

**ISLAMIZATION AND CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY
IN MALAYSIA: 1979-2017**

**A Thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy.**

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Supervised at London School of Theology

May 2019

Islamization and Christian Solidarity in Malaysia: 1979-2017.

Doctor of Philosophy

ABSTRACT

This study points at ecumenical solidarity, prayer solidarity and a shared political consciousness as the three key solidarity elements of Christians in Malaysia; emerging as discernible responses to the Islamization efforts of the government.

It highlights the early role of British colonialists who managed their relationship with the Malay rulers by granting special privileges on matters related to Islam and Malay customs which then then legitimized the need for Islam to become entrenched as a state religion in the nation's constitution.

It examines how Islamization became a tool to consolidate Malay-Muslim hegemony, which in turn affected the relationship dynamics between the Malay community who are entirely Muslims and Chinese and Indian communities who are predominantly non-Muslims. Eventually, the prolonged Islamization led to polarization of society, marginalization of non-Muslims and the consolidation of the political hegemony of UMNO, the dominant partner in the ruling coalition that held had been in power since the time of independence.

It investigates how the Christian community responded to the pressures caused by Islamization, especially by forming new ecumenical alliances, coming together in prayer and by finding ways for the churches to become actively involved in the political processes of the nation. Prior to the onset of the effects of Islamization, all the three solidarity measures could not be considered being significant, discernible elements.

The work showcases the Allah controversy in Malaysia as one of the outcomes of government sanctioned Islamization by highlighting how government administrative mechanisms were used to curtail the use of the word Allah by Christians and takes note of the three specific solidarity responses of Christians in Malaysia highlighted in the study.

The research then triangulates the findings by pointing to the noticeable absence of similar solidarity mechanisms among Christians in Singapore; arguably due to the absence of an overwhelming religious agenda by the government.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this research was only made possible through the support of many who tarried with me in this long journey. My primary supervisor Rev Dr John Azumah needs to be mentioned first as someone who kept pushing to raise the level for scholarly writing and patiently persisted with me throughout this process. Both he and Professor Peter Riddell have been the two most instrumental persons in my postgraduate academic pursuit. My secondary supervisor Dr Graham McFarlane who engaged with me kindly with a heart of gold, I can't thank him enough. I wish to remember Sandra Khalil from LST, whose caring nature and express replies to e-mails provided the much-needed administrative support.

I also wish to thank my friends and leaders of the Tamil Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in Malaysia for granting me the opportunity to undertake this research project. Bishop Emeritus Hwa Yung liaised with the British Methodist Church to give a major portion of the needed funds through its SALT program, to which I am grateful.

My heartiest appreciation goes to my wife Alice who became my pillar of support by believing in me even in my difficult moments and my three daughters; Christine, Chlarine and Catherine who prayed for me regularly and had to endure long periods of my absence.

To end, I sincerely believe that it is only through the abundant grace of God who called me to be His servant that this project both began and came to completion. May all Praise, Glory and Honour be unto to Him alone.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BN	Barisan Nasional (National Alliance Party)
CCM	Council of Churches of Malaysia (A conglomeration of protestant Denominational Churches)
CFM	Christian Federation of Malaysia (A conglomeration of all churches in Malaysia, including the Catholics)
DAP	Democratic Action Party
JAIS	Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor (The Selangor State Islamic Development Department)
JAKIM	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Islamic development Department of Malaysia)
May 13th	A symbolic term that is used to denote the day that destructive racial riots took place on the 13th of May 1969.
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCCBCHST	Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism.
NCC	National Christian Council
NCCS	National Council of Churches of Singapore
NECF	National Evangelical Christian Fellowship
NEP	New Economic Policy
NRD	National Registration Department
PAS	Parti Islam Malaysia (Pan-Islamic Party of Malaysia)
RTM	Radio Television Malaysia (Malaysian National Broadcasting Agency)
UMNO	United Malays National Organization

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter One

In August 1957, Malaya¹ was granted independence when community leaders from the three predominant races (Malays, Chinese and Indians) negotiated freedom from the British colonialists. The discussions were primarily based on the premise that it was possible to bring these three communities to work together towards attaining social development goals for the nation. However, it has now become possible to suggest that the elements of generosity, goodwill and the spirit of compromise that existed during the negotiations that led to the independence of Malaya have since become depleted, with Islam as the religion of the Malays emerging as the single-most dominating factor in the life of the nation.² A prolonged process of Islamization that permeated the different facets of the nation has since caused the societal fabric to become both Malay-dominated and Islam-inundated, leading to a potential need for demarcation between the Malays (who are entirely Muslims) and the non-Malays (who are mostly non-Muslims).

For instance, some of the shopping complexes have begun to label shopping trolleys as non-*halal*, which are then used by non-Muslims to purchase non-*halal* items like pork and alcohol. The government is promoting this, as a news report mentioning that the Domestic Trade, Cooperatives and Consumerism Ministry has proposed to set guidelines on the segregation of trolleys for *halal* and non-*halal* items in the supermarkets under the business licencing requirements in the future.³ In August 2017, a primary school headmaster instructed canteen operators to segregate the drinking cups of the students. The operators then duly labelled the cups as *murid Islam* (Muslim students) in yellow bands and *murid bukan Islam* (non-Muslim students) in blue bands before placing them next to a water dispenser in the

¹ Malaya is the old name for Malaysia. Malaysia was only formed when Sarawak, Sabah and Singapore joined with the other West Malayan states in the year 1962.

² Mohammad Nawab Osman, 'Socio-Political Impact of Islamic Revivalism In Malaysia', in G25 Book Committee, *Breaking the Silence: Islam in a Constitutional Democracy*, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2016, 199-20.

³ 'Ministry mulls guidelines on halal, non-halal trolleys', Bernama News, 19th January 2016, <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/327465>>, Accessed 30th September 2017.

canteen. The matter was resolved only when it brought to the attention of the Deputy Education Minister, who happened to be a non-Muslim.⁴ Moreover, in September 2017, newspaper reports emerged that a local laundrette in the state of Johor had put out a sign at its entrance that the business premises could only be used by Muslim clientele. The sign informed that the management of the laundrette had come to this decision based on the factor of *kesucian* (ritual cleanliness).⁵ As the matter generated public interest, the Sultan of Johor then instructed the laundrette operator to remove the sign, forcing him to open the laundrette to non-Muslim patrons as well.⁶

Although it would be inaccurate to generalize that all Muslims in Malaysia are now desiring to be cautious in their engagement with non-Muslims, the inclination to segregate seems to propose that the multi-racial and collective self-rule that was presented as the main working model to the British had now become suspect.⁷ Moreover, it has now become possible to confirm the suspicion that the steady pace of Islamization has now conditioned some of the Malays to psychologically position themselves to be apart from the non-Malays, albeit through a religious perspective. Such a positioning then places the non-Malays as non-Muslims into a difficult and possibly relegated position.⁸ When the Christian community

⁴ 'End to cup segregation policy', The Star Online, 12th August 2017, <<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/08/12/end-to-cup-segregation-policy-after-being-slammed-school-does-away-with-discriminatory-practice/>>, Accessed 30th September 2017.

⁵ 'Muar laundrette adopts Muslims only policy', The Star Online, 24th September 2017, <<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/09/24/muar-laundrette-adopts-muslims-only-policy/>>, Accessed 30th September 2017.

⁶ 'Johor Sultan orders laundrette to cease Muslims-only policy', Free Malaysia Today, 27th September 2017, <<http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/09/27/johor-sultan-orders-laundrette-to-cease-muslims-only-policy/>>, Accessed 30th September 2017.

⁷ Some have argued that the seeds of the current phenomenon of Islamization in Malaysia were actually sown during pre-independence, colonial period. This will need to be explored in detail in other parts of this work. See William R. Roff, 'Patterns of Islamization in Malaysia, 1890s-1990s: Exemplars, Institutions and Vectors', in F.A. Nizami (Ed.), *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1998, 210-228.

⁸ V. Anbalagan, 'Stop meddling in non-Muslim affairs, interfaith group tells Islamic authorities', The Malaysian Insider, 6th December 2014, <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/stop-meddling-in-non-muslim-affairs-interfaith-group-tells-islamic-authorit>>, Accessed 12th June 2015.

began to experience some of the outcomes of being in a relegated position, they sought comfort through solidarity within their own community, very likely as a coping mechanism.

1.1. Definition of terms.

The topic of this research is: Islamization and Christian Solidarity in Malaysia: 1979-2017.

1.1.1. Christian solidarity.

The Oxford Dictionary defines solidarity as: ‘unity, agreement and support resulting from shared interests, feelings, actions, sympathies ...’⁹ For the purpose of this research, the term is also used to denote bonding, especially with an intention of working together to bring about specific outcomes. The term solidarity is specifically chosen as it captures the spirit of camaraderie that began to manifest itself among Christians in Malaysia after the onset of Islamization. However, the idea of churches working together in solidarity for specific purposes needs to be differentiated from Church-union, where denominations merge to become a single conglomerate of churches. An example of Church-union could be that of the Church of South India (CSI).¹⁰

1.1.2 Islamization.

Islamization has mostly been defined by using different connotative terms. Abdul Majeed thinks of Islamization as a form of ‘revival’.¹¹ Judith Nagata called it a ‘reflowering’,¹² while Chandra Muzaffar characterizes it as being a type of religious ‘resurgence’.¹³ Consequently, it is possible to think of the term Islamization as a compendium of efforts which are specifically designed towards using Islamic tenets to influence the core outworking of a

⁹ Jonathan Crowther (Ed.), *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 1131.

¹⁰ Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India: The Movement Towards Union, 1900-1947*, Connecticut: Seabury Press, 1954.

¹¹ Ali Rahnama (Ed.), *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, Kuala Lumpur: S. Abdul Majeed, 1995.

¹² Judith Nagata, *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam: Modern Religious Radicals and Their Roots*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984.

¹³ Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*, Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti, 1987.

nation.¹⁴ It is the outcome of the inner-need of committed Muslims to make Islamic values to become the over-arching agenda of the nation.

1.1.3 Significance of 1979-2017.

The year 1979 is consciously chosen as this is the year when the First National Christian Conference (NCC) was convened as a major ecumenical solidarity gathering. This event is a landmark juncture in the history of Christianity in Malaysia since it was the first time a national level solidarity assembly took place.¹⁵ This assembly and its sequels became valuable catalysts to initiate other solidarity mechanisms that are explored in this research.

The year 2017 is also intentionally chosen due to the unanticipated political change that took place in Malaysia in May 2018. The Malaysian Parliament was dissolved on the 14th of April 2018 to pave way for the 14th General Elections that took place on the 9th of May 2018, causing the *Barisan Nasional* government to lose its right to rule the nation after being in power since the time of independence. The results shocked the entire Southeast Asian region and ended the sixty one year rule of the *Barisan Nasional* coalition government that was led by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO).¹⁶ Although it is very likely that this change could also bring new dynamics where Islamization is concerned, this research will not attempt to delve in it in order to keep itself within the prescribed investigation parameters of this study.

1.2. Research methodology.

1.2.1 Central aim of the research.

The central aim of this research is to investigate the link between Islamization and Christian solidarity in Malaysia. The task of finding verifiable evidence to prove the tangible

¹⁴ Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001, 332-333.

¹⁵ John Roxborough, 'The Story of Ecumenism', in Lee Kam Hing (*et al*) Editors, *Christians in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 307.

¹⁶ Sumisha Naidu, 'Mahathir's Pakatan Harapan pulls off shock victory at Malaysia general election', Channel News Asia, 10th May 2018, <www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-election-pakatan-harapan-opposition-shock-victory-ge14-10219070>, Accessed 12th June 2018.

connection between Islamization and Christian solidarity will be single-most principal focus of this study.

1.2.2 Research Design.

This research will be conducted based on the principle methods of qualitative analysis which proposes five possible forms of inquiries. The five forms of inquiries that have been described are namely: narrative study, phenomenological study, grounded theory study, ethnography study and case study.¹⁷ The nature and scope of this particular research appears to indicate that this research should be categorized as belonging to the case study variant.

Three specific reasons could be proposed for this indication. Firstly, case study requires the research to ‘make reference to patterns between two or more categories’.¹⁸ In this study, the Malaysian government’s Islamization mechanisms being set alongside the emergence of solidarity among Malaysian Christians fully satisfies this requirement. Secondly, case study typically seeks to come to a conclusion based on ‘naturalistic generalisations’, which in this research is formulated by connecting the patterns of response of the Malaysian Christians towards the effects of Islamization within the nation.¹⁹ Thirdly, case studies need to bring a singular meaning to the larger evidences through the collected data.²⁰ In this research, the concept of Christian solidarity as being the response to Islamization, becomes the overarching denotation throughout the study.

In addition to these requirements, those who describe the investigative techniques of qualitative analysis have also proposed that five main elements need to be present within the method. Firstly, qualitative analysis requires all findings to be seen through the eyes of the people being studied.²¹ Accordingly, the voices and actions of the two main cluster groups

¹⁷ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, California: Sage Books, 2013.

¹⁸ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 199.

¹⁹ Margaret Myers, ‘Qualitative Research and the Generalizability Question: Standing firm with Proteus’, in *The Qualitative Report*, Ronald J. Chenail (Ed.), Florida: Nova South-eastern Institutional Repository, Vol.4, Issue 3, Article 9, 2000.

²⁰ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 98.

²¹ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 399.

in this research, namely the Malaysian government, which facilitated the process of Islamization and that of the Malaysian Christian community will need to be heard. Moreover, qualitative analysis also gives importance to the context of the research.²² To do this, this research is confined within two contexts: it is both the context of Malaysia as a nation and the context of a time-frame, 1979 to 2017. Subsequently, qualitative analysis also requires emphasis to be placed on the process.²³ In this study, the quantifiable process is primarily related to the change in attitude and behaviour, especially in relation to the Malaysian Christian community's reason for increased affinity towards solidarity efforts. Next, qualitative analysis also seeks to use 'flexibility and limited structure' to achieve its purpose.²⁴ In the case of this research, flexibility and limited structure could be determined in two ways. To begin with, the element of flexibility is found because this study seeks to report any possible trajectories that may appear different than the main thrust of this thesis. Next, limited structure would mean that although there are certain fixed parameters that define the context of this study, it will also need to be open to consider other peripheral factors. For example, although this study is predominantly focused on the response of Christians in Malaysia, it is possible for responses of other non-Muslim communities in Malaysia to be brought into the research as well. Lastly, qualitative analysis method also requires all concepts and theories to be grounded in data. This is the reason why accurate dates and specific events will need to be provided throughout this research.

1.2.3. Research Literature.

The different elements related to emergence and development of Islamization in Malaysia are found in the research findings of those who have sought to study it within different contexts.

Chandra Muzaffar is able to point at certain essential characteristics of Islamization in Malaysia by making reference to some of its key contributing elements.²⁵ In his later book, Chandra Muzaffar attempts to relate what Islamization actually means in Malaysia to both

²² Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, California: Sage Publications, 1999, 21-32.

²³ Bryman, *Social Research*, 402.

²⁴ Bryman, *Social Research*, 403.

²⁵ Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence*,

Muslim and non-Muslim communities.²⁶ In her earlier study, Zainah Anwar focusses on Malaysia's Islamization by relating it to the *Dakwah*²⁷ movement among the Malaysian students.²⁸ In her later work, Zainah Anwar suggests some answers to the question, whose version of Islam is being projected in the total exercise of Islamization in Malaysia, especially in relation to women's rights issues.²⁹ Hussin Mutalib tries to unravel the increased role of Islam within the overall socio-political sphere in Malaysia.³⁰ Some other researchers have also tried to highlight how Islamization led to the specific societal changes in the nation.³¹ Academics like Kamarulnizam Abdullah have sought to analyse its relation to national politics³² while Fred Von Der Mehden attempts to articulate the effects of Islamization on the multi-ethnic political fabric of the nation.³³

Non-Muslim responses to Islamization have also been explored by academics and social researchers, with Johan Saravanamuthu proceeding to offer treatises on specific Hindu, Buddhist and Shia Muslim responses to Islamization in Malaysia.³⁴ Some of the Christians' socio-political responses to Islamization have also been studied, especially to find out how they

²⁶ Chandra Muzaffar, *Rights, Religion and Reform: Enhancing Human Dignity through Spiritual and Moral Transformation*, London, New York: Routledge-Curzon, 2002.

²⁷ *Da'awa* is an Arabic term that denotes bringing others into the experience of Islam through conversion efforts.

²⁸ Zainah Anwar, *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah Among Students*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1987.

²⁹ Zainah Anwar, 'What Islam, Whose Islam? Sisters in Islam and the struggle for Women's Rights', in Robert W. Hefner, *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia Singapore and Indonesia*, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2001.

³⁰ Hussin Mutalib, 'Islam in Southeast Asia', in *Southeast Asia Background Series No. 11*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008, 25-40.

³¹ Virginia Hooker and Noraini Othman, *Malaysia: Islam Society and Politics*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2003.

³² Kamarulnizam Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam in Contemporary Malaysia*, Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2003.

³³ Fred Von Der. Mehden, 'Malaysia: Islam and Multi-ethnic Politics', in John L. Esposito, *Islam in Asia: Religion Politics and Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

³⁴ Johan Saravanamuthu, 'From Pluralism to Centralized Islam', in Johan Plattdasch and Johan Saravanamuthu, *Religious Diversity in Muslim Majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014, 237.

fit in with the Islamization narrative of the nation.³⁵ Moreover, local Christian writers have also felt the need to make sense of their own identity in the midst of the growing pressures of Islamization. In his book titled, *A Prophetic Christology for Neighbourology*, Batumalai Sadayandy expresses the need to embrace Muslims in Malaysia as neighbours, despite the difficulties that they were forced to face due to the effects of Islamization.³⁶ Furthermore, academics like Albert Walters have sought to use the theological concept of trinity with a view of proposing a greater Christian-Muslim engagement in Malaysia.³⁷ Wilfred Samuel, another Christian academic, seems to propose that Malaysian theology would need to showcase Incarnational Spirituality.³⁸

Moreover, efforts towards solidarity among Christians, especially as a discernible phenomenon relative to Islamic resurgence in Malaysia have sometimes been noted by specific authors. Albert Walters has suggested that similar to other religious minorities, the Malaysian church organized itself because of the need to ‘shore up their position in Malaysian society and to make a positive contribution to the building of a multicultural, multi-religious, tolerant nation’.³⁹ In his two-page description of Christian unity, he highlights two facts: that they have since been able to ‘organize themselves’ and also comments that they have begun to set up certain research centres to focus on community concerns.⁴⁰

³⁵ Chong Eu Chong, ‘The Christian Response to state-led Islamization in Malaysia’, in Johan Platzdasch and Johan Saravanamuthu, *Muslim Majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014.

³⁶ Batumalai Sadayandy, *A Prophetic Christology for Neighbourology: A Theology for Prophetic Living*, Kuala Lumpur: Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, 1986.

³⁷ Albert S. Walters, *We Believe in One God? Reflections of Trinity in the Malaysian Context*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2002.

³⁸ Wilfred J. Samuel, *Halatuju: Malaysian Theology for Incarnational Spirituality*, Sabah: Sabah Theological Seminary, 2006.

³⁹ Albert S. Walters, *Knowing our Neighbour: A Study of Islam for Christians in Malaysia*, Petaling Jaya: Council of Churches of Malaysia, 2007, 242.

⁴⁰ Walters, *Knowing our Neighbour*, 242-243.

Peter Riddell has also observed correctly that Islamization has been forcing Christians to overcome their problems of internal disunity.⁴¹ In his three-page write-up on the matter, he highlights the fact that they have now come together under one ecumenical umbrella, have begun to work together with fellow non-Muslims and also points to the setting up of Christian research centres as part of their response to Islamization. Commenting on politics, he makes a passing statement that, ‘the emergence of Barisan Nasional Islamization polices ... created an environment where non-Muslims saw a clear need to voluntarily come together and to seek safety in numbers, as it were’.⁴²

Chong Eu Chong also touches on the matter of Christian unity. His study is entitled, ‘Christian Response to state-led Islamization in Malaysia’ is found in the book, *Muslim Majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict*. His write-up on ecumenical solidarity briefly highlights the role of CCM in the formation of CFM.⁴³ Moreover, he also touches on the aspects of increased political awareness but chooses to restrict himself to their increased involvement in the 2008 General Elections. He then chooses to highlight how Christians have used legal means to challenge the courts on the *Allah* issue and their increased involvement in the civil society.

In his book *A History Malaysian of Christianity*, John Roxborough observed the reality of Christians living within the ambit of Islamization in Malaysia and correctly detects their propensity towards prayer solidarity. In order to highlight prayer solidarity as a new development in the life of the Malaysian Church, he points to Malaysian Christians’ growing interest to pray by devoting a brief chapter entitled, *Praying and Belonging*. However, he mainly elaborates on the 2010 annual NECF 40 day fasting and prayer event and highlights the different prayer items found in its prayer guide booklet which pointed to national needs and concludes by stating that Christians have indeed come together in prayer solidarity and

⁴¹ Peter G. Riddell, ‘Islamization, Civil Society and Religious Minorities in Malaysia’, in K.S. Nathan, and Mohd. Hashim Kamali (Eds), *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2001, 169.

⁴² Peter G. Riddell, ‘Islamization’, 170.

⁴³ Chong, ‘The Christian Response’, 302

that ‘the Malaysian Christian sense of belonging has never been stronger’.⁴⁴ However, his four page treatment of the subject failed to identify the specific entities that promoted prayer solidarity or describe how it evolved to become a national level phenomena that involved the different strata of ecclesial leadership. Furthermore, he was not able to recognize the specific occasions in the life of the nation that became rallying points for prayer solidarity among Christians. These are the essential vacuums that this research intends to fill.

Arnold Puyok’s writing entitled, rise of Christian political consciousness and mobilisation, is found as part of the *Routledge Handbook on Contemporary Malaysia*.⁴⁵ His beginning segment explains the general relationship between politics and religion with the following segment highlighting the rise of political Islam in Malaysia. Although he uses the remaining four pages to explain the shift in political thinking among Christians, it is largely based on individual cases that prove its reality rather than point to its source, which will be specific focus as intended in this study. However, we will need to borrow the term ‘political consciousness’ from him as it aptly describes the political awakening of the Malaysian church.

Although all of them have correctly recognised that some forms of networking as evidence of solidarity having already begun, they have not been able to develop the discussions in specific ways as envisioned in this research. In this research, these elements are studied in detail especially by probing the Journals of the NCC gatherings which show the expressed the pains that were being caused by Islamization, leading them to work together towards their vision for greater solidarity.

1.2.4. Scope of the Research.

This study will only limit itself to specific effects on society that arose due to the prolonged Islamization process that has taken place in Malaysia. For instance, although Islamization has had an encompassing influence on the nation, examples will be chosen to be presented only when they are relevant to the solidarity aspects of Christians. This thesis will not seek to provide analysis of each of the individual policies and legislation related to Islamization in

⁴⁴ John Roxborough, *A History of Malaysian Christianity*, Singapore: Genesis Books and STM, 2014,141.

⁴⁵ Arnold Puyok, ‘Rise of Christian Political Consciousness and Mobilisation’, in Meredith L. Weiss (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook on Contemporary Malaysia*, New York: Routledge, 2015.

Malaysia but will only strive do so when they become directly related to Christian solidarity mechanisms.

In addition, although this research seeks to highlight the difficulties experienced by non-Muslims in Malaysia, it will not seek to analyze all its related issues. For instance, although the question of human rights could be related to the discriminatory nature of some of the government's legislation, they may not be relevant to the aspect of solidarity that this study will be focusing upon. However, particular aspects of human rights may possibly need to be referred to if the context requires its presence.

Moreover, this research will also not be able to explicate how other religious minority communities in Malaysia have responded to the phenomenon of Islamization.⁴⁶ It would be beyond the scope of this work to attempt a detailed response of the other non-Muslim communities. Although they are fellow actors with Christians in the Malaysian socio-religious arena, their predicaments would not be explored in detail except when they present themselves as being relevant to the aspect of Christian solidarity.

1.2.5. Research Questions.

In order to study the potential causative factors that necessitated Malaysian Christian solidarity, four key questions will need to be answered.

- i. Why did Islamization become a national phenomenon?
- ii. How can Christian solidarity be considered an identifiable reaction to the Islamization agenda of the government?
- iii. Is the emergent Christian solidarity an external reaction or a reflection of a deeper core of unity?
- iv. Can this solidarity be compared with other contexts for triangulation purposes?⁴⁷

⁴⁶ The other major non-Muslim religions include Buddhists, Taoists and Hindus. They are represented together with Christians in a lobby group for all non-Muslims. It is called, *The Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Taoism* (MCCBCHST).

⁴⁷ Triangulation is the use of more than one source of data in order to establish dependability of the interpretation of available data by way of comparison. See: Alan Bryman, '*Social Research Methods*', 393.

1.3. Research strategy and thesis structure.

1.3.1 Research strategy.

In order to demonstrate that the Christian solidarity has indeed emerged as a response towards the pressures caused by Islamization, this study will need to provide evidence of pressure points caused by Islamization. This is done by examining three specific pressure points that exerted stress upon the Malaysian churches. These are examined in detail in chapter three of this research.

Additionally, in order to show that specific mechanisms of Christian solidarity emerged as a response to Islamization, this study will seek to find evidence of how these mechanisms actually emerged. This study will need to demonstrate how Islamization was able to give rise to a Malaysian church solidarity: both as an organized working cartel and as a collective voice to the government. These factors are scrutinized in chapter four of this work.

1.3.2 Thesis structure.

After the Introduction, chapter two will attempt to identify the specific reasons as to why Islam in Malaysia evolved to be in a position where it became elevated above all the other religions. It seeks to examine some of the historical antecedents, especially by pointing to the role of the British who needed to give Islam a preferential status in order to preserve their own colonial rule. Furthermore, evidence also suggests that after independence, expansion of Islam was actually facilitated by both government and private groups, which in turn helped politicians to achieve their own agendas to be fulfilled through Islamization.⁴⁸

The third chapter begins by investigating the polarization of society which was caused by Islamization. It inspects specific aspects of Islamization that emerged during the administration of three different Prime Ministers who governed the nation according to their own vision of Islamic development. It then continues to examine the marginalisation of non-

⁴⁸ Mohammad Azizuddin Mohammad Sani, 'The Politics of Islamization and Islamic Bureaucracy in Malaysia', in *Breaking the Silence: Islam in a Constitutional Democracy*, in G25 Book Committee, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2016, 128-130 and 133-136.

Muslims, which caused discontentment among non-Muslims especially when they viewed the government as being biased in its treatment towards Muslim and non-Muslims. The chapter then investigates the political hegemony of UMNO as a possible element that has potentially ratified both the polarization and marginalization, as a way to assert Malay-Muslim dominance in Malaysia.

The fourth chapter inspects the Christian community's efforts to foster ecumenical solidarity as a way of bolstering their own religious identity in order to increase strength through collective representation. It then investigates the Churches' role in using prayer to establish a spiritual solidarity to deal with the difficulties they were being forced to experience. Subsequently, the chapter seeks to examine the birth and growth of a combined political consciousness of the Malaysian Church as a possible offensive method to deal with the political hegemony of UMNO.

The fifth chapter is a case study which scrutinizes the Malaysian Church response to the *Allah* controversy especially in the light of the three specific Malaysian Christian solidarity initiatives highlighted in chapter four.

Moreover, for the purpose of comparative analysis, chapter six attempts a triangulation exercise by observing the churches in Singapore and their relationship with the state. Its multicultural and multi-religious nature, with an added benefit of being birthed and separated from Malaysia, makes it an ideal case study candidate.

1.3.3. Fields of Knowledge.

This study will be drawing from different fields of knowledge in order to bring meaning and understanding to the collected data. Firstly, it will need to draw from Sociology, which has been usefully defined as understanding and interpreting events and patterns that transcend particular individuals.⁴⁹ Moreover, since this study focuses specifically on the social cluster of Christians as minorities in Malaysia, this work will need to borrow sociological terms to define their actions and reactions as a community, especially as a minority community within

⁴⁹ Donald Light and Suzanne Keller, *Sociology*, New York: Alfred Knopf Publishing, 1982, 19.

the larger societal framework of Malaysia.⁵⁰ Subsequently, because this work also involves analyzing the actions of the Malaysian government, which exists as a political entity, the scrutiny of politics and public policies also falls under the ambit of Sociology.

Secondly, it is possible to recognize that the element of history is directly involved, especially since this study is related to a specific timeline: 1979-2017. As history involves describing and understanding past events, references will be made to unplanned historical incidents, as well as planned historical events. Unplanned historical incidents would mean events in history where subsequent outcomes were not generally planned or anticipated. On the contrary, planned historical events would be those with an element of planning to bring about a foreseeable outcome. More importantly, because this research is primarily concerned about identifying the emergence of Christian solidarity, the query of when they were forced to emerge, is a question of history. In this research, history becomes vital, both to pin-point the early stages and to trace the development of the solidarity elements.

1.4. Limitations of the research.

Some possible limitations to this research will need to be defined clearly. Firstly, because this is not a study of each individual voice of Christians in Malaysia, the assumption that the voices of the Christian leaders as being the proxy voice of the Christian community on the ground may have to remain an assumption. It is very possible that individual Christians may have chosen to disagree with their leaders' actions in relation to solidarity efforts. Since findings reveal that they have not been expressed openly, this study suggests that that a silent voice is better than a dissenting voice.

Furthermore, because elements of solidarity are measured through the outward expressions and actions of leaders of the Malaysian Church, this study could potentially be inaccurately based on the hypothesis that this outward expression is an indication of their inner personal convictions. There is a possibility that there may be Christian leaders of certain denominations who personally hold to different convictions altogether but only choose to

⁵⁰ See: John. D. Mc Carthy and Wolfson Mark, 'Consensus Movements, Conflict Movement and the Co-optation of Civic and State Infrastructures', in Aldon. D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller, *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

flow along for reasons only known to them. Although it is unsure if such tag along, passive stance solidarity could be considered a real solidarity affiliation, this paper assumes that because they have not protested but have agreed to come along, it is by itself a sign of solidarity.

Moreover, although the solidarity of the Malaysian Church is assumed to be Christian in character and based on Christian ethos and Biblical unction for unity, it is very likely that some Christians may only be coming together as a show of power and defiance against the government rather than based on the outcome of a spiritual conviction to embrace solidarity. It will be beyond the scope of this paper to analyze individual motivations for Christian solidarity.

Lastly, because this study is based on the idea of time, whereby the research seeks to note the differentiation between the negligible solidarity before the year 1979 and the increased and tangible expressions of solidarity afterwards, it is possible to suggest that there may have been previous, albeit private, attempts at solidarity that may not have been documented. Due to the absence of available data on such private initiatives, this study adopts the position that because they did not find their way to the public sphere, they were either minimal or too insignificant to be noted.

