democratic consolidation means that they pursue their vision of ultra-conservative and narrowly defined Islamic orthodoxy by means of other channels, institutions and opportunities available for them. For those Islamists who are increasingly defensive in the context of diminishing political Islam and democratic rule dominated by exceptionally ultra-liberal cleric, Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001) first, and then secular nationalist, PDI-P's Megawati (2001-4), the daughter of the founding father Sukarno, religious pluralism and freedom those presidents cherished and promoted for the democratic future of Indonesia were perceived as major obstacles to their quest for power and legitimacy.

Anti-minority violence and intolerance – and declining mutual respect for one another – since the mid-2000s should be understood as a defensive action of those Islamists seeking to buttress their already narrow basis of authority and power by asserting supremacy of Islam in a deeply divided Muslim-majority society. Religious minority communities suggest that their freedom and civil rights are not adequately honored or protected by the democratic state, despite constitutional religious freedom thanks to assertive and aggressive ultra-conservative Islamist elements.

Plural Society without Religious Pluralism: Malaysia's Muslim Dominant Nation-Building

A lack of collective desire or imagination to build a "Malaysian" national identity based on mutual respect among various religious and ethnic communities contrasted markedly from Indonesia's experience. Malaysia's nationalist leaders, predominantly majority Malay (and Muslim), were from the beginning preoccupied with safeguarding their political dominance in a distinctively divided plural society after the end of British colonial rule. In contrast to Indonesia, the ethnic identities (Malay, Chinese and Indian) formed a major – and deep – social cleavage and gained political salience largely as a result of political elites' manipulation of ethnic allegiance for their political gains. When it came to the role of religion, however, it is important to note that dominant Malay elites were essentially secular and shared a similar secularist vision of a modern state with their Indonesian counterparts. The majority of Malay elites were Western-educated and of aristocratic origin, and according to Anthony Milner, their attitudes were much like "that of the average European." The first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman in particular was convinced that religion had no place in politics and state and religion should be separate, while allowing Islamic laws to play a role in Malay personal life" (Milner 1986, 122-25).

The question of the official position of Islam was a source of debate at independence as was the case in Indonesia, though the debate was settled relatively peacefully thanks to the British colonial policy of privileging Islam and Malay identity and weak Islamist demands at that time. Under British rule Islam and indigenous Malay rulers or sultans had already been incorporated in the colonial state structure and granted official position, prestige and privileges. At a carefully prepared negotiation about independence in 1957, the Malay elites readily chose to establish the majority religion as the official religion of the Federation of Malaya (Malaysia after 1965), while assuring non-Muslim communities the constitutional freedom to practice their faith under Article 11. Moreover, the nine Malay rulers were constitutionally defined as the ceremonial heads of the majority faith in their respective states in the federation (Fernando 2006, 257-58). In short, ethnicity and religion of the majority community were given constitutional primacy from the country's inception, while other communities were formally reduced to a minority status although they gained citizenship, economic and cultural freedom, and other basic rights in return for accepting the political arrangement.

According to the constitutional arrangements put in place by the departing British elites and their Malay allies, the construction of pluralistic ethnic relations and a nation based

on mutual respect among various religious, ethnic and cultural communities was secondary. It was rather primarily motivated by a political calculation and deal among the British, Malay monarchies and Malay ruling elites with whom Chinese and Indian elites were junior partners, so as to maintain a political and social order based on Malay primacy after the British departure. The British not only oversaw the crafting of the founding constitution, but also facilitated the formation of ethnic-based parties representing respective communities, Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), who together formed the ruling coalition, Alliance, and government, in order to ensure a peaceful regime transition and consolidation of state power in the management of delicate ethnic relations.

This same ethnic-based coalition dominated by UMNO expanded over the following years to underpin the ethnic-based party regime and remains in power today, having had far-reaching consequences on inter-religious relations. After the devastating ethnic riots between Malay and Chinese communities in May 1969 that occurred as a result of economic disparities and increasingly assertive Chinese opposition, the party regime tighten its grip over state power and economy to rectify the socio-economic disparities between ethnic communities. It introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970, an ambitious affirmative action program intended to reduce poverty in the predominantly Malay rural sectors while developing Malay urban business and middle classes. Under this scheme, preferences, privileges, and benefits in the forms of scholarship, university admission, loans, contracts, public offices and positions, welfares, housing, and various other allowances were almost unconditionally given to Malays. This ethnocentric redistribution of resources fortified even further Malay primacy and a sense of entitlement in the majority community. Although this pro-Malay policy may have helped mitigate potential sources of inter-ethnic antagonism and violence as some scholars argue (Stubbs 1991), it certainly did not help foster pluralistic attitudes and mutual respect between various communities. Quite to the contrary, it damaged the otherwise traditionally vibrant cultural interactions and communications among communities in a nascent civil society against the backdrop of growing conservative Islamism (Othman, Kessler, and Puthucheary 2008).

