

**Race and Nation in 21st Century Malaysia:  
The Production of Racialised Electoral  
Politics in the Malaysian Media**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the development of ethnoreligious narratives in the Malaysian media. It shows how, despite rapid structural changes in the twenty-first century, including the arrival of new media, the growth of a nascent civil society movement and the shift towards a two-party electoral system, the government, opposition and media continue to construct and reconstruct essentialist ethnoreligious narratives around and through political discourses and events. This process will be demonstrated through a media analysis of the three most recent general elections (2004, 2008 and 2013). Samples are taken from pro-government newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* and pro-opposition website *Malaysiakini*. While the former was founded in 1939, the latter was central to the growth of Malaysia's new media landscape and can reveal how these forms of identity have operated in the new information age. The thesis will draw upon Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an in-depth methodological approach covering textual, discursive and social practices in order to analyse the form and function of journalists' language and the ways in which it constructs ethnoreligious identities. It will be shown that Malaysia's general elections provide a crucible through which Malaysian identity is reconfigured and reshaped; a site where journalists and other writers creatively rework racial and national ideas. But it will also bring to light the fragmentation that underlies the application of these ethnoreligious narratives; a process that has resulted in the reproduction of divisive political discourses.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, media, identity, elections, *Malaysiakini*, *Utusan*



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## Glossary of Terms: Main Political Parties and Organisations

Abbreviation	Name (Malay)	Name (English)
ABIM	<i>Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia</i>	Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement
<i>Amanah</i>	<i>Parti Amanah Negara</i>	National Trust Party
APU	<i>Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah</i>	Ummah Unity Movement
BA	<i>Barisan Alternatif</i>	Alternative Front
Berjasa	<i>Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Se-Malaysia</i>	Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front
BN	<i>Barisan Nasional</i>	National Front
DAP	--	Democratic Action Party
--	<i>Gagasan Rakyat</i>	People's Might
<i>Gerakan</i>	<i>Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia</i>	Malaysian People's Movement Party
HAMIM	<i>Parti Hizbul Muslimin Malaysia</i>	Muslim People's Party of Malaysia
Hindraf	--	Hindu Rights Action Force
IMP	--	Independence of Malaya Party
LPM	<i>Parti Buruh Malaya</i>	Labour Party of Malaya
MCA	--	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCP	--	Malayan Communist Party
MIC	--	Malaysian Indian Congress
PAS (formerly PMIP)	<i>Parti Islam Se-Malaysia</i>	Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party
--	<i>Parti Negara</i>	National Party
PBS	<i>Parti Bersatu Sabah</i>	Sabah United Party
PH	<i>Pakatan Harapan</i>	Hope Pact
PKR/ <i>Keadilan</i>	<i>Parti Keadilan Rakyat</i>	People's Justice Party
PPP	--	People's Progressive Party
--	<i>Partai Rakyat</i>	People's Party
PR/ <i>Pakatan</i>	<i>Pakatan Rakyat</i>	People's Alliance
PRM	<i>Parti Rakyat Malaysia</i>	Malaysian People's Party
--	<i>Semangat 46</i>	Spirit of '46
SNAP	--	Sarawak National Party
Umno	--	United Malays National Organisation

## Introduction

Since gaining independence, successive Malaysian governments have transformed the country's colonial legacy into a political system that positions citizens within a fluid, ethnoreligious framework, which aligns Malay citizens with Islam, Indians with Hinduism, and in contrast positions Chinese citizens as 'kafir' (meaning 'unbeliever', a derogatory term used by Muslims to refer to non-Muslims). Around these ethnoreligious groupings have emerged a set of distinct, essentialist narratives connecting to each, which can be utilised by the government, opposition and/or media. This thesis seeks to shed light on these narratives as they operate in the media, showing how – despite rapid structural changes in the twenty-first century, including the arrival of new media, the growth of civil society and the shift towards a two-party electoral system – the government, opposition and media continue to construct and reconstruct those narratives in and through political discourses and events. This will be achieved through a media analysis of three recent general elections (2004, 2008 and 2013). Around elections, in and through the media different identity discourses become locked in a discursive struggle and those that prevail (those connecting to the party or parties that prevail in the election) are 'crystallised', as important political moments that reshape the identity of those citizens to which they (claim to) relate. The thesis aims to explore the media not just as a site but a *producer* of racialised discourse, revealing how these forms of identity operate in the new information age. It thus adopts a comparative approach, taking samples from pro-government newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* and pro-opposition website *Malaysiakini*. Three key arguments are proposed: firstly, racialisation in Malaysia is supported through the employment and deployment of ethnoreligious discourses; secondly, these essentialist discourses are fragmented, codified, asserted and developed, especially at (and because of) general elections, which are a crucible through which identity is reconfigured and reshaped; and finally, the media provide a platform for the constant production and reproduction of these identities, and thus a window onto Malaysia's racialised politics.

Since independence Malaysia has primarily been governed by three racially-based parties, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). These parties constitute the core of the thirteen-party *Barisan Nasional* (BN) ruling coalition. This racialised framework derives from Britain's colonisation of (what was then) Malaya late in the eighteenth century, establishing a racial division of labour between 'Malays', 'Chinese' and 'Indians'. Contrary to the 'indigenous' Malays, the majority of Chinese and Indian workers arrived under Britain's colonial immigration policy between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century. Because

of this influx, a powerful ethnonational sentiment developed among the Malay community in the early twentieth century. Although in 1946 Britain had planned to transfer power via a Malayan Union concept, with equal citizenship for all citizens, they had underestimated the extent of opposition amongst the Malay community. Central to this opposition was Umno, founded that year by a group of Malay elite to champion Malay rights given the sharp rise in non-Malays (particularly Chinese) under colonial rule. Given the extent of that opposition, Britain was forced to reassess the Malayan Union proposals, and in a revised document acknowledged the ‘Special Position of the Malays’ (Nah 2003, p. 23). This ‘special position’ – i.e. specific citizenship privileges relative to the non-Malays – was inherent to the revised governmental structure, the Federation of Malaya, established in 1948. This political concept, which contained the seeds for the racialisation of differences between Malays and non-Malays, formed the basis of the country’s independence, in 1957.

Because Umno was founded as a party protecting Malays, since independence successive political leaders have reinforced Umno’s relevance through ‘institutionalis[ing] ethnic boundaries and identities’ and ‘racialis[ing] and maintain[ing] such a racial order’ (Fee and Appudurai 2011, p.67). Not only Malays, but Chinese and Indians, are essentialised and mobilised through race, religion and other identity categories to maintain political support. Mandal (2004, p.52) declares that ‘Malaysia’s racialised political system has worked’ and that the state is ‘credited with making colonial era racialisation a postcolonial success’. I argue that one crucial factor behind that success is the persistent employment and deployment, by the government, opposition and media, of ethnoreligious discourses. First, the Malaysian constitution dictates that Malays are required to follow Islam, a stipulation that derives from colonial Malaya, where influential British ideologue Stamford Raffles deemed the Malays to be a ‘race’ that followed the ‘Moslem religion’ (Raffles 1835, p.40). Hence, Malays are mobilised by the government and media through reference to a ‘Malay-Muslim’ identity. Whether fuelled by China’s connection with communism, or because the majority of Chinese are/were not Muslim, contrary to the notion of ‘Malay-Muslim’, the Chinese have been discursively codified by the government and media using a ‘Chinese-kafir’ identity<sup>1</sup>. Finally, the dominant Indian identity relates to the colonial period, where Britain imported many

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<sup>1</sup> This ‘kafir’ labelling has been driven by the dominant Malay-Muslim national identity in Malaysia, and the belief among certain conservative Malay-Muslim politicians that the Chinese Malaysians are antagonistic towards the nation’s strive to brand itself as a model Muslim nation. As will become clear, the Malaysian media often refer to the Chinese citizens in contexts that ignore, or neglect, their myriad religious affiliations (be that as Buddhists, Taoists, or Christians, or even Muslims or Hindus). Instead they are mentioned in reference to, inter alia, their dissatisfaction at the Malays’ ‘special position’, their demand for Chinese education, or their craving for greater political power. The result is that ‘the Chinese’ as a collective often appear ungrateful, greedy and power-hungry – regardless of how far this is from the truth.

workers of Tamil heritage and Hindu faith – contributing to a government- and media-imposed ‘Tamil-Hindu’ identity.

Whereas given the constitutional stipulations Malay-Muslim identity is frequently acknowledged in scholarship, this thesis is the first to connect the Malay-Muslim identity with, and place emphasis upon, the Tamil-Hindu and Chinese-kafir identities. This ethnoreligious focus reflects a key contribution of the thesis. I argue that a combined view of racialisation is crucial to fully understanding how these ethnoreligious essentialisms interact with, and are formed through reference to, one another. These discursive agents are vital to Malaysia’s fast-moving electoral politics – which simultaneously drives the constant evolution of these racialised (and racialising) identities. Around election times, discourses around these identities are mobilised by the government, media and opposition parties as an effective strategy for political support. General elections are thus significant in providing a window onto these identity-making processes; they are a crucible in which identity is reconfigured and reshaped. Each election represents the crystallisation of a political ‘moment’, whereby ethnoreligious identity is reconstituted according to the national and global political climate. Given BN’s desire to maintain the racial status quo, elections offer

...a means to effect forms of social and political change, a terrain in which people can exert their claims to belonging in the nation on their own terms. (Gabriel 2011, p.366)

As will be seen, new media were pivotal to fomenting this change, offering a platform for new forms of identity construction. Because of these shifts in the political landscape, the ethnoreligious narratives are increasingly unstable and fragmented. Nevertheless, they continue to endure.

The second key contribution is the concept of ‘fragmented essentialisms’, which is used to guide the empirical analysis. This is a valuable concept which has particular application in the study of elections. It accounts for the ways in which political actors continue to construct and reconstruct essentialised articulations of ethnoreligious identity vis-à-vis picking up different fragments of the colonial past and reworking them within nuanced political contexts (the general elections being a primary example). The selective emphasis on certain histories (and the suppression of other histories) has caused fragmentation within and between different racial and religious groups in Malaysia. As Chapter 2 demonstrates, four aspects of fragmentation should be considered when applying this concept as an analytical tool: the fragmentation of race; the fragmented message; fragmented audiences; and the fragmented society. In this thesis, the concept will be used to ask what fragments of racialised colonial

discourse are being exploited by these media writers and why, and to determine the division, instability and ambivalence that results in the political landscape.

Since independence, racialisation has been maintained and systematically reinforced and continues to provide the essence of Malaysia's national culture, such that Malaysian politics resembles a fast-moving 'production line' of racialisation. This national culture is enforced through the mainstream press, which different BN parties own and control using colonial-era legislation and other media laws, primarily the 1948 Sedition Act, 1960 Internal Security Act, 1972 Official Secrets Act and 1984 Printing Presses and Publications Act (Chapter 3 explores their significance). By implementing and imposing this various legislation, BN has allowed racialised politics to thrive and obstructed more open communication about the identities of and differences between racial groups – engendering a means of interracial communication that is constrained and cautious.

As the first Malay-language newspaper, founded in 1939, *Utusan Malaysia* holds an important place in Malaysian history. Now owned by Umno, it has been chosen for analysis as it represents an important government voice, providing insight into discursive constructions of Malay identity from a pro-government perspective. The Malay press has been prioritised over Mandarin and Tamil presses for various reasons. First, the Malay press not only relates to Malays, but because it addresses the majority racial group, sees itself as the centre of national discourse. Second, Malay is the national language, and the Malay press holds the strongest connection with the Malay-dominant governing coalition. It thus provides access to an ethnolinguistic nationalism. Finally, there are pragmatic reasons for that choice, relating to my linguistic capabilities (discussed in Chapter 4).

BN's tight media control was weakened after the internet's arrival in 1998. Due to a conscious choice made by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the internet was less regulated so as not to dissuade foreign investors. It thus exposed the limits of government control over racialised discourse. *Malaysiakini* was pivotal to the growth of Malaysia's new media landscape. It emerged in exceptional circumstances, namely the Asian financial crisis and the *Reformasi*, a wide-sweeping oppositional protest directed at BN's governance; centred on, inter alia, the treatment of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, broad corruption and nepotism, and widespread financial inequality. *Malaysiakini* exploited these various issues to make its mark in the 1999 election (see Chapter 3), and has remained a powerful oppositional media voice. It has been chosen because it provides a suitable contrast to *Utusan*, seeking to propel a new political paradigm transcending ethnoreligious divides. But this thesis



assesses the extent to which *Malaysiakini* writers are able to do so, considering the entrenchedness of racialisation and the legal and constitutional limits in place. Although altering the nature in which racialised discourses are communicated, it shall be argued that *Malaysiakini* remains very much an active producer in and of Malaysia's racialised landscape.

Given this discussion, I prefer the concept of 'race' over 'ethnicity'. Gabriel (2015, p.10) argues both concepts are used uncritically in literature on Malaysia, and more problematically, interchangeably. This is perhaps understandable, given that 'the ideology of "race" can be effectively disguised and embedded in the language of ethnicity' (Downing and Husband 2005, p.2). Given the historical dimensions of 'race', 'ethnicity' is the more contemporary term, and it assumes positive dimensions, for instance in the celebration of ethnic diversity or ethnic pride (ibid, p.12). It thus connotes a voluntarist aspect to these identities; consciously claimed and celebrated by members of those groups as markers of cultural difference. Nevertheless, race 'refuses to go away...despite its repudiation as a scientific concept' (Ang 2001a, p.48). In Malaysia, race remains the defining axis of state and society and for this reason 'race' is preferred because it allows for a critical engagement with the state's role in naturalising race as the political reality (Gabriel 2015, p.5) – from which we can explore how non-state and extra-state actors also plug into these racialising structures. The thesis thus agrees with Fee and Appudurai (2011, p.64) that there are strong racialising currents in peninsular Malaysia that continue to structure 'social, economic, political and ideological behaviour'.

Analysing the electoral cycle (2004, 2008 and 2013) will provide critical insight into the constant evolution and dynamic nature of the ethnoreligious identities being elicited. This is a study of essentialism in media discourse in a country where racialisation continues to drive national politics<sup>2</sup>. It seeks to question:

- how these writers engage and rework Malaysia's colonial history, and how *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* writers differ in this regard;
- and how analysis of elections facilitates richer insight into the production and operation of racialised discourse in Malaysia.

I developed these ideas with the aid of six months (September 2013-March 2014) spent with *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia* (UKM) – primarily to undertake a Malay language course

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<sup>2</sup> Based around the study of general elections, this thesis takes national politics to imply the dominant political discourses that drive elections and electioneering. In this respect, the ideas in the thesis mostly relate to the Malaysian peninsula and apply less to the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, which as Chapter 1 demonstrates, have been excluded in and through the Malay-Muslim conceptions of the nation.

(to facilitate the Malay media analysis). This period was invaluable for connecting and comparing what I had read and written about in the previous year to the real political context, ‘on the ground’. For instance, before the 2013 general election I had been swept up by oppositional political rhetoric and believed that BN would be defeated. It was only through conversations with Malaysian locals that I came to realise this was a very unrealistic expectation. This period thus offered an ideal opportunity to investigate that election result further, as well as clarify certain aspects of my research framework. It was the Prime Minister’s incendiary remarks after that election (see Chapter 7) which first made me think about Malaysian identity in terms of fragmentation. Memories of that election were fresh in the memory, and the country at the time of my visit could certainly be described as a fragmented political environment. There were many contentious issues I sought to explore with people of all backgrounds (including scholars, civil society figures, government officials and students), including the enduring relevance of *Bumiputera* rhetoric; the acceptable role for Islam in Malaysia; and competing definitions of national identity (these kinds of ideas informed my sampling procedure; see Chapter 4). Overall, this field experience helped to get me ‘on track’, so to speak, structuring and situating my knowledge from the first year of study and ideally positioning me to move forward with the analysis.

As a caveat, it is important to acknowledge that this thesis is largely drawn to the more ‘spectacular’ political aspects of race and nationalism that are brought to life in the ferment of general elections. It does not seek to make claims about the routine and the everyday, although as Chapter 4 will show, my ethnographic experiences were used to guide empirical analysis. In that chapter I discuss how those experiences caused difficulties in making even the simplest assumptions around the impact of official political discourses on ordinary citizens. My perspective of race changed with each person I met, reflecting how racial categories were complex, ambiguous and mobile categories always in the making. There is a burgeoning collection of scholarship that seeks to break the ‘racial mould’ in this respect, arguing that racialisation is not the be all and end all in Malaysia (see for example Mandal (2004) and various edited volumes by David Lim (2008), Goh *et al.* (2009) and Milner *et al.* (2014)). On the religious side, we should also acknowledge the religious practices that have been silenced in the dominant discursive practices of the Malaysian nation-state. Jain (2007, p.137) for instance acknowledges many instances of interreligious mixing between the Chinese and Tamil communities, including the Chinese worship of the Hindu god Muneeswaran, and the Tamil worship of the Tao deity Tua Peh Kong. There are of course

many other notable examples, but the point is to state here that this thesis will focus on the *dominant* discursive practices that are reinforced through the workings of the nation-state.

Overall, given the impact of the *Reformasi* and new media, the twenty-first century has proven very turbulent for Malaysian politics, reflected by remarkable shifts in the electoral landscape (see Table 1). But each election is significant for different reasons:

**2004:** This was the first election after the events of 9/11 hence there was considerable scrutiny, national and international, on the role of political Islam in Malaysia. This was the first election for new Prime Minister Ahmad Badawi, who had assumed power after the long-reigning Mahathir Mohamad had stepped down. Badawi positioned himself as a reformist, and championed a moderate Islamic programme, *Islam Hadhari*. BN was primarily competing against the oppositional Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which sought to establish a theocratic state and whose leaders allegedly supported the Taliban. BN won 198 of 219 seats, proving the success of Badawi's strategy, and it will be shown how the media reworked broader Orientalist discourses around Islam and 'stuck' them to the PAS-led opposition. This proved much about the fragmented Malay-Muslim identity and how it was reworked by the media as a political tool, i.e. how the media deliberately aligned certain negative ideas around Islam with PAS and removed them from association with the 'Malay' and 'Malaysian' government.

**2008:** 2008 represents a defining moment in Malaysian politics. The election took place in light of two recent, large-scale government protests: the first, by the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (*Bersih*), concerning widespread dissatisfaction towards government corruption; and the second, by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), regarding the mistreatment of the majority-Hindu Indian citizens and thus primarily concerning that community. The political opposition effectively aligned with both organisations to mobilise this widespread resentment and remove BN's two-thirds parliamentary majority, winning 82 seats. Significantly, the Indian citizens, usually pro-government, had rallied against BN for the first time. It will be shown how considerable media focus surrounded the Indian citizens, and there were important debates and tensions between *Malaysiakini* and *Utusan* writers concerning the question of Indian marginalisation, and the consequences of privileging Hindu identity as the basis for Indian political action.

**2013:** 2013's election was the first time in history that popular support for the government fell below 50 percent. Against the backdrop of the Arab Spring, young Malaysian urbanites had continued to protest on a wide range of issues, and this momentum was reflected in the

opposition’s unprecedented haul of 89 seats. However, Umno alone won 88 seats, which – albeit considering other factors behind party support – points to the enduring power of Malay rhetoric (and of *Utusan* writers in enforcing this discourse) in this fast-changing political landscape. In reality, BN backed by *Utusan* had conducted a powerful pro-Malay (and anti-Chinese) campaign in the rural constituencies, and the nature and significance of this (and its critical opposition from certain *Malaysiakini* writers) will be explored.

Party	Number of seats		
	2004	2008	2013
<b>BN</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>133</b>
Umno	109	79	88
MCA	31	15	7
MIC	9	3	4
<i>Gerakan</i>	10	2	1
<b>Opposition</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>89</b>
PAS	7	23	21
DAP	12	28	38
PKR	1	31	30

**Table 1:** Seats in national parliament, 2004-2013 (main government and opposition parties)

### The Malaysian Electoral System

Malaysian elections exist at the federal and state level<sup>3</sup>. Based on the Westminster system (the legacy of British colonialism), in federal elections politicians are elected to the lower house (*Dewan Rakyat*) every 5 years using a first-past-the-post system. The party with the national parliamentary majority forms the government, which since independence has been the BN. The Prime Minister is chosen by the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (King) from the BN party that wins most seats, typically Umno. BN requires a two-thirds parliamentary majority to pass constitutional amendments, and this has happened all except three times in Malaysia (1969, 2008 and 2013). Malaysia has thirteen states, each which holds a separate election for its legislative assembly, through which the Chief Minister for each state is selected (from the party with the majority of state seats). With the exception of Sabah and Sarawak, state elections are usually conducted alongside general elections. As will be explained, under this federal system Kelantan has been ruled by PAS for long periods of Malaysian history.

I have chosen to study national elections for various reasons. Firstly, they offer insight into the broad political debates that define and shape the nation, in contrast to state elections which are state-focused and do not speak as strongly to national issues. Secondly, national elections combine effectively with a study of ‘national’ media outlets (insofar as both aforementioned

<sup>3</sup> Local elections were scrapped in 1965 due to the ongoing confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia; a move made permanent in the 1976 Local Government Act, after an independent commission determined that local governments could not promote national unity (Brown 2013, p.73).

outlets claim to speak to and for the nation). Thirdly, compared with state elections, because of their scale a study of national elections allows for greater emphasis on the multifaceted aspects of national development, concerning political developments, pressures for democratisation, modernisation and so on (ibid). The ten years separating these three elections allow us to understand larger forces and long-term changes, elucidate broader geographical and political trends, and connect domestic affairs to broader international issues. Finally, although it has been argued that Umno's internal assembly elections are where the real power shifts take place (concerning national leadership) (see Case 2002), a study of those elections would be confined to issues involving Umno and the Malays, thus neglecting important discourses emerging through opposition politics.

It is important to briefly discuss the constraints in the political landscape that affect how opposition parties conduct their electoral campaigning. This shall be achieved by discussing 4 'Ms': money, machinery, media and manipulation, asking how they affect the government and opposition in Malaysia. These elements have contributed to BN's 'feel good' campaign strategy, which is crucial for mobilising the rural masses and is absent in the opposition's campaigns (Moten and Mokhtar 2006, p.337).

*Money* – BN has access to considerable funds for its election campaigns, amounting to millions of Malaysian ringgit, which it uses to its full advantage. Around election time, BN issues payouts to individuals, agricultural subsidies and grants to develop local communities and schools, parks and religious buildings, and conducts vital maintenance work on infrastructure in rural areas (ibid). Although certainly not reflecting a causal link with BN support, there is a strong correlation between government patronage and that support. This 'vote buying' strategy extends to BN *ceramahs* (political lectures), which have been known to include pop concerts, distribute free food and other freebies (Weiss 2000, p.433). Importantly, money spent can increase or decrease depending on the potency of the opposition's challenge. Lacking such finances, the opposition is hamstrung in this regard. Citizens who want to contest as independent candidates are also affected by the high deposit required from election candidates, RM20,000 (over US\$5000), one of the highest in the world (Brown 2013, p.73).

*Machinery* – BN utilises its extensive election machinery, which far eclipses the opposition's. BN is able to mobilise this machinery quickly, efficiently and extensively, and its campaign is conducted by 13 separate parties in that coalition, each working to the same objective and championing the same agenda (Moten and Mokhtar 2006, p.337). Election campaigning periods are kept short in order to limit the chances of opposition parties, few and fragmented

as they are, to plan and execute an effective strategy (though naturally both sides campaign long before this official period, in some way or another). Opposition *ceramahs* are often subdued as a result of the 1954 Election Offences Act, which forbids personal attacks, character assassination and the incitement of religious and racial sentiments (Moten and Mokhtar 2006, p.325)<sup>4</sup>. At those *ceramahs* the police make their presence felt, which Weiss (2000, p.431) notes, ‘reinforce[s] fears of instability’ should the opposition win. There is also legislation that bans political rallies, which has curbed public expressions of dissent from civil society (Anuar 2005, p.28).

*Media* – At election times, media reports are dedicated to protecting and promoting BN hegemony (Anuar 2005, p.25), and thousands of pages of advertising space are used to discredit the opposition (Weiss 2000). Stories on the opposition are minimal and often derogatory – for instance painting PAS leaders as oppressive towards women and non-Muslims (Moten and Mokhtar 2006, p.337). Consequently, ‘their policies on economic, political, and cultural matters are hardly heard by the electorate’ (Anuar 2005, p.28). That press excludes images of opposition party figures (Abbott 2011). BN also erects large roadside and billboard advertisements, at huge cost to the taxpayer (Weiss 2000). BN’s image is thus ubiquitous in contrast to the resource-bare opposition. Opposition posters and leaflets are usually ‘only visible in and around election operation centers’ (Moten and Mokhtar 2006, p.324). The opposition has been known to publish its own adverts, but these are few and heavily edited (ibid, p.338). The opposition generally relies on its own publications and, since 1999, the internet. The latter is increasingly common, for opposition publications are confined only to their party members (although this rule is not strictly enforced) (ibid, p.337).

*Manipulation* – Free and fair campaigning is not a significant element of Malaysia’s electoral system. Complaints around Malaysia’s elections have been documented by independent groups, both domestic, such as election monitoring watchdog *Pemantau*, and international, such as the non-partisan, US-based *National Democratic Institute for International Affairs* (Weiss 2000). Malaysia’s Election Commission (EC), the body responsible for monitoring Malaysia’s electoral rolls and periodically reviewing electoral boundaries, is known for its partisan stance towards BN. The EC has been embroiled in many contentious issues regarding voters and the voting process, including spoiled ballots, the exclusion of registered voters, the use of ‘phantom voters’ ‘(foreign nationals or other non-voters paid to vote in the name of deceased or fictitious citizens)’, coercion of voters, and the extension of voting times in

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<sup>4</sup> BN’s aforementioned offences – provision of refreshments, monetary rewards, campaign overspends etc. – also fall under this act, but are overlooked.

certain constituencies (ibid, p.432). Amendments made after 1999, a weak election result for BN, made it impossible to challenge the accuracy of the electoral roll (Brown 2013, p.73). The EC is also implicated in the gerrymandering of electoral boundaries such that pro-BN areas (rural, predominantly Malay) are given greater weight. Given this rural weightage, Verma (2002, p.147) notes that the Malays' 57 percent of the population equates to Malay 'majorities in 70 percent of the peninsular seats, guaranteeing heavy Malay overrepresentation in parliament'.

Overall, these four Ms have ensured that BN has maintained its hegemony over state and society (Anuar 2005). They have created widespread disillusionment towards the legitimacy of Malaysia's electoral system (Weiss 2000, p.433) and perhaps influenced the belief that preventing BN's two-thirds parliamentary majority is all the opposition parties can hope for (contrary to actually capturing parliament). Although impossible to predict how successful the opposition would be given a free and fair system, that it has been denied this chance reflects a great inequity in Malaysian politics.

## **Thesis Structure**

This thesis is structured into 7 main chapters and a concluding chapter. The first three chapters follow a useful trajectory, introducing the reader to Malaysia's electoral history, before taking a closer look at the history and defining characteristics of Malaysia's ethnoreligious discourses, and finally assessing the role and impact of media in the Malaysian landscape. This historical context is crucial to the media analysis, as explained in the methodology chapter that follows. Thereafter, one chapter is dedicated to each analysed election (2004, 2008 and 2013), before a concluding chapter that discusses the media's situation in the political landscape, the nuanced character and operation of these racialised discourses and how they constitute a site of creative intellectual activity.

Chapter 1 assesses the historical evolution of national electoral politics in postcolonial Malaysia (from the first general election in 1955, to the *Reformasi* and advent of new media in 1999). It explores the factors underlying how Malaysia's racialised paradigm was reworked and consolidated throughout the twentieth century, such that BN hegemony was maintained. The chapter documents key shifts in political discourse across four periods: 1955-1964, which captures the country's transition from British rule to independence; 1969-1978, which marked the dawn of a new Malaycentric ruling ideology; 1982-1990, when BN's Islamisation programme began to infiltrate all areas of national life; and 1995-1999, a period driven by a new modernising agenda connected to powerful visions of a new technological age, but which

culminated in the Asian financial crisis and rise of new media. Focus is on key electoral outcomes and the implications they had for internal shifts within political parties as well as pivotal shifts to political discourses around race, religion and other forms of identity. These discourses are integral to Malaysian politics, and the chapter shows how race is sustained and changed through the electoral process, employed and deployed as a powerful political catalyst.

The following chapter explores the complex debates that preoccupy scholars of Malaysian nationalism, concerning the political discourses around key racial groups in Malaysia and the precariousness of different ethno-histories. It is split into two parts, with part I exploring the historical emergence of different ethnoreligious identities, in terms of the mythology and symbolism that underlie these groups, and part II examining how this ethnoreligious framework has been reworked in postcolonial Malaysia. The chapter introduces two key concepts for understanding the empirical analysis: ‘ethnoreligious symbolism’ and ‘fragmented essentialisms’, which together account for how contemporary ethnoreligious discourses are codified through reference to fragments of Malaysia’s colonial-racial past – resulting in a complex, dynamic, messy, contested and ambivalent political terrain.

Chapter 3 introduces and positions *Utusan Malaysia* and *Malaysiakini* in the Malaysian polity, demonstrating how both media outlets emerge from distinct and divergent junctures in this landscape. The first section explores the shift in national voice, from traditional media (elitist, hegemonic and top-down) to new media (multi-scalar, empowering and bottom-up). The second section examines the various factors that limit Malaysia’s media landscape and particularly constrain new media’s potential. The final section explores the imagined communities of *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini*, assessing *Malaysiakini*’s potential to shift national discourse towards a more inclusive narrative. Notably, this chapter utilises certain ideas of Antonio Gramsci, asking how his notions of hegemony and the organic intellectual can help explain the role and agency of journalists in the political landscape, and calculate the potential of *Malaysiakini*’s writers to forge a counter-hegemonic political moment.

Thereafter, Chapter 4 outlines the methodological procedures and theoretical insights applied in this study. It first introduces Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), before discussing the specific approach to CDA devised for this bilingual study. Accordingly, it proceeds to discuss how CDA may need to be adapted for the Malaysian context (with reference to journal entries from my time in Malaysia). Thereafter, the sampling procedure is outlined, both in terms of the media chosen and the theoretical approach to sampling adopted. Finally, it considers the



ambiguities of translation, drawing from Mona Baker's work in translation studies. The thesis then progresses to the three empirical chapters, where CDA has been used to explore the production of racialised electoral politics in three recent elections: 2004, 2008 and 2013.

The first empirical chapter showcases the 2004 election, demonstrating how the post-9/11 geopolitical context influenced certain *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* writers to invoke Orientalist and anti-Islamist discourses to defame the PAS-led opposition. The chapter's core is dedicated to explaining how differences between 'Self' and 'Other' were structured and racialised through and by the use of three discursive 'binaries' that split Malay-Muslim identity along several axes: moderation vs. fundamentalism, modernity vs. antiquity and morality vs. sin. Both media reinforced the 'three Ms' in an unrelenting campaign, aligning BN with the ideal Malay-Muslim identity (moderate, modern and moral), and in contrast, PAS with its Islamised 'Other' (fundamentalist, archaic and evil). Through those binaries, 'ideal' Malay behaviours were reinforced and the 'Otherness' of PAS and its supporters was crystallised; external and threatening. This proved much about the precarity and fragmentation underlying the Malay-Muslim identity and how this was manipulated by the media as a political tool, but also the hegemonic structures in play that influenced *Malaysiakini* writers to turn volte-face against PAS and champion the status quo.

Chapter 6 jumps ahead four years to 2008, where the political landscape had dramatically shifted. It illustrates how the 'Hindraf factor' that had swept the nation influenced *Malaysiakini* and *Utusan* writers to articulate specific media discourses around the Indian community. The chapter's core is dedicated to elucidating the differences between these two antithetical media positions: *Malaysiakini* writers and their focus on Tamil-Hindu subordination and the need to forge transnational links with other Indian diasporas; and *Utusan* writers, who criticised Hindraf's 'criminal' actions and the opposition's exploitation of Indian issues, and instead highlighted that community's socioeconomic progress. Consequently it highlights how both narratives pointed to the fragmentation of Tamil-Hindu identity, with *Malaysiakini* writers focusing on an essentialised image of the 'colonial' Tamil-Hindu subject (which alienated non-Tamils and non-Hindus), and certain *Utusan* writers privileging a middle class lens which mostly ignored the issue of Indian marginalisation. These elements together highlighted the dilemma of Indian representation in Malaysia, but more importantly – coupled with the last chapter – suggested that despite *Malaysiakini* writers' attempts to mobilise mass Indian discontent and challenge BN hegemony, most had succumbed to racialised political imaginings that legitimised the status quo.

The final empirical chapter is based on the media's response to a controversial statement broadcast by the Prime Minister that scapegoated the Chinese for BN's poor performance in 2013's election. *Utusan* had constructed an effective pro-Malay (and anti-Chinese) campaign that invoked historical colonial elements to reconstruct the antagonistic relationship between Malay 'Self' and Chinese 'Other', which bolstered rural Malay support for Umno. This required the resurrection – and expert manipulation – of colonial-historical Malay and Chinese discourses, such that the Chinese were cast as a treasonous group that had attempted to overthrow the 'Malay Kingdom'. This highlighted *Utusan*'s resilience as well as the enduring power of Malaysia's fragmented, racialised political discourse. *Malaysiakini* writers, making a stand against the government, responded by denouncing BN's racialised perspective and emphasising the differences between 'pro-BN' rural areas and 'pro-opposition' urban centres. However, this appeared to represent a politically-loaded counter-critique which exposed important rural/urban class divides that cast doubt on the power and reach of *Malaysiakini*. To fully appreciate the significance of these three electoral 'moments' requires understanding Malaysia's broader electoral history, and so to Chapter 1 we now turn.

# Chapter 1: The Evolution of National Electoral Politics in Postcolonial Malaysia

## Introduction

This first chapter examines the evolution of national electoral politics from before independence until the end of the twentieth century, which ushered in Malaysia's *Reformasi*. The elections are split into four periods suitable for documenting the key shifts in political discourse:

- **1955-1964:** This period captures Malaya's transition from British rule to independence, demonstrating the importance of its racialised election system in forging this process. The 1955 election was essential for Malaya's politicians to prove they could handle self-rule, thus key to securing independence shortly after. The 1959 and 1964 elections reflected Malaya's first attempts as an independent nation to experiment with the Malay/non-Malay power sharing arrangement nurtured by the British colonialists. But the dramatically different results of both elections proved the importance of different domestic and international factors in shaping the government's fortunes.
- **1969-1978:** The 1969 election was significant for its bloody aftermath, demonstrating the weaknesses of the consociational arrangement. It marked the dawn of a new political ideology amongst the Malay intelligentsia, who started to assert their postcolonial 'voice' in governing the country, reinforcing the Malay identity and becoming more authoritarian towards opposing groups.
- **1982-1990:** The 1980s were significant for the government's mainstreaming of Islam, which increasingly infiltrated all areas of national life, whether social, cultural, political or economic. This related to the post-1969 'Malayisation' of national identity, and the resulting political contest between Malaysia's two Malay-Muslim political parties, Umno and PAS.
- **1995-1999:** Contrarily, the 1990s were driven by a new modernising agenda, reflecting powerful visions of a new technological age. The government sought to establish and consolidate an inclusive national identity for the new century. But the 1997 Asian financial crisis brought unforeseen consequences which culminated in a stark contrast in government fortunes between the 1995 and 1999 elections.

Focus is on key electoral outcomes and the implications this had for shifts within political parties, but also pivotal shifts to political discourses around race, religion and other forms of

identity. These discourses drive Malaysian politics, and the chapter demonstrates how race is sustained and changed through the electoral process, employed and deployed as a powerful political catalyst. This racially-driven polity emerged from a complex interplay between colonialism, decolonisation, and modernisation. It was under British rule in the nineteenth century that the concept of race emerged, playing an important role in the administration of colonial society, dividing Britain's economic operations between what were classified in census records as 'Malay', 'Chinese' and 'Indian' racial groups. Through this racialised paradigm modern politics emerged, early in the twentieth century, and when Malaya became independent on 31 August 1957, it was governed by the Alliance, a tripartite coalition moulded around those racial groups: the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC).

We should outline the historical elements that underlay the formation of this first government. In 1947, Malays, Chinese and Indians respectively constituted 49 percent, 38 percent and 11 percent of the population (Hirschman 1980, p.111). Although precolonial Malaya had a multicultural dynamic, the majority of Chinese and Indian citizens travelled to Malaya under the auspices of the British colonial government. Given that historical influx of foreigners, a group of British-educated Malay elite had constructed a powerful, defensive political discourse centred on the need to defend the rights of the Malays, who had been dispossessed in their own land '*Tanah Melayu*' (lit: land of the Malays). Umno was formed on 11 May 1946 by Onn Jaafar, a Malay journalist critical of the royalty's yielding attitude towards the colonialists. Umno's mission statement was to empower the Malay people, in light of their historical subordination and loss of sovereignty under colonial rule, and to prove the Malays' worthiness of self-rule. The party quickly established substantial grassroots support, and its selling point to the Malay community was that indigenous Malays had been set back due to the arrival of those immigrant non-Malay communities. Economically weakened by the Second World War, in 1946 Britain outlined plans to transfer autonomy to Malaya, through establishing a Malayan Union that granted equal citizenship to Malays and non-Malays, with a view to eventual independence. Although greeted unenthusiastically by various parties, non-Malay communities and colonial ideologues included (Cheah 2002, p.15), Umno positioned itself at the head of this resistance. Faced with unrelenting pressure from Umno, the Malayan Union Committee on the Constitutional Proposals in a later report agreed to acknowledge the 'Special Position of the Malays', based on

...a very real fear on the part of the Malays that they may steadily become submerged in a country in which (except for the aborigines) they are the indigenous people. (Cited in Nah 2003, p.518)

Umno thus powerfully persuaded the colonial elite that Malays were the ‘definitive people’ who deserved a special place in the new nation-state. The Malayan Union was replaced by the 1948 Federation of Malaya, and written into the constitution was the obligation of the king to defend the rights of the Malays. In that constitution, restrictions were placed on non-Malay citizenship and only Malays were citizens automatically (Cheah 2002, p.19). Umno’s success in forcing this u-turn in colonial policy made it synonymous with the Malay nationalist struggle leading into independence.

Umno’s legitimacy has much to do with its political identity, grounded in an understanding of the needs of the Malay citizenry. The rural Malay constituency is central to the government’s hold on power, and Umno demonstrates its connections with that constituency through the paradigm of racial politics. Umno ascertains its ‘moral claim to state power’ through promoting ‘Malay unity, protection, and dominance, a mission that itself derives morally from the community’s indigenous standing in *tanah Melayu*’ (Case 1995, p.104). This innate relationship between party and people has never been extinguished in Malaysia (ibid, p.103). By incessantly reinforcing divisive Malaycentric rhetoric, Umno has prevented the formation of a united, interracial working class and hence a true challenge to its hegemony. At crisis points, enforcing this hyper-racialised rural identity through Umno mobilises the support on which the government can always rely (as Chapter 7 demonstrates).

To understand MCA’s formation, we must first discuss the communist movement in Malaya. In the early twentieth century, a strong communist movement had emerged on the peninsula inspired by events in Mainland China, culminating in the formation of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in 1930 in Singapore. MCP received majority-Chinese support based on the overseas cause of Chinese nationalism and support for Chinese language schools in Malaya (Yaakop 2010, p.2). The communist struggle became violent in 1948 when MCP declared its opposition to the Federation agreement, provoking Britain to declare a state of emergency. At this time, the Chinese were ‘stereotyped either as Communist or a sympathiser of the Communist cause’, by the British but also the Malays (ibid, p.8). Unable to distinguish between Chinese citizens and potentially subversive communist sympathisers, Britain resorted to divide-and-rule tactics to contain the Chinese ‘threat’. Rural Chinese were given identity cards (which designated their race) and resettled in ‘new villages’. These were isolated, gated and closely guarded, exclusively-Chinese communities, segregated from Malay villagers, which left an indelible mark on representations of the Chinese community and heightened Malay/Chinese tensions (Sin 2015, p.536). MCA, formed in 1949 by a group of British-educated Chinese elite, was strongly supported by the British as an alternative to the MCP.

For Britain, MCA was the only 'politically acceptable organisation' that could represent Malayan Chinese (Chandler *et al.* 1987, p.408). Britain saw the MCA as a means of bringing more Chinese onside; a non-communist, moderate alternative to the MCP (Tarling 1999, p.274).

MIC was a small bourgeoisie Indian party formed in 1946, consisting of clerks, retailers and merchants (Muzaffar 1993, p.217). It initiated as a radical party, preoccupied with the independence movement in India, before turning its attention toward the Indian community in Malaya (after India gained independence in 1947). MIC positioned itself as a party championing the post-war development of Malayan Indians, particularly those working on the colonial plantations. Aside from MIC, there was a substantial left-wing Indian presence; Muzaffar (1993, p.218) observes that the left's ideological orientation towards the poor and disenfranchised 'endowed legitimacy upon the Indian cause', many of whom were impoverished. But the vast majority of left-wing groups became a casualty of the emergency period (which lasted until 1960), provoking Britain to go 'all out to eliminate left-wing remnants from public life' (p.219). This zero-tolerance approach influenced MIC to drop its radical line and become a conservative, communal political party that served elite interests and cooperated with the British authorities (*ibid.*). In stark contrast, the abolition of labour unions, which had a substantial Indian presence, meant the working class Indian community no longer had a political champion (Colletta 1975, p.92).

### **1.1 1955-1964: From Malaya to Malaysia**

#### ***1955***

When Malaya held its first general election on 27 July 1955, the nation was awash with excitement. It was expected that the Alliance would emerge victorious. The Alliance needed to prove to the British government that it was capable of handling the country's administration. A variant of this model had been proven three years earlier, in the Kuala Lumpur municipal elections. Then, local branches of Umno and MCA had formed a temporary alliance in order to defeat the oppositional, non-communal Independence of Malaya Party (IMP). IMP was led by Onn Jaafar, who had become disillusioned by Umno's racialised rhetoric and left the party after his proposals to offer membership to non-Malays were rejected. In that election, the Umno-MCA alliance won 9 of 12 seats, and the IMP just 2. The Alliance was formalised on 23 August 1953, under the leadership of Umno leader Tunku Abdul Rahman. The Tunku, albeit a less experienced orator than Onn, nevertheless possessed substantial charisma that won over the electorate and his political peers. Only in 1954 did

MIC join the Alliance, after realising that the future of Malayan politics lay in this communal arrangement. The 1955 election was vital for these respective parties to show Britain they could cooperate with one another and were suitable representatives for the various Malayan peoples. In 1955 the Alliance was opposed on two fronts, by *Parti Negara* (formed by Onn after IMP's failure in 1952) and the conservative and Malay-Muslim Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP). PMIP formed in 1951 as an Islamic wing of Umno, albeit re-registered as a separate party for 1955's election. PMIP was composed of ulamas (Islamic scholars), imams and conservative nationalists who sought a radical break from Umno's more secular governing style (Liow 2011, p.379). PMIP's antecedents were in earlier Malay anticolonial nationalist movements, particularly the *Kaum Muda* – a group of Middle East-educated scholars with Pan-Islamic sentiment. PMIP sought to reject Malaysia's racialised state with an Islamic state that deemed all Muslims equal. It was a strong contender for the Malay-Muslim population, particularly the peasantry from the northern, rural, Malay-dominant states – though was less potent in the mixed urban constituencies.

Although the Alliance manifesto covered myriad issues, their promise of independence within 4 years captured the imagination of the electorate, 'dwarf[ing] any communal considerations' (Ramanathan and Adnan 1988, p.7). In the election, the Alliance achieved a landslide victory, winning 51 of 52 seats. The remaining seat was won by PMIP, which had been severely hampered by a lack of funds and party organisation. Although Britain had continued to support Onn, believing him to be popular with Malays, through Onn's failures Britain was forced to accept the Tunku's popularity and the potency of Malay nationalism (Cheah 2002, p.26). Beating off both competitors, the Alliance had carved for itself a strong position to negotiate terms for independence. The election result was to Britain a near-unanimous signifier that an interracial coalition catering to communal interests would provide a solid platform for nation-building. This consociationalist model offered a suitable platform for proportional representation and power sharing between Malays, Chinese and Indians<sup>5</sup>. Significantly, Chinese and Indian Alliance candidates won even in Malay-majority constituencies. However, in 1955 few non-Malays were registered voters and the resulting electorate for the elections was 84 percent Malay (ibid, p.30). Hence, the Alliance's victory did not accurately reflect non-Malay support for consociationalism.

Aside from suffering from British efforts to curb socialism and communism, the left wing was also divided in its stance towards Malay privilege: whereas the non-Malay-dominated Labour

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<sup>5</sup> Consociational states are defined through major ethnic, religious, and/or linguistic divisions. Usually, no group is large enough to form a majority, as with Malaysia. Albeit perceived as conflict-prone, stability is supposedly maintained through consultation between political elites from each ethnic group (Lijphart 1968).

Party of Malaya (LPM) was against Malay rights, the Malay-dominant *Partai Rakyat* supported those rights (Leong 2003, p.92). Such cleavages had relegated class to the political background, submerged under communal differences (ibid). Clearly, leading into independence, the nature of Malaya's pluralism was highly contested:

...as they looked into the soul of independence they drew very different conclusions from the colonial experience. The rhetoric of communalism divided as much as it united the communities of Malaya. (Harper 1999, p.362)

## **1959**

1955's independence promise had detracted from other important political concerns, and rendered marginal any inter- and intraracial differences. But in the independence negotiations, the Tunku had insisted that non-Malays not be accepted as 'nationals' but only as 'citizens'; Malay identity was to form the core of national culture. The Alliance insisted that the constitution include: Article 153, that recognition of 'the special position of the Malays' is a legal requirement; Article 160, requiring Malays to follow Islam; and Article 3, proclaiming Islam as 'the religion of the Federation' (Government of Malaya 1957). These clauses continue to powerfully impact Malaysian politics, the latter two particularly since the 1970s, when Malaysia witnessed an extensive Islamic revivalist movement (see section 1.3). The 'special position' of Malays was part of a quid-pro-quo arrangement between Umno on the one hand, and the MCA and MIC on the other – known as the social contract. While citizenship based on birth right had been ceded to the non-Malays<sup>6</sup>, the non-Malays in-turn must recognise the special position of the Malays as the true natives of the land, Malay as the national language, Islam as the official religion and the importance of the Malay royalty (Leong 2003, p.91). This bargain included a 'four-to-one ratio of Malays to non-Malays in the Malayan Civil Service', which before then had been comprised of many non-Malays (Andaya and Andaya 1982, p.282). Meanwhile, Malays had to accept that whilst the Malay elite retained most political power, the Chinese, through the entrepreneurial Chinese business class that had developed through their participation in the colonial economy, were more economically powerful than the Malays. Indians too were included in this conception, but due to their smaller proportion were less significant to the agreement. Notably, MCA and MIC only accepted the Malays' 'special position' in 1956, one year before independence (Cheah 2005, p.101) – but without consulting their own constituents (Crouch 1996, p.157). Kailasam (2015, p.6) notes that MIC not once considered how these arrangements would affect 'domiciled and local-born Indians'. This represented a classic problem relating to those

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<sup>6</sup> Consequently, many second-generation Chinese migrants now qualified as Malayan citizens (Cheah 2002, p.29).



political parties' commitment to consociational democracy, ruling on *behalf* of those groups rather than consulting with them, as with a more conventional democratic arrangement; 'in the interelection period the relationships between electors and elected are almost nonexistent or antagonistic' (van Schendelen 1984, p.156).

This political compromise caused long-lasting tension from the outset, for all parties concerned. Cheah (2002, p.6) notes that because Umno's leaders did not demand a 'Malaya for the Malays' nation-state this would invite pressure from other nationalist groups, in-turn arousing non-Malay resistance; 'recurring struggles and conflicts [which] would dominate the history of racial politics and nation-building in Malaysia'. After 1957, the proportion of registered non-Malay voters had increased to 43 percent of the electorate due to the citizenship provisions in the constitution (ibid, p.7). Emboldened by the non-Malays' numerical strength, MCA challenged Umno for more Chinese provisions leading into the 1959 election. New leader Lim Chong Eu, who took charge after an MCA leadership election in 1958, proposed reforms to language and education policies and requested that MCA be given more seats, thus challenging a) Umno's position as the dominant party and b) Malay language as the national language (Ramanathan and Adnan 1988, p.6-7). These actions forged ruptures in the MCA leadership, provoking bitter factionalism which Case (1995, p.86) notes alienated its supporters.

Such fragmentation, both within and between Alliance parties, left its mark on the 1959 election. In 1959 the Alliance won just 74 of the 104 seats it contested. Whereas in 1955 the Alliance won 79.6 percent of the vote, in 1959 this was reduced to just 51.5 percent (Cheah 2002, p.90). Many Malays had opted to vote for the PMIP. As a result, PMIP won 13 seats and gained control of the states of Terengganu and Kelantan, becoming the first Islamist party to come to power through elections in Southeast Asia (Liow 2011, p.378). 1959 thus represented the dawn of a new Islamic culture in these states; a concern for Umno, as PMIP's political rival. On the opposite side, many non-Malays voted for the Socialist Front (SF) and the majority-Chinese People's Progressive Party (PPP). SF was formed in 1957 by LPM and *Partai Rakyat*, in spite of their ideological differences. SF gained 8 seats and PPP a further 4. Cheah highlights the 'disturbing factor' that oppositional votes were also given to communal parties (2002, p.90).

## **1964**

By the next general election, in 1964, the Southeast Asian political landscape had vastly changed. On 16 September 1963, Malaya had merged with a cluster of former British colonies

– North Borneo, Sarawak and Singapore – to form Malaysia. The idea for Malaysia was first proposed by Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to the Tunku in 1961. Lee sought help from the Tunku to take over Singapore’s security and contain the communist threat (Chinese-majority Singapore was considered a stronghold for communist activity). This was a clever political move by Lee; his government could not be seen to act against the communists who had helped him come to power (Cheah 2002, p.94). Alliance leaders also believed leaving Singapore separate would risk giving the Chinese too much power in the region – despite Lee’s assurance to the Tunku that Malay political dominance would remain unchallenged (ibid). North Borneo and Sarawak were included primarily to redress the demographic balance in favour of indigenous groups – of which Malays were the most dominant<sup>7</sup>. Both joined the merger provided they could maintain a degree of cultural and political autonomy, as respectively outlined in their 20-point and 18-point agreements (documents covering all aspects of their inclusion in the merger, including respect towards religious freedom among indigenous groups in these regions)<sup>8</sup>. From these demographic shifts emerged a new term, ‘*Bumiputera*’ (son of the soil) – which conveniently grouped the Malays and the non-Muslim indigenous groups of Sabah and Sarawak into one unit. By extension it pitted these ‘indigenous’ groups of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak against non-*Bumiputera* ‘immigrant’ Chinese and Indian communities – impostors into this Malay civilisation. This term became commonplace in government documents. It was significant because the *Bumiputera*/non-*Bumiputera* divide reflected a 50/50 split (Shamsul 1996, p.323). The merger was opposed by Indonesia’s President Sukarno, who viewed it as a neocolonial threat to Indonesia’s sovereignty. This escalated into the *Konfrontasi*, a violent conflict between 1963 and 1966 on the Indonesian-Malaysian border.

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<sup>7</sup> Malay-majority Brunei was also invited, but rejected on the grounds that it would lose oil revenues and compromise the position of its monarchy.

<sup>8</sup> The majority of indigenous groups in these states practised Christianity and not Islam (Crouch 1996, p.168).



**Figure 1:** The Indonesian-Malaysian border on the island of Borneo at the time of the *Konfrontasi* (Adiputra 2010). Military confrontation occurred along the border between Kalimantan (the collective Indonesian name for the parts under Indonesia’s control) and Sarawak and North Borneo.

This fragile political environment influenced the Alliance’s strong performance in the election, on 25 April 1964, taking 89 of 104 seats. The majority of Malaysian citizens had opted for the Alliance as the safe option, considering the potential instabilities that could arise from the *Konfrontasi* threat. Meanwhile, SF lost 6 seats, PPP lost 2 seats and PMIP lost 4 seats, yielding control of Terengganu to Umno – a humiliating defeat for the opposition. But this detracted from an important ideological struggle involving Prime Minister Lee and the Tunku, which broadly reflected Malay/Chinese tensions caused by Singapore’s membership in Malaysia. Singapore’s People’s Action Party (PAP) had challenged for seats on the Malaysian peninsula, leading Umno to retaliate by contesting seats within Singapore. Lee sought to challenge Umno’s communally-oriented vision with one of ‘Malaysian Malaysia’ – reflecting his campaign for a racially equal Malaysia. According to the controversial Article 153, this was seditious. Grassroots support for PAP on the peninsula was poor, and PAP won just one seat overall. Nevertheless, this battle sparked riots between Umno and PAP loyalists in Singapore later that year. In these riots, scores of Malays and Chinese were killed, leading to accusations from both sides concerning who had instigated them: Lee blamed ultras from Singapore’s Umno branch whereas Umno countered by comparing Singapore’s treatment of Malays to Israel’s treatment of Palestinians (Cheah 2002, p.100). In August 1965, Singapore parted ways with Malaysia. Lee’s vision was deemed antithetical and threatening to Umno’s

core ideology. For the future tranquillity of both regions, separation was in the interests of both the Tunku and Lee, whose ideologies were irreconcilable.

## **1.2 1969-1978: An Emergent Postcolonial Voice**

The period between 1957 and 1969 reflected the elite's attempts to experiment with a pure form of consociationalism that was nurtured by the colonialists prior to recognising Malaya's independence. But the country had entered independence still blighted by sharp socioeconomic cleavages between Malays and non-Malays, and such a simplistic quid-pro-quo division of national spoils (reflected in the social contract) had not proven satisfactory to either group. Malay politicians were uncomfortable with the ease at which Chinese entrepreneurs had integrated and assumed control over business and education. An increasing number of Malays were dissatisfied at Umno's failure to transform political power into economic improvement for their community – and turned to alternative representation under the oppositional PMIP. Particularly in Chinese-dominated towns, Crouch (1996, p.165) observes, the idea 'that they (Malays) had become strangers in their own land' bore resemblance to reality. He notes an air of superiority and condescension among the Chinese elite towards their Malay counterparts (p.166). The unrelenting push of Chinese educational societies to maintain Mandarin in schools caused further discontent for Umno, who doubted the commitment of Chinese citizens to the Malaysian project (Yaakop 2010, p.8). Since 1957, MCA and MIC had 'experienced a steady erosion of credibility as representatives of the Chinese and Indian communities', accused of catering to elite interests and not speaking on their peoples' behalf (Crouch 1996, p.18). Singapore's brief inclusion in Malaysia had 'ignited heady visions of a new racial order' (Tarling 1999, p.87), encouraging non-Malay communities to become conscious of their identities and to protect and promote those identities. Early in 1969 Malaysia witnessed further racially connected incidents, involving the murder of a Malay politician by a Chinese gang in Penang, and the shooting of a Chinese teenager by police in Kuala Lumpur. These simmering tensions would culminate in a landmark election result in 1969, forcing the government to take drastic action.

### **1969**

In the 1969 elections the Alliance was opposed on four fronts, by PMIP, the PPP – at the peak of its popularity in 1969 – and two new parties, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the *Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan)*. DAP was founded on 11 October 1965, by former PAP politician, Devan Nair. Based on PAP ideology, it was a secular and socialist party with a predominantly-Chinese leadership which sought racial equality in Malaysia. *Gerakan* was

formed in 1968 by prominent intellectuals in Malaysia, who sought a country free from communalism. It was founded by former MCA leader Lim Chong Eu, who had left the party in 1959 over a dispute with the Tunku. Like DAP, *Gerakan* was a non-communal party with strong Chinese support. These elections, because of the Alliance's eroding public image, coupled with the opposition's desires to cooperate and collectively redress 1964's humiliating defeat, were the closest Malaysia had witnessed to-date. The Alliance suffered a crushing blow, retaining just 66 of its 89 parliamentary seats. Many high-up in Umno and the Alliance were not re-elected. On top of Kelantan, three more states fell to the opposition: Perak to the DAP, Penang to *Gerakan*, and Terengganu, again, to the PMIP. Significantly, PMIP gained nearly half the national Malay-Muslim vote (Liow 2011, p.379). On May 9, the day before the election, the Tunku had famously declared:

The Malays have gained for themselves political power. The Chinese and Indians have won for themselves economic power. The blending of the two with complete goodwill and understanding has brought about peace and harmony, coupled with prosperity to the country. (Cited in Case 2002, p.105)

However, deprived of its two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time, the Alliance's ideology had been challenged by a new multicultural paradigm. The day after the election, the opposition held their victory parade. Certain *Gerakan* and DAP supporters were alleged to have marched through Kuala Lumpur with brooms, to symbolise the sweeping out of the Malays. After consultation, Selangor Umno supporters held their own solidarity procession two days later, on May 13. Exacerbating an already tense environment, continuing demonstrations on both sides led to clashes between government and opposition supporters, causing an outbreak of rioting across the capital, resulting in the tragic deaths of hundreds of Malaysians. This was a dark hour for Malaysia.

On May 15 the Alliance was forced to declare a state of emergency. Parliament was suspended and for two years the country was placed under administration of the National Operations Council (NOC) – an emergency administrative body bolstered together by top government officials. Umno had 'paid a huge price for allowing the races to compete on equal footing' (Hamid 1999, p.32). According to NOC's post-mortem report, 196 people died (143 of them Chinese) and many homes and businesses were destroyed (National Operations Council 1969). The report noted

...the anxious, and later desperate, mood of the Malays...as a result of racial insults and threats to their future survival and well-being in their own country. (Ibid, p.ix)

However, if this report captured the ‘mood of the Malays’, the position of Umno itself was not as precarious. The riots demonstrated that a Chinese political challenge could result in bloodshed – just as with MCP during the first emergency (Cheah 2002, p.7). Hence, they could ‘be interpreted as a mass-level acknowledgement of UMNO authority’ (Case 1995, p.94). Nevertheless, Malay discontent with the Tunku had reached a climax. Tarling (1999, p.87) compares the hatred of the Tunku to Aung San, the ‘Father of modern-day Burma’, who was assassinated in 1947 after attempting to unite Burma’s different racial groups. A group of Umno members known as the ‘Young Turks’ had launched a campaign for the Tunku’s resignation<sup>9</sup>. Most prominent among them was Mahathir Mohamad, who had written a letter to the Tunku urging him to resign; a letter which acknowledged universal hatred for the Tunku among Malays in Malaysia. Consequently, the Tunku persuaded the Umno Supreme Council to expel Mahathir from the party (Case 2002, p.105). Nevertheless, deemed too benevolent to non-Malays, alienating the Malays in Malaysia, in 1970 the Tunku was replaced by Abdul Razak who, Case (2002, p.105) notes, was ‘more attuned to mass-level Malay sentiments’.

The two-year suspension of democracy offered a means for the Malaysian elite to rework race and difference as a useful political tool. Contrary to Malaya’s independence declaration 12 years earlier, which had been rushed through by British authorities in a bid to lighten their economic woes, this period gave the Malay elite more breathing space to articulate Malaysia’s national identity on their terms, reshaping the country’s foundations and formulating a distinctly *post*-colonial vision of national identity. For Umno, to truly succeed in the postcolonial era required a stamp of Malay identity from the ruling elite, which signified that no longer would the position of the Malays, as the racial majority and the group upon which the nation’s core cultural identity was founded, be compromised. Ismail Abdul Rahman, esteemed Umno politician and NOC member, remarked that democracy had been ruined by the opposition parties responsible for the violence (Funston 1980, p.212). This comment typified the NOC’s rhetoric, reflecting the onset of authoritarianism and Malayisation in the country. Around this time the influential Mahathir had published a book called *The Malay Dilemma* (1970), which among other things argued for affirmative action policies for the Malay community and the assimilation of non-Malays within a dominant Malay culture – which for him were both crucial to redressing the socioeconomic imbalance between both groups. Despite being banned soon after its release (perceived as a further attack on the already unstable government), the book shared many theoretical components with, and arguably informed, the thinking of the NOC.

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<sup>9</sup> Based on the Turkish reform movement of the same name in the early twentieth century, the term ‘Young Turk’ signified young Umno members eager for radical regime change.

Central to NOC's vision was the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, an affirmative action policy constructed for the economic empowerment of the Malay community. The 1969 riots had revealed to the government the ineffectiveness of the free market as a means of reducing Malay/non-Malay socioeconomic cleavages (Tarling 1999, p.291). The NEP was an extensive policy which covered employment, income, business and education, and it wrought many significant changes on Malaysian life. It had two goals: 'the eradication of poverty and the restructuring of society to correct racial economic imbalance'; and eliminating 'identification of race by economic function and geographic location' (Government of Malaysia 1971, p.49). Under the NEP, Chinese business competition was strictly regulated, to improve the survival prospects of Malay businesses and firms (Leong 2003, p.94). The policy stipulated that by 1990 Malays should own 30 percent of national equity, contrasting with the meagre 2.4 percent they owned currently. 40 percent of Malaysia's equity ownership would remain in non-Malay hands, which Case notes insulated the Chinese in the economy (1995, p.73). At this time, Malays were woefully underrepresented in higher education. In 1970 Malays constituted just 1.3 percent of engineering students, 12.4 percent of science students and 17.2 percent of medical students (Crouch 1996, p.163). From 1971 onwards Malay language was imposed in secondary schools, and universities adopted quotas for *Bumiputera* students (Case 2002, p.107). This negated the fact that some non-Malays had attained higher entry-level grades than their Malay counterparts (Crouch 1996, p.162). Malays were provided with government grants, and granted 'comparative pedagogical leniency...by the largely bumiputera faculty at Malaysian universities' (ibid). Some have argued (Mahathir included) that these provisions contributed towards a 'crutch mentality' among Malays, reducing their competitive edge (Gomez 2007, p.4).

The NEP reflected Umno's desires to accelerate the Malays' development, connecting with the values of its core voters, many who had turned to PMIP. It was successful, resulting in a decline in poverty

...from nearly 50% in 1970 to 15% in 1990 to 9.5% in 1995—the condition of poverty improved for each ethnic group, especially for Malays. (Haque 2003, p.254)

Malays were brought into the business sector, with a Malay middle class successfully fostered, ranging from small business owners and self-employed to university graduates and corporate workers. However the Malay lower class, the policy's intended beneficiaries, continued to struggle (Case 2002, p.116). The Chinese middle class continued to thrive, growing from 28.6 percent in 1970 to 43.2 percent in 1990. Chinese business empires

prospered alongside the now-stronger Malay business elite (ibid, p.108). But many Chinese remained in the lower-income bracket (Tan 2012, p.7). The Indian middle class grew marginally, from 23.4 percent to 27.3 percent (Crouch 1996, p.185). But their lower classes also got a raw deal from the NEP (Lee and Rajoo 1987, p.413). Thus, whereas the policy addressed economic disparities through a racialised lens, a sharp, multiracial class divide was exposed; a divide camouflaged by the ethnopoliticism of the Alliance parties (Gomez 2007, p.5).

Viewed next to the events that preceded and provoked its implementation, and considering the Malay discontent that had been increasing throughout the previous decade, the NEP's introduction represented a necessary political manoeuvre. It was rooted in Umno's broader strategy of control over patronage for the Malay community. Aside from persuading those citizens that they could not afford to support the opposition, lest they compromise that financial assistance (Crouch 1996, p.121), this demonstrated that Umno understood the transformation of Malay society and gave Umno a *raison d'être* in that transformation. The NEP was important for Umno to stake a claim for the Malays and their protection, thus justifying Umno's national purpose (Fee and Appudurai 2011, p.67). Through its objective to protect 'Malays and other indigenous people' (Government of Malaysia 1971), the NEP transformed *Bumiputeraism* from mere political rhetoric into a politico-economic institutional framework, within which the government could manage all future affairs. It was a crucial component of Umno social engineering, establishing the next twenty years of Malaysia's economic environment and beyond (Crouch 1996, p.26). Case notes that the NEP equipped Malays 'with heightened expectations, organizational know-how, and corporate self-confidence' (2002, p.100). It considerably lessened Malay insecurities, providing them with a helping hand to compete with other groups (particularly the Chinese). However, albeit implemented out of political and socioeconomic necessity, it caused the national discourse to shift towards notions of indigeneity and ethnic belonging (Ting 2009, p.50). For example, contrary to levelling the playing field, since the university admissions changes, the educational system has substantially advantaged Malays and disadvantaged non-Malays. Consequently, a pool of bright Chinese and Indian Malaysian youth has been forced to receive education in neighbouring Singapore or in the West, and see their future outside of Malaysia. Whether or not this racial re-proportioning was intended at the time of the policy's inception, we cannot be sure. But racial differences in perception of the NEP continue to represent a major source of tension (Haque 2003, p.256). For non-Malays, contrary to articulating a new national consciousness, the NEP reinforced the idea that, irrespective of their collective



history under colonialism, and despite their representation under the MCA and MIC, nation-building was the Malays' prerogative. It provides a living reminder to non-Malays of 'the indisputable fact of Malay superior political power' (Leong 2003, p.93).

### **1974**

After parliament was reconvened in 1971, significant amendments had been made to the constitution which made it illegal to challenge the following: Article 152 (Malay as the national language); Article 153 (the special position of the Malays and *Bumiputera*); Article 181 (the position of the Malay royalty); and the entire section on citizenship (articles 14-31). This restricted political discourse, but 'served as a prophylactic against the excesses of ethnic demands in open and uninhibited political debate', as witnessed before 1969 (Ahmad and Kadir 2005, p.59). Since 1969, all Malaysian political life and elections have been lived and conducted in its shadow. 1969's meaning has never been settled or agreed. Instead, references to '1969' offer a useful tool for the Malaysian government, 'as a trope signifying threat, betrayal, and anti-nationalism' (Zurbuchen 2002, p.567). This has particularly been the case in more recent elections, defined by the tense relationship between pro-government newspapers and new, oppositional online media (as explored in Chapter 3). The government-controlled media have thus reworked '1969' for specific election campaigns, employing it as a fluid political device with myriad representations: (1) the Chinese threat to Malay supremacy (2013); (2) the threat of mass demonstrations (1999); (3) the oppositional political threat (2008); (4) the threat of challenges to the constitution (1999); and (5) the 'truth' of untenable racial differences (2013).

The 1974 elections were the first under this new political regime. Malaysia's political parties had undergone significant restructuring, such that electoral competitiveness was reduced. In 1973, the tripartite Alliance was transformed into an eleven-party coalition called the *Barisan Nasional* (BN). BN incorporated regional parties in Sabah and Sarawak, including Chinese parties other than the weakened MCA, which had lost 14 seats in 1969 (Chandler *et al.* 1987, p.413). But also incorporated were *Gerakan*, PPP and PMIP (now known as *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*, or PAS) – three quarters of the political quartet that had pushed the Alliance to the brink four years previously. DAP remained oppositional, and ever since has 'play[ed] the spoiling role in a consociational state, using every opportunity to expose the weaknesses of the Chinese partners' in the government (Fee and Appudurai 2011, p.69). In 1974, with the other opposition parties incorporated into the BN, DAP and the Sarawak National Party (SNAP) were the primary opposition. DAP and SNAP both won 9 seats. In contrast, BN won

135 of the 154 seats it contested. Within the new coalition, Umno won 66 seats, whereas PAS won 14, *Gerakan 5* and the PPP just 1. The appeal of BN to non-Malay communities, Verma notes, was the ‘implicit protection against threats of racial violence’ (2002, p.147). BN appealed to non-Malay communities through the ideals of national unity and multiracial harmony, couched within which was the rhetoric that BN was essential to *maintaining* those elements – the supposed essence of Malaysian identity (ibid, p.148). Case refers to this precarious balance as the ‘Barisan way’ (1995, p.104). BN thus carved for itself the position of ‘puppet master’ of Malaysia’s different racial groups.

### **1978**

Since BN’s inception, the relationship between Umno and PAS had been tense and fraught with internal disagreements. To be sure, PAS’ impact was increased at the national level. It successfully pressured Umno policymakers to ‘Islamise’ BN’s agenda, though Umno consistently rejected its proposals to amend the constitution (Liow 2011, p.380). But this merger was controversial and had led to a split within PAS, with many party members choosing to leave or being ejected. This caused PAS to lose supporters in its northern strongholds, many alienated by its shifted political orientation. This weakness confirmed it as the junior Malay-Muslim partner in BN, which contradicted the ambitions of PAS leader Asri Muda, himself a ‘staunch Malay ethno-nationalist’, to consolidate Malay hegemony (ibid, p.379). Kelantan’s administration ultimately proved to be the downfall of this partnership. There were disagreements between both parties concerning how to govern this state, given its distinct demographic. Accusations of corruption were also made by some Umno members towards Asri’s financial dealings. These tensions were irresolvable, and PAS was ejected from BN in December 1977. After PAS parted ways with BN, a further split within the party leadership caused many PAS leaders and members to join Umno as well as a new offshoot Malay-Muslim party, the *Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front* (Berjasa) (ibid, p.381). In the 1978 election, PAS, having alienated their traditional electorate and been ejected from the coalition, was resoundingly defeated, winning just 5 seats and yielding control of Terengganu and (for the first time since 1959) Kelantan to Umno (ibid). BN, under the governance of new Prime Minister Hussein Onn (who took over after Abdul Razak’s tragic passing in 1976), continued to do well, winning 131 of 154 seats. In contrast to PAS’ fortunes, DAP performed strongly, winning 16 seats to become the leading opposition party.

### **1.3 1982-1990: The Mainstreaming of Islamisation**

The first decade after the 1969 riots also witnessed an Islamic resurgence, and there were

spiritual, economic and nationalistic reasons for this. Aside from the NEP, in 1970 the government had introduced the National Culture Policy (NCP), which emphasised Malay culture as the national culture – but with a particular focus on Islam as ‘an important component’ in moulding that culture (Government of Malaysia 2015, online). Nationalism thus went hand in hand with the renewal of religion (Tarling 1999, p.245). Hadiz and Khoo (2011, p.468) observe the importance of this indigenous/Islamic link, stating that ‘promoting bumiputera...interests has effectively harnessed Islamic identities to state political discourse’. For the urban, modernising, middle class Malays, the turn to Islam allowed them to retain their cultural identity whilst plugging into a global Islamic modernity (Korff 2001, p.279). For Shamsul (1997, p.212), the riots provided the ‘catalyst for a turn to Islam in a world of radical doubt’; hence, they were inseparable from the Islamic resurgence. Islam offered Malays ‘a natural refuge...a panacea for the ills besetting society’ (ibid). The push towards Islamisation was driven by modern concerns for rationalisation, organisation and discipline – something which ‘the pre-Islamic Malay was seen to lack’ (Khoo 2009, p.115). This was enabled by changes wrought by the NEP (Hadiz and Khoo 2011, p.473). Rapid changes to the class structure after 1971 had spawned a variegated Malay middle class which combined traditional Islamic populism with campaigns across a range of social issues connecting to Malaysia’s capitalist transformation, including the precarity of the lower classes and the need for liberal reforms. However, only in the 1980s did Islamisation enter the mainstream. The 1979 Iranian Revolution had reverberated far and wide, influencing the mass resurgence of a grassroots Islamic consciousness that extended across the Muslim world. This was a watershed moment that influenced key identity shifts in PAS and Umno, both which sought to carve a strategic Islamic identity that mobilised popular sentiments.

## **1982**

1982’s election was defined by the battle between Umno and PAS to monopolise Malay-Muslim rhetoric – which was where the political riches lay. On 16 July 1981, following his rapid rise to power since being reinstated into Umno in 1972, Mahathir Mohamad had become the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, replacing Hussein Onn due to ill health. Mahathir was not an Islamist; his letter to the Tunku and publication of *The Malay Dilemma* had advanced his reputation as a Malay ultra. Mahathir was concerned with Islam’s growing importance and how under his leadership Malaysia could position itself as an Islamic nation within this broader revivalist context, to defeat PAS. PAS, like many Islamic parties in the Muslim world, had grown more fundamentalist and radical. In 1979, PAS Youth had

introduced *shūrā* to its leadership selection process<sup>10</sup>, as well as initiating discussions with Islamic parties in Iran, Egypt and Pakistan on the role of clerical leadership in contemporary Muslim societies (Liow 2011, p.382). Since the 1981 PAS general assembly, this youth wing had disputed Asri Muda's leadership. Leading into the election, PAS presented their Islam as the 'moral choice', calling for Islamic amendments to the constitution and criticising rampant development and corruption under BN. Islamist philosophy was unfamiliar to Umno, as it clashed with plural society discourse (Crouch 1996, p.171). Mahathir had thus recruited Anwar Ibrahim, charismatic leader of *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM), into Umno's ranks. Formed in 1971, ABIM was pivotal to Malaysia's Islamic revival, providing a platform for young, educated Muslims to preach and propagate Islamic teachings. Aided by Anwar's Islamic reputation, Mahathir introduced many Islam-oriented programs and policies, crucial for retaining Malays who were allured by PAS' powerful Islamic rhetoric. These tactics crucially consolidated Mahathir's position, and BN won 132 seats in another resounding victory. DAP remained the leading opposition party, albeit winning just 9 seats, and PAS maintained 5 seats. Writing about that election, Mauzy (1983, p.499) observes that contrary to BN's exciting new leadership,

...opposition parties were disorganized, underfinanced, traumatized by infighting, lacking credible alternative programs and policies, and unable to spark issues or to get their various messages across convincingly.