THE PRIMACY OF ISLAM IN MALAYSIA

Chapter Two

Introduction.

The first part of this chapter examines the historical context of this study by analyzing some of the early underlying elements that provided a conducive environment for the germination of Islamization in Malaysia. The second part of this chapter focuses on the strategic actors and specific factors which served to ensure that Islamization would become an all-encompassing entity of the nation.

2.1 Islam in Malaysia.

This segment traces specific historical antecedents that worked together to make Islam become the dominant religion in Malaysia. A combination of all these elements then positioned Islam to become the preferential religion of the state, ultimately becoming recognized as the official religion of Malaysia in the Federal Constitution.

2.1.1 Animism, Hinduism and Buddhist influences.

In the period preceding the arrival of Islam, the Southeast Asian region was mostly occupied by animists who worshipped spirits of nature and fertility symbols.⁵¹ Research has suggested that prior to the arrival of community-centred religions such as Hinduism and Islam, religion was very much a family-centred concern.⁵² Changes in religious preferences occurred mainly due to movement of people, who began to establish trade communities and homogenous colonies in the port towns of the Southeast Asian region.⁵³ The movement of people took place primarily due to Malaysia being positioned at the centre of the sea route between Arabia and India to its west, with China and Japan to its east.

⁵¹ Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 11.

⁵² George Coedes, *The Making of South East Asia*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966, 32.

⁵³ Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 17.

Furthermore, it will be useful to consider these early religious influences as forms of 'Indianization', a definition that helps us to understand their shared origins.⁵⁴ The term is also helpful to point at Indian kings who sometimes considered certain parts of Southeast Asia as potential extensions in order to advance their conquest territories. For instance, Buddhism's expansion through the political might of Sri Vijaya was mentioned by the early Chinese traveller, I Ching.⁵⁵ Sri Vijaya's extension in Southeast Asia was thought to have facilitated the presence of over one thousand monks, with the practices of religious rules and ceremonies that being the same as what was practiced in India.⁵⁶ Accordingly, when both religions existed side by side, a mixture of Hinduism and Buddhism resulted, which then conveniently became assimilated with the animistic beliefs and superstitious practices of the locals.⁵⁷ Consequently, the influences from Hinduism and Buddhism could be seen as evident in modern-day Southeast Asia, where distinct temple structures and practices of Hinduism are seen in Bali, Indonesia and in West Malaysia. Moreover, Buddhist influences have also become visibly more prevalent in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

2.1.2. Islam.

M.B. Hooker, who researched on Islam in Southeast Asia, suggests that the influence of Islam came through Arabic Middle Eastern merchant traders, religious scholars and mendicants, who came to Southeast Asia through pre-existent trade routes beginning from the late thirteenth century onwards.⁵⁸ Subsequently, when the Arabs became increasingly populous in the ports and began to gain favour from the local rulers, they felt comfortable enough to bring in their own religious teachers and started establishing separate colonies for themselves. Furthermore, successive inter-marriage with local women not only made their own religious obligations much easier to observe but also helped their faith to be passed on to oncoming

⁵⁴ George Coedes, *The Indianized States of South East Asia*, Australian National University Press, 1968.

⁵⁵ Coedes, *The Indianized States*, 84.

⁵⁶ D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South East Asia*, London: Macmillan Press, 1955, 48.

⁵⁷ Robert Day Mc Amis, *Malay Muslims: The History and Challenge of Resurgent Islam in South East Asia*, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002, 8.

⁵⁸ M. B. Hooker, *Islam in South East Asia*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988, 3-4.

generations through structured religious instruction.⁵⁹ Eventually, these developments led the Arabic language to play a major role in influencing the Malay language, causing early Malay writings to adopt *Jawi*, which uses Arabic alphabets as its script. Likewise, Arabic influence is also evident through the use of many of the Arabic words that have been incorporated into the vocabulary of the Malay language. Consequently, although the Malay language is now written using Roman alphabets, *Jawi* is still taught as a subject in Malaysia.

However, Robert McAmis is prone to think that another group should also be credited for bringing Islam to the Southeast Asian region and suggests that the Muslims from India were equally instrumental.⁶⁰ As early as 1008, Muslim Sultans vied for and took control over Hindu kingdoms in several parts of Northern India.⁶¹ The spread of Islam as a political venture from Persia reached the North-western parts of India which eventually led Islamic influences becoming dominant in the north Indian state of Gujarat, which was already recognized for its prowess in trade even before the arrival of Islam.⁶² Consequently, it is possible to suggest that trade impetus as well as religious fervour became key reasons which caused around one thousand Gujarati Muslims to congregate in Malacca, one of the key ports of Southeast Asia at that time.⁶³

Moreover, Hooker also suggests that Indian Muslims from southern India could also be credited for bringing Islam to the Malayan peninsula, by observing evidence from early Malay Muslim literature which contain reference to the south of India rather than the north.⁶⁴ In addition, Johan Meuleman's research findings also indicate that the south Indian, Coast of

⁵⁹ Vincent J. H. Houben, 'Southeast Asia and Islam', in Thomas A. Kecskemethy (Ed.), *Annals, American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Los Angeles: Sage Publishing, 588 (Vol. 1), July 2003, 153.

⁶⁰ Robert Day Mc Amis, 'Islam comes to the Islands of South East Asia', in *The South East Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol.12, 1970, 94-95.

⁶¹ I. H. Qureshi, 'Muslim India before the Mughals', in Holt, Peter Malcolm, et al. (Editors), *The Cambridge History of Islam: Volume 2A*, Cambridge University Press, 1977, 3-4.

⁶² Hall, *A History*, 222.

⁶³ Robert A. Hunt, *Islam in South East Asia*, New York: GBGM, 1997, 13.

⁶⁴ M. B. Hooker, 'The Translation of Islam into South East Asia', in M. B. Hooker (Ed.), *Islam in South East Asia*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988, 6.

Coromandel, embraced Islam several centuries earlier before the north.⁶⁵ Consequently, R.O. Winstedt who studied the history of the Malays has duly noted the role of prominent Indians who rose up to influential positions in the Malay royal courts, affirming the Indian connection to Islam in Malaysia.⁶⁶ At present, Indian Muslims have continued to ply their trade in Malaysia, especially in the textile and food industries. In addition, there are mosques that are exclusively for Indian Muslims in Malaysia, known as *Masjid India* where Islamic preaching is carried out in Tamil (a South Indian language) rather than using the Malay language.

Another group, who are the Islamic mystics or *Sufis*, will also need to be recognized as the missionary minded persons who brought Islam to the people of Southeast Asia. They could be defined as holy men from either the Arabic or Indian region who usually travelled together with Muslim traders.⁶⁷ It would not be wrong to suggest that as the traders focused on their trade in the ports, these *Sufi* mystics travelled further inwards to spread Islam in the heartlands. Furthermore, as the local people listened to these holy men who were able to tell stories, taught spiritual truths and even healed some of their physical ailments, it is possible to suggest that the simplicity and piety of the *Sufis* become an attraction to follow Islam. Moreover, when royal households patronized the services of these holy men who were sometimes called to expel evil forces and predict the future, it caused them to be welcomed to stay on to become permanent advisors to the rulers.⁶⁸ However, Anthony Reid who studied the history of Southeast Asia suggests that in the early years of embracing Islam, the sultans were only seen to be Muslims when they dealt with traders in the cities but maintained their beliefs in the supernatural when they went inland to visit their subjects.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, it is

⁶⁵ Johan H. Meuleman, 'The History of Islam in South East Asia: Some Questions and Debates', in K.S. Nathan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali (Eds.), *Islam in South East Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2005, 24.

⁶⁶ R. O. Winstedt, *History of Malaya*, Singapore: Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1935, 41.

⁶⁷ Syed Naquib Al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Sufism as Understood and Practiced Among the Malays*, Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1963, 21.

⁶⁸ Al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Sufism*, 22.

⁶⁹ Anthony Reid, 'Islamization and Christianization in South East Asia: The Critical Phase', in Anthony Reid, (Ed.), *South East Asia in the Early Modern Era*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993, 155.

possible to note that the influence of the *Sufis* in the royal courts has lingered, this is because the concept of Islamic advisor still remains in the Malay sultanates, where each state in Malaysia has an official State mufti. Appointed by the sultan, the mufti often issues *fatwas* (decrees) and wields a very strong influence on all the Muslims in the state.

2.1.3. The significant role of Malacca.

Research indicates that by the year 1400, Muslim traders began to have the ability to control the trade of the Southeast Asian region.⁷⁰ Much of this commerce was focussed on the port town of Malacca, which was founded by Parameswara, a runaway Hindu prince from neighbouring kingdom of Majapahit, whose son is recorded to have converted to Islam.⁷¹ However, it is possible to think that these types of conversions to Islam may have been done to facilitate business with Muslim traders, as embracing Islam would ensure greater affiliation with the influential Arabs and thereby provide useful political connections. Moreover, it is also very likely that the Arabs were needed as allies by the sultans, who were facing occasional threats from the Buddhist kingdom of Siam.

Subsequently, the increasing alliance with the Arabs eventually led the Sultanate of Malacca to become recognized as a functioning Islamic kingdom, serving as an entry point to spread Islam into other areas of the Malay Peninsula. Furthermore, it is also very likely that the Islamic identity of Malacca was being showcased to attract more Muslim traders from the Arabic region and India as they were not only assured protection but also mosques where they could worship freely without undue interference.⁷² These types of diplomatic, politically motivated developments resulted in Malacca becoming the ‘most important commercial centre in Southeast Asia as well as the main diffusion centre of Islam’.⁷³ The

⁷⁰ Moshe Yegar, *Islam and Islamic Institutions in British Malaya*, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1979, 7.

⁷¹ Hall, *A History*, 224.

⁷² Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 56.

⁷³ Hall, *A History*, 227.

relationship with the other Muslims in the region further consolidated Malacca as an Islamic entity and made it become equated with political power.⁷⁴

Moreover, although the establishment of Malacca as a political and religious enterprise became challenged when the Portuguese took over Malacca in 1511, it inadvertently helped to broaden the establishment of Islam in the Malay Peninsula. While fleeing from the Portuguese, the deposed sultan of Malacca and his offspring established Islamic outposts in other parts of the Peninsula, leading to the creation of Islamic kingdoms northwards in Perak, eastward towards Pahang and southwards to Johor.⁷⁵

2.1.4 The British Colonial Rule and Islam.

2.1.4.1 The Malay states.

The British made inroads into South Asia via its commercial enterprise called, The East India Company (1660 to 1760).⁷⁶ Although its administrative base was located in India, trade relations were pursued as far as Southeast Asia, primarily for the lucrative spice trade. Moreover, when the 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty ensured that the Malay Peninsula would remain in the hands of the British with the Dutch taking control of the Indonesian islands of Jawa and Sumatra, it effectively gave a colonial impetus to the British to find ways to involve deeper in the Malay states.⁷⁷ Initially, the British began to intervene in the domain of Malay sultanates when the Malay rulers sought their assistance to quell local rebellion and succession squabbles especially because the British possessed better military technology and trained troops as compared to the poorly equipped, local bodyguards of the sultans.

However, in return for the military assistance that was rendered, the sultans were required to relinquish some form of political authority to the British. These deals were often sealed through the signing of a treaty, the first of which was known as The Pangkor Treaty.

⁷⁴ Yegar, *Islam and Islamic*, 7.

⁷⁵ Malacca has since been renamed Melaka and is one of the thirteen states that makes up modern day Malaysia.

⁷⁶ K. N. Chauduri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East Asia Trading Company: 1660 – 1760*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, XV.

⁷⁷ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 125.

The Pangkor Treaty was signed when the sultan of Perak sought the British to quell successions squabbles that went beyond his control. Subsequently, when similar treaties were signed with other sultans, the pattern then, ‘accelerated the process of British involvement in the peninsular states’.⁷⁸ Eventually, these treaties were expanded, allowing the British to police the state and also establish a system of collecting taxes on behalf of the sultan as the sultans themselves often had difficulty to reign in strong-headed warlords who controlled the river mouths to the interiors.⁷⁹ Moreover, it is also possible to suggest that the sultans were amenable to the deal as they themselves achieved a measure of economic security through the receiving of a regular income as well as military protection by the British.⁸⁰ Consequently, we can safely suggest that these developments became some of the key elements that enabled the British to assert deeper influence over all the states in the Malay Peninsula.⁸¹ Moreover, British influence became even more formalized when it evolved into a ‘Resident System’, a system where a British resident was placed in the state to act as an advisor to the Malay sultan on all administrative, financial and taxation matters.⁸² In order to function as a collaborative system, the sultan was obliged to seek and act on the resident’s advice regarding all administrative matters with an exception on dealings that pertained to Islamic affairs and Malay traditional customs.

However, this peculiar system of two symbols of authority co-existing within one state was not an easy partnership as this ‘diarchy’ as some have offered to call it, was not always a harmonious affiliation.⁸³ One of the possible reasons for this suspicion was due to the fact that the Malay sultans were often conscious that the resident in his court was not acting independently but only acted based on instructions from the office of the Governor of

⁷⁸ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 158.

⁷⁹ John G. Butcher, *The British in Malaya, 1880-1941: The Social History of a European Community in Colonial South-East Asia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, 8.

⁸⁰ Butcher, *The British in Malaya*, 5.

⁸¹ Butcher, *The British in Malaya*, 10-12.

⁸² Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 162.

⁸³ J.M. Gullick, *Rulers and Residents: Influence and power in the Malay States, 1870-1920*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, VI.

the Straits Settlements, the British appointed administrator for the Malay Peninsula.⁸⁴ Despite the existing difficulties, it is possible to suggest that the sultan's relationship with the colonialists prospered because the sultans and their followers were continually getting preferential treatment, especially on matters pertaining to Islam and Malay customs. As a result, it has inadvertently caused Islam in Malaysia to become the only religion to enjoy royal patronage and became viewed as being special and elevated, compared to all the religion of the non-Muslims.

Moreover, research also suggests that this preferential position was sometimes used to their advantage by the Malay rulers. For example, in some of the states, laws were enacted to prevent Malay agricultural lands from being transferred to non-Malay hands, even when the transaction was a mutual deal. Land related issues were particularly sensitive as they were often perceived as threats against safeguarding traditional Malay assets. Moreover, the Malays were also wary of the Chinese and Indian migrants who were continually brought into Malaya by the British to develop the local economy. The Chinese were being brought in to work in the tin mining industry and the Indians were brought in to work in the rubber estates. Indians were also often recruited by as manual labourers to build roads and railways, which provided the transport infrastructure that was crucial to the movement of goods and commodities. However, observers of Malaysian history have sometimes suggested that the economic progress of the Chinese and Indians was sometimes suspiciously perceived as a usurping of Malay economic dominance.⁸⁵ Consequently, it is possible to think that in order to exercise caution against losing their rights and privileges, the Malays entrenched their loyalty to the sultans and consciously chose to take a non-negotiable stand on Islam as being their grip of dominance in a rapidly changing demographic landscape.

2.1.4.2 The elevation of Islam.

Although Malaya was gradually evolving to become multi-racial and multi-religious, through the increasing presence of Chinese and Indians, the British were always careful in their dealings with the Malays. It is possible to postulate that the British sought to ensure that

⁸⁴ Gullick, *Rulers and Residents*, 2.

⁸⁵ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 140.

Islam was positioned in such a way that both the sultans and the Malay people would not be offended especially because they regarded the Malays as the original dwellers of the land who were under the patronage of the sultans.

Subsequently, because the British did not want to be accused of neglecting the Malay race and the Malay rulers, they took certain administrative measures to show that Islamic affairs were indeed given special attention. For example, a *Kadi* was appointed and paid for by the colonial office in Perak in 1879 and was tasked to look into the selection of *Imams* in the various divisions in the state and also to settle matrimonial disputes among Muslims.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the British administration sought to facilitate the appointment of religious teachers who could teach the *Quran* to the Muslim children as after school classes.⁸⁷ In some states, the British paid stipends to the village *Ulama* to teach the *Quran* to Muslim students. Moreover, when mosques needed to be built, ‘the colonial regime often contributed dollar for dollar for building funds raised by local subscriptions’.⁸⁸ Likewise, in the town of Taiping, the British ordered pork stalls within the market to be moved to a far corner that was not frequented by Muslim consumers where a watchman was placed to prevent pork from being carried openly through the market as its smell and appearance deemed offensive to the Muslims.⁸⁹ In addition to all these privileges, the British also declared special days in the Islamic calendar as public holidays, mainly in order to accommodate the wishes of the sultans. As a result, it is possible to think that these developments gave the liberty to some of the Sultans to begin enacting *Shariah* laws and formed village Islamic organizations to come under state administration, very likely as a reaction to the expanding British control of the Malay states.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ J.M. Gullick, *Malay Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Beginnings of Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, 286-287.

⁸⁷ William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya Press, 1967, 16.

⁸⁸ Roff, *The Origins*, 278.

⁸⁹ Yegar, *Islam and Islamic*, 59.

⁹⁰ Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam*, 37.

Consequently, these types of early developments that took place during the period of British Colonization appear to have provided early platforms to legitimize state-led Islamization to become further consolidated Malaysia.⁹¹ Accordingly, it can be proposed that both British assistance and the Sultan's leadership worked in tandem to ensure that Islam gained an elevated status compared to the religions of the migrant races. Therefore, it could then be suggested that it is this sense of dichotomy that began to cement a perception that the Malays and their religion were more important than non-Malays and their religion. This perception that was legitimized by the British eventually led to a psychological conditioning had a direct effect on the events that led to the country's independence and the Federal Constitution.

In addition to these factors, the Japanese invasion of Malaya during World War Two also indirectly contributed to the elevation of Islam. During the World War Two years (1941-1945), the Japanese army managed to take over and occupy the entire Malay Peninsula. During the occupation years, the Japanese were seen as being cautious in dealing with any matter that involved the affairs of the Malay sultans as they were always accorded a reserved status, a respect accorded to their emperor in Japan. Therefore, it would be safe to suggest that the Japanese were not willing to deal with the sultans harshly, primarily as a way of avoiding local communal uprising against the Japanese. Moreover, it is also very likely that because Islam was under the patronage of the Sultan, the Japanese were also sensitive to Islamic affairs as they felt that it could create feelings of unrest among the Sultans. These types of psychological reasoning by the Japanese also gave Islam a unique distinctiveness, something that was not accorded to the non-Muslim religions. Accordingly, it becomes possible to suggest that the both the British administration and the Japanese occupation of Malaya became salient contributing factors for further Islamization to take place.⁹² Subsequently, it would be useful to note that Batumalai, a local Christian researcher, has appropriately suggested that it is the British who played an indirect role in consolidating

⁹¹ Roff, 'Patterns of Islamization', 213.

⁹² Roff, 'Patterns of Islamization', 215.

Islam to become an elevated religion in Malaysia.⁹³ He notes that British decision to appease the Malays by favouring their religion should be considered a key factor that laid the foundation for later Islamization measures to develop. The British decision to accord special status to Islam then resonated in the psyche of the Malays that Islam needed a distinct and an expanded space in the nation.

However, after the end of the Japanese occupation, the accumulated anguish experienced during the war years led to the suppressed hostile feelings among the different races to become explosive. It caused the Malays and the Chinese to experience sporadic violent clashes that caused the killing of civilians.⁹⁴ It only ended after strong and decisive intervention by the British.

2.1.5 Malay needs.

In the Malaysian scenario, it is possible to postulate that the Malay race cannot think of itself as existing apart from the religion of Islam. For instance, Hussin Mutalib, an academic who studied the role of Islam and ethnicity in Malay politics, has accurately concluded that Malays in Malaysia have always felt the need to merge their ethnic identity with their religious identity, Islam.⁹⁵ It is this psychological need that eventually became further accentuated when the British brought in the Chinese and Indian migrants to work in Malaya. Moreover, when the non-Malays naturally brought with them their non-Muslim religions as part of their cultural practices into Malaya, the Malays had to adapt to a new reality of social change. Jim Baker, who compiled a History of Malaysia and Singapore correctly suggests that it, 'created a mixed feeling of unpreparedness, confusion and anger...feelings that prompted the Malays to turn to their religion.'⁹⁶ This psychological dilemma could be one of the key reasons for

⁹³ Batumalai Sadayandy, *Islamic Resurgence and Islamization in Malaysia: A Malaysian Christian Response*, Ipoh: Charles Greenier, 1996, 36.

⁹⁴ A. J. Stockwell, 'South East Asia in War and Peace: The End of European Colonial Empires', in Nicholas Tarding (Ed.), *The Cambridge History of South East Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, Vol. 2, 355.

⁹⁵ Hussin Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, 6-7.

⁹⁶ Abdullah, *The Politics*, 51.

their refusal to accept the British proposal of naturalized citizenship for the Chinese and Indian migrants who had begun to populate many of the townships in Malaya. It is possible to note that the Malays had begun to feel that the British conceded too much to the Chinese and Indians, who had become a growing challenge to their national status and religion, leading to a growing sense of nationalism within themselves.

2.1.5.1 Malay Nationalism.

When the British allowed social conditions which forced Malays to become one among three races, the question of citizenship of the Chinese and Indians became a contentious issue to the Malays. As the Japanese occupation ended in 1945, the British government worked towards forming a coalition of all the individual Malay states by amalgamating them into a single administrative unit called the Malayan Union. However, since the proposal allowed citizenship to be granted to those born within the territory and all future immigrants who lived in the Malayan Union for five years, the Malays perceived this as a reversal of the earlier pro-Malay, pro-Islam policy of the British.⁹⁷ Although the British obtained the Sultans' consent on the proposal, it may not be wrong to suggest that the sultans themselves consented to the proposal in order to prove their allegiance to the British, who may have suspected their corroboration with the Japanese forces during the war years.⁹⁸

Moreover, as the Malays began to feel that their unique racial and religious position in the land was being threatened, their leaders moved to organize a nationwide series of public meetings called the Malay Congress.⁹⁹ Public demonstrations were organized in several cities to gather the support of the peasant Malays. Accordingly, the Malayan Union proposal and its after-effects became catalysts for a nationalistic fervour of the Malays to emerge. In addition, a combination of Islamic reformism, Indonesian nationalism (Indonesia became independent in 1945) and colonial policies worked together to push for the rise of

⁹⁷ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 266.

⁹⁸ Baker, *Crossroads*, 217.

⁹⁹ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 267.

Malay nationalism.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, when the British administrators called for consultative meetings with the Malay leaders and spoke with leaders of other races, a Malay Federation was agreed to, instead of the earlier Malayan Union proposal. The proposal for a Malay Federation was able to strike middle ground, whereby Malays would give concessions on citizenship for non-Malays, who in turn would acknowledge their allegiance to the Malay Muslim rulers.¹⁰¹ In addition, the setting up of The Conference of Rulers became another element pacified the Malays, as it was specifically tasked with safeguarding Malay dominance and the supremacy of Islam.¹⁰² The formation of The Conference of Rulers assured the Malays that the Sultans who hitherto had functioned as their community leader, would continue to do so to safe guard their communal and religious interests.

2.1.5.2 Islam as the official religion of the Federation.

When Sir Gerald Templer became new High Commissioner of Malaya in 1952, he openly declared that the priority of his administration would be the formation of a new nation and immediately formed the Reid Commission, to prepare a constitution for an independent nation.¹⁰³ During the discussions that took place prior to Independence, the British agreed to give Islam a privileged position in the constitution, possibly to appease the Malays and their Sultans. The commission's main challenge was to safeguard the interest of the Malays who were entirely Muslims and also to take into consideration the sentiments of the non-Malays who were almost entirely non-Muslims. The commission began its task by gathering feedback through hearings that were held in towns and villages throughout Malaya and received 131 memoranda which highlighted the concerns of the different races and religions.

¹⁰⁰ A. J. Stockwell, 'British Policy and Malay Politics during the Malayan Union Experiment: 1945-1948', in *The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Monograph No.8*, Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS, 1979, 168.

¹⁰¹ T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 317.

¹⁰² Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 276.

¹⁰³ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 274.

In February 1957, six months prior to independence, the commission published its report and received mixed reactions from both the Malays and the non-Malays.¹⁰⁴ The report noted the difficulties encountered in granting citizenship to non-Malays and took more than two pages to explain the over-riding need to safeguard the special position of the Malays.¹⁰⁵ The non-Malays were only willing to accept the report if ‘it did not infringe on the rights and interests of the non-Malays’.¹⁰⁶ For the Malays, the decision to make Islam the religion of the Federation was a non-negotiable issue despite calls by non-Muslim organizations that urged the commission not to provide for an official religion to the federation.

As a result, the recognition of the special position of the Malays and the need to placate their religion caused the word ‘Islam’ to appear twenty-four times throughout the constitution. Article 3 (1) of the Federal Constitution reads, ‘Islam is the religion of the federation but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the federation’. Additionally, the Malay sultans were mandated by law to function as the custodians of Islamic affairs within their respective states. The *Yang Di-Pertuan Agong* (Paramount Ruler) who would be the ruling monarch for five years (chosen on a rotational basis amongst the sultans), was also tasked to become the custodian of all federal matters pertaining Islam. Moreover, Article 12(2) of the constitution also allows for provision of funds from the federal and state level to be used to establish Islamic schools and higher education institutions. It means that public money could now be used for the expansion of Islam through the building of mosques and other Islamic infrastructure. These provisions recognized Islam as a special and preferential religion, legally accorded by the nation’s Constitution. Other racial and religious groups were not given any forms of safeguarding institutions but were expected to raise their concerns through the race-based political parties that existed as partners within the ruling coalition. After representatives from all the three major races pursued a number of high level talks in London, the nation gained independence

¹⁰⁴ Joseph M. Fernando, *The Making of the Malayan Constitution*, Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS, 2002, 144.

¹⁰⁵ *Report of the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Commission*, London, 1957, 73-75.

¹⁰⁶ Fernando, *The Making*, 155 – 156.

from the British on the 31st of August 1957.¹⁰⁷ With British approval and endorsement, the Reid Commission report became accepted as the basis of all other future legal framework to be built.

Consequently, since Roff has suggested that Islam is intrinsically entrenched in the Malay psyche,¹⁰⁸ it would be unthinkable for them to function publicly if Islam did not become part of the larger social agenda of the nation. Furthermore, since the British had already incorporated Islam related legislations into the administration of the nation,¹⁰⁹ it became natural for Muslim prime ministers to establish further privileges and expansions in their strive for Islamization through the administrative mechanisms available to them. A combination of all these factors set the stage for later manifestations of Islamization in Malaysia to develop. Therefore, it can be safely argued that the administrative model that was provided by the British became a functional example that could not be dismissed by subsequent Muslim leaders, even when the nation was invariably growing to display a multi-religious multi-racial mosaic at its core.

2.2. Islamization in Malaysia.

2.2.1. Social factors.

Apart from the role of the British, the conceptual aversion between the *kaum muda* (younger generation) and the *kaum tua* (older generation) became another important aspect that challenged the mind of Malays to consider the increased role of Islam in the nation. Milner, who recognized the struggle, describes it as primarily being a struggle between the *Shariah* (religious minded) and the *bangsa* (ethnic) minded.¹¹⁰ The term *kaum muda* was applied to modernists' who wished to see Islam as a vehicle to create progress, peace, industriousness

¹⁰⁷ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 277.

¹⁰⁸ William R. Roff, 'Patterns of Islamization in Malaysia: 1890s-1990s, Exemplars, Institutions and Vectors', in *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1998.

¹⁰⁹ Yegar, *Islam and Islamic*, 74-75.

¹¹⁰ A.C. Milner, 'Islamic Debate in the Public Sphere', in Anthony Reid (Ed.), *The Making of an Islamic Political Discourse in Southeast Asia*, Monash University, 1993, 109-116.

and social responsibility.¹¹¹ It made them make a veiled challenge to the Malay sultans' religious bureaucracy which was perceived as being under the monopoly of the *kaum Tua*.¹¹² Although the *Shariah* based *kaum muda* used a number of writings and publications to influence the thinking of the Malay masses, their periodicals and other publications were sometimes banned in certain states partly due to the bureaucratic influence of the *Kaum Tua*, resulting in laws being passed to prohibit anyone from publishing literature concerning Islam without written permission from the sultan.¹¹³ Although the struggle between *kaum muda* and *kaum tua* may seem to be irrelevant for the present, academic Robert Hunt who lectured in a local seminary thinks that 'the issues have not diminished in importance'¹¹⁴. His observation is correct as the struggle to establish the right to speak on behalf of Islam is still an issue in twenty-first century Malaysia.¹¹⁵ Consequently, it would be safe to state that the ideological struggle between *kaum muda* and *kaum tua*, became another cradle to germinate ideas and concepts that helped to mould the thinking that led to the eventual advancement of Islamization in Malaysia.

Moreover, when the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP) was formed in 1951, mainly as an alternative Malay political party to challenge UMNO's domination, it gave a definite and continuous political impetus to Malaysian Islam.¹¹⁶ Most of PMIP members came from the rural areas and became predominantly concerned about the role of Islam in both their private and public lives. The party was later renamed as *Partai Islam se-Malaya* (PAS) and openly accused UMNO (as the leader of the ruling coalition) as not being Islamic enough in its administration of the nation. Moreover, when PAS made considerable inroads into the

¹¹¹ Hunt, *Islam*, 77.

¹¹² Manning Nash, 'Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia and Indonesia', in Martin E. Marty (Ed.), *Fundamentalism Observed*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991, 699.

¹¹³ William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 80.

¹¹⁴ Hunt, *Islam*, 79.

¹¹⁵ 'Why Malaysia's Royals are Speaking Up', *Freemalaysiatoday*, 10th November 2017, <<http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/11/10/why-malaysias-royals-are-speaking-up/>>, Accessed 13th January 2018.

¹¹⁶ Sven Cederroth, 'Indonesia and Malaysia', in David Westerlund and Ingvar Svanberg (Eds.), *Islam outside the Arab World*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999, 268.

Malay community during the 1959 federal elections,¹¹⁷ which possibly emerged due to the support from the dissatisfactions expressed by the *kaum muda*'s aspirations, the emergence of PAS inevitably projected Islam in Malaysia from a private religion to become a more public, albeit political venture. Consequently, this new scenario provided the Muslim community another legitimate way to incorporate their religion into the socio-political life of the nation.

