

The Multi- Ethnic Complexities of Malaysia

Theresa EE

Catholic Research Centre, Kuala Lumpur

The following article was prepared at the request of Paul Tan, Director of the Catholic Research Center, in order to provide readers with additional background information regarding the current tensions in Malaysia. Despite the strong fear of Islamicization policies, and the effective muzzling of the critical press, there are a few voices repeating the call for "dialogue." Theresa Ee's is one of them.

In 1957, the nine Malay states and the two colonies of Penang and Malacca obtained independence from the British to form the Federation of Malaya. Then in 1963, the colonies of Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak joined this Federation which then became the Federation of Malaysia. Singapore left the Federation two years later. Malaysia is now composed of 13 states. The government that took over after independence was the Alliance Party, which consisted of a coalition United Malays National Organization, the Malaya Chinese Association, and the Malayan Indian Congress. Later the National Front was formed, incorporating other component Parties.

According to government census reports, an ethnic group is defined as a group of persons bound together by common language, dialect, religion, and customs. In the 1980 census report, the most recent, the total population of Malaysia is 13,745,200. Peninsular Malaysia has 11,426,600; Sabah, 1,011,000; and Sarawak 1,307,600. In Peninsular Malaysia, Malays number 6,315,600; Chinese, 3,865,400; Indians, 1,171, 100; and others, 74,500. Sabah's population comprises, 838,100 Pri- bumis, 164,000 Chinese, 5,600 Indians, and 3,300 others. Among the Pribumi are included Kadazan, Murut, Kwijau, Bajan, etc., as well as Malays, Indonesians, and Filipinos. Sarawak has a different composition—257,800 Malays, 75,100 Melanaus, 396,300 Ibans, 107,500 Bida- yuhs, 69,100 from other indigenous groups, 385,200 Chinese, and 16,600 others. In short, Malaysia is a veritable hodgepodge of languages,

religions, cultures, and traditions.

In the Malayan Federal constitution of 1957, Islam is recognized as the official religion in a secular state with provisions for the freedom of practice of other religions and their propagation, subject, however, to state law which may control or restrict their propagation among persons professing the religion of Islam. The Malay language which forms the basis of Bahasa Malaysia is also established as the official language in the constitution, special provision being made for the uplifting and betterment of the Malay race. Thus the stage was set for the government to create national consciousness and unity by coercion.

The three major ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia—Malays, Chinese, and Indians—had little social inter-action with one another. There must be many reasons for this. I shall mention but a few. During the colonial period, indentured labourers were imported: Chinese to work in the mines and Indian laborers to work on rubber plantations. The Malays were largely fishermen or padi growers living in rural communities and practicing the Islamic faith brought to them by the Arabs, albeit a particular brand of Islam colored by their own cultural traditions. For example, Malay fishermen have the custom of making offerings to propitiate the spirits of the sea.¹ The Chinese brought their own Buddhist-Taoist religious tradition, and the Indians introduced Hinduism. Christianity came to Southeast Asia with the Portuguese in 1511. During the colonial days Christian missionaries came and started a few mission schools. English was the medium of instruction and the colonial masters gratefully and quickly absorbed these English educated youths into their civil service administration to help them run the country. Christianity, the religion of the colonial masters was adopted by some. By and large, Islam, associated with the Malays who were mainly living “out there,” in and around the jungle, was ignored. There was even a certain amount of *méprise* in the attitude of non-Malays towards Islam. For over a century the three main races have lived together in Malaysia and yet each race is equally ignorant or biased in its views of the others. For example, a common image of the Chinese is that they are materialistic, that they concentrate all their efforts on worldly success and self-advancement, and immerse themselves in trade and business activities, keeping well away from public service and salaried jobs. This in spite of the fact that Chinese philosophy has never advocated that material gain and success alone are desirable, that Buddhism teaches a detachment from all desires, and that the Chinese reckon a businessman only a little higher than a soldier, who is at the bottom of the social scale. There are many other misconceptions. The Muslims think that Buddhism is a form of polytheism, unaware of the Buddhist ideal of a way of life leading to

nirvana.