## **1986**

Throughout the 1980s Mahathir combined 'modernist and developmentalist Islamic policies' with major-scale development in Malaysia (Liow 2011, p.381). This reflected a 'neomodernist' Islamic model, which complimented his broader modern-industrial vision (Case 2002, p.135). PAS in contrast grew increasingly fundamentalist. It attracted support from Malay students and activists 'seeking solace from the effects of rapid capitalist development' (Hadiz and Khoo 2011, p.480). In October 1982 PAS had shunned Muda's ethnonationalist leadership and embraced a leadership consisting of 12 ulama, headed by 'spiritual leader' Yusof Rawa. It also established a Chinese Consultative Committee, in order to proselytise non-Muslims (Liow 2011, p.383). However, certain PAS leaders had accused Umno of '*assabiyah*' (tribalism), being '*kafir*' (infidels), and failing to conform to the true spirit of Islam (ibid, p.383). These tendentious declarations raised eyebrows, and BN exploited this 'radical' image to its advantage. Notes Liow:

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<sup>10</sup> *Shūrā* is a system of consultative democracy in Islam, between the rulers and the Muslim people.

...PAS leaders found themselves being arrested and detained under the internal security act (ISA)<sup>11</sup> on the grounds that their fiery speeches and religious sermons were a threat to national security and racial harmony in the country. (Ibid)

The 1986 election was defined by several important issues. BN had been rocked by the departure of Deputy Prime Minister Musa Hitam, over a dispute with Mahathir. Malaysia was caught in a hard-hitting economic downturn, allegedly resulting from Mahathir's excessive spending. Nationwide union strikes, recent corruption scandals and much more provided ammunition for the opposition (Hanafiah 1987, p.280). DAP was expected to articulate a strong challenge to MCA, based on BN's financial mismanagement. Meanwhile, PAS' 1986 election campaign 'represented best the party in action under the influence of the radical faction' (Hussein 2002, p.92). Its election slogan was 'PAS the party of Allah' and it advocated hudud law as an alternative to the secular constitution. But PAS' image had been severely weakened by its own and the government's actions. In 1986, BN won 148 of the total 177 seats. PAS won just one seat, representing its worst ever performance and initiating the decline of radicalism in the party – at least, until the twenty-first century. In contrast, the 24 seats and 21 percent of the popular vote that DAP recorded represented its strongest performance since the fateful 1969 elections. Ramanathan and Adnan (1988, p.2) explain that this reflected an important, emergent 'urban-rural dichotomy', with urbanites voting for the opposition, primarily DAP, and rural citizens supporting BN, particularly Umno.

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We should not underestimate the impact of Mahathir's use of Islam for political mileage (Hamid 2010, p.161). As Hoffstaedter remarks,

Islam has been gaining ground within politics steadily and is now in a political mainstream position. Islam is invoked at public rallies and in speeches; it is made to seep into the everyday life, much to the dismay of the secular elite and parts of the middle classes in the metropolitan centers of Malaysia. (2009, p.124)

Mahathir's Islamisation policy generated consequences beyond his control, fostering a 'growing class of religious bureaucrats and professionals whose interests lay...beyond the ambit of Mahathir's own "instrumentalist" preferences' (Hadiz and Khoo 2011, p.477). Haque (2003, p.250-251) acknowledges that these bureaucrats increasingly impose Islamic jurisprudence upon Malaysia's common law, covering acts of theft, drinking and premarital sex, and managing marital relationships through Syariah courts. Although for Umno, PAS'

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<sup>11</sup> The ISA and other government legislation, and their influence upon Malaysia's political environment, are discussed in Chapter 3.

Islamist vision is inappropriate and unwelcome in a plural society (Case 2002, p.128), Islamic institutions nevertheless strictly regulate Islam in Malaysia. Dominated by Sunni Muslims, Malaysia does not officially acknowledge alternative teachings, like Shi'ite Islam – revealing the hegemony of the particular form of Islamism consolidated since the 1980s (Mueller 2014, p.3). BN has increased the allocation of Muslim places of worship (at the cost of other religions), and Malay-language schools have become Islamised. This represents a grave threat to religious pluralism, and balancing Islam with non-Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Sikh rights has proven a constant source of political tension (Crouch 1996, p.173). Constitution Article 11 states that '[e]very person has the right to profess and practice his religion' (Government of Malaya 1957). But for non-Malays and non-Muslims, since the 1980s this has not reflected reality. Barr and Govindasamy (2010, p.294) view Islam as an instrument in the Malays' 'ethnic agenda', reinforcing Malay-Muslim centrality and 'condition[ing] non-Malays and non-Muslims to accept their assimilation into the Malaysian nation as subordinate, peripheral partners'.

## **1990**

Since entering office, Mahathir had won friends but also enemies. His governance had certainly proven instrumental in consolidating Malay-Muslim support for Umno and BN. But his radical and unorthodox methods had garnered the wrath of many inside and outside government. In 1987 Mahathir's leadership had been challenged by his former finance minister, Tengku Razaleigh, who had support from a substantial faction within Umno. Mahathir's faction was dubbed 'Team A' and Razaleigh's faction 'Team B'. After narrowly losing to Mahathir, Razaleigh, along with other members of Team B, was expelled by Mahathir. It was subsequently uncovered that during the assembly elections, 'Team A' had fielded candidates from several unregistered branches – rendering Umno illegitimate (Crouch 1996, p.119). Faced by a constitutional crisis, Mahathir became embroiled in a battle with the Supreme Court. Eventually, after several judges were suspended, the court ruled in favour of Mahathir and against the dissident Team B (ibid, p.120). Mahathir reconstituted Umno as Umno *Baru* (New Umno), sourcing the majority of his cabinet from Team A<sup>12</sup>. A group of those expelled by Mahathir, led by Razaleigh, utilised this moment to form a new party called *Semangat 46* (The Spirit of 1946; a nostalgic throwback to the Umno of old).

This struggle between new and old, concerning which party was the Malays' true representative, was decided in 1990's election. *Semangat 46* had united with PAS, Berjasa and

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<sup>12</sup> Eventually '*Baru*' was dropped from this title – though many Malaysians refer to Umno *Baru* as a distinct political period, reflecting Mahathir's authoritarian ruling nature (known as 'Mahathirism').

a further Islamic party founded in 1983, *Parti Hizbul Muslimin Malaysia* (HAMIM). This coalition was called *Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah* (APU). Razaleigh had also formed electoral pacts with DAP, *Parti Bersatu Sabah* (PBS) (a BN party from Sabah that had defected to the opposition at the eleventh hour) and several smaller opposition parties (a pact called *Gagasan Rakyat*). This was the first time that BN was challenged by ‘a credible, multi-ethnic coalition’, one that

...was expected to win enough seats to play a more effective role and to become an alternative government in the future, even if it could not take over the reins of government immediately.

(Khong 1991, p.1)

Leading into the elections, Razaleigh accused Mahathir of becoming dictatorial, corrupt and negligent. However, Malaysia had recovered well from the economic slump, and BN ran on the slogan ‘Peace, Stability and Prosperity’. Significantly, APU won all 39 of the state seats available in Kelantan, leading to PAS regaining control of that state<sup>13</sup>. But nationwide the coalition, particularly *Gagasan Rakyat*, performed poorly. It was believed that irreconcilable ideological differences between PAS and DAP had contributed to its downfall (Chin 1996, p.394). Though a weaker performance, BN still won 127 seats. But it was this unanimous rejection of Umno in Kelantan that would create important and long-lasting ramifications, and PAS has retained control of Kelantan to-date. The PAS ulama proved a vocal force, articulating an alternative, more conservative Malay-Muslim identity that would continue to unseat BN over the next twenty years.

1990’s election reflected a crucial example of Umno’s resilience; its ability to weather that and other political crises. The preceding constitutional crisis indicated Mahathir’s formidable control over the judiciary, where faced with a powerful challenge to his authority, Mahathir manipulated judicial and parliamentary instruments to purge his enemies and rivals (Maznah 2001, p.209). However, Mahathir’s success was not based solely on coercion, but grounded in Umno’s ‘residual legitimacy’, proven though ‘public inaction amid serious material shortfalls’ (Case 1995, p.103). Despite the opportunity to inaugurate a new era under *Semangat 46*, Malays stuck by Umno. That crisis must be understood within the broader sociopolitical context of Umno’s *modus operandi*. Case notes that ‘UMNO has sought to legitimate its political actions by keeping pace with evolving ideas about what it means to be Malay’ (1995, p.105). Despite evident corruption and authoritarianism, Umno’s reform through *Umno Baru* proved that elements of renewal were evident (Maznah 2001, p.209) – reflecting Umno’s responsiveness and relevance.

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<sup>13</sup> Razaleigh’s influence was instrumental: he was from the Kelantan royal house and had the Sultan of Kelantan’s support.

#### 1.4 1995-1999: Consolidating a National Identity

Despite growing Islamisation since the 1980s, Mahathir had managed to mitigate the pressures emerging from PAS' administration of Kelantan. Mahathir firmly believed that modernisation could help Malaysia to overcome past racial tensions. Because Umno had moderated Malay-Muslim identity within a progressive, developmental Islam, room was left for an inclusive Malaysian identity in the BN coalition. In the 1990s there was a consensus that BN, in terms of national prosperity, 'had delivered the goods' (Case 2002, p.125). Mahathir was responsible for bringing racial groups closer than ever before (Leong 2003, p.96). Albeit headed by a party championing Malay political hegemony, BN had adapted well to the requirements of Malaysia's multiracial middle class, combining rural development policies with 'middle-class comfort', a moderated Islamic programme and 'timely cultural compromises' (Case 1995, p.104). These factors contributed to a perception of multiracial legitimacy 'underpinned by substantive performance and material benefits' (ibid, p.103).

Mahathir profited from this period of strong economic growth. In 1991, he introduced *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020). Albeit viewed by sceptics as a continuation of the pro-Malay NEP, *Wawasan* represented Mahathir's attempt to forge an advanced, industrialised country devoid of racial disparity by the year 2020. Shamsul (1996, p.336) notes that in the 1980s Mahathir had modified Malaysia's framework to suit the global changes it faced as a newly industrialising country. The nation's pride, for Mahathir, was reflected in 'mega projects' like the PETRONAS Towers and redevelopment of Kuala Lumpur City Centre, which defined Malaysia as an economically-developed nation (Bunnell 2004, p.iii). For Hilley, *Wawasan* was 'a millennial symbol of growth, wealth creation and nation-building on an unprecedented scale' (2001, p.4). This policy had many objectives, spanning from equitable distribution of wealth to a psychologically-confident society. As 2020 draws nearer, the stipulations in this policy act as an urgent warning that looms over the nation: that they might not 'make it'. In political discourse '2020' is commonly invoked in discussions on the current state of development. Accordingly, albeit reflecting Mahathir's policy, *Wawasan* acts also as a myth, an unreachable utopia, a spectre of progress but also of regress; a realisation of the long road yet to come.

A central element of *Wawasan* was the *Bangsa Malaysia* policy. Malaysians were encouraged to foster a united and culturally-inclusive Malaysian nationality. *Bangsa* represented an important qualitative shift in BN policy: using the word 'Malaysia' transcended the Malay/non-Malay distinction (Case 2002, p.124). According to Lee, *Bangsa* was very popular



with non-Malays, suggesting that the national identity was still evolving and not cemented around the dominant cultural group (1997, p.81). It gave particularly to Chinese Malaysians reasons to be optimistic about their future (Fee and Appudurai 2011, p.76). However, attacked by critics for abandoning ‘Malayness’ (Shamsul 1996, p.333), Mahathir was forced to reiterate that *Bangsa* implied the collective acceptance of Malay special rights, as outlined in the constitution. Thus, Mandal notes, no significant effort was made to change the racial order under that policy (2004, p.72). Framed more sceptically, Singh (1998, p.249) perceived it as a strategy designed to win Chinese support in the forthcoming election. Whichever view we take, the extent of non-Malay support was confirmed in 1995.

### **1995**

BN went into the 1995 election highly optimistic, despite two incidents that favoured the opposition: the arrest of the leader of *Darul Arqam*, an influential Islamic movement with thousands of followers<sup>14</sup>; and the arrest of Lim Guan Eng, son of DAP leader Lim Kit Siang, for sedition on account of having ‘commented too freely’ on a sex scandal involving Melaka’s Chief Minister (Chin 1996, p.395). Due to Mahathir’s recent policies and Malaysia’s strong economy, the DAP struggled to appeal to its core electorate: the Chinese middle class ‘had never had it so good’ (ibid, p.397). Contrary to PAS’ Islamist philosophy, BN’s capitalist orientation appealed to and protected the economic interests of the non-Malay middle classes (Kent 2004, p.15). These factors were highlighted in its manifesto, which through the slogan ‘Vision, Justice and Efficiency’ highlighted BN’s record of political and economic stability, effectively warning voters not to ‘rock the boat’ and jeopardise Malaysia’s economic security (Chin 1996, p.399). Since 1990 *Semangat 46* had suffered from party defections and the party’s stronghold, Kelantan, had suffered from BN’s strategy of starving that state of economic resources. There were also tensions between *Semangat* and PAS over Kelantan’s governance and disputes arising from *Semangat* leaders’ questioning of PAS’ need to table its hudud bill – as promised in its election manifesto. In the 1995 election BN delivered its best performance under Mahathir, winning 162 of the total 192 parliamentary seats. Liow (2011, p.385) notes this was a convincing victory for Umno, which won 89 seats. DAP won only 9 seats, albeit remained the leading opposition party.

### **1999**

Malaysia in 1995 was a far different political environment than four years later. In 1997 financial crisis had struck much of East Asia, extending from Thailand to Hong Kong.

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<sup>14</sup> The movement was rumoured to practice deviant Shi’ite teachings (Houben 2003, p.160).

Malaysia was struck hard, given BN's unsustainable economic policies. The important debate concerned whether or not Malaysia should liberalise according to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) expectations (Khoo 2003, p.49). A political crisis ensued, following a split in Umno between those who championed Mahathir and those who supported his (now) deputy, Anwar Ibrahim. Since joining Umno, Anwar's rise to power had been swift, commanding different ministerial posts throughout the 1980s, being appointed as Finance Minister in 1991 and successfully challenging for the Umno deputy presidency in 1993 (gaining the accompanying position of Deputy Prime Minister). Spectators believed Anwar was being groomed to take over Mahathir's leadership, though both figures were fundamentally opposed over the IMF issue. Whereas Mahathir was strongly against international aid, Anwar advocated IMF's reform agenda (ibid). Malaysia had enjoyed unprecedented economic growth under Anwar as Finance Minister, who had received many plaudits from western financial publications (ibid, p.74). But it was during the financial crisis that the forays of Anwar and his allies into BN's cronyism and nepotism lead to Anwar's dramatic fall. Despite the economic success brought by the NEP, Malaysia's strong economy had deflected attention away from the nepotism and cronyism that defined this policy's implementation (Ibrahim 1999, p.144). Businesses were poorly managed, loans not repaid and some NEP policies lacked economic sense (Leong 2003, p.95). Anwar subsequently resolved to cut government spending, ministerial salaries and curb the implementation of mega projects – a cornerstone of Mahathir's administration. Observes Hilley (2001, p.9):

Anwar's views...threatened to expose not only the deficits of Malaysian civil institutions but the more specific nature of power relations within the political-corporate hierarchy.

As Mahathir grew uneasy, Anwar's position grew increasingly precarious. Anwar was dismissed from office on 2 September 1998, but the situation grew uglier when, just eighteen days later, he was dubiously arrested and charged over accusations of sodomy with a male aide. Following a court hearing on 14 April 1999, Anwar was sentenced to jail for six years.

Rocked by the crisis, Malaysia had spun into political and economic turmoil. These factors, and their influence upon the 1999 electoral vote, would irreversibly change Malaysia's political landscape. That year a *Reformasi* (Reformation) movement swept through Indonesia and Malaysia. This was a series of protests articulated around frustrations with cronyism and corruption that underlay the Asian financial crisis, abuse of draconian regulations by both countries' regimes, and in Malaysia the mistreatment of Anwar, a figure popular with the Malaysian public; a powerful *Reformasi* icon (Khoo 2003, p.10). The *Reformasi* extended far beyond economic and political concerns and broached the question of what type of

government, and governance, was suitable in Malaysia. *Wawasan* and *Bangsa* reflected Malaysia's booming economy in the early 1990s, and Mahathir believed that economically, the country had steered clear of trouble. At this time there was a burgeoning Asian values discourse, which juxtaposed 'Asian' family values and respect for authority against the individualism that defined (and defiled) countries in the West. Malaysia and Singapore were its strongest proponents, believed by their leaders as well as political commentators to explain the economic 'miracle' in East and Southeast Asia. But through the financial crisis, Asian values had been written off by western political theorists as a seemingly 'passé' idea (Hilley 2001, p.3).

Mahathir's anti-IMF rhetoric reflected his 'favourite tactic' of inciting nationalist and anti-western sentiments to buttress support (Maznah 2001, p.219). Throughout his tenure, Mahathir had sporadically produced anti-western tirades that emphasised coloniser/colonised relations – despite 'covet[ing] "modernist" imagery of growth as a sign of approval from the West' (Hilley 2001, p.3). This anti-western 'persona' helped prevent BN from being connected with a neocolonial regime (Nah 2003, p.524). Mahathir shared ambitions with Margaret Thatcher, Britain's leader at that time, for a society defined by social conservatism and economic neoliberalism – and relied on cooperation with Britain to achieve these objectives. 'Asian values' thus were not 'Asian' but a strategic political construct designed to shelter BN from its political critics. Notes Yash Ghai:

The notion that distinct Western and Asian perspectives exist...distorts the debate by suggesting that the key conflict is between the East and the West, rather than that it is within each. (Cited in Langlois 2001, p.32)

In an article published during his imprisonment, Anwar declared that Asian values discourse was one of convenience; a 'largely self-serving' doctrine that deliberately emphasised respect for authority in order to legitimise Mahathirism (1999, p.143). The connection between restrictions to individual rights and economic wellbeing had been debunked; Mahathirism now lacked justification (ibid, p.145). The new middle class formed through the NEP sought a more responsible, transparent, liberal and democratic government (Crouch 1996, p.10). Moreover the emerging, tech-savvy generation of Malaysians, less conscious of Malaysia's turbulent past, viewed western-style democracy and Malaysian culture fully compatible (Ibrahim 1999, p.143). The *Reformasi* particularly enchanted the urban Malay youth, resulting from Anwar's history with ABIM (Weiss 2000, p.420). Umno was thus the architect of its own demise, for the confidence instilled in Malays through the NEP had aroused a youthful assertiveness and dissent against power and authority (Maznah 2001, p.223).

1999's election was more issue-based than identity-based. The *Reformasi* evoked a genuine belief in a governing system outside Malaysia's long-standing communalist and authoritarian political culture (O'Shannassy 2013, p.429). The election witnessed the arrival of *Parti Keadilan Nasional*, which had been launched by Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail during his incarceration (ibid, p.420). *Keadilan* linked with other opposition parties, PAS, DAP and the long-standing *Partai Rakyat* (now reformed as *Parti Rakyat Malaysia* (PRM)), in a coalition called the *Barisan Alternatif* (BA). Numerous NGOs also aligned with BA. Crucially, PAS muted its Islamist rhetoric to pave the way for a joint manifesto based on *Reformasi* issues of justice, democracy and good governance (Case 2004, p.89). This reduced ideological differences between DAP and PAS, which BN normally exploited. Whereas previously, Umno's dominance rendered the elections uncompetitive, there were viable alternatives this time. The result was not as decisive as BA had hoped. BN maintained a solid majority, winning 148 seats. However, Umno won just 72 of those seats, and also lost control of Terengganu to PAS. PAS greatly increased its parliamentary representation from 8 to 27 seats, at the expense of the other opposition parties. *Keadilan* gained 5 seats, likely reflecting a sympathy vote for Anwar and his family (Weiss 2000, p.421). DAP won 10 seats, but party stalwarts Lim Kit Siang and Deputy Chairman Karpal Singh both lost their parliamentary and state seats in Penang (ibid, p.416). Umno's shortfall was offset by enduring support for its non-Malay coalition partners (Case 2004, p.89): MCA won 29 seats and MIC won 7.

Reflecting on the electoral result, Fee and Appudurai (2011, p.78) note that '[t]he Malay middle-class rejection of UMNO called into question the latter's claim to be the effective champion of Malay rights'. The Anwar saga represented the first crisis which Umno had not managed to weather, for it represented the break-up of Malay unity and dislocation of Malay identity politics, two pillars of Umno identity (Maznah 2001, p.211). Contrary to consolidating Umno's power, Mahathir's actions weakened Umno and strengthened PAS – which thrived within the multiracial BA coalition. It was unknown whether PAS' success reflected a protest vote against Anwar's mistreatment, or instead a critical sentiment against Umno's agenda (Weiss 2000, p.426). Regardless, this result marked the first time since 1969 that Malay parties dominated government and opposition alike (ibid, p.414). Like in 1969, PAS had dramatically eroded Umno's popularity and stole a large proportion of the Malay-Muslim vote – likely on account of articulating its Islamic principles not around hudud but around broader *Reformasi* issues, renewing the commitment to Islam around a moral, clean, accountable government (ibid, p.426). As Malaysia moved into the new century, BN would need to make a thorough reassessment of its authority, political relevance and the kind of

policies most suited to the country's increasingly heterogeneous national community.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the evolution of national electoral politics through different periods in Malaysian history, asking how important political events have necessitated key party-political shifts and subsequent discursive shifts around race, religion and class. Particularly it has shown how race has been sustained and changed through the electoral process, persistently employed and deployed as a powerful political catalyst. One cannot deny the extent of political turbulence, and the trials and tribulations that Malaysia experienced in just over four decades of independence. Since 1957 the government persistently adapted to new and often adverse political circumstances, responding to internal and external environmental factors, which in-turn influenced the diverse range of election scenarios. This is BN's *modus operandi*: selectively articulating identity based on shifting political and environmental context. BN has effectively transformed the racialised colonial past into nuanced identity discourses, primarily around race and religion. The struggle to preserve and project racial and religious identities forms the heart of nation-building, driving the contestation of political space and intersecting all realms of Malaysian life (Crouch 1996, p.156). We must acknowledge the instability of these racial and religious categories, resulting from their origin in constructed colonial discourses grounded in mythology and tradition (see following chapter). Nevertheless, after 1969 *Tanah Melayu* discourse played a powerful role in refashioning history and reshaping racial and national identity in Malaysia. It was effective in maintaining political stability, at least until the financial crisis at the end of the twentieth century. Likewise, Mahathir's Islamising strategy in the 1980s appeased the more religious Malay citizens, whilst preventing Malaysia from becoming an Islamic state which excluded non-Malays. Strategies like this represent examples of political brinkmanship that have contributed to Malaysia's reputation as an effective model for multiracial democracy in a Muslim-majority state. Mandal (2004, p.52) notes that Malaysia's racialised political system has worked, albeit provides causes for concern. Beneath the surface lies a constant source of unease, or 'stable tension' (Shamsul 2012), concerning the exclusion of different national histories, groups and identities – whether the potential of the non-communal IMP prior to independence, the status of non-Malays after 1969, alternative groups of Muslims in the 1980s, or indeed the existence of class and other socioeconomic divisions that transcend race. It is significant how the racialised model has been impressed onto the opposition, with those parties assuming racially-dominant profiles, whether 'Malay' PAS or 'Chinese' DAP, thus how their political actions can be influenced by ethnoreligious concerns. Additionally, parties

that have privileged non-communal identity have broadly failed in Malaysian politics. These factors continued to affect Malaysia as it progressed into the new century. The next chapter explores in greater depth the history behind Malaysia's racial groups and how they became implicated in a racialised ideology in Malaysia, mobilised in the colonial state but creatively reworked and consolidated by the postcolonial elite.

## **Chapter 2: Racial Identity in Malaysia: Colonial Imagination and Postcolonial Innovation**

### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews key debates concerning different racial groups in Malaysia and the precariousness of those groups' ethno-histories, using this to introduce two key concepts for understanding Malaysian identity politics: 'ethnoreligious symbolism' and 'fragmented essentialisms'. Both are useful for capturing how the postcolonial state has innovated with certain elements of its colonial past. The review is split into historical and contemporary debates. Part I explores the historical emergence of these identities, in terms of the mythology and symbolism that underlie these groups. It adapts the ethno-symbolist perspective (Smith 1986) to show how we gain a better understanding of Malaysian racial discourse through ethnoreligious symbolism. Having outlined this foundation, part II introduces the 'fragmented essentialisms' concept, which accounts for the multiple, contested and ambivalent nature of Malaysia's essentialist political discourse. It is shown how the production of ethnoreligious discourse is grounded in a fragmented relationship between past and present, albeit one that is part and parcel of the production of new forms of politics based on the layering and nesting of different identities and discourses. This chapter draws together themes of nationalism, race and postcolonial identity in the Malaysian context, drawing on key scholars, whose work intersects these themes, including Anthony Milner, Anthony Reid, Leonard Andaya and Ien Ang.

### **I: Framework for Malaysian Identity: Ethnoreligious Symbolism**

This section consults scholarly literature on Malaysia's history (precolonial and colonial), assessing how historical accounts of Malaysia's racial groups (drawn from linguistic, archaeological and historical evidence), are grounded in tradition, symbolism and mythology. Scholar of nationalism Anthony Smith has spent his career exploring the significance of these factors to the formation and durability of nations. He calls this approach 'ethno-symbolism', the premise of which is that nations are a product of modernity, but also contain, and derive from, pre-modern ethnic elements. These elements together comprise the 'ethnie': 'named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity' (1986, p.32). In *Imperial Alchemy*, Southeast Asian Scholar Anthony Reid shows how Smith's 'ethnie' approach can be applied to uncover how Malaysia's colonial state came into contact with Southeast Asia's existing

political culture, ‘held together by kinship and ritual’, grounded in the supernatural elements of Indian-Javanese cosmologies (2009, p.18). An ethno-symbolist perspective is useful for Malaysia’s multiracial context. Where multiple ethnies inhabit the same territory, the past becomes a battleground. Different groups compete for historical claims on the nation’s past, and ‘political archaeologists’ stake a claim for their group’s ethnic heritage (Smith 1999, p.12). Umno bases its political legitimacy upon political and cultural symbols that maintain ‘linkages to a mythical past’ (Singh 1998, p.250). In contrast, the majority of Chinese and Indians arrived in Malaysia under British colonial policy, and face a historical disadvantage in articulating a legitimate connection with this pre-colonial past.

We may better understand Malaysian racial discourse by privileging *ethnoreligious* symbolism. Through a politically-driven ethnoreligious ‘grid’ developed over generations, each racial group has become discursively codified to a religious position in Malaysia – implicated in ‘ethnoreligious narratives’ of identity. Firstly, because Malay citizens are required by law to follow Islam, Malays are mobilised by government and media vis-à-vis a ‘Malay-Muslim’ identity. Secondly, government and media discourse does not recognise a Chinese religious identity. Whether fuelled by China’s connection with communism, or the fact that most Chinese are/were not Muslim, in contrast to the ‘Malay-Muslim’, the Chinese are discursively codified by the government and media against a ‘Chinese-kafir’ identity. Finally, because most Indians in colonial Malaya practised Hinduism and were of Tamil heritage (Leong 2012, p.36), Indians are positioned by the government and media as ‘Tamil-Hindus’. The importance of the ethnoreligious has been noted by several scholars (Buttny *et al.* 2013; Pandi 2014; Willford 2007), suggesting it is a salient issue which could benefit from further theorisation. This historical analysis is split into four eras, important for understanding how these ethnoreligious narratives materialised: early history, the ‘golden age’ of the Melaka Sultanate, Britain’s arrival and the late colonial period.



<b>0-1600AD</b>	Golden age of Hindu-Buddhist influence.
<b>1200-1400</b>	Arab and Indian traders convert many Southeast Asians to Islam.
<b>1402</b>	Melaka Sultanate established.
<b>1408</b>	Admiral Cheng Ho founds Chinese colony in Melaka.
<b>1408-1500</b>	Migration of Han Chinese, integrate via <i>Baba</i> and <i>Nyonya</i> cultures.
<b>1414</b>	Megat Iskandar Shah is first ruler to convert to Islam.
<b>1450-1511</b>	Melaka's 'golden age'; empire expands and Islam spreads throughout Melayu world.
<b>1511</b>	Portugal makes first European claim on Melayu world, capturing Melaka.
<b>1641</b>	Dutch East India Company and local allies push Portuguese from Melaka.
<b>1786</b>	British East India Company arrives in Penang.
<b>1821</b>	Stamford Raffles publishes Malay Annals.
<b>1824</b>	Anglo-Dutch Treaty divides Malay world between British Malaya and Netherlands East Indies (present-day Indonesia).
<b>1826</b>	Establishment of British-controlled Straits Settlements (Melaka, Dinding, Penang and Singapore).
<b>1840</b>	Beginnings of Malay nationalism, epitomised by work of Munshi Abdullah and debates around ideal Malay community.
<b>1840-1940</b>	Masses of Chinese and Indian workers migrate to Malaya.
<b>1856</b>	Yap Ah Loy arrives in Malaya; central to establishing Kuala Lumpur as trading post for immigrant miners.
<b>1867-1874</b>	Selangor Civil War.
<b>1890</b>	Dawn of a pan-Islamic modernising movement, leading to growth of Malay nationalism on peninsula.
<b>1895</b>	Establishment of Federated Malay States (Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang).
<b>1909</b>	Treaty of Bangkok transfers four northern Malay states from Thai sovereignty to British.
<b>1913</b>	Establishment of Malay Reservation Enactment.
<b>1914</b>	Johor brought under British control; entire peninsula now under British rule.

**Figure 2:** Timeline showing key phases of migration and events during the era of British rule (some dates approximate)

## 2.1 Early Histories and Historical Erasures

As Milner (2008, p.11) declares, a 'Malay' history remains elusive. 'Melayu' as a concept existed, but there is no agreement on its history, or whether it first referred to a place, language or people. According to seventh-century records, 'Melayu' was a language used by people in the region (Andaya 2001, p.324). But around this time, 'Melayu' was an important centre in Srivijaya that incorporated Palembang and Jambi (see Figure 3). Srivijaya was a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom that ruled between the seventh and fourteenth centuries, an influential trading hub that extended across Java, Sumatra and the peninsula (Milner 2008, p.18).



**Figure 3:** Map showing maximum extent of Srivijaya Empire around the eighth century (Kartapranata 2009)

Indian civilisation maintains a glorious history on the peninsula, spanning at least 2000 years. In the first century AD, Indian trade was already brisk in the region, though merchants also arrived from China, Arabia and elsewhere. To the Chinese, the region was known as ‘Nanyang’ (South Seas). Historically it was this region which the Chinese maintained most contact with, travelling from Fujian, Guangdong, Zhejiang and elsewhere to start a new life (Wei 2003, p.10). To Indians, the peninsula was known as ‘Suvarṇabhūmi’ (Land of Gold) (Dhoroisingham 2006, p.2). Tamils played an important role in trade with Southeast Asia. Dhoroisingham refers to a collection of second- and third-century Tamil literature, which mentions travels between South India and Kedah – possibly referring to Langkasuka, an ancient Hindu-Buddhist kingdom that existed in present-day Kedah, between the second and fifteenth century. Through this trade, India’s cultural influence bore its mark on the peninsula, particularly through Saivite temple construction. Hinduism and Buddhism complemented the animist beliefs of the indigenous peoples, and at this time there were hybrid cultural forms like Ramayana *wayang kulit* (Javanese shadow puppetry) performances (Khoo 2006, p.6).

The earliest contact with Islam was in 674AD, and Islam had established a foothold in some coastal towns by the late ninth century (McAmis 2002, p.12). But it is generally accepted that Islam arrived in the thirteenth century, with one account from Sumatra dating its arrival to 1204 (ibid). Through contact with local religious influences – Buddhism, Hinduism and animism – Southeast Asian Islam developed its syncretic local character. Islam spread through the region for commercial reasons – through Muslim merchants from Arabia and India who settled with local women – and not through missionary work. Later in the fourteenth century, Indian missionaries converted much of Southeast Asia’s population (ibid, p.11). But Islam also emerged from ‘higher status Muslim scholars originating in the Middle East’, who claimed antecedents in the Holy Land and genealogical links to the Prophet himself (Nagata 1997, p.132). Some married into local royal and noble families, ‘creating double-prestige genealogies’ (ibid)<sup>15</sup>. Meanwhile, many Indian Muslims had become influential teachers at religious schools (*pondok*) in the rural communities (ibid, p.131). They propagated Islam ‘in an acceptable manner’, combining Middle Eastern and South Asian teachings with animist theology (McAmis 2002, p.25)<sup>16</sup>. Overall, Islamic culture was

...intensely localised, with its own parochial lines of authority, practices and social relationships. In both a social and a political sense, therefore, Islam in Malaysia has long been operating in a context of Malayness and been subordinate to it. (Barr and Govindasamy 2010, p.296)

Stressing these past ethnoreligious convergences is important for highlighting historical erasures. Kent (2004, p.20) observes that the role of Indian culture in Malaysian history has been broadly silenced. Instead, in political discourse Hinduism is attached to the history of colonial Tamil immigration. By defining Hinduism as Indian, it is simultaneously ‘not Malay’ – a notion which has served use since the 1980s, when BN sought to promote Islam to reform the Malay community. In 1986 Mahathir declared that

Hinduism and animism...had shaped and controlled the Malay psyche before the coming of Islam...If the Malays were to become Muslims, these old beliefs must be erased and replaced with a strong and clear Islamic faith. (Cited in Willford 2006, p.37)

Such erasure was implied both figuratively and literally, with the destruction of centuries-old Hindu monuments in favour of mosques and minarets. These historical erasures reinforced the Malays’ primordial essence and weakened the claims of Indians and other non-Malay groups on the nation’s history.

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<sup>15</sup> Royals had no specific racial heritage. Shamsul (2004, p.123) acknowledges a Chinese subject that ruled between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – reflecting the ‘special position’ of the Chinese, even relative to Europeans in these precolonial times.

<sup>16</sup> To-date, Sufism, an Islamic movement relating to Islam’s inner, mystical dimensions, has remained strong in rural Malaysia – particularly in Kedah and Kelantan (Nagata 1997, p.131).

## 2.2 Melaka's 'Golden Age'

Andaya claims that Srivijaya's decline in the fourteenth century was a pivotal moment which caused a 'jockeying for dominance' among different groups in Sumatra, over who could claim to be the new Melayu centre, including the people of Aceh and Minangkabau (2001, p.327). It was, he notes, a migrant group from Palembang that were victorious, travelling to the peninsula 'to recreate the glory of Srivijaya', positioning Melaka as the new centre and trading entrepôt of the Melayu (ibid). Known as the Melaka Sultanate, after this polity was founded in 1402 the Melayu identity was supposedly 'wrenched away from Sumatra' (ibid, p.330).

'Melayu' remained a very hybrid category, incorporating Chinese and Javanese elements (Reid 2009, p.86). In 1408, Admiral Cheng Ho of the Ming Dynasty founded a Chinese colony in Melaka, which existed until the Straits Settlements were established in 1826 (Clammer 1979, p.2). Throughout the fifteenth century, many Han Chinese migrated to Melaka, attracted by its trading potential<sup>17</sup>. They integrated well into local life, forming *Baba-Nyonya* (creole) cultures which privileged Chinese education, however conformed to local customs and spoke a creolised version of Melayu (Tan 2003, p.47).

Megat Iskandar Shah, the second Sultan of Melaka, was alleged to have converted to Islam in 1414 – the first ruler to do so (Khoo 2006, p.6). Islam was firmly established in the mid-fifteenth century, under Sultan Muzaffar Shah, the fifth Sultan of Melaka. Accompanied by a burgeoning literary production scene, Islam 'helped to reinforce and export Melaka values to other parts of Southeast Asia' (Andaya 2001, p.330). Melaka's centrality in the Melayu world was asserted through a court document called *Sulalat al-Salatin* (Genealogy/Descent of Kings) (ibid, p.327). At a similar time, the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Epic of Hang Tuah) was created. This was a popular work which

...began as oral tales associated with the legendary heroes of the Melaka kingdom, particularly the exploits of Hang Tuah, the ideal Melayu subject. (Ibid, p.328)

The *Hikayat* 'helped solemnize knowledge about the virtues of royal greatness and mass deference' (Case 1995, p.82). At this time, the Sultan's power uniquely combined with Islamic teachings. Melayu Sultans viewed themselves as God's representatives, 'the shadow of Allah on earth', endowed with *daulat* – a concept of supernatural power drawn from earlier religious influences (Khoo 2006, p.32). These earlier religious influences formed the basis of

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<sup>17</sup> Malaysian Chinese are associated most closely with the Han ethnic group, because of their history and number of migration – though other Chinese also emigrated: Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, and also Chinese from Taiwan (Tan 2015, p.27).

the *adat Melayu*, a code of conduct concerning the Melayu people's mystic rituals first referenced in the *Hikayat*. These would come into increasing conflict with Islamic teachings, as the two identities, Melayu and Muslim, continued to evolve (Kent 2004, p.20).

Until Portugal's invasion in 1511, Melaka dominated 'as a centre of commerce, religion, and literary output', making it 'synonymous with Melayu civilisation' (Andaya 2001, p.330). Melakans saw themselves as orang Melayu, especially as a cultural category opposed to foreigners from other states (Reid 2001, p.298). 'Melayu' was not racial, but referred to the line of kingship descending from Srivijaya or Melaka (ibid, p.300), and to the ruler/ruled relationship expressed through accepted customs, ceremony and dress (Milner and Ting 2014, p.20). The Sultanate was 'race blind', containing royal figures of Tamil, Hakka and Peguan (Burmese) descent (ibid, p.26-27).

Arguably, the Melakan Sultanate constituted the basis of modern Malay identity. Early literary texts like the *Sulalat* and *Hikayat* have been invaluable for historians tracing the Malay history (Milner 2008, p.21). It was in a revised edition of the *Sulalat* that the phrase '*Tanah Melayu*' first appeared, presumed to mean the peninsula – in a bid to counter Aceh's territorial claims over that space (Andaya 2001, p.328). Through their dissemination across the Melayu kingdom, both works helped, over centuries, to consolidate the 'nationalist fantasy of a Malay golden age' (Khoo 2006, p.32). Though as Milner reminds us, we must take caution when assuming the connection between Melaka (and its antecedents in Srivijaya) and 'the Malays' (2008, p.12). At least, accepted history 'claim[s] the achievements of these kingdoms on behalf of the "Malays"' (ibid, p.9).

### **2.3 British Rule and the Emergence of the 'Ethnoreligious'**

When scholars speak of 'colonial Malaya', they refer to the British period. 'Malaya' was a term used by the British to refer to the peninsula (Reid 2001, p.304), after they arrived in Malaya in 1786 (in the shape of the British East India Company). Then, the Melayu community existed as the *kerajaan* (royalty): a string of Sultanates that varied between those established since the fall of Melaka – in Perak and Johor – and those that extended from older Buddhist-Hindu kingdoms like Langkasuka – for instance in Kedah. The British played a hands-off role, forming a compromise with the rulers. They established a system of indirect rule through the Sultanates, which granted the rulers power over Islamic affairs (Houben 2003, p.155). Because it did not threaten Islam's position, this arrangement promoted stability and discouraged resistance to western hegemony (p.156). Around this time, the Melayu were a 'pre-political' community (i.e. there was no political activity based around a Melayu

identity) which did not see themselves as a common race (Milner 1995, p.11). Only after Britain established a plural society, made up from ‘native’ Malays (the British translation of Melayu) and ‘immigrant’ Chinese and Indian workers, were fluid, indigenous concepts of identity sharpened through quasi-scientific colonial discourse (Reid 2009, p.101).

Through colonial rule, Malays were to be ‘enlightened’ about good government policy, civilisation and progress. Reid acknowledges a ‘gentlemanly and non-competitive stereotype’, where ‘[t]he “real Malay” of colonial discourse was rural, loyal to his ruler, conservative and relaxed to the point of laziness’ (2001, p.306). This contradicted the reality that many were migrants from Sumatra and elsewhere, who had no such loyalty to the Sultan (Reid 2009, p.96). Britain promoted ‘Malayistics’, a scholarly enterprise which reinforced the peninsula as ‘*Tanah Melayu*’ and Melaka as ‘the cradle of Malay civilisation’:

Proper behaviour, customary laws and standards of government, language and literature derived from the oral and written traditions of Melaka became “primordial” values associated with being Malay. (Andaya 2001, p.315-316)

This necessitated a historical erasure of Malay culture elsewhere, particularly the ancient Melayu kingdom of Srivijaya (ibid). Stamford Raffles, an important colonial ideologue, significantly republished the *Sulalat al-Salatin* in 1821, renaming it the ‘Malay Annals’ (*Sejarah Melayu*). This, for Reid, constituted ‘[h]is most influential single act for subsequent understanding of Malay identity’, changing the book’s context from a lineage of kings to the story of a Malay people (2009, p.92). Britain introduced a vernacular education system which, drawing upon the *Hikayat* and *Sejarah Melayu*, implanted the Malays’ historical identity – one which represented ‘a racial sense of lost grandeur’ (Reid 2001, p.307). To British educationists,

...the seeds of the necessary regeneration of the Malay people should be sought primarily in the past, when everything had been so much better. (Maier 1988, in Reid 2001, p.307)<sup>18</sup>

Part II explores how these nostalgic and regressive ideals played a key role in Umno’s nationalist vision; reflecting how the ‘primordial’ core of Malayness was constructed ‘through reference to a specific past that is identified and interpreted, or reinterpreted, for current ethnic needs’ (Andaya 2001, p.316).

‘Malayistics’ exemplified the ‘Othering’ discourse that was imposed on the ‘East’ by the ‘West’ through its colonial mission – as documented by Edward Said (1978) in his seminal

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<sup>18</sup> The majority of Malays remained uneducated. Raffles proposed that only native upper classes be educated (Shamsul 2003, p.112), and by 1920 only 12 percent of Malays aged 5-15 were in school (Reid 2001, p.306).

book, *Orientalism*. The ideological implications of Said's work are widely regarded, suggesting that far from being neutral, colonial knowledge was determined by an essentialist, ahistorical perspective that positioned the West as a superior force and the Oriental subject as the West's burden, in need of order, discipline and 'enlightenment'. Here, Britain was legitimising and empowering its colonial mission through the construction of discourses that fetishised facets of Malay life, stripping the Malays' agency and constructing them as a cultural artefact to be consumed by the West. This has led to an internalised Orientalist thinking among the Malay elite, typified by publications like *The Malay Dilemma* (see part II).

Colonial ideologues believed in preserving and protecting 'traditional' Malay life from 'corrupt' urban influences: Chinese and Indians, but also educated and potentially problematic Malays (Reid 2009, p.96). Although respecting local 'tradition' this meant that Malays were afforded limited economic participation, 'barred from harvesting the fruits of capitalism' (Kent 2004, p.21). Britain's emphasis on protecting the Malay identity had not always been the case. Reid (2009, p.100) notes that for colonial administrators, the prospect of protecting the 'Malay race' was 'a more attractive justification for colonial rule' than the original pretext of protecting Malay rulers – who were key to Britain's lucrative trade deals – from Chinese capitalism, which had been growing through the nineteenth century.

China's defeat by Britain after the First Opium War in 1842 forced masses of Chinese workers to migrate to Malaya (Wei 2003, p.15)<sup>19</sup>. The majority were unskilled workers ('coolies') co-opted as contract labourers in tin-mining areas, rubber plantations and sugar farms (ibid, p.20). They were impoverished, suffered ill health, and died in great numbers, either during the journey or under the hardship of colonial labour. Under the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), Chinese expatriates were viewed as outlaws or traitors, and there was little sympathy for those who had 'put themselves at the mercy of unscrupulous recruiters' (Wang 2015, p.vii). For centuries the Chinese had integrated well into the Melayu community; only in colonial Malaya was their racial lineage articulated against the 'Malays' (Case 1995, p.90). Through written and oral accounts of colonial ideologues, officers and ordinary travellers, negative characteristics were attributed to that group – among them: anti-social, deceitful, scheming, ruthless, and even treacherous (Alatas 1977, p.73). Contrary to the romanticised, rural Malay idyll, Reid (2001, p.306) notes that the Chinese were connected to 'the negative elements of a rampant capitalist order...dedicated to making money by any means possible'.

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<sup>19</sup> Amrith (2015, p.13) observes that more Chinese (11 million) immigrated to Malaya than anywhere else between 1840 and 1940.

The majority of workers demonstrated the ‘Chinese entrepreneurial ethic’ of hard work, savings and investment, to ensure their children’s future (Harrell 1985). However, to one scholar, this distinguished the Chinese worker as

...the mule among the nations – capable of the hardest task under the most trying conditions; tolerant of every kind of weather and ill usage; eating little and drinking less; stubborn and callous; unlovable and useful in the highest degree. (C.G. Warnford-Lock 1907, in Alatas 1977, p.75)

Much tin-mining activity was controlled by *kongsi* (secret societies), a structure imported from mainland China (Case 1995, p.85). Because of their expediency to the ‘understaffed’ British Empire in Malaya, these associations were reluctantly granted autonomy (Wu 2003, p.177). Despite such power threatening the sovereignty of the Malay royalty, Sultans were pressured by Britain to grant concessions for Chinese business. Case argues that tin-mining ‘wrecked Malay political culture’, as Malay rulers were undermined by their subordinates, who struck lucrative deals with Chinese headmen (*kapitan*) (1995, p.83).

Carstens (2005, p.10) observes that Chinese leaders were known less for their economic wealth than for their fighting prowess, and they served as military leaders, mediating between Chinese and Malay workers, and private entrepreneurs. Between 1867 and 1874, different Chinese clans violently competed for control of the tin-mining economy, culminating in the Selangor Civil War (Case 1995, p.85). Yap Ah Loy was a famous figure involved in this war. Since arriving in Malaya in 1856, Yap had progressed from his trade as a tin-miner to becoming a *kapitan* who commanded large influence over Selangor, playing an integral role in founding Kuala Lumpur. His story epitomised the ‘rags-to-riches’ journey that inspired many Chinese to migrate to Malaya (Carstens 2005, p.39). Interestingly, Chinese religious activity was tied to this ‘clan mentality’. Chinese temples were generously funded by wealthy Chinese leaders. Besides serving a religious function, these temples were centres of political activity and resembled secular organisations (ibid, p.32). Many temples related less to popular religions (Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) than to the deification of past Chinese *kapitan*. Kuala Lumpur’s first Chinese temple, the *Xian Si Shi Ye Miao* temple, founded by Yap Ah Loy in 1864, was not dedicated to a traditional deity but a Chinese *kapitan* under whom Yap had served and fought (ibid). Such a glorification of violence further reinforced perceptions developed and disseminated by the British that the Chinese were a people without morals; a tough, tenacious and volatile people who threatened Malay cultural values.

The war was an important signifier of the connection between Chinese resilience and self-sufficiency on the one hand, and militancy and political struggle on the other. In 1895 Britain



took measures to protect the tin-mining economy, tightening its control by establishing the Federated Malay States (FMS; Selangor, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang) and banning Chinese *kongsi* (Amrith 2015, p.14). Under British guidance, *Kapitan* were replaced by business leaders – the kind that would later form the MCA – who were taught about the values of collaboration and legitimate use of power (Case 1995, p.85; p.87). At this time Kuala Lumpur was almost 80 percent Chinese, who were ‘stereotyped as moneylenders and shopkeepers, often quite fiercely independent and resistant to control’ (Kent 2004, p.21). Chinese-owned businesses and banks were commonplace, reflecting the reality that the Chinese had developed control over Malaya’s economic sector. As J. Thomson, a travel writer in Penang, declared in 1875, it was ‘indeed to Chinamen that the foreign resident is indebted for almost all his comforts’ (in Alatas 1977, p.72).

Overall, the Chinese represented a threat to all that the colonialists held dear about the ‘Malay’ stereotype based around Islam and the *kampung* (village) tradition. Together, these different understandings of ‘Chineseness’ in colonial Malaya, whether concerning their immorality, avariciousness, belligerence or unruliness, formed the basis of a constructed imagination of ‘Chinese kafir behaviour’ that informs the postcolonial government’s ruling strategy (see part II).

Britain’s empire was bolstered through the importation of many South Asian workers. The vast majority came from poor, southern Tamil-speaking regions of British-ruled India. These workers were classified as ‘British’ colonial subjects and arrived under an indentured labour system, with ‘little option but to engage with the state’ (Amrith 2015, p.15). Apart from the majority-Tamils, there were other Indian ‘sub-ethnicities’, including Telugu, Punjabi and Malayalam – each bringing ‘its own language and socio-culture practices pertaining to family life’ (Jain 2007, p.127). But such were the classifying practices of the colonial government, that in the 1891 Malayan census, the Indian population was defined as ‘Tamils and other natives of India’ (Reid 2001, p.307). At this time, colonial discourse emphasised India’s caste structure and its irrefutable link with Hinduism. British subjects viewed caste as a hereditary form of social stratification indigenous to India. Herbert H Risley, commissioner for the 1901 India census, saw caste as an explanation behind the Indian people’s arrested racial development – a people burdened by the inferior, primitive, ‘feminine’ Hindu mind (Inden 1990, p.4-5). This obsession with caste and Hinduism animated colonial administrators in Malaya. Ignoring the syncretism that bound Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, administrators classified Indian religion and identity using Hinduism and the caste system (Jain 2007, p.135). Tamil labourers, from the ‘untouchable’ Dalit caste, were considered impure and inhuman.

The Hinduism they practised sharply contrasted the high-caste Hinduism of ages past, including blood sacrifice, fire walking and worshipping false deities (Kent 2004, p.30). There were also Ceylonese Tamils from the higher Vellalar caste, valued by Britain for managing the plantations (Kent 2004, p.26). But colonial discourse highlighted the Dalit untouchables; a sorry people destined for misery.

Tamil labourers had valuable experience working on plantations and, compared to the Chinese, were familiar with British rule (Leong 2003, p.88). For Britain, they were the 'ideal' labour force (Willford 2007, p.16). They were not deemed as capable or self-reliant as the more militant and better-organised Chinese (Amrith 2015, p.14). Compared to the Chinese, there were 'few channels of advancement' for these Indian labourers (Thompson 1955, in Colletta 1975, p.89) and 'rags-to-riches' stories were uncommon (Amrith 2015, p.15). One extreme account depicted them as the 'most abject, hopeless and unpromising specimens of humanity' (Thurston 1903, in Willford 2007, p.16). Dispossessed of agency, they were perceived as docile and malleable, easily managed and disciplined by Britain for its colonial operations (Pillai 2007; Leong 2012; Willford 2007)<sup>20</sup>. But 'passivity in the labourer was not a foregone conclusion' (Pillai 2007, p.xii); they drank much (Kent 2004, p.29) and were argumentative and abusive (Alatas 1977, p.77). Part II discusses the fragmentation of Indian racial identity in Malaya – which eventually served a problem for the MIC. For now, we must realise that the image of the impoverished Tamil-Hindu 'coolie' embodied just one element of Indian migration into Malaya. But it was the most influential in British discourse, and in 1912 the liberal Indian leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale declared his frustration that through the indentured labour system, Indians had come to be equated with 'coolies' throughout the world, stripping them of dignity and degrading India's national identity (Amrith 2015, p.17).

## **2.4 Malay Nationalism and its Islamic Influences**

Albeit connected in Melaka's 'golden age', Malay and Muslim identity became inextricably linked in the late colonial period, when Muslim scholars sought to challenge archaic Malay traditions with modern Islamic values. Shamsul (2001, p.357) argues that Britain's colonial conquest was 'a cultural invasion in the form of a conquest of the native "epistemological space"'. But he neglects the significant contributions of early Malay nationalists, who had applied their own knowledge onto this colonial framework, such that race made sense in an indigenous context, theorised by Malaysians for Malaysians, rather than by Britons for a British audience. For these figures, determining proper Malay customs and religious practice was

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<sup>20</sup> Skilled Indian professionals from North India – doctors, lawyers, teachers and clerks – were deemed harder to manage by the colonialists (Leong 2012, p.35-36).

more important than biological determinism, which was too ambiguous a marker of identity (Reid 2009, p.101). In *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, Milner explores a selection of early written works by indigenous scholars, tracing the ‘novel architecture of debate in Malay society’ (1995, p.7). By the mid-nineteenth century Malaya had become embroiled in vibrant debates concerning different conceptions of community: *kerajaan* (royalty), *umat* (Islamic community) and *bangsa* (Malay race) (p.6). This period, Milner writes, was ‘a time of ideological adventure’ (p.v), informed by ‘experimentation and debate’ (p.11). Britain’s education of the Malay elite had produced a cohort of Malay-Muslim liberals who were cultivating a new political discourse. These intellectuals were attempting to connect Malaya to broader debates in the Muslim world, involving the Hadhramaut (a region of present-day Yemen), Cairo and Muslim India (Nagata 1997, p.132). These writers, Milner notes, were ‘resourceful and creative’ (p.7) in their attempts to inject meaning into the notion of Malayness; manipulating colonial categories of race and nation using local knowledge.

It was in a work by Munshi Abdullah (1840), that ‘*bangsa Melayu*’ first appeared (Reid 2001, p.308). Abdullah, whose parents were of Indian and Yemeni descent, was one of the earliest liberal Malay critics of the Sultanate (Milner 1995, p.10). Having had a strict Muslim upbringing, Abdullah’s work was very Islam-focused and he described the Sultanates as ‘pre-Islamic’. He was keen to redefine Malayness beyond feudal tradition, for the Malays’ subservience to the royalty had hindered their social progress. Living in urbanised Singapore, Abdullah was indifferent to that Malay peasant culture (Reid 2001, p.305). The power and influence of the Sultans had certainly declined under successive waves of European invasion. But Abdullah spewed vitriol about ‘the evils of Malay aristocratic rule’ (Milner 1995, p.13). This feudalistic culture had hindered modernity and progress, depriving Malays of education and independent thought. For Abdullah, ‘race was the primary community’ (ibid, p.51), and represented an ‘egalitarian ethos’ inspired by Britain that transcended and undermined the ruler/ruled relationship (Milner and Ting 2014, p.26).

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, a cluster of immigrant merchants and intellectuals known as *Kaum Muda* (Young Faction) transformed ‘*bangsa*’ through a pan-Islamic *dakwah* (proselytisation) movement (Barr and Govindasamy 2010, p.296). Like Abdullah, they saw Muslim equality as a means of overcoming the anachronistic feudal system. But *Kaum Muda* were in ‘direct conflict with the state religious authorities on a wide range of ritual, doctrinal, and social questions’ (Roff 1967, p.78). They were against the Sufi teachings practised by many indigenous communities that incorporated animist practices, particularly the ‘un-Islamic’ Malay *adat* (Khoo 2006, p.6). The *adat* were ‘the customs that existed before

Islam...the “residue” of Malay custom (that is not Islamic)’ (ibid, p.3). *Kaum Muda* sought a Wahhabi (orthodox) and Syariah-inspired consciousness based on the notion of ‘*Dar-al Islam*’ (territory of Islam), positioning the Malays within a global Islamic community that extended from a *Tamadun Arab* (Arabic civilisation) (Nagata 1997, p.132-133).

Underlying that movement was an anticolonial and nationalist agenda (Barr and Govindasamy 2010, p.296). These intellectuals were expressing dissatisfaction at the royalty’s dependency on British rule, which had reduced Malay political power and caused an unnecessary racial division of labour that disadvantaged the Malays (Hadiz and Khoo 2011, p.469-470). Islam was further being used to sharpen the boundary between Malays and ‘impure’ non-Malays. The early twentieth century thus ‘marked an important shift for Malayan Islam as a consciously exploited marker of ethnicity and as a political device’ (Kent 2004, p.25). Malay-Muslim publications prospered throughout the 1920s, helping to consolidate this political consciousness (ibid). By the 1930s, for the educated Malay youth ‘*bangsa*’ was ‘a locus of political passion’, influencing a powerful anticolonial campaign that foregrounded two elements: Malays were the primary claimants of this territory, but simultaneously the weakest group within it (Reid 2009, p.103). This was reflected in the term ‘*Tanah Melayu*’, intrinsic to which was the belief that ‘non-Malays’ (Europeans, Chinese and Indians) were temporary diasporas that did not view Malaya as their ‘homeland’ (Amrith 2015, p.17). This ideal had been encouraged by Britain ever since it arrived, articulating a separate Malay history for the peninsula in educational and political discourse<sup>21</sup>.

But there was friction between different nationalist groups concerning who embodied the ‘real Malay’ (*Melayu jati*) – with the implication that ‘Anglophile aristocrats and the part-Indian or part-Arab Muslims of Singapore and Penang’ (like Munshi Abdullah) could not (Reid 2001, p.308). Ironically this intra-Malay conflict was as, or perhaps more, significant, than Malay-Chinese difference (Kahn 2006, p.70). Overall, articulations of Malay identity appeared fragmented and confused, as reflected in the Malay Reservation Enactment (1913), which was instituted separately in each state and contained contradictory definitions of ‘Malay’:

...a person of Arab descent was a Malay in Kedah but not in Johor; a person of Siamese descent was a Malay in Kelantan but not in Negeri Sembilan...ma[king] “Malay” and “Malayness” contested categories. (Shamsul 2001, p.361)

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<sup>21</sup> One key contributor was English Orientalist William Marsden, who in *The History of Sumatra* (1784), was alleged to declare that the peninsula was the Malays’ place of origin – though actually he had written that the idea of the peninsula as specifically ‘Malay’ was of European origin (Reid 2001, p.303).

Barr and Govindasamy (2010, p.295) stress that, because Thais and Arabs were incorporated into definitions of Malayness, '[t]his loose formula was really a code for not being Chinese, European or Indian'.

In sum, this Malay-Muslim 'Self' began to emerge, most explicitly towards the twentieth century, as the mirror image of the non-Malay 'Other' that had come to be defined through colonial discourse. However, Islamic and Malay customs were very hybrid elements, both drawing from and evolving alongside one another despite disjuncture between them. In the late 1930s, different nationalist groups, whether Malay-centred, Muslim-centred or otherwise, grappled with and fought over the '*bangsa*' concept – tensions which continued into the postcolonial era and contributed to the contemporary ambivalences tied up in the Malay-Muslim identity, reflecting a 'triangle of religion-nation-ethnicity [that] is loaded with tension' (Houben 2003, p.165).

## **II: Fragmented Essentialisms in Malaysia: Innovating with the Past**

Part I demonstrated how the British shaped a legacy whereby 'Malays', 'Chinese' and 'Indians' were perceived as discrete groups, each implicated in certain discourses, particularly concerning religious identity (or lack thereof). Part II conceptualises how the postcolonial government has maintained and reworked this ethnoreligious framework to manage the difference between those groups. To do this it will first foreground the concept of 'fragmented essentialisms', which is essential for understanding how that framework operates. This is itself an amalgamation of three concepts: strategic essentialism (Spivak 1987), outrage at state humiliation (Reid 2009) and self-Orientalism (Iwabuchi 1994; Matsumoto 2002; Yoshioka 1995).

### ***Fragmented essentialisms***

In *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977, p.142) Malaysian academic Syed Hussein Alatas criticises Mahathir's *The Malay Dilemma* (1970) for 'questioning the diligence' of Malays. Branding rural Malays weak and indolent, Mahathir believed this had caused them to be dominated by the superior West and Chinese. It was on this basis that Mahathir argued for affirmative action policies for the Malay community. But for Alatas, replicating familiar colonial-racial jargon, this proved that the Malay intelligentsia had failed to break away from 'categories of colonial capitalist thought' (1977, p.151). Edward Said has paid homage to Alatas' work. He compares Alatas to Ranajit Guha, both responsible for 'startlingly original' analyses of colonial life (Guha on India, Alatas on Southeast Asia) (1993, p.296). Alatas'

work was defined through a focus on anti-essentialism, postcolonial progress and native empowerment. These same ideas foregrounded Guha's intellectual movement, the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) (founded in 1982). This was a group of scholars that applied Marxist thinking to postcolonial Indian society. They criticised the Indian historiography which reproduced elitist, colonial-essential categories and excluded the 'subaltern' voice (those voices excluded by the hegemonic structures of the state). SSG has since been subjected to various critiques by those who were its key proponents. Speaking in hindsight on his participation in the now 'inadequate' movement, Partha Chatterjee (2013, p.44) concedes that it 'was a product of its time', preoccupied by the turbulence that faced India's new nation-state. Those scholars involved (Guha, himself, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty to name a few), were young and naïve, failing 'to understand embodied practices as activities that people carry out for their own sake' (p.49).

Spivak was perhaps the most famous SSG scholar. She was always aware of the limitations of that group's claims, thus critical of the group she was associated with. For Spivak, essentialism was an embodied practice; a strategy that marginalised groups use to make themselves visible. She acknowledged a 'strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest' (1987, p.205), whereby occasionally, despite consciousness of internal differences, it is necessary for a group to essentialise its identity to achieve political goals. Seen accordingly, Umno could benefit from adopting those essentialised colonial categories and *The Malay Dilemma* provided an important vision of Malaysia's emerging political strategy. Umno made empowered decisions to maintain this knowledge for its own political ends – confirming 'that ethnicity is a category of power, not biology' (Filewod 1994, p.365). Alatas fails to recognise this, and the new forms of politics being manufactured by Umno – which required a reconstruction of colonial history to provide contemporary political meaning.

Strategic essentialism is a useful concept for understanding postcolonial identity-making, showing how social groups may temporarily put aside – or even consciously neglect – internal group heterogeneity, in order to be perceived as a stronger and more unified political force. After 1969, Mahathir and other Umno politicians highlighted the need to protect the 'weak' Malays with the aim of substantially strengthening their power in society, relative to the economically-dominant Chinese. They effectively treated the historical rural Malay identity as a metonym for Malay subordination. Central to Mahathir's 'dilemma' was the pursuit of '*Melayu Baru*' (the new Malay): westernised, business-minded and ready to compete in modern society. The rhetoric of the Malays' dilemma was thus necessary until the Malays had

been rehabilitated through these educational and entrepreneurial channels (Embong 2001b). This reflects Spivak's argument that essentialism is acceptable, insofar as it is applied in a temporarily manner for a political goal. However, this is not realistic for as discussed a 'crutch mentality' is believed to have developed among the Malays. Because essentialisation has repercussions beyond its 'temporary' purpose, some have criticised Spivak for remaining beholden to an essentialising framework (e.g. Nelson 2010) – something which she forcefully denies.

The Malay Dilemma represented a selective reconstruction of the past that excluded the successful roles that urban Malays had played in colonial society, as documented by Kahn (2006) in his book *Other Malays*. Naturally, for Umno politicians to acknowledge those things would be to contradict their own argument that Malays required a greater share of the nation's resources. This was the dominant discourse of its time, but it existed alongside other discourses of Malay identity: chapter 1 discussed the resurgence of Islamic thinking among educated Malays, who incidentally were oppositional to Umno's aggressive modernisation project. For obvious reasons this was excluded from the post-1969 notion of '*Melayu Baru*'. Albeit acknowledging the value of Spivak's thought for providing a means of interrogation of essentialist terms, for the two aforementioned reasons – the persistence of essentialisation past temporary contexts, and the plurality of different essentialisms, I prefer to coin the term 'fragmented essentialisms' (see below).

Malaysian identity is enmeshed in the layering and nesting of different discourses, and these processes are part and parcel of the production of new forms of politics. This is supported by Reid, whose 'alchemy' metaphor reflects his intent to privilege the craft and creativity underlying Southeast Asian nationalism. In *Imperial Alchemy* Reid outlines a model of nationalism called *outrage at state humiliation (OSH)*: 'an emotive variant' of nationalism relevant to Malaysia through 'the perceived humiliation' of state and Islam under European conquest (p.10-11), grounded in 'passionate discontent with the self and nation' (Tsu 2005, in Reid 2009, p.10). Here, the government re-enacts a history of state humiliation through certain cultural performances that mobilise political support. *The Malay Dilemma*, published as it was during Malaysia's break from democracy, represented a new nationalist manifesto. It provided the 'national narrative of a simple, "traditional" kampung people marginalised by colonialism and foreign immigration' that was utilised to provide Umno with political legitimacy (Kahn 2006, p.109). This connected to universal political ideas, drawing upon anticolonial themes like 'resentment and impatience' and 'the guilt of Europe and the innocence of Asia and Africa' (Kedourie 1974, p.146).

Such ritualisation of national inferiority connects to what is known as ‘self-Orientalism’. This concept emerged from the study of Japanese popular culture, concerning how Japan’s self-representation in media and culture is less indigenously constructed than predetermined by a repertoire of Orientalist imagery on Japan (Iwabuchi 1994; Yoshioka 1995; Matsumoto 2002). Japan presented itself according to a caricature of how westerners saw them (as samurais, geishas, culturally enigmatic etc.) (Iwabuchi 1994). Contrary to Said’s argument, this neither reflected the passivity of the Oriental voice, nor the domination of colonial thought, but the active choice of Japanese scriptwriters to mould the nation’s cultural identity vis-à-vis subverting and exploiting western discourse (ibid). This enabled the Japanese elite to construct the national culture around corresponding values (for instance, reflecting perceived Samurai values of courage, discipline and honour) (Yoshioka 1995, p.102). But it also allowed Japan to essentialise the national Self, foregrounding this racialised discursive construct at the expense of repressed ‘Others’ in the nation-state, like Koreans and Ainu (a people indigenous to Japan and Russia) (Iwabuchi 1994). *The Malay Dilemma* was similarly pragmatic, reading from and internalising a colonial script, ritualising those images to reinforce, proliferate and perpetuate an inferiorised Malay identity in social, cultural and political discourse. This did not reflect Mahathir’s absorption of colonial categories, but a deliberate and selective articulation of colonial discourse that supported Umno’s revived nationalist ambitions. Mahathir could reinforce negative Malay stereotypes whilst simultaneously ‘re-indigenising’ and reifying those qualities within a transformed Malay ‘Self’ that the government controlled: ‘a dependent native requiring assistance to climb the ladder of progress’ (Alatas 1977, p.8); the main protagonist in a new national story in which Chinese and Indians were supporting cast.

Together these ideas inform my understanding of fragmented ethnoreligious discourse in Malaysia and its implications for the reproduction of divisive political discourses. The Malaysian government have selected and reconstituted certain aspects of colonial-racial discourse as strategic political devices in the postcolonial era. ‘Strategic’ is too ‘clean’ a word to describe how these essentialised discourses operate, and instead we must acknowledge the messy terrain on which the relationship between colonial and postcolonial thought is grounded. Ang for instance conceptualises essentialism as a ‘provisional and partial “identity” which must be constantly reinvented and renegotiated’ (2001a, p.36). *The Malay Dilemma* represents one instance of this; a timely political intervention that imbued the Malay category with new essential meaning relevant to the political times. Nevertheless, this book was preoccupied by the colonial memory and implicated in processes of inclusion and exclusion;



just one of many ‘fragmented essentialisms’ situated within a complex, dynamic, messy, contested and ambivalent terrain that connects colonial and postcolonial thought.

In essence, ‘fragmented essentialisms’ refers to how different fragments of the colonial past, grounded as they were in historical ambivalence and political myth-making, continue to be exploited for contemporary political ends. The politicians that are claiming to speak on their groups’ behalf are doing so by emphasising selective aspects of those groups’ histories (and suppressing other aspects), which have been fragmented, codified, asserted and developed over successive political generations – resulting in a divisive, unstable and ambivalent postcolonial landscape. The concept itself can be broken down into four separate ‘fragments’, the fragmentation of race; the fragmented message; fragmented audiences; and the fragmented society.

- **Fragmentation of race** – Fragmented essentialisms is a useful concept, for it reflects the atomisation of race in its historical, colonial form, and how postcolonial agents have moved towards the production of new forms of racialising discourse that are grounded in ‘fragments’ of this colonial past.
- **Fragmented message** – In this respect, the concept of fragmentation not only refers to the break-up of race in that historical form but also to the fragmented understanding that results from this discursive entropy. There is a constant tension between the past articulations of these identities and the means by which they will be deployed in the future. Over generations, perhaps the meaning of those identities will continue to erode, but because there will be traceable fragments to the colonial past, they will continue to maintain their emotive meaning – particularly when considering the entrenchedness of racialisation in Malaysia.
- **Fragmented audiences** – As stated the plural in ‘fragmented essentialisms’ is significant, accounting for the multiple essentialisms which are uncomfortably situated against one another. For instance, understandings of ‘the Malays’ as moderate Islamic citizens in 2004 contrast to understandings of ‘the Malays’ as tribal and hungry for Chinese retribution in 2013. But even though ‘the Malays’ were the audience each time, it was actually different sections of the electorate that were being courted for each election (the modern and middle class Malays in 2004; the underprivileged rural Malays in 2013). Both understandings of Malayness are contained within the layering and nesting of different identities and discourses in the postcolonial era.
- **Fragmented society** – But ‘fragmentation’ also refers to how these discourses are uncomfortably situated in relation to the notion of a modern, inclusive Malaysia that

the government is driving forward. Fragmentation thus accounts for the division between these racial groups in the context of a modern society, and highlights the unusual juxtaposition between Malaysia's strive for modernity and the role of politicians, journalists and other agents in actively reengineering and remoulding the country's racialised colonial past.

The concept has obvious utility in the study of this electoral cycle, for it can account for how successive political generations have picked up different fragments of this colonial-racial past and reworked them for contemporary political ends. From an analytical perspective, we can ask what fragments are being used and why, and it is hoped that the empirical chapters will explain this; why the media writers around each election are appropriating certain elements of the ethnoreligious identity in question, and what impact this is having on the groups attached to those identities. Overall it is hoped that the reader understands that ethnoreligious symbolism and fragmented essentialisms are tied into one another, with the concept of fragmented essentialisms used to account for how different fragments of ethnoreligious identity have been reworked so as to result in the contemporary formations of Malay-Muslim, Chinese-kafir and Tamil-Hindu identity.

Moreover, as discussed in the introduction, the thesis adopts a combined view of racialisation that seeks to connect the Malay-Muslim identity to the Tamil-Hindu and Chinese-kafir identities. This concept is thus valuable for understanding the ways in which the different racialising fragments of these ethnoreligious identities come together to form an incoherent whole. They tensely interact with, and are formed through ambivalent reference to, one another. For instance, as shown in Mahathir's earlier statement (see p.46), fragments of Malaysia's Hindu past are uncomfortably positioned against – and intervene in – the prevailing, all-encompassing notion of the 'Muslim-Malay'.

The chapter now explores this concept in official political discourse, asking how firstly the Malay-Muslim identity, then the Chinese-kafir identity and finally the Tamil-Hindu identity exemplify these ideas. The first section examines Umno's deliberate embodiment of 'traditional' Malay identity after independence, in order to gain political weight and legitimacy (grounded in colonial readings of the Melaka Sultanate as the 'origin' of Malays). But this required the suppression of other, particularly Islamic, discourses (espoused by PAS), and the conflict between both elements has resulted in the progressive fragmentation of Malay-Muslim discourse. The second section shows how certain fragments of the history of the Chinese in colonial Malaya have been revived by the state to position Chinese citizens as

economic ‘parasites’ antithetical to the status quo. This image is periodically exploited and magnified when the state feels under threat from the politico-economic power of Chinese political organisations, and contrasted with an ‘ideal’ of compliance to which all Chinese citizens should adhere (exemplified by the MCA). Finally, it is demonstrated how MIC forged its political influence by privileging the majority Tamil-Hindu electorate (drawn from the plantation community), which has marginalised non-Tamils and non-Hindus but also middle class Indians which do not relate to that lower class identity. Overall, MIC, and its failure to construct a holistic political identity, has contributed to the Indian community’s sustained fragmentation.