In addition to these, effects from outside of Malaysia also influenced the minds of local Muslims, especially in their attempts to understand other possibilities of exploring an Islam infused state in Malaysia. For example, Chandra Muzaffar recognized that some of the Malay students who came back from their studies at the Islamic universities in the Middle-East, returned with reformist ideas and 'a commitment to create an Islamic State.'¹¹⁸ Furthermore, influences from neighbouring Indonesia where the *dakwah* movements had also been increasing in strength since the early 1970's, could also be considered a relevant contributing factor. Some of the students who returned from the Institute of Technology in Bandung, Indonesia were known to have disseminated ideas on Islamic renewal in Malaysia.¹¹⁹ This was not withstanding the fact that hitherto Malaysian students were already known to be making trips to Indonesia to study Islamic knowledge from the many *santri* (pious) teachers who were based in Indonesia.¹²⁰ Moreover, some other students were influenced by Javed Ansari, a member of *Jamaati-i-Islami*, a Pakistani religious movement which is heavily influence by the teachings of Maududi.¹²¹ These undergraduates were mostly based in England, namely in Sussex University and Brighton technical college which

¹¹⁷ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 267.

¹¹⁸ Chandra Muzaffar, 'Islam in Malaysia, Resurgence and Response', in *Islamic Perspective*, Vol. II, Issue 1, January 1985, 12.

¹¹⁹ Paul Stange, 'Religious Change in Contemporary Southeast Asia', in Nicholas Tarling (Ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, Vol. 2, 574.

¹²⁰ Manning Nash, 'Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia and Indonesia', in Martin E. Marty (Ed.), *Fundamentalism Observed*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 707.

¹²¹ Zainah Anwar, *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah Among the Students*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk, 1987, 27.

at that point of time held the biggest concentration of Malaysian students.¹²² Consequently, it is very possible to think that when these students came back to become community leaders, they readily embraced both the concept and the outworking of Islamization that was about to receive a fresh impetus in the nation.

2. 2. 2. The Role of Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad (1981-2003).

Islamization in Malaysia cannot be discussed without recognizing the significant role of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad, who worked to ensure that Islamization would become an endemic endeavour of the state. His dual role as prime minister and as an Islamic leader became synonymous, especially when he began to use government mechanisms to promote his own version of Islamization.¹²³ This has caused the Christian researcher Batumalai to accurately define Mahathir as the chief architect of Islamization in Malaysia.¹²⁴ Hussin Mutalib also recognized Mahathir as a key figure in the Islamization of Malaysia, especially by pointing to the fact that there was ‘difficulty in distinguishing Mahathir the politician and Mahathir the Islamic leader, given their overlapping nature’.¹²⁵ This overlapping resulted in Mahathir developing Malaysia in tandem with his desire to develop Islam through government development mechanisms.¹²⁶ For Mahathir, it was not possible to think of the future of Malaysia without Islam being the dominant colour of its overall fabric. Osman Bakar, who is the Deputy CEO of IAIS Malaysia and Emeritus Professor of Philosophy of Science at the University of Malaya, correctly notes that Mahathir’s vision for the country

¹²² Anwar, *Islamic Revivalism*, 27.

¹²³ Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Second Edition), Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001, 331-333.

¹²⁴ Batumalai, *Islamic Resurgence*, 246.

¹²⁵ Hussin Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, 128.

¹²⁶ Mohd. Hashim Kamali, *Islamic Law in Malaysia: Issues and Developments*, Kuala Lumpur: Ilmiah Publishers, 2000, 159.

was to ensure that no laws of the country and no government policies would in any way be in conflict with the teachings of Islam.¹²⁷

Several reasons could be forwarded for recognizing Mahathir's ability to link government mechanisms with Islamization in Malaysia. For example, in 1981 Mahathir announced the inculcation of Islamic values policy in the government administration. This initiative began to ensure that key instruments in the government would become inundated with Islamic agenda. This was primarily achieved through the expansion of the Islamic Affairs Section of the government which came directly under the purview of the Prime Minister.¹²⁸ The department grew from eight staff members to more than six hundred and was given expanded roles to influence the Islamic affairs of the nation.¹²⁹ The department was charged with writing the Friday sermons for nationwide mosques, vetting Islamic preachers, paying the salaries of Imams and conducting orientation for Muslim students going abroad for studies. Moreover, Mahathir also ensured that all government agencies and offices would become closed for two hours on Fridays, in order to enable government servants to attend Friday prayers at local mosques. Furthermore, media programs with Islamic content saw a noticeable increase as the government controlled all the major media stations.¹³⁰ Subsequently, an Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM) was inaugurated with the primary objective of strategizing and implementing Islamic input into all government policies and mechanisms.¹³¹

In addition to all these, Mahathir also made sure that his government would take definite initiatives to facilitate Islam to influence the economic spheres of the nation. In April 1983, he introduced the Islamic Banking Act, as a way of providing an Islamic option for Muslims and within the same year, a new bank called *Bank Islam Malaysia* was formed to

¹²⁷ Osman Bakar, 'A Doctor in the House: Looking for New Insights on Mahathir's Islamisation Policy in his Memoirs', in *Islam and Civilizational Renewal (ICR)*, Kuala Lumpur: IAIS, Vol. 3. No. 2, 2012, 373.

¹²⁸ Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, 'The Notion of Dakwah and its Perceptions in Malaysian Islamic Literature of the 1970's and 80's', in *Journal of South East Asian Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Vol. XX, No.2, 1989, 289.

¹²⁹ Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity*, 143.

¹³⁰ Riddell, 'Islamization', 153.

¹³¹ Riddell, 'Islamization', 165.

facilitate a *Shariah* compliant banking facility for Muslims.¹³² The new bank was able to grow to have more than eighty branches nationwide, functioning with more than 1,200 employees and went on to become listed into the local stock exchange.¹³³ Subsequently, also in 1983, Mahathir's government introduced Islamic insurance as an alternative option for those who preferred insurance underwriters whose policies were based on Islamic tenets.¹³⁴ Later, the need for an Islamic pawnshop was also realized under the purview of *Yayasan Pembangunan Islam Malaysia* (Islamic Development Trust Foundation).¹³⁵ Consequently, it would not be wrong to think that Mahathir consciously developed all these measures to prove that Islam was altogether sufficient for developing a successful economy of a nation.

Moreover, the Islamic legal presence in Malaysia was also being developed to become more forcefully pronounced in order to make it stand equally alongside civil law mechanisms.¹³⁶ In the year 1988, Mahathir ensured that *Shariah* laws became strongly empowered by passing constitutional amendments which forbade civil laws from encroaching on *Shariah* court affairs.¹³⁷ Subsequently, in the same year, *Jabatan Kehakiman Syariah Malaysia* (Department of *Shariah* Judiciary) was created and tasked to restructure and coordinate the operations of all the *Shariah* courts.¹³⁸ *Shariah* courts have since been consciously developed and modernized so that it will be not perceived as outdated or unable

¹³² Mohd. Ridwan Abdul Aziz, *Islamic Banking and Finance in Malaysia: System, Issues and Challenges*, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Nilai: Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 2013, 11.

¹³³ In 1999 *Bank Muamalat Malaysia* was formed as the second Islamic bank with forty branches and a workforce of 1,000 staff. Abdul Aziz, *Islamic Banking*, 13.

¹³⁴ A 2012 study found that Islamic insurance in Malaysia was worth RM 7.6 Billion with twelve local companies and one international company undertaking the business. Lukman Olorogun Ayinde and Abdelghani Echchabi, 'Perception and adoption of Islamic insurance in Malaysia: an empirical study', in *World Applied Sciences Journal*, IDOSI Publications, Vol. 20 No.3, 2012, 407.

¹³⁵ Abdul Ghafar Ismail and Nor Zakiah Ahmad, 'Pawnshop as an instrument of microenterprise credit in Malaysia', in James Connelly (Ed.), *International Journal of Social Economics*, West Yorkshire: Emerald Publishing, Vol. 24, No. 11, 1997, 1344.

¹³⁶ M.B. Hooker, *Islamic Law in South East Asia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, 163.

¹³⁷ Mohd. Azizuddin Mohd. Sani, 'The Politics of Islamization and Islamic Bureaucracy in Malaysia', in *Breaking the Silence: Voices of Moderation*, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2016, 131.

¹³⁸ Mohd. Sani, 'The Politics of Islamization', 131.

to be at par with civil law.¹³⁹ Batumalai observed that the agenda of all-encompassing Islamization was being attempted in order to convey the notion that Islamization could and should take place at all levels of governance.¹⁴⁰

However, it would also be useful to note that questions were also being raised, especially to query the inherent value and purpose of Islamization in Malaysia. For example, Chandra Muzaffar who is a Muslim political scientist, indicted Mahathir's brand of Islamization as not being holistic enough. In his work that examined the different aspects of Islamization in Malaysia, he accused Mahathir's agenda of Islamization as only being predominantly focussed on symbols and forms, rather than the substance of Islam that was needed for the actual social reconstruction of the nation.¹⁴¹ For him, the extent to which civil society elements like justice and equality would be allowed to be practiced in Malaysia eventually becomes the litmus test of the viability of genuine Islamization.¹⁴²

Another political scientist, Seyyed Vali who studied the elements of Islamization in Malaysia and Pakistan, was able to produce convincing evidence that Islamization through bureaucratic policies may have been a strategy to contain emergent challenges from Islamists, as a way of harnessing the energies of Islamism to expand state power.¹⁴³ Devoting a whole chapter to analyzing Islamization in Malaysia, he openly accuses Mahathir as cleverly capitalizing the powerful Islamic social base that was ready for a greater role for Islam in the nation and ingeniously used it to bring their own versions of veritable development. Consequently, he strongly suggests that Mahathir ingeniously used Islamization to pursue selective capitalist development for certain spheres of society as part of its agenda.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ Wan Satirah Wan Mohd Saman and Abrar Haider, 'E-Shariah in Malaysia: Technology adoption within justice system', in *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy*, Vol. 7, No.2, 2013, 256-276.

¹⁴⁰ Batumalai, *Islamic*, 62.

¹⁴¹ Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence*, 102.

¹⁴² Chandra Muzaffar, 'Principles of Equality and Justice in the Quran', in *Breaking the Silence: Voices of Moderation*, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2016, 92.

¹⁴³ Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Islamic leviathan: Islam and The Making of State Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 106.

¹⁴⁴ This aspect will need deeper analysis and will be explored in detail in the next chapter.

While it is possible to agree with some of the reasons which suggest that Mahathir's Islamization may have had underlying motives, the outcome of Islamization reveals that Islamization managed to have a personal impact on Muslims because Mahathir's Islamisation did consciously challenge Muslims in Malaysia towards increased piety and a greater commitment. For instance, when Mahathir directed government departments to be closed on Friday afternoons, it became a way to coax Muslim government servants to attend Friday prayers. Likewise, when Mahathir began to use state resources to build imposing mosques all over the country: it was both to instil pride and also to ensure a sense of belonging, especially by increasing the frequency of association with their fellow believers within the Muslim community. Moreover, when television and radio stations began to broadcast live call to prayer in Arabic, it was a direct effort to urge Muslims to take their prayer times seriously. Consequently, academics like Asma Abdullah who observed the outcome of Islamisation have correctly found that:

The state has played a significant role in systematically strengthening the Malay understanding and belief in Islam so much that being a Malay is now interlinked with the religion and that a Malay's religious identity is now replacing ethnicity as central element of the nation's identity.¹⁴⁵

Her observation then leads us to uncover what could be considered as one of the major flaws of Mahathir's Islamization blueprint that he only focussed on Malays, who were already Muslims to become more Islamic in their spiritual practices and did not try to win over the non-Muslim populace on their role in his Islamization agenda for the nation. Accordingly, the question of why he did not reach out to them would need to be answered. Firstly, Mahathir has been accused of using Islamization as a way to influence the Malay-Muslim electoral base by keeping Malays from voting for PAS which was the only Islamic political party that presented a credible Malay opposition to UMNO.¹⁴⁶ By portraying the UMNO government as already being resplendent with Islamic symbols, he was able to challenge PAS's claim that UMNO was not being Islamic enough in its administration.

¹⁴⁵ Asma Abdullah, 'The impact of Islamisation on Malays in Malaysia', in *Breaking the Silence: Voices of Moderation*, Marshall Cavendish, 2016, 264.

¹⁴⁶ Hassan, *Explaining Islam's Special Position*, 298.

Moreover, Islamization also accorded a way for Mahathir to make the Malay race distinct. When the British brought in Chinese and Indians to work in Malaya, the Malays became one among three races. They were not a strong majority and were often outclassed by the more economically endowed Chinese. Mahathir needed an additional factor that could make them distinct and Islam became a convenient tool for him to achieve it. Therefore, the need to identify the outcomes of Islamization, especially to examine its effect on the socio-political dynamics between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia, becomes all the more pertinent. These factors will be the elements that require specific analysis in a comprehensive way in the next chapter.

Summary

This chapter identified specific ways in which Islam arrived in Malaysia and traced some of the main reasons as to how and why Islam was given prominence by the British colonialists. Subsequently, it analyzed the reasons why Islam was given special protection through the Federal Constitution and also explained the role of Prime Minister Mahathir who consciously ensured that Islamization would play a major role in the entire socio-political landscape of the nation.

POLARIZATION, MARGINALIZATION AND POLITICAL HEGEMONY

Chapter Three

Introduction

This chapter scrutinizes selected consequences of Islamization that emerged as a social phenomenon in Malaysia by analyzing its three key outcomes: polarization, marginalization and the political hegemony that sustained these elements. It will seek to understand how and why these three aspects have since developed to become an unavoidable reality in Malaysia.

3.1. Polarization.

3.1.1. Muslims as distinct from non-Muslims.

Mahathir's Islamization efforts brought about a distinct and discernible demarcation within the overall Malaysian societal framework: Muslims on one side and non-Muslims on the other side of the spectrum. For instance, when Islamization forced Muslims to think and act in ways that would be acceptable to the ways of the *Sunnah* (the way of the prophet), it both challenged and changed some of their own cultural norms. The obsession between what constituted *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (not permissible) began to affect relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims over food matters. The previous culture of being able to eat permissible food although it is prepared by non-Muslims became off-limits as well. Zainah Anwar, who researched on Islamization during the Mahathir era, noted that: 'the sphere of food taboos has extended to not eating anything cooked by a non-Muslim, even if they are friends who are sensitive to the Muslim dietary rules.'¹⁴⁷ Moreover, public demands for rigorous control over *halal* food has increased and meat that is imported into the country must be certified as *halal* with separate Muslim and non-Muslim kitchens being created in hotels as well.¹⁴⁸ Demarcation could also be found in the dressing of Muslim women, which

¹⁴⁷ Anwar, *Islamic*, 86.

¹⁴⁸ Anwar, *Islamic*, 86.

began to embrace Arabic-style clothing as a way of showing their piety and affiliation towards Islam, creating a visible symbol of demarcation.¹⁴⁹

Osman Bakar, a Malaysian academic, has put forth his thoughts by saying that the lingering effects of Islamization in Malaysia would likely be a ripple effect that is most likely to continue well after Mahathir's administration.¹⁵⁰ Writing on Islamization in Malaysia in relation to Mahathir's memoirs, he correctly argues that although Mahathir has since retired, the effects of his Islamization policies will continue to linger. He attributes such tendencies to the concept of belonging that is found within the ambit of Islam as a religion that thrives on social affinity as a key identity of its creed. He believes that this sense of spiritual affiliation is beyond the control of any one person as it is a psychological sense of being included and recognised as part of the global Islamic community. Osman Bakar offers to call it, '*ummatic* Islamization'. He explains:

'Ummatic Islamization' is not seasonal or periodic, but perennial in nature and it is an on-going developmental process that is rooted in the very identity of the Muslim ummah and that exteriorizes the '*tawhidic*' spirit of Islam and the inner dynamism of Islamic law (the *shariah*) which characterise the '*ummatic*' identity.¹⁵¹

It means that Islamization in Malaysia that took place during Mahathir's administration cannot be simply dismissed as the product of a local statesman within a local context but should be viewed as an attempt to forcefully connect the Islamic identity of Malaysian Muslims with the larger global *ummah* as required by Islam.

However, the formation of any social identity that is established along religious lines causes serious concerns for non-Muslims in Malaysia, who are naturally unable to be part of the Islamic *ummah*. They will now be forced to wrestle with their national identity in relation to the Islamic *ummah* where Muslims could be influenced to view them as outsiders or worse still, as a threat to Islamic *ummah*. This is a predicament that has already been noted by Osman Bakar, who recognised that the non-Muslim community in Malaysia had already

¹⁴⁹ Abdullah, 'The impact of Islamisation', 260.

¹⁵⁰ He functioned as the Deputy CEO of the International Institute of Advanced Islamic studies (IAIS) Malaysia and Professor Emeritus of Philosophy of Science at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

¹⁵¹ Bakar, 'A Doctor in the House', 374.

viewed Islamization as a forceful imposition of Islamic ideals and values, resulting in ongoing tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims,¹⁵² very possibly due to the psychological ostracizing that has taken place. It would not be wrong to think that both Muslims and non-Muslims could become increasingly hurt and bitter that the other party is not taking them and their religious identities seriously enough.

Nevertheless, research reveals that not everyone points to Islam as the sole reason for polarization. Collin Abraham's research at Oxford shows that early forms of polarization had already developed during the colonial period due to the segregation of ethnic communities according to their economic functions. He postulates that this social segregation is what eventually led to class factors, which were further accentuated through Malay nationalism and Chinese economic dominance. The Indians were out of this equation as their limited socio-political influence, especially as they 'negated any serious considerations being given to them economically or politically by the colonial government'.¹⁵³ Despite his findings, it is possible to suggest that Collin Abraham's thesis does not necessarily disprove the Islamization factor in the polarization of Malaysian society. On the contrary, it merely points to the societal realities that helped Islamization to capitalize on the latently present polarities. Moreover, it doesn't disprove the fact that Mahathir successfully capitalised on religion to benefit from the already estranged society. Based on Abraham's findings, it would not be wrong to suggest that where Mahathir was concerned, although Islamization could become a potentially divisive factor, it helped the Malays to become recognized as being distinctive from the rest. Consequently, it becomes possible for us to agree with Chandra Muzaffar who suggests that most Muslims in Malaysia have been conditioned to accept this religious demarcation because this 'is a dichotomy that is sacred, an identity demarcation that is divine'.¹⁵⁴ When Mahathir used Islam to accentuate the identity of Malays and made Islam their foremost identity symbol, it pushed the non-Malays to consider themselves and their own religion as being less important than their Muslim counterparts. This has now led to a

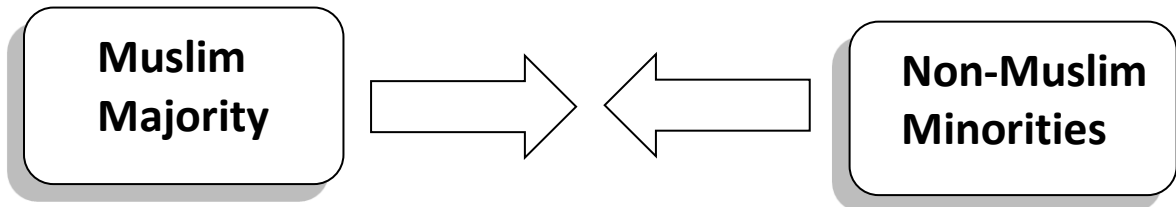
¹⁵² Bakar, 'A Doctor in the House', 373-374.

¹⁵³ Collin Abraham, *The Naked Social Order: The Roots of Racial Polarization in Malaysia*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 2004, 307.

¹⁵⁴ Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence*, 26.

psychological separation between the Muslim and the non-Muslim communities in Malaysia. As a result, this consideration of being distinct and separate forced them to willingly or unwillingly operate as opposite camps.

Figure 1: Polarization of Malaysian society: Horizontal Equation.



3.1.2. Muslims positioned above non-Muslims.

The effects of Islamization that led to the polarization of Malaysian society evolved further to take on another form during the administration of Prime Minister Ahmad Badawi (2003-2009). During his time in office, recurring incidents of minors converting to Islam and matters relating to apostasy became an indication that non-Muslims grievances were not getting the needed attention or necessary intervention from the government. The recurrent cases led several non-Muslim ministers from Badawi's own ruling party to hand in a memorandum which urged him to amend the Constitution to ensure the protection of minority religious rights.¹⁵⁵ As a result, Muslim politicians from the ruling coalition UMNO and Muslim politicians from the opposition party PAS, took a unified stand to criticise the daring move of the non-Malay ruling party politicians. Albert Walters, a Christian researcher who writes on Christian-Muslim relations in Malaysia, recognised the watershed incident as, "no longer government versus opposition. It is Muslim versus non-Muslim - a 'clash of civilisations' of sorts - Malaysian style".¹⁵⁶ Three days later, the non-Muslim ministers withdrew the memorandum as a gesture of honouring Badawi's request to do so. Moreover, they only agreed to do so when he assured them that solutions to the problem would be discussed through the formation of an Inter-Faith Commission. However, his proposed

¹⁵⁵ Walters, 'Issues in Christian-Muslim Relations', 78.

¹⁵⁶ Walters, Issues in Christian-Muslim Relations, 78.

solution never materialised, leading to similar problems continuing to arise from time to time.¹⁵⁷

An investigation as to why the discussions did not materialise reveals that Islamization in Malaysia had evolved to another level, where some Muslims had begun to feel that non-Muslims should not be accorded equal status when matters related to Islam were being discussed, causing the organizing of an inter-faith body to become derailed. Accordingly, the position of Muslims as being pre-eminent became verbalised by certain Islamic groups during the premiership of Badawi. For example, in 2005, the Malaysian Bar Council organised a two-day national level inter-faith conference as a precursor event to form an Inter-Faith Commission. It was attended by 200 representatives from 50 religious groups, including some from moderate Muslim NGOs. However, Badawi instructed the group to focus on inter-faith dialogue instead of focussing on the formation of an inter-faith body that could eventually discuss emerging religion-based social issues. To concur with the stance of the prime minister, Najib Razak as the deputy prime minister warned the group to be sensitive to Muslims as it could be seen as intruding into the domain of Islamic affairs.¹⁵⁸ These statements betrayed the elitist tendencies of certain Muslims who viewed themselves and their religious concerns as being superior and therefore should not be questioned or be placed side by side with the non-Muslims and their religions.

Moreover, elitist tendencies also resurfaced when certain groups considered a discussion on the constitutional rights of non-Muslims in Malaysia as a threat to the supremacy of Islam in the nation. In 2006, a coalition of NGOs who called themselves Article 11, planned to have a series of forums to educate Malaysian citizens on their religious rights

¹⁵⁷ Qishin Tariq, 'Muslim Conversion Issues exclusively Syariah Court's jurisdiction', The Star Online, 30th December 2015, <<http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/12/30/muslim-conversion-issues-exclusively-syariah-court-jurisdiction/>>, Accessed 20th January 2016.

¹⁵⁸ Lee Ban Chen, 'Interfaith Commission-Why Fear It?' Malaysiakini, 29th January 2008, <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/34017>>, Accessed 24th June 2011.

in relation to Article 11 (1) of the country's Federal Constitution.¹⁵⁹ As it was a coalition of thirteen NGOs which included progressive Malay Muslims, it was able to attract participants from different religious backgrounds. However, when actual regional forums were planned in other parts of the country, it generated criticism and opposition from several vocal Muslim groups. They began to imply that the Article 11 forums would give room to un-inhibited freedom of religion, potentially leading to apostasy among Muslims, which led the Article 11 Forums to encounter violent reactions from several Muslim organisations. In Penang, 400 Muslim youths forcibly stormed into the forum, bringing the gathering to an abrupt end. Before the forum, banners and posters were put all over Penang with messages like: 'Don't Seize our Rights', 'Don't Humiliate Islam' and 'Don't Insult our Prophet'.¹⁶⁰ This resulted in some Muslim groups wanting to organize their own forums to combat what they considered as threats emanating from Article 11 gatherings. Subsequently, the Group of Asian Region Ulamas (SHURA), planned a two-day seminar themed, Challenges Facing the Muslims, with one of the speakers presenting the topic, 'Big Agenda for Muslims to Combat Apostasy'.¹⁶¹ Two months later, the sensitive remarks and violent responses that led to police interventions caused Badawi to ban public discussion on religious rights especially when it was related to the formation of an Inter-Faith Commission.

However, although these types of national level issues took place during Badawi's administration, anthropologist Hoffstaedter believes that Badawi actually attempted to make non-Muslims feel inclusive through his *Islam Hadhari* policies, as it was meant to provide a

¹⁵⁹ According to Article 11 of the Federal Constitution, every person in the Federation has the right to profess their own religion and subject to clause 4 of the article to propagate it freely in accordance to their own religions. Clause 4 of Article 11 talks about the restrictions of propagating non-Muslim religions to Muslims.

¹⁶⁰ 'Rule of Law or Mob Rule?' The Star Online, 21st May 2006, <<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2006/5/21/focus/14302072&sec=focus>> Accessed 3rd August 2011.

¹⁶¹ 'Discussion Ban on All says Razi', The Star Online, 11th August 2006, <<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2006/8/11/nation/15113392&sec=nation>>, Accessed 21st February 2012.

way of ‘overcoming the exclusionary models of Islamization’ of the Mahathir era.¹⁶² He argues that *Islam Hadhari* could not become the epitome of Islamic multi-culturalism that it envisaged because its core ideals were hijacked by certain political actors ,and Islamist groups.¹⁶³ However, blaming close-minded Islamists for having influence over the prime minister raises more problems than it solves. For example, why did Prime Minister Badawi choose to listen to them? Whose interests was he trying to protect? Research indicates that the influencers came from his own political party UMNO who needed to protect their Malay-Muslim hegemonic interests and as the President of UMNO, Badawi needed to heed their wishes. The fact that UMNO influenced the decisions of the Prime Minister also came out into the open when Najib Razak as the deputy prime minister made statements to his UMNO colleagues that the setting up of an Inter Faith Commission was actually not allowed to take place as it was a way to protect the sanctity of Islam. He said, ‘UMNO must uphold Islam and not let others defame and question the holiness of Islam’.¹⁶⁴ Najib explained that the postponement was ‘just a diplomatic way of speaking’ as the UMNO Supreme Council had already discussed the matter and rejected the idea.¹⁶⁵ This admission exposed the reality that senior UMNO leaders have sometimes used their power to derail any measures that could potentially risk their hegemonic ideals and interests.

In addition, such decisions also indicate that UMNO leaders had learnt to capitalize on Mahathir’s Islamization and had since taken control of its rein for their own purposes. It could also mean that the polarization caused by Islamization had now become a useful ruse for UMNO politicians to maintain a separateness, as a way of giving Malays an advantage over the non-Malays. Islamization had now become useful for its own pro-Malay policies and UMNO was now using Badawi to enforce it in a strong manner.

¹⁶² Gerhard Hoffstaedter, ‘Islam Hadhari: A Malaysian Islamic Multiculturalism or another Blank Banner?’ in *Contemporary Islam*. Vol. 1, No. 3, 2009, 134.

¹⁶³ Hoffstaedter, ‘Islam Hadhari’, 137-138.

¹⁶⁴ ‘Stern action on SMS Culprit’, *Star Online*, 7th November 2006, <<http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2006/11/07/stern-action-on-sms-culprit/>>, Accessed 11th October 2012.

¹⁶⁵ ‘Stern action on SMS Culprit’, *Star Online*.

Nevertheless, other pertinent questions will also need to be raised. Firstly, was multiculturalism ever the priority of *Islam Hadhari*, as Hoffstaedter suggests?¹⁶⁶ Secondly, did Badawi actually attempt to allow multi-culturalism to flourish as a way of bringing cohesiveness to an already polarised society? To answer the first question, it can be argued that *Islam Hadhari* never had multi-culturalism as its goal, especially because Badawi failed to provide non-Muslims any equal platforms for discussion. Moreover, the reason also becomes clearer when Hoffstaedter states that, ‘Islam Hadhari represents Badawi’s re-conceptualization of Medina society and the covenant of Medina’.¹⁶⁷ The covenant of Medina, was not meant to be a policy document that placed egalitarianism as the pillar of multi-cultural coexistence as the covenant only served to ensure the peaceful co-existence of certain non-Muslims who had no choice but to live within the ambit of the growing dominance of socio-political and possibly a militant Islamic rule. Nevertheless, Hoffstaedter has also inadvertently pointed to another important fact, that elements from Islamic history have played an important role in influencing the minds of modern Muslim leaders in Malaysia. As Muslim leaders, it is understandable that they would naturally look back at how Muslim leaders of the past treated non-Muslims in their land. This by itself could be difficult as researchers of Islamic history have sometime argued that based on the example of Prophet Muhammad’s treatment of non-believers, there was no inequality in Islam and that Islam treated all people as equals.¹⁶⁸ Some influential Muslim clerics like Sayyed Qutb have categorically maintained that ‘Islam grants non-Muslims complete political and religious freedom and protection to practice their religious duties’.¹⁶⁹ However, though such tendencies could be accepted as the stated ideals in the Quran and the teachings from Prophet Muhammad, in reality, they do not address the treatment of minorities by subsequent Islamic rulers who often discriminated against and marginalized minority groups. Those who have

¹⁶⁶ Hoffstaedter, ‘Islam Hadhari’, 138-139.

¹⁶⁷ Hoffstaedter, ‘Islam Hadhari’, 127.

¹⁶⁸ Huseyin Gazi Yurdaydin, ‘Non-Muslims in Muslim Societies: The Historical View’, in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol.3, 1981, 183-188.

¹⁶⁹ As quoted by Sayed Khatab, ‘Citizenship rights of non-Muslims in the Islamic state of Hakimiyya espoused by Sayyed Qutb’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. Vol.13, No.2, 2002, 167.

studied the position of minorities in the Middle-Eastern region have sometimes contested the perception of unconditional acceptance of minorities in Muslim territories.¹⁷⁰

Consequently, since there is a clear contrast between the ideals of the Quranic teachings and the actual treatment of non-Muslims in Islamic lands,¹⁷¹ which particular aspect would then eventually be emulated by Malaysian Muslim leaders? Is it the portrayal of equality in Islam or is it the practices of discrimination by previous Muslim leaders? Based on the realities of the Malaysian socio-political scenario, it is possible that both aspects are concurrently taking place. On one hand, the Malaysian government tries to portray to the international community the aspirations of equality and harmony as envisaged in Islamic ideals by showcasing Malaysia as a moderate and tolerant Islamic nation. On the other hand, it practices a preferential treatment of Muslims even when the rights of its non-Muslim citizens are continuously being jeopardised. Thus the answer to the second question that was raised earlier can only be that, even though Badawi may have intended to showcase Malaysian Islam as being conducive for multiculturalism, it was not within his means to attempt to enforce it during his time in power.