Since the formation of Malaysia in 1965, five general elections were held—in 1964, 1969, 1974, 1978, and 1981. Following the May 1969 elections, a racial riot broke out. Kuala Lumpur was ablaze. The army was brought in. Chaos reigned as all the pent-up distrust and ignorance that marked relationships between the Chinese and the Malays broke out into open hostilities. The rioting purportedly began after the opposition party held a victory parade and the government established a National Operations Council to administer the country. In 1971 Parliament recommenced and constitutional amendments were passed to restrain public discussion of issues that would be inimical to racial harmony. The Alliance Party initiated action to form the National Front. In 1974, the National Front captured 135 parliamentary seats out of 154. But communalism became more entrenched. People could not easily forget the loss of friends and relatives in the riots. Emotions ran high and mistrust between the races hardened still further. After a few years an uneasy truce was finally reached.

In 1966 the first Malaysia Plan (1966–1970) was launched to combat socio-economic problems, which according to the government included the following: (1) heavy dependence on two export products, rubber and tin; (2) a high rate of population increase which posed the problem of finding productive employment for each year's entrants into the labor force; (3) an uneven distribution of income especially between rural and town dwellers and among various social groups, and (4) a relatively low level of human resource development which resulted in shortages of many skills needed to carry out development. By 1971, after the May 13, 1969 race riots, the government felt that while the First Malaysia Plan did serve to strengthen considerably the economy of the country, it did not deal adequately with the main social and economic imbalances characterizing Malaysian society. It was felt that the needs of the poor and imbalances among racial groups would lead to growth without equity. Thus the New Economic Policy (NEP) 1971–1975 was launched. Its main aim was “to promote national unity through the two-pronged objectives of eradicating poverty irrespective of race and of restructuring society to eliminate the identification of race with economic functions.”² The next NEP was for 1976–1980; and we are now in process of the Fourth Malaysia Plan, for 1981–1985.

Then came religious revivalism which seemed to have spread round the world, including Malaysia. The revival of Islam during the last decade has finally made an imprint here in Malaysia. Fanaticism, especially of the Iranian genre, took root. Model Islamic villages known as Darul Arqam (house of Arqam, who was a friend of the Prophet Muhammad) now exist in several states. The occupants of

these villages dress in green or white tunics and wear turbans. They hang pictures of Khomeini in their homes and generally have as little contact as possible with non-Malays. There are other Islamic groups like Abim and Jamaat Tabligh whose common aim is to promote Islamic revival in Malaysia.

Where the Christians are concerned, there are Christian fanatical groups who hold strongly that only Christians can be saved. They try to preach their brand of Christianity to non-Muslims and to Muslims. In addition to this problem, there are also some Chinese religious groups, more Taoist than Buddhist, proselytizing.

And then in 1982, some Hindu Temples were desecrated by Muslim fanatics. During the clash a few people were killed. Religious leaders had the unenviable task of calming their followers. Added to this, the Hindus also resent proselytizing by some Christian groups who make use of films and slides to deride Hinduism.

Another issue which spread mistrust and fear was the language issue. The Chinese and Indians felt that vernacular schools ought to be allowed to co-exist. But as early as 1963, Bahasa Malaysia was introduced in schools to replace English. The complete switch-over came last year in 1983.

No one in his right mind would object to the noble two-pronged objectives of the National Economic Policy. What the non-Malaya see as unjust and undesirable is the implementation of the policy. Malays were said to be the most oppressed race in Malaysia, as the majority of the rural poor are Malaya. A major resentment is the recruitment policy of government servants. For every five persons recruited, four are Malays. Today the majority of government servants in the administration are Malays and people in the top posts are also generally Malays. The Federal Constitution of Malaysia states that only a Malay can become the Prime Minister of Malaysia. Many talented non-Malaya left the government service as hopes of promotion became dimmer. For some time non-Malays were already whispering their discontent, as their rights were being whittled away, slowly but surely. They feared and suspected that the government policy is Islamicization. However, the Internal Security Act which can be used to hold citizens indefinitely without trial made open dissent impracticable.