## **2.5 Umno and the Reconceptualisation of Tradition**

If, in Renan’s (1882) terms, nationalism is based on forgetting as much as remembering, then from the outset, other histories were being suppressed, sitting latently and waiting to erupt. There have been various moments when dynamic political changes have facilitated the re-emergence of these histories, causing the dominant Malay identity to fragment to become multiple and contested. This demonstrates the precariousness of ‘Malay’ identity and helps to explain the fragmentation of that identity as time has progressed. Given the history of early Islamist nationalism, and contestations between different nationalist groups leading into independence, that Umno prevailed in this discursive battle suggested that secularism had also prevailed (implying Umno’s western liberal political approach).

In Umno’s early days it was important to appeal to ‘the Malays’ despite the fact that the Alliance parties had emerged from a privileged, British-educated minority (achieving the former was vital to camouflaging the latter (Gomez 2007, p.5)). Little was done to propagate Islam other than confirming it as the official religion of the Malays. Umno glamourised the Melaka Sultanate as the ‘golden age’ of Malay tradition, emphasising Raffles’ *Sejarah Melayu* and the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. On the one hand, this was a ‘regressive identity’ (Tong 2010) that suggested for the Malay elite, the historical kingdom of Melaka symbolised ‘the essence of what it means to be Melayu’ (Andaya 2001, p.329). But calls to return to this precolonial history did not reflect the ‘quest for some paradisiacal, unsoiled, utopian originary moment’ (Nielsen 2013, p.348). Instead, the intelligentsia deliberately projected Umno’s political identity upon that supposed ‘golden age’, to gain mass appeal and authority. Hari Singh has explored this matter and Umno’s transformation of Malay feudal traditions into a

modern political form (Singh 1998, p.243)<sup>22</sup>. It was important for Umno leaders to form a strong bond with the Malay electorate, hence Umno emphasised the values of absolute obedience and loyalty that defined the ruler/ruled relationship in the Melaka Sultanate. Leading into independence, Malay identity became synonymous with Umno, and ‘Malay unity’ meant uniting behind Umno. Umno positioned itself as the new authority of Malaya, guardian of the Malays, based on the older sultanate system oriented around the concept of divine kingship. This represented a successfully constructed ideology based on ‘selective aspects of a social belief-system’ (Singh 1998, p.243).

What had been excluded was the rich history that Islamic nationalism had played in forming Malay identity. The divisions between *kerajaan*, *umat* and *bangsa* had never disappeared but grown stronger. Moreover, Islam was not a minor element but a ‘pillar’ and ‘ethnic identifier’ of Malayness (Shamsul 2001, p.355). Since its foundation PAS had criticised Umno for failing to uphold true Islamic principles and ground their approach in Islamist political philosophy – with which ‘secular’ Umno leaders were unfamiliar (Crouch 1996, p.171). To PAS leaders and conservative Islamists, Islam deserved more status than the national government granted it. It was unsurprising that in the 1959 election, once the euphoria of independence had subsided, PAS wrenched Terengganu and Kelantan from Umno. Particularly in Kelantan PAS had strong grassroots support, rebuking Umno’s elitist approach and ‘invok[ing] Islam to make sense of the relative deprivation of rural and peasant voters’ (Fee and Appudurai 2011, p.72).

Chapter 1 discussed how the post-1969 ‘rehabilitation’ of Malays connected to a broader Islamist project. The National Cultural Policy utilised Islam as ‘a vehicle of Malay cohesion’ (Tarling 1999, p.228). The 1970s onwards witnessed a complex struggle between Malay and Muslim identities, their histories and national influence; one was local and particularistic, the other universal and global (Hamayotsu 1999). This contest exemplified Malaysia’s struggle to define ‘an authentic Islamic tradition’ (Shamsul 1997, p.225). It required a simultaneous detraditionalisation of Malay culture and a refashioning of history through an Islamic heritage (Hoffstaedter 2009, p.530). Mahathir’s quote about the need to erase the Malays’ Hindu and animist past to make space for the Islamic identity demonstrated this project. He and Umno highlighted the Malays’ hereditary weaknesses, ‘such as being easily satisfied, being inefficient, lacking in initiative, imagination, and effort’ (Alatas 1977, p.150). These so-called elements of Malay identity were to be Islamised through instilling a work discipline

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<sup>22</sup> Clive Kessler and Chandra Muzaffar have also written about this, referring to Umno’s construction of a ‘followership’ (Khuo 2006, p.34).

equivalent to the ‘protestant ethic’ (Hadiz and Khoo 2011, p.477). Constitutional legislation that equates Malays with Muslims has provoked tense conflict caused by essentialised articulations of both discursive categories<sup>23</sup>. The contest between Umno and PAS over the ‘appropriate’ Malay-Muslim identity has engulfed key areas of Malay life. For instance, *wayang kulit* performances, traditional cultural performances in rural Malaysia, were banned in Kelantan by PAS in 1990, considered ‘un-Islamic’ (contradicting literalist teachings). More generally there is much cultural pressure upon young female Malays to cover their hair with a *tudung*, or headscarf – despite contestation concerning this ‘requirement’ as part of Islamic teachings.

Since 1963 and the inclusion of indigenous non-Muslim groups from Sabah and Sarawak, including Kadazan-Dusuns, Muruts and Bajaus, the Malays had lost their exclusive claim on indigeneity<sup>24</sup>. Consequently Mahathir’s Islamisation project allowed him to ‘Islamise’ the *Bumiputera* identity (detaching it from non-Muslim groups). Ever since, tensions have simmered on the one hand in racial terms, between Malays and other indigenous groups, and on the other in religious terms, between Muslim and Christian identity. One recent incident necessitates discussion, where these fragmented and multiple histories erupted in spectacular fashion. Since the *Reformasi*, PAS has gained much ground on Umno, forcing Umno to attempt to ‘out-Islamise’ PAS in order to arrest this declining support. Things came to a climax in October 2013, when Malaysia’s highest court banned the word ‘Allah’ for non-Muslims, a historic and anachronistic decision that overturned a previous court judgment (dispute over this word is complex and longstanding). This ban was not likely religiously motivated but used to enforce the Malays’ position and subjugate non-Malays. The primary groups targeted were indigenous groups in East Malaysia who spoke Malay but practised Christianity.

In 1980 Nagata observed how the Malay language and customs were no longer rigid markers of ‘Malayness’ and so Islam had increasingly been exploited as the essential marker of Malay identity (p.409). The Allah ban indicated this strategy, demonstrating how Islam was used to exclude other *Bumiputera* groups. In order to connect with its core support base in rural peninsular Malaysia, BN had compromised the support of Christian voters in East Malaysia – unwanted complications to Umno’s ethnoreligious discursive formulation. Questions have subsequently arisen concerning the future compatibility of West and East Malaysia under one

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<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, non-Malay Muslims and non-Muslim Malays are excluded from this political narrative.

<sup>24</sup> Although beyond the scope of this review, the identity and history of the aboriginals, the ‘*Orang Asli*’, gives them stronger claims on indigeneity than the ‘Malays’, acting as a constant source of contestation, unsettling and disrupting the legitimacy of the Malay elite’s vision (Nah 2003, p.529).

flag – two such disparate regions in many aspects – forcing the government to take drastic action by amending its sedition act to make calls for secession a criminal offence. By irresponsibly toying with race and religion, Umno was unable to control how these ideas were consumed by the Malaysian population. The damage caused by its actions will take time to repair, and is certainly undesirable for many within BN who realise the importance of this non-Muslim vote in East Malaysia for remaining in power. This ethnoreligious discourse thus spiralled out of control, almost to a devastating effect. In the Malay context, ‘fragmented essentialisms’ connotes Umno’s ruling strategy, which seems less strategic than chaotic and ambivalent.

## **2.6 Chinese and the Protection/Demonisation Dichotomy**

Classified as immigrants, Chinese and Indian citizens have been integrated into the postcolonial state through ‘inclusion by virtue of othering’ (Ang 2001a, p.139). Interestingly Wu (2003, p.180) postulates that the ‘immigrant’ element was not colonially-derived, but developed through Southeast Asia’s postcolonial reality. Nah (2003) has written about the creation of a ‘new-Self’: a Malay ‘Self’, set apart from immigrant ‘Others’. According to Shamsul (1999, p.96), the Malay elite rendered the ‘perceived experience’ of ‘being dispossessed at one’s own home’, such that the nationalist struggle was framed in terms of ‘repossessing’ power from the British and immigrant population. Albeit important for Umno, this ‘dispossession’ idea is powerful both in terms of physical space and cultural identity. Accordingly, the ‘immigrant’ label refers not only to the history of Chinese and Indian migration, but implies that they do not and perhaps will never *truly* belong within this ‘Malay’ civilisation. Whereas in reality the region was invaded by British colonialists, and thereafter a racial taxonomy applied to the different peoples in the region, in the ‘Malay’ postcolonial history this land was always *Tanah Melayu* and other racial groups were ‘impostors’ who did not belong; economic ‘parasites’ (Cheah 1983). This volatile rhetoric has provoked territorialised expressions of national identity from Umno members and other right-wing figures; part and parcel of Umno discourse that maintains its legitimacy as the party of the ‘Malays’. But the ‘social contract’ made with Chinese and Indians at independence, despite appearing to ‘sell out’ the Malays, has been vital to Malaysia’s economic success. Herein lies the dilemma: how to maintain its relevance as a party for the Malay-Muslims despite the necessity of non-Malay contributions to the country?

Since independence, Umno has oscillated between ‘protecting’ and demonising the Chinese, reflecting a responsive political strategy which changes according to internal and external

environmental factors – designed to keep Malays ‘onside’ whilst discouraging a non-Malay exodus. We can position this ‘native/Chinese’ relationship in a Southeast Asian context. Tong (2010, p.15) notes that in this region, their perception as economically powerful has been ‘the source of envy and resistance’. Pinches (1999, p.13) observes ‘[t]hat these relations have oscillated between open hostility, strategic alliance and acculturation’. Such a strategy is likely ‘[w]here the state is “captured” by an ethnic group’, as with Malaysia: ‘[s]ince independence, the Chinese-Malaysian population, although having declined by about 5 per cent, has doubled its share of the economy’ (Tan 2001, p.952; p.961). In comparison, Brunei (which practises hudud law) is less responsive because the Chinese there pack less political and economic clout, at just over ten percent of the population (Suryadinata 1997, p.13). That proportion is similar to Malaysia’s Indian population, who have been spared this ‘special treatment’. Umno’s strategy thus draws upon Malaysia’s specific Malay/Chinese power relations that emerged through history. Fully understanding this strategy requires revisiting the Chinese colonial condition and understanding how selective aspects of that history were reworked into a postcolonial ‘Chinese-kafir’ stereotype.

Notes Lim (2013, p.68):

Chinese ethnicity is generally fixed in a civilisation and raced category that serves as a hypervisible global marker on which is projected and displaced multiple national insecurities. This hypostatic origin can and continues to be set up as a threat to a dominant group’s grip on economic and social power.

Her idea of the ‘hypervisible global marker’ is instructive, suggesting that the Chinese diaspora are unique because of their vast number, their country’s power and their global mobility. Such ideas are deeply implicated in colonial-historical understandings of Chineseness and particularly the ideological opposition between the ‘democratic’ West and ‘authoritarian’ China (ibid). Ang concurs, acknowledging certain ‘sentiments’ associated with being Chinese, whether one’s affinity with cultural-political China or one’s intimate connections with China and the ‘Chinese race’ (2001a, p.48). This she attributes to a ‘mythic’ and ‘fetishized’ China, which was prescribed an ‘excess of meaningfulness’ due to ‘the prominent place of “China” in the Western imagination’ (p.31-32). It has been demonstrated how this translated into colonial Malaya, whereby because of their scale of migration, Chinese citizens were connected with an amoral culture that glorified money, was confrontational and remained somewhat detached from the colonial state.

Various scholars have analysed the comparison between Chinese in Southeast Asia and Jews in central Europe (see Chirot and Reid 1997): both were successful minorities, and money-

making was widely perceived to be innate to both cultures and their long-existing civilisations. Tong (2010, p.15) observes that Chinese in Southeast Asia ‘are viewed as parasites and pariahs, out to make money at the expense of the local population’. It was the ‘pace of change’ driven by Jews in Europe and Chinese in colonial Southeast Asia in those respective capitalist transformations that unsettled the native populations, who resented a minority people with wealth (Reid 1997, p.33). Scholars have spotlighted the idea that the Chinese are exploited by the political elite as a ‘scapegoat’ (Tong 2010) or ‘enemy within’ (Spencer 2014), when the state faces domestic crisis. This is why racial tensions rise at times of low economic performance and Chinese businesses are targeted. Albeit incomparable with the scale of events that transpired in central Europe, Malaysia has been witness to such tragedies like the ‘May 13’ incident.

The phrase ‘Chinese capitalism’ obscures the reality that far from all Chinese Malaysians are wealthy, and capitalism is a political-economic phenomenon which discriminates through race, class and gender. Chinese identity was and is vastly heterogeneous, divided by political affiliation, class, religion and occupation. Only a fraction of Chinese became successful capitalists and leaders, like Yap Ah Loy (Alatas 1977, p.80). However, as once observed by historian Jean Stengers, ‘[t]he psychological needs of nationalism’ carry us ‘to the fragile border of truth’ (in Breman 1990, p.146). The idea that Malays and Chinese differed in terms of wealth, power and privilege has been manipulated as a tool of governance (Nonini 2015, online). Acknowledging what he calls an ‘obsessive forgetting’, Nonini (2015, online) argues that Southeast Asia’s Chinese working classes have been ‘written out of history’. In the postcolonial imagination, Umno have erased the image of the ‘oppressed Chinese tin-miner’ in favour of the ‘successful Chinese businessman’. These representations are powerful in the Malaysian state, perpetuating the Chinese citizen as an ‘economic creature’ (Tan 2001, p.951), or ‘*orang kaya*’ (rich person). Wealth accumulation is a common aspiration of middle class Malaysians in this globalised age; yet, Chinese workers have persistently been viewed by the Malay elite as better able to do so – perhaps because of their historical advantage in the colonial economy.

Overall the Chinese are valued for their economic contribution, reflecting the reality that they are needed for Malaysia’s economic performance – they are a ‘key player’. In earlier times the Malay elite were heavily reliant on Chinese capital (Umno’s peasant support greatly contrasted MCA’s middle class and elite) (Gomez 1999, p.32), although this relationship has shifted since the redistribution of wealth through the NEP. Malaysia’s substantial Chinese minority must be handled carefully (Tan 2001, p.964). They have been granted Chinese



schools and considerable political autonomy (Suryadinata 1997, p.13). Chinese education is handled by Dong Jiao Zong (DJZ), a powerful Chinese educational body in Malaysia that commands more authority than any Chinese political party (Collins 2006, p.305). It utilises this command over the Chinese vote at election times as a bargaining chip, working with the government or opposition depending on which alignment best suits its needs (although such cooperation is not always effective (Collins 2006)).

However, during political, social and economic struggles, the status of Chinese as ‘different’ or ‘other’ than Malay is highlighted. Because Umno originated as a party protecting the Malays, its strategy follows a ‘painfully predictable script’: convincing the polity that every problem is racial or religious, thwarting attempts to transcend this paradigm (Tan 2013, online). These problems usually involve ‘the Chinese’, for instance ‘Malay’ poverty is juxtaposed against ‘Chinese’ wealth. Since independence Malay nationalism has relied on an image of the Chinese as the outcast, and a fear, whether real or imagined, of this Chinese ‘Other’ (Kahn 1998, p.6). Umno depends on this Malay/Chinese tension to justify its role as guardian of the ‘Malay’ cultural identity (Case 1995, p.73). In reality, works like *The Malay Dilemma*, where Mahathir positioned the Malays’ ‘hereditary’ weaknesses against the organisation and drive of the Chinese, prove that this negative imagery merely reflects the anxiety of the Malay Self.

At particularly dire times, Umno distorts and intensifies these representations such that Malaysian Chinese embody their militant and ‘fiercely independent’ ancestors. This imagery is mobilised at times when Umno feels threatened, when economic performance is poor or when a Chinese political organisation exerts its muscle (whether DJZ or the Democratic Action Party (DAP)). The Chinese are reminded how ‘liberal’ the government is, exhorted to show national loyalty and discouraged from exhibiting too much pride in their cultural ‘roots’. In pressing for Chinese educational provisions, DJZ are occasionally branded by the government as ‘extremists’ and ‘chauvinists’, jeopardising national peace – i.e. breaching the social contract that balanced Malay political power with Chinese economic power (Collins 2006, p.305). Such rhetoric positions the secular DAP as a party that militantly opposes the twin forces of Islamisation and Malay dominance (Liow 2005, p.929). Because DAP and DJZ are perceived to exhibit a lack of acceptance of the social contract (in other words the ‘limits’ of Malaysian politics), we can see how colonial imagery of the Chinese *kongsi* has been attached to both organisations, evoking the tropes of militancy, detachedness and menace. Notably, these discourses discourage MCA from speaking out against Umno, by warning them to stick to the acceptable ‘code of conduct’ for Malaysian Chinese. In Umno’s eyes,

MCA's ideal position is within a narrative of Chinese 'subordination' – effectively where they belong in the national 'pecking order'. Tan (2004, p.51) notes that MCA is increasingly encapsulated in the dominant Malay political culture and has been accused of failing to serve its electorate's needs. The application of the 'Chinese-kafir' discourse has thus done its work on MCA, repressing its voice so as to appear impotent, docile and compliant with the status quo.

It was likely that colonial stereotypes influenced how certain Umno supporters responded to the opposition's celebrations after the 1969 elections. These images have been retained and reconstituted by various Umno politicians who occasionally reproduce certain gambits, for instance that given excessive Chinese power, 'May 13 could be repeated', or that 'Malaysia could become the next Singapore' (i.e. become a Chinese-majority state). DAP by no coincidence holds strong connections with the Malay/Chinese riots and that Singapore-Malaysia tension. Put differently, using colonial imagery Umno politicians engender racial conflict through 'fear of the future, lived through the past' (Pesic 1994). Fear mongering is a crucial strategy in the villages, where BN pounces on simplistic stereotypes to maintain cleavages between racial groups. Whether for elections or by-elections, in government media or press conferences, such representations are exhaustively recycled to the same political effect: perpetuating colonial racial divisions through the belief that members of each race will only be served by their own kind (which has precluded the possibility of broader lower-class action against the government (Nonini 2015, online)).

This political brinkmanship, whatever judgment we make, has kept Malaysia stable, more or less since independence and certainly since 1969. Brubaker (2002, p.166) argues that whether or not there is an underlying primordial sentiment is irrelevant: 'cast[ing] ethnic groups, races or nations as the protagonists...[is] central to the practice of politicized ethnicity'.

Subsequently, criticising this practice is trivial – for this is 'precisely what ethnopolitical entrepreneurs are in the business of doing' (p.167). Overall, this was about deploying essences, and the elite's actions in picking and choosing what is enabling. This

...is not belief in a biologically determined...essence or core attributes that can be objectively discovered through observation, but rather a paradoxical conceptual essentialism or "classificatory fiction," self-consciously framed as a product of language, which is no less powerful for being fictional. (Carr 1998, p.123)

Yet this is a perpetual relationship, whereby sporadic hostility shown by Malays causes many Chinese to retreat further within their 'ethnic' markers, attending Chinese-language schools and frequenting Chinese food stalls – forging 'an in-group solidarity that only reinforces their

“internal outsider” identity’ (Tan 2001, p.951). The NEP did much to deconstruct the perceived relationship between the Chinese and economic function, successfully fostering a multiracial middle class and reducing Malaysia’s economic dependence on the Chinese (although less Malay business figures now believe in the need for cooperation (Gomez 1999, p.148)). However, the resulting decrease in Chinese citizens could influence a shift in governing policy towards that group, perhaps less accommodating, in the future. On the other hand, the political situation now starkly contrasts that in 1957. Guan and Suryadinata (2012, p.xxii) argue that whereas the situation at independence reflected a united Malay faction versus a divided Chinese faction, because of their treatment the Chinese have progressively united over decades, whereas Malays – especially since the *Reformasi* – are increasingly divided. Moreover, given China’s post-Cold War resurgence, an increasing number of Chinese are asserting their identity more confidently in Malaysia (Suryadinata 1997, p.17). With that Asian superpower in close proximity, this ‘resinification’ of Malaysian Chinese is something that Umno must handle delicately (ibid).

## **2.7 The Indian Dilemma**

Whereas Umno was central to the production of postcolonial Malay-Muslim and Chinese-kafir identity, this was not so for the Tamil-Hindu identity. Because of the Indian community’s small proportion, it is less central to the Malay ethnonationalist political project. Umno has not required utilising colonial discourses ‘against’ the Indians as it has the Chinese. Instead, Tamil-Hindu identity maintains close linkages with MIC’s formation, and understanding the latter is crucial to grasping the former.

Relative to the Chinese, colonial discourses around the Indians were distinct in that ‘Tamil’ was used as a metonym for ‘Indian’. In Malaya there existed an indisputable link between Indians and estate labour: by 1938, Indians accounted for 80.4 percent of that labour (Brown 1994, p.216). It was a minority of English-educated Indian elite who first articulated an Indian political consciousness. Residing comfortably in the city, unsurprisingly this group showed scant regard for Tamil plantation workers (Kent 2004, p.27). Particularly the high-caste Brahmins, from whom the highest ‘spiritual’ knowledge was preached, scorned the practices of working-class untouchables (ibid, p.30). Similar to Malay vernacular schools, Tamil schools were used to reproduce the Tamil labouring class or ‘underclass’, poorly subsidised and not providing opportunities for higher education (Willford 2007, p.19). These uneducated Tamils did not associate with elitist Indian movements, instead choosing to follow Tamil-

based associations. Overall, because of linguistic, religious and geographical diversity, only in the 1940s did a cohesive Indian identity begin to emerge.

Upon inception in 1946, MIC like previous Indian political organisations was divided between the North Indian middle class leadership and the working class South Indians it claimed to represent (Kent 2004, p.28)<sup>25</sup>. Until 1950, MIC struggled to gain the confidence and support of the Indian majority (Kailasam 2015, p.6). Those elites had taken Indian racial identity for granted, despite failing to define what exactly this was and hence who they were speaking for (ibid). Towards the mid-1950s, there was a surging Tamil consciousness in Malaya, concerning a growing unease regarding the domination of minority non-Tamils in Indian politics (ibid, p.13)<sup>26</sup>. This was particularly the case for MIC, which from then on incorporated more working class Tamils from the ‘untouchable’ Dalit castes of Paraiyans and Pallas (Jain 2007, p.132). In 1954, MIC underwent a ‘Tamilisation’ of identity, transforming from a middle-class non-Tamil leadership committed to multiculturalism, to a leadership connected to the Tamil grassroots (Fee and Appudurai 2011, p.70). Prior to the 1955 election, Tamil VT Sambanthan was elected as MIC leader, heralding an important new era for Malaysian Indian identity (Kailasam 2015, p.14). After 1955 Indian and Tamil identity became synonymous, making it impossible for non-Tamils to lead the Indians anymore (ibid, p.14-15). Since independence, MIC’s identity has been defined around the dominant language, culture and religion of the Tamil community, which constitute its primary support. Tamil language and Hindu customs have been privileged within the Malaysian Indian identity, at the expense of other groups like Indian Muslims, Buddhists and Christians (Leong 2012, p.36)<sup>27</sup>. Today, Tamil-Hindus are MIC’s ‘de facto constituency’, reinforcing the view that ‘Tamil-speaking Hindus *are* the Indian community’ (ibid, p.37, original emphasis).

Economic state of the Indian community aside<sup>28</sup>, MIC can exploit that Tamil-Hindu imagery to mobilise the Indians around dual notions of colonial slavery and downtrodden Indian/Hindu castes (Bose 2015, p.10). According to Pillai (2007, p.x), these images ‘have never been duly re-adjusted by the nation at large’, perpetuating the discursive framework around the subordinated Tamil-Hindu in Malaysia. But class and caste divisions represent sources of tension for this identity. Willford especially notes ambivalences among middle class and elite Tamils, who utilise their ‘symbolic and material capital’ (2006, p.40), to

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<sup>25</sup> These divisions have long hampered and discouraged mass Indian mobilisation (Leong 2012, p.36).

<sup>26</sup> This was inspired by the Dravidian movement in 1940s India (Tamil is one of many ‘Dravidian’ languages spoken in Southern India) (Fee and Appudurai 2011, p.70).

<sup>27</sup> Religious organisations have followed this mould. The Malaysian Hindu Sangam (MHS) aimed to unify the Ceylonese, South Indians and North Indians, but excluded non-Hindu Indians (Kent 2004, p.31).

<sup>28</sup> Almost half of working-class Malaysian Indians remain in poverty.

dissociate from ‘sites of marginality’ that reproduce this history of cultural and political subordination (2007, p.14) – that is, the colonial past of the indentured labourers. This group is also wary of the lifestyle of the Hindu community, which is connected with the oppressed working class Tamils and positioned against the dominating Malay-Muslim identity. Given these enduring fractures, according to Kailasam, an acceptable identity that represents all Malaysian Indians remains elusive (2015, p.3). Though he states that Indians ‘could unite under another cultural trait – religion, perhaps – at a different time...and the process will go on endlessly’ (p.15). Such words brilliantly encapsulate the nature of fragmentation that belies and burdens the Indian identity – as demonstrated by Chapter 6’s analysis of Indian mobilisation under the Hindu label.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed the history, mythology and symbolism that underlie the Malay-Muslim, Chinese-kafir and Tamil-Hindu identities. It has shown how, both in their ambiguous historical connections and their colonially-constructed nature, these identities are grounded in precarious histories. This historical precarity has been exploited in the postcolonial era, for a political framework that plays upon the fragmentation inherent within each of those essentialist discourses: the historical division between Malay and Muslim identity, the mythology of the aggressive Chinese capitalist in colonial Malaya, and the historical tensions between Tamil-Hindu labourers and other Indian groups. We must appreciate the complex debates that were ongoing, concerning the nature of these identities in the precolonial and colonial eras, in order to understand contemporary ambivalences surrounding race, religion and national identity in Malaysia. Malaysia’s postcolonial history draws upon a deliberate rearticulation of past ethnoreligious discourses, based ‘upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning’ (Li 2000, p.151). As effective postcolonial agents, Malaysian politicians have ‘resist[ed], subvert[ed], and transform[ed] their own subjectivities and at least to some extent the socio-political “landscape” in which they dwell’ (Nielsen 2013, p.343). Regardless of how we view them, these identity formation processes, although dynamic and continually evolving, are clearly fragmented and conflicting. As Gabriel puts it, BN’s essentialising strategies are

...at odds with the incommensurable practices, imaginings, representations, affiliations, and desires of the nation’s cultural communities...reveal[ing] the significant ruptures built around the category of race in Malaysia today. (2011, p.350)

As an authoritative voice, BN's words and actions are mimicked by other political agents, media outlets, activist groups, and ordinary citizens, resulting in a broader transactional reality of inevitable ethnoreligious division. These fragmented and conflicting ethnoreligious narratives have contributed to a very confused political discourse. It is nevertheless important to appreciate this fluidity and dynamism as inherent to the postcolonial context. Malaysia's general elections are significant as a site where race is periodically rearticulated, and appealing to race remains the central political catalyst. Elections represent an important political arena where these identities are reproduced and reinforced, such that racial politics can continue to thrive. But because the political environment changes with each passing election, this process is trapped within a dynamic, unstable, messy relationship. The Malaysian media thus provide an important insight into how these discourses operate, and it is hoped that this chapter's historical analytical focus will allow the reader to fully appreciate the power of these discourses in the media analysis that follows. But it is also crucial to understand how the media operate in this political landscape, which leads us into the next chapter.

## Chapter 3: New Media and the Shifts in Malaysia's Political Landscape

### Introduction

This chapter introduces and positions *Utusan Malaysia* and *Malaysiakini* in Malaysia's broader historical landscape, demonstrating how both media outlets emerge from distinct and divergent junctures in this landscape. It does so by examining key social, cultural and political shifts wrought by the advent of new media at the end of the twentieth century. Aptly described by Liow (2012, p.294) as the 'game changer' in Malaysia, 'new media' is taken to mean the electronic news outlets that emerged in Malaysia after the internet was introduced in 1998. Prior to the *Reformasi*, Malaysia's media landscape was confined by established legal constraints that limited its emancipatory potential. But the new media shattered this reality, empowering more Malaysians to contribute to political debate and significantly shifting patterns of political participation since the 1999 election. This chapter draws upon various scholars' work, but particularly the work of Meredith Weiss concerning the influence and effects of new media in Malaysia. However, focus is specifically on interrogating the relationship between new media and racialisation in Malaysia, assessing the potential of websites like *Malaysiakini* to transcend the deeply-engrained processes of racialisation that continue to shape traditional media like *Utusan*. The first section explores the shift from traditional to new media in terms of the rearticulation of the national voice: *Utusan* discourse epitomises the elitist, hegemonic and top-down voice of the traditional media; *Malaysiakini* in contrast is multi-scalar, empowering and bottom-up. The second section examines the discursive limits of Malaysia's media landscape, asking how *Utusan* writers conform to broader constitutional boundaries, and how this landscape ultimately shapes and constrains the potential of *Malaysiakini* writers. The final section explores the imagined communities of both news outlets, and the potential of *Malaysiakini* to shift national discourse away from a racialised to a more inclusive narrative.

Before continuing, it is necessary to state that this chapter utilises the work of Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci – specifically, his notions of hegemony and the 'organic intellectual'. It is important to explain the validity of Gramscian thought when considering Malaysia's media landscape, which is far-removed from his own political context. O'Shannassy (2009, p.90; p.105) believes Gramsci can 'provide the vocabulary for considering questions surrounding the complex operation of hegemony in a country like Malaysia', and 'no longer seems out of place' there. After all, Gramsci's ideas only gained wide acclaim in Europe in the 1970s, over thirty years after his death (Adamson 1980, p.1).

John Hilley is another scholar who advocates a Gramscian framework for Malaysian politics. In his book, *Malaysia: Mahathirism, Hegemony and the New Opposition*, he advocates

...a more considered view of how “specialised” intellectuals and “intellectual communities” may comprise part of a power order by helping to design, reproduce and filter dominant or “common-sense” ideas through key institutions. (2001, p.11)

According to Gramsci, hegemony relied upon ‘a combination of force and consent’ (Gramsci 1975, p.156). Understanding the operation of hegemony requires knowledge of how the ruling class of an educated, modern society depends on manufacturing the consent of the citizenry. ‘Established interests’ (interests reflecting the dominant class) are propagated through state infrastructure, ‘becoming a machine for the preservation of the status quo’ (ibid, p.222). For Gramsci, ‘organs of public opinion’ were crucial to manufacturing this consent (ibid, p.156). Modern scholars thus find Gramscian thought valuable to understanding the operation of the mass media. As Richardson argues, mass media provide a central means by which dominant ideas are transmitted to the citizenry (2007, p.36). It is an important state actor that affects and perpetuates our understandings of the world and our place in that world. This is especially so for the Malaysian media, which as section 3.2 demonstrates, is shackled by legal and constitutional restrictions. Overall, a Gramscian perspective is useful to foreground the context in which the media articles and the opposition between *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* writers are positioned, providing a means of understanding the struggle over the ruling (read: racialised) ideas in Malaysia.

### ***The ‘organic intellectual’***

Gramsci coined a useful term for considering the journalists and writers featured in the analysis chapters, ‘organic intellectual’ – an intellectual which gives their class ‘homogeneity and awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields’ (1971, p.113). These intellectuals ‘play a central role in the construction of ideas, the very organisation of hegemony, across state and civil institutions’ (Hilley 2001, p.117). It is instructive to compare this concept to an opposing concept, the ‘traditional intellectual’.

Gramsci conceptualised traditional intellectuals as those members of society detached from the economic and political order, independent from class and political discourse. Instead they are bound to the past and to traditional institutions of the pre-capitalist era, representing continuity with that past, even despite radical political changes. To Hilley (2001, p.12), the contest between Umno leaders and Islamic traditionalists in PAS exemplifies an important



intellectual struggle in Malaysia. To him, Mahathir's co-optation of Anwar Ibrahim after 1979, reflects Umno's successful 'assimilation' of an important traditional intellectual (ibid).

Recorded whilst he was imprisoned in Fascist Italy, Gramsci's thoughts were scribbled across thirty-three notebooks and the question of how to arrange his ideas has troubled scholars of his work (Gramsci 1975, p.ix). There is certainly no unified agreement on the role of the organic intellectual. Gramsci was interested in intellectuals who sought to cultivate national-popular support for a counter-hegemonic ideology; those who 'align themselves with the emerging popular forces and seek to elaborate new currents of ideas' (Hall 1986, p.21-22). For this reason Hilley makes a useful distinction between organic intellectuals and critical intellectuals, which I will follow. Organic intellectuals are

...individuals and institutions, both within and beyond the party, [that] help sustain hegemony through the reification of dominant interests and social meaning. (Hilley 2001, p.11)

This thesis approaches *Utusan* writers as organic intellectuals that are bound up in Malaysia's racialised society, sustaining and legitimising Umno and the hegemonic racial idea. Hilley (2001, p.13) notes there was traditionally limited space for criticism of Malaysia's racial order, albeit through the *Reformasi* (and the associated emergence of *Malaysiakini*), new critical spaces have emerged. This thesis approaches *Malaysiakini* writers as critical intellectuals, who are attempting to resist the organic racial order in Malaysia. We should question the extent to which they are capable of elaborating new ideas. Or instead, are they continuing to perpetuate racialised structures, reflecting the entrenchedness of racial processes? These aspects will be explored in the analysis chapters.

### **3.1 Voice of the Nation: Who is Speaking?**

#### ***Traditional media: visionaries or 'eunuchs'?***

In 1961 *Utusan Melayu* (The Malay Courier), the oldest Malay-language newspaper in the country, the newspaper used by Malays as a platform for expressing opinions on British colonial rule (Abbott 2011, p.5), was acquired by Umno, leading to a ninety-three-day strike by its employees. This strike was the longest in Malaysia's history, and it was led by the paper's editor Said Zahari, who remarked that *Utusan's* takeover represented

[t]he death of press freedom...It was a turning point when you talk about control of the press...It started with *Utusan* (ibid, p.17).

\* \* \*

Whether we call Malaysia's media regime authoritarian, semi-authoritarian or whatever else, we must appreciate not only Malaysia's unique historical and sociopolitical context, but its positioning within the broader Southeast Asian region and its associated cultural norms. Only then can we appreciate how this takeover provided *Utusan* with a distinct national and cultural purpose, reflecting 'a mix of cultural patriotism and national assertiveness' (Atkins 2002, p.6). This purpose was defined against purportedly negative western influences which 'if not controlled would bring Asian communities to their knees' (Yao 2001, p.16). These 'negative influences' reflected the Asian values debate discussed in Chapter 1. In this context, Asian values implied a set of moral, social and cultural norms and attitudes defining media practice, 'derived from Asian philosophical traditions' (Sani 2005, p.344). Asian values provided a legitimising function for Southeast Asian political regimes. National elite juxtaposed their governments' 'consensus-building media' against the 'adversarial media', described as 'an alien Western import' that betrayed national values and traditions (George 2007, in Kenyon 2010, p.444). This explains BN's stance towards *Malaysiakini* (discussed further on). Overall this contrasting stance taken between detrimental western values and positive Asian values reflected a central way for the government to reinforce its hegemony (Miles and Croucher 2013, p.414).

Early after independence, Malaysia's national identity appeared to many of its politicians to lack cohesion. Malaysia faced many challenges, from eliminating the remnants of communism to addressing the military threat posed by Indonesia. Domestically, Malaysia was concerned with redressing sharp socioeconomic cleavages between the rural, impoverished Malays and the urbanised, upwardly mobile Chinese and Indians. Consequently, the media were positioned 'as vital instruments, if not catalysts, of modernization and socioeconomic development' (Anuar 2005, p.27). The government saw *Utusan*'s potential to unify the different citizens within Malaysia's borders – reflecting an 'ultra-modernist' vision 'based on a strict imagined (and imposed) equivalence of territorial state, media, culture, and nation' (Ang 2001b, p.36). Notes Leong (2012, p.43), '[r]esolute purpose, cohesion, and the "illusion of consensus" were deemed essential for national existence'. The state/media relationship in Malaysia, like many other developing economies, is intimate and highly regulated (ibid). Ever since the paper's acquisition by Umno, *Utusan* writers have been expected to support the government, its interests and national agenda. This agenda centres on the social contract – the implicit acceptance that Malays maintain political control whilst non-Malays have significant control over the economy. *Utusan* and other mainstream media promote and enhance the government's role in preserving this precarious balance, elucidating the complex dynamics of

interracial relations and the government's success in negotiating and managing this process (Tamam *et al.* 2006, p.5).

BN's ownership of key parts of the media is central to this strategy. Mirroring that racialised political structure, the media are partitioned into Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English-language presses. Each newspaper – whether Malay, Chinese, Tamil or English – is owned and controlled by shareholders and investors with close ties to BN's parties, Umno, MCA and MIC (Anuar 2005, p.30-31). Malaysia's four top national dailies are owned by two conglomerates, the New Straits Times Press (NSTP) and *Utusan Melayu Berhad* (UM) (Wang 1998, p.67). Umno controls more than 50 percent of UM's shares (Abbott 2011, p.17). Those on UM's board of directors range from the close political aide of former Prime Minister Ahmad Badawi, to former government senators (Nain 2008, p.164). *Utusan Melayu* (later renamed *Utusan Malaysia*) is consequently the paper most strongly associated with Umno. Government ownership of *Utusan* and other media affords these corporations much money to broadcast BN's message, especially at elections, as outlined in the introductory chapter. Meanwhile, there are certain laws restricting the opposition's ability to articulate its political views (see 3.2). This contributes to 'distortions and misrepresentations of the regime's critics and opponents', helping to explain the longevity of BN (Brown 2005, p.55).

For Sani (2005, p.356), the 'noble' belief that print media must act responsibly to ensure Malaysia's continual development has been manipulated by BN such that the print media's style is more likeable to a form of unbridled government apologetics. From what has been discussed, this idea certainly has credence. Brown (2005, p.44) observes that the 'mainstream media is widely perceived as...sympathetic, if not sycophantic, towards the regime – apologists and eunuchs.' From interviews conducted with different members of Malaysia's media industry, Tapsell (2013, p.623) found that the culture of the Malay-language press, particularly the more conservative *Utusan*, disregarded press freedom. According to *Malaysiakini* founder Steven Gan, Malaysia's lack of critical journalism stems from 'the years of depoliticising at university' which have influenced 'bad habits' (ibid, p.629). This implies what Tapsell calls 'a stifling environment that does not encourage citizens to take an active interest in political and social issues' (ibid), caused by the 'characterisation of student radicalism as socially deviant' (Hilley 2001, p.13). On the other hand, Brown (2005, p.43) acknowledges persistent adversarial trends in journalistic practice: 'many...still pursue their profession with relative independence and chafe at limitations placed upon them.' He cites the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) as an example, which seeks to abolish the Printing Presses and Publications Act (discussed below). NUJ President and *Utusan* journalist

Mohamad Hata Wahari was sacked in 2011 after openly criticising the paper's editorial stance. Consequently, organic intellectuals are not 'passive instruments of the prevailing order' (Hilley 2001, p.11); instead there are clearly areas of contestation and dissent which according to Tan and Zawawi (2008, p.98) 'constitute legitimate elements' of Malay political culture.

In concluding this section, it is important to determine the role of consumers in all of this. Hilley (2001, p.15) notes the new middle class that emerged through Mahathir's developmentalist paradigm in the 1980s, 'created more complex forms of embourgeoisement and political cultural identity'. For Yao (2001, p.7), this group is part of a growing class in Southeast Asia, central to efforts to democratise the region. However, studies have interestingly proven that they are not entirely against the media restrictions set in place. Abbott found that 'Malaysians have more confidence in the press than might be expected, given the semidemocratic nature of the regime' (2011, p.24). He cites the views of Abdul Rahman Embong (2001a) and Francis Loh (2003a), who argue that the middle classes, contrary to a dynamic and progressive force, are a materialist and self-centred group dependent on the state's economic policies. Sani (2005, p.341-342) likewise cites a study by Welsh (1996), which among other things found the proportion of Malaysians seeking to prioritise freedom of speech and press was low, at 22 percent in urban areas and 35 in rural areas. Sani concludes that these attitudes have been affected by the government, which 'has always determined the content and quality of public discourse in Malaysia' (ibid, p.361). In this light, Hilley acknowledges the mass media's role in shaping these middle class behaviours. He notes the 1980s witnessed the promotion of a 'new middle-classness', which encouraged citizens to behave safely, responsibly and not to dissent against the entrenched power structures (2001, p.12-13). In a Gramscian sense, over time these people have come to align with the 'common sense' understandings of society perpetuated through these media. They appropriate that 'ideologically loaded language' to make sense of the world and 'get on in society' (Matheson 2005, p.6). If we agree with Embong and Loh, such acquiescence reflects their reluctance to compromise their comfortable position in the nation-state. Indeed, *Utusan's* positive projection of the government was accepted by this group insofar as Malaysia benefitted, becoming one of Southeast Asia's strongest 'tiger economies' (Wang 1998, p.61). It thus came as no surprise that BN's media project crumbled through the 1997 financial crisis and the *Reformasi*, impacted by 'the new political and social mood' among the middle class (Hilley 2001, p.15).

### *New media: relocating the terrain of the national discourse*

After its arrival in Malaysia in 1998, BN viewed the internet as a catalyst to achieving its *Wawasan 2020* development goals, discussed in Chapter 1 (Smeltzer and Lepawsky 2010, p.88). Two years earlier, Mahathir had launched the ambitious Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), an ambitious and sophisticated project that would transport Malaysia into the digital age. The internet played a key part in this vision. It was a key marker of technological progress, and Mahathir had decided that a policy of internet non-censorship would encourage economic development and foreign investment, helping BN to realise this ambitious vision. However, the internet also powerfully symbolised a new era of hyper-globalisation, redefining the possibilities for global communication. Consequently, there were broader processes at play beyond BN's control. The convergence of the Malaysian state with accelerated processes of globalisation created 'certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics' (Appadurai 1990, p.6). Contrary to consolidating government power, the internet encouraged exactly the opposite; BN's modernist vision of a national culture has been 'steadily crumbling' (Ang 2001b, p.36). The hegemony of the electoral and political order was displaced by a postmodern 'disorder' marked by societal upheaval and fragmentation. Because the internet allowed for freedom of expression, it held the key to advancing Malaysian democracy. There was suddenly space for 'active, adversarial, and dissenting civil society', whose agency had been limited under BN's national development-oriented mainstream media agenda (Leong 2012, p.43).

It was the *Reformasi* in 1998, after the arrest and incarceration of Anwar Ibrahim, when such potential came to light. The *Reformasi* was a synergy between political and online activism that influenced a marked change in Malay voting patterns in the 1999 elections and contributed to irreversible shifts in Malaysia's political landscape. The internet proved a 'key medium for communication between Anwar's supporters and the broader public', providing reports on crucial developments but also broadcasting the meeting points for future protests (Brown 2005, p.46). Dozens of pioneering websites offered a haven from the pro-government bias that defined mass media attitudes towards opposition parties and their candidates, empowering voters with 'critical and relevant political information that very likely influenced their voting decisions' (Willnat *et al.* 2013, p.580). Of those websites, *Malaysiakini* was and remains the most influential. It is caricatured by Brown (2005, p.48) as 'the godfather of internet journalism in Malaysia'. *Malaysiakini* was founded by Steven Gan and Pramesh Chandran, employees of the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA). It offered a 'political but non-partisan brand of independent journalism', providing critical perspectives of the

regime and the opposition. Consequently, albeit viewed ‘as a “thorn in the side” of the Malaysian regime’ (Tapsell 2013, p.618), *Malaysiakini* ‘has garnered the ire of opposition party leaders Lim Kit Siang and Syed Husin Ali’ (Brown 2005, p.47). Nevertheless, although *Malaysiakini*’s official political stance is independent, Gan concedes that an ‘independent’ stance is actually ‘pro-opposition by default’, representing an important challenge to BN (Brown 2005, p.47).

One of Gramsci’s key concepts is the notion of a counter-hegemonic moment, where the consent of the masses breaks down and the ruling ideology becomes a site of class struggle (Gramsci 1971, p.210). For Gramsci, civil society was to play a crucial role in this struggle. Notably Buttigieg (1995, p.4) observes that, although no singular definition can encapsulate Gramsci’s complex understanding of ‘civil society’, how we understand the term now is significantly different from the context in which Gramsci wrote. The term experienced a revival in the West in the 1980s and 1990s, used by liberal groups as ‘a magical explanatory formula’ to explain the fall of communism – despite remaining undefined and unexplained (ibid, p.2). O’Shannassy exploits this vagueness and takes the liberty of analysing the role of Malaysian civil society in that Gramscian context. He postulates whether the *Reformasi* – where the opposition challenged Umno’s rule with a new multicultural paradigm, drawing strength from civil society and a united front that drew disparate oppositional parties together – may have sparked a counter-hegemonic moment in Malaysia (2009, p.92). Those protests demonstrated that consensus had ‘dissolve[d] into dissensus’ (ibid), with a new political force attempting to fill the power vacuum. He cites a statement from Khoo, who declared that the twentieth century’s turbulent climax, defined first by the financial crisis, followed by the Anwar issue and then the election result, proved Umno was ‘fast approaching a state of systemic failure. As it were the “party of the Malays” was trapped’ (Khoo 2003, p.123). The internet, with its capacity for freedom of expression, was central to this discursive shift. *Malaysiakini* effectively employed the technological capacities of the internet to forge nuanced spaces of political contest and media activism (Weiss 2014a, p.91). *Malaysiakini*’s power was in its ability to shift power from the elite to decentralised and localised networks of people and groups, spanning from intellectuals and political thinkers to students and activists – a cacophony of new political voices which represented a somewhat disorienting force for the national elite (Weiss 2013, p.592). Anyone could participate in these debates, contributing to new discourses, formations, shared meanings and concepts of the nation (ibid, p.594).

Led by Gan and Chandran, these individuals constituted a new crop of critical intellectuals that emerged to potentially forge a counter-hegemonic consciousness. Since 1999, BN's grip on identity discourses has been particularly precarious. The social and political landscape has shifted restlessly, and these categories are being contested, negotiated, reshaped, and so on, reflecting important 'moments of ambiguity, instability and resistance to which all discourse is subject' (Bucholtz 2001, p.172). This reflects the 'new politics' highlighted by Loh and Saravanamuttu (2003), defined by fragmentation and high levels of self-conscious agitation, primarily because the growing middle classes no longer readily identify with the ideational structures deployed by the elite, as they did before the *Reformasi*. In Gramsci's words, these intellectuals had 'work[ed] out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world' (1971, p.323). *Malaysiakini* contributed to the expansion of the 'public sphere', where citizens could contribute to national political debates and push towards a 'public opinion' (Weiss 2014b, p.877). Citizens have become part, and speak freely on behalf, of this broader collective, defined by its 'critical mass', representing 'grievances as more structural and political than personal' (ibid, p.881). *Malaysiakini* thus epitomised the internet's potential, 'promot[ing] a blueprint for democratic civic discourse in Malaysia' (Steele 2009a, online). Particularly important was its ability to give voice to and mobilise previously silenced, marginalised and subordinate voices in the nation-state. Consequently, this new political space was defined by its diverse demographic makeup which offered greater potential, especially for those previously marginalised voices, to participate in the construction of meaningful political alternatives (Weiss 2013, p.592).

*Malaysiakini* is notable for privileging its readers' voice, whether through the high volume of letters it publishes online or through user comments relating to different news stories, which are periodically published in specially-produced articles (called 'YourSay', formerly 'Vox Populi'). Both the letters and comments are chosen by editorial staff, and thus cannot be considered as innocent or impartial products separate from *Malaysiakini*'s institutional context. As Richardson (2007, p.149) confirms, letters offer a key means of 'communicating the identity of a newspaper' and representing its readership's values. Speaking about letters pages in western newspapers, he notes they reflect the 'articulate minority' and not the 'vast majority' of readers. But Janet Steele (2009b) believes the user comments in *Malaysiakini* are potentially groundbreaking, albeit underestimated by those in more democratic societies. She cites Dan Gillmoor's work on 'citizen journalism', which proves that 'the ability of *anyone* to make the news will give new voice to people who have felt voiceless' (online, my emphasis).

Such a wide array of opinions promotes diversity, dialogue and freedom of opinion and debate, offering readers the opportunity for fast-flowing and anonymous political exchanges (anonymity which most users utilise). Moreover, repeated exchanges between users can ‘lead to increased ties, familiarity, and solidarity’ (Gong 2011, p.315). But they simultaneously contribute to a heated and unnecessarily frantic online atmosphere which risks distracting from a ‘core’ message that *Malaysiakini* may be trying to deliver. User letters have also caused past trouble for *Malaysiakini*. In January 2003, its Kuala Lumpur headquarters were raided by police on account of reports lodged by Umno youth against a letter highly critical of Malay special rights (Anuar 2005, p.43). Discussing this issue with Janet Steele, co-founder Steven Gan admitted that letters could be problematic, but stated his intention

...to generate debate and this includes publishing letters with which we may disagree... Our letters page is arguably the nation’s most exciting discussion forum. (2009b, online)

For Steele, this reflects the rationalism behind *Malaysiakini*’s operation: privileging rational argument as the basis for political discussion. Nevertheless, certain letters are edited to avoid discussion of ‘seditious’ issues, reflecting what the letters editor S Vicknesan refers to as ‘a moderated public platform’ (ibid). Such ‘moderation’ due to risk of ‘sedition’ implies the enduring control of political legislation over this new media landscape, which will now be discussed.

### **3.2 ‘Teetering on the Edge’: The Media and Malaysia’s Social Reality**

In 1971, following the recommencement of democracy after its two-year suspension, the new BN government began to attempt to manage Malaysia’s racialised condition. This was based around the belief that 1969’s race riots had manifested due to ineffective management of racial differences and tensions (Gabriel 2011, p.359). New constitutional reforms to be implemented entailed restrictions against questioning the status of the Malay language, Malay special rights, the Malay royalty or any aspects of Malaysian citizenship. Violations of these restrictions were acts of treason, punishable with a hefty prison sentence. This section examines these discursive limits to the nation’s media landscape, asking how *Utusan* writers are positioned within this broader legislative context, and how such legislation ultimately shapes and constrains *Malaysiakini*’s potential. BN’s unhindered application of colonial laws far-removed from their original context, has prevented the media, *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* included, from knowing what is acceptable for print. Phrased differently,

...the spectre of national collapse and regional disintegration has been the “socially real” that justifies the terrifying posturing of the state. (Yao 2001, p.14)



Malaysia's suspension of democracy was necessitated due to a 'State of Emergency' having been declared. Ever since, BN has invoked the notion of chaos to justify the use of draconian laws to contain public discourse within certain limits; a 'necessary evil' without which pandemonium could ensue (Wang 1998, p.62). Such a 'terrifying scenario...[is] repeatedly featured in the official pronouncements of the state' (Yao 2001, p.11). Particularly since Mahathir, the print media has been expected to conform to and enforce these limits. In 1985 Mahathir declared that

...for a society precariously balanced on a razor's edge, where one false, or even true word can lead to calamity, it is criminal irresponsibility to allow that one word to be uttered. (Cited in Wang 2001, p.69)

Sani draws comparisons between the libertarian press model and Malaysia's 'authoritarian' model. Sani notes the libertarian press is 'free to publish what it chooses, however irresponsible or biased its actions may seem to be' (2005, p.343), and citing the work of Goonasekera and Ito (1999), argues that the freedom encapsulated in this model can heighten ethnoreligious tensions and promote civil war. Authoritarian press in contrast 'will not allow direct criticism of current political leaders and their projects', and has strong grounding in Malaysian cultural tradition and geopolitical reality (p.344). Arguably, Malaysia has not descended into 'chaos' since 1969, allowing BN's control over media discourse to be claimed successful (p.358). But we should deconstruct the notion of 'national chaos' and ask what it really implies. Given the perceived importance to Umno of maintaining Malay political power, racial stability in Malaysia arguably equates to the stability of the Malays' position in the nation-state. In 1969 the opposition were accused of 'misusing' their freedoms, 'exploit[ing] racial sentiments and dissatisfaction among non-Malays, Chinese and Indians, over Malay special rights' (ibid, p.346). There is a double standard involved in this 'authoritarian' model, for when the Malay press provokes the non-Malays, BN generally speaking is less inclined to take action. This is crucial to understanding the context of Malaysia's media laws. They are a crucial political resource whose power has been strategically and effectively harnessed by the government to maintain Malaysia's racial hierarchy.

Malaysia's colonial legacy bequeathed to the newly independent government an arsenal of policies relating to Britain's past administration of the country. For the BN, these laws reinforce the strength of its collective nation-building efforts, 'protecting and promoting law and order, internal security as well as national development' (Anuar 2005, p.29). They are deemed particularly necessary in achieving the fabled *Wawasan 2020* (Sani 2005, p.351). But

their application has offered a means for BN to suppress political dissent and government criticism, and intimidate oppositional groups (Anuar 2005, p.45). Overall, Malaysia's 'complex ideological and legislative framework, and effective enforcement', is central to BN's aspirations to promote and reinforce its discursive ideological commitments (Yao 2001, p.6). This section will now examine laws relevant to Malaysia's media landscape, exploring the difference between their connoted and denoted meanings and the significance of this in terms of the limits to media discourse.

Malaysia's Sedition Act (SA) was implemented in 1948 under British rule with the intent of preventing discourse deemed seditious. This related to the twelve-year Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), when communist activities were considered to be a risk to the colonial administration. But Muzaffar notes authorities also used it to restrain nationalist movements (especially Umno), which sought an independent Malaya (in Sani 2005, p.350). Hence, from the outset these laws were endowed with twin meaning: protection of the country and protection of the government's position. The SA allows for the arrest without warrant, and detention without trial, of any Malaysian citizen. After the 1969 riots it was tightened to prevent media from printing anything that could generate racial disharmony and social disorder (ibid). Anuar (2005, p.30) observes that it 'has an adverse effect on press freedom and freedom of expression', reflecting BN's power 'to curb genuine and sincere criticisms of some government policies...muzzle critics and dissenters'. In the legislation, a 'seditious tendency' is very ambiguous and assumes myriad meanings. Thus, queries Sani (2005, p.350), what constitutes free speech and what constitutes 'sedition'? This judgment is made at BN's discretion, but the statement is likely to be seditious if it contains anti-Malay content. Therefore, we must scrutinise the notion that it is required for 'public order' – insofar as public order is not taken to mean the racial order of things. Usually if the statement is harmful but pro-Malay it will be overlooked. In recent years, *Utusan* has been given free rein in what it says about other, particularly non-Malay groups and opposition parties in Malaysia. It is notorious for playing up ethno-religious sentiments to gain support for Umno and BN. *Malaysiakini*, in contrast, has been targeted under this act. The raid on *Malaysiakini*'s headquarters 'clearly demonstrated the regime's willingness to deploy the full extent of its repressive machinery should it feel sufficiently threatened' (Brown 2005, p.49). Far from representing an element of the colonial past, this policy is a central component of BN's strategy of information control. In April 2015, it made further amendments to the SA, extending the minimum jail term from three years to twenty years. Other changes included removing criticism of the government as an offence, and in its place, adding a provision to

protect the sanctity of Islam (promoting ill-will, hostility or hatred on grounds of religion). This perhaps reflects the Malaysian government's fears of the perceived secularisation of society brought by the era of postmodernity (Yao 2001, p.15). These changes challenge Weiss's prediction that interventions made by *Malaysiakini* and other online media will have 'likely secular impacts on the culture of formal politics' (2014a, p.106).

Like the SA, the Internal Security Act (ISA) 1960 was a preventive detention law deriving from colonial history, specifically, the Emergency Regulations Ordinance of 1948. British rulers used this law to eliminate subversive threats and prevent terrorism, particularly during the Emergency period. The ISA allowed for the detention of political subjects without trial for up to two years. According to Article 22.1 the ISA could be used against 'any publication that is considered to be a threat to security and public order' (Government of Malaya 1960). It was first used in 1976 to detain two newspaper editors, *Berita Harian's* Samani Mohd Amin and the *New Straits Times's* Samad Ismail, both accused of critical media coverage (Abbott 2011, p.14). Perhaps its most famous use was in 1987, in a government crackdown called '*Operasi Lallang*', concerning the arrests of 106 figures: newspaper editors, NGO advocates and most importantly key figures from various political parties – including DAP, MCA, PAS and Umno (members of Tengku Razaleigh's 'Team B', who at that time were challenging Mahathir's 'Team A'). Mueller declares that 'in the opposition parties' collective memory, *Operasi Lallang* has become a symbol of "injustice" and government "oppression"' (2014, p.20). In 1998 there was a joint operation between Malaysian police and internet service providers

...to track down several internet "rumor-mongers" who had sparked fears of riots in Kuala Lumpur and detain them under the dreaded Internal Security Act. (Weiss 2013, p.603)

The ISA was thus used to send a signal to dissenters in light of the new wave of internet usage, that the government was closely watching. It was a common weapon used against journalists. In 2001 *Malaysiakini* columnist and social activist Hishamuddin Rais was jailed for two years on account of his alleged part in a conspiracy to overthrow the government (Abbott 2011, p.14). The ISA was replaced by the equally ambiguous Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012, which allows the government to undertake 'special measures' to protect national security (Pandi 2014, p.77).

Other policies introduced since 1957 have consolidated this media landscape. The Official Secrets Act (OSA) 1972 was implemented with the intention to protect national security, but instead has been exploited to restrict press freedom (Sani 2005, p.348). The OSA contains

similar provisions that allow for arrest and detention without trial if the media or opposition publicly discuss any topic deemed off limits. Despite amendments in 1986 due to the policy lacking clarity, what constitutes a ‘secret’ is described by Anuar (2005, p.29) as ‘vague’ and ‘all-encompassing’, and classified at BN’s discretion. Other laws, like the defamation law, play a prominent role in curbing dissent in Malaysia, preventing journalists from committing libel – however so defined (Shriver 2003, p.18)<sup>29</sup>. The Printing and Presses Publications Act (PPPA) 1984 is the primary piece of legislation relating to the press industry. It requires that all press publications possess a government permit, renewable on an annual basis (Anuar 2005, p.29). Malaysia’s Ministry of Internal Security is empowered to prohibit the sale, import, distribution and publication of material deemed ‘prejudicial to public order...or national interest’ (Government of Malaysia 1984). It was amended in 1987 to include publication of ‘malicious’ news, punishable by a heavy fine and up to three years in jail (Shriver 2003, p.18). Such regulation acts to keep the press and journalists, whether working for *Utusan* or *Malaysiakini*, constantly on their toes, encouraging them to toe the line or else suffer the consequences. In April 2004, Information Minister Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir delivered a warning that BN could revoke the permits for media organisations that could potentially jeopardise national unity,

...reflect[ing] the kind of patronizing thinking that press freedom is not to be taken as a given or to be fought for, but to be “granted” at the government’s discretion. (Anuar 2005, p.42-43)

The PPPA has undoubtedly influenced Malaysia’s culture of media ownership (Anuar 2005, p.30), with pro-BN editors preventing the need for stringent editorial practices and thus for the internal security ministry to flex its muscle (Kenyon 2010, p.444). Meanwhile, despite all its efforts, *Malaysiakini* is yet to be granted a permit to establish a weekly newspaper (which it has been seeking from the Internal Security Ministry since 2002). The ministry ‘cit[ed] fears that the publication will be prejudicial and jeopardise national security and public order’ (Anuar 2005, p.43).

This brief discussion of Malaysia’s ‘shackled’ media culture (Brown 2005) provides a framework for approaching how we read the Malaysian media. Through these laws, and their ambiguous application, Malaysia’s reality can be constantly manipulated and reconstructed. Further to being used to construct anti-Malay rhetoric as a criminal offence, these laws have contributed to a ‘chilling effect’ on public speech; a form of self-censorship among journalists, due to the fear of being charged and fined with dissent, defamation, or worse,

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<sup>29</sup> Notably, opposition parties have also successfully employed the defamation law. In the past, several members of DAP have won defamation suits against *Utusan*.

being imprisoned (Kenyon 2010, p.440). Accordingly, Malaysian journalists perform in a style of social and written interaction subject to, and confined by, these strict laws. In doing so, they conform to this narrative of ‘teetering on the edge’. As for the broader Malaysian public, Welsh’s study found that 86 percent of respondents supported press freedom, but just 40 percent supported the use of media to discuss sensitive racial, religious and cultural issues (Sani 2005, p.342). These laws have struck anxiety and fear into the heart of the media landscape, fomenting great uncertainty among consumers as to what is suitable for the media to report – especially when *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) and the problems it causes cannot be challenged. Instead it is buried, locked away, and journalists are confined within strictly mediated means of communication that are disorienting and disillusioning. The restrictive effects of those laws on the mainstream media influenced many critics to move to the online sphere, utilising it as a new platform for innovation (Weiss 2013, p.609). But new media’s intervention in this narrative has not been straightforward or absolute. This larger media landscape ‘ultimately helps shape and constrain the innovations new media introduce’ (Kenyon and Marjoribanks 2007, in Weiss 2013, p.602). *Malaysiakini* is no exception here, and adding to these political constraints are acute financial constraints (forcing it to introduce a subscription charge in mid-2002) that prevent it from challenging the reach of the traditional media (Brown 2005, p.47). The new media represent a new threat requiring new methods. This was reflected in the fact that Mahathir’s government quickly ‘backtracked from their initial hands-off approach’ (Weiss 2013, p.603). Aside from introducing the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, which monitors internet content and online communication, and threatens economic sanctions and imprisonment against those who propagate false or offensive information (Government of Malaysia 1998), the government has utilised creative, albeit coercive, ways of maintaining control over information. The final words of Tapsell’s paper are significant,

...suggest[ing] a hardening of a ruling power intent on surviving as an electoral authoritarianism regime, rather than pursuing a swift transition to democracy through an acceptance of media liberalisation. (*Sic*) (2013, p.631)

To postulate as to reasons for the censorship, constraints on the new media are useful insofar as they discourage libel or slander against certain people or parties. Verifying the constant streams of information on such a broad and open information network has proven increasingly problematic (Holst 2012, p.9). During the *Reformasi* for instance, Weiss (2013, p.597) notes that pro-opposition websites ‘all carried their share of hyperbolic or false information’.

Hence,

...if online media are just as biased as fettered offline counterparts, but in the opposite direction...the result could, again, be the further degradation and segmentation of public discourse. (Weiss 2014a, p.106)

Moreover because the internet enables anonymity, it encourages individualistic attitudes and flaming (aggressive and abusive interaction between internet users). Weiss (2013, p.595) cites a study by Hurwitz (1999), which found that ‘most online political discussions tend to lose focus quickly or break down in ugliness’. This lack of true interaction could enhance polarisation, whether geographic, social or racial. Notably, technologies like Facebook and Twitter although not this chapter’s focus have discouraged anonymity, facilitating the merging of real-world and online interaction (Weiss 2013, p.596). Landmark protests like *Bersih* also provide positive evidence against these concerns (see 3.3). Malaysia’s media laws also ought to prevent new media from becoming a reactionary force. In my view, lambasting the ‘privileged’ Malays, or the constitutional constraints, are not productive and progressive means of changing Malaysia’s political discourse; instead this reflects the exploitation of new media as a space for angry netizens to ‘vent’ their anger. Though not advocating the government’s raid on the *Malaysiakini* offices, there is certainly a fine line between free speech and hate speech which *Malaysiakini*’s editors have failed to resolve adequately. Overall, the inability to discuss and contest Malaysia’s political culture openly means the inability to formulate new political alternatives. This leads nicely into the final part, which questions the potential of *Malaysiakini* to intervene in the national discourse and forge a more inclusive political narrative.

### **3.3 *Malaysiakini*’s Intervention in the National Discourse**

The above discussion showed how Malaysia’s media legislation primarily reflects BN’s consolidation of political power. Systematic enforcement of those laws has not only determined the racial categories with which Malaysians continue to ‘identify and organise politically’, but also reduced the space for ‘promoting alternative frameworks’ (Weiss 2013, p.594). This section assesses the readerships of *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini*, examining the respective imagined communities these media are speaking to, before proceeding to ask how far *Malaysiakini* writers have succeeded in changing the political discourse.

The Malaysian print media continue to serve an important role in perpetuating racial identities. Malaysia’s 8 million-strong daily press readership reflects the national population distribution – Malays constitute 55 percent, the Chinese 36 percent and Indians 9 percent (Media Guide 1998, in Wang 2001). Malay papers are written for the Malays and focus on

Malay issues; Mandarin papers are written for the Chinese and focus on Chinese issues; Tamil papers are written for the Indians and focus on Indian issues. English-language papers, deriving from colonial times, are read by privileged and educated citizens. Accordingly, readerships are racialised but also intersect class. Because these newspapers speak to different racial audiences, they play a role in the construction of expected 'racial behaviours'.

As the first Malay-language newspaper, *Utusan* played a historic role in the intellectual development of the Malay nationalist movement, helping to radically alter the political consciousness of the Malay community. Due to its contemporary role as a government mouthpiece, arguably this strand of critical thinking has dissipated. *Utusan* now has a fundamentally different purpose, to propagate information supporting and furthering Umno's political interests. This is not to say *Utusan* does not offer valuable insight into the Malay elite's thinking and perceptions of their own political situation. As Kessler notes:

It is not just of the same "darah-daging", the same flesh and blood, as Umno but is its voice, the authoritative and authentic voice of Umno's deepest soul. (2013c, online)

*Utusan* articles embody the internal contradictions inscribed in the Malay elite's political thought; their hopes and aspirations, but also confusion, misunderstanding and fear. Because Umno is a Malay party representing Malays, *Utusan* has remained an important voice for that community. Kessler's idea that *Utusan* forms part of Umno's 'deepest soul' is important for understanding its role in intraracial government disputes. Naturally, debates around racial identity in the print media are far from static. At various times, like the 1990 general elections when Umno had split into two different factions, *Utusan* articles provide the stage on which these crucial political rivalries 'viciously' play out (Brown 2005, p.55). At these times, *Utusan* writers play the role of 'vocalizing what UMNO leaders and ministers could not themselves say', having been shackled by the Malays' 'culture of deference to leadership and avoidance of confrontation' (ibid, p.52). In its weekend edition for instance, *Utusan*'s editorial team utilises a collective pseudonym, '*Awang Selamat*', under which many controversial news items have been published in recent years, reflecting the paper's shift further to the political right.

Prior to 2004, *Utusan* competed with *Berita Harian* to be the leading Malay-language daily in terms of circulation and readership (Abbott 2011, p.5). Recently *Utusan*'s position has fallen due to increasing controversies over its publishing style. In the brief period that Perak was under opposition control (between March 2008 and February 2009, before defections from the opposition helped BN to recapture that state), that government even boycotted the paper (ibid,

p.6). That *Malaysiakini* in contrast, has gone from strength to strength, is no coincidence. It has consistently provided a platform for the opposition to monitor, and often criticise, the quality of *Utusan*'s journalism. On the other hand, the provocative style of certain *Utusan* writers may be deliberate, to rile this 'moderate' *Malaysiakini* audience, distracting them from their broader political objectives. Recently *Utusan* has also suffered financial problems as a consequence of losing several high-profile defamation suits filed by the opposition. That *Utusan*'s troubles are a recent phenomenon suggests an intrinsic link between *Utusan*'s increasing unpopularity and the growing influence and popularity of the new media. Perhaps Malaysia's politico-media complex (PMC) was more tightly defined before the arrival of new media but has been exposed by the lack of internet legislation decided by Mahathir's administration<sup>30</sup>? *Utusan*'s fortunes also connect to the growing confidence and strength of the opposition, which (as the analysis chapters demonstrate) continued to become more powerful. In October 2015, Anwar Ibrahim was awarded RM200,000 in damages from a defamation suit connecting to two *Utusan* articles accusing him of being a gay rights activist (Anbalagan 2015, online). This might explain why *Utusan* has been accused of sensationalism in its headlines. In the knowledge that 'news of public affairs constantly competes with entertainment' (Tamam *et al.* 2006, p.5), *Utusan*'s staff will be aware of the value of stoking racist sentiments as a strategy for selling newspapers. Nevertheless, according to one report, *Utusan* 'has suffered for its heavily pro-Malay stance', accumulating losses amounted to RM20m due to lawsuits launched by victimised members of civil society and opposition politicians (Ar 2013, online). But Kessler (2013c) argues such articles serve an important role in the maintenance of government power. Particularly since 2008, when BN lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority, *Utusan*'s racist, deliberately provocative and heavily pro-Malay style (as alleged by the opposition and liberal media) has been geared towards *Utusan*'s core readership, in the conservative rural heartlands, where the traditional media still wields considerable authority.

Before *Malaysiakini*, given the essentialised racial discourses perpetuated by papers like *Utusan*, it had not been easy for Malaysians to transcend or at least disrupt these categories, and to promote alternative expressions of identity (Holst 2012, p.2). Naturally, the opposition has also made use of print media. Publications like *Harakah* and *Aliran Monthly* have played their role in the dissemination of critical information. *Harakah*, the media organ of PAS, has been used 'not just for PAS business and campaigns, but more broadly to develop discourse

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<sup>30</sup> PMC refers to the web of relationships between the state government, media, police force, judiciary and even multinational corporations. It is unclear where or when the term first emerged, though it was used in a 2012 report produced by the London School of Economics (LSE) on the Leveson Inquiry (LSE 2012).



and norms' (Weiss 2014a, p.100). However, constrained by the aforementioned laws, these media are limited in many ways. For example, after circulation increased five-fold after Anwar's arrest, *Harakah* was ordered to reduce publishing from twice-weekly to once a fortnight (Weiss 2013, p.597). Overall, it is safe to say new media have greater potential to challenge and reframe the dominant narratives, racialised discourses and traditional ideals of Malay culture perpetuated by the BN through its media monopoly.

How specifically have new media reconfigured what is meant by politics, nationhood and Malaysian identity? In his path-breaking book, *Contentious Journalism and the Internet: Towards Democratic Discourse in Malaysia and Singapore*, Cherian George coins the term 'contentious journalism' to depict how new media are 'challenging the consensus that powerful interests try to shape and sustain through mainstream media' (2006, p.3). In Malaysia, such a challenge involves fundamentally reconfiguring the ethnoreligious identity categories in which claims over national space are inscribed. Weiss believes 'online engagement could deterritorialise identity to an extent not possible with locally rooted print or broadcast media' (2014a, p.106). The internet's key intervention has been to highlight the increasing irrelevance of Malaysia's racialised readership structure, encouraging Malaysians from diverse backgrounds 'to experience and adopt new identities and alliances' (ibid, p.104), forming different 'cognitive, moral, and emotional connection[s]' through those alliances (Polletta and Jasper 2001, in Weiss 2013, p.594). Weiss (2013, p.594) cites the work of sociologist Alberto Melucci (1995), who coined the term 'identisation' – meaning the specification and continual reconstruction of identity categories in such a way as to be politically effective. She believes the new media has potential to engage and influence this process.

Since its inception, *Malaysiakini* has been growing in popularity and influence. By mid-2008 it had become the country's most used online news site (Kenyon 2010, p.448), reaching 4.3 million users on election day that year (Carrington 2015, p.10). *Malaysiakini*'s growth reflects global trends, where across the world digital media are challenging the role of print media in shaping public opinion in the digital age. This point is a pressing one for *Utusan*, which

...exists at Umno's behest not to widen the cultural horizon of the great majority of the nation's Malays but to keep their vision narrowly framed by the same archaic perspective of their political grandparents. (Kessler 2013c)

Such an 'archaic perspective' has been challenged by *Malaysiakini* through new forms of online media engagement. Its news platform is inherently inclusive: though it started as an

English website (representing its educated urban readership), it has expanded to incorporate Malay, Mandarin and Tamil sections. It was the first website to transcend traditional linguistic divides, bringing the same news stories to different racial audiences. Returning to the internet's utility as a platform for forming cognitive, moral and emotional connections, because *Malaysiakini* is a predominantly oppositional space it has been used to air collective grievances and discontent, thus forging common bonds that transcend communal identities. Subsequently, different NGOs have used *Malaysiakini* to promote awareness across a broad range of political issues, leading to a 'series of record-setting crowds at protests over the last several years' (Weiss 2013, p.606). Examples include *Bersih* in 2007, 2011 and 2012, and the more recent anti-GST protests in 2014 and 2015<sup>31</sup>. The key point to take away is that *Malaysiakini*'s imagined community differs to, and subverts, that of the print media by transcending racial, religious and geographical boundaries and bringing together 'disparate groups in civil society' (Abbott 2004, in Brown 2005, p.47).