Furthermore, any infusion from the past would also mean that the rules of engagement for Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia may not entirely be based on principles of equality. Malaysian Muslims may be led to think that they are now more than just different than non-Muslim counterparts, Muslims should be positioned above the unbelievers, as sanctioned in the examples of Islamic history. Accordingly, Maznah Muhammad who teaches at the National University of Singapore found that when Islam became mainstreamed within the bureaucratic structure in Malaysia, ethnic hegemony through *Ketuanan Melayu* (Lordship of the Malays) evolved to facilitate Islamic hegemony through *Ketuanan Islam* (Lordship of Islam), where Islam was utilised to ‘ring-fence the identity of the Malay’.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ P. R. Kumaraswamy, ‘Problems of Studying Minorities in the Middle East’, in *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol.2, No.2, 2003, 248.

¹⁷¹ Bat. Yeor, *The Dhimmis: Jews and Christians living under Islam*, New Jersey, Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985.

¹⁷² Maznah Mohammad, ‘The Authoritarian State and Political Islam in Muslim-Majority Malaysia’, in Johan Saravanamuthu (Ed.), *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia*, London: Routledge 2009, 80.

Maznah's findings help to shed light on why Mahathir and Badawi's Islamization policies were useful to the UMNO-led government. Islamization has become a useful political tool to elevate the social position of the Malays over the non-Malays who are predominantly non-Muslims. Islamization in Malaysia has now given rise to the perception that Islam and Muslims cannot be held side by side, at an equal horizontal level with either non-Muslim religions or persons. Therefore, the concept of *ketuanan* (lordship), either through religion or race, although hegemonic by nature, was actively being supported by UMNO as a way to ensure the dominance of Malays.

Hence, it becomes possible to think that the polarization that segregated non-Muslims during the Mahathir era had since enabled the Badawi era to psychologically position Muslims above the non-Muslims. Ahmad Fauzi an academic who researched the position of political Islam in Malaysia notes the abuse of power:

Rightly or wrongly, *Islam Hadhari* has become identified with wanton abuse of powers against not only non-Muslims but also Muslims suspected of subscribing to unorthodox beliefs. The government failed to pay attention to non-Muslims' concerns at continually being left in the dark.¹⁷³

Due to a growing sense of being under-classed and looked down upon, the non-Muslims who ensured a landslide victory for Badawi when he newly took office in 2004, turned against him and his party (UMNO) in the 2008 elections as they were dissatisfied with his way of managing the non-Muslim affairs. The election results were noted by some as a rebuke to the Badawi administration.¹⁷⁴ They saw him as being weak for giving in to UMNO's ultra-nationalistic elements that influenced government's policies. In what was called a Political Tsunami, the ruling coalition lost its traditional two-third majority that it had enjoyed since the time of independence.¹⁷⁵ If we ask whether Badawi could have fared

¹⁷³ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 'The New Challenges of Political Islam in Malaysia', in *Working Paper No.154, Asia Research Centre*, (This was a paper that was presented at the Asia Research Centre Conference at the Murdoch University, Perth, 12 to 13 February 2009,

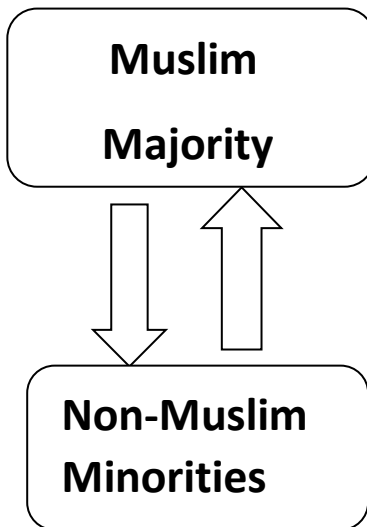
¹⁷⁴ 'Malaysia's Election: A Political Tsunami?' *The Economist*, 10th March 2008, <<http://www.economist.com/node/10833119>>, Accessed 1st December 2008.

¹⁷⁵ 'Political Tsunami (Newspaper headline)', *The Sunday Star*, 9th May 2008.

better if he had practiced a more tolerant and inclusive approach to non-Muslim grievances, we could answer that it may not be so, as the Malay electorate and his own party UMNO would have shunned him for siding too much with the non-Malays. Overall, Badawi was seen ‘as a weak and indecisive leader’, partly because of his inability to control the aggressive elements from within his own party.¹⁷⁶

We then safely conclude that Badawi was unable to mend the polarizations that festered from the time of Mahathir’s reign. Badawi’s administration was hijacked by Islamists from UMNO who did not want to grant the non-Muslim / non-Malays an equal positioning with the Muslim Malays. These factors worked against the non-Muslims and allowed for a superior positioning of Islam to take place within the Malaysian societal framework. Consequently, UMNO’s need for ethnic superiority has led to hybrid-polarization in Malaysia: a Malay versus non-Malay ethnic polarization and a Muslim versus non-Muslim, religious polarization. This hybrid-polarization has conveniently accorded the Malays a psychological social edge over the non-Malays. This means that the polarization that began as a horizontal split has since evolved into a vertical positioning, with Muslims positioned above and non-Muslims below.

Table 2: Polarization of Malaysian society: Vertical Equation.



¹⁷⁶ Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, ‘The Coming of Age of the Reformasi Generation’, in Bridget Welsh and James Chin, *Awakening: The Badawi Years in Malaysia*, Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2013, 136.

3.2. Marginalization of non-Muslims.

The polarization of Malaysian society which eventually led to the preferential treatment of Islam and Muslims has since led to the non-Muslims to a situation of being marginalized. For example, local researcher Chandra Muzaffar has already indicated that non-Muslims in Malaysia have sometimes been denied certain benefits by the government, which has resulted in non-Muslims being unable to enjoy similar privileges as Muslims.¹⁷⁷ This experience has sometimes resulted in the expression of protest voices, emerging from non-Muslims and expressed through the press statements by MCCBCHST on emergent issues.¹⁷⁸ However, one researcher has since suggested that the act of voicing out itself could become counterproductive for non-Muslims. Hamayotsu argues that when minority communities in Malaysia push for equal religious rights, it provokes the Malay elites to increase the defence of their socio-political position and power.¹⁷⁹

3.2.1. Religion based socio-economic dynamics.

The evidence for religion based social inequality can be observed clearly in the implementation of the *Bumiputera* affirmative action policy that was practiced by the government. The government justifies granting of special privileges and benefits to the Muslims (as Malays) due to the socio-political dynamics that were established during the early post-independence era.¹⁸⁰ During the period, the government implemented a *New Economic Policy* (NEP), which was a thirty year program from 1970s to the 1990s to provide a more equitable sharing of economic resources.¹⁸¹ The *Bumiputera* affirmative action, as the

¹⁷⁷ Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence*, 88.

¹⁷⁸ MCCBCHST is the acronym for Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism.

¹⁷⁹ Kikue Hamayotsu, 'Towards a More Democratic Regime and Society? The Politics of Faith and Ethnicity in a Transitional Multi-Ethnic Malaysia', in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol.2, 2013, 61-88.

¹⁸⁰ The Malays agreed to the British suggestion to accord citizenship for Chinese and Indian migrants only when the Malays' special status was entrusted to be safeguarded by the Malay royals.

¹⁸¹ The NEP has since been replaced by two new policies, namely the National Development Policy (NDP) and the National Vision Policy (NVP).

NEP was called, legitimized the giving of special economic privileges and administrative positions to certain races based on demographic proportions.¹⁸²

To understand marginalization, the landmark study conducted by the *Malaysian Studies* research journal, which is published by a local university, becomes pertinent to study the condition of non-Muslims.¹⁸³ This in-depth academic study investigated the government's *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil) preferential policy and highlights the marginalization. In 2003 it allocated an entire issue to investigate the outcomes of the NEP as a race based economic empowerment policy. It analysed the key reasons for the policy and investigated its after-effect on the different communities in Malaysia.

To begin with, the researchers discovered that the non-Malay *Bumiputera* who are mostly non-Muslims, were not able to significantly improve their economic capabilities through the NEP as a *Bumiputera* affirmative program. Their findings have revealed serious anomalies in the outcome of the NEP policy, that although the NEP was drafted as a policy to ensure socio-economic betterment of all *Bumiputera* communities, it did not produce the expected outcome for non-Muslim Bumiputeras. Although the NEP was framed as a plan for equitable wealth distribution among the different races, it side-lined the non-Malay *Bumiputera*, very likely due to them being non-Muslims. For instance, Bilson Kurus and Wilfred Tangau who analysed the statistics of the non-Malay *Bumiputera* in the state of Sabah found that the *Bumiputera* in Sabah were below the poverty line, lacked basic amenities and lacked basic educational opportunities. Their findings made them to conclude,

Furthermore, as a marginalised and disadvantaged group in many ways, it is abundantly clear that the indigenous community will comparatively find it more difficult to cope with the numerous challenges ahead.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² *Bumiputera* is a Malay word that translates as sons of the soil. The term is used to define the Malays and the other native dwellers, like the East Malaysian natives and the aboriginal tribes found in West Malaysia. It is used as a way of distinguishing the original inhabitants of the land as opposed to the Chinese and Indian migrants who are not *Bumiputera* but migrated to Malaya through British commercial interests.

¹⁸³ Richard Mason and Ariffin S. M. Omar, *The Bumiputera Policy: Dynamics and Dilemma*, *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies*, Penang: Universiti Sains Malaysia, Vol.21, No 1 & 2, 2003.

¹⁸⁴ Bilson Kurus and Wilfred M. Tangau, 'Towards the National Vision Policy: Review of NEP and NDP among the *Bumiputera* Communities in Sabah' in Richard Mason and Ariffin S. M. Omar (Eds.), *The Bumiputera*

The reality of their situation despite them being classified as *Bumiputera* has often led the non-Malay *Bumiputera* in Sabah to become disenchanted with the term *Bumiputera* and began to view it as a ‘Malay analogous policy’.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, the condition of the non-Malay *Bumiputera* in Sarawak, which is the other East Malaysian state, was no better. The research noted that, ‘for a larger *Bumiputera* rubric, the Dayak felt themselves to be treated as second-class *vis-à-vis* the Malay-Muslim communities who wield political power in the state’.¹⁸⁶

Moreover, in West Malaysia the situation of the *Orang Asli* (Indigenous community), who are considered as *Bumiputera* by virtue of them being the original dwellers of the land, revealed an equally negative outlook. The research outcome showcased their predicaments both in educational opportunities and economic benefits and also emphasized the government’s refusal to allow them to manage their own interests. Furthermore, the findings also highlighted discrepancies in land ownership issues which preferred the Malays. These types of discrepancies within the *Bumiputera* categories caused a researcher to ask a rhetorical question, ‘so why are the *Orang Asli* still on the periphery? Simply because fairness and justice had not prevailed in the distribution of rights, resources and opportunities’.¹⁸⁷ He then openly states his finding that such a situation has resulted in the term *Bumiputera* having little meaning or usefulness among many within the *Orang Asli* community.¹⁸⁸ Based in these types of situations, another researcher, Ahmad Suaedy strongly concludes that,

Inequalities have also emerged within the *Bumiputera*, creating a group which some have labelled ‘second class *Bumiputera*.’ ... It cannot be denied that they have

Policy: Dynamics and Dilemma, Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies, Penang: Universiti Sains Malaysia, Vol.21, No 1&2, 2003, 281.

¹⁸⁵ James F. Ongkili, ‘The Problem of Kadazandusun *Bumiputeraism*: Promises, Privileges and Politics’, in Richard Mason and Ariffin S. M. Omar (Eds.), *The Bumiputera Policy: Dynamics and Dilemma, Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies*, Penang: Universiti Sains Malaysia, Vol.21, No 1&2, 2003, 206.

¹⁸⁶ Richard Mason and Jayum A Jawan, ‘The *Bumiputera* Policy and ‘Dayakism’: An Interpretation’, Richard Mason and Ariffin S. M. Omar (Eds.), in *The Bumiputera Policy: Dynamics and Dilemma, Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies*, Penang: Universiti Sains Malaysia, Vol.21, No 1&2, 2003, 190.

¹⁸⁷ Colin Nicholas, ‘The *Orang Asli*: First on the land, last in the plan’, in Richard Mason and Ariffin S. M. Omar (Eds.), *The Bumiputera Policy: Dynamics and Dilemma, Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies*, Penang: Universiti Sains Malaysia, Vol.21, No 1&2, 2003, 326.

¹⁸⁸ Nicholas, ‘The *Orang Asli*’, 328.

suffered from economic and educational inequalities which have restricted their access to jobs, the economy and politics.¹⁸⁹

Furthermore, the fate of the non-*Bumiputera*, who are mostly Chinese and Indians, also needs to be explored, since it reveals a socio-economic marginalization based on the NEP Policy. Lee Kam Hing who teaches at the University of Malaya, found that most Chinese in Malaysia did not benefit from the policy and generally considered NEP mainly as a Malay affirmation strategy, even when it was replaced by two other replacement policies.¹⁹⁰ However, it is interesting to note that Kam Hing strongly suggests that hints of Islamic undertones were also found to be gradually working behind the scenes of the NEP. He observed that,

Changes in international and local politics is witnessing a shift of the debate from the *Bumiputera* policy to that of a broader Islamic state. It appears to be one where Malay rights is to be revised within a programme determined by Islamic requirements.¹⁹¹

The Indians were also noted mired in the same predicament as they did not fare very differently after the implementation of the NEP. K. Anbalakan who is currently an associate professor at Curtin University (Sarawak campus) demonstrates that their equity level within the overall Malaysian economy remained at one percent, similar to before the implementation of the NEP. It also becomes very telling when he titled the outcome of his research as, 'The New Economic Policy and The Further Marginalization of Indians'.¹⁹²

Accordingly, when the investigation of whether the NEP has actually been an impartial policy in a multicultural environment, the response comes back in the negative. Furthermore, based on his analysis, K.S Jomo who has served as visiting professor at both

¹⁸⁹ Ahmad Suaedy, 'Islam and Minorities: Managing Identity in Malaysia', in *Al-Jamiah*, Vol.48, No.1, 2010, 32.

¹⁹⁰ Lee Kam Hing, 'The *Bumiputera* Policy: Chinese Views and Perspectives', Mason, Richard and Ariffin S. M. Omar (Eds.), *The Bumiputera Policy: Dynamics and Dilemma, Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies*, Penang: Universiti Sains Malaysia, Vol.21, No 1&2, 2003, 358.

¹⁹¹ Kam Hing, 'The *Bumiputera* Policy', 360.

¹⁹² K. Anbalakan, 'The New Economic Policy and the further marginalization of the Indians' in Richard Mason and Ariffin S. M. Omar, *The Bumiputera Policy: Dynamics and Dilemma, Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies*, Penang: Universiti Sains Malaysia, Vol.21, No 1&2, 2003, 379.

Cambridge and Cornell University clearly states that NEP does contain discriminatory elements that favours the Malay community over the others.¹⁹³ Moreover, P. Ramasamy who was a former professor at a local university and a visiting Senior Research Fellow in Institute of South East Asian Studies strongly suggests that political factors worked together with the *Bumiputera* priority policy, reduced the social status of non-Malays to a secondary position. Writing in the social predicament of the non-Malays, he noted:

The new forms of politics that emerged did not totally discard the interests of non-Malays, but made them secondary to the larger interests of Malays. Therefore the kind of inter-ethnic bargaining and compromise that was so essential for the success for the earlier consociational model become less and less relevant under the hegemonic politics of Malays.¹⁹⁴

Consequently, based on the findings presented above, when we attempt to isolate the differentiating factor between the Malay *Bumiputera* and the non-Malay *Bumiputera*, the only glaring distinction that emerges is the element of religion. The Malays are all Muslims whereas all the other non-Malay *Bumiputera* are mostly non-Muslims. Therefore, based on the outcome of the NEP, it becomes possible for us to propose that because the Malays are Muslims, they have been able to liberally enjoy the privileges and benefits of the NEP in ways that the non-Muslim *Bumiputera* were not able to. Consequently, it is possible to suggest that the term *Bumiputera* is not a straightforward definition but a loaded term that is used by the government to justify privileges to reach and benefit certain groups of people which in this case is the Malays who are entirely Muslims.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ K .S. Jomo, 'Whither Malaysia's New Economic Policy?' in *Pacific Affairs Journal*. Vol. 63, No. 4, Winter, 1990-1991, 469.

¹⁹⁴ P. Ramasamy, 'Nation-Building in Malaysia: Victimization of Indians?' in Leo Suryadinata (Ed.), *Ethnic Relations and Nation Building in Southeast Asia: The Case of the Ethnic Chinese*, Singapore: ISEAS Publications, 2004, 150.

¹⁹⁵ Mariam Mokhtar, 'The many classes of Bumiputera in Malaysia', *Free Malaysia Today*, 26th July 2017, <<http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2017/07/26/the-many-classes-of-bumiputera-in-malaysia/>>, Accessed 10th August 2017.

3.2.2. Religion based opportunities.

Evidence reveals that apart from economic benefits, the Malays as Muslims also receive other forms of privileges. For instance, the language requirements and the government quota system ensure that a majority of the students in the public university would be Malays. This was validated through the research of Ng Kiok Nam, who tabulated statistics on the number of students entering public universities.¹⁹⁶ The research revealed that Malay students were given more seats as compared to other races. The pattern has continued further as in 2014, a report emerged that sometimes some non-Muslim students were subjected to questions on Islam in order to qualify for scholarships.¹⁹⁷

Research has also revealed that job opportunities in the government sector have become another area where marginalization surfaces. Paul Monash's Master of Philosophy research which was conducted at the Birmingham University focussed on the agenda of Malay supremacy in Malaysia. In his study, he provides statistical evidence that shows majority of civil service positions being held by Malays and strongly suggests that the government is consciously using ethnic domination by ensuring that government instruments, including the police and the armed forces remain in the control of the Malays.¹⁹⁸ Monash also suggests that a credible reason for the lack of non-Malays in the civil service is the element of Islamic influence and Islamic regulations that come as part of the government's Islamization agenda. Moreover, he also postulated that non-Muslim civil servants often felt overwhelmed when they were asked to attend Islam related classes and when they were being forced to work within an Islam inundated environment. Furthermore, he highlighted the fact that non-Malays were often by-passed for promotions and have not been given the opportunities to upgrade themselves by allowing them to attend the upgrade courses required for the promotion. According to Monash, all these elements have served to

¹⁹⁶ Ng Kiok Nam, 'Islam in Malaysia', in *Islam in Asia: Perspectives for Christian-Muslim Encounter*, J. P. Rajashekar and H. S. Wilson (Eds.), Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1992, 100-101.

¹⁹⁷ 'Non-Muslim students asked to name prophets of Islam at scholarship interviews', The Malay Mail Online, 30th April 2014, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/non-muslim-students-asked-to-name-prophets-of-islam-at-scholarship-interview>>, Accessed 4th June 2015.

¹⁹⁸ Paul Monash, *Malay Supremacy*, Kuala Lumpur: Maygen Press, 2003, 145.

reveal a hidden form of psychological marginalization of the non-Malays within the Malaysian civil service.¹⁹⁹

Furthermore, research also leads us to a pivotal study which points to non-Muslims being forced to undergo experiences of being side-lined in the private sector as well. For example, evidence indicates that due to the influences caused by of Islamization, some Muslim business leaders were now seeking to make the private sector become Islamic by making it *Shariah* compliant. Patricia Sloane who holds a Doctorate from Oxford University and teaches at a local university undertook an in-depth research on the business practices of Muslim-led commercial entities in Malaysia. She then found that a form of ‘Corporate *Shariah*’ was being discreetly practiced within private business circles. She witnessed that offices and corporate settings were become increasingly Islamic, ‘where piety and Islamic subjectivities are shaped, monitored and enforced, not left up to individual and personal choice.’²⁰⁰ In addition to these, she was also able to observe that those involved in promoting Corporate *Shariah* in Malaysia intended to make Islamic economy as the norm of private economy even if it means subsuming other forms of business practices. Furthermore, she noted that certain Muslim corporate leaders believed that,

the enterprises of Malaysian Chinese capitalists whose economic hegemony Malays had been contesting for over a generation would eventually be subsumed within the Islamic economy of Malaysia, part of the process of Malaysia's broad *sharia-ization* and Islam's Malaysian ‘take-over’ beyond.²⁰¹

Her investigation into business practices of several corporations that were managed by Muslim business leaders substantiates the suspicion that Islamization had now led to certain types of marginalization aspects to become embedded in their business practices. For example, she noted that out of twenty one companies that she studied, only three had non-Muslim employees in their corporate headquarters.²⁰² She found that there were significant

¹⁹⁹ Monash, *Malay Supremacy*, 147.

²⁰⁰ Patricia Sloane White, ‘Working in the Islamic Economy: Sharia-ization and the Malaysian workplace’, in *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2011, 308.

²⁰¹ White, ‘Working in the Islamic Economy’, 312.

²⁰² White, ‘Working in the Islamic Economy’, 321.

reasons for why most Muslim corporate leaders gave preference to employ Muslim staff. These leaders considered employing Muslims both as a means of giving them a livelihood as well as ensuring their faithfulness to their own call as spiritual leaders of their companies.²⁰³ Furthermore, some corporate leaders felt that though non-Muslim employees may be smarter, they could not be trusted to comply with the higher ethics and stricter controls required in an Islam compliant company.²⁰⁴ When such disparities are justified in the name of Islam, it becomes a religion based marginalization where non-Muslims are perceived as being less valuable and therefore, less preferred.

When we ask why religion based marginalization could have become justified in a multi-cultural and multi-religious environment like Malaysia, it is possible to suggest that marginalization may have been permitted to be justified under the broader umbrella of accommodation and tolerance within the growing ambit of Islamization. For instance, when Muhammad Hamidullah, a Muslim academic, published a study on patterns of relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims, he thinks that that when Muslim governments accommodate minorities to live in their lands, it must be reciprocated with a response of gratitude from the minorities.²⁰⁵ Because the minorities were living within the ambit of an Islamic society, they must learn to abide by the ways of the majority even if it meant making adjustments that they themselves may not be comfortable with. Likewise, when an academic study was conducted to understand the relationship between Malays and the Chinese in Malaysia, two local academics also sought to establish the benevolent nature of the Malays as Muslims.²⁰⁶ The academics claimed that it was actually Islam that caused the Malays to

²⁰³ Sloane noted that most of them had a psychological susceptibility to view themselves as Caliphs of their business organizations. With this notion of spiritual authority, they regulate the choice of selecting suitable employees. White, 'Working in the Islamic Economy', 321.

²⁰⁴ White, 'Working in the Islamic Economy', 321.

²⁰⁵ Muhammad Hamidullah, 'Relations of Muslims with non-Muslims', in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol.7, No.1, 986, 9.

²⁰⁶ Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin and Mohd Ridhuan Tee Abdullah, 'Social Relation between the Malays and Chinese Communities from a Civilizational Perspective', in *World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology International Journal of Social, Behavioural, Educational, Economic, Business and Industrial Engineering*, Vol.6, No.10, 2012.

extend tolerance to the Chinese migrants who came to work in Malaya.²⁰⁷ Additionally, the researchers also suggest that when non-Malays overstep the accommodative nature of the Malays, either by challenging their special position or their religion, it may then cause the Malays to shift to adopt a more aggressive stance. They noted that,

In general, the Malay community was respectful and civil towards foreigners as the main aim in life for them was to live peacefully. To ensure the continuity, the non-Malays must also accommodate the Malays' religion and traditions, and avoid from inciting the Malays' wrath, such as by questioning their status as the indigenous people of the land and mocking their religious affairs.²⁰⁸

However, such postulations lead us to another query. Who decides if Islam has indeed been mocked or blasphemed? In some modern Muslim states, blasphemy laws have been known to cause severe problems to non-Muslim minorities mostly due to it being abused by ill-intending Muslims.²⁰⁹ The enacting of blasphemy laws in Malaysia is very much a strong possibility because, as the agenda of Islamization is gradually pushed further in Malaysia, it will eventually lead to finding ways of further uplifting the sanctity of Islam, especially to avoid any forms of encroachments by non-Muslims. Subsequently, it is also very possible that such an enactment would then be used to empower *Shariah* courts to come against any non-Muslim who dares to question the government when it legitimizes marginalization and discrimination in the name of Islam.

In addition to these types of risks, there is also another inherent danger. When one religious community is in constant suspicion of other religious communities, it has the potential to develop to a point of causing harm towards their perceived antagonists. However, a local researcher is willing to offer his suggestion on how to address such a situation. Amri Baharuddin Shamsul, who teaches in the Institute for Ethnic Studies at a local university, concluded that despite the different aspirations among all the stakeholders in Malaysia, the key challenge is to avoid any form of extremes and strive to find the necessary balance. He notes in his conclusion:

²⁰⁷ Wan Husin and Abdullah, 'Social Relation', 2662-2663.

²⁰⁸ Wan Husin and Abdullah, 'Social Relation', 2664.

²⁰⁹ See Qaiser Julius, 'The Experience of Minorities under Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws' in David Thomas, and Greg Barton (Eds.), *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Routledge. Vol.27, No.1, 2016, 95-111.

However, the real challenge is to seek a middle ground or a compromise between an authority-defined nation, framed within the context of *Bumiputera* dominance (as articulated by a particular group within the Bumiputera, namely, UMNO) and the everyday ideas about nations-of-intent propagated by both the various *Bumiputera* and non-*Bumiputera* groups.²¹⁰

Although his suggestion for a solution appears pliable, there is an inherent difficulty with his offer. To begin with, it becomes a monumental challenge to ascertain who will get the privilege of defining the authentic middle ground. The Muslims who are used to the benefits of NEP and the non-Muslims who feel slighted because of the NEP may find themselves becoming engaged in another tug-of-war. Secondly, it becomes difficult to locate the middle ground when the government itself is not keen on finding it but is poised to maintain the swing to only one end of the spectrum, as a conscious way of legitimizing the ongoing marginalization.

3.2.3. Non-approval for non-Muslim religious structures.

Non-Muslims in Malaysia are often subjected to various types of difficulties when they need to renovate, expand or build new religious structures. In September 1998, during Mahathir's premiership, a document entitled *Guidelines for planning places of worship for non-Muslims* was circulated by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government. The guideline stipulated that henceforth, the building of any non-Muslim places of worship could only be approved after getting written approval from the respective State Islamic Councils.²¹¹ As a result, the MCCBCHST as the representative body of non-Muslim religious communities began receiving recurring reports of how non-Muslims were facing hindrances in obtaining permission to build temples and churches. In June 2007, the MCCBCHST published an open memoranda directed to the government in a booklet entitled, *Unity Threatened by Continuing Infringements of Religious Freedom*. One part of the memoranda highlighted the difficulty. It noted that:

²¹⁰ Amri Baharuddin Shamsul, 'Nations-of-Intent in Malaysia', in Stein Tonnesson and Han Antlov, *Forms of the Nation*, Curazon Publishers, 2007, 346.

²¹¹ *HARMONI*, MCCBCHST Publication, 2000, 6.

The building of non-Muslim places of worship is a source of great difficulty and unusual conditions are imposed ... churches have been relocated numerous times even after approvals are given.²¹²

Moreover, the memorandum also highlighted that height limits and structural restrictions on non-Muslim houses of worship were not practical. For instance, structures like the Sikh community's *Gurdwaras* (worship centres) were prone to be disapproved by the authorities simply because they were perceived as bearing similar resemblance to Muslim mosques. Consequently, recurrent difficulties caused Bishop Ng Moon Hing, as the chairman of the CFM to publish another protest note in 2012.²¹³ It was an open letter that was directed to the prime minister for his possible intervention. However, it needs to be noted that these types of open letters and memorandums are only last resort actions as the non-Muslim community leaders often come to this stage only because they have not been able to get the required assistance through the existing channels. When nothing happens, especially after politicians from the ruling party have sometimes assured the non-Muslims that their problems would be looked into, it adds to their feelings of frustration.²¹⁴

Consequently, instead of undergoing difficulties and obstacles related to getting the government approvals or finding sympathetic politicians to intervene, some non-Muslim groups have found their own way of dealing with the issue. For instance, in order to circumvent this recurring problem, new churches and temples have sometimes chosen to worship in commercial buildings such as shop-lots and factories. Furthermore, some have registered themselves as community centres to obtain permits for their building, with some other churches and temples operating privately from homes in residential areas. However, the government agencies concerned are somehow either unwilling or unable to legitimize their presence.

²¹² *Unity Threatened by Continuing Infringements of Religious Freedom*. A note of protest by the MCCBCHST, 15th July 2007, 7.

²¹³ 'CFM tells PM: Respect Law, Remove Anti-Christian Rules and Policies', *CCM News*, January –March 2012, 12-13.

²¹⁴ 'Deputy Home Minister to look into issues faced by minority religions', *UCA News*, 3rd July 1989, <http://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/1989/07/03/deputy-home-minister-to-look-into-issues-faced-by-minority-religions&post_id=38175>, Accessed 12th October 2014.

Why have the governmental authorities come to a position where they are unable to help even when they know of the existence of non-Muslim places of worship operating illegally within their jurisdiction? To a certain degree, it is possible to postulate that, the phenomenon of Islamization in Malaysia has since influenced Muslim officers in the government to quietly ignore the plight of non-Muslims as a way of non-legitimizing non-Muslim religious developments. Moreover, the phenomenon of Islamization becomes suspect because resistance arises not only from the government but also from local Muslim residents who reside near the area. In one incident, protests were made by Muslim NGOs even when the government authorities had already given sanction.²¹⁵ In August 2009, a group of Muslim protesters opposed the building of a Hindu temple in the vicinity of their residence and showed their seriousness by marching to the temple site while carrying a severed head of a cow.²¹⁶ As cows are sacred animals for Hindus, it was deemed as an insult to the entire Hindu community of the nation. Although reactions were voiced by concerned parties, the police took no action against the protesters.²¹⁷ However, 16 Hindus were arrested by the police for attempting a candle light vigil protest against the offensive incident.²¹⁸ When we query why the local Muslims resorted to such actions, it would not be wrong suggest that the effects of Islamization has since made Muslims overly cautious in allowing any improvements to non-Muslim religious developments. Moreover, Islamization has also radicalized some of the Muslims, where local Islamic terror cells have been known to target

²¹⁵ Pathma Subramanian, 'Fearing 'Christianisation', local NGO wants construction of new church to be stopped', Malaymail online, 2nd November 2014, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/fearing-christianisation-local-ngo-wants-construction-of-new-church-stopped>>, Accessed 16th November 2015.

²¹⁶ '*Mutual Acceptance and Respect for All Faiths*', Malaysian BAR Council Press Statement, 3rd September 2009.

²¹⁷ Lee Lam Thye, Cow head incident must not go unpunished, 4th September 2009, <<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2009/9/4/focus/4631427&sec=focus>>, Accessed 17th December 2012.