The act is a most effective weapon to silence the public. Even when the Prime Minister in 1982 proposed setting up a consultative body comprising government officers, intellectuals, and Islamic scholars to study how Islamic principles could form the basis for Malaysia's development program, no one spoke up. Today prominent Malay leaders are openly advocating Islamicization. Last month, for example, an Islamic Civilization Seminar was held in Kuala Lumpur and Islamic

scholars from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other parts of the world came to speak of the glory of Islam. The few non-Malays who were invited to sit on the panel were sadly inadequate, being untutored in their own religions.

Everywhere Mosques and Suraus are being built by the government to provide places of worship for the Muslims. However government bureaucrats make it difficult for non-Muslims to build their Temples and Churches.

The *Alkitab*, the Indonesian translation of the Bible was banned because it contains certain Arabic terms like *Allah*, *imam*, etc., which the Muslims feel would create confusion among persons professing the religion of Islam. They also feel that the use of these words is a subtle method employed by Christians to proselytize Muslims. Some Christians, especially the Pribumis in Sabah and Sarawak, can only read Bahasa Malaysia which is very close to the Indonesian language. Christians protested on this ground. Their leaders met the Deputy Prime Minister who is also the Home Minister. The ban was partially lifted. Now only Christians and Churches are allowed to possess the books. Recently copies of the *Alkitab* and *Perjanjian Bahru*, the New Testament translated in Malaysia but printed in Singapore, were confiscated. Notice was served that they would be destroyed. The Christian representatives appealed to the Deputy Minister in the Home Affairs and the books were finally released. Burial grounds are also not provided in certain states for non-Muslims to bury their dead. In the area of education, Heads of schools were advised to remove crucifixes from their class rooms. Islam is taught during school hours to Muslim children but other religions are not allowed to be taught by their school teachers. The Ministry of Education has worked out the syllabus for teaching moral education to non-Muslim pupils. Eighty percent of the present teachers in the Teachers' Training Colleges are Muslims, which means that many non-Muslim students will be taught moral education by Muslim teachers. Only Islamic Civilization is taught to all teachers so that they will understand Muslim students. "How about teaching other religious civilizations also so that Muslim teachers will understand non-Muslim pupils?" the non-Muslims complain. And so the list goes on.

On 6th August 1983, the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism was formed, the aims of which are:

- § To promote understanding, mutual respect, and cooperation between people of different religions;
- § To study and resolve problems affecting all inter-religious relationships;

§ To make representations to the government, when necessary, regarding religious matters.

Although dialogue was not explicitly mentioned in the aims of the body, it is, however, one of the methods used to achieve those aims. Dialogue would imply a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that he or she can change and grow.³

It is with this in view, of promoting harmony between peoples of different faiths through dialogue, that the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism organized a one-day Seminar, April 7th 1984, on "Common Religious Values for Nation Building."

For the present, Malaysia being what it is, dialogue with Muslims seems very difficult. For dialogue includes the possibility that at any point in the process of listening to the other, we may find the other's position so persuasive that, if we are to act with integrity, we should have to change. Nevertheless, the Second Vatican Council has issued a call for Catholics to dialogue with Muslims. We are a polyglot of races, cultures, religions, and languages. This and the events I have quoted have created resentments which have made inter-religious cooperation an arduous task. Each individual will have to understand the issues and sensitiveness which exist in order to build a united Malaysia.

Notes

1. Ahmad Ibrahim, *Islamic Law in Malaya*. Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1975, Preface.

2. Quoted from the *Fourth Malaysia Plan: 1981-1985*. Kuala Lumpur, 1981.

3. Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue." *Inter-Religio* 5:1984, pp.30-33.