In this light, which groups are actually empowered through *Malaysiakini*? Weiss (2013, p.605) argues new media 'are fundamentally democratic in that anyone with a computer or smartphone has access to them'. This point is significant, for in Malaysia the internet is more urban than rurally-based. According to a report by Freedom House (2009, p.81), 80 percent of internet users live in urban areas, suggesting that most citizens in rural areas rely on traditional media. Because the less-populated rural constituencies are given greater electoral weight, those heartlands are still viewed by critics as a barrier to the new media's influence to impact politics. O'Shannassy argues that, viewed 'through a Gramscian lens', the 2008 electoral result represented a 'crisis of authority' (2009, p.99). However, his optimism is contrasted by Miles and Croucher (2013, p.415), who emphasise that only the working class can effect 'fundamental change'. Although writing about Malaysia's trade unions, their observation about the working class is significant as a general point – reflecting Kessler's declaration:

It is in those (rural) parts of the country, in those electorates, that Malay domination of national political life is grounded. (2013a)

Although traditional media is biased towards the government, because it is racialised to represent Malay interests, it is not 'so discredited or detached from socio-political reality as to be unimportant or unresponsive' (Weiss 2013, p.593). *Malaysiakini* caters to an

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<sup>31</sup> The *Bersih* protests were mass demonstrations held to raise awareness of the need for electoral reform. They are discussed in Chapter 6, where they played a key role in BN's loss of two-thirds majority after the 2008 election. The anti-GST protests were held in response to government plans to introduce the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on April 1 2015. This was a 6 percent tax levied on many consumer goods that protesters believed would widen the poverty gap.

urban/educated readership, and thus reinforces democratic trends in the urban areas, consolidating the links between civil society, NGOs and student organisations (Weiss 2014a, p.94). It is detached from the rural areas, whose emancipatory potential remains silenced (ibid). This digital divide is not only rural/urban but inevitably intergenerational. The rise of alternative media connects to the politicisation of younger voters, whose identities were ‘moulded in a fundamentally different discursive environment than those of their elders’ (Weiss 2013, p.609). This explains why the *Reformasi*, although significant, was an urban and peninsula-centric movement and it was the urbanised Malay youth that voted for the opposition. Notwithstanding these constraints, new media hold greater potential to shift the political imaginings in Malaysia. Today, ‘nearly three-quarters of Malaysians...[are] under 40 years old’ (Weiss 2013, p.608-609). This, coupled with cyberspace’s increasing penetration of the Malay heartlands, proves that over time this new demographic will make its presence felt. Smartphone technology will continue to infiltrate the Malaysian interior, unsettling the dichotomies of rural and urban and exclusion and inclusion (Liow and Afif 2010, in Weiss 2013, p.600). Ever more Malaysians will be included in these networks, gaining the opportunity to consume online content. Internet usage in Malaysia has witnessed an extraordinary increase, from 3,700,000 in 2000 to 20,100,000 in 2013 (World Bank 2015). This is 67 percent of the country’s population, and we may question the view that a new consciousness must derive from the working class (cf. Miles and Croucher 2013). This is certainly not to say that online space is inherently oppositional. Malay nationalist group *Perkasa* (discussed in Chapter 7) has successfully utilised its presence in cyberspace to tap into and reinforce the conservative political attitudes of the rural heartlands, combating the influence of websites like *Malaysiakini* (Liow 2012, p.310). Online media can thus contribute to and reinforce the tribalism of racial identity. As BN has become increasingly tech-savvy, it has also found increasingly creative ways of utilising cyberspace’s potential, engaging with social media like Facebook and Twitter. Weiss (2014a, p.101) observes:

Najib had well over double opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim’s Facebook friends as of mid-2010 and about 60 per cent more Twitter followers.

Overall, it is clear how *Malaysiakini* has been utilised to promote and consolidate an alternative narrative of Malaysian identity transcending racial, religious and geographical boundaries. But it remains to be seen how far this website and other new media can detach themselves from the urban/educated middle class and significantly reconfigure the voting trends in the predominantly-Malay rural areas. Alas, *Malaysiakini* may have mapped onto existing social, cultural and political disparities (Weiss 2013, p.605).

## Conclusion

...new media is limited in its ability to reshape the fundamental themes and narratives upon which Malaysian politics has long been anchored, so as to effect political and societal transformation. (Liow 2012, p.295)

This chapter has introduced the two newspapers chosen for analysis, *Utusan Malaysia* and *Malaysiakini*. Both media outlets, and their cultures of production and consumption, are distinctly positioned in Malaysia's historical and political landscape, and the differences between them reflect pivotal changes and developments in Malaysian society. Both papers offer different consensuses on the ideal political values and cultural meaning that should define Malaysian life. They offer different architectural plans concerning the nation's construction: *Utusan*, on the one hand, a dominant, linear Malay voice represented by the guardians of *Ketuanan Melayu* and representing BN's national vision; and *Malaysiakini* on the other, a more secular and inclusive platform for different writers to pose important questions to the Malaysian status quo, representing an embryonic national vision. The chapter has sought to examine the key differences between them, but also highlight enduring tensions that continue to constrain *Malaysiakini*'s potential. Even if we do not wholly agree with Liow's concerns, the effects of new media on the rearticulation of collective identities are certainly unclear (Weiss 2013, p.601). Whilst new media risk reinforcing existing social, cultural and political cleavages, the traditional media continues to hold considerable influence, for its innate connections with the country's demographic makeup, and its colonial and nationalist histories. Because of Malaysia's uneven development, *Malaysiakini* remains limited in its ability to connect to the rural masses, and the differences between these groups and the educated middle classes reflect a persisting geographic divide that we would be foolhardy to ignore. Writing about the 2013 elections, Kessler remarks:

For many of those intelligent, persuasive and globally-networked young Kuala Lumpur cosmopolitans, the Malay heartlands and those who live there are just as foreign and remote a world as they certainly were to the visiting journalists. (2013a, online)

However, the dichotomy between both worlds is becoming increasingly unclear: rural citizens use Smartphones and BN has reinforced its presence in cyberspace. There are also broader political currents continuing to shape the new media's potential. BN has exploited its strict hold on media legislation to control the content and quality of public discourse, fomenting an internalisation of racialised discourse across Malaysian society. This is shown by the acceptance of the Malaysian public to restrictions to free speech, and by the broader 'chilling effect' on journalistic practice. Given the government's amendments to the SA, this is

unlikely to dissipate but actually could be amplified. Communal identities thus continue to define the politics of interaction in Malaysian society, and this includes online discussions. It is therefore important to acknowledge Weiss's (2009, p.754) remark that *Malaysiakini* has aided the formation of a cohort 'of critically minded young journalists', reflecting 'a newly vibrant media environment' – whilst simultaneously maintaining our reservations concerning the potential of this new landscape to alter how politics is conducted. Ultimately, BN has maintained power over its identity categories, perpetuating those racial categories as part of an important political strategy which forces the opposition media to internalise the norms of journalism practised by the print media. Media across the political divide continue to play up race and religion, considered by Wang (2001, p.85) 'a very powerful tool to blind voters from the real issues at stake.' Transcending these boundaries and promoting alternative frameworks is a constant struggle. It must be stressed that this will be an incremental and inherently reflexive process, marked by constant processes of identity negotiation and rearticulation. Nevertheless, over time, considering its unprecedented potential to deterritorialise Malaysia's racial groupings, and in light of its growing political influence, *Malaysiakini* just may be the torchbearer of a new national discourse.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

### Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological procedures applied in this study. It is split into five parts. It will first introduce Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) generally, before discussing the specific approach to CDA that was devised, as necessitated through a project conducting research across two languages. Section three asks how the context of CDA may change in order to be suitable for analysis in the Malaysian context, and this discussion will be backed up through reference to journal entries kept throughout my time in Malaysia. Such reflexive practice provided a useful means of overcoming cultural preconceptions held by the western researcher and particularly fostering sensitivity to the cultural differences in play. Thereafter, the chapter will discuss the sampling procedure, both in terms of the choice of media and in the significance of my theoretical approach to the sampling process (Martela 2011, p.1). Finally, it will explore the ambiguities of translation, basing discussion around Mona Baker's work on translation studies.

### 4.1 The Value of CDA

This section discusses CDA as a methodological approach, acknowledging how CDA's toolbox offers a means of unpacking the complexities of discursive representations in the Malaysian media. CDA emerged from a field of critical linguistics developed by the Lancaster school of linguistics, in which Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak were key proponents. Teun A van Dijk from the University of Amsterdam was another influential contributor. Rather than a self-contained methodological approach, Fairclough (2001, p.121) defines CDA as 'a theory or method which is in a dialogical relationship with other social theories and methods', and exhorts researchers to embrace these interconnections. CDA has a rich and diverse theoretical heritage, drawing particularly from the theories of Antonio Gramsci (introduced in Chapter 3) and Michel Foucault. Though, as Fairclough (whose framework I shall be using) admits, he uses discourse 'rather differently' to Foucault (2003, p.227). Consequently, I will not focus on Foucault, but just acknowledge the importance of his legacy for the formulation of CDA as 'a theory or method' in itself.

Broadly speaking, CDA is interested in the relationship between language, power and ideology. Koller (2009, online) notes that 'texts act as carriers for ideology', hence the language used by media is a reflection of state power. For Richardson, language and society are inherently connected: language is a reflection of society, but also represents society in a

particular way – reinforcing his point that journalistic language ‘shapes reality by shaping our view of reality’ (2007, p.13). In the Gramscian sense, reality is built and negotiated through the text and this reality reflects the understandings of the powerful in that society (Koller 2009, online). Richardson (2007, p.31) refers to the ‘mobilisation of bias’, reflecting how texts are used to defend and promote vested interests. CDA’s interest is in the unequal power that shapes representations of certain people and groups. Fairclough and Wodak note the ‘ideological effects’ of discourse that ‘produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities’ (1997, p. 258). CDA’s aim is therefore to demystify the power relations inscribed in texts, connecting them to broader ideologies (Wodak and Meyer 2009, p.3). In this instance, my focus is on the ‘ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities’, and how discourses in the Malaysian media both reflect and reproduce the unequal power relations between these groups. Downing and Husband (2005, p.37) note that the media frame

...excludes depth and variety at the same time as it obsessively focuses on one trait or a mere handful of them.

For example, in Malaysian media representations of race, certain groups like the *Orang Asli* have faced perennial representation as an excluded and marginalised group.

CDA has value in situating language within wider frameworks of social, cultural and historical experience (Matheson 2005, p.3). Because societies are constantly on the move, CDA must explore how and why certain discursive representations are conveyed ‘in particular texts at a particular moment in time’ (Koller 2009, online). It is therefore important not only to analyse these media texts in the specific historical moment of their production, distribution and reception (Graddol 1994, p.18), but to locate them within ‘historically evolved and sedimented processes of communication’ (Matheson 2005, p.8). This reflects Fairclough and Wodak’s (1997, p.258) observation that discourse

...is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped...constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it.

CDA allowed me to emphasise the coeval relationship between the past and present; that is, understand how discourses of race, religion, nationality and so on, are chronologically and socioculturally anchored, reinforcing and to an extent reconstituting the colonial past from which they are drawn. Malaysian media have contributed to the historical construction of myths, customs, beliefs, rituals and so on, which play an important role in shaping national

life. Each text builds on and reinforces this historical repertoire of meaning, making the structures of knowledge more meaningful (Matheson 2005, p.10).

Inherent in CDA is the notion of ‘polysemy’, that texts contain multiple meanings. Different people bring their own backgrounds and experiences to these texts and thus interpret and understand them in different ways (Berger 2014, p.30). Consequently the meaning of the text does not exist *a priori* but emerges through an interaction between producer, text and consumer (Richardson 2007, p.15). Polysemy importantly reflects the ‘differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance’ and the idea that ‘societal contradictions are inscribed into texts’ (Wodak and Meyer 2009, p.10; p.17). Because of these contradictions, language and the identities it produces are inherently inconsistent and unstable, providing the terrain upon which particular identities are contested, legitimised and enacted (Graddol 1994, p.2). Media texts are thus sites of struggle that on the one hand reveal the prevailing power of ideology, but on the other demonstrate contestations and struggles over these representations (Wodak and Meyer 2009, p.10). CDA seeks to determine the areas where such discourses are being actively resisted and changed (ibid, p.9). It places emphasis on examining within these texts the tensions, paradoxes, ambiguities, inclusions and exclusions, and so on, which aid reflection on the broader functions of racial and national identity in Malaysia.

## **4.2 Doing CDA**

Whilst the above section was useful for explaining CDA’s suitability to this case study, it is important to outline explicitly the methodological process. This, according to Müller (2010, online), is absent in much discourse analysis research. He criticises the ‘vague specification’ accompanying much methodological writing, highlighting its lack of theoretical rigour (ibid). Simultaneously he accepts each study is different, highlighting the importance of tailoring one’s method to their own research ‘to fully harness’ the power of that discourse analytical method (ibid). He writes:

The transition from discourse theory to discourse analysis is achieved when the discourse analyst has adapted the discourse theoretical framework to the empirical phenomena in question. (Ibid)

For this study I adapted the framework of Fairclough (1995), which offered an accessible pathway into CDA and was broad and flexible enough to be worked into my cross-cultural research context. In taking the text ‘as a form of social practice’, Fairclough highlighted how the text, its production and reception, and the broader sociocultural context are inherently intertwined (Fairclough 1995, p.7). His method was path-breaking in locating the text within



the discursive and sociocultural contexts that determine, but are also reproduced through, that text. His three-tier model is split accordingly, based around textual, discursive and social scales of analysis. These will now be explained, with reference to the emphases placed within each and particularly the different focus necessitated by each media outlet (considering the significant differences between the grammatical structures of the Malay and English languages). This focus varied at different times, according to the specific political contexts defining each election.

### ***Textual practices***

Fairclough (1995, p.7) highlights the need to pay ‘attention to textual form, structure and organization at all levels’, spanning from lexical choices to ‘higher levels of textual organization’. ‘Micro’ aspects of this level, such as modality (use of modal verbs or adverbs) or syntax (sentence structure), were de-emphasised. This was so the different textual and discursive practices of the Malay-language press could be flexibly incorporated if and when required. Jones (2007, p.363) observes the futility of ‘looking for “predictable linguistic characteristics” of a particular political position or ideology’ – a position further complicated by the analysis being conducted across two languages. Instead, explicit focus was placed on elucidating the broader narratives in these articles, exploring representations of individuals, groups and other social actors, and social relations between them. Here, Richardson (2007, p.38) notes that the ‘Ideological Square’ is a useful tool for determining the us/them relationship within media articles: how ‘our actions’ are positioned against ‘their actions’, with emphasis on the positivity of the former and negativity of the latter. This was particularly useful for *Utusan*, to position the Malay/non-Malay discursive dichotomy that informed the writers’ perspectives. For instance, in the 2013 election *Utusan* writers located Malays and Chinese in an ideological opposition; the former kind-hearted and generous, the latter rude and ungrateful. Considering the different political agendas of both media outlets, there was likely to be uneven coverage between them. Focus was placed on the agreements and similarities, but also disagreements and antagonisms, between these media and the articles they produced. Particularly in *Utusan* it was instructive to focus on inclusions and exclusions: which topics were emphasised and which avoided? Across both media outlets, lexical choices were highlighted only when they stood out as centrally relevant to the article’s narrative. A more concentrated focus on lexical choices would be difficult in *Utusan*, for many Malaysian words express ‘an idea rather than any definite part of speech’ (Hamilton 2005, p.8), hence discussing their meaning would not so much reflect the politics of the paper as the politics of my own translation (see 4.5).

### ***Discursive practices***

Fairclough (1995, p.7) refers to the

...order of discourse – that is, a historically particular structuring of discursive (text-producing) practices...the specificity of particular situations of text production.

This tier positions the text within the social conditions of production and consumption of that media outlet, exploring the relationship between media and media audience. Focus is particularly on texts that ‘construct text producer-audience relations in diverse and contradictory ways’ (ibid, p.8). This producer-audience relationship is examined against a specific social, economic and political backdrop (Richardson 2007, p.39). I explored how both media outlets drew upon specific social, cultural and political discourses to convey their identity and values to their audiences. At this level, specifically the values of news production, and the differences in each media outlet’s politics of production were examined: what was the story’s appeal to the audience and why was it chosen? How would journalists from *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* be treated if they propagated favourable or negative coverage (covered in Chapter 3’s discussion of media legislation)? Were there connections between different articles, relating to the production of a broader narrative? What was the politics of this ‘intertextuality’ and how did it reflect broader political trends of production and consumption? For instance, in 2013 the majority of *Utusan* articles were connected to a broader narrative of Chinese treason, which was influenced by a statement delivered by the Prime Minister after the election accusing Chinese citizens of betraying the government. The aim for these *Utusan* writers was to turn their Malay readership against the Chinese, and the politics at that time (i.e. the rise of DAP after the election) necessitated this intensification of explicitly racial discourse.

### ***Social practices***

Fairclough (1995, p.7) notes:

Texts negotiate the sociocultural contradictions and more loosely “differences” (Kress 1988) which are thrown up in social situations, and indeed they constitute a form in which social struggles are acted out.

He thus stresses the importance of locating textual analysis within broader social structures and settings. This final tier examines the relationship between the text and society; how the text is produced by, but also has the potential to transform, that society. What are the broader social, cultural and political systems shaping these media institutions and their audiences? In

*Utusan*, how did texts (and certain patterns across texts) reproduce, rationalise and/or naturalise Malaysia's racial order? Were *Malaysiakini* writers contributing to the same productions of meaning, or were there significant areas of contestation and resistance? Contrarily, perhaps the boundaries between both papers were not so clear, but blurred and disjointed. At this level it was important to 'join the dots', so to speak, determining trends in habits of representation ('Othering', for example) for certain subjects and connecting certain words, phrases and texts to wider structural and social inequalities and common assumptions (e.g. 'Malays are the definitive people', or 'the Chinese are against Islam'). How did these assumptions affect or harm the position of those groups? Overall, considering this thesis' emphasis on racialised discourse, the broad question concerned how these texts plugged into, or challenged, the racialised contexts of power, ideology and hegemony in the Malaysian worldview. As an example, in the 2004 election both media outlets plugged into broader social, cultural and political currents concerning representations of militant Islam. Many texts reproduced and rationalised Orientalist discourses focused around an alien Islamic 'Other' in contrast to the normalised Malay/Malaysian 'Self'. These discourses were used to harm PAS' election chances and make the idea of supporting that party seem irrational, and they stemmed from decades of hegemonic rule under Umno, through which a dichotomy between moderate and progressive Muslims, and fanatical extremists, had been constructed and normalised.

Overall, these three tiers combine to provide an effective framework for analysing media texts within the context of racialisation and racial politics in Malaysia. The central focus was on discursive and social practices that positioned these media texts within the Malaysian polity (a macro-contextual approach). Hopefully it is clear to the reader how previous chapters have contributed to this broader picture (Chapter 1 through its focus on discourses of governance and party politics, Chapter 2 on the historical emergence and evolution of different ethno-religious subject groups, and Chapter 3 through its focus on media ownership, control and editorial practices). Particular attention was paid to the historical dimensions of these discourses, exploring how historical events and ideologies were reconstituted and re-appropriated at exceptional political moments.

### **4.3 CDA in Non-Western Contexts and the Self as an Instrument of Knowing**

How might my application of CDA need to be sensitive to the non-western research context? This section explores this question, with reference to my first-hand experiences of Malaysian culture and society. It is important to acknowledge the value of my six months spent living and studying at the *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia* (UKM), between September 2013 and

March 2014. During this time I studied the Malay language and was positioned at IKMAS (Institute of Malaysian and International Studies), an influential social science research institute. Throughout that time I kept a research journal, important parts of which informed my primary analysis (referenced below). These experiences could be mobilised as a methodological tool, using the Self as an instrument of knowing. This period represented an invaluable opportunity that positively impacted my overall approach, providing important theoretical insights into the lifestyles of Malaysian friends and colleagues; encouraging a degree of cultural sensitivity to the complexities of Malaysian society (considering my western epistemological perspective); and improving my understanding of the complexity of the consumption of media discourses.

To frame this section, I will ‘piggy back’ off the discussion in a book by Khosravini (2015), *Discourse, Identity and Legitimacy: Self and Other in Representations of Iran's Nuclear Programme*, in which he uses CDA to analyse the Iranian press. Khosravini acknowledges that ‘the roles and functions of discourse in societies may vary, depending on their socio-historical moments’ (2015, p.75). For example, he writes that because most CDA studies analyse societies in the stage of late modernity, they make assumptions concerning ‘the covert concentration of power in discourse and semiosis’ (ibid). Essentially, social structures are reproduced through consent and not through coercion. Given the media restrictions discussed in the previous chapter, it is perhaps necessary to shift away from the notion of discourse as concealed within social structures of power and instead as open and exposed; operating in an overt, not covert manner. Whilst in Malaysia, on different occasions I was reminded that Malaysia was experiencing its own, particular sociohistorical ‘moment’; Malaysian society was at a crucial point, or ‘crossroads’. The *Reformasi* had resulted in the opening up of national discourse: no longer was there a silence surrounding Malayness and racial identity, but instead this had been confronted more openly since the turn of the century and the advent of the less restricted new media, which was overtly challenging and exposing the racialised structures of power. To ignore such cultural-contextual differences and instead assume discourse’s universal character risks ‘preventing the *actual* deconstruction of certain discursive mechanisms in that particular society’ (ibid, p.75, original emphasis).

One such cultural-contextual difference concerns CDA’s assumption that racial discourse is necessarily *racist*. Whereas van Dijk (1995) argues for a focus on the function of ‘racism’ in discourse, Mandal believes this concept ‘does not necessarily reflect the condition of state and society in Malaysia’, and subsequently that accusations of racism ‘often run aground and do not find widespread support’ (2004, p.58). Instead he adopts the term ‘racialisation’:

...as a process by which groups are categorised, selectively privileged and marginalised *without necessarily* imposing the claims of supremacy, violence and outright repression typically associated with racism. (p.53, my emphasis)

Due to my first year of reading about Malaysia from afar, I arrived, late in 2013, fascinated by its political model. But those I met, whether colleagues, friends or even strangers seemed quite matter-of-fact about Malaysia's racialised system, causing me to reflect on political culture in the UK, which no longer seemed as 'normal'. I was, in Benedict Anderson's words, forced 'to see my Europe as through an inverted telescope' (1998, p.2). One man asked why I was interested in Malaysian politics, which to him was 'so boring and predictable'. I realised this was usual to Malaysians, as naturally one would expect it to be. Try as I may to consciously prevent myself from 'exoticising' or 'Orientalising' my research matter, I appreciated that I was unable to necessarily free myself from such biases, deeply learned and assumed as they were. As a westerner there were gaps in my insight and subtle biases at work, which always remained just beyond my ability to see and negate them.

Had I stayed in rural areas for longer periods than intermittent weekends away, I may have become more sensitive to the cultural differences in play, particularly the racialised articulation of Self/Other. As it was, I was for the most part on a university campus which in many ways reminded me of all the comforts of home (notwithstanding aggressive, intrusive monkeys and equally intrusive calls to prayer from the muezzin). Many people did agree that racialisation aside the national politics was indeed at a turning point. To some, the *Reformasi* had created 'chaos', to others 2013's election result was the strongest sign of the potential for that all-elusive factor, 'change'. Towards the end of my stay, I was not so sure; especially as Anwar Ibrahim was re-convicted of sodomy charges in March 2014, just as he was preparing to contest an important by-election (resulting in cries of '*Reformasi 2.0!*'). It seemed that perhaps Malaysian politics was quite cyclical, experiencing ebbs and flows, with different phases of identity shift, as the government periodically sought to renew its legitimacy.

One central point of this thesis, as expressed through Chapter 2's discussion of 'fragmented essentialisms', is that Malaysia's postcolonial reality is inevitably messy and ambivalent. Throughout my time in Malaysia, I came to appreciate this messiness and ambivalence. Different people supported different parties for different reasons. What was important to some was not to others, just as different groups in any country hold varying degrees of interest in politics and governmental concerns. All this made me realise the difficulty of making even the simplest assumption concerning how the electoral discourses discussed in this thesis impact ordinary citizens. In relation, it is important to realise *Malaysiakini* and *Utusan* are not

homogeneous entities but defined by diversity and differences of opinion and through the individual perceptions and writings of Malaysians themselves. My focus is on how these writers are theorising new forms of identity through reworking their country's colonial history. They 'perceive their existence through socially shared discursive expressions', drawing from the myriad pockets of history that constitute the nation's extraordinary past (Kaunismaa 1995, p.3).

Khosravini (2015, p.75) notes Fairclough's methods 'are applied in many non-Western parts of the world with generally legitimate critical ends'. He is critical of the view of Shi-Xu, who argues that

CDA practitioners...only blindly apply CDA's concepts, values, and models to their chosen phenomena and questions, whether or not they are situated in Asia, Africa, Latin America or elsewhere. (2009, p.33)

One of Shi's arguments is that 'Anglo-American/European Western' CDA practitioners (especially those researching non-western phenomena) are potentially detached from their object or subject of study, shackled by a 'deeply rooted ethnocentrism' (p.208). There were certainly times, when in discussions with scholars at UKM, that I was exhorted to challenge my fundamental assumptions concerning nation-building. This helped me to think about my positionality; how it was not as simple as just being a western outsider, but that it was difficult to connect intimately with the issues being raised in Malaysia. With Shi's views in mind, I hope, first, to have demonstrated not a 'blind' approach but one specifically tailored to the study's cross-linguistic research focus; and second, through the inclusion of first-hand journal accounts, to have proven I am not detached from my research matter, but instead have connected this study's theory, method and application to my first-hand experiences of Malaysian society. Moreover, albeit not a general election, I have experience of Malaysia's election atmosphere which I deem invaluable to this research.

This was when attending the March 2014 by-election (the one Anwar was supposed to have contested), which was unlike anything I expected. The contest was between MCA's Chew Wei Fun and PKR's Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (Anwar's wife, who had assumed his role)<sup>32</sup>. That day I chatted to officials, BN politicians, supporters on both sides of the divide and other members of the public. Through these discussions, certain 'familiar' ideas (that featured in my media analysis) were conveyed. According to BN supporters, under the government, Malaysians lived a prosperous life, so why the need for *Reformasi*? This idea was repeated by

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<sup>32</sup> *Keadilan* had merged with PRM in 2003 to form *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR).

various supporters, as if they valued wellbeing primarily on economic terms – perhaps reflecting their middle class aspirations? The opposition, they argued, were ‘*memainkan*’ (toying with) democracy, PAS were the ‘Taliban’ of Malaysia, DAP were ‘Chinese extremists’, Anwar was a political opportunist. Some supporters even voiced gripes about the new generation, who do not appreciate the ‘sacrifice’ of their forefathers. One man, proudly pointing to his blue BN t-shirt, chimed in with the declaration that Malaysia treated its ‘immigrants’ much better than America did ‘*pada zaman dulu*’ (in ancient times) – which ‘immigrants’ were implied I was not sure, but I had my suspicions. In contrast, one opposition supporter spoke of Anwar as Malaysia’s ‘messiah’, its one true hope. He informed me that, as the messiah did for his people, Anwar made the sacrifice for his own people (referring to his recent incarceration). Another PAS supporter, inadvertently reinforcing the crude ‘Taliban’ stereotype, warned of a ‘*tentera agama*’ (religious army), though his decorative Malay was too complex to fully understand.



**Figure 4:** Government and opposition flags line the streets near a polling booth in Kajang

The election was similar to a festival atmosphere: flags lined the streets, and BN supporters on motorbikes cruised through the crowds, revving their engines to the crowd’s delight. It was a day out, with stalls selling varieties of food; t-shirts whether government- or opposition-themed selling like hotcakes; flags being waved; and cheering and chanting either side of the road, whether cries of ‘*hidup Melayu!*’ (Long live the Malays!), or ‘*Reformasi!*’ Although, as

stated by a policeman, there was *'tegang'* (tension) between both sides, it seemed...almost *friendly* – and certainly passionate. There were friends on either side of the divide, according to one PKR supporter I chatted with. Though this was vehemently opposed by two female BN supporters who I posed this same question to; *'mereka Melayu lain!'* (They are the other Malays!), they retorted, as if in disgust. Regardless, I was stunned at the passion of both sets of supporters, and at the unique political culture there. As one man wittily remarked to me, *campur-ing* (mixing) between Malay and English, *'ini demokrasi-ala-dunia ketiga* (this is third world democracy)...No one is killed, no one is hurt, instead things go on as normal – the beauty and mystery of Malaysian politics'. I began to think he had a point.

Albeit, according to Khosravini, unnecessarily 'polemic and intellectually unproductive' (2015, p.76), Shi's argument underscores the importance of 'be[ing] critically reflexive on the cultural dimension of knowledge production' (Shi 2009, p.213). In this light, Khosravini concedes that CDA does not have a rich history of analysing discourse in 'plural societies' (2015, p.76). He highlights Blommaert's criticism that CDA 'makes such observations only about that one, very particular, society...highly integrated, Late Modern, and post-industrial, densely semiotised First-World societies' (2005, p.35). Indeed, Malaysia is not (yet) part of what Blommaert terms 'the core of the world system' (ibid). Previous chapters have shown how understanding Malaysian society requires an appreciation of the unique power relations that emerged through historical circumstances. Only then can we adopt a more sensitive cultural approach, avoiding a Eurocentric critique of 'racism' (cf. van Dijk 1995) and instead, in Mandal's words, understanding 'racialisation...[as] a function of politics in Malaysia in complex, uneven and contested ways' (2004, p.58).

In this respect, there is something to be said about the added value that a more 'grounded' approach to CDA can have. That is, this was not a purely textual, abstracted use of CDA, whereby Malaysian elections and media were merely studied and analysed at 'distance'. Instead, it drew from, and incorporated within, prior fieldwork observations to enrich and add rigour to the research. Building on Shi's criticism, one central allegation levelled at CDA from critics is its tendency to remain beholden to a western-liberal theoretical lens, for instance privileging European theorists like Foucault and Gramsci (see for example Bucholtz 2001). Breeze (2011, p.499) notes how most CDA studies 'assume their own left-wing political standpoint uncritically'. Grounding my CDA approach in my own experiences of Malaysian life allowed me move beyond CDA's western antecedents – insofar as this is possible. It enabled me to at least *try* to understand Malaysian politics beyond this Eurocentric position and become more culturally sensitive. This relates to what was discussed above



concerning my decision to appropriate the term ‘racialisation’ and not ‘racism’ In essence, I tried not to detach the textual, discursive and social scales of analysis from their positioning in particular social, cultural and political contexts. Instead I attempted to appreciate the discursive creativity of these writers, grounded in and drawing from a complex colonial-historical tapestry of images, symbols, ideas and myths – something which I could only begin to understand when engaging with the complexities of Malaysian society firsthand.

When reflecting back on my encounters with Malaysians from across the social, cultural and political spectrum the complexities of Malaysian politics come back into sharp focus. For instance, to some people I met, although they were very opposed to the racialised government coalition they were even more antagonistic towards the opposition parties, particularly PAS and DAP for failing to move beyond identity politics and continuing to clash on issues of Islamisation and the need for a secular constitution. Other times I was reminded how the ‘moderate’ line that the government touts has caused it to win support from the most unlikely of people. For instance, one time whilst travelling in a car with a transgender Malay, he was surprised that I did not vouch for Umno (I assume, because the PR coalition contained PAS which was of course more strictly Islamic).

On the other hand, there were times that my understandings were enforced, for instance when learning about a member of staff at the university who had been somewhat ostracised due to his Shi’ite beliefs; or when an Indian journalist recalled his torment at the debilitated state of media corruption; or when a Malay colleague told me of the frustration he experienced when attempting to convince neighbours from his village to move beyond their loyalty to Umno and not be fearful of the Chinese and the DAP. These observations were really useful in providing me with powerful and illuminating insights into the ways in which key ethnoreligious discourses would be presented in the elections and the media.

In essence, whilst these examples show how my readings of the country, its people and politics were reinforced, those moments above represented important moments where things that previously seemed black and white were reduced to grey areas, and simple assumptions were unsettled – reflecting ‘the moments of ambiguity, instability and resistance to which all discourse is subject’ (Bucholtz 2001, p.172).

#### **4.4 Sampling**

This section discusses the implications of my chosen media outlets and the relevance of my chosen sampling strategy. It is important to acknowledge how my decision to learn the Malay

language and my subsequent experiences of living and studying in UKM were central to the formulation of my methodological framework. This reflected an abductive approach, whereby the research design was not clear at the outset but emerged alongside the researcher's progressive understanding of their research matter, based on a reflexive attitude that looked forwards and backwards throughout the research process. Between September 2013 and March 2014 I undertook an intensive Malay language course which ensured my knowledge of Malay was sufficient to read Malay-language material. This I believed would help enhance my credibility as a researcher of Malaysian culture and politics. As the national language, understanding Malay is central to understanding national political discourse, and this influenced my decision to learn Malay over the other primary 'ethnic' languages, Mandarin and Tamil. Whereas modern Malay utilises a Romanised alphabet, Mandarin and Tamil are vastly more challenging for a western researcher to learn and apply, thus to reach a sufficient level within the time constraints of the PhD. Out of reading, writing, speaking and listening, reading Malay is the easiest form of learning for foreign-language beginners, firstly because it only requires translating the text in front of you and secondly because it avoids the need to master phonetic differences and correct intonation (necessitated in speaking and listening). This is why print media, and not radio or television, are being studied. The latter are more ephemeral and harder to translate for Malay-language beginners, contrary to the permanence of written text. At UKM I not only studied the Malay language but also the cultural and historical foundations of that language. Albeit no longer the 'racy idiom of peasants' (King 1986, p.ix), the roots of the Malay language lie in the historical existence of the rural masses, spoken through performances of Malay culture like *pantun* (traditional Malay poems) and *peribahasa* (Malay proverbs/idioms) common to all members of the community. Spoken Malay was very colourful, informal and dialects varied from region to region, drawing from different historical experience. In contrast, standardised Malay is much younger than its counterpart. Standardised Malay was required for written communication, and was introduced in the late colonial period for a variety of reasons, including the need for Britain to centralise its administrative practices and begin to educate citizens under a modern curriculum. For the latter, a set of uniform principles were needed to teach the Malay language to the students. One difficult example was how to understand the use of affixes in verb formations (for in spoken Malay verbs were commonly used in stand-alone form). Writing in 1971, Omar observed that '[a] great majority of the native speakers of Malay have never been able to master the use of certain affixes' (p.78). This more modern strand of the language is 'used for all purposes – science as well as literature, economics as well as agriculture' (King 1986, p.ix). It is this strand which is found 'in newspapers, magazines, modern novels and short

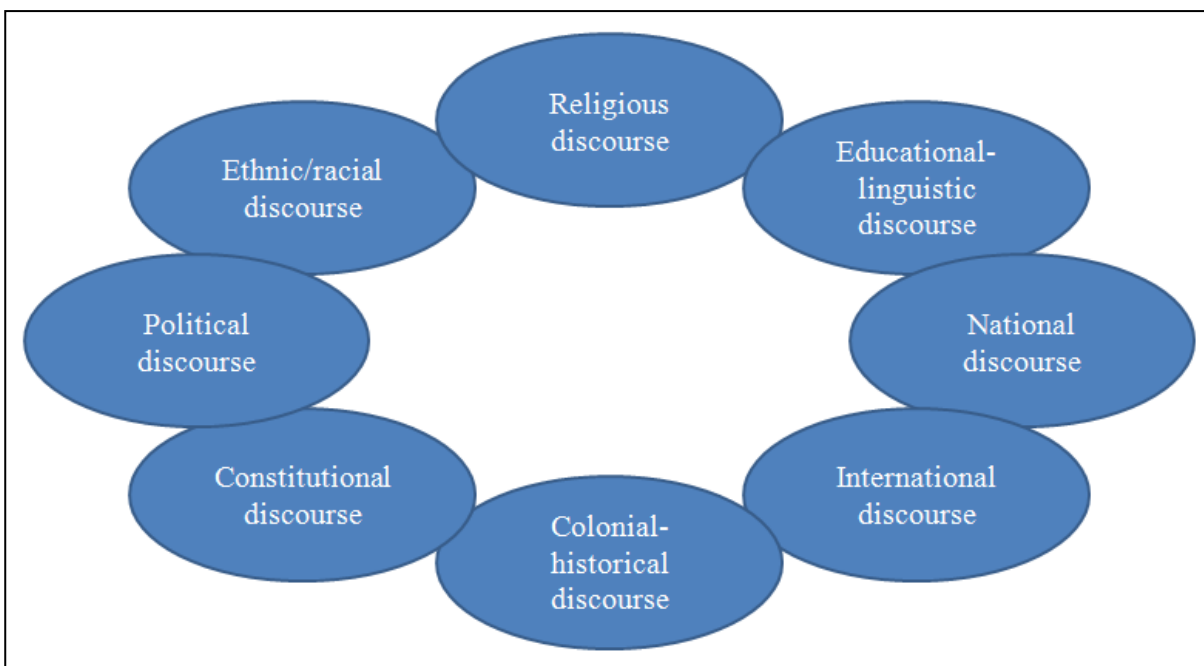
stories, government reports, and official and commercial correspondence of all kinds' (ibid, p.viii). Albeit more extensive, this form is easier to translate because of the specificity through which different affixes delineate different meanings. In contrast, informal, spoken varieties of Malay are more fluid, requiring a trained linguist to appreciate their cultural and linguistic significance.

Because of the party-political context of my research I sought to represent the government/opposition antagonism through the two media outlets most closely associated with those respective political standpoints. Although naturally a wide array of Malaysian media was available for analysis, my Malay language focus precluded the possibility of studying pro-establishment Mandarin or Tamil presses. *Utusan* is among the most notorious of the pro-establishment papers, known for its unrelenting support of the administration, hence reflected the most suitable Malay-language media choice. Of all the potential opposition media outlets, *Malaysiakini* is the most famous and most oppositional; as explained in Chapter 3 its genealogy lies in the oppositional reform movement which emerged in 1998. My experiences of university culture strongly influenced this decision to conduct a comparative study of pro-government and opposition media. Established in 1970, UKM was born from resurgent nationalist ambitions to preserve the Malay language that peaked after the Malay-Chinese riots. UKM instructs in Malay and is one of five research universities in the country. *Utusan* and UKM are thus (loosely) connected through their pro-government position and championing of language nationalism. In contrast, most of my friends on campus supported different opposition parties. My experiences of this young and politicised student cohort, at university just one hour's drive from the capital Kuala Lumpur, connected with *Malaysiakini*'s politicised, urban and more youthful readership. From a practical aspect, the accessibility of the online *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* archives (searchable by date and/or keyword) for westerners also influenced their selection. Notably, *Malaysiakini*'s archive only starts from May 2001, and having contacted *Malaysiakini* staff I was informed that a server fire had destroyed older files. Subsequently I could not analyse media articles from the 1999 election, where *Malaysiakini* made its first and indelible impact.

### ***The benefits of theoretical sampling***

Given my ethnographic experiences of living and studying in Malaysia, I adopted a theoretical sampling approach, which is appropriate for someone with prior knowledge of their case study. In theoretical sampling the researcher is central to the sampling process, using prior field experience to inform data collection (Martela 2011, p.1). Theoretical

sampling also provided an effective means of analysing articles with inherent connections to my theoretical and methodological commitments. For my sampling method I adapted the approach outlined by Altheide and Schneider (1996). This was a gradual process, initiating with some extensive reading of *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* articles from each election. The time-frame chosen for this reading was from the date Malaysia's parliament was dissolved until two weeks after the election had finished. From this preliminary reading, recurring discourses were identified and expanded into broader discursive categories (Figure 5) within which discussion of certain topics fell. The content of these categories was constantly refined according to the emerging understanding of the case study, and Table 2 shows the final outcome.



**Figure 5:** Discourses in the Malaysian media

Using this table as a framework, a list of keywords was developed to guide data collection (see Altheide and Schneider 1996), enabling me to collect articles based on their topical relevance to those discourses (incorporating news reports, opinion pieces and letters to the editor). After this broad data set was collected, it was refined through constant comparisons between different articles. Throughout this process, attention was drawn to key electoral events and central media commentaries, and spotlighting these contributed to a progressively selective focus on relevant people, groups and parties defining each election. In the final sample, each article emphasised aspects or themes of Malaysia's racialised discourse that were important to answering the research questions. Articles were also purposively selected based on their title, for instance in the 2013 election the *Utusan* article '*Apa lagi Cina mahu?*'

(What more do the Chinese want?) had clear connotations concerning the problematic Malay/Chinese relationship and could not be ignored within the research remit. 150 articles were sampled overall (50 for each election, 25 for each media outlet).

	Ethnic/racial discourse	Religious discourse	Educational-linguistic discourse	National discourse	International discourse	Colonial-historical discourse	Constitutional discourse	Political discourse
<b>Topic:</b>	<i>Bangsa Melayu</i> /'the Malays'	Malay-Muslim identity	<i>Bahasa</i> 'mother tongue'	National security	Malaysia as part of ASEAN	Pluralism and plural society	The constitution and articles within	Elitism
	<i>Ketuanan Melayu</i> /Malay supremacy	The Muslim world	Vernacular languages and schools	National unity	Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries	Colonial experiences	The social contract and citizenship	Conservatism
	<i>Bumiputera</i> /non- <i>Bumiputera</i>	Hudud and syariah law	Chinese education	Sabah and Sarawak	Malaysia in relation to other Muslim states	Feudalism		Communism and socialism
	Non-Malays/minorities	Malaysia as an Islamic State		Malaysian/ <i>orang Malaysia</i>		'May 13' and other historical events	Class	
	Native and indigenous populations	Apostasy and conversion		Immigrant/ <i>pendatang</i>				
Non-Muslims								
	Secularism							

**Table 2:** Media topics of discussion according to discursive category

Having obtained those samples, NVivo was used to code the media articles. This entailed reading each article and coding different sections of those articles against the aforementioned discursive categories and media topics. Consider, for example, this sentence taken from the article 'An open letter to non-Malays', written by former PKR Secretary-General, Salehuddin Hashim after the 2004 election:

It is part of the process of philosophical reassessment that we need to go through in order for us to look to the future with dignity and earn the mutual respect of fellow Malaysians.

Hashim was discussing the importance of Malay introspection, and so the sentence was coded to *Bangsa Melayu*/'The Malays'. However, the statement's broader context related to the question of hudud law in Malaysia, and so was also coded to Hudud and syariah law. Moreover, 'earn the mutual respect of fellow Malaysians' was coded to Non-Malays/minorities. Albeit not as labour-intensive as quantitative coding, this process nonetheless achieved its central objective, to form links between different articles, thus providing the platform for successive stages of discursive analysis.

In theoretical sampling, the sampling and analysis stages are not discreet processes but inherently interconnected throughout the research; a fluid, iterative, highly reflexive process,

involving constant comparison between concepts, data and analysis (Wodak 2004, p.200). In this method, the researcher moves back and forth between their 'preunderstanding' of subject matter, various theoretical perspectives and the data itself, to provide 'the best possible yet *fallible* explanation' for the data (Martela 2011, p.1, my emphasis). This preunderstanding – 'our concepts, beliefs and theories' – is in interplay with the data at all times, and it is important not to deny our experience but to embrace it and help it to mould the analytical process (ibid, p.12). Consequently, data is never raw but interpreted from the outset (ibid, p.9). Bucholtz (2001, p.168) concedes that CDA too often

...yields findings that can always be predicted in advance, once the basic power relations have been sketched out. It is too rarely surprising, too rarely sensitive to subtlety, complexity, or contradiction.

But it is because of this 'predictability' that we must unpack these representations. Moreover, the idea that CDA merely affirms the relationship between language and power in society, neglects the novelty and creativity of the researcher's interpretation of the data (albeit one consistent with their broader understanding of the research context) (Martela 2011, p.7). As Milner (1995, p.5) states, '[i]nterrogating texts...can thus give greater scope, greater free play, to the expression of autonomous perspectives.' Overall I sought to recreate the past through constructing media narratives that evoked the unique political atmosphere of those elections. I have also relied heavily on direct quotes, which lets the text, and not me, do the talking. Nevertheless, Wicks and Freeman (1998) note the need 'to engage in discussion about which purposes are advanced and why' (in Martela 2011, p.5). The researcher's own worldview and value judgments influence their choices concerning what is relevant to the research design: 'what to include and exclude in the scope of our fieldwork, analysis and writing' (Bucholtz 2001, p.166).

#### **4.5 Ambiguities and Power in Translation**

Discussing the complexities of translation, Baker (2011, p.15) notes the process itself depends on, inter alia, the relationship between source language and target language, the translator's understanding, background knowledge and prejudices. This section discusses my translation of the Malay-language texts with reference to general ambiguities in translation, and then to more ethical dimensions caught up in the cross-cultural translating process. Baker's (2011) text drives this discussion, but reference is also made to other relevant scholars, including Spivak (1993).

Baker (2011, p.107) notes the importance of understanding how the text's meaning is determined by that language's grammar structure. In Malay, aside from the lack of formal tense structure, the meaning of many words depends on the sentence's context, hence the translator's burden of choosing the most appropriate word. Baker's text is widely recognised as an essential guide for novice translators, and it proved a useful point of reference for my own translations. Only after reading this text, I realised that certain struggles I faced were common problems for all translators, for example:

- when experiencing 'culture-specific concepts...[that] may relate to a religious belief, a social custom or even a type of food' (p.18);
- when the source language concept is 'not lexicalized in the target language', that is, when it is not 'allocated' a target-language word (ibid) – examples were '*para*', '*pula*' and '*wahai*';
- when the source language word is 'semantically complex', i.e. conveys a broader idea in the target language (p.19);
- when a general word is used to overcome a relative lack of specificity in the target language (p.25) – as two examples, the verb '*memperkudakan*' (to treat someone or something like a horse) was interpreted as 'to exploit', and the verb '*mendaulatkan*' (to endow someone or something with supernatural power, based on the culture-specific '*daulat*' concept discussed in Chapter 2) was interpreted as 'to empower'.

Below are listed various other examples that emerged throughout the analysis process, whose correct translation required careful treatment and sensitivity to the statement's context:

- '*Lah*' – ubiquitous in the Malay language, and has no direct translation but can be used in many contexts, from softening the tone of a sentence to emphasising certain statements, and it was important to determine the meaning of '*lah*' in the English translation.
- '*Dia/ia*' – '*dia*' is primarily the pronoun for male and female, but can also translate as 'it' or 'they'. Sometimes it appeared as '*ia*', the literary form for '*dia*'.
- '*Pun*' – also ubiquitous, this word has as many as seven different uses in Malay and it was important to determine its use correctly each time.
- '*Bangsa*' – this word actually translates as 'race' or 'nation'. Sensitivity to the sentence's context, in terms of the political environment at that time, was essential to the correct translation.

Elsewhere, Baker covers the difficulties of recognising, interpreting and translating idioms (p.68). If changed in any distinct way, these phrases would lose their meaning. Mastery over idiomatic expression, she notes, is the exclusive right of the native speaker. Given that translating idioms ‘demands that the translator be not only accurate but highly sensitive to the rhetorical nuances of the language’ (Fernando and Flavell 1981, in Baker 2011, p.75), fortunately they were uncommon in the media articles – though there were times when I had to make judgments, for instance translating ‘*warna kulit sebenar*’ (true skin colour) into the more commonly understood English idiom of ‘true colours’. Noting the tension between accuracy and naturalness, Baker argues that translators can deviate – at times, significantly – when that deviation is not centrally relevant to the given context (p.60). Nevertheless, it is important to be sensitive to the specificity of the language being translated, showing sufficient care towards ‘the rhetoricity of the original’ (Spivak 1993, p.181). Perhaps as an ‘intermediate’ reader of Malay, I prefer to endorse Baker’s view that the translator’s primary concern is with ‘communicating the *overall meaning* of a stretch of language’ (2011, p.9, my emphasis).

Baker observes the importance of reflecting on the what, how and why of translation; what we do, how we do it and why we choose that way (ibid, p.1). It is paramount to acknowledge the impossibility of a ‘complete’ translation (however much I am reluctant to employ this term), given the different histories, contexts and global trajectories of the Malay and English languages. The act of translation is caught up in a twofold politics of ‘morality’; of morality to the text and of morality to the author – remaining faithful to the author’s intent and meaning (Pramoedya 1982). Occasionally, these two commitments can clash with one another. I noted above how I sought to divorce the analytical process from political judgment – at least, as much as possible. Discussing translation as a professional practice, Baker and Maier (2011, p.2) note certain ‘ethical issues’ have arisen and garnered interest, relating to positionality and moral values. In any language, producing a neutral translation of the source text is not possible. Spivak observes

...that the politics of translation takes on a massive life of its own if you see language as the process of meaning-construction. (1993, p.179)

For Spivak, acknowledging the limits of translation is essential, and she warns of ‘the impossibility of translation in the general sense’ (p.196). She talks of the need to ‘surrender to the text’ and ‘solicit the text to show the limits of its language’ (p.183). Hence, it is important not to be too rigid in this process, but to allow the text to reveal its meaning to the translator.



Spivak warns of ‘the old colonial attitude’ tied up in the act of translation, explaining how she attempts to overcome this by privileging the subject’s voice:

At first I translate at speed. If I stop to think about what is happening to the English, if I assume an audience, if I take the intending subject as more than a springboard, I cannot jump in, I cannot surrender. (p.189)

Similarly, Max Lane, in his translation of the Indonesian novel by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind), in his translator’s note writes:

I have tried to avoid totally surrendering the translation of the text to the sovereignty that is sometimes given to the translator’s language. (1982, p.12)

Albeit an invaluable opportunity, my six months at UKM were insufficient to gain a full appreciation of the cultural roots, history and significance of certain particularities of the language. Studying Malay is a constant process, and to use a worn-out cliché, those six months were only the beginning. Since then I have striven to expand my knowledge of the language’s form and function. Nevertheless, to the native speaker perhaps the Malay language’s intricacies, its elegance and beauty, will have been compromised in my own translations. Translation broadly conforms to the analytical process discussed above; constantly revisited, revised and altered according to the researcher’s understanding of the context of those media articles.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a thorough outline of my method, including my theoretical commitments, chosen procedure, sampling process and other epistemological considerations concerning my cross-cultural research context (and fieldwork experience). CDA is a valuable tool for analysing the Malaysian media, to elucidate the discursive representations at work in those texts. It is a theory in itself, which has framed my broader approach to writing this thesis. The method is thus not a discreet stage in this research, but inherently connected to, and incorporates within, other stages of the research, including prior historical-contextual work. Accordingly, previous chapters have deliberately positioned the reader’s understanding of the central tenets of Malaysian political discourse, including its antecedents in the colonial era, evolution throughout the postcolonial period and its relation to the media landscape. CDA is well-equipped to interrogate the media/society relationship in Malaysia, exploring how the relationship between language, power and racialised ideology manifests through the media’s application of ethnoreligious discourses; examining how media both reflect and reproduce those unequal power relations; and appreciating the historical relations that underlie this

process. CDA's sensitivity to the societal contradictions inscribed in texts offers a means of elucidating the fragmentation of these ethnoreligious discourses. More specifically, I have outlined my bespoke methodological approach (drawing from Fairclough (1995)), which enables the examination of textual, discursive and social practices according to the specific contexts necessitated by my cross-lingual research focus. This is an effective framework for analysing media texts within the context of racialisation and racial politics in Malaysia. Moreover, this application of CDA has been considered in terms of its non-western focus, making useful reference to my firsthand experiences of Malaysian society and cultural life. These experiences were used to drive the theoretical sampling process, to forge a sophisticated framework connecting the research data to my own knowledge and understanding. Finally, through this chapter I hope to have exposed myself to the reader, particularly the limits of my knowledge and of my translations, both implicated in political judgments and driven by a lingering sense of 'the old colonial attitude' (Spivak 1993, p.189). The next three chapters provide the central empirical content of this study, applying a CDA perspective to the 2004, 2008 and 2013 elections – starting with 2004, where the political environment had shifted significantly since the *Reformasi* movement at the end of the twentieth century.

## Chapter 5: 2004's 'Blue Wave' and the Islamic State Question

Hadi is not relevant at all to the 21st century...he does not seem to understand that he is not living in the Middle East.

(Lim Kit Siang commenting on PAS leader Abdul Hadi Awang, *Malaysiakini*, 14 March 2004)

### Introduction

This chapter demonstrates how key writers from *Utusan Malaysia* and *Malaysiakini* reworked broader Orientalist discourses around Islam and 'stuck' them to PAS. It does so by examining a media discourse that separated the 'Malay-Muslim' from its Islamised 'Other', influenced by the post-9/11 geopolitical context. The Malay-Muslim discourse was structured and racialised by and through the use of three discursive 'binaries' that split Malay-Muslim identity along several axes: moderation vs. fundamentalism, modernity vs. antiquity and morality vs. sin. These binaries were operationalised by both media outlets:

- *Moderation vs. fundamentalism* – This first binary illustrates how these *Malaysiakini* and *Utusan* writers distinguished on the one hand between government articulations of moderate Islam and on the other, a specific imagining of Islamic fundamentalism representing PAS' agenda. BN's victory was constructed as the victory of moderate Islam over fundamentalism (as advocated by PAS 'radicals').
- *Modernity vs. antiquity* – The chapter reveals how both media dichotomised the 'modern, progressive' BN against an imagining of PAS leaders that positioned them outside of history: as timeless antiques irrelevant to Malaysia's fast-paced modernity. Within this representation PAS was also the root of poverty and deprivation that had left citizens in the states it ruled behind 'the rest'.
- *Morality vs. sin* – Finally, the chapter demonstrates how both media demonised PAS leaders as sinners who had deviated from the 'true' teachings of Islam, setting them against Badawi as a moral leader who set the right example for his people.

Through these binaries the 'Otherness' of PAS supporters was defined: Malays were shown how to be Muslims vis-à-vis the negative representations of PAS, whose quest for theocracy encroached upon Malay wellbeing and divided Malay unity. Consequently, PAS' Islam was positioned outside of, and as threatening to, Malayness. Throughout the election, negative media stereotypes of PAS were used, in Ang's terms, to 'fix' Malay behaviours (2001a, p.25), with perceptions of 'us' (moderate, modern and moral) formed and developed in reference to 'them' (fundamentalist, archaic and evil). The chapter illustrates how both media reinforced

those ‘three Ms’ throughout an unrelenting campaign that eroded PAS’ image and firmly located those values with BN. This exposed, in Gabriel’s (2011, p.363) words, ‘the splits and other-nesses lurking within the national and cultural self’.

Considering the diversity of electoral issues in 2004, this focus on anti-Islamist discourses has been chosen to elucidate the important link between Islamic and national identity that influenced these *Malaysiakini* writers’ positioning against PAS. It is important here to acknowledge that *Malaysiakini* offers a diverse platform for discussion, giving voice to a plurality of ideas which are often hotly contested. Nevertheless, to the casual observer, these *Malaysiakini* and *Utusan* writers were singing the same anti-Islamist tune, utilising negative images and discourses to represent PAS as a radical group antithetical to BN’s brand of moderate Islam. As the chapter explains, given *Malaysiakini*’s usual oppositional alignment, this was a crucial political ‘moment’ that resulted from a unique combination of factors (*Utusan*’s anti-opposition stance, *Malaysiakini*’s progressive readership and the crucial post-9/11 context) (see 5.2). It also suggested that these *Malaysiakini* intellectuals had struggled to detach themselves from hegemonic structures of meaning that defined the BN power order. These narratives nonetheless constituted a frenzied site of discursive activity, highlighting how dominant ideas were being legitimised and reinforced, but also contested and resisted. These elements tie into the conclusion, which explains how analysis of this media reveals the media’s situation in the political landscape and provides us with a nuanced understanding of the character and operation of racialised discourses and how they constitute a site of creative intellectual activity. Before proceeding to the central argument, we must ask how 2004’s political context impacted the election, and how it affected the media commentaries and broader strategies of both media outlets.

### **5.1 Political Context**

The events of September 11 and the subsequent War on Terror (WoT) were responsible for redrawing global boundaries that distinguished between the West and the Muslim world. As a Muslim-majority region, Southeast Asia was designated by the US as the ‘second front’ for the WoT (Hamid 2010, p.155). The region had come under intense scrutiny after Bali in Indonesia suffered from an Al-Qaeda-linked bombing on 12 October 2002 (Houben 2003, p.165). Given Malaysia’s reputation as a moderate Muslim country, America designated Malaysia an important ally in Southeast Asia (Hamid 2010, p.155). America’s post-9/11 ‘[o]bsession with the phenomenon of terrorism’ (ibid) brought Malaysia into global Islamic

struggles involving the West and liberal democracy on the one hand, and Asia and radical Islamism on the other.

Through decades of Islamisation Malaysia had positioned itself within a globalised Muslim network, and through US geopolitical labelling practices after 9/11 Malaysia was alleged as a 'breeding ground for Muslim radicals' sympathetic to Al-Qaeda and fundamentalist causes (Hamid 2010, p.154). Since 2001, America has encouraged Malaysia to closely monitor localised processes of Islamisation, which includes detaining suspected Islamic militants. One such group was the Mujahidin Group of Malaysia (KMM), whose leader was allegedly Nik Adli Nik Aziz, the son of PAS 'Spiritual Leader' Nik Aziz Nik Mat. Certain elements of PAS were purportedly sympathetic to KMM's political agenda, and the party's political stance was anti-US and pro-Taliban (ibid, p.159).

Malaysia's post-9/11 political environment provided the battleground on which the rivalry between Umno and PAS would play out. Just eighteen days after the 9/11 attacks, Mahathir raised controversy after he designated Malaysia an Islamic State on 29 September 2001. This manoeuvre represented an act of brinkmanship intended to outflank PAS, removing the space for it to make claims for an Islamist agenda. In this context, Malaysia already practised a form of state Islam which took into account, and was founded upon, the country's rich cultural and ethnoreligious diversity. In contrast, the Islamic State that PAS propagated was positioned by the BN as extreme and excessive (Hamid 2010, p.156); expelled beyond the limits of acceptable politics, culture and society in Malaysia.

BN rode the wave of global sentiment against militant Islam to position itself as 'the modern, secular alternative to Islamic fundamentalism' (Martinez 2002, p.135). Malaysia had recovered well since the 1997 financial crisis. As an important economic cog in Southeast Asia, Malaysia practised a self-proclaimed moderate and progressive variety of Islam that BN claimed was crucial to its economic performance. This brand of Islam was important for Malaysia's burgeoning middle class and to accommodate the sizeable non-Muslim Chinese and Indian groups. In contrast, PAS' Islamic State agenda threatened the livelihoods of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. BN highlighted PAS' 'KMM sympathies' and other rumours concerning the party and its leaders for political currency, reflecting what Houben (2003, p.166) calls 'overacting' as a result of exploiting 'simplified projections of a general Muslim extremist threat'.

Up until 2004, given this post-9/11 environment, discourses around PAS had persistently been politicised this way: BN demonised PAS as a militant organisation in a bid to win back

Malay-Muslim support after the 1999 fallout and keep the non-Muslims onside (Hamid 2010, p.154). How this was done distinguished 2004's election as unique, arresting strong reformist currents in Malaysia that emerged at the dusk of the twentieth century and instead painting BN as the choice of the Malaysian 'patriot'. This international context was effectively mobilised in a manner not dissimilar to the 1964 election, when Malaysians gathered behind the Alliance and the *Konfrontasi* threat. But what other factors were involved in this election?

### ***BN reforms, BA disintegrates***

After ruling for 22 years, in 2003 Mahathir had stepped down to make way for new Prime Minister Ahmad Badawi. This was widely seen as the end of an era, one which had ended on a rather sour note considering the financial crisis and the ensuing Anwar saga. It was important for Badawi to regain the support of the discontent Malaysian public. Contrary to Mahathir's reputation as a Malay ultra, Badawi positioned himself as a political moderate, preventing him from being perceived as a Mahathir 'yes-man'. Contrary to Mahathir, Badawi was not perceived to be adept as a political tactician; rather, coming from a civil servant background, Badawi lacked grassroots support and was 'a misfit in the rough and tumble of UMNO realpolitik' (Hamid 2010, p.165). However, Badawi's self-constructed persona as a political progressive certainly demonstrated political guile, and his promise to reform BN, which hijacked the themes of the *Reformasi*, effectively halted the momentum of that reform movement. Badawi introduced a nuanced and inclusive brand of Islam called '*Islam Hadhari*' (progressive Islam), which was purportedly moderate, emphasised development and protected the rights of non-Muslims in the country.

Going into the election, the optimism surrounding Badawi contrasted with perceptions of the opposition. Having suffered in 1999 due to its associations with PAS, and due to ideological tensions between both parties, DAP left the BA coalition in 2001 and positioned itself against its former ally. Fadzil Noor, leader of PAS and the broader opposition since 1989, considered a political moderate and close friend of Anwar's, passed away in June 2002 and gave way to the more socially conservative but politically radical Abdul Hadi Awang, who had little in common with Anwar's cause (Moten and Mokhtar 2006, p.338). It was then that the ulama wing in PAS ultimately prevailed over the moderates, undoing Fadzil Noor's work in aligning PAS' Islamist cause with the multiracial opposition (Liow 2005, p.917). Late in 2003, Hadi in his attempts to 'out-Islamise' Umno had released the 'Islamic State Document' which outlined their intentions, were they to come to power, to implement hudud law in Malaysia. This was deemed by various political commentators to be a misinterpretation of its 1999

success, for although PAS had become the dominant opposition party, this was likely a result of protest votes given by moderate Malays rallying against the government. Now 1999 had passed, many were expected to abandon such a hard-line political option. As a party with secular ambitions, DAP also had motive to drive non-Muslim antipathy against PAS to gain political support. DAP was vocal in its anti-PAS campaign, demonising its objectives as irrelevant to a multireligious, multiracial country like Malaysia and further as contravening the 1957 social contract (Moten and Mokhtar 2006, p.328).

### ***2004 and Malay hearts and minds***

In the 2004 elections the role and position of Islam in Malaysia, as much for Muslims as for non-Muslims, was centrally important. Because BN was facing a PAS-dominated opposition, Malay-Muslim voices were privileged on either side, with Islam the key discursive battleground; focus was on the battle between Umno and PAS for Malay hearts and minds in the country's heartlands (Liow 2005, p.916). Leading into the election, PAS emphasised the Islamic State Document and its quest to establish a theocratic state in Malaysia. Badawi in contrast emphasised *Islam Hadhari*, his brand of moderate and progressive Islam that he claimed was more suitable for Malaysian society and particularly the significant non-Muslim sections of society. Given this latter factor, how Badawi positioned BN's 'inclusive' brand of Islam vis-à-vis PAS was vitally important, drawing upon broad public antipathy towards Islamic 'fundamentalism' and saying to those groups that BN was the only choice for those who wanted to progress in this rapidly modernising economy.

In 2004 BN achieved its strongest victory since the coalition was reformed in 1974. This victory followed the same pattern since independence, but it was how BN dominated, winning 198 of 219 parliamentary seats, in what Malaysian media dubbed a 'blue wave' of support (referring to BN's party flag) which is of particular interest in this chapter. PAS lost 20 of the 27 seats it had won in 1999 and was wiped out in Terengganu and nearly in Kelantan, where it had ruled since 1990. PKR remained marginal, losing 4 of the 5 seats it had won in 1999. Umno in contrast won 109 seats. This pattern of voting revealed a great deal about the political aspirations of Malaysia's Muslims and the future of economic development that the middle class envisioned. 2004's election was framed as a struggle between two visions of Islam, and the election results were viewed as a success for moderate and progressive Islam within a meaningful multiracial coalition. Badawi had managed to turn BN's fortunes around after 1999, proving it was still relevant, which put him in a strong position to take Malaysia forward in the new century.

## 5.2 Introduction to the Media Commentaries

This chapter analyses 50 media articles from *Utusan Malaysia* and *Malaysiakini*.

*Malaysiakini* featured prominent and prolific journalists, like Agence France-Presse's (AFP) Eileen Ng and M Jegathesan, blogger Lee Ban Chen, renowned academic Farish Noor and various figures connected to PKR, including former press secretary to Selangor Chief Minister Abdul Khalid Ibrahim, Arfaeza Abdul Aziz, and former PKR Secretary-General, Salehuddin Hashim. Reader letters also featured, which contributed to the broader political debates in motion. *Utusan* remained more locally focused, relating to its Malay readership, featuring a host of front-page and special reports compiled by its editorial team, including a piece by senior editor Zulkiflee Bakar, and public figures Ustaz Dusuki Ahmad and Vice Chancellor of *Universiti Malaya*, Hashim Yaacob.

*Malaysiakini* sought to present this political spectacle to the world, and one article by AFP's M Jegathesan was entitled 'Poll reflects global Islamic struggle', in a way which located this local political contest on the global political stage<sup>33</sup>. For *Utusan* this global frame was also significant. Hamzah Sidek described Malaysia as 'a model Islamic country' (*negara Islam contoh*)<sup>34</sup>. Another article adopted similar rhetoric, quoting Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Abdul Hamid Zainal Abidin, that Malaysia 'has been recognised by the international Muslim community' (*telah diiktiraf oleh masyarakat Islam di peringkat antarabangsa*) and this 'cannot be disputed further' (*tidak boleh dipertikaikan lagi*)<sup>35</sup>. Political Islam certainly was the central feature of the election, and Badawi was quoted declaring that '[t]he single most important issue in the coming elections is the attitude of Muslims towards religion in government'<sup>36</sup>. This stance was generally mirrored in the media, though Lee Ban Chen postulated that non-Malay opposition to the Islamic State was one reason why it 'became the sole issue of the general elections' (*menjadi isu tunggal pilihanraya umum*)<sup>37</sup>. Overall, both media recognised Islam as the key campaign issue, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the important role of non-Muslim groups, insofar as they related to the government's and opposition's articulations of Islam. Nevertheless, the dominant links between Malay, Muslim and national identity meant that Islam had become the central focus of the state's political discourse (Hadiz and Khoo 2011, p.468).

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<sup>33</sup> 'Poll reflects global Islamic struggle', M Jegathesan, *Malaysiakini*, 09/03/2004

<sup>34</sup> 'Impian Hadi ubah imej serban Pas', Hamzah Sidek, *Utusan*, 15/03/2004

<sup>35</sup> 'Program pembangunan BN bertepatan negara Islam', *Utusan*, 20/03/2004

<sup>36</sup> 'Islam most important issue in elections: Abdullah', Eileen Ng, *Malaysiakini*, 17/03/2004

<sup>37</sup> 'Bulan dilanda gelombang biru', Lee Ban Chen, *Malaysiakini*, 25/03/2004



Both media outlets criticised PAS' political direction since 9/11. *Malaysiakini* writers highlighted how its recent actions had upset the delicate balance between Muslims and non-Muslims and alienated the more liberal, urban citizens. Given their Malay remit, *Utusan* writers focused more particularly on the battle between Umno and PAS, with specific reference to certain areas like Kelantan and Terengganu. Writers also invoked Quranic parables to gain the moral highground over PAS, delegitimising that party as a viable option for Muslims. Both media were aware of PAS' exploitation in the post-9/11 political environment. Farish Noor acknowledged PAS' wrong political manoeuvres since 9/11, concerning 'statements on women, the Taliban, Muslim-non-Muslim relations, etc', which had exposed PAS to anti-Islamist rhetoric<sup>38</sup>. These statements were the latest in 'a negative chain of equivalences' that had positioned PAS in the Malaysian landscape, among other things, as extreme, fanatic and intolerant<sup>39</sup>. Noor was a key intellectual involved in these debates, and he wrote three articles discussing the election result and what it meant for PAS – two which are discussed. *Utusan*'s Zulkiflee Bakar likewise noted 'seven controversial statements' (*tujuh kenyataan kontroversi*) Nik Aziz had issued since 9/11, which BN had exploited as a campaign strategy<sup>40</sup>. PAS' Islam represented a 'foreign demon' which could be exploited to divert attention from the noticeable problems and inequities under BN rule. Both media positioned PAS and its supporters as unfamiliar and strange, distant and threatening; detached from the 'normal' realm of Malaysian politics. These dichotomous discursive constructions, Noor observes, were the legacy of Malaysia's past, for since the 1980s PAS had been locked into the government's discourse that divides 'moderate progressives' from 'misguided fanatics'<sup>41</sup>. This reflected the reality that the meaning of the language, symbols and imagery associated with PAS had been predetermined through, but also reinforced, Malaysia's 'dominant cultural order' (Hall 2008, p.240).

Albeit usually oppositional in ideology and content – and noting that both media outlets are not homogeneous entities but defined by diversity and differences of opinion – in 2004 key *Malaysiakini* and *Utusan* writers effectively joined forces in an anti-Islamist agenda, utilising negative images and discourses to reinforce PAS as a radical group antithetical to BN's brand of moderate Islam. Such an alliance, or perhaps 'anti-Islamist moment', emerged through the specific post-9/11 geopolitical context – which BN had harnessed to connect PAS with an extremist 'threat'. This strategy represented neither a calculated move by both papers, nor a predetermined, pre-emptive 'strike' on the opposition. But it arguably contributed to BN's

<sup>38</sup> 'Part One: PAS second nadir', Farish A Noor, *Malaysiakini*, 25/03/2004

<sup>39</sup> 'Part Two: Umnos failed modernist Islamic project', Farish A Noor, *Malaysiakini*, 03/04/2004

<sup>40</sup> 'Mampukah Pas bertahan?', Zulkiflee Bakar, *Utusan*, 25/03/2004

<sup>41</sup> 'Part Two: Umnos failed modernist Islamic project', Farish A Noor, *Malaysiakini*, 03/04/2004

strong victory this time around. Opinions across both media outlets often coincided, and this will be shown throughout the chapter. The stance of these *Malaysiakini* writers was less due to the pressure to conform to a pro-government line than the need to connect with its ‘moderate’ target audience (an educated/urban readership aware of what was at stake). This nevertheless suggested that, although the *Reformasi* had opened up new critical spaces, these spaces were always conducive to the hegemonic order. That PAS was criticised due to *Malaysiakini* readers’ ‘moderate’ stance connected with *Utusan*’s anti-PAS agenda, which focused on constructing PAS as a divisive political force, both for Malays and Malaysia more broadly. The chapter will now discuss the first discursive binary, moderation vs. fundamentalism.

### 5.3 Moderation vs. Fundamentalism

Key to this first binary was how an Orientalised imagery of fundamentalist Islam was utilised to evoke the notion of ‘threat’ in relation to Islam. Writers effectively elucidated certain elements of Islamic culture, the most extreme, and utilised them to essentialise PAS’ fundamentalist vision. That is, Orientalist imagery of the threatening and demonised figure of the ‘Islamic terrorist’ was deliberately used to strike fear into the Malaysian electorate concerning PAS and its supporters. This imagery tapped into a history of Islamic conflict between the West and the Islamic world, drawing upon the tropes of Taliban, Afghanistan and Iran. ‘Taliban’, ‘Taliban-style’, ‘Taliban scenario’, ‘Talibanesque’, ‘Afghanistan’ and ‘Iranian Revolution’ were just some of the words used to relate to PAS, by politicians, journalists and readers. Such references externalised PAS as an element far-removed from Malaysian life, expelling something distinctively Malaysian into the realms of the foreign and unacceptable. For instance, employing an effective combination of these tropes, *Malaysiakini*’s Lawrence Bartlett noted PAS’ approach was akin to ‘Afghanistan’s ousted Taliban fundamentalists’<sup>42</sup>. These words drew deeply on a range of assumptions, understandings and fears as produced through a repertory of ‘anti-Islamist’ ideas, discourses, images and ‘truths’ about these places that extended over centuries of western imaginings of ‘Islam’ and ‘the Orient’. But they were particularly powerful in the post-9/11 era, influencing the symbolic meaning inscribed in this article and others like it. Within this broad civilisational narrative of East meets West, BN was positioned as a ‘western’ actor that was battling PAS’ ‘foreign’ form of Islam that drew from those other countries and was therefore ‘radical’, ‘extreme’ and/or ‘fundamentalist’. Such comparisons made the right choice seem obvious: naturally Malays would not risk their livelihood under such leadership. It was clear how these journalists manipulated global anti-

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<sup>42</sup> ‘Islam the key issue in general election’, Lawrence Bartlett, *Malaysiakini*, 04/03/2004

Islamist sentiment against PAS. By tapping into discourses around 9/11, and drawing upon the repertoire of historic images connected to PAS, they were able to harness the fears of the electorate around radical Islam and project those elements onto the opposition. Although this cannot be proved, that *Malaysiakini* was initially funded by a US corporation (McDaniel 2002, p.174) is one possible reason why *Malaysiakini* editors legitimised this viewpoint. Regardless, evidently they sought to create a liberal readership that connected with a ‘western’ stance on politics and democracy.