²¹⁸ Syed Jaymal Zahid, 'Police arrest Uthayakumar, 15 others in aborted candle light vigil', 6th September 2009, <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/litee/malaysia/article/Police-arrest-Uthayakumar-15-others-in-aborted-candlelight-vigil/>>, Accessed 19th December 2012.

existing non-Muslim religious structures.²¹⁹ Explaining how non-Muslims tend to understand their difficult experiences in the light of increasing Islamization, Chandra Muzaffar notes that ‘the general feeling among non-Muslim groups is that greater restrictions are being imposed upon the practice of their religions ... is because of the state’s deep commitment to Islam and the prevailing Islamic atmosphere’.²²⁰

Therefore, evidence appears to suggest that the marginalization of the non-Muslims in Malaysia, especially when it is related to the issue of building new religious structures, it is directly related to the phenomenon of Islamization.

3.2.4. Demolitions.

Christians as non-Muslims in Malaysia are also forced to experience marginalization when governmental authorities have sometimes demolished non-Muslim religious structures that were already built. Findings indicate that authorities mostly demolished these places of worship on grounds that either they were built illegally or because they were occupying government land. However, these reasons are not always the norm. In 2005, an *Orang Asli* chapel in the state of Johor was demolished by state government authorities even though they had built the chapel in 2003 after receiving the assurance from the Director General of the *Orang Asli* Affairs Department.²²¹ Eventually, the *Orang Asli* were vindicated by the High Court which ruled that the local authority was wrong to undertake the demolition and asked it to pay for damages. In another case in the state of Melaka, the *Orang Asli* had to get a court order to stop local authorities from demolishing their chapel.²²² Moreover, a half built *Orang Asli* chapel in Kelantan was issued a stop work order by the JHEOA. This was despite the fact that it was being built on customary native land that belonged to the 500 *Orang Asli*

²¹⁹ Ashvin Kumar, ‘Batu Caves temple attack dashed’, 31st August 2016, <<http://www.thesundaily.my/news/1956450>>, Accessed 13th September 2016.

²²⁰ Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence*, 88.

²²¹ V. Anbalagan, ‘Johor government will compensate orang asli community’, 7th August 2012, <<http://www.nst.com.my/latest/johor-govt-will-compensate-orang-asli-community-1.121892#>>, Accessed 12th November 2013.

²²² ‘Court halts Malacca Orang Asli chapel demolition’, 26th November 2011, <<https://m.malaysiakini.com/news/182494>>, Accessed 9th January 2012.

Christians of the village.²²³ Learning from previous experiences, the *Orang Asli* Christians have since learnt to take their case to the courts and sometimes approach sympathetic NGO's and civil society groups for support.²²⁴

3.2.5. Muslims tolerating non-Muslims.

Research suggests that hindrances to building non-Muslim religious structures are continuing because the government does not view them as serious problems at all. It is highly possible that the government actually feels that non-Muslims need to be grateful for the tolerance accorded to them thus far by the government. For example, Chandra Muzaffar who studied Islamization in Malaysia, describes the marginalization experienced by the non-Muslims as being only a minor inconvenience and thinks that although certain limitations have been placed upon non-Muslims, the non-Muslims have mostly been allowed to practice their faith freely.²²⁵ According to him, although Islamization had become more pronounced, the non-Muslims were actually free to choose other available alternatives and to adjust accordingly. Moreover, another local academic, Ibrahim Abu Bakar, who researched on religious tolerance in Malaysia tends to echo a similar stance. He sets out specific reasons as to why non-Muslim communities in Malaysia are faring comparatively well in Malaysia. He begins by stating that non-Muslims in Malaysia are enjoying relative freedom because Islam itself calls upon its adherents to be tolerant of others.²²⁶ Moreover, he believes that the federal constitution is able to protect all its citizens' rights regardless of their religious affiliations.²²⁷ Furthermore, he notes that the Malaysian legal system has thus far been able to keep order

²²³ 'Jungle church faces demolition', Debra Chong, 17th September 2010, <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/jungle-church-in-kelantan-faces-demolition/>>, Accessed 13th December 2013.

²²⁴ 'Stop Bullying the Orang Asli Community', CCM Youth Press Release, 22nd September 2010.

²²⁵ Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence*, 88.

²²⁶ Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 'The Religious Tolerance in Malaysia: An Exposition', in *Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences*, Vol.7, No.1, 2013, 90-92.

²²⁷ Bakar, 'The Religious Tolerance', 92-93.

and enforce tolerance.²²⁸ Moreover, the government has even taken steps to be inclusive by declaring non-Muslim festivals as public holidays, funding some of the non-Muslim religious activities and taking efforts to reject religious extremism. Lastly, he credits Prime Ministers' inclusive slogans, like Badawi's *Islam Hadhari* and Najib's *1 Malaysia* as actually being showpieces for Islamic tolerance.²²⁹ Furthermore, when local academics like Roslan Mohammad Nor write about tolerance in Malaysia especially in relation to the *Allah* controversy, he seems to think that Christians as non-Muslims actually need to be grateful because the government has already given them the privilege to practice their religion freely.²³⁰ He thinks that the insistence of Christians on usage of the word *Allah* would only lead to disharmony and therefore need to submit to the judiciary which has already ruled that the word *Allah* is only for the use of Muslims. Moreover, he also goes on to advise Muslims in Malaysia who thought that the word *Allah* could also be used by non-Muslims to reconsider their stand.

Therefore, it is possible that the aspects that both these academics have listed may actually be a reflection that helps us to understand the majority view of Malaysian Muslims, including those in authority. Nevertheless, considering both their listings, it must be agreed that non-Muslims in Malaysia are comparatively faring better than certain other Muslim majority nations where stricter interpretations of Islamic law directly disfranchise women and out-rightly persecute religious minorities. However, one key reason why the government may be allowing a limited freedom of religion for non-Muslims is because Prime Ministers as national leaders often have the need to depict Malaysia as a model Islamic nation and an example for moderation in the international arena,²³¹ often becoming successful in their quest

²²⁸ Bakar, 'The Religious Tolerance', 93-94.

²²⁹ Bakar, 'The Religious Tolerance', 95.

²³⁰ Mohammad Roslan Mohammad Nor, 'Religious Tolerance in Malaysia: An Overview', in *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research*, Vol. 9, No.1, 2011, 26.

²³¹ 'Malaysia a model Muslim Nation', The Star Online, 21st January 2016, <<http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/01/21/malaysia-a-model-muslim-nation/>>, Accessed 15th July 2016.

for such portrayal.²³² The portrayal is usually done by showcasing the freedom of religion provision in the Federal Constitution, the presence of non-Muslim religious structures and also by pointing to the government sponsored open house events during non-Muslim religious festivals.

However, one related query eventually arises within the scope of the argument. If Malaysia was indeed a fully moderate and tolerant nation, why are non-Muslims still complaining? To answer the question, it would be useful to compare the Malaysian situation with the findings of sociologist Jürgen Habermas. Habermas conducted a study on aspects of intolerance and discrimination while describing the difference between two different types of tolerance.²³³ Through his research, he points to the first type of tolerance that originates when one community tolerates another whom they consider to be inferior. This stance often takes place because they have made a judgment call to minimize the convictions of those who are different than them. However, this type of tolerance can be insulting because it is a patronizing form of benevolence over the other.²³⁴ On the contrary, there is a second form of tolerance, which emerges through ‘mutual perspective taking’ that eventually allows one community to accept the differences of the other.²³⁵ Therefore, this would be the ideal form of tolerance that would reflect a desire to ensure equality and inclusion of everyone within the community. Consequently, Habermas thinks that it is the latter form of tolerance that should become the preferred mode of engagement in society, especially within a multi-cultural environment.

Accordingly, when we juxtapose his findings with the Malaysian context, how can we then understand the limited freedom accorded to non-Muslims by the Muslim majority government in terms of the portrayed tolerance? Based on the ongoing difficult experiences of the non-Muslims, it is possible to suggest that most non-Muslims in Malaysia have a

²³² Syed Umar Ariff, ‘Malaysia a leading example in Muslim world: Tunisian leader’, <<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2017/07/256556/malaysia-leading-example-muslim-world-tunisian-leader>>, Accessed 27th November 2017.

²³³ Jürgen Habermas, ‘Intolerance and discrimination’, in *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, Vol.1, No.1, 2003, 5.

²³⁴ Habermas, ‘Intolerance and discrimination’, 5.

²³⁵ Habermas, ‘Intolerance and discrimination’, 6.

perception that the government is practicing the patronizing form of tolerance as opposed to the inclusive type of tolerance. The difficulties that they have undergone have convinced the non-Muslims that they are not being tolerated by virtue of them being equals, as their protest voices and voicing of grievances seem to betray their feeling of merely being accommodated, albeit as inferiors by their Muslim majority counterparts. Therefore, it is possible to think that it is this condescending approach that Roslan Mohammad Nor and Ibrahim Abu Bakar were trying to imply through their postulations of tolerance when they accuse non-Muslims of not being appreciative of the existing tolerance in Malaysia.

In addition, there could also be theological reasons to explain the lofty stance of the Muslim government which tolerates the non-Muslims citizens in a condescending way. It is safe to suggest that Islam, as with Christianity, has the tendency to promote exclusivism which becomes apparent because both religions subscribe to a faith system which believes that only those who have the right faith in the right god would eventually be privileged with a blessed afterlife. Therefore, those who confess a different faith can co-exist with them externally but could never be considered as their equals in their internal psyche. Influential Islamic thinkers have sometimes called for Muslims to make a clear distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially when they co-exist within a Muslim majority nation.²³⁶

Consequently, it becomes possible to suggest that Islamization in Malaysia has since prejudiced the mind of the Muslim government that their superior faith mandates superior positioning of Muslims in society. Hence, the understanding is not, we are different yet we are equals. It is now, we are different and therefore we are not equals, an outcome of the aspect of polarization that was discussed earlier in this study. Moreover, it is also possible that Christians themselves may be harbouring the same types of lofty sentiments but are unable to project such superior tendencies due to their minority status and limited influence within the Muslim majority society.

²³⁶ Syed Abul A'la Maududi, *Rights of Non-Muslims in an Islamic State* (7th Edition), Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1982.

3.2.6. The positioning of *Shariah* Law above Civil Law.

It would be safe to propose that the existence of a hybrid legal system presents several types of difficulty for non-Muslims in Malaysia, amplifying their feelings of being marginalized. This is primarily because Islamization in Malaysia has empowered the *Shariah* law to position itself above the jurisdiction of civil law. This happens when cases with overlapping jurisdictions are directed to *Shariah* courts for remedy by the civil court judges, reinforcing the reality that the civil courts are now limited in their powers and non-Muslims who depend on them for justice must now be willing submit to the *Shariah* court's powers. In Malaysia, *Shariah* Law became positioned above Civil Law when the civil courts' powers were curtailed in 1988, where a revision of the Federal Constitution, known as amendment 121 (1.A) was passed in parliament, It stated that all the civil courts would henceforth have no jurisdiction over any aspects that fell within the purview of the *Shariah* courts. At that point of time, most Malaysians were led to believe that this change was something that would not unduly affect the non-Muslims as *Shariah* laws and *Shariah* courts only existed to satisfy Muslims' legal needs. However, conflicts have since risen especially when the query of what actually falls within the ambit of the *Shariah* law becomes a contentious issue.

3.2.6.1 Conversion Issues.

The clash between Civil Law and *Shariah* law has become a serious national concern, especially in cases of supposed conversions to Islam. The issue becomes exacerbated when Islamic authorities choose to retain dead bodies of loved ones at the hospital and refuse to release them to the families.²³⁷ The shocked family then becomes further exasperated when the High Court refuses to grant an injunction to the family to stop the Islamic Department from taking possession of the body. These type of situations happen because the civil courts out-rightly declare that Islamic affairs are not under its jurisdiction. For example, in 2010 a public controversy erupted when Maniam Moorthy, a national hero who took part in the first Malaysian expedition to Mount Everest died in a government hospital. His Hindu wife was stunned when Islamic authorities came to take his body away for Muslim burial. She then

²³⁷ 'Malaysian Islamic court declares dead man Muslim amid Hindu family's objections', 7th July 2008, <<http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/07/07/asia/AS-Malaysia-Conversion-Dispute.php>>, Accessed 25th April 2012.

challenged the legality of his supposed conversion in the civil court but the case was passed on to the *Shariah* court instead. Subsequently, Moorthy was buried as a Muslim in an Islamic cemetery after the *Shariah* Court ruled that they had found sufficient evidence of his conversion before his death. His wife contested that she had not been told by her husband about the conversion and pursued a civil court case to challenge the verdict of the *Shariah* court. The case eventually reached the Appeals Court which ruled that the civil courts had no jurisdiction on the matter.²³⁸

However, the question of why the Islamic authorities did not attempt to inform the family concerned about the conversion prior to the person's death is also a related question worth asking, as it could have avoided the many problems that arose after their death. Two possible reasons could be offered. Firstly, the converts to Islam may have a tendency to feel that their conversion would bring disappointment to their family and therefore keeping it a secret would be a better option. Secondly, it is also possible that the Islamic authorities allowed the conversions to be kept a secret, in order to keep the family from influencing them to return to their original faith. Consequently, it is possible that these factors cause the non-Muslims to conclude that the governmental authorities have not been honest, especially when Muslim authorities are quick to come after their loved one's bodies after their death. When grieving non-Muslim families and their relatives view themselves as being dealt with unfairly, it confirms their suspicion that the Islamic government is using *Shariah* law to marginalize them and their legitimate concerns. When such incidents happen, the families tend to feel disenfranchised that they do not have legal muscle to challenge the *Shariah* Courts, which leads them to feel slighted and marginalized by the very government that is supposed to protect their interests.

Furthermore, the *Shariah* courts have also become a hindrance for Muslims who decide to become non-Muslims. When Muslims who decide to change their faith make applications to the National Registration Department (NRD) to change their religious status, the NRD immediately refers the matter to the Islamic authorities. The *Shariah* courts then deal with them as apostates who need to be undergo rehabilitation. These types of situation

²³⁸ 'Civil court cannot decide on Moorthy's religious status', 20th August 2010, <<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?sec=nation&file=/2010/8/20/nation/20100820131534>>, Accessed 20th April 2012.

arise because Muslims often think of their religious convictions as part of their primordial relationship with Allah. Commenting on a particular case, a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM) stated that the conversion of Muslims who decide to leave Islam was tantamount to ‘violation of a contract’ between *Allah* and the Muslim. He wrote:

All Muslims, either by birth or by conversion, must be made to realize that they have actually entered into a primordial covenant with god in the supernatural realm long before they were born to this world.²³⁹

However, the problem becomes compounded when not all Muslims view their religious status as a contract with their erstwhile god. In some cases, Muslims have decided to opt out of Islam because they had never been party to their own conversions in the first place. For instance, when Banggarma Subramaniam claimed that she was unknowingly converted to Islam at the age of seven, the authorities claimed that her conversion was done with the permission of her father at the Islamic welfare home where she was living at that time. Nevertheless, Banggarma maintained that she was not amenable to her father’s decision and had lived according to Hindu ways and therefore needed to change her religious status in her identity card. The NRD however, refused to process her application until she obtained clearance from the *Shariah* courts. The Penang Islamic Council stated that she would have to undergo the mandatory counseling classes first before giving her their consent.²⁴⁰

Consequently, due to recurring cases, the MCCBCHST as the representative body of non-Muslims sent two memorandums to the government, asking it to address the difficulties that arose from what it perceived as forcible actions of the *Shariah* courts. In 2005, a 22 page memorandum entitled *Respect the Right to Profess and Practise One’s Religion* was put forth.²⁴¹ Two of its three segments were titled, ‘salient issues affecting non-Muslims’ and ‘conflicts and problems arising from state legislation on Islamic law’. When the government

²³⁹ Wan Azhar Wan Ahmad, ‘Some Reflections on Lina Joy: Let *Shariah* court deal with the Issue’, Institute Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (Institute for Islamic Understanding), 19th June 2007, <http://www.ikim.gov.my/v5/index.php?lg=2&opt=com_article&grp=2&sec=&key=1283&cmd=resetall>, Accessed 14th May 2012.

²⁴⁰ *Banggarma should have complete freedom to choose her own religion*. MCCBCHST Media Statement, 25th November 2009.

²⁴¹ *Respect the Right to Profess and Practise One’s Religion*. MCCBCHST Media Statement, 20th October 2005.

did not respond to them, in 2007, another 10 page memorandum which was titled, *Unity Threatened by Continuing Infringements of Religious Freedom* was published where several cases were highlighted.²⁴² Page six of the document was subtitled, ‘Islamization of the government’, which openly accused government servants of allowing their personal religious sentiments to interfere in their administration. However, since the government did not respond to the memorandums that were submitted by the MCCBCHST, it is unclear if any government agency has been tasked with looking at the documents. Then, non-responses by the government inadvertently send a signal to the non-Muslims that their grievances are not being heeded because of the government is more interested in maintaining preferential policies towards Islam and Muslims, albeit through its control of the *Shariah* courts. However, we will need to inspect the issue in a deeper way by asking, can a person’s right to choose their own religion be taken away from them, especially by the government?

3.2.6.2 Freedom of religion.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights indicates that the ability to choose one’s own religion must be recognized as a fundamental human right.²⁴³ Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that the charter was not ratified by most Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia and Iran who were critical of the document, claiming that it was laden with Judeo-Christian influences and also as not in compatibility with *Shariah* requirements.²⁴⁴ Subsequently, Muslim countries under the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) of which Malaysia is part of, came up with their own, *Cairo Declaration on Human Rights*. Article 10 of the Cairo Declaration states that, ‘Islam is a religion of unspoiled (*sic*) nature. It is prohibited to exercise any form of compulsion on man ... in order to convert him into another

²⁴² *Unity Threatened by Continuing Infringements of Religious Freedom*. MCCBCHST Media statement, 15th June 2007.

²⁴³ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights came as a charter that was framed by the United Nations in 1948 as Resolution 218.A, both as a way to establish a working standard for individual freedom and also to avoid the recurrence of the two world wars. Malaysia was not part of the signatories of this charter as Malaysia only achieved nationhood through its independence in 1957.

²⁴⁴ Abiad Nisrine, ‘*Sharia, Muslim states and international human rights treaty obligations: a comparative study*’, in *British Institute of International and Comparative Law*, 2008, 60-65.

religion'. However, difficulties emerge when the Cairo Declaration ends with Article 24 and 25 which states that all the previously listed Articles will be subjected to the interpretation of *Shariah* principles.²⁴⁵

Shariah qualified human rights tend to display one focal problem, whose version of *Shariah* will be applied in the interpretation? In the Malaysian context, Sheikh Showkat Hussein who taught at the International Islamic University in Malaysia wrote a research article on Human Rights from an Islamic perspective. He appears to suggest that based on the Quranic verse which calls for no compulsion in religion,²⁴⁶ Islam actually allows its believers to change their convictions. He believes that 'freedom of faith not only extends to the non-Muslims, but also to various sects of Muslims themselves'.²⁴⁷ He also writes that his convictions are based on Islamic tradition, especially during the time of Prophet Muhammad, who according to Showkat, upheld a person's personal choice of faith.

However, when we study the Malaysian context, apostasy does appear remotely possible but becomes difficult when it comes with a proviso that such changes will need to be verified by the *Shariah* courts first. For instance, based on research findings of those who analyzed apostasy related cases in Malaysia, there is strong evidence that it is the *Shariah* courts in Malaysia that have the final say on the matter.²⁴⁸ Their findings based on the Malaysian context also shows that:

'Apostasy laws ... violate religious freedom in so far as they restrict and even punish Muslims who attempt to renounce their religion by requiring them to repent by detaining them for the purpose of rehabilitation and education'.²⁴⁹

Therefore, when these realities become known to non-Muslims in Malaysia, they may be able to create feelings of degradation. For instance, when they hear of former Muslims being

²⁴⁵ The Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, < <http://www.oic-oci.org/english/article/human.htm>>, Accessed 17th May 2014.

²⁴⁶ Surah Al Baqara, Verse 256.

²⁴⁷ Sheikh Showkat Hussein, *Islam and Human Rights*, Kuala Lumpur: Budaya Ilmu, 1991, 26.

²⁴⁸ Hassan Saeed, 'Apostasy Laws in Malaysia: Jurisdiction and Constitutionality', in Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed (Eds.), *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, 152.

²⁴⁹ Saeed, 'Apostasy Laws', 156.

castigated and penalized for embracing a non-Muslim religion, it forces them ask the question, why are Muslim authorities unable to accept non-Muslim religions as legitimate expressions of faith? Consequently, it is possible to suggest that, when non-Muslims see the Malaysian government as not accepting other religions as being equivalent with Islam, it makes them further convinced that a religion based marginalization has become an unavoidable reality in Malaysia which they will have to endure.

In addition, it would be important to note that although the Malaysian constitution does not condone or approve any forms of marginalization, the reality of the situation on the ground proves otherwise. For example, when researchers study religious minorities under Islamic rule, they seem to have found that although modern-day Muslim governments do not condone marginalization of the minorities through their constitutional provisions, the reality on the ground presents a different scenario. Abdullahi A. An-Naim who teaches at Emory University studied the position of religious minorities under Islamic law, especially in regards to their scope of influence within different socio-cultural contexts. He observed the practices of Muslim nations and discovered that although these modern Muslim nations have indicated equality in their Constitutions, the reality of the situation on the ground were often contrary to constitutional provisions. He then suggests that it was actually the implementation of *Shariah* law that was causing the problem. He states that, ‘most of these Constitutions also authorize the application of *Shariah* laws. As such these constitutions also sanction discrimination against religious minorities’.²⁵⁰

In his attempt to explain the disconnect, he postulates that discriminatory situations have since come about largely because *Shariah* laws were born out of cultural norms that were relative to the life of Prophet Muhammad. He therefore argues that just as the early Islamic jurists had the privilege to define the *Shariah*, in ways that were relative to their own cultural contexts, modern Muslims must also be given the privilege to interpret *Shariah* in tandem with modern day political and social realities, as only then it would lead to a modern

²⁵⁰ Abdullahi A. An-Naim, ‘Religious Minorities under Islamic Law and the Limits of Cultural Relativism’, in *Human Rights Quarterly*, No.9, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, 1.

Shariah that would be compatible with the current international standards of human rights.

²⁵¹ He ends his research by saying that:

Since the Muslims cannot, and should not be allowed to, justify discrimination against and persecution of non-Muslims on the basis of Islamic cultural norms, the Muslims themselves must seek ways of reconciling *Shariah* with fundamental human rights.²⁵²

Consequently, a critical examination of his work helps us to understand that the existence and practice of certain forms of *Shariah*, may not be entirely suitable to the context of modern day ethical standards.

3.2.6.3 Quest for a Malaysian *Shariah*.

Since Islamic scholars like Abdullahi A. An-Naim strongly feel that a tweaked version of the *Shariah* would actually be more compatible with current societal norms, which forms of *Shariah* would then be suitable to modern Malaysia would be a relevant inquiry. However, it is possible to suggest that most Muslims in Malaysia may not be willing to modify anything within the existing *Shariah* laws in Malaysia, as they may consider such attempts as erroneous efforts to duplicate human rights and civil laws which to them are modern, albeit western influence. Consequently, these Muslims may have a compelling need to go back to *Shariah* as stipulated by their prophet Muhammad, as a way of ensuring the sanctity of the prescribed Islamic way of life. Moreover some Islamic scholars like Professor Noel Coulson, who taught at the University of London, thinks that Muslims actually need not modify the *Shariah* as it is self-sufficient as it is. He argues that the challenge to reconcile modern societal realities with an ancient code of law like *Shariah* should not be viewed as being problematic. In his opinion, it is only the finding out the definition of legal demarcations that presents the challenge for the *Shariah* modernists. He writes:

The needs and aspirations of society cannot be, the exclusive determinant of the law, they can legitimately operate within the bounds ... established by the divine command and it is precisely the determination of this limit which is the unfinished task of legal modernism.²⁵³

²⁵¹ An-Naim, 'Religious Minorities', 10-11.

²⁵² An-Naim, 'Religious Minorities', 18.

²⁵³ Noel J. Coulson, *A History of Islamic Law*, Aldline-Transaction, 2011, 6.

In other words, he believes that the main task for the current proponents of the *Shariah* jurists is primarily a challenge of how to infuse the core principles of *Shariah* into modern realities rather than struggling to find ways of infusing modern realities into *Shariah*.

While such a position appears to offer a fresh way of approaching the dilemma of how to reconcile a dated law system that existed within a specific cultural context with an increasingly global, modern society needs, the actual task itself may not be easily accomplished. Furthermore, it is also possible to think that his arguments cause other complications. For example, who will determine the definition of the core principles of the *Shariah* framework in Malaysia, especially to determine the status and position of a *Shariah* defined *Dhimmi* (non-Muslims living within an Islamic realm) in a modern context like Malaysia? Since *Ijma* (consensus of scholars) is one of the cardinal prerequisites for the interpretation of Islamic law,²⁵⁴ will the status of *Dhimmi*s be allowed to be interpreted differently by local Islamist hardliners? Who will then finally validate any forms of newer interpretations? Would international Islamic scholars be sympathetic to the new nuances of *Shariah* law which the modern Malaysian Islamic jurists may decide to propose (based on the realities of living in a multi-cultural environment) or would they decide purely based on the times and practices of Prophet Muhammad? These are some of the types of challenges that become serious fundamental issues that would jeopardize any attempts to modernize the core values that are embedded within the traditional scope of *Shariah*. Consequently, any forms of changes that would appear different than the traditionally accepted *Shariah* are bound to be labelled as illegitimate by convention guided Islamic jurists who favour a more direct interpretation of *Shariah*, especially based on Islamic history antecedents.

However, research evidence reveals that there have been attempts to modernize the outworking of the *Shariah* legal system in Malaysia. Unfortunately, there is a very strong possibility that it seems to be an outward alteration rather than an effort to engage with its core. Based on a broad study of the Malaysian *Shariah* courts, Professor Michael Peletz claims that local *Shariah* judiciary is already incorporating certain modernization aspects to its system. As an anthropologist at Emory University, he is inclined to think that the

²⁵⁴ For a succinct reading on the meaning of *Ijma*, see: Imran Ahsan Khan Nyazee, 'Outlines of Islamic Jurisprudence', Pakistan Advanced Legal Studies Institute, 2010, 177-180.

Malaysian *Shariah* is already evolving in order to adapt to global challenges.²⁵⁵ His research was titled, *Malaysian Syariah Judiciary as Global Assemblage: Islamization, Corporatization, and other Transformations in Context*. Based on his attendance in Malaysian *Shariah* courts and his discussions with key officers from the local Islamic legal fraternity, he made his observations about the changing face of the Malaysian *Shariah*. He gives several reasons as to why the Malaysian *Shariah* can be thought of as embracing modernity. Firstly, he notes that *Shariah* lawyers and judges have borrowed useful systems and administrative structures from external sources. For example, they have since placed importance on written complaints as opposed to the oral renditions that were the norm in Islamic traditions. Furthermore, case file systems, written judgments and maintaining of Islamic law journals are seen as attempts to emulate the Malaysian civil law framework that came from the British common law model.²⁵⁶ Moreover, he observed that the Malaysian *Shariah* has since adopted corporate dress codes similar to western society styles²⁵⁷ and have embraced modern technology by providing electronic solutions such as *e-Shariah* portals.²⁵⁸ In addition, some of its key management principles and accounting systems have been borrowed from Japan.²⁵⁹

However, these types of modernization initiatives and improvements in standards of practice need to be critically reviewed for what they actually represent. It is possible to propose that these changes are taking place merely as unavoidable upgrades that are much needed to function in a modernized environment. As an anthropologist, Peletz has very ably described the external administrative mechanisms that are needed in order to adapt and survive in a globalized environment. However, the fact that the intrinsic core values of *Shariah* have remained un-addressed could be one strong reason as to why Peletz has not been able to observe or describe any changes in the core elements that define the theologically

²⁵⁵ Michael G. Peletz, 'Malaysian Syariah Judiciary as Global Assemblage: Islamization, Corporatization, and other Transformations in Context,' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 55. No. 03, July 2013.

²⁵⁶ Peletz, 'Malaysian Syariah', 610-611.

²⁵⁷ Peletz, 'Malaysian Syariah', 613.

²⁵⁸ Peletz, 'Malaysian Syariah', 615-616.

²⁵⁹ Peletz, 'Malaysian Syariah', 617-618.

derived legalisms that constitute the actual nucleus of the *Shariah* framework. Hence, it is possible to contend that the Malaysian *Shariah* is still very much fixated on its Arabic roots and continues to be defined by what prophet Muhammad envisaged as the code of life within the societal framework within the Arabian Peninsula. Consequently, it would not be wrong to suggest that the current scenario of the Malaysian *Shariah* is that it neither sees the need, nor is it willing to interpret the *Shariah* in the manner that people like Abdullahi proposed, that it forces itself to evolve, as a way of embracing multi-cultural values of modern society.

Furthermore, accusations are put forward that the formation and implementation of Islamic law in Malaysia are actually attempts by the state to claim monopoly on the interpretation of Islamic law. This causes the issue to become further compounded. The research done by Tamir Moustaffa, who functions as a Professor of International Studies at Simon Francis University and holds visiting fellowships in Princeton University and the Harvard Law School, validates this position. Having conducted extensive research on the dual legal systems in Egypt and in Malaysia, his research findings claim that the Malaysian *Shariah* is not as authentic or as accurate as it needs to be, as actually prescribed by Islamic law. Tamir begins his proposition by defining and elaborating on *fiqh* (the foundational philosophy behind Islamic law) as the basic requirement for Islamic legal framework and then moves on to focus on the motives and methods of the implementation of *Shariah* on Malaysia. Based on his findings, he convincingly argues that the need to placard *Shariah* law is actually a sly move by the UMNO-led government to present itself as a credible Islamic entity.²⁶⁰ He then strongly contends that such motivations have since caused the Malaysian government to subvert the core epistemological principles of *fiqh* that are absolutely necessary ingredients within the Islamic legal framework.