The fourth Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad who came to power in 1980 attempted to rectify the inter-ethnic tensions and imbue a sense of “Malaysian” national identity, despite growing authoritarianism during his term in office (1981-2003) and the regime’s active promotion of Islamism. Mahathir co-opted the charismatic leader of the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), Anwar Ibrahim into UMNO and government to launch Islamization policies. The federal government invested massive resources to expand religious bureaucracies to sponsor Islamic education, develop Islamic banking and financial products, and strengthen Shariʿa court and laws while promoting progressive Islamic thoughts and values in tandem with economic development. Without doubt, the pro-Islam initiatives were primarily intended to preempt the Islamist opposition, Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and sustain electoral support within the Malay community. However, the Malay elites, Mahathir in particular, also acknowledged the imperative of cultivating popular support in the economically dominant Chinese business and urban middle-class communities in order to achieve economic and cultural

modernization – and ultimately regime survival. The answer for them was the official promotion of multi-culturalism, religious moderation, and peaceful ethnic relations (Hamayotsu 2002).

Declining Religious Pluralism and Freedom: Ascendancy of Multi-cultural Pro-Democracy Civil and Political Societies and Ethnocentric Nationalist Backlashes

To what extent the regime's promotion of multi-culturalism – and progressive Islamism – has contributed to truly pluralistic attitudes and mutually respectful social interactions within various communities is uncertain. Despite abundant authoritarian powers and political and economic resources at their disposal, the UMNO elites, including Mahathir as well as his moderate successors, Abdullah Badawi and Najib Razak, continued to confront persistent conservative elements and exclusive and discriminatory attitudes within the party, state and civil society. In the context of state promotion of Islam, state religious officials grew more resourceful and powerful than ever before. Some of those officials either did not appreciate or simply ignored the UMNO's commitment to moderate Islamic visions to advance their own narrow and rigid interpretation of Islam and agendas through the expanding state apparatus. The UMNO elites strengthened new federal religious agencies such as the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) and the Department of Syariah Judiciary (JKSM) since 1980s to centralize the administration of Islamic matters which constitutionally fall under the jurisdiction of sultans in respective states, but prove to be only partially successful. Given the constitutional constraint, they needed to spend extra resources and invent administrative mechanisms to seek compliance of those state religious officials and sultans who tend to be defensive about their limited sources of authority and power.

It is against this backdrop of institutional rivalry between political and religious elites, as well as the constitutional primacy of Malay identity and politicized religion that the issues of apostasy and religious conversion (out of Islam) have become extremely controversial in the past decade. The issues of apostasy are especially problematic for religious pluralism and freedom in divided societies such as Malaysia since it criminalizes Muslim conversion. Although Malay renunciation of Islam is relatively rare, non-Malay, especially Hindu-Indian conversion (in and out Islam) and related matrimonial issues such as custody and conversion of children have led to high-profile legal battles.[4] In the context of Malaysia's dual judicial structures wherein civil and Shariah courts run in parallel, apostasy and conversion cases raise an issue of jurisdictional conflict between the two, because the non-Muslim (Malay) spouses of Muslim converts prefer to take their cases to civil courts to seek settlement on divorce and/or custody. Many non-Muslims generally believe that they would be treated unfavorably in Shariah courts which attained greater autonomy from their civil counterparts as a result of the constitutional amendment in 1988. These legal issues

[4] A Malay attempt to renounce Islam may be quantitatively rare but tends to stir disproportionately large controversy and media attention when it occurs. The most prominent legal case is the Lina Joy case involving a Malay woman who sought to change her religion and name in order to be married with her Christian boyfriend. After a long and bitter battle, she lost her case and left the country.

related to apostasy tend to fuel xenophobic and hostile reactions in the Malay community, especially among religious department officials who are eager to regulate such practices against the backdrop of highly politicized religious identities (Hamayotsu 2012).