Generally speaking, liberal media across the world, particularly in the West, negatively represent the Taliban government, which apart from its anti-western ideology is newsworthy for its practices of ‘amputation’ and ‘stoning of women’. These writers knowingly made the connection between PAS and that regime. One news article almost did so word-for-word, declaring that PAS wanted to transform Malaysia ‘into a theocratic state complete with Taliban-style Shariah laws including amputation and stoning to death’<sup>43</sup>. It was thus not out of place for Eileen Ng to open her article with the following sentence:

A rural Malay heartland ruled by Islamic fundamentalists has become a crucial battlefield in forthcoming elections which will shape Malaysian politics.<sup>44</sup>

This simple sentence reflected the tension between Ng’s perception of the more ‘Islamic’ Malays in the northern states and *Malaysiakini*’s ambition for a moderate national vision. Those words, ‘Islamic fundamentalists’, acted to discredit the entire PAS project and what it stood for. Albeit with *Malaysiakini*, Ng seemed to align with the racial order and as a Malaysian Chinese citizen was uninterested in giving PAS a voice. In her writing, any challenge towards BN hegemony was absent. *Malaysiakini* writers often explicitly used phrases that located PAS and its supporters beyond the realms of Malaysia’s moderate politics. Take for instance this sentence describing a PAS rally, written by AFP’s M Jegathesan:

“If Spanish voters can change their government, why can't we? God willing we will form the next government,” PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang told cheering supporters, who punched their fists into the air and cried “Allahu Akbar” (God is greatest).<sup>45</sup>

It was interesting that both Ng and Jegathesan worked for AFP. As one of the largest and most well-known press agencies, AFP represented an institution which was helping to ‘sustain hegemony through the reification of dominant interests and social meaning’ (Hilley

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<sup>43</sup> ‘PAS challenges PM to state stand on hudud’, *Malaysiakini*, 09/03/2004

<sup>44</sup> ‘For Pak Lah, Terengganu is the main battleground’, Eileen Ng, *Malaysiakini*, 07/03/2004

<sup>45</sup> ‘Hadi urges M’sians to copy Spanish voters’, M Jegathesan, *Malaysiakini*, 16/03/2004

2001, p.11). Although this cannot be proven, the phrasing in these articles perhaps reflected their subtle editing in a way that promoted western democratic ideals, with which *Malaysiakini* staff had aligned, ‘creat[ing] a *shared understanding* of policy ideas, social development and cultural values’ (ibid, original emphasis). More broadly this suggests how what these journalists ‘have to say comes out of particular histories and cultures and that everyone speaks from positions within the global distribution of power’ (Hall 1989, in Ang 2001a, p.36). It shows how perceptions of PAS’ brand of Islamist politics were being shaped by external Orientalising forces. Said (1998) has spoken about the power of such Orientalist imagery, for instance the Iranian Revolution was represented in western media by black banners, fist punching and delirious shouting; images of negative and evil animation that position Islam as a frightening, mysterious and threatening faith. These images allowed for little distinction between piety and violence. Elsewhere, Ng made connections between PAS and militant religious schools in rural Malaysia, through Nik Aziz’s son, drawing upon the accusations discussed in the introduction<sup>46</sup>. These schools she notes were accused of being ‘ideological centres’ for PAS. Naturally, she was just reporting the news but by doing so she was implicated in BN’s stratagem of politics and political discourses. This was recognised by PAS leaders, who vehemently denied those accusations and were quoted admitting that ‘the government’s real fear is that they breed supporters’ for PAS<sup>47</sup>.

Connections with Iran were more multifaceted, involving PAS and Umno. They were driven by Salehuddin Hashim, a prominent PKR politician. Hashim was an important critical intellectual who was attempting to resist the organic racial order in Malaysia. Although his article naturally championed PKR and Anwar Ibrahim, such articles were rare (in contrast to pro-BN articles) perhaps because of Anwar’s incarceration and PKR’s limited relevance relative to PAS in this election. But Hashim’s views are important, for he made interesting comparisons between the ideological differences between Umno and PAS, and the political situation in Iran during and after the reign of the Shah:

In Egypt, Turkey, Morocco and Indonesia, among many other Muslim-majority countries where the percentages of Muslim population are far greater than in Malaysia, theocracy remains on the

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<sup>46</sup> ‘Religious schools in spotlight over militancy’, Eileen Ng, *Malaysiakini*, 17/03/2004

<sup>47</sup> These values resonated with *Malaysiakini*’s readers: Tai Lo Chin expressed their relief that ‘Malaysia is not, at the moment, thank God, going the way of the Taliban’ (‘A victory for all Malaysians’, *Malaysiakini*, 22/03/2004); ‘MA’ described PAS leaders as ‘ultra-conservative’ and ‘literalist’, privileging a system that excluded women ‘from the governance of the country’ (‘Choose either a corrupt regime or a dangerous regime’, *Malaysiakini*, 18/03/2004); for ‘Disappointed’, PAS ‘keep women in the homes and rule this as the only permissible role of ladies in society’ (‘Islam is the greatest social religion’, *Malaysiakini*, 14/03/2004). Hence, *Malaysiakini* like *Utusan* provided a central means by which dominant ideas – negative, *a priori* assumptions surrounding PAS – were transmitted to the citizenry (Richardson 2007, p.36).

backburner. Iran is one, but by default - excesses and brutality of the Shah era had compelled them to resort to a convenient escape route that many Iranians are already regretting.<sup>48</sup>

Hashim thus positioned Malaysia within a broader Islamic context, drawing upon Iran as a negative example of where Malaysia's future could lie. This was a shrewd move because it was the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that inspired PAS' theocratic shift. Although the contexts of both countries were vastly different, fragments of Iran's past could be applied to Malaysia's current political environment and used against PAS. In 1979, the Shah was ousted and an Islamic republic installed in place of Iran's old monarchy. By aligning PAS with the Iranian regime Hashim immediately invited the reader to imagine scenes of excess which typified the Iranian representations. He aligned Umno ideology with the excesses of the Shah, who as a western ally had perhaps forgotten the meaning of Islam for his people. Umno politicians too had forgotten this meaning, which for Hashim had caused the reversal of Malay support in 1999. He asked fellow Malaysians 'to stop Umno-bred diseases before despondency tempt us to look for unthinkable alternatives' (*sic*). PAS was thus the symptom of an 'Umno-bred disease' born from the excesses of rampant capitalism, particularly under the Mahathir era.

This disease metaphor is interesting because the communist threat was also described as such. Hence, 'disease' was not only something that worked in 2004, but summoned up older disorders in the polity and aligned them. But did 'disease' embody corruption, racism, materialism, authoritarianism? Islamist politics could have resulted from any or all of these things. Hashim was plugging into the ideas discussed at the chapter's outset; that PAS' support was not due to the increasing piety of Malays, thus that there was limited basis to the politics sanctioned by PAS. Hashim was interested in offering neither PAS, nor its struggle for a new Islamic identity, a voice. Instead he focused attention on Umno and its ideology – the focus of the *real* Malay struggle. In this we could detect traces of the counter-hegemonic forces that had emerged in 1999, where Umno's ideology had become a site of struggle for the Malay middle class. Indeed, his ideas pointed to a central tension for *Malaysiakini* readers: despite representing a better option than the PAS-led opposition, the new-look BN under Badawi was still encumbered by the same issues that defined Mahathir's administration. These ideas were reflected in MA's letter, which noted that despite PAS' rejection by 'the moderate Muslim majority', 'Umno will have to clean up themselves before the next election'<sup>49</sup>. Such an assumption, that all Malays were moderate, likely subtly reinforced audience behaviours: 'true' Malays appreciated the complexity of the situation, and

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<sup>48</sup> 'An open letter to non-Malays', Dato' Salehuddin Hashim, *Malaysiakini*, 12/03/2004

<sup>49</sup> 'Choose either a corrupt regime or a dangerous regime', MA, *Malaysiakini*, 18/03/2004

the need to construct a progressive and inclusionary Islamic model; in contrast, the PAS minority were ‘radicals’ – fierce, fiery and foolish citizens. Simultaneously, this revealed the fragmentation inherent in this essentialist discourse: the idea of ‘moderation’ was a myth, for arguably Umno’s administration is very narrow and marginalises specific groups. This reflects the precariousness and pedagogic instability of that state-controlled discourse (Gabriel 2011, p.349). Nevertheless, through tight state control over political speech and dissent, Malaysians had come to internalise that discourse. The point of interest here concerns not only the need for writers and readers to deny PAS’ authority but to construct it as a negative outcome of Umno’s regime. This exposed where they believed Malay-Muslim identity should remain: within the constitutional strictures of religion, language and custom.

Set against ‘extreme’ representations of PAS, both media outlets highlighted *Islam Hadhari* in order to position Badawi’s brand of Islam as the moderate brand. Certain articles highlighted Badawi as a gentler, respected figure that could help citizens understand Islam’s role in Malaysia. Badawi’s personality certainly helped these representations, pitting a moderate and fair-hearted man battling a ‘puritanical’ opposition (the words of university professor P Ramasamy)<sup>50</sup>. The journalist who wrote this article was AFP’s M Jegathesan and at the end he highlighted Badawi’s pledge:

Abdullah said the government’s introduction of “Islam Hadhari” was centred on “how to become a good Muslim, the need to be honest and hardworking. We want the promotion of Islam in moderation with various races living together in harmony.”

Eileen Ng similarly emphasised BN’s pledge against fundamentalism:

The Barisan Nasional's manifesto pledges freedom of worship for all religions and “to fight all forms of racial intolerance, extremism and terrorism.”<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, Ustaz Dusuki Ahmad recognised that Badawi won because he ‘very much convinced the people who want to live in peace and comfort’ (*amat meyakinkan rakyat yang ingin hidup aman dan selesa*)<sup>52</sup>. As a religious scholar, Ahmad was an intellectual who existed ‘beyond the party’ (Hilley 2001, p.11); a traditional intellectual who had been won over by Umno’s ideology. Each of these seemingly innocent examples reveals the underlying ambivalence within the Malay-Muslim essentialism; implicit in the statement of what *we* (BN) offered was that *they* (PAS) offered something different, entirely (negative), reflecting the uneasy ambivalences underlying these fragmented discourses. Whilst on this topic, the

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<sup>50</sup> ‘Poll reflects global Islamic struggle’, M Jegathesan, *Malaysiakini*, 09/03/2004

<sup>51</sup> ‘Chinese support pivotal to Pak Lah’s success’, Eileen Ng, *Malaysiakini*, 16/03/2004

<sup>52</sup> ‘Allah tidak bersama dengan Pas’, Dusuki Ahmad, *Utusan*, 04/04/2004

word ‘*rakyat*’ (people) was a word commonly used in *Utusan* articles, to convey the idea of the ‘people against PAS’. ‘*Rakyat*’ is a catch-all, inclusive term used in political contexts to describe ‘the people’ as opposed to ‘the government’. Arguably, it is a term more commonly associated with the oppositional media, for instance to describe the *rakyat*’s grievances with the regime. Given organisations like *Gerakan*, the term also implies a leftist kind of solidarity. To align the *rakyat* with BN may thus be an attempt to position BN as the government of justice for the people; a clever strategy that proved the Badawi government was responsive and dynamic, encouraging solidarity against PAS ‘outsiders’.

The piety and moderation of Badawi’s approach was highlighted throughout the campaigns of both media outlets, though one particular incident stands out, which particularly *Utusan* writers exploited. Abdul Hadi Awang had alleged Badawi’s Islamic image was ‘unauthentic’ and used to conceal Umno’s more secular identity<sup>53</sup>. Referring to a parable in the Quran, Vice Chancellor of *Universiti Malaya* Hashim Yaacob criticised the ‘prejudiced’ (*berprasangka*) Hadi in comparison to the ‘forgiving’ (*pemaaf*) Badawi:

I’d like to remind us all about how God forbids the faithful to be prejudiced, find fault with others and speak ill of others. God envisions that people who do these things will be punished to eat the flesh of their dead relatives (surah al-Hujarat: 11)...Among the attributes of a true leader are being mature, rational, patient, unphased by trivial matters, forgiving and able to stand on their own strengths. The Prime Minister has all these qualities and I expect he has also forgiven those ill-intentioned words against him.

*Sukalah saya mengingatkan diri kita tentang bagaimana Allah melarang orang beriman daripada berprasangka, mencari-cari kesalahan orang lain dan mengata orang lain. Allah membayangkan bahawa orang yang melakukan perkara-perkara ini akan dihukum memakan daging saudaranya sendiri yang sudah mati (surah al-Hujarat: 11)...Antara sifat-sifat pemimpin sebenar ialah berada dalam keadaan matang, waras, sabar, tidak tercabar dengan perkara remeh, pemaaf dan mampu berdiri di atas kekuatan sendiri. Perdana Menteri mempunyai semua sifat ini dan saya jangka beliau juga telah memberi keampunan ke atas kata-kata yang berniat tidak baik terhadapnya itu.*<sup>54</sup>

Hashim Yaacob exemplified the alignment between academia and the government, and this is acknowledged by Shamsul, who notes that

...many of these scholars have become “backroom boys” to the various communal organizations and ethnic-based political parties...contribut[ing] towards the perpetuation of ethnic division in Malaysia. (1996, p.344)

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<sup>53</sup> ‘PAS chief says Pak Lahs Islamic image not authentic’, Arfaeza A Aziz, *Malaysiakini*, 06/03/2004

<sup>54</sup> ‘Kematangan Perdana Menteri -- Tidak emosional, tidak pula memulangkan paku buah keras’, Hashim Yaacob, *Utusan*, 14/03/2004

Whereas the division between Malay and Muslim identity derives from the nineteenth-century contest between *umat* (Islamic) and *bangsa* (Malay) communities (Milner 1995), Yaacob sought to delegitimise PAS through drawing upon universal Islamic teachings to claim that PAS did not qualify as part of the *umat* altogether. But this simultaneously revealed the slippage within the moderate/fundamentalist essentialist binary, for extreme Islamic views were also held by *Utusan* writers. Moreover, although teachings of Islamic jurisprudence existed in and of themselves (and could be called upon by either Umno or PAS to justify political action), in 2004 they were almost exclusively (and successfully) aligned with the Islamist opposition (amputation, stoning to death etc.).

Elsewhere, Hamzah Sidek declared PAS leaders

...are unable to comply with simple orders like not slandering, not being arrogant, not mocking, not being proud.

...yang tidak mampu mematuhi perintah yang mudah seperti tidak memfitnah, tidak takbur, tidak mencerca, tidak riak.<sup>55</sup>

He compared them to Badawi, who was a moderate, a pacifist, a man of the people:

Pak Lah did not respond to the attacks against him. Instead Pak Lah surrendered to the people to determine the truth. Indeed, ever more people realise the truth of Pak Lah.

*Tidak pula Pak Lah membalas serangan terhadap dirinya. Sebaliknya Pak Lah menyerahkan kepada rakyat untuk menentukan kebenaran. Memang semakin ramai rakyat menyedari kebenaran Pak Lah.*

This moderate/fundamentalist dichotomy was effective not only for constructing Malay behaviours but also for the non-Muslims, who were positioned particularly by *Utusan* writers as the oppressed 'Other' of PAS<sup>56</sup>. Chapter 2 discussed the dichotomy defining the Malay/Chinese relationship, but in 2004 the demonisation of the Chinese was located firmly with the opposition. For *Malaysiakini* writers, BN was a safe place: a 'refuge' of sorts<sup>57</sup>, where 'multiracial harmony' existed<sup>58</sup> and 'the basic framework of democracy' could be safeguarded<sup>59</sup>. *Utusan* exploited the Islamic State issue to construct the Chinese as vulnerable non-Muslims that required BN's protection against the PAS 'threat'. One article highlighted a

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<sup>55</sup> 'Impian Hadi ubah imej serban Pas', Hamzah Sidek, *Utusan*, 15/03/2004

<sup>56</sup> This was not helped by public statements produced by PAS leaders; *Utusan* quoted Nik Aziz admitting that he 'condemns people who do not like Islam and people who cannot accept the Quran and the hadith' (*kecam orang tak suka pada Islam dan orang tak boleh terima al-Quran dan hadis*) ('Doa 'kaburkan penglihatan' tak salah agama - Nik Aziz', *Utusan*, 18/03/2004).

<sup>57</sup> 'Part One: PAS second nadir', Farish A Noor, *Malaysiakini*, 25/03/2004

<sup>58</sup> 'For Pak Lah, Terengganu is the main battleground', Eileen Ng, *Malaysiakini*, 07/03/2004

<sup>59</sup> 'Malays confirm theyre moderates', Sri Arjuna Dewata, *Malaysiakini*, 24/03/2004



Chinese fishing community in Parit Buntar, a town in Perak currently governed by PAS, who were attracted by Umno candidate Abdul Hamid Zainal Abidin<sup>60</sup>. One community member was quoted remarking they had ‘made a mistake’ (*buat silap*) voting for PAS and wanted Abdul Hamid to win. Another remarked on the need to support a government that could ‘defend their children’s future’ (*membela masa depan anak-anak mereka*), by ‘helping all Chinese schools in the region’ (*tolong semua sekolah Cina di kawasan ini*), implying PAS had not done so.

The above statement naturally reflected Badawi’s own position on the issue, and in one article Badawi was quoted remarking:

(They) do not have to worry about what we do. But I do not know about (the actions of) another party.

*(Mereka) tak perlu bimbang dengan apa yang kami lakukan. Tapi tak tahulah tentang (tindakan) parti yang satu lagi.*<sup>61</sup>

True Malaysian Muslims were those who lived ‘in harmony with other races’ (*dalam suasana harmoni dengan kaum lain*), he said. Likewise, in an interview with Umno candidate Che Min Che Ahmad, who had spent her career working in the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM), Che Min highlighted ‘communities which are now neglected by Pas’ (*kemasyarakatan yang kini diabaikan oleh Pas*)<sup>62</sup>. The repetition of implicit remarks like these throughout the election campaign reinforced the viewpoint that PAS were out of touch with Malaysia’s principles of multiracial ‘harmony’.

These examples are interesting, for they locate the Chinese within the subordinate and impotent identity discussed in Chapter 2. The 2004 election was thus one where Chinese would be ‘protected’, significantly, from the external PAS ‘threat’. It reflects how these essentialised Malay and Chinese identities not only can co-evolve but can also split, with certain aspects of each being applied to different political elements (the ‘docile’ Chinese being protected by ‘big brother’ Umno, with PAS ‘extremists’ this time demonising that group). But they also show how *Utusan* writers ‘got in line’, so to speak, with BN’s objectives, not to alienate the Malaysian Chinese but to practise the moderation that Badawi preached. *Utusan* was a crucial ‘organ of public opinion’ in manufacturing this reality (Gramsci 1975, p.156).

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<sup>60</sup> ‘Kaum Cina mula terpicat keperibadian Abdul Hamid’, *Utusan*, 20/03/2004

<sup>61</sup> ‘Tiada pertembungan UMNO-Pas tegakkan agenda Islam’, *Utusan*, 09/03/2004

<sup>62</sup> ‘Isu dibangkit Pas kelirukan rakyat’, Nizam Yatim, *Utusan*, 17/03/2004

In certain *Utusan* articles, the impression of PAS exclusion was emphasised against the ‘inclusive’ BN through the voices of Chinese politicians. *Utusan* on behalf of Malays was giving voice to the Chinese, as promised by the multiracial BN and particularly under Badawi. Values of Malay/Chinese cooperation were highlighted through stories focusing on cooperation between Umno and the Malays, and MCA and *Gerakan* and the Chinese. (Of course historically, MCA represented the only politically acceptable organisation for the Chinese according to the British in colonial Malaya, because it understood the importance of cooperation and the limits of Chinese political power (Case 1995, p.87). It was these qualities of Chineseness that *Utusan* writers subtly sought to emphasise.) These key figures across BN represented a unified voice against PAS. One such article discussed the alienation of Chinese in PAS-governed Terengganu. It featured a quote from MCA Vice-President Fong Chan Onn on PAS’ attempts to woo Chinese voters:

All this is empty talk (promises) by PAS. Within the four years it (Pas) ruled, many laws were passed to prevent various cultural and charitable activities involving the interests of particularly the Chinese community.

*Ini semua cakap-cakap (janji) kosong Pas. Dalam tempoh empat tahun dia (Pas) memerintah, banyak peraturan yang diluluskan bagi menghalang pelbagai aktiviti kebudayaan dan kebajikan yang melibatkan kepentingan masyarakat Cina khususnya.*<sup>63</sup>

That article constructed PAS as a fraud that was ‘fishing for votes’ (*memancing undi*) and ‘deceiving’ (*mengabui mata*) non-Muslims into giving their support – actions the article noted were ‘desperate’ (*terdesak*). But, noted Umno Vice-President Muhammad Muhd Taib, those people knew this: ‘the Chinese community is well-versed in the trickery of Pas’ (*masyarakat Cina arif dengan tipu-helah Pas*). Another important Chinese figure, *Gerakan* President Lim Keng Yaik was reported saying:

The non-Malay community, especially the Chinese in Terengganu are not easily fooled and they know the government which can defend their fate and future.

*Masyarakat bukan Melayu terutama Cina di Terengganu tidak mudah di bodoh-bodohkan dan mereka tahu kerajaan mana yang boleh membela nasib dan masa depan mereka.*

Lim’s statement was implicit but this increased its power, as though such knowledge was presumed; BN did not even have to be named. Instead, it was highlighted as the logical choice through the rhetoric of inclusion and multiracial cooperation. In the Gramscian sense, the reality being conveyed through these discussions around Chinese behaviours was the product

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<sup>63</sup> ‘BN sifatkan Kerajaan Terengganu semakin terhimpit’, *Utusan*, 08/03/2004

of the understandings of those different powerful voices in Malaysian politics; *Utusan* was hegemonically enacting government power through BN's 'naturalising ideology', defined by 'common sense' ideas repeated by its politicians, for instance that BN was necessarily *protecting* the Chinese (Koller 2009, online).

Yusri Sahat's article focused on the 'cold reception' (*sambutan dingin*) that PAS and PKR politicians received from a Chinese community in Perlis, and it followed a near-identical pattern, scrutinising and criticising the relationship between PAS and the Chinese, and highlighting PAS' deception of that community (luring them with 'sweet promises' (*janji-jani manis*) they were unable to fulfil)<sup>64</sup>. Another article likewise criticised PAS for vacillating on its policy towards the sale of beer and pork to non-Muslims in Terengganu (based on recently published photos of Chinese men holding beer in Chinese-language newspaper *China Press*), featuring words from Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak that it was a method of manipulating the Chinese vote:

Their stance can change according to time and situation (meaning) they are never consistent, in fact they voice an opinion as if it were a fatwa but instead, it changes according to the situation.

*Pendirian mereka boleh berubah ikut masa dan situasi (bermakna) mereka tak pernah konsisten malah mereka mengeluarkan pendapat seolah-olah ia satu fatwa tetapi bukan, ia berubah ikut keadaan.*<sup>65</sup>

The author conveniently excluded the fact that the Malaysian government had also changed its policy toward the Chinese, applying examples of Syariah law to the sale of alcohol in certain regions since the 1980s (Haque 2003, p.250-251). This again reveals the co-production and co-evolution of the Chinese and Malay identities, with a subordinate Chinese identity aligned with and against the extreme and oppressive PAS Muslim identity. As Milner (1998) and others have acknowledged, the Malay category is dialectically related with racialised 'Others'. The same goes for the Chinese category, which is relational and externally defined through a Malay-led, state-controlled (in this case, media-controlled) discourse. Because BN won a powerful mandate, its position was secure and the Chinese were not viewed as a political threat, instead as benign and cooperative. Such representations starkly contrasted those in 2013, where the Chinese played a very different role, as did the Malays (see p.181).

The clothing of PAS leaders represented an interesting way in which these *Malaysiakini* and *Utusan* writers constructed the Islamist 'threat' to non-Muslims – who, Farish Noor

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<sup>64</sup> 'Pembangkok mainkan lagu lama di Perlis', Yusri Sahat, *Utusan*, 02/03/2004

<sup>65</sup> 'Pendirian Pas mengenai arak mengelirukan', *Utusan*, 21/03/2004

highlights, 'were frightened of the Taliban scenario being repeated'<sup>66</sup>. Hamzah Sidek spoke of PAS' image of 'turban and robe' (*serban dan jubah*) which scared non-Malays:

The image of turbans and voting PAS to enter heaven will not enable that party to rival UMNO which is accepted by all communities because of its approach which is fair in religious issues and dynamic in developing the country.

*Imej serban dan undi Pas masuk syurga tidak akan membolehkan parti itu menyaingi UMNO yang diterima oleh semua kaum kerana pendekatannya yang adil dalam soal agama dan dinamik dalam membangunkan negara.*<sup>67</sup>

A variation of this argument was made by Zin Mahmud, who argued that PAS had transitioned from being like Umno to something quite different from it<sup>68</sup>. One *Malaysiakini* report highlighted PAS' plans to impose a dress code in Kedah:

Islamic opposition party PAS will require Muslim women to wear headscarves and ban mini-skirts for non-Muslims if it wins a northern state in weekend elections, a report said today.<sup>69</sup>

Head of PAS women's wing in Kedah, Wan Tom Wan Mohamad Noor, was quoted stating that 'the dress code would help curb most social ills and crime, including rape and incest'. Such extreme words evoke imagery of the Taliban regime, which according to one Taliban representative rules that 'the face of a woman is a source of corruption for men who are not related to them' (Gohari 2000, p.108). Naturally, such representations also worked on the liberal *Malaysiakini* readership more generally, aiming to convince them that PAS rule would erode Malay tradition. This showed how these educated readers had become assimilated into the natural order, legitimising and reproducing the hegemonic images around PAS.

*Malaysiakini*'s Amin Iskandar declared:

PAS leaders are eager to display Islam's skin but not its contents. Let's look at the majority of PAS leaders, many are eager to grow beards and wear robes and turbans....Do they forget that the skullcap is Malay culture? In addition, many PAS leaders are fond of using Arabic words like "ana and anta" to replace "me and you" in everyday conversation.

*Para pemimpin PAS hanya ghairah untuk memperlihatkan kulit Islam tetapi tidak isinya. Cuba kita lihat majoriti pemimpin PAS, ramai yang ghairah untuk membela janggut dan memakai jubah serta serban....Apakah mereka terlupa bahawa songkok adalah budaya masyarakat Melayu?*

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<sup>66</sup> 'Part One: PAS second nadir', Farish A Noor, *Malaysiakini*, 25/03/2004

<sup>67</sup> 'Impian Hadi ubah imej serban Pas', Hamzah Sidek, *Utusan*, 15/03/2004

<sup>68</sup> 'Rakyat tolak fahaman Pas', Zin Mahmud, *Utusan*, 23/03/2004

<sup>69</sup> 'PAS to impose dress code if it wins Kedah: report', *Malaysiakini*, 18/03/2004

*Selain itu, ramai pemimpin PAS yang gemar menggunakan perkataan Arab seperti "ana dan anta" bagi menggantikan "saya dan awak" dalam perbualan seharian.<sup>70</sup>*

These elements he argued reflected PAS' attempt to 'ARABise' (*meng 'ARAB'kan*) the Malays. This statement was clever in demonstrating that PAS Muslims were *not* Malay-Muslims; they may have classified as a brand of Muslim, hence their fondness for Arabic words. But if so, they did not belong in Malaysia. Malaysian Muslims wore skullcaps (*songkoks*), and by refusing to do so they were influencing their own exclusion from the centre of Malay cultural life. In reality, the Malay language derives from Jawi which is an Arabic alphabet. But inherent in these fragmented essentialisms was the suppression of various histories; in this case, the Arabic culture underlying Malay culture which most likely pre-dated the *songkok*, which Yunus (2007, online) has argued, were first derived in the thirteenth century from Islamic traders!

Salehuddin Hashim's letter was, in his words, 'An open letter to non-Malays'<sup>71</sup>. In it he spoke directly with his audience: 'Let not the proliferation of headscarves and skullcaps scare you. These do not require deep Islamic jurisprudential thought to adopt.' There was a tone in his writing which suggested PAS was unsuitable for Malaysia; its ideals were irrational and impulsive, considering Malaysia's delicate multiracial and multireligious balance. For him, PAS' 'Turban' image represented a political performance, and non-Malays should recognise this. Hashim was effectively criticising the PAS traditional intellectuals, arguing that they were exploiting their connection with 'tradition' to detach themselves from Malaysia's social, cultural and political order.

Regardless of the extent to which this discussion was grounded in reality, these articles had done their work, spotlighting the non-Malays as a group negatively affected by PAS. In contrast, the media commonly emphasised *Islam Hadhari*'s suitability for a multicultural citizenry; a dominant idea that was transmitted. This reflected Badawi's ideals, because for him, *Islam Hadhari* was crucially a brand of Islam whose central features 'should also be owned by non-Muslims' (*patut dimiliki juga oleh bukan Islam*)<sup>72</sup>. Significantly, *Utusan* presented Badawi as the BN chairman and not the Umno leader. The multiracial BN and not Malaycentric Umno was the electoral vehicle. Badawi was constructed as a man of the

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<sup>70</sup> 'Rakyat tolak dasar Islam konservatif amalan PAS', Amin Iskandar, *Malaysiakini*, 30/03/2004

<sup>71</sup> 'An open letter to non-Malays', Dato' Salehuddin Hashim, *Malaysiakini*, 12/03/2004

<sup>72</sup> 'Tiada pertembungan UMNO-Pas tegakkan agenda Islam', *Utusan*, 09/03/2004

people, capable of ‘uniting every citizen’ (*menyatukan setiap rakyat*) because his government supported common aspirations<sup>73</sup>. He was quoted saying:

What we emphasise is that we support the people because the people support BN, and we know that the people’s support is in the form of the mandate they will give to us.

*Apa yang kami tekankan ialah kami menyokong rakyat kerana rakyat menyokong BN, dan kami sedar sokongan rakyat itu adalah dalam bentuk mandat yang mereka akan beri kepada kami.*

Such repetition of ‘*rakyat*’ did its work, emphasising that PAS supporters did not qualify as ‘the people’ because they supported a party outside of all that the people stood for. But these words also implied that citizens would be united within and across racial communities. This made *Islam Hadhari* appear less threatening to non-Muslims and more feasible as an apparently inclusive policy, vis-à-vis negative perceptions of PAS’ agenda. In this article Badawi was quoted declaring: ‘Good Muslims are peace-loving Muslims that create opportunities for all’ (*Islam yang baik ialah Islam cintakan keamanan dan mencipta peluang untuk semua*).

Given the extent of space dedicated to this first binary, it was arguably the most significant in 2004, working for *Utusan*’s dedicated Malay following, *Malaysiakini*’s liberal readership and, generally, non-Muslim groups. The post-9/11 environment had been effectively manipulated against PAS by both media, allowing them to externalise that party and position it outside of ‘all that is Malaysian’ about Malaysian Islam. Overall we see how key writers for both media institutions played a primary role in the construction and transmission of popular ideas that legitimised BN hegemony (Hilley 2001, p.117).

#### **5.4 Modernity vs. Antiquity**

It should be stressed that the three binaries through which the broader dichotomy was constructed were all interrelated. Accordingly, the Orientalist visions of Islamic fundamentalism positioned PAS as old-fashioned, out-of-touch with modern times. Because fundamentalism was oppositional to BN’s approach, by extension it was anti-modern. More distinctly, throughout the election campaign the media effectively used Orientalist imagery to compare modernity and development under BN against poverty and exclusion in PAS-ruled Kelantan and Terengganu. PAS was located outside of Malaysian history, an ideal ‘Other’ which the media could use to its advantage. Writers exploited the position of PAS leaders, who as traditional intellectuals bore no relation to the present but were tied to a pre-capitalist

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<sup>73</sup> ‘*Manifesto BN dilancar - Berteraskan masa depan cemerlang, gemilang, terbilang*’, *Utusan*, 15/03/2004

(thus un-Malaysian) era. This dimension was driven hard by certain *Utusan* writers, who were speaking out to the Malays in those states which BN believed had been neglected. The idea of a ‘modern and progressive Islam’, through *Islam Hadhari*, was BN’s official party line, incessantly repeated by Umno politicians and Badawi himself. These ideas heralded from the Mahathir era, where Mahathir sought to align developmentalism with Islamic identity (Liow 2011, p.381). This showed BN was dynamic and responsive in how it formulated Islamic policies, but also usefully contrasted PAS’ articulation of Islam which according to *Utusan* perceptions was stagnant and static. Similar to the modern/fundamentalist binary, separate groups of words were used to highlight the values of BN and PAS: BN was connected with ‘progress’ (*kemajuan*) and ‘development’ (*pembangunan*); PAS with ‘deprivation’ (*kekurangan*), the notion of being ‘left behind’ (*ketinggalan*), and ‘marginalised’ (*terpinggir*).

Kelantan played an important role in *Utusan*’s ‘anti-Islamist’ campaign, and various articles noted the importance of Umno’s struggle there. Ruled by PAS since 1990, Kelantan reflected Umno’s failure to be considered the first choice for Malays residing there. In one article, ‘Don’t let Kelantan continue to be left behind’ (*Jangan biarkan Kelantan terus ketinggalan*), editor Zulkiflee Bakar described the Kelantanese as ‘the only Muslim group which were left behind in all respects’ (*satu-satunya kelompok Islam yang ketinggalan dalam semua segi*)<sup>74</sup>. Bakar’s article contained key ideas surrounding the Muslims in Kelantan, resurrecting historical discourses of Muslim humiliation under colonialism. ‘*Ketinggalan*’ holds specific emotive power in the Malaysian imagination, reflecting how Malays were excluded from colonial development policies and thus struggled to compete with their non-Malay peers. It featured in Malay commentaries in the colonial and immediate post-independence era, for instance in Munshi Abdullah’s work, which portrayed certain races as “‘on the move’...and thus threatening’ (Milner 2008, p.110). Here, Bakar positioned PAS similar to how early nationalist groups viewed the colonial government: as the oppressor of Muslims, neglecting its duty to develop the ‘*ketinggalan*’ Malay-Muslims in Kelantan. BN in contrast was the people’s saviour, the Malays’ white knight, ‘appearing with sincerity, with the hope to change the fate of Kelantan’ (*muncul dengan ikhlas, muncul dengan harapan untuk mengubah nasib Kelantan*). Bakar’s calls to unite the *rakyat* suggested Kelantan had divided the Malaysian Muslims, keeping these ‘*ketinggalan*’ Muslims from achieving their Malaysian potential. Bakar emotionally appealed to the Kelantanese reader to consider ‘the fate of future generations’ (*nasib generasi akan datang*) that too may be left behind. Published the day before the election, this article represented an all-out effort to sway the Kelantanese voters to

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<sup>74</sup> ‘*Jangan biarkan Kelantan terus ketinggalan*’, Zulkiflee Bakar, *Utusan*, 20/03/2004

vote for BN. As part of *Utusan*'s editorial team, Bakar was part of the so-called 'intellectual community' discussed by Hilley (2001, p.11) in Chapter 3. This group were a central cog in the BN machinery, acting as gatekeepers to the dominant and common sense ideas propagated through the mass media. Bakar's writing encapsulated *Utusan*'s rhetoric concerning PAS, reflecting a broader campaign that was driven by *Utusan* against PAS in Kelantan.

This campaign located discourses of Islamic humiliation exclusively with the opposition, who were 'impostors' in BN-ruled Malaysia, tarnishing the dignity of Umno and the Malays. One special report noted the importance of Umno's recapture of Kelantan, according to Mahathir and Badawi:

Based on the situation, it's time with a heart sincere and full of humility for Kelantan UMNO leaders to fulfil the dream of both leaders not solely for the sake of BN politics, but for the dignity of UMNO in that state.

*Berdasarkan kepada keadaan itu, sudah tiba masanya dengan hati yang ikhlas dan penuh tawaduk pemimpin-pemimpin UMNO Kelantan memenuhi impian kedua-dua pemimpin bukan semata-mata demi untuk politik BN, tetapi demi maruah UMNO negeri tersebut.*<sup>75</sup>

Umno infighting had resulted in the return of Kelantan to PAS in 1990, thus jeopardising 'race, religion and country' (*bangsa, agama dan negara*). Another article declared similarly that 'recapturing the fortress lost to Pas' (*menawan semula kubu yang terlepas ke tangan Pas*) was an outcome upon which depended 'the dignity and future of UMNO' (*maruah dan masa depan UMNO*)<sup>76</sup>. These ideas were thus transplanting classic discourses of West/East colonial humiliation onto Malaysia's federal-state relations, with the citizens of PAS-ruled Kelantan humiliated in and excluded from the modern Malaysian nation; 'they cannot have access to it and to the benefits that flow from it' (Farmer 2011, p.16). After PAS narrowly avoided losing Kelantan in 2004, Umno Kelantan Liaison Chairman Mustapa Mohamed was quoted declaring:

We want to warn the Pas government this time that we will not be silent, all the people of Kelantan have risen to change the state government.

*Kita ingin memberi amaran kepada kerajaan Pas kali ini bahawa kita tidak akan berdiam diri, seluruh rakyat Kelantan telah bangkit untuk mengubah kerajaan negeri.*<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> 'Pas boleh tewas jika UMNO Kelantan mantap', *Utusan*, 09/03/2004

<sup>76</sup> 'UMNO tawar bangunkan Islam Hadhari Terengganu Bestari - Yakin ikrar calon', Wan Zulkifli Wan Yaacob, *Utusan*, 11/03/2004

<sup>77</sup> 'Pas kekalkan tampuk pemerintahan di Kelantan', *Utusan*, 22/03/2004



PAS was thus positioned as an illegitimate despot whose inevitable fate was to be ousted from power.

Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak was reported in one *Utusan* article to declare ‘that Muslims are humiliated and marginalised in various aspects of life, including in his own country’ (*bahawa umat Islam dihina dan dipinggirkan dalam pelbagai sudut kehidupan termasuk di negara sendiri*)<sup>78</sup>. Razak stated:

We do not want Muslims in this country to become like Muslims in Kosovo, Bosnia and also in Palestine. There is no Muslim country in the world that can be advanced and progressive other than Malaysia because of the policies, programmes and approaches made by the government.

*Kita tidak mahu umat Islam di negara ini menjadi seperti umat Islam di Kosovo, Bosnia dan juga di Palestin. Tiada negara Islam di dunia ini yang boleh maju dan progresif selain Malaysia berikutan dasar, program dan pendekatan yang dibuat oleh kerajaan.*

This again clearly exemplified the juxtaposition of modernisation and progress under BN against the humiliation of ‘colonised’ Kelantan Muslims. Those states he mentioned were all states where Muslim groups had been violently marginalised, and not dissimilarly to the Iranian example discussed above, showed how he and other figures were attempting to tie Malaysia into more universal and global political histories of Muslim humiliation under the hands of impostors. This was an effective way of framing the Umno/PAS battle and overall, *Utusan*’s message was that Kelantan and Terengganu had fallen into the wrong hands (just as Malaya had fallen into British hands, or indeed Bosnia had fallen into Serbian hands), and it was better if they returned to BN, their rightful owner. Benslama writes that

...humiliation by the other is a powerful affect that can move the masses...This image also assumes that Islam or Muslims can be assimilated to a unified entity capable of the same feelings, desires and experiences...Yet nothing could be further from the truth. (2009, p.63)

Inherent here was the idea that *Utusan* writers were exploiting the myth of Malay-Muslim unity, which in reality was unattainable, as reflected in the fragmentation of the Malay-Muslim discourse. Chapters 1 and 2 acknowledged how PAS’ support base emerged from a rural, peasant culture that saw no value in Umno’s vision (Fee and Appudurai 2011, p.72). This was why it managed to wrench control of Kelantan away from Umno after the euphoria of independence, and maintain control of that state for most of Malaysia’s history. Nevertheless *Utusan* writers on behalf of BN were taking ownership of the Malay community, essentially asking of PAS ‘what have you done to *our* people?’ Their argument

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<sup>78</sup> ‘BN hanya perjuang ajaran Islam sebenar’, *Utusan*, 16/03/2004

was that PAS had destroyed Umno's vision of Malay unity, to distract from the fact that Umno's policies perhaps held limited relevance in this radically different social context. PAS had failed the Malays, because it had rejected Umno's *Ketuanan Melayu* agenda.

The campaign for Kelantan aside, other *Utusan* articles overtly highlighted this modernity/antiquity binary. Noraini Abdul Razak drew it out very explicitly with her article, '*Islam Hadhari focuses on progress*' (*Islam Hadhari tumpu kemajuan*). She compared the progressive ideals of this policy against another approach, presumably that practised by PAS:

There is also another group viewing Islam purely from a political point of view and marginalising other priorities....When this situation occurs, Islam is no longer seen as a complete religion (universal) but from a narrow perspective and this actually causes Muslims to become weak and marginalised from mainstream development.

*Ada juga golongan lain melihat Islam dari sudut politik semata-mata dan meminggirkan keutamaan-keutamaan lain....Apabila keadaan ini berlaku, Islam tidak lagi dilihat sebagai satu agama yang lengkap (syumul) tetapi daripada perspektif yang sempit dan inilah sebenarnya yang mengakibatkan umat Islam menjadi lemah dan terpinggir daripada arus pembangunan.*<sup>79</sup>

Other examples subtly reinforced this PAS/BN fracture through suggestive statements that linked progressive values with BN. One such article quoted Badawi remarking: 'Vote for us (BN), we have a future for you. We will appreciate and use that mandate wisely' (*Undi kami (BN), kami ada masa depan untuk anda. Kami akan menghargai dan menggunakan mandat itu dengan bijak*)<sup>80</sup>. Likewise, asked about his aspirations if Umno gained control of Terengganu, Deputy Liaison Chairman of Umno Terengganu, Idris Jusoh noted his desire to build a 'global standard Terengganu' (*Terengganu yang bertaraf global*) which was 'excellent, knowledgeable, competitive' (*cemerlang, berilmu, berdaya saing*)<sup>81</sup>. This reflected his ambition to implement a 'smart' (*bestari*) *Islam Hadhari* programme which would 'drive the future of Terengganu' (*menggerakkan masa depan Terengganu*). Elsewhere Abdullah Hassan questioned 'whether Pas still wants to be considered relevant' (*adakah Pas masih mahu terus direlevankan*)<sup>82</sup>. Hence this modern/antique dichotomy was subtly reinforced through many articles which utilised language pitting a 'fundamentalist' Islamist party struggling to keep pace with the modern and progressive government. This element of chronology draws from a strong tradition of Eurocentric philosophy, where western modernity was located as the yardstick against which claims to modernity were examined

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<sup>79</sup> '*Islam Hadhari tumpu kemajuan*', Noraini Abdul Razak, *Utusan*, 16/03/2004

<sup>80</sup> '*Manifesto BN dilancar - Berteraskan masa depan cemerlang, gemilang, terbilang*', *Utusan*, 15/03/2004

<sup>81</sup> '*UMNO tawar bangukan Islam Hadhari Terengganu Bestari - Yakin ikrar calon*', Wan Zulkifli Wan Yaacob, *Utusan*, 11/03/2004

<sup>82</sup> '*Pas parti 'aneh*', Abdullah Hassan, *Utusan*, 19/03/2004

(Chakrabarty 2000, p.8). We can apply Chakrabarty's argument to government and media representations of the atrophied PAS states. Here, PAS' articulation of governance was being placed on trial, with certain *Utusan* writers asking whether it qualified as modern, and therefore as Malaysian. In doing so they invoked stereotypical symbols of modernity (and backwardness) deriving from the capitalist West, but which – considering BN's antecedents in the British-educated Malayan aristocracy (Gomez 2007, p.5) – simultaneously legitimised the government's agenda of capitalist development. By rejecting that agenda, it was easy for these writers to align PAS using colonial-capitalist Orientalist imagery of an inferior, backwards Islam – incapable of achieving Malaysia's level of modernity.

*Malaysiakini* writers were not wholly detached from these Orientalist representations. Eileen Ng likewise questioned the relevance of theocracy and Syariah law in 'this rapidly-developing multiracial nation'<sup>83</sup>. This simplistic juxtaposition of modernity and theocracy obscured the reality that Malaysia's national development had been driven by an Islamic modernising vision since the 1980s. Ng noted the peculiarity of PAS' ideals, describing Nik Aziz as 'a small man with a white goatee' whose 'pious lifestyle has become a tourist attraction'. Consequently, PAS was more like a cultural artefact than a party which held relevance to modern politics, and Ng was reinforcing the criticism of tradition advanced by *Utusan* writers. Ng's words were designed to marginalise Aziz and PAS, preventing them from being taken seriously by the reader. This was a classic strategy used to contain and represent PAS within the dominant cultural framework, 'expos[ing] its characteristics easily to scrutiny and remov[ing] from it its complicating humanity' (Said 1978, p.150).

The theme of being stuck in time set against the pace of modernity was strongly expressed in *Malaysiakini*. Observed Farish Noor:

The ulama of PAS, stuck as they were in their own morass of parochialism and isolated from the rest of Malaysia's plural society...may think of themselves of the masters of the universe when they are in their *madrasah* (religious school), surrounded by admiring loyal followers who have been taught not to think, but the rest of the country was moving in a different direction altogether<sup>84</sup>. (*Sic*)

Noor characterised PAS as 'medieval' – although acknowledged the part of media restrictions in constricting PAS' ability to sever itself from this representation. He was one of the few who did so, which was surprising considering the importance that *Malaysiakini* placed on challenging media practice in Malaysia. Noor was one of *Malaysiakini*'s most forward-

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<sup>83</sup> 'Nik Aziz warns of 'fires of hell'', Eileen Ng, *Malaysiakini*, 15/03/2004

<sup>84</sup> 'Part One: PAS second nadir', Farish A Noor, *Malaysiakini*, 25/03/2004

thinking intellectuals, seeking to elaborate and propagate nuanced, counter-hegemonic ideas concerning BN. Although he acknowledged PAS on those negative terms he refused to accept its positioning within the modernity/antiquity binary; instead that discourse was part of the ‘classificatory fiction’ that had shrouded people’s perceptions of BN in this election (Carr 1998, p.123). Noor was also one of the few that acknowledged Malaysia’s own brand of ‘fundamentalism’, relating to the Internal Security Act (ISA) which is far from ‘moderate’ and ‘progressive’<sup>85</sup>. He was critical of BN, arguing that Mahathir had privileged ‘the needs of global capital’ and neglected the ‘fundamental liberties and freedoms that are at the heart of Islamic jurisprudence and ethics’ – and which form the basis of a modern society. This reflected a tension similar to that expressed by Salehuddin Hashim: that despite representing a better option than PAS, BN was far from perfect.

In this light, there is something to be said about how class intersected with racial identity in this election. Khoo Kay Peng noted that ‘the people’ are ‘immune and indifferent’ to infringements on democracy as long as ‘economic development and material benefits’ can be guaranteed<sup>86</sup>. Reader Abdullah Junid likewise declared that ‘*as long as no one is starving, Malaysians prefer the devil they know than the possible saint they don’t*’ (my emphasis)<sup>87</sup>. This relates back to the discussion of the ‘consenting’ middle class in Chapter 3: insofar as the middle class is concerned, PAS’ calls for an alternative Islamic model would fall on deaf ears, because their comfort of living has been sustained. Indeed these middle class Malays were more interested in modernisation, which curtailed and caused tension with their more authentic, Islamic identity (Korff 2001, p.279) – perhaps one championed by PAS. In Matheson’s terms, *Malaysiakini*’s readers were partaking in the use of the same ‘ideologically loaded language’ to make sense of the world and ‘get on in society’ (2005, p.6). In 2004, and in broader historical terms, this ideology had denied PAS a voice.

Temporal representations were mirrored by opposition politicians, for instance DAP’s Lim Kit Siang, who retorted that PAS leader Abdul Hadi Awang did not

...seem to understand...that we are in the first decade of a new millennium and not a few centuries ago...Hadi is not relevant at all to the 21st century...he does not seem to understand that he is not living in the Middle East<sup>88</sup>.

AFP’s M Jegathesan likewise compared PAS’ ‘ancient’ ideals to the ‘modern’ BN, likening the difference between these parties to the difference between ‘Iraq and Indonesia’<sup>89</sup>.

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<sup>85</sup> ‘Part Two: Umno failed modernist Islamic project’, Farish A Noor, *Malaysiakini*, 03/04/2004

<sup>86</sup> ‘Three post-election scenarios’, Khoo Kay Peng, *Malaysiakini*, 29/03/2004

<sup>87</sup> ‘Malaysians voted for the safe and familiar’, Abdullah Junid, *Malaysiakini*, 23/03/2004

<sup>88</sup> ‘Youre not in Middle East, Lim tells Hadi’, *Malaysiakini*, 14/03/2004

Jegathesan really brought out this modernity/antiquity dichotomy, through powerful imagery evoking strong themes of neo-Orientalism:

PAS controls two of country's 13 states, both in the rural northeast of paddy fields and coconut palms, while Kuala Lumpur boasts gleaming skyscrapers, an overhead monorail system and six-lane highways jammed with modern vehicles. (*Sic*)

Such an obvious comparison, between the 'gleaming skyscrapers' of Kuala Lumpur and the 'paddy fields and coconut palms' of the states ruled by PAS, showed how effectively the fragmentation of the Malay-Muslim identity could be put to use when inundated with such rich colonial imagery and symbolism. Together with Eileen Ng above, working for AFP, both Jegathesan and Ng symbolised the 'western expert', through which PAS and its leaders were given 'a kind of extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status' (Said 1978, p.283). Just like the first binary, ordinary *Malaysiakini* users attached to these representations<sup>90</sup>. Those collective examples reinforced the belief that PAS supporters were living in something equivalent to the dark ages; only pro-BN Muslims, the 'enlightened' ones, were to be included in, but also to lead, the national culture. In Saidian terms, these readers had assumed precedent over this Islamist 'Other', affiliating themselves with dominant knowledge driven by those with authority (ibid, p.20).

Overall, working the same way as the first set of representations, and effectively complementing them, the idea that PAS was an archaic party whose value system had held back its constituents and was out-of-touch with the modern and progressive BN, will likely have disarmed that party as a political force in 2004. This is particularly so given Malaysia's aforementioned stance as 'the modern, secular alternative to Islamic fundamentalism', where economic development is a crucial aspect of its success (Martinez 2002, p.135). This time around, both media institutions had helped to reinforce this common sense perspective of BN.

## 5.5 Morality vs. Sin

The third and final binary concerns the dichotomy between on the one hand Malaysia's practice of true Islamic teachings, inculcating a moral religious mindset in her citizens, and on the other, PAS' sinful actions which deviate from the true Islamic faith. This dichotomy was most apparent in *Utusan* articles, but occasionally concerned *Malaysiakini* articles. The

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<sup>89</sup> 'Poll reflects global Islamic struggle', M Jegathesan, *Malaysiakini*, 09/03/2004

<sup>90</sup> Sri Arjuna Dewata, combining both binaries discussed thus far, spoke of the 'moderate' Malays as 'enlightened Muslims that subscribe to the true virtues of being fair and balanced in whatever they do' and 'the stabilising factor in a multi-racial Malaysian society' ('Malays confirm they're moderates' (*Sic*), *Malaysiakini*, 24/03/2004); for Tai Lo Chin, PAS 'want to take the country back to AD600' ('A victory for all Malaysians', *Malaysiakini*, 22/03/2004); for MA, they favoured an 'ancient model' that privileged a 'backward, extreme and narrow politics' ('Choose either a corrupt regime or a dangerous regime', *Malaysiakini*, 18/03/2004).

central focus of this dichotomy was on PAS' campaign agenda. It had arisen that certain PAS leaders had promised heaven to supporters who voted for them in the elections, whereas others would be sent to hell. This was a controversial issue which drew criticism from both sides of the political divide. Arguably, this binary was so effective because of Badawi's reputedly 'pious' persona and background in Islamic studies. Badawi had produced various statements, drawing upon his own religious authority to vilify PAS' actions:

Life after death is the promise of God. We cannot promise heaven, it's up to God to decide. We can only work hard to become good Muslims.<sup>91</sup>

And in another,

Sometimes what PAS is saying is an insult to the intelligence of the Malays but it still appeals to some...Heaven is not a gift that we can offer to people, it is God's decision. In this life we just need to do good, we cannot promise that which does not belong to us.<sup>92</sup>

Given its (predominantly) Malay-Muslim readership, *Utusan* had a clear agenda against PAS. Using Badawi's position as a basis, the broader aim of these writers was to show how PAS had violated Islamic practice. It did so by highlighting how PAS was practising an improper form of Islam (that violated Sunni teachings). Malaysia had officially practised the Sunni Islam of Shafi'i School of jurisprudence since Mahathir gained power in 1981 (Mueller 2014, p.3). One article criticised PAS' actions in relation to how they violated this school of thought. It featured the words of the Mufti of Johor that

...anyone who intervenes in those affairs as if they know about supernatural matters or claim themselves to share the power of "divinity" is highly opposed to the Quran and understandings of the Sunnah Wal-Jama'a sect<sup>93</sup>.

*Sesiapa yang campur tangan dalam urusan itu seolah-olah mereka mengetahui perkara-perkara yang ghaib atau mengaku dirinya berkongsi kuasa sifat `ketuhanan` dan ini amat bertentangan dengan al-Quran dan fahaman ahli Sunnah Wal-Jamaah.*<sup>94</sup>

This Mufti represented another example of a traditional intellectual that was coopted by Umno, particularly as Johor was the birthplace of Umno and so the Mufti had perhaps acquiesced to Umno's strong articulation of Malay nationalism there. Those PAS leaders' actions were obviously un-Islamic, but *Utusan* writers used the heaven-for-votes row as a platform to further reinforce the dominant Sunni interpretation of Islam that Umno-BN propagated. The Mufti was quoted remarking that PAS leaders would be 'forced to repent'

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<sup>91</sup> 'Pak Lah steps into heaven for votes row', *Malaysiakini*, 09/03/2004

<sup>92</sup> 'Islam most important issue in elections: Abdullah', Eileen Ng, *Malaysiakini*, 17/03/2004

<sup>93</sup> Sunni Islam

<sup>94</sup> 'Kempen isu syurga bercangah akidah', *Utusan*, 06/03/2004

(*wajib bertaubat*) for this act. Interestingly, it was in such discussion of PAS leaders that these *Utusan* writers inadvertently revealed the extremity (and hegemony) of BN's own Islamic perspective, in how strictly it enforced Sunni Islam and suppressed Shi'ite teachings, considered 'deviant' in Malaysia (Mueller 2014, p.34). But this was effectively projected onto PAS, particularly when *Islam Hadhari* was posited as the antithesis to PAS rule; the former's 'improper' practices in opposition to the latter's 'true' (*sebenarnya*) teachings of Islam, as discussed below.

Remaining on this explicitly religious tone, certain *Utusan* articles recited Quranic verses that reflected PAS' deviation from the straight path. *Universiti Malaya's* Hashim Yaacob remarked:

To people who like to damage the good name of others and spread evil, God says: Anyone who likes to spread scandal among the faithful, will be stricken with severe punishment in this world and the next.

*Kepada orang-orang yang suka menjatuhkan nama baik orang lain dan menyebarkan kejahatan, Allah ada berfirman: Barangsiapa yang gemar menyebarkan skandal di kalangan orang beriman, akan ditimpa hukuman berat di dunia dan di akhirat.*<sup>95</sup>

Making references to different verses in the Quran, Yaacob posited that book as the fountain of truth; the one text Malays should use as a moral guide. Mohd Shauki bin Abd Majid, doing likewise using a parable from the Quran, argued that PAS' intentions 'betray God, the Prophet and the Muslim community' (*mengkianati Allah, Rasul dan kaum Muslim*)<sup>96</sup>.

*Utusan* journalists deliberately assumed the moral high ground. Abdullah Hassan acknowledged these actions were just the latest in a series of incidents; a 'chaos of opinions' (*kecamukan pendapat*) that risked 'touching and damaging the faith' (*menyentuh dan merosakkan akidah*)<sup>97</sup>. Hamzah Sidek questioned the religious credibility of PAS supporters, comparing them to the righteous, Malay majority:

Ever more Malays are aware that the determination to enter heaven is God's right, not the right of Hadi Awang, Nik Aziz and Pas. They also know that only those who believe and do righteous deeds will enter heaven.

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<sup>95</sup> 'Kematangan Perdana Menteri -- Tidak emosional, tidak pula memulangkan paku buah keras', Hashim Yaacob, *Utusan*, 14/03/2004

<sup>96</sup> 'Mengapa Abu Zar tidak diberi jawatan', Mohd Shauki bin Abd Majid, *Utusan*, 05/03/2004

<sup>97</sup> 'Pas parti 'aneh'', Abdullah Hassan, *Utusan*, 19/03/2004

*Semakin ramai orang Melayu yang sedar bahawa penentuan masuk syurga itu hak Allah, bukan hak Hadi Awang, Nik Aziz dan Pas. Mereka juga tahu bahawa hanya orang beriman dan beramal soleh sahaja yang akan masuk syurga.*<sup>98</sup>

Ustaz Dusuki Ahmad noted voters ‘felt tired of the slogans and empty rhetoric that misused religion and the words of God’ (*merasai jemu dengan slogan dan retorik kosong yang menyalahgunakan agama dan ayat-ayat Allah*)<sup>99</sup>. He criticised the hypocrisy of PAS leaders who promised heaven despite coveting to ‘live in luxury’ (*hidup mewah*). In contrast, voters ‘required candidates who were qualified and came with a good, moral and religious image’ (*memerlukan calon yang berkelulusan dan berketerampilan sebagai orang baik, berakhlak dan beragama*). Ahmad concluded ‘God was not with Pas’ struggle and the angels also did not help them’ (*Allah tidak bersama dengan perjuangan Pas dan para malaikat juga tidak menolongnya*). These collective examples worked together to reinforce the split between moral and righteous BN supporters and deviant PAS ‘sinners’. It was particularly by drawing upon people like Ustaz Dusuki Ahmad’s religious authority (as a religious scholar trained in Islamic law) that *Utusan* so effectively achieved this dichotomy. *Utusan* was thus drawing on traditional intellectual authority i.e. Islamic scriptures, but reframing these through a pro-BN framework, and this connected to BN’s refashioning of Islamic history after 1980. As stated, this combination of statements and articles criticising PAS’ ‘deviant Islam’ would be effective in containing the opposition but also reinforcing the body of religious knowledge that Umno propagated (von der Mehden 2013, p.347).

This normalisation of religious knowledge was achieved in articles with a more implicit message. For instance, one *Utusan* article noted how Umno was being represented in Permatang Pauh by an Imam of the national mosque, Pirdaus Ismail<sup>100</sup>. This article subtly highlighted Umno’s Islamic values in featuring a respected Islamic figure that had chosen not to associate with the nation’s Islamist party but with the more moderate and good-natured Umno, which practised the proper form of Islam in Malaysia. Highlighting that Pirdaus’ predecessor had run for PAS in 1999, Hamzah Sidek postulated as to why the new Imam had chosen BN, concluding that the ‘change’ (*perubahan*) and ‘truth’ (*kebenaran*) brought by Badawi had encouraged Pirdaus and others to support him<sup>101</sup>. Pirdaus represented just one more example of an influential religious figure assimilated into the Umno rank and file, demonstrating how Umno had conquered PAS on the ideological battleground.

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<sup>98</sup> ‘*Impian Hadi ubah imej serban Pas*’, Hamzah Sidek, *Utusan*, 15/03/2004

<sup>99</sup> ‘*Allah tidak bersama dengan Pas*’, Dusuki Ahmad, *Utusan*, 04/04/2004

<sup>100</sup> ‘*Imam Masjid Negara mungkin dicalonkan di Permatang Pauh*’, *Utusan*, 04/03/2004

<sup>101</sup> ‘*Impian Hadi ubah imej serban Pas*’, Hamzah Sidek, *Utusan*, 15/03/2004



True to its alignment against PAS in this election, *Malaysiakini* featured an article which featured ex-PAS division leaders Noraini Yaakob and Abdul Latiff Mohamad, who had turned against the party and emerged to criticise the heaven-for-votes promise<sup>102</sup>. *Utusan* featured a similar article, instead highlighting the opinions of former PAS members who criticised this action on various fronts. For Che Azizah Che Hamid, it ‘gave a false impression of Islam’ (*memberi gambaran yang salah terhadap Islam*). For Noraini Ismail, it was important ‘not to be easily influenced’ (*janganlah mudah terpengaruh*) and ‘not to deviate from the true teachings of the religion’ (*tidak terkeluar daripada landasan agama yang sebenar*). But for Hassan Tengah, this was to be expected from a party who ‘liked to brand other people infidels’ (*suka mengkafirkan orang lain*)<sup>103</sup>. These subjects were important, as former PAS members and leaders who would now vote for Umno after realising the error of their ways. Under the broader umbrella of *Utusan*’s pro-Sunni discourse, these collective anti-PAS voices reinforced the suppression of Muslim identity through that hegemonic prism. The effect of these different Muslim voices remarking on how they turned their backs on the party would likely have reflected the media’s intentions to influence the average Malay reader and, for *Utusan*, demonstrate that Umno was the logical voters’ choice. In this instance, incessant repetition of this anti-PAS narrative, reflecting in Gramscian terms the accepted sphere of ‘common sense’ constituted a vital strategy of hegemony (Gramsci 1975, p.173). It was points like these, when writers for both media outlets focused on the same events and used them to delegitimise PAS in the same way, that the media strategies of both outlets *seemed* so aligned. (There were other examples, for instance when *Malaysiakini*’s Farish Noor<sup>104</sup> and *Utusan*’s Zin Mahmud<sup>105</sup> both constructed PAS as a delusional group disconnected from political realities.) They pointed to the fact that in 2004 *Malaysiakini*’s potential to innovate had been constrained by the broader media and political landscape (Kenyon and Marjoribanks 2007, in Weiss 2013, p.602). This leads into the concluding remarks, which evaluate the exploitation of the fragmented Malay-Muslim identity and how this was effectively put to work by the media in 2004.

## Conclusion

In this chapter the essentialisation of the Malay-Muslim identity has been shown to work through three central ‘binaries’: moderation vs. fundamentalism, modernity vs. antiquity and morality vs. sin. The chapter has demonstrated how, within this binary structure, key *Utusan*

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<sup>102</sup> ‘Ex-PAS division leaders turn on old party’, Yaakub Dasan, *Malaysiakini*, 08/03/2004

<sup>103</sup> ‘Janji ‘Syurga’ cemarkan Islam’, *Utusan*, 10/03/2004

<sup>104</sup> ‘Part One: PAS second nadir’, Farish A Noor, *Malaysiakini*, 25/03/2004

<sup>105</sup> ‘Rakyat tolak fahaman Pas’, Zin Mahmud, *Utusan*, 23/03/2004

*Malaysia* and *Malaysiakini* writers reconstructed Orientalist discourses around Islam and aligned them with the PAS-defined opposition, proving the fragmentation of the Malay-Muslim identity and how this was exploited by the media for a political end. The conclusion will focus on the three central aspects of the argument: the nature of the fragmentation of Malay-Muslim identity, the media's situation in the political landscape and the role of the intellectuals and intellectual communities producing these discourses.

In 2004 these *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* writers creatively worked with the Malay-Muslim ethnoreligious discourse, which served an important role in the production of Malaysian politics. Here, a normalised Malay-Muslim identity was positioned against its Islamised 'Other', and this difference was structured through three interrelated binaries: moderation vs. fundamentalism, modernity vs. antiquity and morality vs. sin. These binaries reinforced 'normal' behaviours within the remit of Badawi's 'progressive and forward-looking' Islamic programme (Hoffstaedter 2009, p.121). This was set against a specific and strategic imagining of Islamic fundamentalism that was used to define PAS externally to the Malay status quo as propagated by *Umno*. The media's Malay-Muslim dichotomy represented the fluidity in which ethnoreligious identity is conceptualised but also the fragmentation associated with such identities. This dichotomy was based on a precariously balanced, state-controlled discourse, contained within which was the suppression of alternate histories and narratives (for instance the extremity of BN's political discourse or the role that Middle Eastern politics played in Malaysia's Islamisation). Nevertheless, that fragmentation was exploited within the dominant BN media frame that positioned PAS outside of all that was Malay or indeed Malaysian; a foreign demon, strange, distant and threatening.

The chapter showed how 2004's post-9/11 geopolitical context influenced both media to scrutinise and position PAS as a fundamentalist Islamic party. Both media related to PAS utilising fundamentalist imagery implicitly relating to 9/11 and drawing upon anti-Islamist assumptions, understandings and fears. In 2004, *Malaysiakini* never threatened to destabilise BN's position, despite its potential to do so. Instead, those writing for this website and *Utusan* utilised powerful 'discursive formations...that stress[ed] the internal logic of culturally specific ways of thinking, talking and acting' (Holst 2012, p.17). Aside from *Utusan*'s own anti-PAS campaign, given *Malaysiakini*'s sympathies for promoting a liberal political agenda this was perhaps one reason why PAS suffered its unfortunate fate, relegated to the status of 'Taliban of Malaysia'; 'trounced and kicked back to the boondocks' after its 1999 success<sup>106</sup>. It was not that this represented a combined 'anti-Islamist agenda'; instead, both media outlets

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<sup>106</sup> 'Part One: PAS second nadir', Farish A Noor, *Malaysiakini*, 25/03/2004

had different agendas, different readerships and different political ideals, but it was how these coincided in 2004 which mark such a unique political moment. Overall this reveals how effectively the BN election machinery was put to work, to tap into the nation's past and its fragmented histories, resurrecting specific and deliberate examples of tensions between Umno and PAS and particularly where PAS had alienated the broader electorate. *Malaysiakini's* intellectuals were relating to PAS within the prevailing structures of meaning in Malaysian society, and were implicated in the construction and transmission of language, concepts and discourses that reinforced the organic political order.

In 2004, across both media outlets there were intellectuals working for BN's objectives. *Utusan* showcased individuals within but also beyond the party, such as the academic pro-BN 'backroom boys' (Shamsul 1996), other legal analysts and Muslim figures employed by the state. In *Malaysiakini*, Eileen Ng of the AFP was a dominant political voice championing the natural order. She and other intellectuals helped to sustain BN hegemony by way of partaking in the state's ideologically loaded language. These ideas were successfully transmitted between writer and reader, reflecting the reproduction of dominant ideas across this new media community (notwithstanding resistance from certain individuals, such as academic Farish Noor and PKR's Salehuddin Hashim, for whom BN's broad support was problematic). Its significant victory was arguably the result of the vocal middle class, a group that transcended ethnoreligious divides who had spoken out in *Malaysiakini* to determine PAS' fate and ensure that pluralism and democracy prevailed over that party's ideals. However, because of the need to protect Malaysia in that sensitive post-9/11 political environment, these *Malaysiakini* writers enmeshed themselves in the status quo and no questions were asked of that website's transformative potential – particularly given its educated, middle class readership. Such a classist emphasis would prove difficult for mobilising the grassroots in the future. As the next chapter reveals, the working class Indian Malaysians were the media focus in the 2008 elections, and the chapter explores the reworking of the Tamil-Hindu ethnoreligious discourse by key writers across *Malaysiakini* and *Utusan*.

## Chapter 6: 2008's 'Political Tsunami' and the Indian Awakening

Indian Malaysians were liberated from the shackles of a post-colonial mindset of blind subservience, thanks to Hindraf.

(KJ John, *Malaysiakini*, 18 March 2008)

### Introduction

This chapter illustrates how the 'Hindraf factor' surrounding 2008's election influenced key *Malaysiakini* and *Utusan Malaysia* writers to produce politicised representations of the Indian community that suited their respective political agendas: *Malaysiakini* writers' focus on Tamil marginalisation, exclusion and impoverishment; and *Utusan* writers' focus on Hindraf's extremity and criminality which betrayed BN's benevolence and assistance to the Indian community. It is shown how this reflected the fragmented essentialisations of Tamil-Hindu identity, where each media outlet exploited different elements of the fragmented history of the 'Tamil-Hindu'. The chapter explores the differences between these two antithetical media positions – their historical origin, inclusions and exclusions, and other tensions – to demonstrate the predicaments that continue to face the Malaysian Indian community.

The first analysis section explains how these *Malaysiakini* writers produced a narrative of the 'colonial' Tamil-Hindu to position the Indian community. This narrative focused on the marginalisation and exclusion of the Tamil-Hindu 'underclass' in a dominant Malay-Muslim space, using those ideas as a basis from which to empower the Indian community and disrupt and subvert the dominant political order. However, albeit pivotal to mobilising the Indian community, these narratives failed to gain consent from non-Tamil and non-Hindu Indian groups because they did not offer a legitimate counter-ideology. Instead, they reproduced and perpetuated Malaysia's racialised structure. The chapter then illustrates how certain *Utusan* writers developed a critique of Hindraf and the opposition, concerning their deliberate exploitation of Hindu working class issues at the cost of a broader Indian identity. However, *Utusan*'s own agenda was based around an equally fragmented narrative of the Indian middle class and socioeconomic progress. The divergence within and between both media outlets connected to the broader dilemma of collective representation for the Indian community.

The second analysis section follows a similar argument, focusing on a specific event, the Hindraf 'rose protest', to show how these *Malaysiakini* and *Utusan* writers differed in their representation of the Hindraf protests and protesters, in their attempts to position the broader Indian community. This was based on their different political agendas: *Utusan* and its

championing of *Ketuanan Melayu*, driving forward representations of extremity and criminality in a Malay-dominant society; and *Malaysiakini* and its focus on positioning this plighted Indian ‘diaspora’ within a transnational postcolonial network, where critical support for that community could be forged. It is demonstrated how there was evidence in *Malaysiakini* of a counter-hegemonic moment, where Hindraf figures and other writers attempted to mobilise mass Indian discontent and challenge BN’s legitimacy. *Utusan* in contrast failed to legitimise its narrative based on the weakened legitimacy of BN since 2004 and the much-changed political context prior to the election.

It is shown how 2008’s electoral moment plugs into the nation’s electoral past, particularly the formation and evolution of MIC and its marginalisation under BN rule. The chapter demonstrates the importance of studying elections not as discreet events but as part of a broader cycle. Notwithstanding aspects of continuity between 2004 and 2008, 2008’s central focus on a different identity campaign revealed how racial identity is not fixed but mobile, arguably transient, at the mercy of the fast-paced to-and-fro of Malaysian electoral politics. It is shown how certain identity discourses were reworked according to the political shifts that occurred between 2004 and 2008. Through the comparisons drawn between Malay-Muslim and Tamil-Hindu identity, particularly in terms of the suppression of Hindu culture, this chapter crucially demonstrates the construction of ethnoreligious identity as a mutual and co-evolving process – a key argument most forcefully made in Chapter 7. Like the previous chapter, before proceeding to the central analysis, 2008’s political context, and how it informed the media commentaries and broader strategies of both media outlets, will be explored.

## **6.1 Political Context**

In 2008 the world was in the grip of a global financial crisis that had first originated in America, through irregularities caused by sub-prime mortgage letting, before escalating into a broader housing and banking crisis of global proportions, with wide-reaching and hard-hitting impacts in many countries across the world, including in Southeast Asia. The contracting US economy ‘sent ripples across export-dependent Asian economies’, casting doubt on Malaysia’s objective to become a developed economy by 2020 (Abidin and Rasiah 2009, p.7). By 2008, ‘income inequality had soared to levels among the worst in the region’ (Weiss 2009, p.746). Malaysia was caught in a spiral of economic downturn that would last until the present day, with the value of its ringgit against the dollar continuing to drop. The declining state of the economy would have negative ramifications for BN in the 2008 election, which

would be viewed unfavourably in those circumstances. Increased unemployment and poverty risked aggravating racial tensions, even amongst the middle class – representing a stark contrast to 2004, when the satisfied and more importantly unified middle class assented to the new regime under the new Prime Minister. These problems were magnified by continuing accusations of widespread corruption under Badawi, who four years ago had presented himself as ‘Mr. Clean’ and promised to institute wide-ranging structural reforms (Weiss 2009, p.747). But there were other events, both local and global in significance, which had led to speculation among academics, journalists and opposition politicians that BN would perform particularly poorly in this election.