In order to explain his findings, he uses the term ‘Anglo-Muslim’ to describe the Malaysian Islamic law system, as a way of demonstrate it as a blend of two legal traditions. He notes that,

The law was ‘Anglo’ in the sense that the concepts, categories, and modes of analysis followed English common law, and it was ‘Muslim’ in the sense that it contained

²⁶⁰ Tamir Moustaffa, ‘Judging in God’s Name: State, Power, Secularism and The Politics of Islamic Law’, in *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2014, 16.

fragments of Islamic jurisprudence that were applied to Muslim subjects. As such, Anglo-Muslim law was an entirely different creature from classical Islamic law.²⁶¹

To validate his discovery, he presents his evidence based on some of the judgements and rulings made by the Malaysian *Shariah* court judges. He found that although passages from the Quran or the Hadith were being cited in the courts to support the decisions of the judges, it did not mean that the *usul-al-fiqh* methods of legal analysis in the interpretation of Islamic law were being adhered to.²⁶² To confirm his argument, he was able to reveal that those who formulated the *Shariah* law procedures had no formal education in Islamic law and most of what was scripted as Islamic law measures were copied from English Common Law procedures. He states that this fact was openly admitted by the key persons involved in the framing of the procedures as they actually thought that it was the only right thing to do.²⁶³ Subsequently, he comes to the conclusion that by monopolizing interpretation, codifying select fragments of *fiqh* and deploying them through state institutions, Malaysian *Shariah* courts are only ‘judging in God’s name’.²⁶⁴

If we consider his findings to be accurate, his discoveries warrant further investigation. If Islamic law in Malaysia is not a genuine Islamic legal apparatus, should Islamic citizens be submitting to a law mechanism which has since been faulted as being pseudo-Islamic. Moreover, is it fair for such legal prescriptions to be forcefully imposed on non-Muslims as well? When we attempt to answer these questions, it is possible to come to a conclusion that Malaysian citizens may not actually have a choice. Moreover, it is very likely that Tamir’s findings will have minimal or no bearing on the Malaysian *Shariah* courts at all. The years of psychological conditioning, that the existing interpretive mechanisms are sufficient and the convincing portrayal of *Shariah* as a modern professional entity (as Peletz has claimed) become the needed visible signals to successfully persuade the general public that all is well within the Malaysian *Shariah*.

²⁶¹ Moustaffa, ‘Judging in God’s Name’, 157.

²⁶² Moustaffa, ‘Judging in God’s Name’, 158.

²⁶³ Moustaffa, ‘Judging in God’s Name’, 165.

²⁶⁴ Moustaffa, ‘Judging in God’s Name’, 167.

Consequently, considerations of what originally constitutes Islamic law have become serious reasons as to why some have proposed Islamic regulations to be considered as a form of guidance for society rather than be used for governance of state law mechanisms. For instance, when Abdul Aziz Sachedina who is a professor and Chair for Islamic Studies at George Mason University writes on the inherent challenges that surface when attempts are made to bring Islam into the public square of modern reality, he believes that Islamic tenets should preferably be used for guidance rather than for governance.²⁶⁵ He aptly finds that using Islam as a tool for governance becomes difficult simply because the fundamental problem of Muslim political identity that is based on religious exclusivism runs contrary to the ‘emerging global spirit of democratization through acknowledgement of religious pluralism’.²⁶⁶ For him, guidance would mean suitable adaptations are allowed to take place especially when Islamic core values remain as its guiding posts. This is contrary to governance, which entails strict moral and legal codes being imposed with efforts taken by the state to see it being forcibly enforced. Based on his findings, it is possible for his considerations to be taken as valuable input on how religious law should be observed and practiced in Malaysia, that *Shariah* law is best used as a moral and spiritual guideline rather than be used to legitimize authoritarian governance.

However, another question also arises. If *Shariah* in Malaysia has been used as a tool for control, as Tamir Moustaffa has accused, would the government be willing to give up their devices? It would not be wrong to suggest that any forms of change will actually be dependent on the Muslims themselves, as they will be the ones who will need to speak up and let those in power know that they desire Islam as a way of guidance. It is likely that they may have to express their difficulty in accepting commands from those who insist on interpreting Islamic law as governance which qualifies them to function as domineering moral guardians.²⁶⁷ Ahmad Fauzi, a local Muslim academic who writes about the challenges

²⁶⁵ Abdul Aziz Sachedina, ‘The Role of Islam in the Public Square: Guidance or Governance’, in *ISIM Papers* 5, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006.

²⁶⁶ Sachedina, ‘The Role of Islam’, 7.

²⁶⁷ Aida Lim, ‘Married couple sues JAWI after traumatic khalwat raid’, *Malaymail Online*, 17th February, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/married-couple-sues-jawi-after-traumatic-khalwat-raid>>, Accessed 1st March 2017.

facing *Shariah* law in Malaysia, has already noted their imperious dealings with the public. He has noted the growing public perception which exists among non-Muslims and an increasing number of Muslims themselves, that the whole Islamic bureaucratic and judicial structures forego compassion and social propriety in dealings with the public.²⁶⁸ Therefore, it can be safely concluded that in a multi-cultural and multi-religious context such as Malaysia, the proposal of *Shariah* as a form of guidance would be better suited to promote inter-religious harmony, as opposed to governance that tends to become rigid and intimidating, especially in the way it has marginalized the non-Muslims.

This section has been able to demonstrate that non-Muslims in Malaysia have sometimes been forced to undergo situations of being marginalized. They have been experiencing socio-political marginalization through certain lacks in upward mobility opportunities, undergoing difficulties pertaining their religious structures and are legally incapacitated due to *Shariah* law taking precedence over Civil law. The following section will seek to determine who permitted such predicaments to become the norm for non-Muslims in Malaysia.

3.3. Islamization and the Malay political party UMNO.

Up until the Barisan Nasional coalition government's fall from power in the 9th of May 2018 General Elections, the political party UMNO functioned as the key controller of the ruling coalition. The position of the Malay political party UMNO as a facilitator of Islamization in Malaysia has been recognized by Greg Barton, who points to UMNO's need to placard its own Islamic credential as a prominent factor in the outworking of Islamization in Malaysia.²⁶⁹ Moreover, Hussin Mutalib has already described UMNO as a political party which accentuates ethnic dimensions of Islamization in Malaysia by correctly suggesting that such a situation has risen due to its need to champion Malay rights and privileges.²⁷⁰ Chandra

²⁶⁸ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 'The implementation of Islamic law in contemporary Malaysia: Prospects and Problems', in *RSIS Working Paper: No. 169*, Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2009, 29.

²⁶⁹ Greg Barton, 'Islam, Society, Politics and Change in Malaysia', in Jason F. Isaacson and Colin Rubenstein (Eds.), in *Islam in Asia: Changing Political Realities*, New Jersey: Transaction, 2002, 115.

²⁷⁰ Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity*,

Muzaffar has attempted to describe the different means used by UMNO to ensure its political survival.²⁷¹ Kikue Hamayotsu's research entitled, *Demobilizing Islam: Institutionalized Religion and the Politics of Co-optation in Malaysia*, describes how UMNO made Islam become institutionalised in Malaysia.²⁷² John Funston, who researched the Malay political scene in Malaysia, thinks that, 'UMNO drama is about power. The slogans and rallying calls for Malay unity and the survival of the Malays are mostly convenient instruments in the pursuit of that power'.²⁷³

However, it needs to be stated here that it would be erroneous to generalise that all the Malays in Malaysia are supportive of UMNO and that all non-Muslims are against UMNO. For example there is one main Malay party that challenges UMNO's Islamic overtures, which is the Islamic political party PAS. It has sometimes openly challenged the type of Islamization that UMNO Prime Ministers have sought to establish in the nation. For instance, when Prime Minister Badawi promulgated *Islam Hadhari* as a model for Islamic development, PAS refuted the idea and called it un-Islamic.²⁷⁴ PAS usually promotes its own version of what it considers to be genuine Islamization in Malaysia. Moreover, there are other Malay-majority parties like the *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR) that do not agree with UMNO's discriminative agenda. PKR, which translates as People's Justice Party in Malay, was formed as a reaction to what it considers as Mahathir's unjust sacking of his then deputy Anwar Ibrahim from UMNO. Its political manifesto that comes as a collective statement with the opposition coalition calls for justice and equality in society as part of its political aspirations.²⁷⁵

²⁷¹ Chandra Muzaffar, *Challenges and Choices in Malaysian Politics and Society*, Aliran, 1989.

²⁷² Kikue Hamayotsu, *Demobilizing Islam: Institutionalized Religion and the Politics of Co-optation in Malaysia*, Unpublished Doctor of Philosophy Thesis, Australian National University, July 2005.

²⁷³ John Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of UMNO and PAS*, Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1980, 190.

²⁷⁴ Kees Van Dijk, 'Different settings, different definitions and different agendas: Islamic and secular political parties in Indonesia and Malaysia', in Mohamed Salih (Ed.), *Interpreting Islamic Political Parties*, New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2009, 71.

²⁷⁵ *Buku Jingga: Ubah Sekarang, Selamatkan Malaysia* (Orange Book: Change Now, Save Malaysia), Pakatan Rakyat Political Manifesto Booklet.

On the other hand, there were non-Malay political parties that continued to work with UMNO despite its Islamization agenda. However, it would not be wrong to suggest that they continued in the coalition partnership very likely due to their own political expediency, which was to remain in power within the ruling coalition. Lastly, support for UMNO may have also come from some non-Muslims themselves, who may have preferred coming under the rule of a known entity rather than taking the risk of supporting untested Malay parties. For the purpose of this study, we will only seek to discover why UMNO promoted an Islamic agenda that was not inclusive of non-Muslims.

3.3.1. The need to impose Malay-Muslim hegemony agenda.

3.3.1.1 UMNO as champion of the Malays.

If UMNO is indeed pursuing a Malay-Muslim agenda, the question of why it is trying to do so would become the first stage of investigation. Chandra Muzaffar has already proposed that the use of political power by UMNO was actually a control mechanism to establish dominance.²⁷⁶ However, Anne Munro-Kua considers that this dominance was largely accepted with certain forms of populist elements present in it because its dominance was largely tolerated by the people and therefore could be thought of as mandated, albeit indirectly by the people. Hence, in her opinion, she prefers to define the people mandated domination of UMNO as an ‘authoritarian populism’.²⁷⁷ To elaborate, she points to the beginnings of political engagement in Malaysia as one of the reasons for authoritarian populism to take root in Malaysia where it was the power sharing formula during independence that has enabled UMNO to exert dominance over the other non-Malay parties. Therefore, in order to understand the existence of the power-tier within the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional, which appears to have mandated the need for Malay hegemony in Malaysia, the formative years of Malaysia, will need further scrutiny.

To begin with, it needs to be understood that the Malay race in Malaysia is actually an amalgamation of different groups of people, mostly from the neighbouring islands of

²⁷⁶ Muzaffar, *Challenges and Choices*, 32-38.

²⁷⁷ Anne Munro-Kua, *Authoritarian Populism in Malaysia*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996, 105-125.

Indonesia and Philippines.²⁷⁸ Almost all Malays may be able to trace their lineage roots, either to a specific province or to a particular ethnic grouping within the Southeast Asian region. ‘I feel like I am returning to my roots’, said former Prime Minister Najib Razak, who traced his Bugis ancestral roots to South Sulawesi in Indonesia when making a social visit to his ancestral village.²⁷⁹ Due to their varying origins, it is possible to suggest that in order to compensate for the variances of origin and to amalgamate the diversified backgrounds of Malay ethnic roots, Islam became a core identity value of what it means to be a Malay. This proposition is confirmed by Kamarulnizam Abdullah who seems to think this is the main reason why Islam has become the single most powerful common denominator for Malay religious-cultural identity,²⁸⁰ which has since been used by UMNO as a power-tool to champion Malay politics.

Together with these types of ethno-religious identity considerations, UMNO’s distinctiveness as a reliable champion of the Malay race began to emerge forcefully during the time of negotiations for independence. During the period of the British rule, the Malays were wary of the growing numbers of Indian and Chinese migrants whom the British brought to Malaya to improve the local economy.²⁸¹ Therefore, when the British proposed to allow Chinese and Indians to become naturalised citizens during the proposal for the formation of a ‘Malayan Union’ (elaborated earlier), it was strongly opposed by the Malay community. The Malays felt that they would lose their status as original dwellers of the nation and reduce them to become just another community among all the others.²⁸² Moreover, the suggestion that the Chinese and Indian foreign migrants could be given citizenship jolted the Malay race into a political frenzy and made Malay nationalism a reality, of which UMNO became the

²⁷⁸ Andaya. *A History of Malaysia*, 9-10.

²⁷⁹ Saodah Elias, ‘Najib: Gowa visit like a homecoming’, *The Star Online*, 19th November 2009, <<http://www.thestar.com.my/story/?file=%2f2009%2f11%2f19%2fnation%2f5142635&sec=nation>>, Accessed 14th April 2011.

²⁸⁰ Kamarulnizam Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam in Contemporary Malaysia*, Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2003, 217.

²⁸¹ Khong Kim Hoong, *Merdeka: British Rule and The Struggle for Independence in Malaya: 1945-1957*. Kuala Lumpur: Institute for Social Analysis, 1984, 84.

²⁸² Wan Hashim, *Race Relations in Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1983, 46.

forerunner.²⁸³ The elites within the Malay community rallied the peasant Malays and organising large scale protests to voice out their disapproval to the Malayan Union proposal by the British. Their placards said, ‘Malaya belongs to the Malays, We don’t want the other races to be given the rights and privileges of Malays’.²⁸⁴ Consequently, these race-based nationalistic sentiments led to the formation of a Malay political party UMNO. UMNO was birthed when 41 Malay NGOs formed a single representative body that embodied the political consciousness of the Malays.²⁸⁵ However, Paul Monash suggests that although the UMNO led revolt against the British was primarily organised to protect Malay privileges, it was also an example of how Islam become the basis for Malay unity and political power, especially when the political hegemony of Malays came under threat.²⁸⁶ In addition, authors like Hoong Khong Kim, who writes about the events leading to Independence, strongly suggest that while Malays were keen to achieve self-rule, the Malays who fought against the Malayan Union were not primarily fighting against the presence of the British colonialists, rather, they were opposed to the threat that came from the presence of Chinese and Indians and everything that entailed through the naturalisation of their citizenship.²⁸⁷ Consequently, it led the first generation UMNO leaders to recognize the unifying role of Islam and included the defence and expansion of Islam as one of the key objectives of the UMNO Constitution.²⁸⁸

Consequently, UMNO takes it upon itself to stand for the assertion of Malay Muslim interests and sees no reason to be apologetic for articulating it. Although this stance of fighting for one’s own privileges may be considered as being selfish or unfair, especially in the context of the modern multi-culturalism, some have argued that they have positive implications. Some local Malay academics have sometimes suggested that UMNO’s strong

²⁸³ Hoong, *Merdeka*, 84.

²⁸⁴ Cited in: Hoong, *Merdeka*, 8.

²⁸⁵ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 267.

²⁸⁶ Monash, *Malay Supremacy*, 126.

²⁸⁷ Hoong, *Merdeka*: 84-85.

²⁸⁸ Lughman Thaib, ‘Muslim politics in Malaysia and the democratization process’, in *European Social Sciences Research Journal*, Vol.1, No.1, 2013, 70.

hand in the multi-ethnic ruling coalition should be thought of a winning formula because it is 'indicative of a strong government concomitant with effective governance to keep ethnic politics and politicisation, including ethnic tensions in check'.²⁸⁹ While it is possible to partly agree to such a suggestion, as certain types of dominant leadership styles do become useful to keep difficult issues from hijacking the peaceful administration of the nation, the fundamental question of setting the boundary lines of the required domination becomes a complicated disposition. For instance, who gets to define the acceptable basis of what a strong-handed administration is and where would its limits be? These questions arise because some of the non-Malays at the receiving end of the domination are already crying foul and accusing UMNO of forcefully promoting hegemonic interests. Consequently, it would not be wrong to propose that allowing one party to dominate for the sake of promoting a false sense of peace has precarious implications, especially in a multi-religious, multi-cultural context such as Malaysia.

3.3.1.2 UMNO's election dynamics and UMNO's relationship with the Malay Royals.

UMNO's power-base came from its un-challenged leadership position in the Barisan Nasional party (BN), which is the ruling coalition that administered Malaysia since the time of independence in 1957. Due to the leadership role of UMNO within BN, it is possible to postulate that every election victory for BN was equivalent to a mandate from the people for UMNO. This is what has led researchers like Anne Munro Kua to suggest that UMNO's dominance was legitimised through populist authority. However, there appears to be an anomaly within the overall election results which needs further investigation as how electoral mandates are actually obtained.

In Malaysia, political coalitions are authorized to become the ruling government based on the number of seats they hold in the Malaysian Parliament. It is not based on the number of individual votes received by the parties. Nevertheless, although both results appear to suggest an analogous outcome, in reality they are not identical, especially when used to

²⁸⁹ Zakaria Haji Ahmad and Suzaina Kadir, 'Ethnic Conflict: Prevention and Management: The Malaysian case', in Kusuma Snitwongse and W. Scott Thomson (Eds.), *Ethnic Conflicts in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2005, 49.

gauge the popular support of the people. For example, the 2013 General Election results showed that BN had only obtained 47.38 percent of the popular votes compared to the 50.87 percent votes for all the other parties.²⁹⁰ Despite the marginal disapproving votes for the ruling party, BN continued to be in power through the 189 seats that it obtained in the Parliament compared to the 89 seats that were obtained by the opposition.²⁹¹ Hence, researchers like Graham Brown who studied the Malaysian electoral system, make strong accusations that BN had been holding on to power only because of the gerrymandering done by the Election Commission Agency of the government.²⁹² He presented evidence from his research to prove that parliamentary constituency allocations are done in a peculiar way to allows BN to remain in power, even when it does not have the popular mandate from the people. He clearly proposes that such a situation has been allowed to happen because the Election Commission, which is supposed to be an independent body, comes directly under the control of the Prime Minister's Department.²⁹³ Since Prime Ministers are actually Presidents of UMNO, it would not be inaccurate to conclude that UMNO used this arrangement to remain in power even when it did not receive the popular mandate of the people.

Furthermore, UMNO consistently projects its image as the protector of the Malay race through its ability to promote itself as the vanguard of loyalty to the Malay royals. The perception of UMNO being loyal to the Sultans was actually cemented during its vocal dissent to the formation of the Malayan Union. Initially, the Sultans agreed with the British plan for a Malayan Union by giving their consent signatures, but subsequently sided with the Malay elites who opposed the plan. The Andayas, as historians, seem to think that one of the possible reasons for the change of mind could be the manner in which the signatures were

²⁹⁰ Khoo Boo Teik, '13th General Election in Malaysia: Issues, Outcomes and Implications', in *Report 1, IDE-JETRO*, 2013, 6.

²⁹¹ Boo Teik, '13th General Election', 3.

²⁹² Graham Brown, 'Playing the (non) ethnic card: The electoral system and ethnic voting patterns in Malaysia', in *CRISE Working Paper No.21*. Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, April 2005.

²⁹³ Brown, 'Playing the (non) ethnic card', 4.

obtained, which was through a combination of, ‘tact, cajolery and veiled threats’.²⁹⁴ However, others like Khong Kim suggest that the Sultans rejected the Malayan Union proposal because it could have led to a reduced role, especially as heads of Islam, which may have caused them to lose their status as leaders of Malay social life.²⁹⁵ Therefore when the sultans rejected the Malayan Union and UMNO stood behind their defiance, it provided a valuable base for a good partnership to emerge, as both parties had the same ethnic power-base, the Malays. Consequently, when UMNO protested against the formation of the Malayan Union, it was also interpreted as its effort to safeguard the Sultans’ position as Islamic heads.

Subsequently, these influences from the political trajectories from the past were effectively used by UMNO as useful tools to maintain its champion identity, as the defender of Malay rights, the defender of Islam and also as the defender of the Malay Royalty, with all of them becoming intrinsically amalgamated. Therefore, UMNO’s role easily oscillated among the three, leading Paul Monash who researched on Malay supremacy to suggest that ‘the relationship between Islam and Malay ethnicity ... oscillating between two polarities’.²⁹⁶ Moreover, academics like Wan Hashim have already noted that ‘Islam to the Malays is a powerful unifying force ... it also serves to keep the non-Malays, who are not Muslims, outside the group. It becomes a barrier to intermarriage between Malays and the non-Malays unless the latter adopt Islam’.²⁹⁷ Nevertheless, even when non-Malays convert to Islam, Chinese Muslims and Indian Muslims as non-Malays have sometimes failed to achieve Bumiputera status.²⁹⁸ This is one of the key reasons why ‘UMNO, in particular, wants to safeguard the distinct characteristic of Malay-*Bumiputera* so that other races will be unable

²⁹⁴ Andaya and Andaya. *A History of Malaysia*, 266.

²⁹⁵ Hoong, *Merdeka*, 81.

²⁹⁶ Monash, *Malay Supremacy*, 125.

²⁹⁷ Hashim, *Race Relations in Malaysia*, 71.

²⁹⁸ Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam*, 222.

to claim its *Bumiputera* status'.²⁹⁹ Zainal Kling, who is a professor at a local University notes that,

The fact that UMNO was the most important political party to fight for and assume the protection of Malay rights... has implanted in the Malay mind the singular role of UMNO as the only reliable Malay party. To its advantage, UMNO has replayed and manipulated this tune.³⁰⁰

Consequently, it can be agreed that although Malay political allegiance in Malaysia (up until May 2018 General Elections) was divided among three main Malay-dominated parties of UMNO, PAS and KEADILAN, it was UMNO that usually took the dominant position. Accordingly, when these realities are added to the fact that UMNO had never contested fewer than 50 percent of the total parliamentary seats, UMNO was able to assert dominance in national politics, it became difficult for any other party to challenge its political hold.³⁰¹

3.3.2. UMNO Presidents as Prime Ministers.

Malaysian Prime Ministers have often felt the need to act as proxies of UMNO, primarily to perpetuate its Malay hegemony interests. For instance, John Hille has already recognized that UMNO leaders' control of the nation as a form of hegemony.³⁰² He arrives at this reasoning by focussing specifically on Mahathir's methods of establishing control of the state while recognizing UMNO as the key element that provided a foundation to the national leaders' power aspirations.³⁰³ The need to be in control was established since the time of Independence, when the Barisan National coalition learnt to function effectively through a power-sharing formula that saw non-Malay parties working in compliance with UMNO's

²⁹⁹ Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam*, 223.

³⁰⁰ Zainal Kling, 'UMNO and BN in the 2004 election: The political Culture of Complex Identities', in Saw Swee Hock and K. Kesavapany (Eds.), *Malaysia: Recent Trends and Challenges*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2006,163.

³⁰¹ Ong Kian Meng, 'Malaysian Political Parties and Coalitions', in Meredith Weiss (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia*, New York: Routledge, 2014, 28.

³⁰² John Hille, *Malaysia: Mahatirism, Hegemony and The New Opposition*, London: Zed Books, 2001, 10.

³⁰³ Hille, *Mahatirism*, 83-151.

requirements.³⁰⁴ This arrangement was a direct outcome of a political compromise that saw UMNO giving concession on the dispute of Chinese and Indian citizenship during the struggle for independence.³⁰⁵ Therefore, based on these considerations and in order to maintain the longstanding practice within the BN, it became mandatory for the President of UMNO to function as the chairman of the BN coalition. As a result, Prime Ministers took office to lead the nation by the virtue of being Presidents of UMNO. Consequently, it is only through their leadership position in UMNO that persons became eligible to become Chairman of BN which automatically entitles them to become the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Hence, researchers like Graham Brown have correctly observed that the triennial UMNO elections actually become more important than General Elections, as that would be the deciding platform to decide who would lead the country.³⁰⁶ Consequently, it could be safely suggested that because the Prime Ministers and the Deputy Prime Ministers were selected due to their position in UMNO, the ability to appease the Malay hegemony agenda within UMNO, especially due to the need to win party elections, becomes their primary motivation. Moreover, during national level General Elections, the candidate selection lists from all the other Barisan National component parties need tacit approval of the Prime Minister. Subsequently, due to the Prime Ministers' dual function as Presidents of UMNO, it is possible to suggest that they only chose candidates who have been proven to have a good working relationship with UMNO.³⁰⁷

Consequently, due to the considerations above, it is also possible to suggest that Prime Ministers who came to office had the ingrained need to serve the interests of UMNO, which was the instrumental element that placed them in this high office. It then becomes uncertain how much leeway UMNO would give him, in order to serve the interests of the non-Malays in Malaysia who also look to him for leadership and support. Due to this inner dilemma,

³⁰⁴ Kling, 'UMNO and BN', 160.

³⁰⁵ Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 276.

³⁰⁶ Brown, 'Playing the (non) ethnic card', 14.

³⁰⁷ Sothi Ratchagan, 'Ethnic Representation and the Electoral System', in Syed Husin Ali (Ed.), *Ethnicity, Class and Development in Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia (Social Science Society of Malaysia), 1984, 128.

Prime Ministers have sometimes chosen to publicly assure the citizens of Malaysia that they are indeed Prime Ministers for all Malaysians.³⁰⁸ To examine the issue further, it would be worthwhile to select an example of one of the Prime Ministers, as an attempt to understanding their inner dilemma to decide between Malay and non-Malay priority interests.

Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad would be ideal case study material as he was the longest serving premier of Malaysia.³⁰⁹ Before becoming the Prime Minister, he wrote a book entitled *The Malay Dilemma*, which revealed some of his inner motivations for the need to realize political power. The book was written in the year 1970, fresh from the memory of the race riots that took place in May 13th 1969. In it, his main thesis was about the need to take the Malay race to a greater level of socio-economic mobility and enlarging their spheres of influence within the multi-racial nation. Additionally, he also openly blamed the existing Malay political leaders for giving up too much to appease the non-Malays and subsequently accused the non-Muslims who received many benefits from the government as not being grateful enough. He begrudgingly wrote, ‘generously the Malays have offered to compromise. This generosity is not acknowledged. It is taken as a matter of course’.³¹⁰ Moreover, he argued that this had been the pattern of relationship since the time of Malacca and went on to accuse the early Chinese traders of working with western traders to ‘milk the Malay Sultanates dry’.³¹¹ Prior to putting his thoughts in book form, Mahathir had already written an open letter to Tunku to criticize him for being preoccupied with the demands of the non-Malays.

Subsequently, due to its aggressive pro-Malay stance, which openly argued for greater economic kickbacks at the expense of other races, the book was banned by the then

³⁰⁸ ‘Najib Promises to be a Prime Minister for all Malaysians’, Bernama News, 10th May 2013, <<http://english.astroawani.com/malaysia-news/najib-promises-be-prime-minister-all-malaysians-13850>>, Accessed 12th December 2013.

³⁰⁹ Moreover, General Election that took place on the 9th of May 2018 he became the seventh Prime Minister of Malaysia at the age of 92.

³¹⁰ Mahathir Mohammad, *The Malay Dilemma*, Kuala Lumpur: Federal Publications, 1970, 144.

³¹¹ Muhammad, *The Malay Dilemma*, 35.

Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman.³¹² It is possible that Tunku had valued the important role of the non-Malays in birthing the nation, especially the non-Malay community leaders who were part of his delegation that negotiated independence talks in London. Moreover, Mahathir's pro-Malay hegemonic stance and ultra-critical view of the nation's administrators could not be tolerated long by Tunku, causing him to expel Mahathir from UMNO for a brief period.³¹³ Therefore, it would not be entirely wrong to suggest that Mahathir's thoughts on the upliftment of the Malays that were set forth in his controversial book potentially influenced his government policies during his tenure as the Prime Minister of Malaysia. Consequently, as examined earlier in this study, he has been adept at using Islam as a useful instrument to bring his Malay affirmation agenda to the fore, especially by making it to become synonymous with his Islamization agenda.

In addition, the reality of UMNO leaders bringing their family members into key administrative positions in the nation becomes another leadership aspect within UMNO that needs further scrutiny. For instance, the second Prime Minister of Malaysia, Hussein Onn was the son of a former president of UMNO, Onn Jaafar. Thereafter, one of Hussein Onn's sons, Hishammuddin Hussein, became a key leader in UMNO while serving in various cabinet portfolios. Moreover, the sixth Prime Minister, Najib Razak is himself the son of the third Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdul Razak. Mukhriz Mahathir, the son of the fourth Prime Minister Mahathir became one of the Vice Presidents of UMNO and also became the Chief Minister in his home state of Kedah. These types of family legacies within UMNO become important to note for one important reason, it is possible that the new generation of UMNO leaders could have harboured the need to prove their reliability to those with political connections with their family, which began from the time of their fathers. Thus, it would not be entirely inaccurate to suggest that it is only by being pro-Malay and pro-Islam that these novices would be able to ensure their supporters of their reliability and therefore ensure political survival within UMNO.

³¹² The ban on the book was only lifted after Mahathir became the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia in the year 1981.

³¹³ Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam*, 55.

Furthermore, there is also the strong possibility that these new leaders would have also learnt from their fathers, especially on the different ways of keeping the Malays constantly dependent on UMNO as their preferred political guardians. For example, Hoffstaedter has correctly noted that in order to ensure that Malays will always continue their support for UMNO, a key strategy of an UMNO leader would include that of maintaining a psychological perception that the Malays are constantly being under threat.

There is particularly fertile ground for Islamicity (*Sic*) in Malaysia. Authority usually takes shape during times of uncertainty or strife ... In Malaysia, this is easy, as Malayness and Islam are continually seen to be under threat. There exists a vicious circle in which people who have achieved authority maintain the perception of Malayness and Islam as threatened because they can use this perception as a base for their power.³¹⁴

For that reason, it is possible to suggest that the later generation UMNO leaders could have learnt from their predecessors, especially on prevailing methods on how to use fear-mongering symbols to influence the Malay Muslim mind for UMNO's own political mileage. Likewise, when young Malays choose to question UMNO or challenge its actions, UMNO leaders often accuse them of forgetting their benefactors and for being ungrateful to those who have worked hard to advance their cause.³¹⁵ These types of postulations also become useful for junior UMNO leaders who point to the work of their seniors as the sole reason for the current privileges that are enjoyed by the Malay community. Thus, it becomes possible for upcoming UMNO echelons to establish the notion that Malays in Malaysia will need to continue supporting them as a way of being grateful to the struggles of the UMNO forefathers.

³¹⁴ Hoffstaedter, *Modern Muslim Identities: Negotiating religion and ethnicity in Malaysia*, NIAS Press, 2011, 162.

³¹⁵ Khoo Boo Teik, *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and its Discontents*, London: ZED Books, 2003,199.

3.3.3. UMNO as the patron of progressive Islam in Malaysia.

3.3.3.1 UMNO vs PAS.

UMNO also needed to maintain the perception as the protector of progressive Islam in Malaysia in order to neutralize intra-Malay competition for votes. It achieved this by repeatedly using the race-religion card, primarily to ensure its own political survival.³¹⁶ In the Malaysian context, PAS is the only other Malay political party that works with an open schema to promote Islam as its main agenda. Although PAS had a history of trying to work together with UMNO for a brief period in 1973 to 1977, it was forced to withdraw from the ruling coalition when its younger members became critical of its cooperation with UMNO.³¹⁷ Since then, PAS has, ‘campaigns for the Implementation of Islamic principles in society and government and is generally critical of the secular and elitist flavour of UMNO’.³¹⁸ Moreover, in order to challenge UMNO’s Islamic credentials, PAS has openly accused UMNO of being *Kafir* and un-Islamic for working with non-Muslim coalition partners in the ruling coalition.³¹⁹ As a result, UMNO has felt the need to somehow project itself as the sole political party that seeks to represent a moderate and progressive version of Islam.