Increasingly aggressive and antagonistic religious departments, courts, and elites against religious practices and activities that they consider offensive and insulting to Islam, have occurred when the country experienced an unprecedentedly assertive multi-ethnic pro-democracy movement in civil and political societies. In particular, pro-Malay nationalist movements such as Perkasa and ISMA (*Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia* or Malaysian Islam Solidarity) and Malay media have become extremely provocative and antagonistic against the non-Muslim/Malay communities. Their xenophobic and discriminatory assertions about their special rights and privileges generated uncertainties and fears among the minority communities as well as liberal organizations, thereby having deteriorated already delicate inter- and intra-religious relations even further.

In the wake of the so-called "Allah" controversy when the Catholic weekly newspaper, Herald, took a legal action against the government's banning of the usage of the word, Allah among non-Muslim communities, Malay nationalist organizations and media reacted belligerently, not only aggravating tension among communities, but also putting extra pressures on the courts. Tension between Muslim and non-Muslim (especially Christian) communities, has grown especially high since the High Court ruled in December 2009 to overturn the government's ban. Mob violence ensured having left at least three churches in Kuala Lumpur attacked and one badly damaged. Muslim-Malay organizations threatened Christian communities to stop using the Arabic word, Allah, which they claimed was exclusive to the Islamic faith. In the following weeks, nine more churches and other places of worship were attacked across the country (e.g., BBC News, November 4, 2009). A number of Christian community leaders feared that the predominantly Malay bench would not be impartial in issuing a judgement under such a tense situation. In the end, the Federal Court rejected the Catholic Church's appeal on its constitutional right to use the word in January 2015 (*Malay Mail Online*, January 23, 2015).

In Malaysia, religious intolerance and conflict have found their outlets primarily in the courts, street, and media and rarely reached the level of violence seen in Indonesia in the recent decade. However, the issues of religious and ethnic identities seem to be more deep-seated and far-reaching, making the development of pluralistic attitudes and mutually respectable relations among religious communities more problematic. The ruling Malay elites from the inception were obsessed with protection of Malay dominance in the deeply divided plural society upon which their regime was built. On the other hand, they were not particularly concerned about building of a coherent national identity

"In Malaysia, religious intolerance and conflict have found their outlets primarily in the courts, street, and media and rarely reached the level of violence seen in Indonesia…"

that could transcend narrow ascriptive identities. Despite some efforts by Malay ruling elites, especially Mahathir, to build a stronger national identity, Malaysian state, society and politics remains to be permeated by ethnic identity and chauvinism. Moreover, in the context of growing Islamism and regime support for Islamic institutions and agendas, religious issues such as conversion have been highly politicized by ultra-conservative nationalist organizations, elites, and media who are eager to defend their narrow agendas, in particular the supremacy of Malay identity and Islam. The rise and popularity of aggressive ethnocentric movement such as Perkasa and ISMA since the mid-2000s has made non-Muslim communities, especially Christians, extremely uncomfortable and anxious about their future despite the unprecedentedly strong multi-cultural pro-democracy movement in Malaysia's civil and political societies. The future of Malaysian democracy seems rather grim when it comes to the issues of religious pluralism and freedom even if the party dominant regime is somewhat weakened, because the regime itself was built on ethnocentric majoritarian rule. The change of political regime alone will not automatically alter this feature which has become deeply embedded in the state and societal institutions.

Conclusion

My comparative analysis of two Muslim-majority nations in Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Malaysia, suggests that construction of religious pluralism and mutually respectful relations between and within religious communities is still work in progress. Although both nations have made some important progress, albeit at a different pace and in a different manner, in the process of political democratization, they are faced with an uphill task of cultivating truly pluralistic attitudes and behaviors among various religious communities. Placed in a comparative historical perspective, the experiences of Indonesia and Malaysia show that the particular ways in which essentially secularist ruling elites have dealt with religious communities, the majority faith in particular, in the process of regime formation and nation-building have shaped inter- and intra-religious relations in many decades to come.

There is an important difference between the two nations. In the case of Indonesia, the ruling elites from the state's inception were obsessed with formation of the united nation that transcends narrow ascriptive identities, particularly religion and ethnicity, as a prerequisite for building a modern state. The aspiration of pluralistic nation-building seems to have been deeply embedded in state and societal organizations, despite occasional tragic mass killings among communities and ideologies. On the other hand, Malaysia's future looks rather grim when it comes to the questions of religious pluralism. The nation and state were built on ethnocentric majoritarianism and the aspiration of pluralistic nation-building was lacking among elites from the country's inception. The superior status of the majority faith is deeply established in the state and societal structures. Whether Malaysia's nascent multi-cultural pro-democracy movement alone will be able to overcome those structural obstacles to build a truly democratic and pluralistic society is an extremely tough question that has yet to be answered.

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