### ***Anwar Ibrahim and the revival of multiculturalism***

2004 was a bad election for the opposition and particularly PKR, which had won just 1 seat, overshadowed by PAS’ aggressive electoral rhetoric and rendered inaudible given Anwar’s incarceration. But late in 2004, *Reformasi* icon Anwar was released from jail under Badawi’s orders. As Ufen (2009, p.605) notes, Anwar was ‘charismatic and internationally esteemed’, and through this international reputation he had been heralded ‘an unabashed globalist well suited to the modern world of markets and media’ (Johnson 1998, in Esposito and Voll 2000, p.618). Legally speaking, he was forbidden from returning to politics until 14 April 2008, 37 days after the conclusion of the election. But Anwar’s political reputation meant he was viewed as the de facto opposition leader, and drawing on his political influence, he lobbied for political change based on PKR’s values of equality and justice that had served BA well in 1999. Under Anwar’s mediation the opposition reunited as a singular coalition, ‘*Barisan Rakyat*’ (People’s Front). Important was the reunification of DAP with PAS, which had learned from 2004 and removed the unpopular Islamic State element from its manifesto, adopting a multicultural front suited to Malaysia’s diverse demographic. This softer image was certainly due to Anwar’s positive influence, but also the emerging influence of the party’s ‘Erdoganist’ faction (named after then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had switched from openly championing Islamist politics to a more moderate political approach), key members of which were voted into power at PAS’ 2005 general assembly.

### ***Ahmad Badawi and the failures of Islam Hadhari***

In stark contrast, BN was facing internal problems. Aside from failing to eradicate corruption within his party, many had begun to question Badawi’s leadership – media critics as well as politicians, not least Mahathir. Leading Umno politicians such as Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak and Minister for Education Hishammuddin Hussein had been recorded making

chauvinistic statements which undermined Badawi's 'progressive' party line and his policy *Islam Hadhari* (Singh 2008, p.159). Despite Badawi's claims, there was a growing realisation among non-Muslims of the power of syariah law, reflected by

...a series of court cases pertaining to consequences emanating from Hindu conversions to Islam, the custody of children, the religious identity of deceased persons, and so on. (Moten 2009, p.34)

What was widely considered to trigger a revolt against Badawi was a series of government-sanctioned temple demolitions. Between April and May 2006 several high-profile Hindu temples had been demolished by government authorities on account of their 'illegal' construction, despite the reality that some had existed for decades, others even centuries. Those incidents generated widespread Indian antipathy towards *Islam Hadhari*, and its objectives to encourage mutual understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims appeared hollow and insincere. Hamid (2010, p.167) criticises the policy for being racially exclusive, paternalistic, ill-defined and hypocritical. Overall it was unsurprising that a poll conducted on voter sentiment surrounding 2008's elections found that freedom of religion was the factor with which Chinese and Indian Malaysians were 'least satisfied regarding the government's performance' (Leong 2012, p.37). Indians featured strongly in 2008, and this chapter will focus on the Hindraf factor to elucidate the Indian racial factor in 2008.

### ***Hindraf and the Indians: taking the fight to the streets***

To understand the impact of 2008's election we must appreciate the significant shifts concerning 'the rising claims to political legitimacy and inclusion that Malaysia's minority ethnic communities [we]re voicing' (Gabriel 2011, p.367). On 10 November 2007 the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (*Bersih*) held a mass demonstration for electoral reform in Kuala Lumpur<sup>107</sup>. However, police declared the rally illegal and attempted to disperse the tens and thousands of protesters with tear gas and chemically-infused water cannons – which heightened public discontent 'and helped unite opposition activists' (Weiss 2009, p.752). The protests raised awareness of those issues and provided a positive example of political collaboration between prominent leaders from PKR, PAS and DAP, other civil society groups and NGOs.

Just fifteen days later, perhaps emboldened by *Bersih*'s success (Leong 2012, p.40), another rally was held by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), a coalition of 30 Hindu NGOs formed in January 2006, advocating for equal rights for Indian Malaysians (Govindasamy

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<sup>107</sup> *Bersih* was founded in July 2005 to address accusations of government corruption and long-held opposition gripes concerning electoral irregularities, including gerrymandering, malapportionment and access to mass media.

2015). This demonstration was held in protest of the aforementioned temple demolitions, but more generally reflected the Indians' 'cumulative sense of having been thoroughly marginalized within Malaysian society since independence' (Leong 2012, p.38). One event particularly encouraged this impassioned response. On 30 October 2007, a temple in Kampung Rimba Jaya was demolished by the Shah Alam City Council authorities – causing a skirmish between police and temple attendees, and the wounding of 20 people. Significantly, it was just over a week before Deepavali, the Hindu festival celebrated as a public holiday by all Malaysians. This demolition powerfully symbolised government attempts to eradicate Hinduism under accelerating Islamisation in Malaysia. On August 31 2007, the 50-year anniversary of Malaysian independence, Hindraf had filed a US\$4 trillion lawsuit alleging mistreatment of the Indian community. The lawsuit was filed against the British Government, which by Hindraf chairperson P Waytha Moorthy was accused of

...withdrawing after granting independence and leaving us (Indians) unprotected and at the mercy of a majority Malay-Muslim government that has violated our rights as minority Indians.

(Saravanamuttu 2008, p.74)

A central point of controversy was Hindraf's accusation of 'ethnic cleansing' of Indians, addressed to then Prime Minister Gordon Brown (Govindasamy 2015, p.121). On 25 November 2007, Hindraf organised a mass rally which was to culminate in the handover of a memorandum containing 100,000 signatures in support of this lawsuit to the British High Commission. That day some 30,000 Indians took to the streets to protest their unequal treatment, exposing long-held tensions over that community's marginalisation in Malaysia. Hindraf, like *Bersih*, provided a mobilising platform for those groups disenfranchised by the regime. However, like *Bersih*, Hindraf and its supporters were designated illegal by the police. Badawi accused Hindraf of inciting 'chaos' that unsettled and destabilised the country. Further alienating the Indian minority, five Hindraf leaders were detained without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA), 'sen[ding] a chilling message...that as minorities they would always be treated as second-class citizens' (Singh 2008, p.158). The opposition criticised Badawi's handling of these protests, and very quickly, just as with *Bersih*, came to align with Hindraf. The rally and its suppression provided the key catalyst for the Indian 'awakening', a community moved by the winds of change. A survey highlighted by Ufen (2009, p.618) found that 90 percent of Malaysian Indians viewed Anwar Ibrahim as a political visionary – reflecting strong links between the opposition, Hindraf and Indian empowerment.



Hindraf had captured the hearts and minds of the Indian youth and played a large role in forging Indian anti-BN sentiment. Both the rally and BN's excessive response, notes Leong (2012, p.39), were captured in the media, providing

...graphic and emotionally charged images [which] were swiftly and assiduously uploaded by bloggers, websites, and online news broadcasts to be witnessed by the thousands.

*Malaysiakini* was central to Hindraf's success and impact, featuring those protests and protesters in articles and video clips, reflecting its founders' intentions to 'giv[e] voice to the voiceless' (Steele 2009b, online). These clips were replicated and redistributed by opposition parties and 'reached deep into Tamil communities where many people lack access to the Internet' (Leong 2012, p.39). New media's potential to go 'viral' encouraged connections with international communities through 'the tropes of religious freedom, postcolonialism, constitutional rights, diaspora, and transnationalism' (ibid). Hindraf's operations influenced the Indian and British governments to apply external pressure on Malaysia, based on their concern for the living conditions of these persons of Indian origin (ibid). Overall, Hindraf, aided by new media, had brought the Indian community to the centre of Malaysian politics, made audible the Indian 'voice', and created a resurgence of ethnoreligious consciousness among that community. Leong (2012, p.45) acknowledges that Hindraf had established itself as a new media pioneer.

### ***2008: the political tide turns***

All this 'rendered the ground, in electoral parlance, "sweeter" for oppositionist politics' in 2008 (Liow 2012, p.297). Understandably the mood in BN going into the election was pessimistic. By 2008 Anwar had crafted an image for himself as 'a Malaysian leader fighting for equality, justice, and fairness for all Malaysian races' (Moten 2009, p.38). BN were aware of Anwar's threat and sought to undermine his public image, highlighting his past as a Muslim youth leader and Umno Deputy Prime Minister to prove that supporting him was against the interests of non-Muslim Chinese and Indians. BN's manifesto was entitled 'Security, Peace, Prosperity', though there were no significant material differences with 2004's 'Excellence, Glory, Distinction', based on achieving a balance between political Islam and economic development and improving standards of education. Crucially, BN had only launched its campaign website two weeks prior to the election – reflecting a 'too little/too late' scenario (Leong 2012, p.44). The opposition's manifesto, 'Toward a Just Malaysia', appealed to many groups disenfranchised under the regime. It was a product of collaboration between opposition parties as well as 'input from non-party activists' (Weiss 2009, p.750),

thus reinforcing the strong links between civil society and the political opposition. A central aspect of this manifesto was the promise to abolish the New Economic Policy (NEP), considered by the opposition as divisive and ineffective in addressing economic inequality. Overall, because of Hindraf, general dissatisfaction with BN equated to a strong dissatisfaction towards MIC. Albeit initially non-partisan, Hindraf had switched to the opposition, which seemed a more promising prospect for Indian Malaysians, according to a statement given by Waytha Moorthy (see p.174).

Malaysia's twelfth general election marked a turning point in the country's history, redefining the political landscape. The opposition performed the best it had since 1969, winning 82 parliamentary seats to remove BN's two-thirds majority and seizing four more state assemblies on top of Kelantan: Malay-majority Kedah, the wealthy, Chinese-dominated state of Penang, racially-mixed Perak and urbanised Selangor. Selangor, Malaysia's richest state and home to capital Kuala Lumpur, was a particular shock – considered a BN stronghold, particularly among business groups benefiting from development there. Wang (2001, p.83) acknowledges that even in the past, when BN suffered hegemonic crises, it maintained its two-thirds majority. That it did not this time suggested the new media's influence, a new player in the political landscape. After 2008, PKR became the dominant opposition party, winning 31 seats. DAP won 28 seats and PAS 23. The opposition overall won 47.79 percent of the popular vote, with such a significant shift since 2004 dubbed by the media as a 'political tsunami' – a metaphor powerfully depicting this surge in opposition support. In many ways 2008 represented 1999's unfinished business, signifying the powerful re-emergence of multiculturalism. Each opposition party performed well; 'a turning point in the country's political development' (Fee and Appudurai 2011, p.64). This was a 'message of multiculturalism delivered by a Malay-led opposition,' rendering it acceptable and less 'threatening' to Malays (ibid, p.79). The opposition's Indian support marked a key difference with 1999's election:

	<b>Estimated swing to opposition parties (%)</b>	<b>Percentage of electorate</b>
Malay voters	4.6	61.6
Chinese voters	21.7	30.0
Indian voters	58.5	7.6
'Other' voters	-18.0	0.8

**Table 3:** Racial determinants of swing to the opposition, West Malaysia 2008 (adapted from Brown 2008)

Given their previously steadfast government support despite considerable economic woe, those temple demolitions had revealed what really mattered to that community. BN had performed poorly. Umno maintained 79 parliamentary seats, albeit 30 less than in 2004. MCA won 15 seats, 16 less than in 2004. MIC won only 3 seats, 6 less than in 2004, and significantly, President Samy Vellu, who had ruled in Sungai Siput in Perak for over thirty years, lost his seat to PKR. Many other MIC senior ministers experienced the same fate. *Gerakan* was wiped out, winning only 2 seats, 8 less than in 2004. Significantly, the election results were attributed to the power of new media, as was confirmed by the statements of Badawi and his deputy, Najib Razak, who admitted they had underestimated new media's power and thus lost 'the cyber-war'. But it was how this coincided with Anwar's resurgence and particularly the Hindraf rally which leads us into discussion of the media commentaries. It is particularly clear in this chapter how *Malaysiakini* as a new media tool was effectively used in the Tamils' struggle for communal representation (Leong 2012, p.34).

## **6.2 Introduction to the Media Commentaries**

This chapter analyses 50 media articles from *Utusan Malaysia* and *Malaysiakini*. *Malaysiakini* had gone from strength to strength since its inception in 1999, and in the election build-up the online media outlet removed its subscription fee, providing more citizens with access. Circulation of *Utusan*, meanwhile, had declined, not only due to growing trends towards social media and improved internet access, but from increasing concerns over its partisan reporting style (Abbott 2011, p.6).

Once again there was a broad array of opinions in both media outlets. *Malaysiakini* featured articles written by editorial staff, high-profile journalists RK Anand and Syed Jaymal Zahiid (who had been arrested and subsequently released by authorities in the January of that year), columnists Helen Ang and KJ John, blogger Mahendran, as well as interviews with key BN figures, including Mahathir. There were also important Indian actors like the president of the Malaysian Indian Business Association (MIBA). One of the most important articles was an editorial written by co-founder Steven Gan, celebrating *Malaysiakini*'s role in forging this unprecedented result. *Utusan* featured a selection of front-page articles, opinion pieces and electoral analysis, with quotes from a wide array of BN parliamentarians (many from MIC who lost their seats in the election), as well as legal expert Mohamad Sofee Razak. One writer, S Anand Kumar, wrote several important articles on the Indian community in a way that suggested *Utusan* was 'listening' to that community this time around. Going into the election, both media realised the importance of the Indian vote, resulting from Hindraf's

politicisation of Indian issues. According to KJ John, Hindraf helped liberate Indians ‘from the shackles of a post-colonial mindset of blind subservience’<sup>108</sup>. *Malaysiakini* was evidently being used to construct a nuanced ‘media narrative of the religious oppression suffered by Hindus in Malaysia’ (Leong 2012, p.39). Mahendran for instance focused on Buntong, a constituency in Perak whose electorate was 46 percent Indian<sup>109</sup>. This community was alive ‘with Hindraf sentiment’ and had developed ‘hatred towards the MIC and its chief, S Samy Vellu’. Most *Malaysiakini* writers were anti-BN, giving deliberate coverage to Hindraf, which according to Gan was what ‘Malaysians deserved’<sup>110</sup>. This reflected Gan’s aforementioned commitment to ‘stand with the underdogs, no matter who they are’ (Kee and Gan 2010, p.214-215). *Utusan* writers were more ambivalent regarding the sentiment of the Indian community. On the one hand, one article acknowledged the split among that community and that Indian support could be lost ‘as a sign of protest and dissatisfaction towards BN’ (*sebagai tanda protes dan tidak puas hati terhadap BN*)<sup>111</sup>. Another added that pro-Hindraf Indians would switch to support PKR<sup>112</sup>, which is a controversial point discussed in the chapter, marking the tensions between Indian Malaysians and the groups claiming to speak for them. On the other hand, *Utusan* promoted MIC as the best party for that community. S Anand Kumar was confident about MIC’s chances, noting it had chosen ‘young and well-educated candidates’ (*calon-calon muda dan berpendidikan tinggi*) who would steal Indian hearts, on top of acknowledging that long-serving Samy Vellu would experience no problems retaining his seat<sup>113</sup>.

The ‘political tsunami’ (*tsunami politik*) metaphor was powerfully employed by both media outlets. Gan’s article for instance was aptly titled ‘*The perfect storm on March 8*’, and he acknowledged *Malaysiakini*’s role in helping the opposition to make history. In contrast, Kumar titled one of their articles ‘*Suara kaum India dalam kerajaan tenggelam*’ (Voice of Indians in government sinks), in which they expressed shock for this mass oppositional vote<sup>114</sup>. Australian academic Manjit Bhatia made no small matter of MIC’s ‘battering’ and the fact BN had been ‘mauled and gutted’; a reflection of the ‘dirty politics and wild and wooly promises’ (*sic*) of Badawi’s administration<sup>115</sup>. The image portrayed in much *Malaysiakini* writing was that Badawi had lost control of Umno, with momentum gaining for his removal. This same sentiment extended to MIC President Samy Vellu. In stark contrast, this was the

<sup>108</sup> ‘The sinking of Umno’, KJ John, *Malaysiakini*, 18/03/2008

<sup>109</sup> ‘Buntong’s Indians play kingmakers’, B Mahendran, *Malaysiakini*, 01/03/2008

<sup>110</sup> ‘The perfect storm on March 8’, Steven Gan, *Malaysiakini*, 19/03/2008

<sup>111</sup> ‘*Rentak pengundi 3 kaum*’, Mohd. Khuzairi Ismail, *Utusan*, 06/03/2008

<sup>112</sup> ‘*Kaum Cina, India perlu terus bersama BN*’, *Utusan*, 04/03/2008

<sup>113</sup> ‘*Tugas pertama calon MIC*’, S. Anand Kumar, *Utusan*, 22/02/2008

<sup>114</sup> ‘*Suara kaum India dalam kerajaan tenggelam*’, S. Anand Kumar, *Utusan*, 11/03/2008

<sup>115</sup> ‘Malaysia’s new dawn?’, Manjit Bhatia, *Malaysiakini*, 12/03/2008

rebirth of the opposition, and chiefly Anwar Ibrahim and PKR. *Malaysiakini* writers plugged into the political ‘lingo’ of PKR, epitomised by its slogan, ‘A New Dawn for Malaysia’. For Bhatia, Anwar ‘exemplifie[d] this country-wide attitudinal change’; for Gan, Anwar was

...the man of the hour...reinvent[ing] himself as a Malay leader who speaks the language of the future - one which assures everyone a place under the Malaysian sun.

Overall, how Indians were positioned within these media narratives revealed much about the opposition between Malays and non-Malays; disenfranchised Indians were set against Malays as the ‘chosen ones’. But this of course was the reason why these *Malaysiakini* writers had emphasised the ‘marginality’ of the ‘Tamil-Hindu’ in the first instance, and the chapter now explores the effects of their employment of this ethnoreligious essentialism.

### **6.3 Exploring the *Malaysiakini* Commentary of the ‘Colonial Indian’**

This section explores how a key group of *Malaysiakini* writers utilised the Hindraf protests as a platform from which to develop a media commentary around the ‘colonial Indian’ in Malaysia. Given MIC had failed to protect the Hindu faith, *Malaysiakini* sought to construct Hindraf as the new ‘Indian champion’, innovatively reframing the Indian discourse around Tamil and Hindu issues, to provide Indians with an audible voice within Malaysia’s ethnoreligious framework. Chapter 2 discussed how the British colonialists highlighted the ‘untouchable’ Dalit caste as a weak and helpless group. Drawing upon that historical ‘knowledge’, *Malaysiakini* journalists connected the racial identity of the Indian community to those colonial Tamil labourers – thus establishing connections between the Indians’ colonial history and their postcolonial present. Colonial narratives of Indian identity were used to position the contemporary Indian community, reflecting a strategy of political resistance. By emphasising their ‘colonial’ origins, this commentary could transform that history into a counter-hegemonic narrative that challenged and disrupted Malaysia’s dominant racial hierarchy, putting forward questions concerning the Indians’ marginalisation and subordination in the nation-state, and particularly their position vis-à-vis the ‘privileged’ Malays. Accordingly, the Indian consciousness was intensified on its ‘home ground’ (Soja 1996). These media narratives had created a ‘third space’ (ibid), through which the Indian community generated new political meaning and identity (Weiss 2013, p.592). This space was defined by ‘ambivalence and overlap...translation and negotiation’ (Gabriel 2011, p.370); the defining qualities through which these fragmented essentialisms operate. Indeed, this focus on colonial Tamil-Hindu identity bore problems for Indian Malaysians who did not belong to

either group, reflecting the fact that these *Malaysiakini* writers had reinforced Malaysia's racialised political paradigm.

### ***The Tamil-Hindu 'underclass' in Malaysian society***

Many *Malaysiakini* writers depicted the Tamil-Hindus as an 'underclass' in Malaysian society. From this they could discuss the extent to which Indian fortunes had shifted from their 'colonial origin'. Syed Jaymal Zahiid noted many Indians had been '[l]iving in shanty houses' since the Japanese occupation, conditions which had not changed significantly<sup>116</sup>. Effectively, Indian problems derived from and simultaneously perpetuated the colonial condition, for instance their illiteracy precluded the possibility of employment or enrolling their children in education. These colonial/postcolonial links were recognised by MIC politicians. MIC leader S Sothinathan was quoted labelling himself as someone 'from the hardcore poor':

Both my parents were rubber tappers and I grew up in an estate before moving to a squatter area when I was studying in university. My parents always emphasised on the importance of education, and it is with sheer hard work and with the help of the government in terms of loans that I came up in life.<sup>117</sup>

In his interview with *Malaysiakini* after the election, new MIC Secretary-General Dr S. Subramaniam asserted:

I consider this as a transition period in our social evolution of a estate-based community to an urban-based community. We will overcome this challenge, so once we become a more stable urban community, we will be able to take on the challenges of the urban environment. Then we will be able to find our own place and become a successful community. (*Sic*)<sup>118</sup>

These words from various MIC figures resisted dominant BN discourses around Indian socioeconomic progress (see 6.4), reflecting Hilley's (2001, p.11) acknowledgement that organic intellectuals are not passive vessels of knowledge transmission, but instead contest and challenge dominant discursive structures.

Within these discourses, contrary to merely focusing on the Indians' 'immigration' (which was an unsatisfactory means of understanding the historical origin of that community), their British origins were deliberately emphasised. Such an idea reinforced the notion that Indians were illegitimates who had no natural belonging in and to Malaysia. Joe Fernandez forcefully declared:

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<sup>116</sup> 'PSM's Aru gets the estate votes', Syed Jaymal Zahiid, *Malaysiakini*, 06/03/2008

<sup>117</sup> 'The 'quiet kid' of Teluk Kemang', RK Anand, *Malaysiakini*, 06/03/2008

<sup>118</sup> 'Q&A: Samy Vellu still relevant', RK Anand, *Malaysiakini*, 22/03/2008

When you virtually kidnap, which is what the British colonials allegedly did, perfectly-contented people from the freedom of the vast Tamil Nadu countryside and subject them to virtual enslavement in the pressure-cooker of a regimented estate environment, the pressures build up over the century and decades and must eventually find an outlet.<sup>119</sup>

Likewise, Helen Ang acknowledged that Indians did not arrive here by choice but through ‘a marriage of convenience’ between Britain and Malaya<sup>120</sup>. Such strong words show how the Indians’ ‘colonial’ origin had become a tensely fought discursive battleground (Gabriel 2015, p.4), influenced by Hindraf’s ‘critique of the foundational principle on which the nation and national identity are constituted’ (Devadas 2009, p.93). These ‘colonial origins’ resonated with *Malaysiakini*’s broader readership, as demonstrated in letters written by Amar and Azizi Khan<sup>121</sup>. Those reader contributions were very poignant, suggesting that Indians were pouring their hearts out now that their voice had been heard. *Malaysiakini* thus provided a political space where ‘marginalised’ Indian voices could debate key issues and contribute to the public sphere (Weiss 2014b, p.877).

This narrative’s focus on the Indians’ colonial and postcolonial exclusion allowed for broader discussion on the respective positions of Indians and Malays within this ethnoreligious order. One such discussion concerned Hindraf’s accusation of ‘ethnic cleansing’ – which as discussed was a very controversial declaration which some of Malaysia’s ‘netizens’ rejected (Leong 2012, p.40). Nevertheless for these writers, ethnic cleansing was not taken to mean genocide, but instead adopted a more surreptitious meaning. Observed columnist KJ John:

If it is true that 30,000 Indian women are without proper documentation, could not this be considered “intentional ethnic cleansing”? Or, if as the former Selangor MB has admitted, there are 5,000 Indians youths in the state without a birth certificate, wouldn’t this be a clear and deliberate policy oversight? When new immigrant Indonesians are given red ICs<sup>122</sup> at will or “new Sabahans” are created overnight, surely it is not wrong for some groups to be very aggrieved over this.<sup>123</sup> (*Sic*)

KJ John was trying to reorientate views around Hindraf’s allegedly outlandish claim, connecting the case of Malaysian Indians to other cases where similar occurrences had been happening, for instance in South Africa. This was arguably an attempt to reconstitute common

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<sup>119</sup> ‘Indian winter of discontent’, Joe Fernandez, *Malaysiakini*, 19/03/2008

<sup>120</sup> ‘May 13, Feb 14’, Helen Ang, *Malaysiakini*, 14/02/2008

<sup>121</sup> Referring to the Indian Malayan workers recruited to work on the ‘Death Railway’ (a 250 mile railway built between Burma and Thailand by Japanese prisoners of war in 1943), Amar exclaimed: ‘This community literally died for this country’ (‘Illogical to say Indians are not self-reliant’, *Malaysiakini*, 22/02/2008); Azizi Khan described the Tamils as a diligent people who had silently struggled since independence, ‘endur[ing] hardship because it is in their nature to do so’ (‘Political thug’ caused Indians’ problems’, *Malaysiakini*, 22/02/2008).

<sup>122</sup> ‘IC’ refers to the identity cards that all Malaysian nationals must carry

<sup>123</sup> ‘The sinking of Umno’, KJ John, *Malaysiakini*, 18/03/2008

understandings of the Malaysian Indians, not merely as a racial minority but a group whose fate demanded global scrutiny; this was not an innocent policy oversight, but a human rights problem which commanded the attention of organisations like the United Nations.

Accordingly, KJ John had replicated Hindraf's strategies in forging these local-global links, and 'committed to a project of opening up the national history and challenging state discrimination', by way of 'form[ing] solidarities that are not part of the state apparatus' (Devadas 2009, p.95).

KJ John's reference to the identity cards of 'immigrant Indonesians' connected to 'Project IC': the allegation that BN has granted citizenship to immigrants who according to the constitution could be classed as Muslim *Bumiputera*, thus boosting the numerical strength of Muslims against non-Muslims and reinforcing the Malay-Muslim national identity. Blogger Mahendran highlighted this issue, featuring a comment by Indian citizen S Ravi, who complained about being excluded from the voting register:

They say I'm not on the list, but I have voted four times before. They just ignored my pleas. I am a citizen of this country. What difference is there between me and an Indonesian if I can't cast my vote?<sup>124</sup>

Mahendran was thus working with the Indian grassroots to legitimise a new political voice, exposing 'the institutional claim to democracy and equality to all citizens by the state' by 'returning to specific instances where racial discrimination takes place' (Devadas 2009, p.94). To answer Ravi's question, put bluntly Indonesians would be deemed more useful to BN for their Muslim status. Joe Fernandez noted that smart Indians were those who had left Malaya when it became independent; those who showed foresight of the *Bumiputera* agenda and its subsequent impact<sup>125</sup>. These various examples show how Indians in this commentary were branded as second- or even third-class citizens, outsiders, excluded in all realms of life – positioned at the foot of the racial hierarchy that had been put to use in the colonial administration and sustained by the independent government.

*Malaysiakini* writers and spokespeople stressed the loyalty of the Malaysian Indians, which in their eyes compounded their disbelief concerning the Indians' 'exclusion' from the national project. MIBA president P Sivakumar remarked:

In the eyes of God all men are equal but the NEP divides Malaysians into two distinct classes – bumiputra (son of the soil) who have special rights and non-bumiputra (not a son of the soil).

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<sup>124</sup> 'The rise of 'Makkal Sakthi'', B Mahendran, *Malaysiakini*, 08/03/2008

<sup>125</sup> 'Indian winter of discontent', Joe Fernandez, *Malaysiakini*, 19/03/2008



Today after 50 years of independence, every Indian born in this country is asking why such classifications and discrimination. When will all these stop?<sup>126</sup>

MIBA was a key intellectual institution, and the understandings of powerful figures like Sivakumar arguably influenced the ‘reality’ of other *Malaysiakini* readers<sup>127</sup>. Sivakumar’s thinking positioned the NEP as a vehicle for Malay supremacy more than a model of economic assistance – an idea supported by various scholars (Leong 2003; Ting 2009). Indians were not indigenous to this land; they were ‘not a son of the soil’ and had no paternal protection or economic assistance. Similarly, one citizen in Mahendran’s article, Vickneswaran, remarked Indians were “‘anak tiri” (stepsons) of this soil!’ After the election, in another article entitled ‘*Miba – Give multiracial politics a chance*’, Sivakumar acknowledged his support for Hindraf and reiterated:

NEP did little for the Indians. The community achieved successes due to its own effort. Otherwise, why would 30,000 Indians take to the streets despite the police warning that it is an illegal gathering?<sup>128</sup>

Indians were not entitled to the fruits of this land – this land which was a fruit of their colonial labour. Instead they were illegitimate children, whose blood belonged elsewhere<sup>129</sup>. This revealed the tension grounded in the fragmentation of the ‘colonial’ Indian identity, in which a powerful and symbolic discourse of Tamil oppression was driving perceptions of the Malaysian Indian community<sup>130</sup>.

### ***Playing into the hands of the enemy***

That the above discourses related to the Indians utilising examples of the Tamil ‘underclass’, reflected the tension between Tamil and Indian identity, reinforcing Leong’s (2012, p.37) words that Tamil-Hindus ‘are the Indian community’. Of course this was a political fiction, and that Tamil-Hindu narrative was far from seamless, contested by several readers. There were tensions within that Tamil-Hindu essentialism, racial and religious, showing the struggle and contestation surrounding the meaning of Indian identity and its perceived ‘colonial’

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<sup>126</sup> ‘Indian business group lauds PKR manifesto’, RK Anand, *Malaysiakini*, 01/03/2008

<sup>127</sup> Readers’ letters were occasionally infused with anti-Malay sentiment: Amar compared ‘self-reliant’ Indians to the economic assistance of the Malays and *Bumiputera* ‘born with a silver spoon in their mouths’ (‘Illogical to say Indians are not self-reliant’, *Malaysiakini*, 22/02/2008).

<sup>128</sup> ‘Miba – Give multiracial politics a chance’, RK Anand, *Malaysiakini*, 20/03/2008

<sup>129</sup> One *Utusan* article inadvertently revealed such discourse, focusing on the launch of an MIC polling centre. Chief Minister of Selangor, Dr. Mohamad Khir Toyo, acknowledged business entrepreneurs who ‘operated in forbidden areas’ (*beroperasi di kawasan yang tidak dibenarkan*). Directed at an Indian audience, the implication was that the majority of these traders were Indians illegally squatting on Malay land (‘*Syarat lesen barangan lusuh dilonggar*’, *Utusan*, 13/02/2008).

<sup>130</sup> Naturally, given *Malaysiakini*’s independent stance, not all letters were pro-Hindraf: Shaukat Ali expressed their contempt for the ‘whining’ Indians, arguing that ‘[v]ery few of us are born with a silver or golden spoon in our mouths’ (‘Indians should stop their whining’, *Malaysiakini*, 21/02/2008). Letters like this one proved that the digital sphere, defined as it is ‘between racialized and non-racialized expressions’, ‘closes down productive dialogue and opens up cross-cultural encounters, dialogues, contests and solidarities’ (Devadas 2009, p.102).

origin, and the frustration that, by continuing to reproduce these racialised structures, these *Malaysiakini* writers like Hindraf had ‘inadvertently play[ed] into the hands of the “enemy”’ (Devaraj 2007, online). Certain readers objected to this volte-face turn towards the Hindraf position, reflecting the observation of Leong (2012, p.40) that

Netizens, among others, have directed much criticism at Hindraf...for being locked in the race-based politics of Malaysia and exclusionary of the other Malaysian Indian constituencies.

According to Amar, although most Indians were Tamils, Hindraf drew support from ‘a wide section of the community’, and as well as Tamils the Hindraf leadership was composed from Telugus and Malayalis<sup>131</sup>. Therefore this connection between Tamil and Hindu identity was, according to him, a ‘key deception’. Shaukat Ali nevertheless acknowledged the problem still lay with Hindraf’s Tamil leaders, who were ‘calling the shots with regard to their agenda and confrontational approach’, alienating

...the majority of the Indian Malaysian community which comprises not only Tamils, but also Sikhs, Malayalis, Gujaratis, Sindhis, Punjabis and Goanese - and which not only include Hindus, but also Christians, Buddhists and Muslims.<sup>132</sup>

This reveals the fragmentation of both aspects of that identity: both the ethnic and religious aspects were grounded in an essentialising myth. Moreover,

...each of these subgroups has its own concept of ethnicity and had always strived to remain separate and distinct from each other. (Kailasam 2015, p.5)

Subsequently, considering the contestation of these multiple and fragmented voices, we begin to understand why a truly collective Indian identity has yet to be forged – why essentially, ‘[t]he Indians at large remained as fragmented as ever.’ (ibid, p.1)

Ali’s reference to Hindraf’s ‘confrontational approach’ more broadly explained ‘ambivalence about the stigmas attached to the Indian ethnic label’ among other members of the Indian electorate (Willford 2006, p.31). That is, Hindraf had excavated the Indian colonial past and transformed it into a ‘site of marginality’ deliberately positioned against the dominating Malay-Muslim national identity (Willford 2007, p.14), which caused problems for other Indians who in Gramscian terms just wanted to ‘get on in society’ (Matheson 2005, p.6). Gerard Lourdesamy for instance noted ‘a large number of Indian Muslims who now want to become Malays’<sup>133</sup>. Curiously, Islamic identity had overridden their racial identity, allowing

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<sup>131</sup> ‘Illogical to say Indians are not self-reliant’, Amar, *Malaysiakini*, 22/02/2008

<sup>132</sup> ‘Indians should stop their whining’, Shaukat Ali, *Malaysiakini*, 21/02/2008

<sup>133</sup> ‘How not to become the new BN’, Gerard Lourdesamy, *Malaysiakini*, 18/03/2008

them to ‘partake of two ethnic worlds’ (Nagata 1974, p.336) – reflecting the fluidity and instability of these identities. Overall this Indian/Malay overlap acts to disturb the racial foundations of the country, serving as a reminder of the ‘many areas of cultural overlap’ between Indian and Malay culture (ibid, p.335). This was particularly problematic for one Indian Muslim, who believed that problems of Indian representation and empowerment had been reinforced by Hindraf itself: ‘Hindraf should have been “Iindraf” from Day One or “Makkal Sakthi”’ (referring to Hindraf’s slogan, ‘People’s Power’), allowing the Indian Muslims to politically participate – contrary to being ‘marginalised and “ethnically cleansed” very systematically’ since 1957<sup>134</sup>. Their use of those words was not accidental, suggesting that – contrary to Hindraf who had articulated that claim as a politically enabling device for the Hindu population – it was the Indian Muslims who were truly marginalised, located off Malaysia’s ethnoreligious grid. This tension between Indians and Malays thus reflected ‘[a]n exacerbated uncertainty of identity’ which ‘produce[d] a struggle for symbolic transcendence from the ethnosymbolic ordering of the nation-state’ (Willford 2006, p.31). But these articles also proved the fluidity of the Indian identity, for in 2008, Hinduism was the mobilising element of the Indian collective. As Kailasam (2015, p.15) alluded to previously, it may not be like this in the future, but based on those other elements of identity which were forgotten, hidden or silenced.

It has been important to acknowledge the key slippage and differences within this Tamil-Hindu essentialism, to demonstrate the fragmentation of the Tamil-Hindu identity in the first instance and the reality that the Indians remain greatly divided. These articles show the significance of the fragmented essentialism, in that it was always doing work, legitimising the inclusion of certain groups of Indians and the exclusion of others. But they also suggest how it is important not to overemphasise *Malaysiakini*’s power to forge new imagined communities vis-à-vis subverting dominant narratives and transcending racial boundaries (cf. Abbott 2004, in Brown 2005, p.47).

#### **6.4 *Utusan*, Opposition Trickery and BN Benevolence**

This section discusses *Utusan* writers’ opposition to that narrative, based on the assumption that opposition parties and *Malaysiakini* writers had exploited Hindu issues for political mileage. Although of course part of *Utusan*’s agenda to disparage and discredit the opposition, this nonetheless raised important questions concerning those writers’ deployment of this Tamil-Hindu discourse – particularly which groups had claimed this Indian ‘voice’ and

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<sup>134</sup> ‘Indian Muslims ‘ethnically cleansed’’, Marginalised TMIM, *Malaysiakini*, 06/03/2008

the resulting exclusion caused. However, the narrative adopted by these *Utusan* writers was equally exclusionary, based around a fragmented narrative of the Indian middle class and socioeconomic progress; a narrative that had failed to engage the newly politicised Indian voters, in contrast to *Malaysiakini*.

### ***Media exploitation of the fragmented Indian identity***

We must remember that opposition political parties had deliberately latched onto this Indian campaign in 2008. Mahendran acknowledged DAP's campaign strategy for the Buntong seat which sought to exploit Indian 'anger'<sup>135</sup>. His article featured quotes from various MIC figures, mostly negative on this matter. MIC party volunteer M Raju conceded that although some MIC leaders were inactive, the opposition was 'simply making use of the Hindraf issue'. Another figure, MIC Perak Youth head, S Jayagobi, declared that DAP 'hijacked the whole episode' and alongside the other parties 'poisoned the rakyat to hate MIC and Samy Vellu'. These collective MIC opinions epitomised *Utusan*'s perspective of the opposition and by extension the support of most *Malaysiakini* writers for the Hindraf-opposition alliance.

*Utusan* journalists were sceptical about Hindraf's objectives and in relation to that, *Malaysiakini*'s pro-Hindraf agenda. There were simple signs that gave this away, for instance when S Anand Kumar wrote that Hindraf 'claims to want to defend the welfare of the Indian community' (*mendakwa ingin membela nasib masyarakat India*)<sup>136</sup>. The verb 'to claim' (*mendakwa*) undermined the truth behind Hindraf's political objectives, reflecting *Utusan*'s scepticism towards that organisation. Kumar accorded to Gramsci's definition of the organic intellectual, defining and reinforcing the dominant Indian political agenda, providing Malaysian Indians with 'homogeneity' and an awareness of their 'function' in the Malaysian state (Gramsci 1971, p.113). Azman Anuar acknowledged that the opposition's approach 'searches for popularity by raising sensational issues to get the people's attention' (*mencari populariti dengan membangkitkan isu-isu sensasi untuk mendapat perhatian rakyat*)<sup>137</sup>. In another article, MIC Vice President S Veerasingam observed the falsehood of 'the opposition parties' promise that they could change the fate of the Indians' (*janji parti pembangkang bahawa mereka mampu mengubah nasib kaum India*)<sup>138</sup>.

*Utusan* writers explicitly linked this strategy to Anwar Ibrahim. One article featured an interview with former PKR leader, S Nallakaruppan, who had left to start a new party, the

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<sup>135</sup> 'Buntong's Indians play kingmakers', B Mahendran, *Malaysiakini*, 01/03/2008

<sup>136</sup> 'Tugas pertama calon MIC', S. Anand Kumar, *Utusan*, 22/02/2008

<sup>137</sup> 'Bantu jelaskan isu kepada pengundi', Azman Anuar, *Utusan*, 16/02/2008

<sup>138</sup> 'Pilih calon BN bagi pastikan kaum India dibela', *Utusan*, 05/03/2008

Malaysian Indian United Party (MIUP) ‘who pledged support to *Barisan Nasional*’ (*yang berikrar menyokong perjuangan Barisan Nasional*)<sup>139</sup>. Nallakaruppan reminded the Indians to be wary of PKR’s ‘tricks’, which reflected Anwar’s political self-interest:

Anwar and PKR do not care at all about the fate of Indians in this country. I have a basis for saying so. Since I joined PKR in 2006 and left the party last year, I found that PKR does not have a programme for the Indian community...I hope Indians are not easily fooled by his tricks.

*Anwar dan PKR langsung tidak mempedulikan nasib kaum India di negara ini. Saya ada asas untuk berkata demikian. Sejak saya menyertai PKR pada tahun 2006 dan keluar daripada parti itu tahun lalu, saya dapati PKR tidak ada program untuk masyarakat India...Saya harap kaum India tidak mudah tertipu dengan helahnya.*

Nallakaruppan was particularly effective as a formerly critical intellectual who had returned to the racial order, reflecting the struggle of certain figures to displace themselves from that order. But simultaneously his thinking that Indians will only be served by their own kind was implicated in the ideological and philosophical makeup of the BN itself (Ramasamy 2001, p.4312).

Elsewhere, MIC’s S Sothinathan cautioned Indians against believing Anwar and his claims to represent them:

He held many important positions before. He was once the deputy prime minister. But what did he do for the Indian community? Now, can we believe him when he says he wants to help the Indians when he is no longer in power?<sup>140</sup>

Another *Utusan* journalist focused on a text sent by Umno Youth Chief Hishammuddin Hussein to him that morning<sup>141</sup>. This in itself revealed the close interconnections between that party and the government media. Similar to Nallakaruppan’s caution, the text warned that journalist of Anwar’s political self-interest, the leader ‘who needs all his wishes obeyed’ (*yang perlu diturut segala kemahuannya*). Among other things, Anwar was ‘unprincipled’ (*tidak berpendirian*), ‘hypocritical’ (*bermuka-muka*) and ‘arrogant’ (*angkuh*). The article criticised Anwar’s international connections, connecting this to Hindraf:

The tactic of expressing discontent to foreign countries is nothing new for Anwar. In December last year he also got help from foreign powers by exploiting the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) issue.

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<sup>139</sup> ‘Pembangking tidak mampu bela nasib rakyat’, Saifulizam Mohamad, *Utusan*, 20/02/2008

<sup>140</sup> ‘The ‘quiet kid’ of Teluk Kemang’, RK Anand, *Malaysiakini*, 06/03/2008

<sup>141</sup> ‘Tidak boleh bodoh semua orang’, Wan Syamsul Amly Wan Seadey, *Utusan*, 07/03/2008

*Taktik meluahkan perasaan ke negara asing bukanlah perkara baru buat Anwar. Pada Disember tahun lepas dia juga pernah mendapatkan bantuan kuasa asing dengan mengeksploitasi isu Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf).*

Published the day before the election, this was a final warning to the reader not to be fooled by Anwar's 'tricks' (*helah*) and to realise his true intentions. This reflected BN's overall antipathy towards Anwar and the political threat he constituted. These collective examples reveal much about the precariousness of Tamil-Hindu identity and that it was based more on a political agenda than colonial 'truth'. Kailasam (2015, p.15) notes that

...ethnic groups are not objective entities but rather cultural constructs that take different forms based on the issues being championed, and this is more likely to happen among extremely diverse communities such as Indians.

These words support the proposition that the Indian identity was being reconstituted to champion a political agenda, more so than anything else. With this we should be wary of Leong's (2012, p.51) assumption concerning the passing of ethno-religious politics in Malaysia.

Overall this discussion suggests how the opposition may have exploited this selective Tamil-Hindu discourse, for solidarity with the Tamil-Hindu cause provided important political currency. If we agree that the opposition was 'playing' with the Indian identity to gain influence, we may ask who indeed was speaking for the Indians and what this meant for that community more broadly. Co-founder Steven Gan was far from coy about *Malaysiakini's* support for Anwar this time around, given his branding of Anwar as 'the man of the hour' who sought to assure 'everyone a place under the Malaysian sun'<sup>142</sup>. This contradicts Said's (1994, p.xii) view that critical intellectuals should not be 'compelled into some slogan, orthodox party line, or fixed dogma', nor affected by their political affiliations or loyalties. It is thus important to question the extent to which intellectuals in *Malaysiakini* were capable of elaborating new ideas and sustaining these ideas as the basis for a critical, counter-hegemonic ideology (as opposed to simply gaining immediate and short-term political currency). That is, to what extent was Gan aligned with these emergent Indian forces? That MIBA was a strong voice in this commentary also reflected the broader reality that a select group of political elite had put its stamp on *Malaysiakini's* discourse. MIBA President, P Sivakumar, beforehand had lent political legitimacy to the opposition, backing PKR's manifesto and exhorting Indians to vote for 'credible candidates'<sup>143</sup>. MIBA was speaking for its own business interests, and its

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<sup>142</sup> 'The perfect storm on March 8', Steven Gan, *Malaysiakini*, 19/03/2008

<sup>143</sup> 'Indian business group lauds PKR manifesto', RK Anand, *Malaysiakini*, 01/03/2008

support for PKR and multiracial politics was more to serve middle class business interests than the (predominantly working class) Indian community overall. This dilemma was recognised in a letter by A Thamby, who pondered whether supporting the opposition would ‘ensure we have a rightful place in Malaysian society’ if those parties adopted a ‘strategic’ approach (which maximised their political representation)<sup>144</sup>. It reflected Lee and Rajoo’s (1987, p.395) point that insofar as BN consociationalism continued to prevail, Indians would benefit from a collective identity that could compete with the Malays and Chinese for political resources. In the Spivakian sense, Thamby knew that the opposition’s appropriation of Tamil-Hindu discourse was a deliberate move which made visible the Malaysian Indians and made audible their voice. But they were aware of the opposition’s ‘real’ motives and thus conscious of the repercussions this would have for the fragmented Indian community as soon as election fever had once again dissipated. He was thus reproducing some of the critique around the problems of essentialisation in temporary contexts. In this sense, the *Malaysiakini* writers featured in this chapter were implicated in the exploitation – and perhaps exaggeration – of the Hindraf issue such that the opposition could get closer to power. After all, albeit featuring quotes from members of the public, we must remember these quotes were ‘organized and arranged into a coherent narrative that aims to drive home a specific point of view’ (Leong 2012, p.47); one *Malaysiakini* editors were trying to convey.

### ***Doctors and lawyers: a story of socioeconomic achievement***

*Utusan*’s dominant stance was that Indians were not marginalised, certainly in terms of their socioeconomic development<sup>145</sup>. *Utusan* privileged an equally exclusionary lens, based not on a working class perspective but the slim Indian middle class, designed to champion BN’s role in stimulating socioeconomic growth (Anuar 2005, p.27). These writers opposed the colonial framing of the Indian community and particularly denied the legitimacy of the ‘Tamil-Hindu’ discourse that was used by some *Malaysiakini* writers – which to an extent was based on political fiction, as Chapter 2 discussed. Of course this was the same fiction that MIC itself had exploited to ‘Tamilise’ the party back in 1954, but these aspects were conveniently excluded and instead *Utusan* writers explored Indian identity through privileging a middle class lens. This naturally reflected the broader BN power order, which through its media institutions sought to filter or suppress discourses around the working class Indian – just as Britain had suppressed left wing discourse in the colonial era.

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<sup>144</sup> ‘What political role for the Indian?’, A Thamby, *Malaysiakini*, 29/02/2008

<sup>145</sup> There were exceptions when *Utusan* recognised the link between Indians, Tamil identity and the lower class. One article for instance commended BN politician Azeez Abdul Rahim on his ‘ability to speak Tamil’ (*[k]ebolehan berbahasa Tamil*), which had helped him to gain the support of a local farming community (‘Azeez mahir bahasa Tamil’, *Utusan*, 01/03/2008).

Awang Selamat, the collective pseudonym given to *Utusan*'s editorial team, declared:

Awang does not think that community wants to take a risk by rejecting BN including the MIC. This is because under the shelter of the BN, it is proven that the Indian community who are a racial minority get a better position in all fields, despite attempts to deny this reality.

*Awang tidak fikir kaum itu mahu mengambil risiko dengan menolak BN termasuk MIC. Ini kerana menerusi naungan BN, terbukti masyarakat India yang merupakan kaum minoriti mendapat kedudukan lebih baik dalam segala bidang, walaupun hakikat ini cuba dinafikan.*<sup>146</sup>

*Utusan*'s Awang team represented a small but powerful intellectual community designed to perpetuate the Malays' *Bumiputera* agenda through which Malaysia's racial hierarchy was defined (Devadas 2009, p.93). Whilst acknowledging 'discontent towards the socioeconomic achievements of Indians in the country' (*perasaan tidak puas hati terhadap pencapaian sosio ekonomi kaum India di negara ini*), *Utusan*'s Borhan Abu Samah noted BN had not marginalised that community; instead, the Indian community was comprised of many successful doctors and lawyers and in terms of poverty rates, the Indians (2.9%) were much better off than the Malays (8.3%)<sup>147</sup>. Likewise, for Kumar, although clearly a minority, Indians were 'not marginalised' (*tidak dipinggirkan*)<sup>148</sup>. In contrast, BN had done much for this community:

Government assistance to that community has not stopped up to this point, instead they are attempting to trace a proportion of the Indian community who live without an identity card and birth certificate. This shows the government is helping the Indians to defend their rights as Malaysian citizens.

*Bantuan kerajaan kepada masyarakat tersebut bukan dihentikan setakat itu sahaja, malah mereka turut berusaha mengesan sebilangan kaum India yang hidup tanpa kad pengenalan dan sijil kelahiran. Ini menunjukkan kerajaan turut membantu kaum India untuk mempertahankan haknya sebagai rakyat Malaysia.*

Overall, these various intellectuals helped the ruling class to maintain its hegemony over the rest of society, setting the political agenda and propagating the state's 'established interests' (Gramsci 1975, p.222); essentially, defending BN's treatment of the Indians. As with *Malaysiakini*, readers' sentiments generally reflected their paper's views<sup>149</sup>.

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<sup>146</sup> 'BISIK-BISIK AWANG SELAMAT', Awang Selamat, *Utusan*, 29/02/2008

<sup>147</sup> 'Jambatan kaum India', Borhan Abu Samah, *Utusan*, 13/02/2008

<sup>148</sup> 'Masyarakat India perlu bijak memilih', S. Anand Kumar, *Utusan*, 03/03/2008

<sup>149</sup> V. Subramaniam wrote in to express their dissatisfaction with the Indians' voting choice, arguing that Indians were 'not marginalised' (*tidak dipinggirkan*) but 'capable of competing with other races' (*mampu bersaing dengan kaum lain*) ('Sedih kaum India mengundi ikut perasaan', V. Subramaniam, *Utusan*, 13/03/2008).



These views were confirmed by certain experts on the Indian community. Another article utilised the views of *Universiti Sains Malaysia*'s Dr Sivamurugan Pandian, who confirmed:

The Indians who are still divided or on-the-fence voters...need to be assured that the government particularly MIC has never marginalised them, instead strives to meet their every demand.

*Kaum India yang masih berbelah bahagi atau pengundi di atas pagar...perlu diberi jaminan bahawa kerajaan terutamanya MIC tidak pernah meminggirkan nasib mereka sebaliknya berusaha untuk memenuhi setiap tuntutan mereka.*<sup>150</sup>

Confirming Shamsul's statement in the last chapter, Pandian existed as a university intellectual beyond the party who – like Kumar – nevertheless performed the role of championing the organic racial order, arguing that only an Indian party could protect the Indians' fortunes, thus reproducing common-sense knowledge that legitimised the *Bumiputera*-defined nation of intent (Shamsul 1996, p.343). One article more glaringly spelt out to the Indians all that BN had done, highlighting the words of MIC President Samy Vellu, who listed a string of multi-million ringgit grants that had been allocated to the Indian community, including an RM8m college and RM100m for Tamil national schools<sup>151</sup>. All of this, according to the author, was 'so that (the Indian community was) not left behind from mainstream development' (*agar tidak ketinggalan daripada arus pembangunan*). This, they note, was in response to allegations by the opposition, which had inferred exactly the contrary. Vellu was even quoted noting BN had actively helped the Indian community to 'move specific temples' (*memindahkan kuil-kuil tertentu*). He criticised the opposition for not 'opening its eyes' (*membuka mata*) and instead 'making accusations recklessly' (*membuat tuduhan secara membabi-butu*), and finally declared it was 'the opposition that actually did not defend the fate of the Indian community' (*pembangkang sebenarnya yang tidak membela nasib masyarakat India*).

When *Utusan* writers did acknowledge Indian economic hardship, they noted it was not a problem unique to that community. As Kumar declared:

Keep in mind, not only the Indians are poor. How about the Malays, Chinese and those others who live in poverty.

*Perlu diingat bukan sahaja terdapat kaum India yang miskin. Bagaimana pula orang Melayu, Cina dan mereka yang lain yang turut hidup dalam kemiskinan.*<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> 'Rentak pengundi 3 kaum', Mohd. Khuzairi Ismail, *Utusan*, 06/03/2008

<sup>151</sup> 'RM427 juta peruntukan BN khusus majukan masyarakat India', *Utusan*, 02/03/2008

<sup>152</sup> 'Masyarakat India perlu bijak memilih', S. Anand Kumar, *Utusan*, 03/03/2008

These instances where class was discussed in *Utusan* reflected a critique advanced by Devaraj (2007, online), that the problems articulated by Hindraf

...are also experienced by workers of all races in Malaysia – even the Malays, who are the beneficiaries of the Bumiputra policies.

For Samah, Indians were facing the same problems as Malays, in adapting to the rapid shift ‘from a rural society to an urban society’ (*daripada masyarakat luar bandar kepada masyarakat bandar*)<sup>153</sup>. Another article featured Dr Abdul Razak Omar, <sup>political secretary of the</sup> esteemed <sup>Putra World Trade Cent</sup>re club, who referring to the opposition, stated:

How are the Indians said to be marginalised, while the UMNO Information Unit produced a book explaining that the professional and rich Indians are quite numerous. If they say the Indians are marginalised without disclosing the true facts, we should not accept it entirely. This is because there are poor Indians, likewise, there are Malays who are poorer.

*Bagaimana kaum India dikatakan terpinggir, sedangkan Unit Penerangan UMNO mengeluarkan buku yang menjelaskan profesional dan orang kaya India cukup ramai. Kalau mereka kata kaum India terpinggir tanpa mengemukakan fakta sebenar, kita tidak patut menerimanya bulat-bulat. Ini kerana ada kaum India miskin, begitu juga ada kaum Melayu yang lebih miskin.*<sup>154</sup>

Nevertheless, for most *Malaysiakini* writers what this economically-focused argument neglected was the Indians’ sense of national belonging. Most significantly, MIC had failed to protect Indian religious interests. Vellu and MIC represented the community through a developmentalist paradigm and not a cultural one that related to more sensitive issues like the demolished Indian temples that sparked the Hindraf protests. This was why these writers had sensed the opportunity to make Hindraf, with its focus on Hinduism, the new champion of the Indians. For them, it was not about plugging into BN’s ‘development for all’ line this time around, but about emphasising the narrowing spaces of Hinduism under an increasingly dominant Malay-Muslim identity. This is why emphasising traditional Hindu practice, as observed by Devadas (2009, p.95), represented ‘a galvanising force’ for the Hindraf movement. University lecturer Manjit Bhatia observed that MIC was negatively viewed by its constituents as a result of being a consenting party in the oppression of Indian rights, destruction of temples and suppression of peaceful protest:

It may be too late, especially after the MIC silently acquiesced to Umno’s long brutalising of Indian rights, bulldozing Indian temples, unleashing violent attacks by the state’s pusillanimous security apparatus on peaceful street protests of disgruntled Indians led by Hindraf, whose leaders

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<sup>153</sup> ‘Jambatan kaum India’, Borhan Abu Samah, *Utusan*, 13/02/2008

<sup>154</sup> ‘Bantu jelaskan isu kepada pengundi’, Azman Anuar, *Utusan*, 16/02/2008

were summarily jailed, without recourse to the courts, thanks to the cowardly regime's Internal Security Act.<sup>155</sup>

This was a reality that *Utusan* writers were forced to accept after the election. One article observed that Indian support for the opposition was 'no longer a secret' (*bukan menjadi rahsia lagi*), as a result of its turn against Samy Vellu and – referring to Hindraf – 'developments involving the Indian community in recent years' (*perkembangan yang membabitkan masyarakat India kebelakangan ini*)<sup>156</sup>.

## 6.5 Racialising the Hindraf Protests

On 16 February 2008, Hindraf supporters held a second protest, against the incarceration of five Hindraf leaders. Around 300 supporters, children included, planned to bring the Prime Minister flowers to persuade him to release those detained. However, they were met with water cannons and tear gas, in what reflected a panicked and excessive response. Badawi himself had released a statement condemning those protesters. This was an important event which received international media attention, and the timing of the event after the election campaigning period had started, offered an opportunity for both media outlets to use it as a focal point for their respective campaigns. This section illustrates how *Utusan* chose to discredit Hindraf's campaign by racialising it as a challenge to the Malay establishment, and asks how this was resisted by *Malaysiakini* writers. It will then demonstrate how these *Malaysiakini* writers responded, by drawing on the requests of Hindraf leaders. Certain writers also sought to position these Indian Malaysians within an imagined global community, drawing on the broader tropes of transnationalism and postcolonialism. Such tropes, notes Leong (2012), 'are powerful forces in the context of contemporary India's large, mobile, and influential middle class' (p.39), and in 2008 they evinced the potential of *Malaysiakini* and other new media to construct new trans-border solidarities that could foment political mobilisation.

### *The Hindraf protests: challenging the Malay status quo?*

On the front page of *Utusan*'s 17 February edition was an article with the headline '*Respect the elections – Illegal assemblies arouse fear in the people*' (*Hormati pilihan raya – Perhimpunan haram timbulkan perasaan takut rakyat*)<sup>157</sup>. The article highlighted Badawi's words that these protesters aim 'to arouse fear in the people' (*menimbulkan perasaan*

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<sup>155</sup> 'Malaysiakini's new dawn', Manjit Bhatia, *Malaysiakini*, 12/03/2008

<sup>156</sup> 'Bolehkah MIC pulih semula?', *Utusan*, 17/03/2008

<sup>157</sup> 'Hormati pilihan raya – Perhimpunan haram timbulkan perasaan takut rakyat PM', Zainul Azhar Ashari and Shariza Abdullah, *Utusan*, 17/02/2008

*takut...di kalangan rakyat*), that they ‘do not respect the democratic process’ (*tidak menghormati satu proses perjalanan demokrasi*), and instead are intent on bringing about ‘chaos’ (*huru-hara*). In this article the protesters were referred to as ‘parties that tried to disrupt the elections’ (*pihak yang cuba mengganggu pilihan raya*). Badawi was quoted declaring:

We need to enforce the law because we do not want chaos, anything bad that could cause an uncontrollable situation or people who are unhappy if the government does not act... We have no law to prevent those people bringing the children but to me it’s really bad and regrettable.

*Kita perlu menguatkuasakan undang-undang kerana tidak mahu berlaku huru-hara, apa-apa yang tidak baik yang boleh sebabkan keadaan tidak terkawal atau rakyat tak senang hati jika kerajaan tidak bertindak...Kita tidak ada undang-undang mencegah orang berkenaan membawa anak tetapi kepada saya ia paling tak elok dan dikesali.*

Holst (2012, p.9) acknowledges BN ‘makes heavy use’ of the mass media ‘to support its identity formation policies’. In 2008 this was patently clear. This article was fully behind Badawi, and sought to delegitimise Hindraf as ‘Malaysian’, positioning Hindraf and its supporters as extreme elements that had challenged *Ketuanan Melayu* and had no place in the Malaysian polity. Another article quoted Badawi criticising the ‘jealous’ (*iri hati*) opposition:

They want to divide BN because they envy our success in governing the country. Hindraf also say don’t support UMNO. These are all tactics so that the situation becomes chaotic, BN weak and they will get success.

*Mereka nak pecah belahkan BN kerana iri hati kejayaan kita memerintah negara. Hindraf pun kata jangan sokong UMNO. Ini semua taktik supaya keadaan menjadi kelam kabut, BN lemah dan mereka akan mendapat kejayaan.*<sup>158</sup>

An article by Amiruddin Harun effectively reinforced Badawi’s position by utilising quotes from important Umno figures that vilified the act of protest<sup>159</sup>. Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage, Rais Yatim, described the protests as a ‘cultural danger’ (*bahaya budaya*) that ‘cannot be accepted by the society of this country’ (*tidak dapat diterima oleh masyarakat negara ini*). ‘Masyarakat’ (‘society’) functioned similarly to ‘*rakyat*’ in this context, positioning Malaysians and Malaysian culture against those troublemakers. Umno Information Chief Muhammad Muhd Taib strictly distinguished democracy, within the gambit of constitutional security, from demonstrations, which were a ‘forbidden’ (*haram*) act:

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<sup>158</sup> ‘Pembangkang iri hati – Tabur tohmahan, fitnah kerana kejayaan BN tadbir negara’, Zainul Azhar Ashari and Zamzurina Ahmad, *Utusan*, 27/02/2008

<sup>159</sup> ‘Demonstrasi jalanan ranapkan negara’, Amiruddin Harun, *Utusan*, 20/02/2008

...any problems in the country must be resolved respectfully because there are many other approaches that can be used aside from demonstrating illegally.

*...sebarang masalah dalam negara harus diselesaikan secara terhormat kerana ada banyak lagi pendekatan lain yang boleh digunakan selain berdemonstrasi secara haram.*

Mimicking Badawi's words, Taib stated that the protests 'could trigger chaos' (*boleh mencetuskan kekacauan*). Of course, 'chaos' really meant disruption to the Malay establishment. It conveyed the 'illegitimacy' of Hindraf's political challenge; dismissed merely as an Indian attempt to rile the Malays.

The idea of danger was repeated elsewhere by MIC Youth Chief SA Vigneswaran<sup>160</sup>. This article acknowledged 'the culture of street demonstrations *waged* by opposition parties' (*budaya demonstrasi jalanan yang diperjuangkan oleh parti pembangkang*). The word 'waged' does specific work in the mind of the reader. Another article criticised those groups for 'blowing sentiment' (*meniup sentimen*):

...MIC leaders...had to deal with specific groups in that community which kept blowing sentiment as if the Federal Government, some state governments and the MIC do not defend the Indians.

*...para pemimpin MIC...terpaksa berhadapan dengan golongan tertentu dalam masyarakat itu yang terus meniup sentimen seolah-olah Kerajaan Persekutuan, sesetengah kerajaan negeri dan MIC tidak membela nasib kaum India.*<sup>161</sup>

Likewise, another *Utusan* article criticised two Tamil newspapers for encouraging the Indian community to demonstrate against the MIC. This was according to a claim made by MIC President Samy Vellu, who had criticised these papers for fomenting Indian discontent:

I know those who did this work are not Indians but those who were hired to 'intoxicate' them so that they are willing to do street demonstrations...I know the opposition parties which are doing that work to bring themselves to *incite* the Indians to stage a demonstration against MIC.

*Saya tahu mereka yang melakukan kerja ini bukan masyarakat India tetapi mereka yang telah diupah dengan "memabukkan" mereka sehingga sanggup melakukan demonstrasi jalanan....Saya tahu parti pembangkang mana yang melakukan kerja itu sehingga tergamak menghasut masyarakat India melakukan demonstrasi terhadap MIC.*<sup>162</sup>

The italicised verb 'incite' again does specific work in the mind of the reader. The paper did not encourage, exhort or indeed request, but it *incited* the Indians to stage a demonstration. The use of this verb, to connote violent or unlawful behaviour, suggests those papers had no

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<sup>160</sup> 'Rakyat tidak terima demonstrasi jalanan', *Utusan*, 21/02/2008

<sup>161</sup> 'Kaum Cina, India perlu terus bersama BN', *Utusan*, 04/03/2008

<sup>162</sup> 'Dua akhbar Tamil hasut kaum India sertai demonstrasi jalanan', *Utusan*, 28/02/2008

legitimate cause or concern for doing so, but instead just intended to create, in Badawi's words, 'an uncontrollable situation'.

Throughout, rhetoric surrounding the Indians was infused with notions of 'irrationality'. Badawi for instance, warning the voters but particularly the Indians, was quoted declaring that 'voting is not just a vote without thought' (*Mengundi bukan hanya undilah tanpa fikir habis*)<sup>163</sup>. Elsewhere Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak was recorded 'requesting any parties not to be emotional' (*meminta mana-mana pihak agar tidak bersikap emosional*) when making their voting choice<sup>164</sup>. Supporting Hindraf and the opposition was couched as a rush of blood to the head, a one-off incident which the Indians would later regret. Kumar argued:

It is needless for the Indian community to spawn feelings of hatred or anger towards the party. Although recently, many matters have happened concerning Indian society they should think rationally.

*Tiada gunanya masyarakat India melahirkan rasa benci atau marah terhadap parti itu. Walaupun sejak kebelakangan ini, banyak perkara berlaku terhadap masyarakat India tetapi mereka seharusnya berfikir secara rasional.*<sup>165</sup>

In a post-mortem piece, Kumar used similar rhetoric, bitterly questioning 'why that community was so angry' (*mengapa masyarakat itu sungguh marah*)<sup>166</sup>. By challenging their government, these Indians had thus suffered from an irrational thought process, driven by fierce emotion. Kumar, perhaps inadvertently, was reproducing pro-establishment discourses of Indian identity, based on subordination and the notion of 'falling into line' – which of course reinforced the hegemony of the consociational order. That Malaysian Indians were expected to be compliant reinforced Pillai's (2007, p.x) belief that this colonial stereotype had yet to be readjusted by the nation-state. As Chapter 2 discussed, just as a 'meek and malleable' identity was imposed upon the Indians by Britain to facilitate its colonial enterprise, a similar identity has been maintained in the present day to reinforce Malaysia's racial hierarchy. Only by supporting BN and MIC could Indians survive in Malaysia; a dominant idea expressed in *Utusan*. This example represents one more way in which the fragmentation of the Indian identity manifested, with BN highlighting selective aspects of colonial identity to attempt to control group behaviours. Yet, based on an essentialising myth, through Hindraf and new media spaces like *Malaysiakini*, the 'reality' of that identity had

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<sup>163</sup> 'Nasihat PM kepada Cina, India', Habibah Omar, *Utusan*, 03/03/2008

<sup>164</sup> 'Masa depan terbaik kaum Cina, India bersama BN', *Utusan*, 07/03/2008

<sup>165</sup> 'Masyarakat India perlu bijak memilih', S. Anand Kumar, *Utusan*, 03/03/2008

<sup>166</sup> 'Suara kaum India dalam kerajaan tenggelam', S. Anand Kumar, *Utusan*, 11/03/2008

been eroded, rendered irrelevant according to shifting contexts of Indian ethno-communal representation (Leong 2012, p.31).

There is something to be said about the style of *Utusan*'s reporting here. In his study of bias in the government-owned media, Abbott (2011, p.23) wrote that

...the vast majority of reports were purely descriptive providing little context, analysis or critique. Where a reporter did depart from simple description, it was invariably to reinforce the report rather than to deviate from it.

Such style was evident here, with these *Utusan* reports doing little other than to paraphrase important voices from across the BN cabinet, and – in Kumar's case – reinforce and drive home the government viewpoint. Although on the one hand accepting that the media is duty-bound to report the news, that *Malaysiakini* in contrast positioned government voices against opposition voices in its own reports (see p.176), hinted at the more linear political line that *Utusan* was pushing. *Utusan* articles had no intention other than to get behind BN and unreservedly propagate its objectives (Anuar 2005, p.27), to construct those protesters as a combative, perhaps militant political group. This was a broader reflection of government discourses that positioned these protesters as 'extremists' who were committing a crime, in danger of causing instability by contesting the Malays' position as crystallised in the constitution.

Notably, there were fragments of truth to these representations. In the fax sent to Gordon Brown, discussed at this chapter's outset, Hindraf leaders had 'rather unwisely suggested that continued repression might force Tamils into "terrorism"' (Belle 2015, p.407). On this note, Govindasamy (2015, p.121) acknowledges that the government had recently linked Hindraf with the Tamil Tigers, a militant separatist group that sought an independent state within the North and East of Sri Lanka (considered predominantly Tamil-Hindu regions, as opposed to the majority Sinhalese-Buddhist population). BN had used this alleged connection to declare Hindraf illegal, seditious in attempting to break apart the Malaysian project. *Malaysiakini*'s Joe Fernandez acknowledged how Hindraf's objectives had been undermined by the government through references to this terrorist organisation. He noted:

Hindraf has reportedly threatened a Sri Lanka style situation in Malaysia if the Tamils are further pushed into a corner...If there are two things that the Tamils are fanatical about, it is language and religion. The Tamils are even more fanatical than the French over language.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> 'Indian winter of discontent', Joe Fernandez, *Malaysiakini*, 19/03/2008

Fernandez showed much awareness of the motives behind BN's negative construction of Hindraf, and was very critical of the racialising tendencies of the BN administration. In another article he noted this was 'a deliberate campaign of disinformation', caused by Umno's tendency to 'turn anything that happens in the country into a racial issue'<sup>168</sup>.

Whether or not those protests were actually articulated against the 'Malay establishment' was discussed in *Malaysiakini*. In an interview with *Malaysiakini*, Mahathir remarked:

Well, quite a lot of their demands were quite unreasonable – practically denying the position of the Malays as the indigenous race on this country. You know this is something very sensitive to the Malays. Either you get the support of the Malays or you get the support of the Indians. If the government tells the Malays "sorry you've got the same status as the Indians" I think there will be a big drop of support for the government from the Malays.<sup>169</sup>

Consequently in Mahathir's view, the protest was reducible through a Malay/non-Malay dichotomy; these Hindraf supporters had directly challenged Malayness. At least until Hindraf emerged, observed Mahendran, Indians had been 'mostly conservative' and the majority had acquiesced to the BN regime<sup>170</sup>. Accordingly, it was understandable why their political 'awakening' was perceived as being tied into an anti-*Ketuanan Melayu* agenda. Indians mobilising under the Hindraf banner were attacking the policies of the Malay-led government. In a society where racialisation is all-embracing, it was inevitable these protests would be consumed as a racial provocation made in the name of a collective Indian identity (Holst 2012, p.1). The instability engendered by BN's loss of two-thirds majority in 2008 perhaps provided another basis for the racialised framing of the protests<sup>171</sup>.

However, *Malaysiakini* editor K Kabilan was intent on emphasising that Hindraf were not anti-Malay. As an Indian Malaysian on *Malaysiakini*'s editorial team, Kabilan was at the forefront of *Malaysiakini*'s ambition to form an allegiance with Hindraf as an emergent political force, 'seek[ing] to construct new currents of ideas' (Hall 1986, p.433) linking the opposition with political progress and Indian empowerment. His article focused on Hindraf's alignment to the opposition campaign (having previously stated it would remain non-partisan), and quoted Waytha Moorthy who 'stressed that Hindraf is not against the Malays or Islam':

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<sup>168</sup> 'Umno's formula – turn everything racial', Joe Fernandez, *Malaysiakini*, 13/03/2008

<sup>169</sup> 'Q&A: Indian grouses not with me but Samy', Soon Li Tsin, *Malaysiakini*, 06/03/2008

<sup>170</sup> 'The rise of 'Makkal Sakthi'', B Mahendran, *Malaysiakini*, 08/03/2008

<sup>171</sup> For instance, one reader compared the Hindraf protests to the 1969 Malay/Chinese riots, thus delegitimising the Hindraf protests as a form of democratic participation ('Taking our rights for granted', SK, *Malaysiakini*, 29/02/2008).



We have lived peacefully and in harmony with the Malays but Umno which controls the BN has deliberately adopted and implemented policies that divide and rule the multi-racial and multi-religious population.<sup>172</sup>

Kabilan noted Hindraf leader Waytha Moorthy had ‘accused Umno of instilling fear among Malays in relation to Hindraf’s demands’.

Anti-Malay agenda or not, the use of women and children in those protests was a controversial issue which was exploited by *Utusan*. One writer likened these actions to a kind of indoctrination:

...children who were carried along were indirectly taught to hate, curse and mock the government at an early age, this behaviour is very immoral and completely unpatriotic...those innocent parties should be protected, nurtured, educated to love the country and not used for interest or to apply pressure to a desired matter.

*...kanak-kanak yang dikendong bersama secara tidak langsung sudah pun diajar membenci, mencaci dan mencerca kerajaan sejak kecil lagi di mana perlakuan ini sungguh tidak bermoral serta amat tidak patriotik sama sekali...golongan yang tidak bersalah ini sepatutnya dilindungi, diasuh, dididik menyayangi negara dan bukannya dipergunakan untuk kepentingan atau mengenakan tekanan terhadap sesuatu perkara yang dikehendaki.*<sup>173</sup>

Written by Mohamad Sofee Razak, a Malaysian lawyer, Razak was an example of an organic intellectual existing beyond the BN but tied to its objectives. This objective involved mobilising the *Utusan* machinery to propagate the natural order of *Ketuanan Melayu*, and Razak used his legal knowledge to reinforce these ideas. Hindraf’s use of women and children was ‘extreme and unhealthy’ (*melampau dan tidak sihat*), ‘leading to harm and injustice’ (*membawa kepada kemudaratan dan kepincangan*). This behaviour was unlawful and un-Malaysian:

Behaviour that clearly does not respect the laws of the country and those extreme activities must be contained and stopped immediately so as not to become a culture and practice in our country...As everyone knows, illegal rallies are not the way of the Malaysian people.

*Perlakuan yang jelas tidak menghormati undang-undang negara dan aktiviti ekstrem itu perlu dikekang serta dihentikan segera agar tidak menjadi budaya dan amalan di negara kita...Seperti semua sedia maklum perhimpunan haram bukan cara rakyat Malaysia.*

Interestingly, a very similar argument featured in a reader’s letter published the following day<sup>174</sup>, revealing how certain ideas had trickled through the different layers of Malaysian

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<sup>172</sup> ‘Vote opposition, Hindraf tells supporters’, K Kabilan, *Malaysiakini*, 03/03/2008

<sup>173</sup> ‘Demonstrasi jalanan bukan cara politik kita’, Mohamad Sofee Razak, *Utusan*, 20/02/2008

<sup>174</sup> ‘Demonstrasi jalanan gugat kestabilan negara’, Forum, *Utusan*, 21/02/2008

society, from the Prime Minister himself, to *Utusan*'s journalists and finally to the readership. Nevertheless, through *Malaysiakini* and other new media, these pro-government discourses had begun to be exposed. Liow (2012, p.303-304) notes that opposition media imagery of these protests painted a very different picture, showing 'Indian women carrying children while being sprayed by the water cannons of riot police' – which, he notes, strongly harmed BN's chances in the 2008 election, as admitted by then MCA President Chua Soi Lek.