Academic Amritha Malhi, who teaches at the Australian National University, is willing to suggest that it was Mahathir who successfully influenced the Malay mind into thinking that there were two streams of Islam in Malaysia, those who advocated a narrow, backward-looking and traditional view of Islam as opposed to UMNO leaders who were modernist, forward-looking and held a more rational view.³²⁰ Accordingly, UMNO have

³¹⁶ Ahmad Fauzi Ahmad Hamid and Che Hamdan Che Mohd. Razali, ‘Political Islam under Najib’, in *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol.30, No.2, 2015, 306.

³¹⁷ Virginia Hooker, ‘Still ‘Islam and Politics’ but Now Enmeshed in the Global Web’, in Virginia Hooker and Noraini Othman (Eds.), *Malaysia: Islam Society and Politics*, Singapore: ISEAS Publications, 2003, 17.

³¹⁸ Hooker, ‘Still Islam and Politics’, 18.

³¹⁹ Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam*, 192.

³²⁰ Amritha Malhi, ‘The PAS-BN Conflict in the 1990s: Islam and Modernity’, in Virginia Hooker and Noraini Othman (Eds.), *Malaysia: Islam Society and Politics*, Singapore: ISEAS Publications, 2003, 237.

sometimes painted a *Taliban* view of PAS in order to intimidate voters.³²¹ These types of manoeuvres have since become vital for the survival of UMNO within the Malay electorate especially since ‘PAS poses a serious ideological and electoral threat’ to its dominance of Malaysian national politics.³²² Consequently, it becomes safe to agree that the success of UMNO very much depends on its ability to cajole the Malays into siding with their projected version of progressive Islam.

However, in this competitive approach between PAS and UMNO, a potential danger will need to be recognized, that each party is now engaged in a game of one-upmanship for Islamic credentials. Therefore, it becomes possible to suggest that in order to succeed in the political arena of Malaysia, an excessive focus on Islam became a mandatory requirement. Based on the evidence of his research into Malay politics, academic Hussin Mutalib who teaches political science at the University of Singapore has accurately found that,

As the challenge of Islam was met with more Islam, politics, therefore, assumed an increasingly religious colouring, and consequently Islam, particularly in more recent times, has been dynamically propelled to the centre-stage of Malaysian politics’.³²³

Accordingly, when the BN both creates and promotes government funded Islamic institutions through its Islamization efforts, they become evidences of UMNO being able to develop Islam in ways that PAS is not able to do. Furthermore, academics like Mutalib suggests that the formation of the many Islamic Institutions gave an imposing vision of Islam to the masses, ‘which help sustain hegemony through the reification of dominant interests and social meaning’.³²⁴

Nevertheless, academics like Kamarulnizam Abdullah, who is a dean at a local university, have argued that unlike PAS, UMNO has never placed Islam at the centre of its political agenda, simply because it has primarily relied on making ‘narrow Malay

³²¹ Malhi, ‘The PAS-BN Conflict’, 240.

³²² Malhi, ‘The PAS-BN Conflict’, 241.

³²³ Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity*, 137.

³²⁴ Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity*, 11.

nationalism' as its core value.³²⁵ Such a situation then leads us to ask, was UMNO's Islam actually more moderate compared to PAS?

3.3.3.2 UMNO and Islamist elements.

Although UMNO appeared to have championed progressive Islam in Malaysia, there are reasons to suggest that UMNO forcefully side-lined alternative expressions of Islam in Malaysia and only promoted Islamists who were laced with a Malay supremacist agenda. For example, the research of Ahmad Fauzi and Che Hamdan strongly suggests that UMNO successfully hijacked other emerging expressions of Political Islam for its own expediency. In their study, they were able to successfully verify multiple shades of Islam in Malaysia, which is actually pluralist in nature due to existence of the different actors and varied Islamic expressions on the ground. They have also correctly proposed that political Islam in Malaysia has an appearance of being monolithic, 'only because its reigning political masters wanted them to appear thus, for manifestly political purposes'.³²⁶ Furthermore, the researchers also argue that this monopoly of perception is being legitimised through the usurping of emerging Islamic movements and absorbing them into the fold of UMNO. Consequently, they propose that this is the reason why the Najib administration took aboard *Wahhabi* and *Salafi* influenced Islamists, in order to project them as being part of UMNO's own Islamic credentials.³²⁷

However, it needs to be understood that these types of co-optations were not without difficulties, especially since they posed various forms of difficulty for the non-Muslims. Some of these groups that enjoyed strong links with UMNO have been known to be fighting for the hegemony of Malays by upholding the sovereignty of Islam. For instance, UMNO maintains its link with the twenty thousand strong ISMA (Malaysian Muslim Solidarity), which rallies under the motto, *Melayu Sepakat Islam Berdaulat* (When Malays unite, Islam becomes sovereign). ISMA is often unapologetic when it makes statements that sideline the non-Muslims. For example, one of ISMA's articles claimed that Chinese migrants were

³²⁵ Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam*, 181.

³²⁶ Fauzi and Hamdan, 'Political Islam under Najib', 305.

³²⁷ Fauzi and Hamdan, 'Political Islam under Najib', 319.

actually brought into Malaysia by the British to oppress the Malays based on the idea that Chinese miners used criminal triads to terrorise the Malays.³²⁸ Moreover, ISMA leaders have even openly stated that those who assert themselves as moderate Muslims were actually enemies of Islam.³²⁹ ISMA tends to explain such a claim by saying that, those who advocate moderate-ness cunningly imply that there were other incorrect forms of Islam, which were either too conservative hence extremist forms of Islam. For ISMA, due to such insinuations related to the call for moderation, those who advocate moderateness in Islam were actually sowing division among Muslims.

Furthermore, UMNO's use of Islam as its key survival tool in the national political arena has the potential to bring other impending implications as well. For instance, Ooi Kok Hin, a political science graduate from Ohio State University, has put forward a thesis that Political Islam in Malaysia had now evolved to affect the future direction of politics in Malaysia. He thinks that because Islam has become a key identity marker in the politics of the nation, it will begin to affect how emerging issues in the nation will become interpreted, primarily through religion based perspectives.³³⁰ Moreover, he also projects the lessening influence of non-Muslims in national politics which is based on statistical evidence that shows that when non-Malays become reduced demographically, they increasingly lose the ability to count themselves as being politically significant. Furthermore, he strongly argues that this situation has come about due to electoral gerrymandering that ensured that Chinese majority parliamentary constituency seats were reduced to only 13 percent with no Indian

³²⁸ 'Chinese have always bullied Malays', ISMA analyst claims, The Malaymail Online, 9th October 2014, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/chinese-have-always-bullied-malays-isma-analyst-claims>>, Accessed 17th November 2015

³²⁹ " 'Moderate Muslim' invented by 'enemies of Islam' ", claims ISMA leader, The Malaymail Online, 20th May 2014, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/moderate-muslim-invented-by-enemies-of-islam-claims-isma-leader>>, Accessed 17th November 2015

³³⁰ Ooi Kok Hin, 'The Rise and Rise of Muslim Politics', 1st February 2016, *The New Mandala, Asia Pacific: Australian National University*, <<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2016/02/01/the-rise-and-rise-of-muslim-politics/>>, Accessed 15th February 2016.

majority constituencies being present. Consequently, he reasons that this has since effectively reduced both the ‘quality and quantity’ of non-Muslims’ political influence in the nation.³³¹

However, Ooi’s projections have been called into question by those who query whether Islam was ever the central focus of those who were manipulating the Malaysian political arena. Manjit Bhatia, an Australian researcher, has counter-proposed that the quest for UMNO’s ethnic hegemony agenda was the actual superseding priority of political Islam in Malaysia.

Ooi mistakes the rise of Muslim politics for the power-play around Malay-ness ... All of this is still to play for, and even harder to play for, by the increasingly desperate, crisis-prone and deeply scandalous UMNO-Malay, one-party state primarily for its material survival. The sooner we understand this, the less likely we are to exaggerate claims that Malaysian politics is being subsumed by Muslim politics.³³²

Moreover, Manjit also seems to argue that a return to Islam as the core of Malay identity should not be construed to be a return to traditional modes of Islam because the rise of alternative preferences, like the emerging *Shiite* expressions of Islam, showed that different flavours of Islam were increasingly being considered favourably by Malays in Malaysia. In addition, he is also willing to suggest that educated, urban Muslims were becoming repudiated by UMNO for using Islam for their political gain and therefore were more likely not to choose Islam but to choose the opposition as their possible ideological alternative. Considering both the scholars’ perspectives, it adds credence to the charges that UMNO uses its identity as the promoter of Islam to ensure its own domination in the local political arena.

However, the motive of UMNO, which is to ensure the dominant status of the Malay race through the elevation of Islam, will also need to be examined in the light of how it affects non-Muslims in Malaysia. Because *Wahhabi* and *Salafi* influences have already permeated the ‘civil service, UMNO-linked media and the ruling party’,³³³ it may potentially cause non-Muslims to become suspicious as to what moderation actually means in Malaysia. For

³³¹ Kok Hin, ‘The Rise and Rise of Muslim Politics’.

³³² Manjit Bhatia, ‘Muslim Politics is not subsuming Malaysian Politics’, <<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2016/02/08/muslim-politics-is-not-subsuming-malaysian-politics/>>, Accessed 15th March 2016.

³³³ Fauzi and Hamdan, ‘Political Islam under Najib’, 325.

example, Fauzi Ahmad and Che Hamdan postulate that it would not be wrong to think that non-Muslims are stunned that it is UMNO, as opposed to PAS that is moving towards radical Islamist elements. This is because it is UMNO that has always been projecting itself as the spokesperson for moderate Islam and has repeatedly accused its rival PAS of harbouring extremist elements.

Therefore it would not be wrong to deduce that UMNO's legitimising of these Islamist tendencies has potentially caused anxiety for non-Muslims by putting them in a situation where they do not know whose brand of Islam to trust and are therefore unable to decide which Islamic party would be able to understand their needs as a religious minority. Moreover, it is also possible to postulate that due to the government giving legitimacy to the hard-line expressions of Islam, they were also in another dilemma: where was this quest for deepening Islamization taking them to?

3.3.4. UMNO and Malaysia as an Islamic State .

The promulgation and the impetus for an Islamic State agenda have become important priorities for UMNO. However, the necessity for such a state needs to be examined first. The origins of the idea for an Islamic State began from the time of Prophet Muhammad when he formed a loosely structured state apparatus within Medina.³³⁴ It is from this idea that formal delineations of state and nationhood began to develop. However, the current motives for the formation of an Islamic state would need a deeper scrutiny in order to understand its motives correctly. Ashgar Ali, who headed the Institute for Islamic studies in India, suggests that the idea of an Islamic State has since become an altered entity that only serves to justify some of the Islamic political leaders' aspirations for power.³³⁵ Furthermore, he is willing to propose that the concept of the Islamic State is now being used by ruling classes who have since utilized religion as a punitive tool to wield authoritarian rule.³³⁶ Moreover, based on an analysis of countries like, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan, he argues that none of them portray the type of ideals of the of Islamic State envisioned by Muhammad very much

³³⁴ Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.

³³⁵ Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Islamic State*, Gujarat: Vikas Publishing, 1980, 37.

³³⁶ Engineer, *The Islamic State*, 89-92.

because they have yet to establish social justice principles that such a state would actually warrant. He asks, 'Are the Muslim rulers who are keen to proclaim an Islamic State sincerely committed to an Islamic vision of a just and egalitarian society? It is not so'.³³⁷

Similarly, academic Abdullahi an-Naim who teaches at Emory University, has also proposed that, if Islam is to be rightfully returned to the people, it needs to move away from being an instrument of monopoly of the state.³³⁸ However, he qualifies his proposal by saying that instead of pushing Islam entirely out of politics, it should not be used as the sole criterion for the management of any nation. Furthermore, Abdullahi also postulates that any attempts to enforce *Shariah* coercively would be wrong as it would be contrary to Quran's insistence of voluntary acceptance of Islam.³³⁹ He says that 'a major conceptual contradiction in the dangerous illusion of an Islamic State is the notion that Sharia principles can be enforced through the coercive power of the state'.³⁴⁰

When we relate both their findings to the Malaysian context, it would not be wrong to suggest that it is this coercive tendency of the Islamic State is what non-Muslims in Malaysia are actually being wary of. Due to growing Islamization, the state has already been coercing its non-Muslim population to accept certain Islamic influences that they have not been comfortable with. Moreover, it is also possible to come to an understanding that non-Muslims in Malaysia are already struggling to identify their social position within the highly Islamized environment. Consequently, we are then led to ask, are the non-Muslims in Malaysia already living within the realm of an Islamic state or are they unwillingly heading towards one? Although the idea of establishing an Islamic State may be the aspiration of some Malaysian Muslims, the non-Muslims as fellow citizens have not been given room to give their views or express their concerns. Furthermore, non-Muslims in Malaysia have sometimes been told out-rightly not to comment on matters related to Islam, even when it

³³⁷ Engineer, *The Islamic State*, 23.

³³⁸ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, 'A Theory of Islam, State and Society', in Kari Voght (*et al*) Editors, *New Directions in Islamic Thought: Exploring Reform and Muslim Tradition*, London: Tauris, 2009, 147.

³³⁹ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari`a*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008, 3-4.

³⁴⁰ An-Naim, *Islam and the Secular State*, 148.

had the possibility of affecting them.³⁴¹ Consequently, it can be safely suggested that the non-Muslim communities are actually being forced to tag along quietly towards the direction of an Islamic State, without their own voices being heard or considered.

Additionally, it is also possible to put forward another reason as to why UMNO is willing to push for an Islamic State in Malaysia even when it has the propensity to alienate non-Muslims. It is related to its inherent need to outdo PAS in the political arena. In 2001 Prime Minister Mahathir publicly announced that Malaysia was already a fully functioning Islamic State.³⁴² His statement was then rationalized through an Information Ministry booklet, *Malaysia Adalah Sebuah Negara Islam* (Malaysia is an Islamic State).³⁴³ However, Mahathir's announcement led to the opposition party PAS to question his rationale and accused him of being overly simplistic in understanding the actual Islamic foundations that were needed for the establishment of an Islamic state. Moreover, PAS leaders have sometimes suggested that the goal to establish an Islamic State is actually a basic aspiration of Islam and is therefore part of every Muslim's belief system.³⁴⁴ Hence, it is possible to suggest that Mahathir's main reason for defining Malaysia as an Islamic State seems to be both politically as well as spiritually motivated. However, it became UMNO's useful political strategy to counter PAS' claim that only it could administer the nation in a truly Islamic

³⁴¹ 'Shut up about Hudud, ISMA warns non-Muslims', Malaysia-today, 4th April 2014, <<http://www.malaysia-today.net/shut-up-about-hudud-isma-warns-non-muslims/>>, Accessed 5th June 2015.

³⁴² Lee Ban Chen, 'The Islamic State Debacle', Malaysiakini, 12th November 2001, <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/7017>>, Accessed 14th January 2012.

³⁴³ The following reasons were offered. It was observed that Muslims had already become the majority community of the nation. Furthermore, it highlighted that all the constitutional monarchs at Federal and all State levels were exclusively Muslims. Subsequently, because all the topmost positions of the police and Military were held by Muslims, he asserted that it was Muslims who controlled the defence of the country. Moreover, the civil service and the overall government machinery leadership was now in the hands of Muslims. Consequently, it observed that Federal and the State Constitutions already had various Islamic elements woven into them. Wan Teh, Wan Zahidi. *Malaysia Adalah Sebuah Negara Islam*. Kementerian Penerangan Malaysia (Malaysia is an Islamic State, Information Ministry of Malaysia). Kuala Lumpur, 2001.

³⁴⁴ Dzulkifli Ahmad, 'PAS Position on Islamic State and Hudud Laws', in *Report of the National Conference of a National Conference on Islamic Resurgence and Religious Freedom*, 21st to 24th October 2002, 33.

way.³⁴⁵ Subsequently, in order to override the objections that were being raised by PAS, Mahathir responded by seeking the affirmative opinion of a Muslim Jurist from Al-Azhar University in Egypt. When the jurist gave his endorsement that Malaysia was indeed an exemplary Islamic State, government controlled media quickly proclaimed that it was more proof that Malaysia was already an Islamic State.³⁴⁶ Consequently, it becomes possible to think that Mahathir's espousal of Malaysia as an Islamic State was UMNO's way of using the notion for its own benefit.

Moreover, when Prime Minister Badawi promoted the conceptual Islam Hadhari during his tenure in office, it was viewed by some as his own way of consolidating the idea of an Islamic State.³⁴⁷ However, a disturbing connection emerged when one of the ten principles in Islam Hadhari was termed as 'protection of the rights of minority groups and women'.³⁴⁸ It led observers of Islamization in Malaysia to ask whether the term protection was being used in a similar context in the way *Dhimmi*s functioned as protected minorities under an Islamic State.³⁴⁹ As a result, it caused non-Muslims to view Islam Hadhari as further 'supplementing and complementing the Mahathir administration's Islamizing policies over the last two decades or so'.³⁵⁰ Moreover, non-Muslims also began to suspect the protection of minorities that was promoted in the Islam Hadhari manifesto when UMNO ministers in Badawi's cabinet did not see the need to be sensitive to the feelings of non-Muslims in the country. One of the members of the Parliament openly stated that Malaysians who were not

³⁴⁵ A good discussion on PAS and its attempts at defining and promoting Islamic state can be found in, Liew Chin Tong, 'PAS Politics: Defining an Islamic State', in Terence Gomez (Ed.), *Politics in Malaysia: The Ethnic Dimension*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

³⁴⁶ Luqman Haziq and Mohd Razee Hassan, 'Malaysia is a Model Islamic State: says Dr Tantawi', *Bernama News Agency*, Malaysia, 10th July 2003.

³⁴⁷ Muhammad Sharif Bashir, '*Islam Hadhari: Concept and Prospect*', Islamic University of Malaysia, <<http://www.islamawareness.net/Asia/Malaysia/hadhari.html>>, Accessed 15th May 2012.

³⁴⁸ Badawi, *Islam Hadhari*, 4.

³⁴⁹ Peter. G. Riddell, 'Varieties of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Malaysia, 1999 – 2005', in Anthony O' Mahoney and Emma Loosely (Eds.), *Christian Responses to Islam: Muslim-Christian Relations in the Modern World*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

³⁵⁰ Walters, 'Issues in Christian-Muslim Relations', 74.

willing to submit to Islamic values could choose to leave the country.³⁵¹ Furthermore, another member of Badawi's cabinet threatened to stop the use of the translated versions of the Bible in the Malay and Indonesian language if Christians insisted on using the word *Allah*.³⁵² Badawi's silence on the two incidents made the non-Muslims wonder about the 'protection of minorities' that was espoused in his Islam Hadhari principles.

The difficulty of UMNO trying to infuse Islamic State ideals into a multi-religious context such as Malaysia has led non-Muslims to offer their own input into the matter. For instance, a local Christian scholar suggests that the government should consider functioning as a Pluralist Democracy. Ng Kam Weng, who holds a Doctorate from Cambridge University offers his thoughts as to why it may be difficult to force-fit Malaysia into an Islamic State mould.³⁵³ He rationalizes that motivation for an Islamic State usually comes from the innate need of Muslim leaders to administer the nation according to an Islam-centred mode as opposed to what they perceive to be western influenced, secular mode. Subsequently, he is willing to suggest that Muslim leaders have sometimes wrongly claimed that non-Muslims are generally against the idea of an Islamic State because they want the freedom to eat pork in the open, operate casinos and to dress indecently in public. While disputing their claims, Kam Weng insists that it is actually the fundamental issue of citizenship rights that the non-Muslims would be forced to encounter in an Islamic State is what they are more concerned about.

He then offers three vital democratic principles, as his way of explaining the viability of a Pluralist Democracy system. For him, the first democratic element of Pluralist Democracy needs to be the libertarian principle, which promotes toleration. He proposes that by wielding this principle, the state recognises the right of each of its citizens to freely practise their own forms of religion. Secondly, he suggests the equalitarian principle, which requires the impartiality of the state, which consciously chooses not to favour any particular

³⁵¹ Walters, 'Issues in Christian-Muslim Relations', 74.

³⁵² Walters, 'Issues in Christian-Muslim Relations', 75.

³⁵³ Ng Kam Weng, '*Pluralist Democracy or an Islamic State?*' *Krisis and Praxis*, Kairos Research Centre, 12th April 2006, <<http://www.krisispraxis.com/archives/2006/04/pluralist-democracy-or-islamic-state/>>, Accessed 13th June 2011.

religion to the extent of discriminating against other religions. Thirdly, he believes that in order to uphold a Pluralist Democracy type of state, the element of neutrality must always be guarded. In his opinion, no state should favour its citizens just because they are religious, as democracy requires states to maintain impartiality. Consequently, he becomes inclined to conclude that only a Pluralist Democracy would serve to promote a civil society that has the ability to transcend partisan politics, which will be capable of exercising rounded judgment and be in a neutral position to weigh any alternatives.

Based on his suggestions, Ng Kam Weng's convincing arguments for a Pluralist Democracy could be taken seriously. As Ng Kam Weng rightly points out, it is possible to think that Pluralist Democracy principles would at be allowed to ask the other questions of whether its dealings with its citizens are being fair, equitable and impartial. Although it can be argued that Islam and the Islamic State principles also place a premium on justice and fairness, examples from most of the already existing, so-called Islamic States have not been able to exemplify these virtues. Furthermore, the issue becomes even more difficult in Malaysia because the quest for Islamic state has already defined its non-Muslims as *Dhimmi*, a label that seeks to differentiate their inferior position within the larger, Muslim majority society.³⁵⁴ *Dhimmi* is a difficult term to use in modern day nations as Kumaraswamy, a researcher who studied minorities in Muslim contexts has noted that,

Religious tolerance, personal protection and conditional community security of the *Dhimmi* in return for allegiance to the Islamic rule are very different from equality... In other words, if the believer and the *Dhimmi* are equal, where is the need to separate them politically as well as socially? ³⁵⁵

However, it would also be necessary to realize that Kam Weng's postulations may not be considered seriously by Malaysia's Islamic authorities because they would only consider an understanding of an Islamic state based on Islamic tradition rather than be willing to consider an innovative form of a modern Islamic state, especially from a *kaffir's* (an unbeliever's) perspective.

³⁵⁴ The Malaysian government has already labelled its non-Muslim citizens as *Dhimmi* in page six of its *Malaysia is an Islamic State* booklet that the Information Ministry published in 2001.

³⁵⁵ P.R. Kumaraswamy, 'Problems of Studying Minorities in the Middle East', in *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol.2, No.2, 2003, 249.

In addition, it is also possible to interpret that UMNO's quest for an Islamic state may not be entirely compatible with the stipulations of the Federal Constitution. Although the Constitution of Malaysia states Islam as the official religion of Malaysia, it may not be accurate to consider it as being equal to the notion of an Islamic State. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the father of independence and the first Prime Minister was noted to have said, 'I would like to make clear that this country is not an Islamic State as is generally understood, we merely provide that Islam shall be the official religion of the State'.³⁵⁶ His statement was in tandem with what was already affirmed by the Reid Commission who insisted on highlighting the secular identity of Malaya. Para 169 of the Reid Commission's report stated that,

The religion of Malaysia shall be Islam. The observance of this principle (as conceded by the Alliance itself) shall not impose any disability on non-Muslim nationals professing and practising their own religions and shall not imply that the State is not a secular State.³⁵⁷

Yet, despite such safeguards, the position of Malaysia as a secular state has often been challenged. Mohamed Azam Mohamed Adil is an associate professor and Deputy CEO of the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies Malaysia argues that even if the Malaysian Constitution does not explicitly claim that Malaysia is a secular state, Islam has been deliberately placed above all other religions of the state and therefore it would not be wrong to identify Malaysia as an Islamic State.³⁵⁸ Moreover, he also argues that because the *Agong* as the supreme monarch of the state takes office by declaring that he will protect the religion of Islam at all times, any claim that insist Malaysia is not Islamic state is actually irrelevant.³⁵⁹ Considering his arguments, it is possible to suggest that although Islam has been given an important role in Malaysia, the two reasons mentioned may not be sufficient to invalidate the original intentions of those who framed the constitution, who expressed the secular notion of the nation.

³⁵⁶ The Malaysian Parliament Records, HANSARD, 1st May 1958.

³⁵⁷ *Report of the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Commission*. Her Majesty's stationery office, Colonial No.330, 103.

³⁵⁸ Mohamed Azam Mohamed Adil, 'Federal Constitution: Is Malaysia a secular state?' in *Islam and Civilizational Renewal Journal*, Vol. 6, No.1, Kuala Lumpur: IAIS Publication, 2015,123.

³⁵⁹ *Mohamed Adil*, 'Federal Constitution', 123.

Consequently, the difference between an Islamic country and an Islamic State will need to be defined. For instance, although the government is keen to project itself as an Islamic State, as detailed through its *Malaysia is an Islamic State* booklet, the ability to define it in accordance to the corpus of an Islamic State may be fundamentally different. For instance, in order to claim Malaysia as an Islamic State, the government will have to set certain aspects of its Islamic governance in order. Pending issues, like the lack of uniformity in the aspects of Islamic law among the different states in Malaysia will need to be addressed first, as a fully functioning Islamic State would need to ensure standardization, especially in matters related to the interpretation of Islamic law. These variances have sometimes become a problem for Muslims when certain states issue *fatwas* that are not followed by other states.³⁶⁰ This lack of uniformity becomes an important challenge to the claim that Malaysia is already a homogenous, Islamic State. Moreover, when the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak joined the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia in 1963, the question of religion became one of the foremost contentious issues. For example, they were even wary of using the term Malaysia, as they feared that it would eventually make them inferior to the Malays who were entirely Muslims.³⁶¹ In addition, the Cobbold Commission concluded that ‘we are agreed that Islam should be the national religion for the Federation. We are satisfied that the proposal in no way jeopardises freedom of religion in the Federation, which in effect would be secular’.³⁶² As a result, the issue of non-compliance of the East Malaysian states becomes a serious misnomer for Malaysia to become recognised as an Islamic State. Therefore, it would not be wrong to postulate that these anomalies indicate that more systemic changes will need to be undertaken before Malaysia can be recognised as a singular, Islamic State entity. Not the least of which is getting most of its citizenry to agree with the notion.

³⁶⁰ Zainah Anwar, ‘Only in Malaysia: Where we have gone wrong with fatwa’, *The Star Online*, 4th August 2014, <<http://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/sharing-the-nation/2013/08/04/the-essence-of-fatwa/>>, Accessed 24th September 2014.

³⁶¹ Report of the Commission of Enquiry, North Borneo and Sarawak, 1962. The Cobbold Commission, 148 (d), Name of the Federation.

³⁶² Report of the Commission of Enquiry.

Nevertheless, when arguments are put forward to indicate that it may not be entirely possible to recognize Malaysia as an Islamic state, the situation is then utilised by UMNO to intensify its efforts to conform Malaysia to become an Islamic State. Tamir Moustaffa who described the erroneous aspects of Islamic law in Malaysia, observes that the dilemma actually benefited the UMNO-led government.

The ruling party claims to have delivered an ‘Islamic state’. With this pivot, the government highlights its ‘Islamic’ credentials, in a bid to curry favour with UMNO’s Malay Muslim base, and (ironically) to (again) undercut its Islamist party rival, PAS. In each guise—as bulwark against religious resurgence or as the guarantor of an ‘Islamic state’—the government seeks to benefit from the emotive tropes that are evoked by way of the secular versus-religious schema.³⁶³

The legitimacy of the arguments related to this dilemma were some of the aspects that Mahathir had in mind, 14 years later, when he claimed that Malaysia is neither a secular nor an Islamic State.³⁶⁴

However, based on the realities of increasing Islamization in Malaysia, it becomes possible to conclude that although the concept of Islamic State is not stated in the Federal Constitution, the nation is already becoming one by way of practice, a state of being that suits UMNO’s hegemonic agenda. How does UMNO successfully perpetuate such agenda to the nation’s masses?

3.3.5. UMNO’s control of media.

UMNO was able to promote its political and religious agenda to influence the nation by using certain state mechanisms that were under its control, making it possible to suggest that UMNO controlled what becomes public information, in order to shape public opinion about emergent issues and national concerns. For instance, through the buying of the groups of companies that controlled the media, UMNO often used the print and Television media to put forth its own analysis on key issues that took place in the nation. Paul Monash gave all the needed evidence of how the UMNO-led coalition and their cronies gradually took control

³⁶³ Moustaffa, ‘Judging in God’s Name’, 167.

³⁶⁴ ‘Secular or Islamic State? Neither, says Dr. M’, The Malay Mail Online, 19th June 2014, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/secular-or-islamic-state-neither-says-dr-m>>, Accessed 15th November 2014.

of the main television and print media.³⁶⁵ Moreover, John Hilley who noted the monopoly of media during the crisis when Mahathir sacked his deputy, seems to think that media output in Malaysia had an identifiable format that projected positive impressions of the ruling government, though the way it ‘prioritised, structured and delivered’ information.³⁶⁶ When Mustapha Anuar researched the relationship between *Politics and the Media in Malaysia* by scrutinizing the connection between state and mass media in Malaysia, he was able to reveal findings that point at UMNO as consciously manipulating mainstream media to use it as a propaganda tool during elections.³⁶⁷ Moreover, he goes on to accuse BN as the UMNO-led coalition as hampering freedom of information, accomplished through the assistance of press owners who are pro-government entities, and by using laws that curtail press freedom.³⁶⁸ Furthermore, he was able to note that the Malaysian press presented only a positive view of the government by providing scarce and mostly negative coverage of the opposition.³⁶⁹ Similarly, Graham Brown’s research (discussed earlier) has also demonstrated that the Malaysian Media was shackled by the government, using it for its own purposes.³⁷⁰

Consequently, it is possible to propose that because UMNO had the ability to manipulate the mainstream media to its own advantage, UMNO used it to project its own version of how Islam should be interpreted by Malaysians. This was found by an assistant professor at the Doshisha University in Japan, Yuki Shiazaki, who conducted a study to identify different groups in Malaysia that shaped public opinion in the national arena. His research observed that the controllers of Malaysian media organisations ‘cleverly eliminate discourses that are critical of the government and releases contents aiming to damage the

³⁶⁵ Monash, *Malay Supremacy*, 187-189.