Clearly, the new media had begun to show its power and given the altered global context since the election four years previously – accusations of government corruption, oppression of non-Muslim identity and Badawi's diminished reputation in light of those negative incidents – the government media had failed to effectively harness the sentiment of the electorate this time around. Those incidents had reduced BN's legitimacy, weakened its support and thus precipitated the hegemonic crisis in 2008. *Utusan* meanwhile, constrained by its broader pro-Malay agenda, was limited in its ability to reach out to the Malaysian Indians – despite strongly featuring MIC's voice and deploying staff like Kumar to claim their constituency's voice. On the other hand, *Malaysiakini*, central to Malaysia's new media landscape, represented an important 'weapon' in the Indians' 'struggle for representation' (Leong 2012, p.34). It is important to unpack this strategy.

### ***Malaysiakini: the birth of a counter-hegemonic moment***

*Malaysiakini*'s response to the rose protest was very different, featuring extensive coverage of those protests, reflecting co-founder Steven Gan's ambition to privilege the Hindraf voice. There were numerous articles on the rose protest, and several have been selected for discussion. On the day of the protest, *Malaysiakini* had published an article entitled '*Abdullah lashes out at "extremist" Hindraf*'<sup>175</sup>. The scare quotes around 'extremist' and the verb 'to lash out' indicated the scepticism, disagreement and overall critical stance taken towards Badawi's words (that Hindraf sought to arouse fear in the people, did not respect the democratic process and were attempting to disrupt the elections). That author contrasted Badawi's views with those of Hindraf's national coordinator R Thanenthiran, who declared Abdullah did not represent 'the needs and welfare of all races in this country'. Later that day, *Malaysiakini* published an article entitled '*Rose protest: All but 9 released*', which embodied dramatic real-time coverage on the events and their unanticipated negative aftermath<sup>176</sup>. For instance, the article had been updated at 8pm that evening to include the latest information on the fate of those protesters, including blogger Mahendran who had been arrested whilst

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<sup>175</sup> 'Abdullah lashes out at 'extremist' Hindraf', *Malaysiakini*, 16/02/2008

<sup>176</sup> 'Rose protest: All but 9 released', Syed Jaymal Zahiid, *Malaysiakini*, 16/02/2008

covering those demonstrations. Seemingly, Mahendran's unfortunate fate as an 'agenda-setter' in this election (Pandi 2014), imprisoned for his attempt to create awareness and change the oppressive environment for the Indians, proved Hilley's (2001, p.13) observation that there was still limited space in Malaysia for criticism of the organic order. The overall picture painted by the article was that this had been a 'stand-off' between police and Hindraf protesters. Under the sub-heading 'Police reaction unnecessary', space was devoted to Hindraf chairperson P Waytha Moorthy, who acknowledged his shock concerning the day's incidents and made a powerful statement which located the Malaysian Indians within a broader political struggle of global significance:

Peaceful struggle, gesture of Love and cry for justice of the poor and underclass Indian society has been met with violence and brutality by the state sanctioned by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The attack on peaceful poor and underclass people who came with roses is appalling. I invite all peace loving people throughout the world to condemn this brutal attack on innocent citizens who were exercising their rights under Article 10 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution and Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (*Sic*)

Waytha Moorthy and other figures within and outside of Hindraf had 'work[ed] out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world' (Gramsci 1971, p.323), and were seeking to propagate this new vision to the broader Indian collective.

It was perhaps these words which influenced *Malaysiakini* writers and readers to seek to empower the Indian voice and locate these Indian Malaysians within an imagined global Indian community, drawing on the broader tropes of transnationalism and postcolonialism. Leong (2012, p.39) notes that the speed and global connections enabled through the new media enable such tropes to be so effectively utilised, constituting powerful forces in uniting diverse diaspora Indian communities all over the world; allowing those communities to share their respective experiences. Particularly the broader media reaction to the response of the government and police force revealed the strength of this imagined community. The day after the events, one *Malaysiakini* article reported:

Indians across the world demonstrated outside the offices of Malaysian embassies and high commissions on Saturday to condemn the government and police...The demonstrations – which took place almost simultaneously in New York, Los Angeles, London, Belgium, Northern Island, Indonesia, New Zealand, New Delhi and Mumbai – were believed to be the first internationally-coordinated action in support of the Indian cause in Malaysia. (*Sic*)<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> 'Rose violence: Global demo against M'sia', *Malaysiakini*, 17/02/2008

Such a powerful counter-response was perhaps evidence of the slow but sure legitimization of this new discourse surrounding the Indians, although only time would tell if it became a permanent fixture in the political landscape. What was certain was that *Malaysiakini* writers had harnessed the technological power of the internet to create new spaces of online activism (Weiss 2014a, p.91). The article featured a quote from New York-based Anantha Paskaran, now running a financial consultancy, who described those protesters as his ‘fellow Indians in Malaysia’. Paskaran had grown up in Malaysia, which highlighted the ‘brain drain’ of the non-*Bumiputera* community due to exclusion under *Ketuanan Melayu* policy (World Bank 2011, p.126). But members of this imagined community are buoyed by the growing power of India, whose population is set to supersede China’s in the future. It was likely that the oppositional media were keen to emphasise this, especially as this was the first time the Indian community had been given such widespread coverage – the commentators would be keen to exploit this for all it was worth. Thus, noted Joe Fernandez, ‘the Indian community has been further emboldened to make demands’<sup>178</sup>. Drawing upon the economic strength of their ‘imputed “homeland”’ (Ang 2001a, p.31), articulating their racial identity utilising the trope of the global Indian diaspora showed the Malaysian government what was really at stake. It is thus clear how through the Hindraf issue *Malaysiakini* evinced the new media’s potential to introduce new social, cultural and political dynamics that affect the politics of representation of Malaysian Indians, moving that community ‘closer to, if not into, the center of the Malaysian imaginary’ (Leong 2012, p.40).

## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the fragmentation of Tamil-Hindu identity through exploring the respective media campaigns of *Malaysiakini* and *Utusan Malaysia* in 2008. Due to the ‘Hindraf factor’, *Malaysiakini* writers excavated and reconstituted the colonial imagination of the Tamil-Hindu to pose a political question to the Malays and empower the Tamil-Hindu community in Malaysia. *Utusan* due to its pro-government remit focused on the socioeconomic progress of Malaysian Indians and imposed a racialised frame on the Hindraf protests and protesters, in a bid to manage the ‘subordinate’ Indian identity and reinforce the consociational order. Throughout, there was much contestation between both campaigns, reflecting the fragmentation of Tamil-Hindu identity and – like the last chapter – how it was always vulnerable to manipulation. This conclusion focuses on three key aspects: the Tamil-Hindu essentialism and its implications for a fragmented Indian community, the important role that *Malaysiakini* played in 2008’s political landscape, and particularly the role that its

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<sup>178</sup> ‘Indian winter of discontent’, Joe Fernandez, *Malaysiakini*, 19/03/2008

critical intellectuals played (or attempted to play) in forging a counter-hegemonic political moment (in light of their middle class affiliations).

In 2008 *Malaysiakini* writers used the Hindraf protests as a platform to develop an influential media commentary around the subordinated 'Tamil-Hindu' in Malaysia. This Tamil-Hindu essentialism emphasised the Indians' colonial Indian past, strategically positioning this colonial origin as simultaneously the point of emancipation for a group that had not progressed in time, but been marginalised and excluded under Malaysia's racial hierarchy; one which positioned Malay-Muslim identity at the top and Tamil-Hindu identity near the bottom. This reinforces Bhabha's words that '[t]he "past-present" becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.' (1994, p.10) That 'marginality' was put to use in the Indian narrative, developed 'as a space of radical openness' to recover that community's voice (Soja 2009, p.57). This analysis helps us to further understand the construction of the Malay-Muslim and Tamil-Hindu identities as a mutual and co-evolving process: ideas of Tamil-Hindu subordination were useful for positioning the oppressed Indian identity against the dominant Malay-Muslim national identity, particularly in terms of the suppression of Hindu culture. Nevertheless this discourse was implicated in the exclusion of 'Othered' Indian identities, those from non-Hindu and non-Tamil backgrounds, reflecting the fragmentation of both aspects of that identity in the first instance; both grounded in an essentialising myth. But also excluded were those not from the Indian working class, as demonstrated in *Utusan*'s narrative, which lauded Indian socioeconomic progress and denied Indian exclusion (despite some MIC voices acknowledging this exclusion). The disjuncture between the narratives of Indian identity and the cohesiveness of that community are starkly clear in these media accounts, revealing the fragmentation of the Indian identity and the enduring dilemma of Indian representation in Malaysia.

In this election, new media were integral to shifting the politics of Indian representation in Malaysia. Key *Malaysiakini* writing drew upon the tropes of transnationalism and postcolonialism to successfully forge extra-state solidarities, where critical support for new ideas around the Malaysian Indian community could be forged. However, in 2008 these writers played into the hands of the enemy by focusing on such a hegemonic, racialised (and not class-based) notion of identity. This resulted in reader discussion that was occasionally unproductive, defined through contestation caused by cross-cultural difference. It is thus important not to overestimate *Malaysiakini*'s power to forge new imagined solidarities that transcend racial boundaries. Nevertheless, it effectively harnessed modern technologies to spread the message of the Indian community throughout the Malaysian polity and beyond. It

was this potential which BN and *Utusan* journalists did not appreciate, or perhaps had underestimated. *Utusan*, in stark contrast, failed to articulate a meaningful campaign. In contrast to the responsiveness and political strategy that defined *Malaysiakini* writing, the attempts of *Utusan* writers to counter this by championing *Ketuanan Melayu* and driving forward representations of extremity and criminality in a Malay-dominant society were exhausted and predictable. Confined by its pro-Malay agenda, *Utusan* had failed to harness 2008's political environment.

In 2008, *Malaysiakini* featured a range of intellectuals, from prominent figures in MIBA, to key editorial staff (Steven Gan and K Kabilan), to agenda-setting grassroots activists like blogger Mahendran and ordinary journalists like Joe Fernandez, each who were very aware of BN's tactics and sought to construct new ideas linking the opposition with political progress and Indian empowerment. However, for what exact reason the Indians' story was being told we cannot be sure. Again, it was the middle class which was steering *Malaysiakini's* discourse, which arguably reflected the new media audience more generally. It is not possible to say for sure, but it is arguable that some in the *Malaysiakini* contingent (Gan, Sivakumar) exploited the Tamil-Hindu discourse more for a broader agenda that involved their ambitions to change the political regime, and less because they truly sought to change the Indians' fate. In this the potential for a counter-hegemonic moment was perhaps constrained by these writers' political affiliation. Appropriating this ideology whilst simultaneously being implicated in elite political networks, this resulted in the very ambiguous position of the middle class (Kua cited in Hilley 2001, p.244). But these intellectuals collectively represented a strong voice, and in 2008 the BN experienced its worst result in its history. As the next chapter reveals, *Utusan* changed its strategy in a bid to bypass this middle class 'voice' and talk to the rural Malay masses. In many ways it proved effective, evincing the government media's creativity in its reconstruction of ethnoreligious discourses, and more significantly that we should not write *Utusan* off as a potent force in Malaysian politics.

## Chapter 7: 2013's 'Chinese Tsunami' and the Resurrection of 'Tanah Melayu'

The Chinese community failed in their attempt to overthrow the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) government that has the Malays at its core.

*Masyarakat Cina gagal dalam usaha mereka untuk menumbangkan kerajaan Barisan Nasional (BN) yang orang Melayu menjadi terasnya.*

(Senior editor Zulkiflee Bakar, *Utusan Malaysia*, 7 May 2013)

### Introduction

This chapter demonstrates how 2013's election was defined by a tense media battle between on the one hand, *Utusan* writers' racialisation of the Malay/Chinese landscape, and on the other, the emphasis placed by *Malaysiakini* writers on rural/urban difference. It shows how, influenced by the Prime Minister's accusation of a 'Chinese Tsunami', influential *Utusan* journalists revived a distinctly and unapologetically ethnonational discourse around the Malays and Chinese. In reality, BN backed by *Utusan* had conducted a powerful pro-Malay (and anti-Chinese) campaign in the rural constituencies, and the nature and significance of this (and its critical opposition from *Malaysiakini* writers), and what it reveals about the fragmentation of Malay and Chinese identity, are explored.

The first part of the analysis shows how, in light of the Prime Minister's comments, *Utusan* writers constructed a Chinese-kafir essentialism targeted against those Chinese citizens who were presumed to have voted for DAP in the election. That group was constructed as a militant group that had attempted to overthrow the government, having been mobilised by DAP – an 'extremist' organisation that sought to place Malaysia under its own control. The chapter then illustrates how certain *Malaysiakini* writers opposed this narrative vis-à-vis critiquing Najib, Mahathir and *Utusan* – each representative of diseases inherent in the administration. Writers vocally denied BN's racialised perspective, acknowledging that the tsunami was actually 'rural-urban' or 'Malaysian'. However, they consequently exposed perceived social, cultural and political differences between the 'unsophisticated' rural citizens and the 'enlightened' and progressive urbanites.

The chapter then shows how *Utusan*'s aforementioned anti-Chinese campaign was located within a broader campaign centred on the 'Malay at peril', in which key *Utusan* journalists sought to incite fear and distrust among the Malay readership toward their non-Malay peers. Writers constructed an imagined Malay community, members of which were cast in a

political drama that highlighted the Malays' perilous circumstances, utilising 'familiar, ancient, and deeply rooted cultural elements' of Malay life (Kessler cited in Case 1995, p.82), deriving from the Melaka Sultanate. This suggested to Malay readers that they would lose their sense of 'Self' if the opposition continued to grow in power and influence. It reflected *Utusan*'s ambition to reinforce the early, exclusionary nationalism of the late colonial period. Overall this section argues that *Utusan* writers, aware of *Malaysiakini*'s alignment with civil society and the opposition, 'bypassed' this middle class voice and conducted an effective and orderly campaign directed at a rural Malay audience, catalysing support for Umno and providing a suitable pretext for the subsequent racialisation of the political landscape.

It is shown how 2013 could be located within Malaysia's colonial past, with BN's decision to scapegoat these Chinese citizens necessitated by the post-election circumstances. This reflected 'the ebb and flow of ethnic revitalisation and racialisation', where racialisation is necessitated through poor economic performance (Fee and Appudurai 2011, p.76). Hence, the formation of Chinese identity is a two-way process, both shaping, and shaped by, Malaysia's political and cultural landscape at that time (Tong 2010, p.234). This chapter again highlights the importance of studying elections within a broader cycle. For instance, the rural-urban divide had been overshadowed in 2004 by the Islamic State question and in 2008 by the Hindraf issue; but 2013 clearly showed that this divide represented the limits of *Malaysiakini*'s reach whilst simultaneously representing the enduring power of *Utusan*, whose writers demonstrated resilience in mobilising the rural Malay readership. Before progressing to the analysis, the chapter asks how 2013's political context affected the election, informing the specific media commentaries and broader strategies of both media outlets.

## **7.1 Political Context**

2010 witnessed a political movement across the Arab world on a scale unprecedented in modern times, known as the 'Arab Spring': a wave of uprisings across the Middle East; some violent, others peaceful. These protests were distinct for their creative use of social media to broadcast and communicate their message to the world, undermining repressive state controls. Significantly, in most countries these protests were distinct for 'the absence of Islam' and instead for the participation of youth and civil society (Kamali 2011, p.370). The issue was not these countries' Islamic identity; instead, a new generation of Arab-Muslims was expressing discontent with, inter alia, authoritarianism, corruption, inequality, poverty and unemployment (Marcinkowski 2012, p.532). The Arab Spring generated regime change in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, and political reforms in Algeria, Jordan, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait,



Morocco, and Saudi Arabia. However it also fomented major civil wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria, the effects of which are still being felt.

There was a very universal element to those uprisings, and viewed in this light, albeit not in the Arab world, as a majority-Muslim country Malaysia was never apart from that sociopolitical context – especially given the growth of civil society. Speaking generally, Malaysia has consistently presented itself as a stable and prosperous multiracial democracy in the Muslim world and particularly Southeast Asia. But according to Aras and Ekim (2015, online), there is ‘almost an unbridgeable gap’ between this image and its ‘deplorable human rights record’. Various protest movements had continued to push for political reform, exposing BN in a negative light due to its hostile response. In 2011 *Bersih* held its second rally in Kuala Lumpur, following the successes of the first in raising awareness about the need for democratic and electoral reform. It amassed over 20,000 protesters but like 2007 those attendees were met with riot police, tear gas and criminal charges. Subsequently, Umno Youth leader Khairy Jamaluddin had released a statement accusing the opposition of attempting to ‘manufacture a Malaysian version of the Arab spring’ (The Guardian 2011, online). International media were highly critical of BN’s response, with criticisms of Prime Minister Najib Razak’s ‘strong-arm tactics’, likeable to Egypt’s ousted leader Hosni Mubarak (Tisdall 2011, online).

Malaysia would unlikely experience the same fate as the Arab world. *Bersih*’s Chairperson Ambiga Sreenivasan declared that ‘[w]e don’t want an Arab Spring’, but for the political system to reflect ‘the will of the people’ (Chooi 2012, online). The issues that sparked the Arab Spring were not dissimilar from those in Malaysia, and critics have not ruled out an Arab Spring across Southeast Asia. Palatino (2012, online) notes ‘encouraging signs of citizens standing up for themselves’ in Burma, Malaysia and Indonesia, particularly acknowledging *Bersih* as a ‘shining example’ of a ‘grassroots initiative’ that could spark the region’s Arab Spring. One major rally in January 2013 proved that Malaysian protests did not have to spell controversy. During the People’s Uprising Rally, attended by hundreds of thousands of people, police were commended by the government, opposition and general public for how they handled these protests, proving that peaceful assembly could be achieved. But it was the latest in a series of protests demonstrating the discontent of Malaysian citizens, who were collectively holding their politicians to account (Leong 2012, p.46). Going into the thirteenth general election, Malaysia’s political environment was very different than ten years ago. But there were other issues that defined the kind of election battle that took place.

### ***2009: Najib replaces Badawi***

2008's election generated much insecurity among the Malay elite, who had lost confidence in Ahmad Badawi. Badawi subsequently faced internal and external pressure for his resignation, which he announced on 1 April 2009 during the Umno General Assembly. Badawi was replaced by Najib Razak, widely held by political observers to be Mahathir's 'true' successor, more aligned to Mahathir's approach. That year Najib implemented the 1Malaysia policy, which 'emphasise[d] the importance of national unity regardless of race, background or religious belief' (1Malaysia 2015, online). There were certainly similarities with *Bangsa Malaysia*, discussed in Chapter 1, which encouraged Malaysians to foster a united and culturally inclusive Malaysian nationality. Comparing the two, O'Shannassy (2013, p.435-436) argues that in 'eschew[ing] any mention of *bangsa*', 1Malaysia reflected a more 'ethnically-neutral approach to governing' influenced by *Pakatan Rakyat*'s successes in 2008 and could potentially 're-legitimise UMNO and the BN' after 2008's setback<sup>179</sup>. However, if 1Malaysia represented the soft and culturally inclusive 'face' of Najib's administration, then emerging alongside was an organisation that performed BN's 'dirty work'.

After the election, a Malay NGO called *Perkasa* had been formed by controversial Malay politician Ibrahim Ali and sponsored by Mahathir. Described by Govindasamy (2015, p.122) as 'the radical face of UMNO', *Perkasa* advocates Malay and *Bumiputera* supremacy, defending Malay rights in light of their alleged infringement by non-Malays. This group undermined the legitimacy of Najib's 1Malaysia policy, reflecting broader tensions within Umno, between conservatives and more progressive-minded politicians. A 2009 poll found that little over one-third of respondents understood 1Malaysia's purpose, a sentiment echoed by Mahathir the following year – reflecting '[t]he disjuncture between the image and practices of Najib's government' (O'Shannassy 2013, p.437). Since the start of office, Najib had faced the dilemma of articulating an inclusive national identity which regained voter support whilst simultaneously appeasing those politicians discontent with the Malays' socioeconomic position. These tensions spilled over into 2013's election campaign<sup>180</sup>.

### ***Souring Malay-Chinese relations***

Albeit not discussed in the last chapter, considering DAP's growing Chinese support and MCA's much-reduced political representation since 2008, the Chinese no longer had strong

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<sup>179</sup> After the 2008 election, the makeshift *Barisan Rakyat* coalition was officiated as *Pakatan Rakyat* (People's Alliance).

<sup>180</sup> There were other ethnoreligious controversies, including Muslim-Christian tensions over the use of the word 'Allah' and protests relating to the *Pakatan*-ruled Selangor government's relocation of a Hindu temple to a Muslim-majority area – which further undermined the 1Malaysia policy, albeit have not been included due to lacking relevance to the chapter's Malay/Chinese focus.

government representation. Segawa (2015, p.183) notes how BN's policies toward the Chinese respond according to the political climate. Immediately after 2008, 'BN extended non-Malay social and cultural rights in an attempt to regain non-Malay support', focusing on developing Chinese community facilities, including the offer of Chinese scholarships and funding Chinese primary schools (ibid, p.186). However there were inconsistencies between these efforts and its support for *Perkasa*, which alienated Chinese and Indian voters (ibid, p.188). Welsh believes *Perkasa*'s appeal stemmed from the perception that 'the Chinese had gained power in 2008 through opposition victories', threatening Malay political-economic power (2013, p.139). Additionally, Sun (2014, p.39) notes that Chinese voters had grown to ignore MCA's threat that voting *Pakatan* would usher in a theocracy under PAS.

On this note, since president Ong Ka Ting's decision not to seek re-election after 2008, MCA 'had been plagued with internal strife' (ibid, p.42). Up until 2013, bitter factionalism continued to compromise MCA's position amongst the Malaysian Chinese community. Whereas in the past these leadership contests 'g[ot] the Chinese Malaysian community emotionally involved', now MCA appeared irrelevant to that community's interests, a mere cosmetic addition to 'the Umno-BN one-party state' (Wong 2009, online). Sun (2014, p.44) further notes that because of these 'self-serving' internal party battles, MCA was perceived to lack concern for the interests of the Chinese community at large. As for Umno, given diminished Chinese support, consociationalism held decreasing value (Segawa 2015, p.189), leading to its ruthless tactics in 2013.

### ***2013: what was at stake?***

Despite the promise of regime change under Najib and 1Malaysia, it seemed Malaysians were drawn to a sense of *déjà vu*, with memories of 2008's political landscape influencing the opposition's agenda. *Pakatan*'s momentum had continued to build, capitalising from its alliance with civil society, and the perseverance of ethnoreligious issues that undermined government credibility. PKR, DAP and PAS were bound by their multicultural 'pact', and *Pakatan*'s manifesto highlighted the need for unity between different racial groups, positioning that coalition as the hope for all Malaysian people. This had been successful with the Chinese in 2008, and consequently *Pakatan* rallies were popular with Chinese crowds, indicating likely swings to the opposition in Chinese-majority seats (Khoo 2013, p.12-13). Welsh notes that BN spread photos of these rallies among the rural Malay community, 'to fan feelings of ethnic insecurity' and feed 'the Malay-ultranationalist zeal that had exploded since the opposition's gains in 2008' (2013, p.145).

BN's manifesto was entitled 'People First! A Promise of Hope'. MCA, MIC and *Gerakan* had lost their authority as voices of the non-Malay communities, and for Najib regaining BN's two-thirds majority was not easy. However, 'Perkasa's consistent radical-racist approach toward non-Malays...ha[d] mobilised rural Malays to some extent to return to UMNO' (Govindasamy 2015, p.124). *Perkasa* had successfully combated *Malaysiakini* in cyberspace (Liow 2012, p.310) and had become an effective pressure group which influenced Umno's move to the right in the election. The close relationship between both organisations was highlighted when Ibrahim Ali contested as an independent candidate in support of BN. *Perkasa* Vice-President Zulkifli Noordin was also chosen to run for Umno, replacing a dropped out candidate. For Kessler, the situation was clear: the government had chosen to focus on the rural Malay community, battling PAS for 'the national Malay soul' (2013a, online). This reflected what he terms a 'Perkasa Mild' approach, where BN 'wr[ote] off in advance' the Chinese vote and instead had to 'win enough peninsular Malay votes, and enough of them in the right places' (ibid). Essentially, Umno 'had strategically decided to "go it alone"...doom[ing] its non-Malay partners' (Khoo 2013, p.11). BN's campaign mobilised a 'collective cultural and political anxiety' among the Malay electorate towards the non-Malay 'threat', positioning Umno as the legitimate guardian of Malay identity and '*Tanah Melayu*' (ibid). 'Chinese' DAP and multicultural PKR, and their alliance with PAS, were threats to this identity.

On May 5 2013, BN was pushed to the brink, winning just 133 of 222 seats. But this belied the strength of Umno's performance, winning 88 seats, against MCA's meagre 7 and MIC's 4. The number of seats held by Chinese parties in BN more than halved since 2008. The opposition increased their seats from 82 to 89, achieving 50.87% of the popular vote. The DAP won 38 seats, PKR 30, and PAS 21. The electoral result was the clearest sign yet of the divide between rural citizens and the growing urban middle classes. Significantly, both *Perkasa* candidates failed to win in their constituencies. Nevertheless, Umno won just one seat less than the three opposition parties combined, 'emerg[ing] politically even more dominant than it had been before', earning the right to define the national agenda (Kessler 2013a, online). Crucial to this agenda was handling the growing support for DAP among Chinese voters, for this party had achieved its strongest win to-date.

## **7.2 Introduction to the Media Commentaries**

This chapter analyses 50 media articles from *Utusan Malaysia* and *Malaysiakini*. In 2013, *Utusan* was the key driver of ethnoreligious discourse, showing creativity in reworking the

Malay-Muslim and Chinese-kafir ethnoreligious categories. This essential ‘Malay/Chinese fracture’, and its interpretation by these *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* writers, provide the core of this chapter’s analytical material, casting light on the developing relationship between *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* and their respective audiences, and exposing the growing sociocultural fractures created by the new media landscape.

*Malaysiakini* featured an extensive range of perspectives, from blogger K Temoc to key civil society figures like Dr Lim Teck Ghee, director of the Centre for Policy Initiatives (CPI) and Tricia Yeoh, chief operating officer of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS). *Malaysiakini* regulars like Ram Anand, Nigel Aw and Josh Hong provided important commentaries, as did a key post-election piece from opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim – which as shall be demonstrated very likely influenced the broader sentiment of *Malaysiakini*’s writers and readers. The ‘voice’ of the readers was represented by letters to the editor but also by various ‘YourSay’ articles (articles containing the editor’s pick of the best user comments on different news stories) published during the election period, several which feature in this chapter. These articles contained a bewildering array of opinions, ranging from ironic and witty remarks to extensive criticisms of Najib’s administration. *Utusan* featured the usual selection of pieces arranged by the editors, including important contributions from Zaini Hassan and Zulkiflee Bakar, both on that editorial team. There were also contributions from public figures like Salleh Buang, renowned legal analyst, and lawyer-cum-activist Khairul Anwar Rahmat. As with the previous two elections, such figures were important for *Utusan*, to reinforce the status quo and ‘lay down the law’ – an important means of manufacturing popular consent. Various politicians featured across several articles, including Mohd Ali Rustam, Umno’s Chief Minister of Melaka, who, although considered to have been a rising star, failed to retain his seat.

The immediate post-election atmosphere was seemingly defined by a heated to-and-fro between *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* writers, based on their oppositional stances toward the election result. This was magnified by a statement given by Najib Razak after the election, alleging a ‘tsunami’ of Chinese votes away from BN and towards the opposition<sup>181</sup>. Certain Chinese communities had been ‘taken in’ by the opposition’s ‘extremist ideologies’, and Najib called for a ‘national reconciliation process’. To an extent, he was right:

Chinese voters caused a tidal wave of anti-regime sentiment that brought MCA to its electoral nadir, reaffirmed Gerakan’s irrelevance, and strengthened DAP as never before. (Khoo 2013, p.24)

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<sup>181</sup> ‘Najib blames polls results on ‘Chinese tsunami’’, Ram Anand, *Malaysiakini*, 06/05/2013

Sun (2014, p.37) estimates that in certain constituencies approximately 90 percent of Chinese citizens voted for the opposition. But on top of Chinese dissatisfaction, corruption, poor governance and ‘officially sanctioned ethno-religious chauvinism’ had caused this overwhelming backlash against BN (Khoo 2013, p.25), interestingly reflecting broader trends that have seen the decline of secular nationalism in many Muslim countries for the same reasons: unfulfilled promises and corruption. This way BN was like a foreign impostor, because the racialised secularism it practised was the historical legacy of colonialism, carrying with it the evils associated with that era (De Ley 2000, online).

Najib’s words provided a core focus in both media outlets. He was immediately chastised by the opposition and liberal media for inciting racial tensions, undermining his ‘moderate’ Malaysia image. One key message for those writing in *Malaysiakini* was that this was not a Chinese issue but better reflected the difference between rural and urban areas. Readers were first and foremost Malaysians and should rise above BN’s amoral use of racialised discourses to maintain hegemony. Writers were aware that Najib’s racialisation of the election result sought to detract from the reality that the national majority – regardless of race – had voted for the opposition for the first time in Malaysian history. Blogger K Temoc was keen to emphasise there was also much contestation among different Umno figures, reflecting the diversity of opinion but more significantly fractures within that party<sup>182</sup>. He referred to renowned moderate politician Saifuddin Abdullah (who incidentally had lost his seat after the election), Khairy Jamaluddin and pro-Umno blogger A Kadir Jasin, each who had rejected Najib’s racialised election rhetoric.

In making that statement, Najib had legitimised BN’s pro-Malay campaign; a campaign which had written off the Chinese vote. *Utusan* supported Najib’s position, taking the Chinese ‘tsunami’ as a given – reinforcing his words with stories that focused on the ‘racist Chinese’ and the DAP as an anti-Islamic, anti-Malay, chauvinist party. Although Najib had implied a surge of support towards DAP, *Utusan* writers worked with this tsunami metaphor to imply a ‘wave’ of Chinese Malaysians who endangered the country’s Malay identity, drawing upon the fraught colonial history between both communities. This position was chiefly demonstrated by a series of articles written by senior editor Zulkiflee Bakar, including the now infamous ‘*Apa lagi orang Cina mahu?*’ (What more do the Chinese want?), published the day after the election<sup>183</sup>. To make an important reiteration, the ‘Chinese-kafir’ essentialism refers to the ways in which the Malaysian media – particularly *Utusan* – often

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<sup>182</sup> ‘*Apa lagi Umno mahu*’, K Temoc, *Malaysiakini*, 10/05/2013

<sup>183</sup> ‘*Apa lagi orang Cina mahu?*’, Zulkiflee Bakar, *Utusan*, 07/05/2013

refer to the Chinese citizens in contexts that ignore, or neglect, their myriad religious affiliations (be that as Buddhists, Taoists, or Christians, or even Muslims or Hindus). Instead they are mentioned in reference to, inter alia, their dissatisfaction at the social contract, or their hunger for Chinese schools, or the DAP's craving for greater power. The result is that 'the Chinese' as a collective often come off appearing as ungrateful, greedy and power-hungry – regardless of how far this is from the truth<sup>184</sup>.

### ***7.3 Apa Lagi Orang Cina Mahu?***

Bakar's words have been appropriated for this section because they epitomise the anti-Chinese rhetoric of *Utusan* writers, but also the BN – Najib, Mahathir and various other figures. This section examines *Utusan*'s strategy, demonstrating how the Chinese-kafir essentialism was strategically reconstructed and moulded around DAP and its Chinese supporters. These Chinese citizens were cast as a militant group whose growing power threatened the core values of the Malay establishment – like the *kongsi* of the colonial era. This historical positioning and continuity was important in excluding the centuries of ethnoreligious mixing (for instance the *Baba-Nyonya* creole cultures discussed in chapter 2), and legitimised *Utusan* writers' location of Malaysian Chinese as 'outsiders' (Gabriel 2014, p.1212).

Before proceeding to that core argument, it is useful to examine media framings of DAP running into the election, which are essential for understanding Najib's 'Chinese tsunami' remark and *Utusan*'s ensuing anti-Chinese campaign. For the election, DAP's Lim Kit Siang had chosen to contest in Gelang Patah, a small town in Johor, and he was facing Johor's Chief Minister, Umno heavyweight Abdul Ghani Othman. As the birthplace of Umno, Johor was strongly pro-Umno, and a brief examination of Johor and the discourses being spun by Umno will provide insight into the broader campaign being conducted by *Utusan* in 2013 (for the electoral threat of Lim and DAP was certainly not unique to Johor but symptomatic of broader shifts in the political landscape).

#### ***DAP in Johor***

Former Umno politician Ruhanie Ahmad, writing for *Utusan*, criticised Lim's decision to campaign in Johor for three reasons:

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<sup>184</sup> One particularly useful treatment of the complexity of the Malaysian Chinese community remains Judith Nagata's (1974) paper, 'What Is a Malay?', an ethnographic account of her research in Penang, in which she expertly explores the multiple ways that Chinese Muslim identity falls in the gap between Malayness and Chineseness, neither allowed to be one nor the other. Guan and Suryadinata (2012, p.xviii) also offer a useful discussion of these issues, noting that Chinese Muslims occupy a liminal space in the Malaysian nation-state, as a 'double minority' – as a Chinese citizen in the Malay-Muslim dominated state and as a Muslim outside the 'true' Chinese community.

First, testing the accuracy of the Johor Malay spirit as the originator of the anti-Malayan Union movement in 1946. Second, measuring the support of the Chinese voters and clearing the way for the strengthening of DAP in the birthland of UMNO and the main stronghold of the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) since independence. Third, strengthening the psychological bond and physical distance of DAP's Malaysian Malaysia with PAP in Singapore, as its pioneer.

*Pertama, menguji kejituan semangat Melayu Johor selaku pencetus gerakan anti-Malayan Union pada tahun 1946. Kedua, mengukur sokongan pengundi Cina serta merintis pengukuhan DAP di bumi kelahiran UMNO dan kubu utama Barisan Nasional (BN) sejak merdeka. Ketiga, mengeratkan jalinan psikologi dan jarak fizikal Malaysian Malaysia DAP dengan PAP di Singapura, selaku pelopornya.*<sup>185</sup>

Ahmad's aim was to highlight the 'threat' of those oppositional Chinese voters to Johor, and the alleged links with PAP were to portray Lim not as a 'true' Malaysian but as a Chinese sympathiser. In Ahmad's eyes, DAP was not a bona fide political party but represented the remnants of Singapore's history, 'continuing to champion the objectives of the PAP' (*terus memperjuangkan matlamat PAP itu*). Ahmad quoted journalist Tan Siew Sin from an old *Utusan* article warning Malaysians of 'a group of Chinese people...attempting to destroy Malaysia for their own interests' (*segolongan orang-orang Cina...berusaha menghancurkan Malaysia bagi kepentingan mereka sendiri*). Consequently, Ahmad had positioned DAP as an illegal and surreptitious organisation that had no legitimate place in Malaysia. This highlights how fragments of history were being utilised and exploited to reinforce the Chinese-kafir identity, with Ahmad connecting DAP with those militant organisations of days past. Ang (2001a, p.28) notes that history

...is always ambiguous, always messy, and people remember – and therefore construct – the past in ways that reflect their present need for meaning.

We can see how this specific articulation of Chinese identity was projected to reflect the ruling Malays' need for meaning, in light of the two most recent – and worst – election results in BN's history.

*Malaysiakini's* Kuek Ser Kuang Keng and Lee Way Loon noted:

Being the birthplace of Umno (in 1946) and many of its strongmen, Johor's political landscape has largely been shaped by Umno's race-based politics built on Malay dominance. Having been under Umno's political monopoly for almost seven decades, Malay Johoreans have been indoctrinated with a strong sense of Malay nationalism and supremacy.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> 'Kit Siang dan Malaysian Malaysia', Ruhanie Ahmad, *Utusan*, 29/04/2013

<sup>186</sup> 'Malay nationalism' a hurdle for Johor Pakatan', Kuek Ser Kuang Keng and Lee Way Loon, *Malaysiakini*, 22/04/2013



Johor occupies a central position in Malay political discourse. As the birthplace of Umno, it provides the root of that party's strength – in other words, for Umno to fall, Johor must fall (Hamid 1996, p.218). This article was assessing that possibility in light of the opposition's hopes. The authors observed that issues of 'foreign control' (i.e. non-Malay leadership) alarmed Malay Johoreans, drawing upon the words of a PAS spokesman, who noted the struggle to convince those Malays that a Chinese Malaysian would not become Chief Minister in Johor let alone the Prime Minister, and that the Malay 'holy trinity' (language, royalty and religion) would be protected. Such was the sentiment that Ruhanie Ahmad was trying to incite among his readers<sup>187</sup>. Given BN's deployment of *Utusan* to promote this pro-Malay message this time around, the task for that PAS spokesman and other opposition politicians was arguably difficult.

In reality, Johor was the focus of a broader *Pakatan* struggle. Kuek Ser Kuang Keng and Nigel Aw had produced an article on Johor's Felda settlements, where voters were known for their loyalty to Umno<sup>188</sup>. 'Felda' stands for Federal Land Development Authority, the government agency that handles the relocation of poor Malay villagers into newly developed settlements. It was established in the 1960s to improve the lives of rural Malaysians, focusing on the relocation of displaced Malay farmers to Malay reserve land (Rasiah 2006, p.186). Because this scheme encouraged Malay peasant participation in crop production and land management, it had decreased PAS' appeal in those areas. The article featured a quote from PKR's Chua Jui Meng, who described those settlements as 'the heart of the Malay heartland'. But they observed how PAS had experienced growing success by highlighting various problems including 'the alleged short-changing of Felda settlers through the manipulation of oil palm extraction rates', and hence how 'the (opposition) coalition is slowly but gradually chipping away at BN's final bastion of total power'.

Nevertheless the dominant government-driven narrative remained strong, driven by people like Mahathir. Throughout the campaign, Mahathir on various occasions had noted his opposition to DAP's strategy, which would 'result in the Malays becoming less and less qualified and poorer'<sup>189</sup>, was 'racist' (*rasis*) due to solely targeting Chinese constituencies<sup>190</sup>, and sought to 'mak[e] the Chinese hate the Malays'<sup>191</sup>. Coming from the same generation as

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<sup>187</sup> Another article did likewise, exploiting DAP's positive relationship with PAS to argue that 'Pas was forced to bow to the DAP's will' (*Pas terpaksa tunduk dengan kehendak DAP*) and was now 'successfully moulded' (*berjaya ditarbiah*) by that party, thus reinforcing the negative Chinese/Malay relationship that *Utusan* sought to drive home ('*DAP berjaya tarbiahkan Pas - Rujhan Abdul Rahman*', *Utusan*, 02/05/2013).

<sup>188</sup> 'Pakatan chips away at BN's last bastion of dominance', Kuek Ser Kuang Keng and Nigel Aw, *Malaysiakini*, 28/04/2013

<sup>189</sup> 'Ethnic politics at heart of GE13 campaign', John Grafilo, *Malaysiakini*, 25/04/2013

<sup>190</sup> '*DAP, Pas dua-dua parti rasis - Dr. M*', *Utusan*, 30/04/2013

<sup>191</sup> 'Chinese 'rejected Malay hand of friendship'', Ram Anand, *Malaysiakini*, 07/05/2013

Lim, both figures were political archrivals. Many have acknowledged Mahathir's vendetta against the Lim family (see for example Ooi 2015), and Lim in the past has criticised Mahathir's exploitation of the politics of racial fear, to silence DAP and prevent it from exposing BN's weaknesses (Hwang 2003, p.193). *Malaysiakini* was eager to highlight this oppositional narrative, and featured an opposing statement from Lim on his motives in Johor<sup>192</sup>. Criticising Mahathir for his 'wild, baseless, irresponsible and racist' remarks, Lim reminded Mahathir to

...always act as a responsible "elder statesman" and not succumb to cheap and irresponsible tactics as race-baiting and inciting communal sentiments, which are completely antithetical to his concept of Bangsa Malaysia in Vision 2020.

Lim insisted DAP was not sowing racial conflict towards Chinese voters, but instead that DAP's values emulated Umno's founding father, Onn Jaafar, who had sought to open Umno to non-Malays. Nevertheless, this neglected the fact that Onn himself had been ostracised from the Umno mainstream for vocalising his indifference to the Malay status quo (Cheah 2003, p.25). Moreover, these various remarks made by Lim were no match for the strength of Mahathir's voice, which was influential in the government's campaign.

As discussed, although technically retired, Mahathir was far from irrelevant, given his patronage of *Perkasa* and links to Najib. Before the election *Malaysiakini's* Nigel Aw identified connections between the past ways Mahathir had treated the Chinese and the possible manner in which Najib may also:

Even though Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is showering promises to advance Chinese education in the country, he may go back on his word, just as former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad did.<sup>193</sup>

Aw argued that in the past, the Chinese electorate had been deceived by BN, highlighting the words of Lim Guan Eng:

They make promises but will they fulfill them? Just like in 1999, when Mahathir accepted the Su Qiu request for more freedom and after the general election that year, he turned around and bit them. Najib and BN are able to do the same because their record over the last 50 years is not about making promises but breaking promises made. (*Sic*)

Prior to the 1999 election, given the doubt concerning Malay votes caused by the Anwar saga, aware of the Chinese constituency's political significance, an ad hoc organisation called the

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<sup>192</sup> 'Kit Siang: I'm emulating Umno's founding father', *Malaysiakini*, 09/04/2013

<sup>193</sup> 'Najib may not honour promises to the Chinese', Nigel Aw, *Malaysiakini*, 01/05/2013

Chinese Associations Election Appeals Committee (Suqiu) had submitted a memorandum which called for more political freedom, in an attempt to lever power from that situation. It was accepted by Mahathir before the election, but rejected afterwards on the grounds it could jeopardise Malay 'special rights' (Khoo 2003, p.126). Hence, BN was reputed for tactically manipulating the Chinese vote if and when circumstances demanded.

It has been important to briefly examine these discourses – *Utusan*'s reinforcement of the 'threat' of DAP and its Chinese supporters, the struggle of *Malaysiakini* writers to counter such rhetoric, and how this connected to the perceived threat to the Malay establishment that journalists, spectators and casual observers alike reckoned the thirteenth general election could signal. This debate dominated the post-election media reaction, to which we now turn.

### *Apa lagi orang Cina mahu?*

The morning of 7 May, emblazoned across *Utusan*'s front page were the words '*Apa lagi orang Cina mahu?*' (What more do the Chinese want?)<sup>194</sup>. The story focused on the 'insolent actions of a group of Chinese youth' (*perbuatan biadab sekumpulan remaja Cina*) who had launched a silent protest in light of the election result, which Zulkiflee Bakar argued 'angered the Malays' (*membangkitkan kemarahan orang Melayu*). His rhetoric was such that those Chinese citizens had committed rebellion or treason. It started with the powerful words:

The Chinese community failed in their attempt to overthrow the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) government that has the Malays at its core. That failure will surely disappoint those who so much hoped in the 13th General Election (GE-13) it was a platform for them to "bury" UMNO through the opposition's success.

*Masyarakat Cina gagal dalam usaha mereka untuk menumbangkan kerajaan Barisan Nasional (BN) yang orang Melayu menjadi terasnya. Kegagalan itu sudah tentulah mengecewakan mereka yang amat berharap dalam Pilihan Raya Umum Ke-13 (PRU-13) ia menjadi medan untuk mereka 'menguburkan' UMNO melalui kejayaan pakatan pembangkang.*

Such words resembled the historical days of colonial Malaya, where British rulers in their accounts of the Chinese placed an unnecessary and negative emphasis on those Chinese subjects who appeared to them as anti-social, deceitful, ruthless, and treacherous. Naturally those accounts obscured the reality that citizens from China had assimilated into the indigenous culture over centuries of maritime trade. As noted in chapter 2, it was only in colonial Malaya that 'Chinese' and 'Malay' were constructed as racial categories, and

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<sup>194</sup> '*Apa lagi orang Cina mahu?*', Zulkiflee Bakar, *Utusan*, 07/05/2013

subsequently articulated against one another (Case 1995, p.90), collapsing centuries of cultural, linguistic, religious and other forms of mixing in the process.

Utilising combative language throughout, Bakar argued GE13 represented a master plan by the Chinese electorate to topple BN, exploiting ‘the willingness of PKR and Pas to cooperate with DAP’ (*kesediaan PKR dan Pas bekerjasama dengan DAP*). Bakar questioned what more the Chinese wanted, having been ‘given special treatment by the BN government’ (*diberi layanan yang begitu istimewa oleh kerajaan BN*). Bakar ended his article with the incendiary statement that ‘the patience of the Malays has its limits’ (*kesabaran orang Melayu ada hadnya*). Clearly, because of this hegemonic crisis – the government’s second in five years – these *Utusan* writers had been directed to protect and promote BN hegemony (Anuar 2005, p.24).

The following day, chief editor Zaini Hassan released an article in which he noted that

...everyone already knows the true colours of the Malaysian Chinese...I made a prediction several years ago about their attitude...I admit Chinese people are wise enough. They are a smart and intelligent race. Keep in mind, the blood that flows in their veins is the blood of that race’s 5,000-year-old civilisation. The fact is that they feel they can live without the Malays in this land of Malaysia. Their life is money, Chinese schools, Chinese language and Chinese culture. That is enough for the Malaysian Chinese. Other things are not important.

...semua orang sudah tahu warna kulit sebenar orang Cina Malaysia...Saya telah membuat ramalan sejak beberapa tahun lalu mengenai sikap mereka...Saya mengakui orang Cina cukup bijak. Mereka adalah bangsa yang cerdas dan pintar. Perlu diingat, darah yang mengalir dalam tubuh mereka adalah darah ketamadunan 5,000 tahun bangsa itu. Hakikatnya mereka merasakan mereka boleh hidup tanpa orang Melayu di bumi Malaysia ini. Kehidupan mereka adalah wang, sekolah Cina, bahasa Cina dan budaya Cina. Itu sudah cukup bagi orang Cina Malaysia. Yang lain-lain tidak penting.<sup>195</sup>

Hassan demonstrates a deeply primordialist view of Chinese identity, as ‘*kiasu*, selfish, greedy. That is their nature’ (*kiasu, pentingkan diri sendiri, tamak. Itu adalah ciri-ciri mereka*). *Kiasu* has no direct English translation; it derives from Hokkien, and incorporates ‘markers of keen competition, selfishness, materialism, always wanting to win and afraid to lose’ (*Sic*) (Joseph 2009, p.15). The Chinese were ‘wise and clever in making political arrangements for the sake of their own race’ (*bijak dan cerdas dalam membuat percaturan politik untuk kepentingan bangsa mereka sendiri*). According to Hassan, those Chinese voters had ‘fallen into DAP’s trap, who said Malaysia this time was theirs’ (*termakan tipu daya DAP*

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<sup>195</sup> ‘Pasca PRU-13: Ke mana Melayu selepas ini...’, Zaini Hassan, *Utusan*, 08/05/2013

*yang mengatakan Malaysia kali ini adalah milik mereka*). Louie (2004) has spoken of the idea of Chineseness; that its perception ‘as a racial form of identification extending beyond the boundaries of the nation-state’ has influenced the belief that people of ‘Chinese’ descent who do not (or perhaps never did) live on Chinese soil are considered not as nationals but ‘racially Chinese’ (p.162). The nature in which the Chinese ‘character’ was described by these writers above reflected this reality.

Both Bakar and Hassan had clear direction to protect and preserve the organic order, reflecting

... [t]he allocative control of the media by political parties [which] allows them to decide on the scope and nature of the media content. (Wang 2001 p.74)

Like previous elections, there were individuals beyond the party and particularly within academia who were pulling the strings. The perspective of Bakar and Hassan was supported by Malaysian Chinese academic Khoo Kay Kim, who observed that ‘racism is still thick in their souls since entering *Tanah Melayu* until today’ (*semangat perkauman dalam jiwa mereka masih tebal sejak memasuki Tanah Melayu sehingga hari ini*)<sup>196</sup>. Khoo viewed the Malaysian Chinese very negatively:

The Chinese do not understand the spirit of unity. Many of them do not consider Malaysia as their own country, but always felt colonised. Therefore their spirit of racism is still thick.

*Kaum Cina tidak faham tentang semangat perpaduan. Ramai daripada mereka tidak anggap Malaysia sebagai negara sendiri sebaliknya sentiasa merasakan dijajah. Sebab itu semangat perkauman mereka masih tebal.*<sup>197</sup>

Ien Ang writes that Chinese identity is

...confined to essentialist and absolute notions of ‘Chineseness’, the source of which can only originate from ‘China’, to which the ethnicized ‘Chinese’ subject must adhere to acquire the stamp of ‘authenticity’. (2001a, p.30)

Clearly, Khoo’s perspective positioned the Chinese subject in such a way; not belonging in and to Malaysia, but existing apart from it, as ‘Chinese’ and not ‘Malaysian’. CPI director Lim Teck Ghee criticised *Utusan*’s tactics, remarking that to aid its ‘media onslaught...aimed at provoking an extremist and emotional Malay response to the outcome of the recent

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<sup>196</sup> ‘Perkauman orang Cina masih tebal’, *Utusan*, 10/05/2013

<sup>197</sup> This rhetoric was mirrored by former Chief Minister of Melaka Mohd. Ali Rustam (‘*PRU-13: Mohd. Ali kecewa sikap pengundi Cina punca kalah di Parlimen Bukit Katil*’, Amran Mulup, *Utusan*, 06/05/2013).

elections’, *Utusan* had ‘now found its academic champion’<sup>198</sup>. Lim noted how Khoo, as an academic, must appear to *Utusan*’s readers to

...be speaking the truth about the racism in the Chinese community and their lack of love for the country...Given special prominence by *Utusan*, they are likely to be widely disseminated in the Malay community.

It was thus not only that Khoo was playing the role of organic intellectual by, in Gramsci’s words, giving his Chinese community ‘homogeneity and awareness of its own function’ (1971, p.113), but acting as an informant for the *Malays* as to the economic and political operations of the Malaysian Chinese (based on this essentialisation of negative Chinese cultural and behavioural traits)<sup>199</sup>.

However, Najib himself had come out defending *Utusan*, suggesting *Utusan*’s inherent embeddedness in common government rhetoric. Albeit articulating an extreme and deep-rooted strand of Umno’s thinking (Kessler 2013c, online), in 2013 this thinking aligned with the racialised expressions of anxiety and fear of many prominent BN figures; both government and media were inseparable. On 7 May Najib released a press statement in which he declared: ‘You blame *Utusan* but you don’t ask about the Chinese papers’<sup>200</sup>. Najib repeated that those Chinese voters had been ‘taken for a ride’ by the opposition. Another *Malaysiakini* report affirmed these views, quoting Najib that the opposition had utilised an ‘extreme formula to garner votes’ that could ‘destroy the beloved Malaysia...destroy everything that has been built by Umno and Barisan Nasional’<sup>201</sup>. To further complicate matters, Mahathir had come out in support of Najib’s observations. He was reported at a press conference in Putrajaya declaring that the Chinese Malaysian community had ‘rejected the (Malays’) hand of friendship’<sup>202</sup>. To him, they had been tricked by DAP ‘propaganda’ that sought to bring down a ‘corrupt’ Malay government.

It was Bakar’s article which caused the most controversy. The title, ‘*Apa lagi orang Cina mahu?*’ was so simple yet so powerful, helping to naturalise common sense ideas around the Chinese. Other articles and political figures repeated these words in such a way that Bakar’s ideas did not seem novel or nuanced; instead, *Utusan*’s readership knew this all along. Vice President of *Parti Cinta Malaysia* (PCM), Huan Cheng Guan was quoted in assistant editor Zulkefli Hamzah’s article, remarking about ‘usual’ Chinese behaviour:

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<sup>198</sup> ‘Spewing poison on Chinese lacking ‘multiracial spirit’’, Lim Teck Ghee, *Malaysiakini*, 11/05/2013

<sup>199</sup> Throughout *Utusan*’s campaign Chinese citizens were aligned with representations of the ‘greedy Chinese capitalist’, concealing the reality that many Chinese were in the lower-income bracket (Tan 2012, p.7).

<sup>200</sup> ‘Najib defends *Utusan*, says Chinese papers the same’, *Malaysiakini*, 07/05/2013

<sup>201</sup> ‘Umno is not racist, claims Najib’, Bernama, *Malaysiakini*, 11/05/2013

<sup>202</sup> ‘Chinese ‘rejected Malay hand of friendship’’, Ram Anand, *Malaysiakini*, 07/05/2013

For me it was normal. The Prime Minister has done what is best and never marginalised the Chinese from all aspects, especially education. They want Chinese schools, we built, they want Chinese universities, have also been built. So what more do the Chinese want?

*Bagi saya itu perkara biasa. Perdana Menteri telah membuat yang terbaik dan tidak sesekali menganaktirikan orang Cina dari semua sudut terutama pendidikan. Mahu sekolah Cina sudah dibuat, mahu universiti Cina juga sudah dibuat. Jadi apa lagi yang orang Cina mahu?*<sup>203</sup>

One reader also did this by repeating Bakar's damning words, 'What more do they want? Everyone knows the answer.' (*Apa lagi mereka mahukan? Semua orang tahu jawapannya.*)<sup>204</sup> This assumption, of the greed and detachedness of the Chinese reflects, in Ang's terms, 'an excess of meaningfulness accorded to "China"' (2001a, p.32). In this instance, Malay anxieties were being projected upon a racialised Chinese 'Other', and the Malaysian Chinese identity gained its meaning in and through this hyper-politicised context. This is particularly interesting considering how Chapter 5 explored the ways in which the 'subordinate' Chinese identity was dominant; that is, Chinese citizens were valued for their cooperation with Malays and the BN, and their acceptance of the established order. Released just one day apart, Bakar's and Hassan's articles had a clear motive, and we can extrapolate two key themes in these articles that influenced *Utusan's* broader narrative of Chinese treason: that the Chinese were a militant or extreme group; and that Chinese organised political action effectively legitimised a Malay 'response'. Both ideas featured prominently in *Utusan*.

The theme of Chinese militancy was evident in many articles. Speaking generally, Azman Ibrahim declared Chinese prejudices were 'very extreme and only thicken racial polarisation' (*amat keterlaluan dan hanya membentuk polarisasi kaum yang menebal*)<sup>205</sup>. Mohd Ali Rustam was quoted remarking that Chinese voters were 'very racist and practise racial politics' (*sangat rasis dan mengamalkan politik perkauman*), and 'want to kick us like rubbish on the roadside' (*nak tendang kita macam sampah di tepi jalan*)<sup>206</sup>. The extremity or militancy of the Chinese was best demonstrated using the notion of organised political action, whether implied surreptitiously through the schooling system or more openly through political protest. Khairul Anwar Rahmat's article represented a typical example of the former, acknowledging the 'Chinese chambers of commerce that can build private schools to continue sowing racism' (*dewan perniagaan Cina yang boleh membina sekolah-sekolah swasta untuk terus menyemai semangat perkauman*)<sup>207</sup>. Such wording conjured up imagery of organised

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<sup>203</sup> 'Mengurus tsunami Cina PRU-13', Zulkefli Hamzah, *Utusan*, 12/05/2013

<sup>204</sup> 'Masa memperkasa bangsa Melayu', Ahmad Mohamad Radzi, *Utusan*, 17/05/2013

<sup>205</sup> 'Analisis PRU-13 – Tsunami politik perkauman perlu dirawat', Azman Ibrahim, *Utusan*, 06/05/2013

<sup>206</sup> 'Orang Cina tidak kenang budi saya – Ali Rustam', *Utusan*, 07/05/2013

<sup>207</sup> 'Peringatan untuk Melayu', Khairul Anwar Rahmat, *Utusan*, 08/05/2013

and surreptitious political action conducted by certain sections of the Chinese community within the schooling system. It played upon the common perceptions held by BN politicians towards the ‘extremist’ Dong Jiao Zong (DJZ), the Chinese educational body which has assumed the role of ‘defender of Chinese-Malaysian identity’ (Collins 2006, p.311)<sup>208</sup>. The Black 505 rallies were also exploited to demonstrate the militancy of the Chinese<sup>209</sup>. An article by a writer with the pseudonym ‘Pahit-Pahit Kopi’ represented the best example of this, noting a group of Chinese protesters who were

...obsessed that the Chinese will be in power in this country, believed through demonstrating in “black shirts” that the people will rise up with a black wave and may spark racial riots.

...taksab Cina akan berkuasa di negara ini, percaya melalui demonstrasi “berbaju hitam”, rakyat akan bangkit dengan gelombang hitam dan mungkin sehingga tercetus rusuhan kaum.<sup>210</sup>

In the 1969 riots certain groups of Chinese supporters were alleged to have marched through Kuala Lumpur. Arguably, this author was attempting to position the reader’s thinking within that historical context, so as to give the impression of alarm and urgency. 2013 was the epitome of an election where ‘1969’ could be deployed as a trope to signify the Chinese ‘threat’; in Zurbuchen’s (2002, p.567) terms, of Chinese ‘betrayal and anti-nationalism’<sup>211</sup>.

Editor Zulkiflee Bakar was chiefly implicated in *Utusan*’s ‘Chinese-ification’ of those protests. It should be reiterated that there was absolutely no connection between these protests and a Chinese or DAP-based contingent. These protests resembled the multicultural *Bersih* rallies; the latest in a long line of demonstrations challenging for free and fair elections (Lim 2014, p.139). Yet Bakar, one of the foremost intellectuals championing the Umno order, focused particularly on DAP as a primary actor in those rallies. Referring to the Black 505 rallies, in another article he remonstrated: ‘What is the true game of the opposition, especially Kit Siang and DAP in this matter?’ (*Apakah mainan sebenar pembangkang khususnya Kit Siang dan DAP dalam soal ini?*)<sup>212</sup> Bakar framed Lim as the main instigator of anti-government sentiment, ‘unable to contain his anger following the opposition’s failure to overthrow the UMNO-led *Barisan Nasional* (BN) government’ (*tidak mampu membendung*

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<sup>208</sup> *Utusan*’s Zulkiflee Bakar utilised similar ideas, highlighting the experiences of ‘Ahmad’, presumably a Malay boy, who felt alienated by the anti-establishment Chinese school which he attended (*‘Mengurus tsunami Cina PRU-13’*, *Utusan*, 12/05/2013).

<sup>209</sup> This was a series of opposition-led protests contesting the alleged electoral fraud that was committed in 2013. Protesters were encouraged by *Pakatan* to wear black t-shirts to mourn the so-called ‘death of democracy’.

<sup>210</sup> ‘*Apabila Cina terus ikut angan-angan Anwar Spring*’, Pahit-Pahit Kopi, *Utusan*, 14/05/2013

<sup>211</sup> Other articles latched onto these ideas: Nizam Yatim wrote about a group of Chinese youth ‘in black dress’ (*berpakaian hitam*) who wanted to ‘blackmail’ (*mengugut*) the Malays (*‘Memperkuat kuasa politik-ekonomi Melayu’*, *Utusan*, 14/05/2013); legal analyst Salleh Buang admonished this organised political action, referring to the 2012 Peaceful Assembly Act, to criminalise the behaviour of those parties (*‘Protes remaja baju hitam’*, *Utusan*, 15/05/2013).

<sup>212</sup> ‘*Apa lagi Kit Siang mahu*’, Zulkiflee Bakar, *Utusan*, 17/05/2013



*kemarahnya berikutan kegagalan pakatan pembangkang menumbangkan kerajaan Barisan Nasional (BN) yang ditunjangi oleh UMNO). DAP was an insatiable political force that would go to extreme lengths to gain power:*

...what we are discussing is Kit Siang's attitude. He has done an illegal stage rally to attack the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak with insulting words, including the use of the term "devil known as the Prime Minister". If we look at what is enjoyed by Kit Siang and DAP, he should not do so and this raises the question of what else the DAP Advisor wants? Is the success of DAP in becoming the dominant party in the opposition not enough?

*...apa yang kita persoalkan sikap Kit Siang. Beliau menjadikan pentas perhimpunan haram untuk menyerang Perdana Menteri, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak dengan kata-kata menghina termasuk menggunakan istilah "syaitan yang dikenali menjadi Perdana Menteri". Jika melihat kepada apa yang dinikmati oleh Kit Siang dan DAP, beliau tidak sepatutnya berbuat demikian dan ini menimbulkan persoalan apa lagi yang Penasihat DAP ini mahukan? Tidak cukupkah dengan kejayaan DAP menjadi dominan dalam pakatan pembangkang...?*

Elsewhere, Bakar described the opposition as '*biadab*' (insolent)<sup>213</sup>, a word usually reserved by the Malay elite to describe the behaviour of Chinese politicians. Subsequently, *Pakatan* was 'Chinese-ified'. Siegel notes this word also implies savagery, and 'belong[ing] to a different class of beings' (2001, p.109). Consequently, the opposition were uncivilised; unable to live in, abide by, but also *alien to* the Malay establishment. It was described as harbouring a 'ravenous appetite for power' (*nafsu kemaruk kuasa*), due to Chinese influence:

The opposition's struggle now is not for the people but to meet the ravenous appetite for power. That is why if we witness the assemblies being held they are attended by a large proportion of the Chinese community.

*Perjuangan yang dilakukan pembangkang sekarang bukan demi rakyat tetapi demi memenuhi nafsu kemaruk kuasa. Sebab itulah kalau kita saksikan dalam perhimpunan yang diadakan ia disertai oleh sebahagian besar kaum Cina.*

Hence, Najib's 'Chinese tsunami' idea was rearticulated to imply those opposition supporters who supported a coalition that did not benefit Malays but was fronted by a 'Chinese' agenda. Bakar characterised the opposition as a party defined by Chinese values (that is of course, inasmuch as those 'kafir' values were defined by his and *Utusan*'s agenda and actually had a limited connection with reality). By reinforcing this zero-sum opposition between Malay and Chinese identity, had legitimised *Utusan*'s campaign-wide discussion of Malays and Chinese as historical 'adversaries'. Certainly, the rise of a Chinese-dominated opposition was perceived by the Malays as 'a dangerous challenge to their constitutional rights' (Hilley 2001,

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<sup>213</sup> 'Anwar sekadar 'kuda tunggangan' DAP', Zulkiflee Bakar, *Utusan*, 19/05/2013

p.32). Irrespective of the reality behind this assumption, DAP and Lim Kit Siang were central to the rise of the opposition and the two-party system in Malaysia (Ooi 2015). Additionally, Govindasamy (2015, p.123) notes that Lim Guan Eng's successful defence of his position as Penang Chief Minister (since winning it in 2008) reflected DAP's growing dominance. Thus we must position Bakar's rhetoric within this reality of Chinese ascendancy.

Bakar's second idea, that Chinese political action legitimised a Malay 'response', featured prominently in *Utusan* articles but also was supported by key political figures. One week after the election, former Court of Appeal judge Mohd Noor Abdullah was recorded at a forum making controversial statements about the Chinese plot to seize political power, warning them of an ominous Malay 'backlash':

For the Malays, the *pantang larang* (taboo) is to be betrayed, because when they are betrayed, they will react and when they react, their *dendam kesumat tidak tersudah-sudah* (wrath will be endless). When Malays are betrayed, there is a backlash and the Chinese must bear the consequences of a Malay backlash.<sup>214</sup>

The judge's role in this campaign revealed how the judiciary was tightly enmeshed in the BN power order; just one of many institutions positioned to perpetuate government hegemony (Jomo and Tan 2008)<sup>215</sup>. Albeit just a snapshot, this and other articles operated collectively to weave a tightly-knit narrative of Chinese treachery, supported by journalists, statements from political figures and *Utusan*'s readership. Writers sourced their hegemonic legitimacy by excavating a rich tapestry of colonial mythology around the 'Chinese-kafir' identity which connected to the Chinese *kongsi*, using this to locate DAP and the Chinese in the political landscape. In all this, vast layers of cultural, linguistic and religious difference, complexity and opposition within the Chinese community were collapsed within a powerful identity marker that alienated and detached that community from their sense of belonging in and to Malaysia. 'They', as a collective, were 'Chinese', and they had no place 'here'. There was a pressing need to do this due to the political influence that DAP had gained after May 5. DAP was thus positioned as the embodiment of those surreptitious political organisations, driving forth rebellious Chinese behaviours – which had caused historical problems for Malayan society. Moreover, as Chapter 2 discussed the *kongsi* culture was imported from mainland China (Case 1995, p.85), hence making these connections also served to emphasise the foreignness of the Chinese in Malaysia. Understandings of Malaysian Chinese identity in the

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<sup>214</sup> 'Ex-judge warns Chinese of backlash for 'betrayal'', Nigel Aw, *Malaysiakini*, 12/05/2013

<sup>215</sup> These ideas featured elsewhere: *Gerakan* politician Liew Yew Aw was quoted utilising this idea of Chinese 'betrayal' (*mengkhianati*) ('*Mengurus tsunami Cina PRU-13*', Zulkefli Hamzah, *Utusan*, 12/05/2013); Nizam Yatim discussed the ex-judge's words in light of the importance of avoiding 'chaos' (*kekacauan*) between the Malays and the economically-proficient Chinese ('*Memperkuat kuasa politik-ekonomi Melayu*', *Utusan*, 14/05/2013).

GE13 aftermath were therefore inherently enmeshed within the colonial memory of the racial Chinese subject. This reveals the fragmentation of Chinese-kafir identity and how it was grounded in and provided a replication of the colonial myth of Chinese aggression whilst simultaneously legitimising the articulation of a reactive, defensive Malay identity. Consequently, colonial mythology was utilised to reinforce the purportedly absolute differences between the ‘Malays’ and ‘Chinese’, marginalising the latter (Gabriel 2011, p.364). This showed how the media – whilst constructing a contextually-sensitive narrative around the Chinese – were bound by ‘the historical contexts of meaning and action and the more subtle workings of power’ (Li 2000, p.172). The present-day Malaysian Chinese identity was

...defined primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of their cultural and national past and of the existence of an ongoing relationship with that past. (Gabriel 2014, p.1215)

#### **7.4 *Malaysiakini* Against the Machine**

This section explores how *Malaysiakini* writers, in their aggressive opposition of BN’s racialised framing of the election outcome, demonstrated signs of forging another counter-hegemonic political moment. Seeking to expose Malaysia’s politico-media complex, writers collectively targeted anyone that featured controversially in this tense post-election environment, whether Najib, Mahathir, *Utusan* staff or the ex-judge. In this they not only opposed Najib’s comments but demonstrated a broader awareness of different institutional structures and their central link through BN’s racialised articulation of politics. They were, in Iwabuchi’s (1994, p.76) terms, ‘recognis[ing] the fragmented, multiple and mobile nature’ of these identities, focusing on the process of (and reasons behind) their construction as opposed to their innate essence. Nevertheless, their own explanation of the election results, based on rural/urban and class difference, was infused with tensions concerning negative perceptions of the rural masses, revealing much about the nature and scope of *Malaysiakini* and its readership.

#### ***Najib, Mahathir and the media reflection***

From the outset, *Malaysiakini* journalists were very astute concerning BN’s strategy. Two days after the election Ram Anand remarked:

Racial tension and racial divide will only play into the hands of Umno, MIC and MCA. It will make them relevant again...This is not good for the nation – not after an election that should have officially heralded a new age for a two-party system.<sup>216</sup>

As alluded to in section 7.3, highlighting the links between Najib, *Utusan* and Mahathir was important to these writers' critique, reflecting their intent to brand Najib as the 'second Mahathir' and thus delegitimise Najib for their readership. This was less about Najib than demonstrating Mahathir was still in control, pulling the strings; Najib was Mahathir's puppet. Musa (2003) argues that Najib rose to the top of Umno out of homage and gratitude to his father, the late Abdul Razak, who had implemented the NEP back in 1971. Combined with this elite heritage, Najib had consolidated links with Mahathir and Umno's old guard, hence was strongly connected with Umno and *Ketuanan Melayu* ideology (Gatsiounis 2008). Keen to expose these links, and the fallacy of 1Malaysia, *Malaysiakini* writers portrayed Najib, *Utusan* writers and Mahathir as one and the same, all culpable for the racialisation of the election result, but more importantly, separate cogs in the broader BN machinery. Making light of Najib's failure to replicate Mahathir's success in 1999, Josh Hong derisively remarked:

Najib had done everything possible to please the Chinese community, including putting on Chinese suits, playing the Chinese drum and even sending his pampered son to the heavily polluted city of Beijing to learn some basic Mandarin, but still failed to win the crucial vote.<sup>217</sup>

Blogger K Temoc, whose article was deliberately titled, in opposition to *Utusan*, '*Apa lagi Umno mahu?*' (What more does Umno want?), noted Najib's remark

...was all it took for former PM Dr Mahathir Mohamad to run away with it in a lamentable direction so as to wreck his fury at Umno's favourite punching bag, the Chinese. Needless to say, many like *Utusan Malaysia* jumped on the bandwagon to echo his regrettable spewing of unnecessary poison.<sup>218</sup>

He utilised a quote from former Umno law minister Zaid Ibrahim, who acknowledged similarities between Najib and Mahathir, both 'uncompromising' and 'fiery'<sup>219</sup>.

Given Hilley's (2001, p.13) observation of the traditional suppression of political dissent, it was perhaps in 2013 when *Malaysiakini* demonstrated its counter-hegemonic potential. This was achieved through its expansion of the YourSay platform, such that YourSay articles were

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<sup>216</sup> 'When Najib failed as a statesman', Ram Anand, *Malaysiakini*, 07/05/2013

<sup>217</sup> 'The hard work starts now', Josh Hong, *Malaysiakini*, 10/05/2013

<sup>218</sup> '*Apa lagi Umno mahu?*', K Temoc, *Malaysiakini*, 10/05/2013

<sup>219</sup> Tricia Yeoh also acknowledged this Najib-Mahathir connection, noting that both had augmented Malay/Chinese division ('The malapportionment of blame', *Malaysiakini*, 11/05/2013).

published almost daily, further enhancing the opportunities for ordinary readers to contribute to national political debates and discourses. These articles were very dominant in 2013,

...contentious in that they directly and explicitly challenge[d] the authority of elites in setting the national agenda and in forging consensus. (George 2006, p.4)

However, such comments were not always constructive or helpful. In one YourSay article, the entire range of user comments was dedicated to criticising the ‘racist’ Najib<sup>220</sup>.

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim featured in a stand-out article criticising the government’s actions after the election, which only served to reinforce *Malaysiakini*’s agenda<sup>221</sup>. This showed that, whilst *Malaysiakini* had taken strides towards privileging the ordinary readers’ voice, it was still the most powerful voices that were constructing and influencing the political reality of the opposition supporters. Anwar particularly cast a formidable figure, which reflected his days as a ‘fiery orator’ in ABIM, making his name by mobilising the Muslim youth (Ooi 2009, p.22). Najib’s statement was a ‘racist rant’ that reflected his ‘cowardice’ and ‘desperation’. Anwar criticised Najib for ‘attacking’ the Chinese community whilst simultaneously ‘provok[ing] the Malay community to respond and react’. He recognised the power of Najib’s voice to influence the actions of the broader administration:

By venting out racist outbursts, Najib effectively gave the order to his supremacist minions to go on the warpath against not just the Chinese community but the Malay and other communities who did not vote them.

Referring to certain *Utusan* journalists, Anwar dramatically declared that Umno had ‘let loose their racist dogs of war to spew their poison on the people’<sup>222</sup>. Such rhetoric reaffirmed Brown’s (2005, p.44) argument that *Utusan* staff were perceived as ‘apologists and eunuchs’, there at Umno’s disposal.

Writers predictably reacted strongly against ex-judge Mohd Noor Abdullah’s words, and made links between him and Najib just as they did with Najib and Mahathir. One article quoted Anwar comparing Abdullah to Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan:

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<sup>220</sup> ‘Pemerhati’ lambasted Najib, the ‘fork-tongued Umno politician’ for ‘get[ting] his gutter press like *Utusan* to make false racist accusations against the Chinese’; ‘Kokkeong’ criticised Najib for his ‘patently racist remark’ and ‘defending *Utusan Malaysia*’s racism’ (‘Najib knows nothing about being non-racist’, YourSay, *Malaysiakini*, 13/05/2013).

<sup>221</sup> ‘Race relations and the moral imperative’, Anwar Ibrahim, *Malaysiakini*, 14/05/2013

<sup>222</sup> This ‘poison’ metaphor mirrored K Temoc’s rhetoric, but also featured in other articles (‘Of geography, race and a BN merger’, Nathaniel Tan, *Malaysiakini*, 09/05/2013; ‘What more does Umno want?’, YourSay, *Malaysiakini*, 17/05/2013). Evidently, *Malaysiakini* was demonstrating its capability to transmit key ideas on a large scale, embodying an ‘organ of public opinion’ (Gramsci 1975, p.156).

Former appeal court judge Mohd Noor Abdullah's racist speech puts the Ku Klux Klan to shame and makes Hitler proud. How long more are we to tolerate such hate mongering and race baiting from the illegitimate Najib government?<sup>223</sup>

Anwar's ideas were imitated by *Malaysiakini*'s readers. Four days after, a YourSay article was produced which featured a range of criticisms of the ex-judge<sup>224</sup>. 'TehTarik' described Abdullah's words as a 'hate speech', referring to Anwar's comments and reaffirming his comparisons between the ex-judge, Adolf Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan. 'Dark Archon' declared that '[w]hatever Mohd Noor had said will not be forgotten. He'll be remembered as a racist from now on.' Arguably, these comparisons being made by Anwar and *Malaysiakini*'s readers, reflected the depoliticising potential of these online media (Hurwitz 1999, in Weiss 2013, p.595). This relates back to what Mandal (2004, p.58) said about accusations of racism not finding 'widespread support' because of their extremity and detachedness from real issues. Likewise, given the extreme political implications of what was being said, these comments seemed to represent 'flaming' more than acceptable and serious political contributions. Readers were also not coy about linking Abdullah with Najib, with several holding Najib accountable for the ex-judge's comments. 'Ferdtan', for instance, posted a comment criticising BN, ending with the words 'Any comment, PM of 1Malaysia?' That sentence epitomised the legitimacy crisis facing Najib's administration. Along with other readers' remarks it suggested that contrary to 're-legitimising' Umno (cf. O'Shannassy 2013), 1Malaysia and its perceived failure epitomised the collapse of BN's authority among the middle classes. The anonymous context of YourSay influenced the branding of Najib in the same derogatory fashion as the ex-judge, with these users able to hide behind their internet identity. In another YourSay article, with the retaliatory title '*What more does Umno want?*', more readers aired their anger and frustration<sup>225</sup>. As Richardson (2007, p.149) reminds us, this title was not innocent but reflected the editor's means of communicating the anti-Umno values of *Malaysiakini*'s readership. In this article, '2 Tim 1:7' acknowledged their regret that Umno 'must manufacture an enemy so that gullible Malays can project their personal failings onto them', an approach they likened to Hitler, who 'trick[ed] ordinary Germans into blaming the Jews for their personal defects and their national ills'. Elsewhere Pemerhati criticised Najib for encouraging 'his Perkasa racist goons and other thugs to try and cause racial and religious tension'<sup>226</sup>.

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<sup>223</sup> 'Anwar: Ex-judge's speech puts Ku Klux Klan to shame', *Malaysiakini*, 13/05/2013

<sup>224</sup> 'If you meant transformation, why say jihad?', YourSay, *Malaysiakini*, 17/05/2013

<sup>225</sup> 'What more does Umno want?', YourSay, *Malaysiakini*, 17/05/2013

<sup>226</sup> 'Najib knows nothing about being non-racist', YourSay, *Malaysiakini*, 13/05/2013

### *The rural-urban debate*

Criticism of Najib's administration was important, but not central to these writers' agenda. Wary of the potential damage of these various remarks, *Malaysiakini* writers and opposition and civil society figures were quick to present a united front. They vehemently denied BN's racialised perspective, and propagated an alternative explanation around rural-urban and class differences. Although BN's ruling ideology had become a site of discursive struggle, *Malaysiakini*'s collective response was disjointed and – particularly in the readers' letters – infused with tensions surrounding perceived sociocultural differences between rural and urban voters. These tensions epitomised the fragmentation and self-conscious agitation of Malaysia's 'new politics', a result of the critical questions being asked concerning the nation's identity and the enduring relevance of racial division (Loh 2003b, p.279). Shamsul (1996, p.342) notes how the 'involvement (of the "new" middle class) in the process of "mental production" has become increasingly significant', but perhaps this was at the expense of *Malaysiakini*'s potential to speak to the rural masses. Importantly, this reflected, just as in the previous elections, that the supposed 'critical intellectuals' were not speaking for 'the masses', but for middle class interests.

The day of Najib's 'Chinese tsunami' remark, Neil Khor responded by acknowledging instead an 'urban tsunami':

Najib is calling it a "Chinese tsunami" but the reality goes beyond merely Chinese disenchantment. It is a swing away from the BN's race-based formula in the cities...So, at the time of writing, it is very clear that the BN has lost in the cities.<sup>227</sup>

Khor exhorted Malaysians to look beyond Umno's attempt 'to play the race card', but nevertheless conceded BN's 'convincing' win in rural Malaysia and, referring to Najib's words acknowledged that '[s]ome form of national reconciliation must now take place'. Nathaniel Tan more bluntly remarked it was 'as mischievous as it is stupid' to entertain Najib's racialised perspective, reaffirming the 'obvious, glaring truth' that the problem was not 'Chinese-Malay' but 'an urban-rural one'<sup>228</sup>. Columnist Josh Hong also acknowledged this phenomenon<sup>229</sup>. These observations reflected a crucial debate in this election. On the one hand, although they reflected the opposition's move away from a politics based on race (Tan and Zawawi 2008, p.95), this very move was grounded in the acknowledgement that urban Malaysia was positioned antithetically as the 'Other' to a rural, racialised *Bumiputera* identity

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<sup>227</sup> 'An urban tsunami – what now for BN?', Neil Khor, *Malaysiakini*, 06/05/2013

<sup>228</sup> 'Of geography, race and a BN merger', Nathaniel Tan, *Malaysiakini*, 09/05/2013

<sup>229</sup> 'The hard work starts now', Josh Hong, *Malaysiakini*, 10/05/2013

– reflecting the enduring correlation between rural/urban and *Bumiputera*/non-*Bumiputera* division (Verma 2002, p.62). As Chapter 1 discussed, the rural classes are under government patronage and thus a strong source of BN support; ‘a powerful lever against the emerging democratizing forces’ (Jesudason 1993, p.10). Such statements thus reflected the limits of the conception of politics advanced by these writers.

These ideas were supported by key opposition figures and public intellectuals, reflecting the ‘salience’ of the new media in Malaysian society, ‘underpin[ning] the efficacy of its emergent civil society vis-à-vis the mono-vocality of mainstream media’ (Leong 2012, p.51). Whilst PAS Secretary-General Mustafa Ali commented that GE13 represented ‘the rejection, in general, of BN by all groups’<sup>230</sup>, Lim Guan Eng highlighted PAS’ success in Malay-majority Terengganu (winning 15 seats) which proved the scapegoating of the Chinese community was ‘a gross distortion of data’<sup>231</sup>. Anwar Ibrahim chose to go with the phrase ‘Malaysian tsunami’<sup>232</sup>. DAP’s Lim Kit Siang also used this term:

So long as he (Najib) wants to polarise and racialise this phenomenon, then they themselves are guilty of a racist outlook and they are incapable of any national reconciliation. It’s not a Chinese tsunami; it’s a Malaysian tsunami.<sup>233</sup>

In that article, professor of Political Economy at *Universiti Malaya* Edmund Terence Gomez was quoted using the term ‘urban middle-class tsunami’<sup>234</sup>. Tricia Yeoh likewise rejected the racial analysis in favour of ‘a split between urban and rural voters, hence a spatial and class, rather than an ethnic, divide’<sup>235</sup>. Yeoh saw through Najib’s ‘incendiary’ comments – resulting from a ‘desperate need’ to explain BN’s ‘worst election performance’ in history. She nevertheless acknowledged *Pakatan*’s failure ‘to craft messages that better target the low-income, rural and Malay voters’.

*Malaysiakini*’s readers were quick to get behind the ‘Malaysian’ or ‘urban’ tsunami narrative, but in so doing seemed to view the rural Malays as an inferior group to the urbanites<sup>236</sup>. This was a broader reflection of the ‘disconnection of the new middle class from “the

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<sup>230</sup> ‘Najib defends Utusan, says Chinese papers the same’, *Malaysiakini*, 07/05/2013

<sup>231</sup> ‘Chinese ‘rejected Malay hand of friendship’’, Ram Anand, *Malaysiakini*, 07/05/2013

<sup>232</sup> ‘Race relations and the moral imperative’, Anwar Ibrahim, *Malaysiakini*, 14/05/2013

<sup>233</sup> ‘Najib win masks biggest test after Chinese M’sian exodus’, Daniel Ten Kate and Shamim Adam, *Malaysiakini*, 08/05/2013

<sup>234</sup> Another professor, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin of UKM recognised these same elements (class and rural/urban difference) (*‘Apa lagi Umno mahu’*, K Temoc, *Malaysiakini*, 10/05/2013).

<sup>235</sup> ‘The malapportionment of blame’, Tricia Yeoh, *Malaysiakini*, 11/05/2013

<sup>236</sup> ‘Shernren’ for instance acknowledged the rural-urban divide and admonished Umno’s ‘obsolete and quite possibly dangerous’ *modus operandi*, whilst noting that it was the urbanites’ mission ‘to wake up’ rural citizens (‘So much to learn and apply from GE13’, *Malaysiakini*, 06/05/2013); doctor and lecturer Soong Kee Teoh acknowledged the ‘urban tsunami’, whilst criticising rural Malays for being ‘blinded by Umno propaganda or even being racial themselves’ (‘This GE, the tsunami was urban, not Chinese’, *Malaysiakini*, 08/05/2013).



rest”...complicat[ing] the task of constructing any broad populist agenda’ (Hilley 2001, p.244). We see how this idea of the enlightened urban Malaysian with which *Malaysiakini* was accustomed, was juxtaposed against the indoctrinated ‘country bumpkin’; rural, working class and easily deceived by *Utusan*’s campaign strategy. As much was admitted by Mahathir, who was quoted conceding that Malays who supported DAP were ‘the educated ones’<sup>237</sup>. It was thus starkly clear that *Malaysiakini* was trapped on the wrong side of the prevailing sociocultural chasm that separated the democratic, urban Malaysians and the rural Malay masses – hence muting the latter’s emancipatory potential (Weiss 2014a, p.94). If we cast our memory back to Chapter 1, and Crouch’s (1996, p.165) observation of the estrangement between rural Malays and the predominantly Chinese towns and cities, we can detect certain similarities here, reflecting enduring prejudice concerning urbanite perceptions of the rural Malay citizenry.

Given the passion shown in this media response, *Malaysiakini* and the opposition had perhaps been caught off-guard by *Utusan*’s and BN’s strategy. This connected to what Kessler (2013a, online) observed after the election:

...the key to the election was Malay votes. In comparison, nothing else really mattered much at all...The young sophisticates with their congenial “discourse” and “narratives” were nice people, but a very poor guide to what the election was really about — how it was being conducted where it really mattered.

Additionally, these narratives were uncertain and incomplete, falling short of offering ‘a clear response, a compelling alternative, and a challenge to the Umno/BN line’ (ibid). Whereas the term ‘Malaysian tsunami’ implied a multiracial swing towards the opposition, ‘rural-urban’ was more loaded and revealed the readers’ discriminatory attitudes towards the rural working classes. *Utusan*’s campaign was simple, ‘[a]nd in these matters, simplicity is what works, while complexity invites misunderstanding’ (Kessler 2013b, online). But Najib’s ‘Chinese tsunami’ remark and its interpretation by *Utusan*’s journalists were just the tip of the iceberg, and as the next section reveals, BN through *Utusan* had been conducting an effective pro-Malay/anti-non-Malay campaign throughout the election.

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<sup>237</sup> ‘Chinese ‘rejected Malay hand of friendship’’, Ram Anand, *Malaysiakini*, 07/05/2013

## 7.5 The Great Malay/Chinese Landscape

Umno has a rare opportunity now. It faces two options in dealing with the political realities it now faces: It can evolve in a non-racial direction, or it can retreat into its shell, and decide “forget the non-Malays, let’s become even more ultra Malay.”<sup>238</sup>

Little did that quote’s author, Nathaniel Tan realise that BN had chosen to manufacture this ‘political reality’ before the election. Hence, Najib’s remarks reflected a broader government/media campaign which sought to bolster Malay support whilst effectively ‘discarding’ the Chinese vote. Given the power of civil society in the cities, this campaign was primarily targeted at the rural Malay seats. This section examines *Utusan*’s pro-Malay campaign, particularly the part it played in fomenting this Malay/Chinese division.

Key *Utusan* writers constructed a creative and effective campaign aimed at bolstering rural Malay support for BN. This centred on a reworking of Malay identity that related to the GE13 political environment. Their rhetoric was overtly ethnonational and chauvinistic, reflecting that newspaper’s position as a mouthpiece for the ‘beleaguered’ Malay community. Such overt chauvinism was perhaps part of a strategy to provoke *Malaysiakini*’s readership and bait them into reactive and defensive political argument, as opposed to forming constructive and nuanced political ideas. Writers spoke of ‘*bangsa*’ – the Malay race, and not ‘*negara*’ (country or nation). They emphasised the divide between Malays and non-Malays, positioning Umno as the Malays’ defender against an imminent non-Malay ‘threat’. Umno embodied what these writers believed was the ‘true’ Malay identity, and *Pakatan*’s political challenge was posited as a hit to Malay dignity. There were similarities here with the anxiety and desperation that arose through the perceived threat to the Malays’ ‘future survival’ after the 1969 election (National Operations Council 1969, p.ix). This campaign was constructed at two levels. First, it was important to establish the imagined readership that *Utusan* was addressing, and writers elicited a specific discursive construction of what I term the ‘Malay at peril’ – an embodiment of this envisaged readership: weak, exploited and increasingly helpless. 2013’s election represented a classic scenario of when Umno required an image of the Chinese pariah to reinforce that party’s role as the Malays’ guardian (Kahn 1998, p.6); an image which these *Utusan* writers appropriated and elaborated in order to foment racial and religious tension and stimulate Malay political support. Second, with this audience in mind, writers sought to recapture a nostalgic and romantic sense of ‘what we were’, by casting themselves and their readers in a Malay ‘fantasy’ grounded in historic notions of the Melaka Sultanate.

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<sup>238</sup> ‘Of geography, race and a BN merger’, Nathaniel Tan, *Malaysiakini*, 09/05/2013

### *Constructing the ‘Malay at peril’*

At the end of his post-election piece, criticising the ‘Chinese’ origin of *Pakatan*’s election slogan, ‘*Ini kalilah!*’ (This is the time!), chief editor Zaini Hassan emotionally exclaimed:

Malays all this time have been cheated and continue to be cheated by others. My fellow Malays, did you know that the term “*Ini kali lahhh...*” is the dialect of Chinese slang! But it is carried with pride, with spirit by the Malay people, children and women. I say enough. Malays are not willing to be cheated any more, bribed anymore. Just enough.

*Melayu selama ini telah ditipu dan terus ditipu oleh orang lain. Wahai bangsaku sekalian, tahukah anda bahawa istilah “Ini kali lahhh...” adalah loghat slanga Cina! Tetapi ia dibawa dengan megahnya, dengan bersemangatnya oleh orang Melayu, anak-anak Melayu dan muslimah-muslimah Melayu. Cukuplah. Melayu tidak rela ditipu lagi, disuap lagi. Cukuplah.*<sup>239</sup>

Such racially emotive writing reflected *Utusan*’s ‘strong chauvinist agenda’ and the reality it had been ‘exempted from the control of the authorities’ (Fong 2010, p.156). The specific linguistic construct ‘*bangsaku*’ is short for ‘*bangsa aku*’, literally meaning ‘my race’. Compared to the pronoun ‘*saya*’, which has the same meaning but is used in more formal contexts, ‘*aku*’ is used when the relationship between speakers is very informal and close; it was like Hassan was confiding in the reader before taking his last breath. Hassan thus used ‘*bangsaku*’ to inform the reader they were all part of a tight-knit Malay community. In Malay literature the pronoun ‘*aku*’ is useful because it can be shortened to the suffix ‘*-ku*’, which rhymes nicely with the suffix ‘*-mu*’, short for ‘*kamu*’ (you). Subsequently, it is utilised in poems and song lyrics based on personal relationships and emotions. The word ‘*bangsaku*’ likewise features extensively in a proud tradition of Malay nationalist poetry (see Abadi 2011), reflecting the romanticism and nostalgia bound up in historical perspectives of Malay community. Overall, Hassan’s manner was very self-deprecating. He acknowledged Malays were ‘withered in terms of their thinking’ (*layu dari segi pemikiran mereka*) and ‘emotional in terms of their feeling’ (*beremosi dari segi perasaan mereka*). These ideas were reflected in the broader discourse, with one journalist remarking that Malays were ‘increasingly weak’ (*semakin lemah*)<sup>240</sup> and another that they were ‘powerless to defend themselves’ (*tidak berdaya mempertahankan diri*)<sup>241</sup>. Clearly, such Malaycentrism proved that 1Malaysia rhetoric had given way to the race paradigm, due to the perceived, monolithic ‘threat’ to Malay interests (Milner *et al.* 2014, p.5).

<sup>239</sup> ‘*Pasca PRU-13: Ke mana Melayu selepas ini...*’, Zaini Hassan, *Utusan*, 08/05/2013

<sup>240</sup> ‘*Perpecahan sesama orang Melayu menyebabkan bangsa itu semakin lemah*’ *Utusan*, 12/05/2013

<sup>241</sup> ‘*ANALISIS PRU-13: Roket DAP lebih bahaya daripada Musudan*’, Borhan Abu Samah, *Utusan*, 12/04/2013

Each of these statements sought to encourage a response in the Malay reader, reflecting a broader metaphor of warfare deployed throughout the campaign. Titles of *Utusan* articles pointed to this metaphor. ‘*Pertahan hak bangsa Melayu*’ (Defend the rights of the Malays), by Kamil Maslih, was a typical example<sup>242</sup>. Maslih quoted the Chairman of the Malaysian Association of Welfare and Islamic Proselytisation, who stressed the need for an ‘attitude of struggle’ (*sikap perjuangan*) in the Malay community:

Malays should be implanted with the attitude of struggle since childhood so that the fate of this race is not to be homeless in their own country, we must always defend Malay rights.

*Orang Melayu perlu ditanam dengan sikap perjuangan sejak dari kecil lagi agar nasib bangsa ini tidak merempat di negara sendiri, kita mesti sentiasa mempertahankan hak Melayu.*

There are comparisons to be made with the fear-mongering here and the opposition to the Malayan Union Proposals, where it was noted that Malays’ ‘fear[ed]...that they may steadily become *submerged*’ (Malayan Union Committee on the Constitutional Proposals, in Nah 2003, p. 23, my emphasis). Of course flooding is a common metaphor for the forces of the status quo to refer to immigration (Cunningham-Parmeter 2011), but it is interesting how it links both the 2013 election and an early, exclusionary Malay nationalism, and this is discussed further on.

In a Gramscian sense, over time this predominantly Malay readership had aligned with ‘common sense’ understandings of the Malay ‘homeland’ perpetuated through *Utusan* and other institutions. These were the same discourses which first provided Umno’s legitimacy as it sought to gain a political following. To Zaini Hassan, the Malays needed to unite. He regretted the apathetic relationship between Umno and PAS, which had progressively worsened and consequently weakened the Malays. Hassan deemed PAS supporters as ‘one of us’; ‘members of the family’ that required coaxing back inside. PKR and DAP supporters in contrast, were not. These ideas were supported by Khairul Anwar Rahmat, who exhorted PAS supporters to join their Malay compatriots: ‘To Pas supporters, enough is enough... accept the fraternal greeting from UMNO’ (*Kepada penyokong Pas, cukup cukuplah... sambutlah salam persaudaraan daripada UMNO*)<sup>243,244</sup>.

These declarations resembled Malay ‘war cries’. Hassan declared he was prepared to be branded ‘as a tribalist, racist and ultra’ (*sebagai assabiyah, rasis dan ultra*) if it meant

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<sup>242</sup> ‘*Pertahan hak bangsa Melayu*’, Kamil Maslih, *Utusan*, 09/05/2013

<sup>243</sup> ‘*Peringatan untuk Melayu*’, Khairul Anwar Rahmat, *Utusan*, 08/05/2013

<sup>244</sup> Various *Utusan* readers also replicated this ‘Malay unity’ rhetoric (‘*Masa memperkasa bangsa Melayu*’, Ahmad Mohamad Radzi, *Utusan*, 17/05/2013; ‘*Surat terbuka kepada Nik Aziz*’, Dr Hasan Mad, *Utusan*, 15/04/2013).

defending his people. Bakar likewise, discussing the need to incarcerate the ‘insolent’ opposition, declared:

We do not need to care about what foreign countries want to say if strict action is taken. This is our country, this is our homeland, this is the land where our blood has spilled, so let us determine how to resist disruptive elements like the opposition.

*Kita tidak perlu mempedulikan apa negara asing mahu kata jika tindakan tegas berkenaan diambil. Ini negara kita, ini tanah air kita, ini tanah tumpah darah kita, maka biarlah kita yang menentukan bagaimana hendak menentang anasir-anasir porak-peranda seperti pakatan pembangkang ini.*<sup>245</sup>

This election was a crucial example of where an inner monologue had been appropriated within *Utusan*, as indicated by Brown (2005) in Chapter 3. This time, an overtly conservative and right-wing discourse was playing out in *Utusan* and silencing the moderate BN line – deemed irrelevant to Umno’s rural campaign.

At a more simple level, writers often referred to Malaysia as ‘*Tanah Melayu*’ (i.e. an exclusive, ethnonational space and not an inclusive, national space). GE13 starkly reflected that this discourse had never disappeared in Malaysian politics (Suryadinata 2014, p.132). It was woven into *Utusan*’s DNA, emerging implicitly through certain sentences, such as Khairul Anwar Rahmat’s: ‘It seems this land belongs to other people’ (*Bumi dipijak seolah-olah milik orang lain*) (implying the non-Malays). In other ways, efforts were made to emphasise that BN exclusively championed a Malay agenda. Kamil Maslih’s article featured the words of UKM geopolitics lecturer Prof Dr Mohd Fuad Mat Jali, who noted that Malays supported BN because ‘they are convinced that party is capable of preserving the status quo in the struggle for religion, race and country’ (*mereka meyakini parti tersebut mampu memelihara status quo dalam perjuangan agama, bangsa dan negara*). To him, *Pakatan* had compromised the religiosity of Malay identity:

The Malays do not like seeing the coalition between Pas, DAP and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) because many things have been lost, especially relating to the interests of Islam and the Allah issue.

*Orang Melayu tidak suka melihat pakatan antara Pas, DAP dan Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) kerana banyak perkara telah tersasar terutama berkaitan kepentingan agama Islam serta isu kalimah Allah.*<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> ‘Anwar sekadar ‘kuda tunggangan’ DAP’, Zulkiflee Bakar, *Utusan*, 19/05/2013

<sup>246</sup> ‘Majoriti Melayu sokong BN’, Kamil Maslih, *Utusan*, 21/04/2013

Similarly, another article quoted Dr Hasan Ali, president of 'Jati' (a pro-Umno Malay-Muslim NGO), who warned Malays against voting for PKR or 'parasites in Pas' (*parasit dalam Pas*)<sup>247</sup>. Jati exemplified an intellectual agency linked to the Umno network, contributing to the shared repertoire of meaning that supported hegemonic framings of society. Ali declared *Pakatan* had 'failed to glorify Islam, champion the Malays and empower the royal institution' (*gagal mengagungkan Islam, memartabatkan Melayu dan mendaulatkan institusi raja*)<sup>248</sup>. These references to 'Malayness' were reminiscent of the late colonial period, where there was frenzied debate as to who should and should not be included in such a conception of identity (Shamsul 1999, p.95).

### *Utusan's amateur dramatics*

With this audience established, *Utusan* writers showed imagination in their mobilisation of the rural Malay community. They cast themselves and their readers in a literary epic, a tale of good and evil, sacrifice and revenge<sup>249</sup>. This epic invoked themes of the Melaka Sultanate, the supposed Malay 'golden age'. Utilising that history, these organic intellectuals sought to sustain the highly territorialised, hegemonic conception of racial identity, legitimising Umno's power hierarchy. It reflected the Malays' 'aspirations grounded in the mindset of the exclusionary early and mid-twentieth Malay nationalism' (*sic*) (Kessler 2013b, online), which as Chapter 2 discussed, after 1948 harnessed the political and cultural symbolism of the Melaka Sultanate (Singh 1998, p.250). *Utusan's* strategy reflected the Malay intelligentsia's intent to 're-legitimise' Umno. Readers were cast as loyal subjects in the royal kingdom, in contrast to the opposition, 'treacherous villains' who had defied the conventional order of things. As Hall has argued:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. (Hall 1998, p.225)

This mythical history of 'Melayu' identity was the very category that was subject to such processes. It was like these *Utusan* writers were testing their readers' loyalty, based on the assumption that loyal citizens should demonstrate deference and obedience to that order.

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<sup>247</sup> 'Melayu Islam wajib undi BN', Saifulizam Mohamad, *Utusan*, 14/04/2013

<sup>248</sup> One reader latched onto these ideas, reaffirming Najib and Umno as the true defenders of Malay identity ('*Masa memperkasa bangsa Melayu*', Ahmad Mohamad Radzi, *Utusan*, 17/05/2013).

<sup>249</sup> Writing was often whimsical and over-elaborate, for instance focusing on Malay 'sacrifice' (*korban*) ('*Pertahan hak bangsa Melayu*', Kamil Maslih, *Utusan*, 09/05/2013) or 'the tears of the Malays' (*air mata orang Melayu*) ('*Peringatan untuk Melayu*', Khairul Anwar Rahmat, *Utusan*, 08/05/2013).

In this epic, Malays who supported PKR and DAP were cast as theatre villains, or ‘traitors’, deemed to have compromised their Malay values. Former PKR *Wanita* chief, Aminah Abdullah, criticised PKR leaders for fuelling racial sentiment, ‘lecturing in front of tens of thousands of Chinese people...making allegations that UMNO is racist’ (*berceramah di hadapan puluhan ribu orang Cina...membuat tuduhan UMNO bersikap perkauman*)<sup>250</sup>. Effectively by siding with the Chinese, PKR leaders had forfeited their Malay identity. Importantly, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was the ‘master villain’ in this narrative. Anwar himself had noted his perception as ‘Public Enemy No 1 and traitor to King and country’, which reflected Umno’s theatrics<sup>251</sup>. Anwar’s character resembled Hang Jebat, a controversial figure in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. According to legend, Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat were close companions, before Hang Jebat chose to rebel against the Melaka Sultan whom he served, and consequently was sentenced to death. Compared to Hang Tuah’s perception as ‘the ideal Melayu subject’ (Andaya 2001, p.328), Hang Jebat was infamous for his betrayal of the Malay establishment – as a Malay anarchist. Anwar’s positioning thus drew ‘upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning, and emerge[d] through particular patterns of engagement and struggle’ (Li 2000, p.151). More broadly, the symbolism of the *Hikayat* had been invoked to reconstruct the Malays’ ‘racial sense of lost grandeur’ that the colonialists had instilled since the nineteenth century (Reid 2001, p.307). The ‘virtues of royal greatness and mass deference’ encapsulated in this work (Case 1995, p.82), were transformed to the virtues of Umno’s greatness and deference to the *Ketuanan Melayu* hegemonic order.

*Utusan* editor Zulkiflee Bakar highlighted the relationship between Anwar and Lim, reflecting his attempts to delegitimise Anwar as ‘un-Malay’ and therefore unviable for *Utusan*’s readers. The article was entitled ‘Anwar is just the DAP’s “horse”’ (*Anwar sekadar ‘kuda tunggangan’ DAP*), and alleged that DAP was exploiting Anwar to ride the wave of public discontent:

DAP know they cannot move alone for fear of being accused of chauvinism, so the best way is with Anwar in illegal assemblies. They support what is done by Anwar because of the belief that if the opposition win in this clash it is not Anwar or PKR but DAP that profits.

*DAP tahu mereka tidak boleh bergerak sendirian kerana bimbang akan dituduh chauvinis, justeru cara terbaik ialah bersama-sama Anwar dalam perhimpunan haram. Mereka menyokong apa juga*

<sup>250</sup> ‘Sudah lama DAP main isu sentimen perkauman – Aminah’, *Utusan*, 07/05/2013

<sup>251</sup> ‘Race relations and the moral imperative’, Anwar Ibrahim, *Malaysiakini*, 14/05/2013

*yang dilakukan oleh Anwar kerana percaya kalau pembangkang menang dalam pertarungan ini yang akan untung bukan Anwar atau PKR tetapi DAP.*<sup>252</sup>

The gist of the article was that Anwar was the DAP's puppet, a Chinese collaborator. This was despite the reality that many Chinese opposition supporters were suspicious of Anwar's past as a fiery pro-Malay, pro-Muslim political figure (Backman 2005, p.81). It exemplified the extent to which some *Utusan* journalists were going to delegitimise Anwar. Because DAP was riding Anwar's influence, the implication was that Anwar had betrayed his Malay identity, and language like this reinforced the zero-sum opposition between Malay and Chinese values; PKR Malays were not 'true' Malays, but traitors to the Malay establishment.

It was this mythology that pro-establishment figures used to make sense of the world<sup>253</sup>.

Pahit-Pahit Kopi, referring to Anwar's allegations of electoral fraud, depicted Anwar as a man who harboured a grand plot to bring down the Malay establishment:

Anwar wants to seize the seat of the Prime Minister in an undemocratic and undignified manner. What is his purpose of inciting the people to believe that GE-13 was unclean. What's the message with the slogan Lies, Lies, Lies which was peddled throughout the country? Anwar and the opposition leaders continue to desire to "sodomise" the people's minds with false allegations about GE-13...If the actions of Anwar and the opposition leaders are not stopped, it is not impossible an Anwar Spring could happen in our country.

*Anwar mahu rampas kerusi Perdana Menteri dengan cara tidak demokratik dan bermaruah. Apa tujuan dia menghasut rakyat supaya mempercayai PRU-13 tidak bersih. Apa mesejnya dengan slogan Tipu, Tipu, Tipu yang dijaja ke seluruh negara? Anwar dan pemimpin pembangkang terus bernafsu untuk 'meliwat' pemikiran rakyat dengan tuduhan palsu tentang PRU-13...Jika perbuatan Anwar dan penyokongnya tidak dibendung, tidak mustahil Anwar Spring boleh berlaku di negara kita.*<sup>254</sup>

The words 'Anwar Spring' reflected a rare, explicit reference made to the events that had transpired across the Arab World two years ago, seeking to connect Anwar's ambitions with the chaos and political unrest that had spread throughout those countries and was still ongoing. We could speculate that Pahit-Pahit Kopi, by doing so, was forging a link between Anwar's 'unfinished business' (in achieving power in Malaysia) with the 'unfinished revolution' of the Arab Spring, connecting Anwar's struggle, from 1999 to the present, with a broader, ongoing political revolution (Stark 2013, p.56).

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<sup>252</sup> 'Anwar sekadar 'kuda tunggangan' DAP', Zulkiflee Bakar, *Utusan*, 19/05/2013

<sup>253</sup> For instance, former Umno leader Sanusi Junid addressed Anwar as 'traitor to race, religion and country' (*pengkhianat bangsa, agama dan negara*) ('Melayu kembali pada UMNO', Zin Mahmud *et al.*, *Utusan*, 14/04/2013).

<sup>254</sup> 'Apabila Cina terus ikut angan-angan Anwar Spring', Pahit-Pahit Kopi, *Utusan*, 14/05/2013



Returning to Zaini Hassan's article, Hassan uses the Malay word 'wahai', and asking why is instructive. 'Wahai' has no English translation but is used to convey emotion, authority over the listener and/or to command attention. In the Malay translation of the Quran the words of the Prophet Muhammad often start with 'wahai'. We could say then, that 'wahai' reminded the reader that political change could happen on a 'biblical' scale. Conveniently, the Chinese 'wave which frightened the Malays' (*gelombang yang menakutkan orang Melayu*) was the apocalyptic event which the Malays had been warned about<sup>255</sup>. The Chinese tsunami was the first symbol of a larger, impending disaster which required a biblical miracle:

Praise be to God the Malays in Malaysia are still protected by the Almighty. We must believe it. PAS people and Anwar must come to terms with the will of God. Not a stone wall blocking the advancement of the Chinese tsunami, but with the help of God, a divine intervention to His people in this blessed land.

*Alhamdulillah orang Melayu di Malaysia ini masih dilindungi oleh Yang Maha Esa. Kita harus percaya itu. Orang Pas dan Anwar harus redha dengan ketentuan Illahi itu. Bukan tembok batu yang menyekat kemaraan tsunami Cina itu, tetapi hasil pertolongan Allah, divine intervension kepada umat-Nya di bumi bertuah ini.*

Hassan spoke as if it was the Malays' mission to build a new promised land: 'O Malays, unite. Let us form a new Malaysia. New Umno. New Pas. New Malays.' (*Wahai umat Melayu, ayuh bersatulah. Marilah kita membentuk Malaysia Baru. UMNO Baru. Pas Baru. Melayu Baru.*) He thus invited the reader to indulge in the 'nationalist fantasy of a Malay golden age' (Khoo 2006, p.32)<sup>256</sup>.

When Kessler speaks of 'the "real campaign" for Malay votes' (2013a, online), these were the ideas he implied: overtly ethnocentric and targeted directly at the loyal rural Malay stronghold. Consequently, Najib's 'Chinese tsunami' comments were hardly surprising; predictable, even. This leads us into the conclusion, which discusses the effectiveness of *Utusan*'s mobilisation of the Chinese-kafir essentialism, *Malaysiakini*'s fragmented response, and what this says more broadly about the media landscape and the role that racialising discourses still play in that landscape.

## Conclusion

In this chapter the essentialisation of the Chinese-kafir identity has been shown to work through creative narratives produced by *Utusan Malaysia* writers that positioned the Chinese

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<sup>255</sup> 'Pasca PRU-13: Ke mana Melayu selepas ini...', Zaini Hassan, *Utusan*, 08/05/2013

<sup>256</sup> One reader plugged into this biblical discourse, warning of an 'unspeakable catastrophe' (*malapetaka amat buruk*) ('*Surat terbuka kepada Nik Aziz*', Dr Hasan Mad, *Utusan*, 15/04/2013).

historically in their role as members of the colonial *kongsi*. The chapter demonstrated how BN backed by *Utusan* had conducted a powerful, highly racialised pro-Malay/anti-Chinese campaign in the rural constituencies. *Malaysiakini* writers demonstrated resistance to *Utusan*'s narrative, but its own narrative of rural/urban difference was infused with racially-charged understandings of rural life. This conclusion discusses the implications of these ideas under three contexts: understanding *Utusan* as the (successful) driver of ethnoreligious discourse in this election, the enduring role of *Utusan* in the political landscape relative to *Malaysiakini*, and lastly the continuing problems for *Malaysiakini* relating to its middle class readership, which had limited appeal to the rural masses.

In 2013, key *Utusan* writers were driving forth ethnoreligious discourse, showing creativity in their reworking of the Chinese-kafir essentialism. The chapter explored how the Chinese-kafir category was invested with meaning relating to the negative role that China had played in Malaysia's colonial past, and subsequently projected upon the DAP and its Chinese support base to alienate them from the Malaysian state. Malaysia was a country where the Chinese had no place, and multiculturalism the product of a 'Chinese' agenda (dictated by DAP's leadership of the opposition). The chapter proceeded to examine how this discourse was positioned against a Malay-dominant landscape. These *Utusan* writers delved deep into a rich tapestry of colonial mythology, using crude and simplified framings of racial identity to resurrect an early, exclusionary nationalism that drew from the fragmented history of Melaka's 'golden age'. Notably, in 2013 the Malay racial category was stripped of its ethnoreligious context, because of the political circumstances. Islam did not play a central role, because *Utusan* had targeted its campaign at the rural Malay constituencies. Political Islam was a broader Malaysian issue affecting the Malay middle classes and non-Malays, thus was irrelevant to *Utusan*'s agenda. Urban Malays were excluded from *Utusan*'s campaign based on their supposed rejection of the 'core' Malay identity. Subsequently when we speak of the Malay-Muslim essentialism we realise the inherent instability as to who can and cannot be included in such a conception of identity. The emphasis within this category shifts according to the media audience being addressed.

The chapter showed how, influenced by Najib's accusation of a 'Chinese Tsunami', *Utusan* journalists revived a distinctly and unapologetically ethnonational discourse around both the Malays and Chinese. *Utusan*'s campaign was politically relevant, given BN's hegemonic crisis and the ascendancy of the opposition and DAP. These *Utusan* writers developed a voice that was separate from and simultaneously influencing the government discourse. *Utusan* demonstrated its relevance and resilience, deployed by BN to promote and protect the

*Ketuanan Melayu* narrative this time around. It was not detached from, but inherently embedded in common government rhetoric, suggesting the enduring importance of *Utusan* as a print media form. Given Umno's success, we could infer that these *Utusan* writers successfully appealed to their audience, which over time had aligned with the 'common sense' understandings of Malay 'homeland' perpetuated through *Utusan* and other media. Writers sourced their hegemonic legitimacy by locating themselves in this historical-political landscape, manipulating the politics of racial fear to mobilise the rural masses against the opposition.

*Malaysiakini* had been inspired by *Pakatan*'s growing strength since 2008, and journalists were propagating an alternative vision of national identity which Malaysians would confront together. In 2013 *Malaysiakini* featured a wide range of political commentators, including journalists, bloggers, politicians and other civil society figures. The intention was clear: to foment a legitimacy crisis and forge a counter-hegemonic moment, just like in 2008. These writers collectively targeted Umno politicians, *Utusan* editorial staff and other supporters of the regime, challenging their ideas with an effective counter-critique that appealed to *Malaysiakini*'s multiracial audience. Ordinary readers also generated critical discussion as to the enduring relevance of racial discourse and BN rule in Malaysia. Nevertheless, occasionally this debate was depoliticising and unproductive, detracting and distracting from *Pakatan*'s broader objectives. More importantly, the rural/urban narrative prominent in some *Malaysiakini* articles was infused with tensions concerning perceptions of the sociocultural differences between 'unconscious' rural and 'enlightened' urban voters, revealing much about the nature, scope and limited emancipatory potential of *Malaysiakini* and other new media. That middle class readership was clearly disconnected from the realities of rural life, which limited *Malaysiakini*'s ability to push beyond its 2008 success and offer political discourse that transcended urban Malaysia. In contrast, key contributions from *Utusan*'s Zaini Hassan and Zulkiflee Bakar spoke straight to those people in a language they understood, and along with other politicians, NGOs and academics, reinforced the hegemonic *Tanah Melayu* worldview. Clearly, this three-part electoral cycle has been revealing in what it demonstrates about firstly, the power of the media and its embeddedness in Malaysian society, secondly, the flexibility with which racial and national discourses are applied and operationalised in Malaysia, and finally, the role that Malaysia's intellectual community has played in forging a distinctive brand of identity politics. These three themes will be taken forward and explored in the concluding chapter.

## **Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

This thesis has argued that Malaysia's general elections represent an important crucible through which Malaysian identity is reconfigured and reshaped. The essentialist ethno-religious discourses witnessed in the Malaysian media around election times represent an important example of the enduring power of racialisation in the political landscape and, more significantly, the role of racialising discourses in new media production. These journalists and writers have creatively reworked racial and national ideas, engaging Malaysia's colonial past and reworking that past to produce original political discourse. Nevertheless these discourses, in their fragmented colonial-historical links, have legitimised processes of inclusion and exclusion for different racial and religious groups, thus reinforcing a divisive political landscape. This concluding chapter will synthesise the empirical findings and examine their broader significance, and is structured into four sections. First, it revisits the research context, reaffirming the importance of the research and what it aimed to do. Then, it synthesises the empirical findings with particular reference to the role of ethno-religious identity and fragmented essentialisms in each election. Thereafter, the core of the discussion focuses on three things: the media's situation in the racialised landscape, the operation of ethno-religious discourse, and the role of Malaysia's journalists and writers as organic and critical intellectuals, forging nuanced identity discourses. Finally, the chapter discusses limitations and opportunities for further research (with reference to the possible election scenario in 2018).

### **The Production of Racialised Electoral Politics in the Malaysian Media**

This thesis argued that one way racialisation has manifested is through the persistent employment and deployment by the government and media of dynamic, albeit fragmented, ethno-religious discourses: 'Malay-Muslim', 'Chinese-kafir' and 'Tamil-Hindu'. Due to various factors discussed in Chapter 2, these discourses have been reinforced over generations, and are deeply entrenched in Malaysian society, affecting things, processes, people, institutions and other organisations. This thesis argued that around election times these identity discourses are effectively mobilised for political support, reflecting a 'production line' of racialisation through which these identities are periodically reformed. Hence, the electoral media represent a significant (but broadly untapped) site of racialised discourse.

There has been no previous study which specifically analyses the role of elections in racialisation per se, and moreover how this process is shaped over a broader electoral cycle. This study therefore explored and interrogated the media's usage of contextually-specific ethnoreligious narratives across three Malaysian general elections (2004, 2008 and 2013), through a critical discourse analysis of 150 articles across Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* and pro-opposition website *Malaysiakini*. Each election was different, in terms of the domestic and international political climate through which it was defined. It was thus likely that racialised discourses would manifest in nuanced ways for each election, according to these different contexts. This twenty-first-century focus was further significant in that it allowed for an exploration of the confluence between *Malaysiakini* and the racialised political landscape. The research was guided by two key questions:

- How did these journalists and writers engage and rework Malaysia's colonial history, and in what ways did *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* writers differ in this regard?
- How does analysis of elections facilitate richer insight into the production and operation of racialised discourse in Malaysia?

Both questions will be revisited further on, after the empirical findings have been summarised. This thesis underlined the concepts of 'ethnoreligious symbolism' and 'fragmented essentialisms' as central to the process of meaning-making in Malaysian politics. The chapter will refer back to both concepts, as a means of guiding the discussion. It is therefore useful to revisit them here. First, the ethno-symbolist perspective was adapted to explain how – given the interconnectedness of racial and religious identities (and particularly the colonial government's role in forging those connections) – *ethnoreligious symbolism* is a more useful framework for the Malaysian context. Over centuries, discourses around the primary racial groups, whether the 'Muslim' Malays, the 'kafir' Chinese or the 'Hindu' Tamils, developed, contained within which was a language for speaking about those groups' identities. Second, the concept of *fragmented essentialisms* was introduced to explore how these identities are fragmented, as an inevitable outcome of the postcolonial condition, which has provided the basis for a nuanced identity politics. Overall this concept accounts for the inevitably multiple, contested and ambivalent nature of postcolonial identity categories. They have been subverted and transformed into a politics of identity in Malaysia which albeit effective for maintaining the status quo, has resulted in an unfortunate and limiting set of political discourses. Malaysian journalists (as one example of many groups partaking in this same meaning-making process) are thus making sense of this, simultaneously resisting and

reconstructing dominant colonial narratives within the ethnoreligious framework. The chapter will now outline the analysis results, with regard to both concepts.

### **Synthesis of Findings**

**2004's 'Blue Wave' and the Islamic State Question:** this chapter was dedicated to interrogating the media's exploitation of the fragmented Malay-Muslim identity, using the 2004 denouncement of PAS as a platform for doing so. It demonstrated not only how the specific post-9/11 context influenced political discourse to centre on Umno, PAS and Malay-Muslim identity, but how this discourse was specifically anti-Islamist, highlighting PAS as a party of extremists that propagated fundamentalist Islamic teachings (primarily an Islamic State complete with syariah law) – contrary to the 'moderate' and 'progressive' BN (epitomised by Badawi's *Islam Hadhari* programme). This political environment, the chapter argued, influenced a unique political moment where certain *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* writers joined forces, effectively mimicking those ideas. The core of the chapter explored how both media utilised a powerful, racialising binary that invoked Orientalist and anti-Islamist discourses to define PAS and its supporters. This binary was threefold: *moderation vs. fundamentalism* (where writers contrasted PAS, as a fundamentalist, extremist and oppressive party, against BN, as the party for 'moderate' Malays); *modernity vs. antiquity* (where writers contrasted the old-fashioned and ancient PAS against the modern and progressive BN); and *morality vs. sin* (where writers set the morality of the BN against the PAS 'sinners'). It was thus through those binaries that the fragmentation of the Malay-Muslim identity was clearly demonstrated, reworked to the media's and government's advantage. Through those binaries the 'ideal' Malay-Muslim behaviours were demonstrated (and aligned with BN), though it was shown how this revealed fractures and tensions within that community. Most importantly it showed how these *Malaysiakini* writers had been 'assimilated' into the racialised order; a theme which continued into 2008.

**2008's 'Political Tsunami' and the Indian Awakening:** this chapter chose the 'Hindraf factor' as the focus for examining the fragmentation of Tamil-Hindu identity in 2008's election. Indian issues were a key focus in 2008, and the chapter demonstrated how Hindraf's campaign for religious freedom influenced specific media discourses on the Indian community: *Malaysiakini* writers' commentary on the 'colonial Indian', based on reworking the Tamil-Hindu essentialism; and *Utusan* writers' criticism of the Hindraf/opposition agenda, which denied Indian socioeconomic progress. It was shown how both narratives, but particularly the one advanced by *Malaysiakini* writers, were implicated in processes of

inclusion and exclusion; a factor inherent to the way these racialising discourses operate. *Malaysiakini* writers had reinforced an essentialism which positioned Indians as subordinated subjects who had not progressed in the nation-state. This excluded non-Tamil and non-Hindu Indian citizens, and alienated those not from a working class background. This illuminated important questions concerning *which* Malaysian Indians were being spoken for, and consequently whether this politicisation of Hindu issues was sustainable for the broader Indian community. Media coverage of the Hindraf ‘rose protest’ was analysed to argue that certain *Malaysiakini* writers had attempted to forge a counter-hegemonic political moment, generating transnational links between the political struggle of Malaysian Indians and that of other transnational Indian ‘diaspora’; a promising sign of the new media’s power. However, this was overshadowed by the fact that those writers had again been influenced to use fragmented, racialising discourses that legitimised Malaysia’s ethnoreligious order.

**2013’s ‘Chinese Tsunami’ and the Resurrection of ‘Tanah Melayu’:** this chapter utilised the Prime Minister’s scapegoating of Chinese voters (for BN’s poor electoral performance) as a focus for analysing media discourses around specific sections of the Malay and Chinese communities. It explored how BN’s rhetoric was reinforced by *Utusan* – and strongly opposed by *Malaysiakini*. These *Utusan* journalists creatively reworked the Chinese-kafir essentialism to position the DAP and its supporters, not unlike the colonial *kongsi* of days past, as militant, extreme and treasonous; behaviour that, according to some writers (and public figures), legitimised a Malay ‘response’. This latter rhetoric drew from colonial discourses around the Melaka Sultanate, and it was shown how *Utusan* writers effectively reworked those ideas to construct an emotional and theatrical discourse concerning the perilous future of ‘*Tanah Melayu*’. Interestingly, ethnoreligious identity was de-emphasised because *Utusan*’s campaign was overtly Malaycentric and did not require manipulating Islam as a campaign issue. In contrast, it was shown, *Malaysiakini* writers and readers, as well as key opposition figures, opposed this racialisation of the electoral result. Their response was heated and passionate, collectively targeting key figures in the government, broader administration and mainstream media. They did not indulge in any ethnoreligious rhetoric but developed a counter-narrative of rural/urban difference. The chapter argued that – given it was Malaysia’s urban middle classes who had continued to voice their dissent, increasingly vocally, against the regime – this could reflect two problems for *Malaysiakini*: firstly, its limited appeal beyond Malaysia’s urban centres; and secondly, its vulnerability to ‘high intensity’ debates that detrimented its broader political vision. In contrast, 2013 evidenced

that *Utusan*, by employing all the rhetorical tools at its disposal, was a powerful, resilient force in this fast-shifting media landscape.

These diverse election scenarios demonstrate how the media can employ and deploy ethnoreligious narratives according to different political circumstances. The influence of these narratives depends on, inter alia, which media institution deploys them, how effectively they are positioned by writers within broader (geo)-political contexts, which group(s) they target, and whether the emphasis is placed on racial or religious identity. These narratives are thus a true embodiment of the fragmented essentialisms concept, repeatedly coming in and out of focus according to differing electoral contexts, thus constantly redrawing the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion for the members of these groups. There are important elements to take away from this, both positive and negative, and these will now be discussed.

### **Unpacking Malaysian Racialisation Through the Electoral Media**

It is important to unpack and examine the nuanced processes at work in Malaysia's identity politics, asking what this reveals about the production of identity in postcolonial Malaysia. Drawing examples from the analysis, this section revisits the research questions vis-à-vis three elements:

- First, it explores how the media is both a product and producer of Malaysia's racialised society;
- Second, it evaluates the operation and effectiveness of Malaysia's ethnoreligious discourses around election times;
- Finally, it argues that Malaysia's journalists represent an untapped source of ideas around racial and national identity.

The aim is to provide a snapshot of how these fragmented discourses operate in the media landscape, and what this reveals about the potential, and pitfalls, of Malaysian identity politics.

#### ***Understanding the media as a product and producer of Malaysia's racialised society***

Although *Utusan* is more understood in regard to its positioning within the Malaysian politico-media complex, less understood is how *Malaysiakini* has impacted, and been impacted by, this racialised landscape. Other studies have not focused closely on this issue, but instead have written about *Malaysiakini* in light of its alignment with a new political discourse that is anti-BN and transcends ethnoreligious cleavages. Phrased differently,



although *Malaysiakini* (and the new media more broadly) has been explored in reference to its potential to forge that new political paradigm, it has not been assessed with a view to its role as an active producer of racialised discourse, per se. This first part therefore approaches these *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* writers as products and producers of Malaysia's racialised society, exploring the implications that this has, in terms of the limits experienced by *Malaysiakini*.

Accepting race as the taken-for-granted reality in Malaysia enables us to understand how the media – through the production of ethnoreligious discourse – is enmeshed within a politics of race that positions racialised experiences as the accepted norm. It allows us to ask in what ways the media is able to separate from – and, in *Malaysiakini*'s case, displace – these processes. Chapter 2 explored how Malaysia's ethnoreligious discourses are deeply embedded and implicated in the colonial past, and it showed how they materialised and evolved throughout the colonial and postcolonial eras. The 'norms' associated with each group – whether 'Muslim Malays', 'kafir Chinese' or 'Hindu Tamils' – have been constructed, arranged, reinterpreted, absorbed and internalised over generations, by political figures, organisations and ordinary citizens, which has acted to normalise these ethnoreligious narratives. But such is their strength that these evolving historical relations over time have acquired political agency, shaping people, processes, institutions, organisations and other things in the Malaysian polity. Hence, these ethnoreligious categories are naturalised by, and continue to naturalise, historically-forged racial relations in Malaysia. In this light it is unsurprising that this ethnoreligious framework had particularly potency in the application of this study, allowing for an analytical perspective that shed light on the identity of political parties and their supporters around election times, and the role of media in contributing to this identity formation (although, as has been stressed, this is not applicable across all contexts in Malaysia).

It is therefore important to revisit the dialogue (and ideological tensions) between the media and the national-historical structures within which they are embedded. Chapter 3 reviewed literature on Malaysia's media landscape to advance the argument that, despite seeking to transcend racial divides, the new media (epitomised by *Malaysiakini*) is always vulnerable to being drawn into these same processes. But this conclusion was based on what *Malaysiakini* writers could not say (legally speaking), and not what they *chose* to say. To clarify, media discourse is shackled by legal, constitutional, environmental and other restraints relating to press ownership, conformity in the workplace and so on. But it is also limited by intangible factors; for instance, speech acts that reassign the meaning of certain words in the political imagination. Around 2004 *Malaysiakini* writers were influenced by BN's repetition of

negative utterances around PAS, concerning images of Islamic fundamentalism and extremism. They discarded the opposition's calls for a new collective identity and instead demonised PAS' Islamist agenda. Although 2004's election was determined by the post-9/11 political context, which perhaps necessitated the construction of an 'ideal' Malay-Muslim identity, in 2008 *Malaysiakini* writers were again influenced by prevailing ethnoreligious currents – this time concerning the 'oppressed' Hindu community.

Whether 'old' or new, the media clearly appropriated these ethnoreligious categories (*Malaysiakini* less so in 2013). Certainly in the case of *Malaysiakini* – a model for political diversity and difference of opinion – the writers' application of these ethnoreligious narratives should not be conceptualised as a conscious, ideological process. This should be evident given its 'independent' (read: oppositional) political orientation. Instead, these narratives reflect the racialising power of Malaysian discourse, in its capacity to retain, retrieve and reconstitute certain pockets of history. The writers featured in this thesis speak from and through particular histories, and – as Chapter 4 discussed – 'perceive their existence through socially shared discursive expressions' (Kaunismaa 1995, p.3). Media institutions are structured within specific sets of sociohistorical relations that define Malaysia's racialised political landscape, which in-turn shape the writing patterns of journalists and writers connected to them. It is not easy for these writers to disentangle themselves from those ideas; contrarily, they maintain a role as active producers of that landscape. Despite Weiss' optimism about the potential of cyberspaces like *Malaysiakini* to alter the paradigm of communication, we must accept the extent to which they are rooted in this (post)colonial-historical landscape. This study has shown *Malaysiakini* writers are struggling with the production of ethnoreligious discourses, and occasionally can reinforce Malaysia's brand of racialised politics. Malaysian politics, albeit dynamic, is defined through an essentialist political framework which both traditional and new media can plug into, when the political environment so demands. This framework is discussed below.

### ***Malaysia's ethnoreligious discourses as sites of creativity***

As discussed, albeit noted by certain scholars (Buttny *et al.* 2013; Pandi 2014; Willford 2007), the ethnoreligious context is less acknowledged in scholarship on Malaysia. This section thus elucidates the factors underlying Malaysia's ethnoreligious discourses, exploring how they change and adapt according to differing political contexts, and how their mobilisation around election time brings different impacts, short and long term, upon Malaysian society. It examines how electoral 'moments' provide an important context where

ethnoreligious essentialisms are ‘crystallised’, which has long term impacts upon identity formation in Malaysia by Malaysians.

Gabriel argues that a ‘critical reflection on the meaning of race’ is much needed in Malaysia (2015, p.1). I have argued that race adopts a fundamentally different form in the media, one implicitly and insidiously expressed through the ethnoreligious context. That is, ethnoreligious identity represents one way in which race can be employed in Malaysia, and the Malaysian elections are an important site where ideas around the ‘ethnoreligious’ are periodically and creatively worked and reworked. At this time, Malaysia’s colonial history is exploited by the government and media for different political goals, to support the creation of politically enabling, albeit fragile and fragmented, ethnoreligious discourses. These discourses are nevertheless very effective, flexible and adaptable to changing political conditions.

In a certain light, these discourses offer a way into understanding, in Reid’s (2009) terms, Malaysia’s ‘alchemy’. Chapter 2 demonstrated how particularly Malay and Muslim identity, but also Chinese and kafir identity, and Indian (Tamil) and Hindu identity became intertwined in the political imagination, formed through a fusion not only of precolonial and colonial elements, but indigenous and foreign influences. The empirical chapters exploring the 2008 and 2013 elections demonstrated how the interconnections between these identities operated in the contemporary era, whereby the Tamil-Hindu and Chinese-kafir identities gained their meaning in and through their positioning against the dominating Malay-Muslim national identity. It was the colonial era (and associated essentialist paradigm) through which the identities of these groups became firmly attached to certain myths, symbols and cultural assumptions. Naturally these discourses are defined by contradictions, which reflect on the one hand their ‘fixedness’ in colonial histories and on the other, their inherent fluidity resulting from the ‘fabrication’ of that racialised colonial modernity. These ethnoreligious categories were always precarious; multiple, contested and ambivalent, ‘grounded in the complex and intricate intertwining of commonality and difference’ (Ang 1994, p.75). Chapter 2 highlighted the hybridity of these ethnoreligious categories, and this became apparent in the analysis: within each category, the ‘racial’ tussled with the ‘religious’, reflecting the problems caused by their hybridity, with two essential identities competing in the same discursive space.

Such instability is not necessarily an obstacle but a central feature of their *post*-colonial condition. Positioned in a liminal space between the ‘colonial’ and ‘postcolonial’ – a ‘third space’ produced on the edge (Soja 1996) – these categories are inherently mobile and

adaptable to changing political conditions. Expressed differently, the form, content and arguably significance of these categories differ across time, according to different social, cultural and political, but also local and global contexts. These ethnoreligious categories act as cultural ‘signifiers’ that are consistently ‘recoded’ (whether by the government, media or another actor) as a means of renegotiating and rearticulating the underlying racial identities to which they relate. This media analysis has shown how elections are a crucible through which identity is reconfigured and reshaped, providing a window onto the operation of these ethnoreligious narratives. It highlighted the flexibility of Malay-Muslim identity in its ability to switch between an Islam-dominant conception that positions Malays as members of a global Muslim community (i.e. 2004), and a *Bumiputera*-centred one which emphasises the local indigenous perspective (i.e. 2013). The broader ethnoreligious framework subsequently adapts itself around this conceptual ‘stretching’, with different identities coming in and out of focus at different times. These aspects are defining features of Malaysia’s political culture, and those ethnoreligious categories represent an important intervention in Malaysia’s postcolonial present – distinguishing the ‘layered’ postmodern identity which Reid (2009) describes.

In the course of this research it became clear how analysing this electoral cycle could offer insight into the negative effects of the constant reproduction of these ethnoreligious categories. Given the nature of Malaysia’s political discourse, elections are often defined around sensitive political issues, and where sensitive issues lie, there is an opportunity for essentialisation. Elections thus represent a ‘battleground’ where these categories are periodically reformed and reshaped, and each election represents the latest tectonic shift in Malaysia’s political landscape. At these times these identity categories are volatile, dictated by struggles between government and opposition and between *Utusan* and *Malaysiakini* (struggles which can be exasperated by non-state actors, like Hindraf in 2008), reflecting a discursive ‘tug of war’ that is messy, contested, open-ended, and perhaps even chaotic. The restlessness exhibited in this political discourse reflects the ‘passionate discontent with the self and nation’ expressed by these writers, especially in Malaysia’s early days as a nation-state (Tsu 2005, in Reid 2009, p.10). This has been intensified by *Malaysiakini*, allowing for the instantaneous production and dissemination of ethnoreligious narratives, which adds to their ‘disposability’. That is, they do not represent the real but, in Yao’s (2001) terminology, the ‘socially real’ – designed for specific electoral performances that are temporally contingent. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge the ‘continuing and continuous operation of “fixing” performed by [these] categories’ (Ang 2001a, p.25), which regulate the behaviour of

group members according to an ideal ‘type’ and exclude those who do not conform – such as the Shi’ite Muslim community.

### ***Organic intellectuals and political change***

Throughout the research, another theme emerged. Notwithstanding the unfortunate conditions within which writers were formulating their ideas, the narratives explored in this thesis indicate how Malaysia and Malaysians have come to terms with the racialised forms of identity that dominate in Malaysia. It was clear how, as Chapter 3 discussed, these journalists were making important contributions as organic and critical intellectuals. Whether pro- or anti-BN, these educated individuals were formulating important theories of identity and change, providing insight into the processes driving constructions and reconstructions of racial identity in Malaysian politics. Gabriel (2011, p.365) speaks of ‘the alteration and interrogation of hegemonic discourses by the discourses of the people’, and clearly *Malaysiakini* has begun to make an intervention here. It has been argued that the work of postcolonial theorists Bhabha, Said and Spivak – each whose ideas implicitly inform the conceptual framework of this thesis – lacks specific and grounded empirical evidence (see for instance O’Connor (2003) for a critique of the ‘generalizing impulse’ of Said and Spivak). ‘Traditional’ postcolonial theory, preoccupied with analysing literary texts, is perhaps detached from the ‘organic’ worldview – in this instance, one grounded in specific Malaysian geographies. This close reading of the Malaysian media thus reflects a treatment of postcolonial politics that is thought-provoking and in touch with current political times. The writers featured are significant for four reasons: they are highly contemporary; they are very creative; they are historical innovators; and they are political engineers. This final section thus assesses the benefits and drawbacks of the work of those writers in these four contexts.

Firstly, whether writing for *Utusan* or *Malaysiakini*, journalists used these discourses to forge wide-reaching links between local citizens and contemporary global processes, allowing them to position these citizens within new relational networks and spheres of authority, defined by broader geopolitical currents. Essentially, they used these discourses ‘as a strategy to open up avenues for new speaking trajectories’ (Ang 2001a, p.24). The contrasting international environments separating each election reflected the different contexts, or global political ‘spectacles’ which these journalists exploited to position different groups in the Malaysian polity. In Ang’s terms, they reflected

...specific conjunctures and contexts in which “identity” can be mobilized as a political concept, and the specific ways, positive or negative, in which it intervenes in those conjunctures and contexts. (1994, p.73)

*Malaysiakini* writers were driving forward the global connections, drawing on that website’s international readership in order to locate these discourses in a more fluid, politically enabling context. In 2004, writers relocated the local Umno/PAS contest on a global political stage. They effectively harnessed western-Orientalist currents that dictated negative perceptions of Islamic fundamentalism, and within this context they naturalised the PAS Islamist ‘threat’. As discussed, this was simultaneously grounded in ‘truth’ (like the allegation of PAS leaders’ Taliban support) and dictated by Umno’s historic labelling practices against PAS. Regardless, *Malaysiakini* as much as *Utusan* was an exclusionary force in 2004, characterised by the use of discursive violence against those Malays and Muslims that deviated from the BN ‘norm’. In 2008, writers ‘piggy-backed’ off Hindraf’s influence to successfully shape identity discourses around the ‘marginalised’ Indians, through broader global discourses around postcolonialism, transnationalism and the Indian diaspora. Essentially, Indians were positioned within a broader global network – at least, those Indians that practised Hinduism and whose ‘Tamil’ ancestors arrived under colonial rule.

Secondly, we should appreciate (and not overlook) the ‘discursive creativity’ of *Utusan*’s journalists and writers. O’Connor (2003, p.229) criticises the ‘condescension’ of postcolonial theory to seek to provide a form of ‘enlightenment from beyond’, and this supports the point made about the need to privilege the creativity behind the forms of identity being elicited in these media. These writers have demonstrated high levels of creativity in how the discourses attached to those ethnoreligious categories have been applied – at different elections, to different groups. They exploited what could be termed colonial-racial imagery and ‘stereotypes’, to creatively play with that history. *Utusan* has been dismissed as a reactionary media outlet by the opposition, media critics and various academics. Considering Kessler’s (2013c, online) remark that *Utusan*’s purpose is to keep the Malays’ perspective ‘narrowly framed by the same archaic perspective of their political grandparents’, such a statement is misleading and neglects the creative processes showcased in *Utusan*’s campaigns. For instance, in 2004 writers effectively reworked the vocabulary of old colonial discourse, using the word ‘*ketinggalan*’ (‘left behind’, reflecting the Malays’ exclusion under British rule) to enact a contextually-specific identity for Malays in the state of Kelantan, positioning PAS as the new ‘coloniser’ and ‘oppressor’ of Kelantan Malays. In 2013, the effects of this ‘creative license’ were more significant. Writers employed a rich tapestry of colonial mythology and

Malay cultural history, conjuring up imagery of the Chinese *kongsi* to cast certain groups of Malaysian Chinese citizens as a political ‘threat’, as well as casting the Malay readership in a political ‘drama’ that positioned them as subjects of the Melaka Sultanate. This not only isolated those Chinese groups and alienated them from the predominantly Malay rural areas, but also drew a wedge between the rural Malays and urbanised Malays, devaluing the latter’s identity as national citizens.

Thirdly, these writers have transformed a space of colonial/postcolonial ambivalence into a space of discursive production, reworking the hybridity of these ethnoreligious identities as a political tool. In Ang’s terms, history ‘is always ambiguous, always messy’ and these journalists have reconstructed it to compliment their ‘present need for meaning’ (2001a, p.28). The fragmentation of these identities has been exploited for a political goal: the creation of politically enabling, albeit discursively harmful, ethnoreligious discourses. The application of these ethnoreligious discourses represents an innovative strategy, which emancipates these writers from the colonial logic of essentialism and racial fixedness (Soja 1996). For instance, in 2004 writers from both media exploited the fragmentation of Malay-Muslim identity to demonstrate the Muslim identity that most suited Malaysia’s citizenry, constructing a discursive juxtaposition between the ‘ideal’ Malay-Muslim and its radical, PAS-driven ‘Other’. Naturally this had negative consequences, with PAS and its supporters externalised and positioned beyond ‘all that is Malaysian’ about Malaysian Islam. It was also clear how, within these ethnoreligious categories, writers exploited ‘religious’ identity to shape ‘racial’ identity, as necessitated by the political environment. *Utusan* writers sought to shape Malay behaviour through an emphasis on Islamic discourses centred on morality and sin, connecting PAS to the latter in order to emphasise the connection between BN and the former, implicit in which was the reinforcement of BN’s normative reinforcement of Sunni Islam. In 2008, in contrast, a number of *Malaysiakini* writers through their support of Hindraf were implicated in the ‘Hinduisation’ of Indian identity – albeit causing the exclusion of non-Hindu Indian narratives.

Finally, analysis of these elections suggests the myriad ways these journalists can employ ethnoreligious discourses to reengineer the colonial past, according to that specific political moment. Speaking about postcolonial identity, Ang notes that

...it is always fabricated, and therefore malleable and unfixed...[it] can be asserted, politicized and mobilized for different purposes, by different agents. (1994, p.76)

We must remember these journalists are conforming precisely to their role as ‘ethnopolitical entrepreneurs’ (Brubaker 2002). In the context of *realpolitik*, Malaysia perhaps provides a model of this politicisation of racial identity. This is about deploying essences; these journalists’ actions in picking and choosing what is politically enabling. It proves perhaps, that this past offers powerful and infinite possibilities in the ways it can be ideologically reconstructed and rehistoricised. Such reconstruction and renegotiation is part and parcel of the media’s usage of these ethnoreligious categories – a process central to Malaysia’s fast-moving racialised politics. Whether such connections can be made with other regions in Southeast Asia, or countries more broadly, can only be confirmed by further research.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This section outlines various limitations encountered during the data collection and analysis stages. It will ask how future research could ‘fill’ those gaps or build on this study, taking into account future trends in the field of Malaysian politics.

First, notably these narratives were selected for analysis on the basis of personal choice, reflecting a sampling process that was inherently subjective. As explained, this was not arbitrary but grounded in an abductive theoretical process that involved constant oscillation between prior knowledge of the case study and the dominant themes emerging in each election. Consequently, this method was rigorous, and any scholar using that method to understand how race operated through those elections would acknowledge the significance of the selected articles. One could argue that, in choosing these narratives the researcher has merely reinforced the essentialist discourse in question, thus the hegemonic structures of the Malaysian polity – but that would be an incorrect assumption. Instead, these articles were chosen to support an argument that proposes a rethink of race in Malaysia, accounting for the nuanced (and perhaps contrasting) contexts and conjunctures through which it may operate (using the media as an example).

Second, such narratives are specific to peninsular Malaysia, where racialisation is more potent (Shamsul 1996). A study including East Malaysia may provide a different outcome, however would risk compromising the analytical focus. Moreover, given the theoretical sampling procedure, aligned with my experience of living and studying in West Malaysia, logically the strongest study would play to the researcher’s strengths. Moreover, the thesis was primarily a study of dominant political discourses in the media around election times, and because general elections are driven by peninsular interests, Sabah and Sarawak were deemed less important in that respect.



Third, this thesis examined the production of media discourses, but not *how* these discourses are consumed – aside from speculating. Further exploration was beyond the scope of the thesis. Nevertheless, to support the argument that *Malaysiakini* has inadvertently become a racialising agent in the political landscape, further research assessing how these media impact voting patterns is desirable. Additionally, the *Malaysiakini* articles analysed in this thesis confirm how ethnoreligious discourses have impacted a new media space, however the interaction between these ethnoreligious categories and new media (possibly resulting in the heightening of the emotive significations connected to those categories), is an aspect warranting further research. Particularly the homogeneous ‘group mentality’ demonstrated in certain YourSay articles in 2013, like that criticising ‘racist’ Najib, could be analysed through a lens that explores new media and affective networks or spaces. Also interesting would be examining how social media like Facebook and Twitter have been impacted by these ethnoreligious discourses, scrutinising the emotive significations attached to these new online identities.

Fourth, although certain scholars have recognised the potential of studying ethnoreligious discourse in Malaysia, this is the first study which utilises that as a conceptual framework. This comes with positive and negative aspects. Generally, more effort could be spent analysing the character of these discourses, specifically the contexts in which they are employed and deployed. Perhaps the component demanding most clarification is the ‘Chinese-kafir’ discourse; how this is constructed and in what contexts it operates. The thesis has attempted to explain that this essentialism refers to the ways in which the Malaysian media – particularly *Utusan* – often refer to the Chinese citizens in contexts that ignore, or neglect, their myriad religious affiliations (be that as Buddhists, Taoists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus or whatever else). As it stands, the ‘Chinese-kafir’ concept is rigorous, clearly explained in Chapter 2 in relation to dominant histories of the Chinese workers in colonial Malaya and useful for explaining the Malay intelligentsia’s antipathy towards Chinese political parties. But we should ask whether ethnoreligious discourse has influenced East Malaysia, for example ‘Iban-Christian’ or likewise. Perhaps this concept is geographically specific to peninsular Malaysia. Connecting to the second point, a study confirming this would be timely.

Fifth, and in relation to this, the fragmented essentialisms concept could perhaps be taken further. Chapter 2 outlined how this concept could be used as an analytical tool, to provide insight into four aspects of racialising discourses: how postcolonial agents can continue to exploit ‘fragments’ of the colonial past; how the essence of these identities will continue to

erode over successive generations; how these discourses contribute to, and exacerbate, the fractures within the groups to which they claim to relate; and how these colonially-derived discourses are uncomfortably situated against notions of modernity and modernisation. Remembering Ang's (2001a, p.48) words that race 'refuses to go away...despite its repudiation as a scientific concept', the notion of 'fragmented essentialisms' shows how the contexts of race have altered and continue to shift in the postcolonial era, grounded in the atomisation of race and how these 'fragments' of colonial history continue to provide the defining structures for understanding the present (despite being uncomfortably situated against other identities and discourses). This is a clearly valuable concept that has potential to be applied in other studies in Asia, for example to explain the continuing non-Hindu antipathy in India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, or to account for the perpetual exclusion of Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar. The concept of fragmented essentialisms can also perhaps be broadened, to include different scales of analysis based around class, rural/urban difference, indigenous/migrant, and so on. It is up to future studies to take the concept in new directions.

### ***What next for Malaysian politics?***

Overall, the methods adopted in this study represent an effective and current means of exploring Malaysian political discourse, and there is no reason to suggest that a similar study cannot be produced which incorporates the next general election, in 2018. This will prove very interesting, for despite growing trends towards oppositional support, as shown in 2008 and 2013, *Pakatan Rakyat* dissolved in June 2015, due to irreconcilable tensions between DAP and PAS. It was succeeded by the *Pakatan Harapan* (Hope Pact), an alliance that is similar in composition, containing PKR and DAP, but also a new PAS splinter party, *Parti Amanah Negara* (led by a group of progressives from PAS who had split from that party in 2015). Added to the already tense battle between Umno and PAS, this third Islamic party will ensure that Malay-Muslim discourse – and different articulations of that discourse – are deeply entrenched in 2018 electoral rhetoric (provided *Amanah* endures until then). Meanwhile, DAP is unlikely to lose support given the extent of government corruption exposed in the recent 1MDB scandal. On the contrary, it is likely to profit from this saga, just as it did in 1986, in light of BN's broad financial mismanagement. This will likely influence *Utusan* writers' further intensification of the Chinese-kafir essentialism, continuing to direct this at the pro-BN rural constituencies, whose significance could possibly have been further reinforced through a re-delineation of Malaysia's electoral boundaries (the last delineation exercise was back in 2003), as BN relies on authoritarian measures to cling onto power. Meanwhile, *Malaysiakini* writers are unlikely to shift from the united, multicultural stance

that brought the opposition so close in 2013, however, they must resist the temptation to be drawn into the government's and *Utusan*'s games, and in Kessler's (2013b, online) words, more forcefully deliver a 'game changer', proclaiming 'directly, clearly, explicitly, in plain words', that a new Malaysia is finally 'coming into being'.

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