³⁶⁶ Hilley, *Mahathirism*, 137.

³⁶⁷ Mustafa K. Anuar, ‘Politics and the Media in Malaysia’, in *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2005.

³⁶⁸ Anuar, ‘Politics and the Media in Malaysia’, 29-32.

³⁶⁹ Anuar, ‘Politics and the Media in Malaysia’, 28.

³⁷⁰ Graham Brown, ‘The rough and rosy road: sites of contestation in Malaysia’s shackled media industry’, in *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.78, No.1, 2005, 39-56.

image of the opposition'.³⁷¹ Moreover, he was also able to discover that these, state friendly actors, often collude with private Islamic groups who try to wield their own Islamic influence through the media. He then goes on to suggest that these multiple actors work together to ensure that the Malaysian public and private space gets saturated with Islamic influences. In Shiozaki's opinion, this gradual influencing that conditions the thinking of the masses is actually a welcome development. He seems to suggest that this is the main reason why Malaysia has not become like other radical Islamic nations that experience terrorism and civil war.³⁷²

Furthermore, UMNO uses the media to create the impression that it is the only Muslim party that could competently stand for Malay rights. Since PAS is the only other Malay-Muslim Party that fights for Islamic values and Islamic principles of governance, it often gets vilified through negative coverage. For example, when PAS leaders made statements on cultural and linguistic equality based on Islamic principles, UMNO quickly accused them of selling the birth-right of the Malays.³⁷³ Moreover, when PAS leaders held dialogue sessions with members of the Chinese community in a Chinese Assembly Hall, an UMNO controlled Malay daily noted that the hall was usually used for consuming pork and alcohol.³⁷⁴

However, such actions by UMNO are not without ramifications as these types of selective reporting may have given room for certain types of prejudices to develop. Amira Firdaus' research found evidence that media preferences were usually associated with ethnicity in Malaysia, where each ethnic group preferred to read only certain newspapers, watch selected news channels and listen to specific radio stations.³⁷⁵ Based on a survey taken

³⁷¹ Yuki Shiozaki, 'Formation of Public Spheres and Islamist Movements', in *Journal of the Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions*, No. 3, 2007, 109.

³⁷² Shiozaki, 'Formation of Public Spheres', 119.

³⁷³ *Utusan Malaysia* (Malay Daily), 6th December 1986, as cited by Kua Kio Soong in *Polarisation in Malaysia*, 41.

³⁷⁴ *Utusan Malaysia*, 6th December 1986, 41.

³⁷⁵ Amira Firdaus, 'Ethnic Identity and News Media Preferences in Malaysia', in *Media: Policies, Cultures and Futures in the Asia Pacific Region*, Curtin University Australia, 27th to 29th November 2006.

on university students, she found that most students preferred to read newspapers that were published in their own vernacular languages. Although she suggests that such a situation may have possibly risen due to each person being comfortable with their own vernacular languages, she highlighted the concern that only a small percentage of Indian and Chinese students were reading Malay language newspapers despite Malay being the National language.³⁷⁶ She expressed further anxiety when the outcome of the research also noted that each vernacular newspaper focused mainly on their own ethnic issues and concerns. Therefore, it becomes possible to suggest that the readers of these different newspapers actually have different perspectives on the important issues that emerge in the nation. Moreover, the researcher was also able to show the influencing role of the political parties over the different newspapers.

Utusan Malaysia is closely linked to the Malay political party UMNO, while The Star is closely affiliated with the Chinese political party MCA ... each party is in the business of looking after their ethnic interests. A casual look at the different newspapers should betray different agendas. And these agendas are then conveyed to their readers.³⁷⁷

When we hold all these aspects in tandem, a potentially divisive scenario emerges. Although it is normal for each ethnic community to safeguard its own interests, the repetitive rendering of ethno-political social agendas do not inculcate positive developments that are required in a multicultural environment like Malaysia. Furthermore, it also enables journalists and media managers with wrong motives to subtly implant innuendos that may not be true in reality.

This situation often emerged in the way UMNO used the media to portray Christians as working to topple the ruling government. In May 2011, the UMNO owned Malay newspaper *Utusan Malaysia*, carried a front-page headline with the title, *Malaysia Negara Kristian?* (Malaysia a Christian nation?). In the news article, an opposition Parliamentarian was accused of supporting a Christian program where supposed prayers to establish a Christian state were thought to have been made. The article alleged that around 35 Christian priests stood together in a circle while making a declaration prayer that Malaysia would become a Christian nation that would be led by a Christian Prime Minister. Subsequently,

³⁷⁶ Firdaus, 'Ethnic Identity', 12.

³⁷⁷ Firdaus, 'Ethnic Identity', 13.

the article implied that because a member of the opposition was present at the event, it would mean that this was actually part of the overall chauvinistic efforts of the Chinese opposition to use Christianity to overcome the supremacy of Islam that was being upheld by the present Malay majority government.³⁷⁸ Responding to the issue, the Christian community asked the Prime Minister to take action against the newspaper for publishing and spreading what it called, 'dangerous lies', that could potentially stir religious conflicts.³⁷⁹ Subsequently, the Home Affairs Ministry conducted investigation on the matter and announced that there was no case in the allegations that were made by the newspaper.³⁸⁰ However, it is possible to suggest that a repeated vilification of the Christian community has been able to influence the younger generation in UMNO. In August 2012, the youth wing of UMNO came under criticism for uploading a politically motivated statement on their Facebook fan page. It hosted a poster with the text: '*Jika anda setuju untuk jadikan Kristian sebagai agama rasmi persekutuan Malaysia, teruskan sokongan anda kepada Pakatan Rakyat. God bless you my son*' (Translation: If you agree to make Christianity as Malaysia's official religion, continue your support for Pakatan Rakyat. God Bless you my son). The message in the poster implied that anyone who votes for the Pakatan Rakyat as the opposition party would actually be voting for Malaysia to become a Christian nation. Although the offending poster was taken down by the website's administrators, criticism mounted against the UMNO Youth wing for allowing such remarks to appear in their Facebook page. Subsequently, the website administrators did not reveal who uploaded the offending contents but issued a public apology.³⁸¹ Nevertheless, as the fan page had garnered 52,593 likes to the poster, the issue

³⁷⁸ Rokiah Abdullah and Mohd. Khuzairi Ismail, '*Malaysia Negara Kristian?*' (Malaysia a Christian Nation?), <http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2011&dt=0507&pub=Utusan_Malaysia&sec=Muka_Hadapan&pg=mh_01.htm>, Accessed 17th May 2011.

³⁷⁹ Debra Chong, 'Christian leaders want PM to act against Utusan', 9th May 2011, <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/christian-leaders-want-pm-to-act-against-utusan/>>, Accessed 19th May 2011.

³⁸⁰ Aaron Ngui, 'Home Ministry confirms no case in Christianity becoming official religion', 17th October 2011, <<http://www.thesundaily.my/news/179115>>, Accessed 16th November 2011.

³⁸¹ Lisa J. Ariffin, 'UMNO Youth fan page apologizes for provocative Facebook post', 26th August 2012, <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/umno-youth-fanpage-apologises-for-provocative-facebook-post/>>, Accessed 30th August 2012.

managed to bring out the hidden thoughts about the perception of threat from Christians.³⁸² It suggests that many young Muslims felt that the danger of a Christian political takeover through the opposition was an actual possibility and were willing to share their feelings through the UMNO social media portals.

Consequently, some local academics have since suggested that ‘UMNO controlled vernacular media have dangerously slid down the path of ethno-centrism and intolerance in their discourse’.³⁸³ This has been allowed to happen because non-Muslims are publicly vilified, often projected as being ungrateful to the benevolent Malay government. For example, when the results of the 13th General Elections showed that a major share of the Chinese votes went to the opposition, UMNO owned Utusan Malaysia ran the headline, *Apa Lagi Orang Cina Mau* (What else do the Chinese Want)?³⁸⁴ The article claimed that the Chinese community was working with the opposition to topple UMNO, the only party that was trying to maintain a Malay monopolised government. Moreover, by asking what else do the Chinese want, the newspaper implied that the Chinese community was being greedy for more political power and were eyeing to wrest it from the Malays. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that UMNO came to a stage where it could get away with making scathing statements without being accountable, even when it publicly derides and insults other communities.

However, how does UMNO get away without being accountable, especially when it articulates ethno-centric, divisive matters through the media? It is possible to think that UMNO’s control of certain government portfolios also enabled it to control the media content. For instance, in Malaysia, it became acceptable for Prime Ministers to appoint UMNO politicians as Home Affairs Ministers and as Information Ministers. Subsequently, these ministers used their portfolios to control what became public consumption. For instance, Information Ministers like Mohammad Rahmat who served two terms (1978–1982,

³⁸² Alyaa Alhadjri, ‘UMNO denies link to controversial FB site’, 28th August 2012, <<http://www.thesundaily.my/news/473295>>, Accessed 30th August 2012.

³⁸³ Fauzi and Hamdan, ‘Political Islam under Najib’, 323.

³⁸⁴ Zulkiflee Bakar, ‘Apa Lagi Orang Cina Mau’, Utusan.com.my, 7th May 2013, <http://www1.utusan.com.my/utusan/Pilihan_Raya/20130507/px_03/Apa-lagi-orang-Cina-mahu>, Accessed 30th July 2013.

1987–1999) were openly recognised as UMNO’s propaganda tool.³⁸⁵ Former UMNO stalwarts like Zainuddin Maidin who served as Information Minister from 2006-2008 was the former chief editor of the UMNO controlled Utusan Malaysia. The information Ministry has since been renamed as Communications and Multimedia Ministry and continues to be led by UMNO politicians, with the last Minister of the previous ruling government being Syed Salleh Keruak, the UMNO Deputy Liaison Chairman for the state of Sabah.

However, it would not be wrong to propose that with the advent of the alternative media through the internet, UMNO’s lost some of its ability to claim a complete monopoly on information. John Hicks observed that new internet-based alternative news websites have been able to fill the previous ‘journalistic vacuum’ that existed in Malaysia.³⁸⁶ However, his bold claim of ‘many Malaysians now abandoning the mainstream press altogether in search of alternative news sources’ needs further scrutiny.³⁸⁷ Although the availability of alternative media and the desire for neutral reporting may seem to be successful, it has other connotations as well. Sharon Ling, who analysed the role of alternative media in Malaysia seems to think that it has yet to bring the needed change in society. She argues that, ‘it is not enough to merely point out to what the desirable alternative is, there must also be clear and practical solutions as to how this alternative can be achieved’.³⁸⁸ Therefore, it is possible to suggest that the alternative media should consciously find ways to bring positive changes in society, in ways that the UMNO controlled media has not be able to do.

Summary

This chapter pointed at some of the key reasons for the social dynamics that led to the polarization of Malaysian society. It then recognized the different ways why the non-Muslims

³⁸⁵ “Tok Mat ‘Mr Propaganda’ Terbaik (Tok Mat is the best Mr Propaganda)”, Malaysiakini, 1st January 2010, <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/120950>>, Accessed 15th December 2014.

³⁸⁶ Hilley, *Mahathirism*, 170.

³⁸⁷ Hilley, *Mahathirism*, 172.

³⁸⁸ Sharon Ling, ‘The Alternative Media in Malaysia: Their Potential and Limitations’, in Nick Couldry and James Curran (Eds.), *Contesting media power: Alternative media in a networked world*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, 296.

considered themselves as being marginalized by their government that was fixated by Islam. It then recognized some of the main roles and tools of the political party UMNO that legitimized these aspects. The next chapter will attempt to investigate the foremost responses of the Christians who live as part of the non-Muslim minority in Malaysia.

ECUMENICAL SOLIDARITY, PRAYER SOLIDARITY AND A SHARED POLITICAL CONCIOUSNESS

Chapter Four

Introduction

The main task of this chapter is to examine how specific solidarity initiatives began to develop among Christians in Malaysia. Its aim is to find out how these initiatives could be related with Islamization, especially as possible responses to the three main outcomes of Islamization that were explored in the previous chapter.

4.1. Ethnic and denominational realities.

The larger canvas of Malaysia as a multi-ethnic nation is a key factor that defines the ethnicity based reality of the Malaysian church. These realities are justified by the Christians as they desire to identify themselves along linguistic and ethnic sub-divisions that enable homogenous worship communities. Moreover, apart from these subdivisions most Christians have also chosen to remain within the scope of their own denominations which means that they have either little or no opportunity to engage with fellow Christians from other denominations. Consequently, it would not be wrong to think these two aspects have become the key historical realities that hindered the Malaysian Christian community from undertaking solidarity initiatives prior to Islamization.

Research suggests that one of the strong reasons for their divided stance is possibly due to the selective work of the Missionaries who came to Malaysia.³⁸⁹ For example, when some of the more experienced missionaries came to work in Malaysia, they were often prone to work among ethnic groups that they were already working with in their previous work in other countries. Due to their experience in language capabilities and cultural norms, they were naturally drawn to reach out to the local migrant community, whether it was China or India. Subsequently, when they began to see successful conversions rates, it caused them to further their work within the particular community.

³⁸⁹ A comprehensive historical overview of all the major denominations in Malaysia has been provided in Appendix 1. This is to minimize the number of words as well as to avoid a narrative style writing.

However, it is possible that such developments then perpetuated a parochial type of thinking among the converts themselves. For instance, the Evangelical Lutheran Church is one such denomination which only focusses on the Indian community, particularly the Tamil community in Malaysia. One main reason for this preference was the priority of the German missionaries from the Leipzig Evangelical Lutheran Mission, who were already working in Tamil Nadu, one of the states in southern India. Moreover, in November 1906, the Mission chose to send a Tamil worker, Thiruchiluvai Joseph, to work in Malaya, he too naturally focussed on the Tamils.³⁹⁰ Additionally, when Herman Matthes came in 1908 from the Lutheran Mission in India, he too focussed only on servicing the Lutherans in the northern region around Penang. Denominational ties were also significant as although the Tamil Lutherans were open to attend Tamil churches of other denominations, their identity as Lutherans remained. For instance, when the Methodist Bishop Thoburn started a Tamil Methodist Church in Kuala Lumpur in 1898, Tamil Lutherans were willing to attend the new church services but politely refrained from becoming full members.³⁹¹

Furthermore, the Chinese migrant workers in Malaya became the natural focus of Lutheran missionaries, helping to spur the growth of the Chinese Lutherans (LCMS). The Lutheran efforts to reach the Chinese were given an official impetus in June 1951, when the Commission on World Mission of the Lutheran World Federation (COWM) proposed for a survey to gauge the feasibility of mission work among the Chinese Diaspora in Malaya and Singapore.³⁹² It led to Bishop Sandergen to chair the First Southeast Asian Lutheran Consultative Council in 1952 with two papers presented for discussion.³⁹³ The first was, *The (Chinese) New Villages in Malaya - A Challenge to the Church of God*, with the second paper entitled, *Opportunities for Church Work among Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia* being presented by Russel Nelson, a professor at the Lutheran Seminary in Hong Kong. As

³⁹⁰ Goran Wiking and Samuel A. Abishegam (Eds.), in *And I Will Be With You: From Diaspora to Diocese: A History of the Tamil Lutherans in Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: ELCMS, 1994.

³⁹¹ N. C. Sargant, *The Dispersion of the Tamil Church*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1962, 89.

³⁹² Julius Paul, 'The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia', in Lee Kam Hing (*et. al*) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 208.

³⁹³ Warren Lau, *A Heavenly Vision: The Story of the Lutheran Church in Malaysia and Singapore, 1952-1991*, Kuala Lumpur: LCMS, 1993.

a result, Lutheran mission organisations felt moved to reach the Chinese in Malaya, causing the Chinese Lutherans to form a church body separate from the Tamils. It was termed as, The Lutheran Church of Malaysia and Singapore (LCMS) and was formally constituted in August 1963 with the American missionary Paul Alberti giving episcopal leadership.³⁹⁴

Moreover, the Presbyterians themselves had an inclination to minister among the Chinese when William Milne began the Presbyterian work in 1814.³⁹⁵ Although he initially began to work among the Scottish expatriates, he simultaneously reached out to the Chinese community. However, research reveals that Chinese outreach work received an impetus to develop much faster when Rev JAB Cook, who had missionary experience in China, came to Malaya in November 1881.³⁹⁶ Furthermore, when Rev Tay Sek Tin arrived in 1897, he established many more new Chinese congregations and by 1901 the Chinese congregations formed their own Chinese Synod.³⁹⁷ One of the reasons for the Chinese distinctiveness could also be because they were always looking back to the Presbyterian Church in China, ‘not only for its constitutional models but also for amendments to its structures rules and procedures’.³⁹⁸

The English speaking Presbytery on the other hand, were only concerned about ministering among Caucasian expatriates and English speaking locals. These were mostly Scottish planters and tin miners who were, ‘by and large absorbed into their own needs and involvement in the mission did not extend past providing financial assistance’.³⁹⁹ Consequently, in 1958, the English-speaking Presbyterian churches worked out their

³⁹⁴ Gideon Chang, ‘The Lutheran Church of Malaysia and Singapore’, in Lee Kam Hing (et al) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 254.

³⁹⁵ Robert M. Greer, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Singapore*, Singapore: Malaya Publishing House, 1956, 4.

³⁹⁶ Ann Johnson, *The Burning Bush*, Singapore: Dawn Publications, 1988, 79.

³⁹⁷ John Roxborough, ‘The Presbyterian Church’, in Lee Kam Hing (et. al) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 82.

³⁹⁸ Roxborough, ‘The Presbyterian Church’, 82.

³⁹⁹ Roxborough, ‘The Presbyterian Church’, 84.

independence from their British links and formed their own Synod.⁴⁰⁰ Although efforts to unite with the Chinese were explored, it proved to be difficult due to two key reasons. It has been proposed that this is both due to ‘affiliation to their country of origin rather than their country of residence’ and ‘difficulty in extending missions outside their grouping’.⁴⁰¹

However, the Methodist Missions, reached out to all the races by incorporating all their mission activities under one administration. For instance, in West Malaysia, the missionaries worked with both the Tamils and the Chinese while in East Malaysia, they reached out to the local Iban (indigenous) community as well as the Chinese migrants from Foochow. Whenever the missionary leadership needed to consolidate a particular ethnic grouping, or needed ministers to lead churches, they sourced Methodist ministers from either China or India who understood the respective ethnic cultures and could speak the language. Eventually, this led to an administrative system which provided for one episcopal head overseeing six different groupings. This has resulted in each Annual Conference grouping having its own President who manages the funding, administration and personnel within the network of churches under them. However, only the Trinity Annual Conference, which consists of English speaking churches, has both the Chinese as well as Indians as pastors and members. Others like the Chinese Annual Conference, the Tamil Annual Conference, the Iban Annual Conference, the Sarawak Chinese Annual Conference and the Sengoi (an indigenous people group) Mission Conference, are strictly ethnic based. This administrative arrangement has been maintained to allow each group to grow as they strategize and reach out to the challenges and needs of their own community. Moreover, having a single Bishop as the single overseer who ordains and approves ministers of the respective Annual Conferences helps to ensure a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, each group is very much independent of each other and mostly come together in a limited way for official purposes, namely in events like, the General Conference Combined Pastors’ School and General Conference Prayer Conventions.

⁴⁰⁰ Roxborough, ‘The Presbyterian Church’, 76.

⁴⁰¹ Roxborough, ‘The Presbyterian Church’, 77.

The Catholic and Anglican churches are not subdivided according to ethnic groupings but are segregated according to geographical demarcations and come under dioceses that function as regional entities. However, most churches within these dioceses are made up of homogenous communities. For instance, when a particular church is constituted by members who are Indians, the parish priest who is posted there will most likely be an ethnic Indian who would then conduct services in Tamil.

Other denominations like the Mar Thoma church exclusively cater for Indians whose origins are from the Indian state of Kerala. In India they are recognized as ethnic Malayalee who choose to worship in their mother tongue, Malayalam. Similarly, although a few Indians have joined English speaking Baptist congregations, the Baptist Convention in Malaysia is very much a Chinese mainstay. Accordingly, it would be safe to suggest that within the Malaysian context, only churches who conduct their worship in English seem to be able to attract members from all races. For instance, when the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) church that caters mainly for the indigenous East Malaysians started a congregation in West Malaysia and conducted worship in English, they were able to attract both the Chinese and Indians to become their members. Likewise, although many of the local AOG churches function as a multi-ethnic church under one single administration, they often have four different language services with their own pastors to cater for the specific ethnic and language groupings.

Although mono-ethnic worship services have been helpful to facilitate ministry matters, church members of mono-ethnic communities have very little interaction with members from other ethnic backgrounds, especially if they come from a different denomination. This is the reality that has kept Christians in Malaysia away from each other. Consequently, we could propose that denominational divisions and the ethno-linguistic reality of multi-racial Malaysia become the two main factors that hindered any meaningful solidarity to develop.

4.2. Ecumenical Solidarity.

Research indicates that effects of Islamization have since forced the Christian community to find ways to strengthen existing connections and forge new ones with fellow Christians from other denominations. The National Christian Conferences (NCC) gatherings as ecumenical

solidarity gatherings helped them to respond collectively to issues related to Islamization especially by invigorating their previously dormant ties.

There is some useful literature on Malaysian ecumenism that is available for the purposes of this research. A booklet by John Roxborough provides a valuable background.⁴⁰² Roxborough has also contributed one segment on Malaysian ecumenism within a book that chronicles the overall Malaysian church history.⁴⁰³ However, both his books were published more than two decades ago and therefore do not fully represent current developments. More recently, Chong Eu Choong very briefly describes the Christian community's need to come together and identifies them as a response 'to the government's encroachment on their religious sphere'.⁴⁰⁴ His writings on ecumenism constitute only a small part of one chapter within a book that discusses religious diversity in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Though these works appear to give an overview of Malaysian ecumenism, none of the works have dealt with the role and development of the NCC gatherings which emerged as the prime fruit of Malaysian ecumenism. Moreover, the ecumenical solidarity of the Malaysian church cannot be fully understood without examining the roots that led to the periodical NCC gatherings. Furthermore, it is through the early NCC gatherings that the formation of one single ecumenical body which represents the Malaysian church emerged. In addition to these, it is through NCC gatherings that Christians in Malaysia gained the platform to meet together and converse meaningfully with each another. Consequently, the articulations during the NCC gatherings empowered the Malaysian church to take on the larger scheme of Islamization as it provided an avenue for Malaysian Christians to frame concrete responses towards its after-effects. Therefore, since relevant research on the evolutionary stages of ecumenical thought and action in Malaysia is lacking, this study will

⁴⁰² John Roxborough, *A Common Voice: A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Malaysia*, Petaling Jaya: Council of Churches of Malaysia, 1991.

⁴⁰³ John Roxborough, 'The Story of Ecumenism', in Lee Kam Hing (*et al*) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992.

⁴⁰⁴ Choong, 'The Christian Response', 296.

attempt both to focus on the embryonic stages of the NCC gatherings as well as to discover the specific outcomes of the NCC gatherings.

4.2.1 Early collaborations.

This segment investigates some of the earlier solidarity initiatives of the Malaysian churches as a way of identifying some of the key milestones that helped later solidarity networking to develop. One of the earliest forms of collaboration began through the sharing of church premises. For example, when new mission bodies came into Malaysia, they needed premises to conduct their mission activities and had to rely on existing churches to hold worship services. A Mar Thoma church leader wrote:

When we began to organise as a church here, we were greatly assisted by sister churches ... even today in parishes where we have no church building of our own, services are held in other church buildings and we are ever grateful.⁴⁰⁵

Similarly, during the war years, the Assemblies of God (AOG) churches met in premises of St Mary's (Anglican) Church, Presbyterian Church and the Methodist School hall.⁴⁰⁶ Moreover, church properties were sometimes sold to sister denominations for the Christian missions in the area to continue unhindered. For example, in 1937 the Methodists sold one of their properties on the island of Penang for the use of Lutheran missions.⁴⁰⁷

Furthermore, cooperation was also evident when the First Southeast Asia Lutheran Consultative Conference was organised in 1952 in the Wesley Methodist Church in Penang.⁴⁰⁸ Though the conference was organised to assess the possibility of starting Lutheran work among the Chinese migrants in Malaya, the Methodist church welcomed the Lutheran initiative. Moreover, the Methodists used their Methodist Publishing House in Singapore to

⁴⁰⁵ Verghis George, 'The Mar Thoma Church', in Lee Kam Hing (*et al*) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 227.

⁴⁰⁶ Tan, 'The Assemblies of God', 232.

⁴⁰⁷ Paul, 'The Evangelical Lutheran Church', 204.

⁴⁰⁸ Paul, 'The Evangelical Lutheran Church', 209.

bring out a newsprint called the Malaysia Message that highlighted the region's overall mission activities which 'did a great deal for inter-church understanding and cooperation'.⁴⁰⁹

However, encouragement for formal ecumenical networking and ecumenical partnerships came from outside the nation. For instance, it was John Mott, the chairman of the Edinburgh World Mission Conference of 1910 who visited Malaya in 1913 as part of his Asian tour, who pushed the agenda of networking and cooperation among denominations.⁴¹⁰ His visit encouraged the local clergy to initiate the Life and Work Movement. Functioning with the motto, 'doctrine divides and action unites' they began monthly meetings around the 1920s.⁴¹¹ Subsequently, in the 1930s, this ad-hoc group gradually evolved to become a formal committee that was termed as the 'Malayan Committee of Reference and Counsel'.⁴¹² Nevertheless, the need for a single body that could discuss matters of common interest only became accentuated during World War Two (1939 to 1945).

The effects of World War Two, especially in the way it promoted later ecumenical partnerships to develop cannot be overstated. For instance, theological barriers were breached when Anglican clergy were invited to celebrate communion services for AOG congregations.⁴¹³ Moreover, when unity in worship began to emerge in the Changi Prison in Singapore, some observers think that it was from the experiences of Changi prison 'that the commitment towards church unity and ecumenism began to take root'.⁴¹⁴ Furthermore, when the British in Malaya surrendered to the Japanese in February 1942, only Bishop Wilson of the Anglican Church was allowed to continue his ministerial work. To consolidate what had automatically become an inter-denominational ministry, Bishop Wilson formed a 'Federation of Christian Churches in Malaya'.⁴¹⁵ Through this federation, united services for all

⁴⁰⁹ Roxborough, 'The Story of Ecumenism', 280.

⁴¹⁰ Roxborough, *A Common Voice*, 6.

⁴¹¹ Roxborough, 'The Story of Ecumenism', 283.

⁴¹² Roxborough, 'The Story of Ecumenism', 283.

⁴¹³ Tan, 'The Assemblies of God', 232.

⁴¹⁴ Walters, *Knowing our neighbor*, 194.

⁴¹⁵ Roxborough, 'The Story of Ecumenism', 288.

denominations were held in the larger churches that were not destroyed by Japanese bombs. Despite its constrained activities due to Japanese restrictions, 'it achieved a great deal and set important precedents of cooperation for the future'.⁴¹⁶ Furthermore, when the war years ended in 1945, specific steps were taken to initiate a formal body that could function at a national level. Subsequently, some of the protestant clergy worked together to form the Malayan Christian Council (MCC) in January 1948.⁴¹⁷ Consequently, it is possible to think that the spontaneous solidarity that emerged under duress during the Japanese occupation would become a type of precursor for later ecumenical movements to develop, especially as a response to the difficult overbearing policies of an Islamic government.

Although the MCC focussed mainly on issues related to cooperation and unity between churches and clergy, the MCC was also forced to take on another role, as a recognised representative of the Christian community. For instance, when the nation marched towards independence, MCC made several representations to negotiate with the Reid Commission that was drawing up the new constitution for the nation. However, the MCC's push to ensure freedom of religion for all was not entirely successful, as they were not able to put the clause, 'freedom to profess, practice, propagate and change' into the new Federal Constitution.⁴¹⁸ In 1965, the MCC was renamed Council of Churches of Malaysia and Singapore (CCMS) when Singapore moved out of Malaysia to become a separate nation. Moreover, it would be useful to note that the Malaysian government itself began to recognize the valuable role of CCMS in the life of the nation. After the racial riots of 13th May 1969, the government formed a Goodwill Council and The National Consultative Council to address emerging issues that could divide the nation and CCMS representatives were invited to become part of both the reconciliatory councils.⁴¹⁹ Subsequently, in 1975, Malaysia and

⁴¹⁶ Michael S. Northcott, 'Two Hundred Years of Anglican Mission', in Lee Kam Hing (*et al*) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 53.

⁴¹⁷ John Roxborough, *A History of Christianity in Malaysia*, Singapore: Genesis Books and Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, 2014, 81.

⁴¹⁸ Roxborough, 'The Story of Ecumenism', 302.

⁴¹⁹ Roxborough, 'The Story of Ecumenism', 303.

Singapore formed two separate councils, with the Malaysian segment becoming known as the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM).

4.2.2 National Christian Conferences as Ecumenical gatherings.

Ecumenism has been described as ‘the organised attempt to bring about the cooperation and unity of all believers in Christ’, with the word having Greek origins which denote a sense of being in a global household.⁴²⁰ Moreover, because religion by itself is recognised as a way of forming solidarity nucleuses that focus on common entities and rituals, sociologists believe that these solidarity nucleuses serve a social function by giving a larger, collective meaning to its adherents.⁴²¹ Accordingly, it becomes possible to suggest that when one’s own religion and religious expression is either repressed or restricted, it becomes a strong reason for a more collective, albeit wider solidarity to be developed. Consequently, the National Christian Conferences (NCC) became the most important forum that both initiated and fostered greater ecumenical solidarity among Christians in Malaysia.⁴²² Furthermore, when the pressures caused by Islamization became a key focus of their deliberations, ecumenical solidarity became a matter of priority, enabling them to rise above their denominational differences.

4.2.2.1. Voicing of grievances.

It is safe to suggest that the effects of Islamization became a key factor that dominated the thinking of Christians when they came together for the NCC gatherings. For instance, the themes of the NCC and their workshop topics reveal that concern for the nation was paramount in the minds of the NCC organizers, especially in relation to the Christian community’s need to live out its witness within the Muslim majority nation. Moreover, the

⁴²⁰ Timothy P. Weber, ‘Ecumenism’, in Walter A. Elwell (Ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984, 340.

⁴²¹ Richard Sosis and Candace Alcorta, ‘Signalling, Solidarity, and the Sacred: The Evolution of Religious Behaviour’, in *Evolutionary Anthropology*, Vol.12, No. 6, 2003, 265.

⁴²² A specific review on each of the individual NCC gatherings till the Ninth NCC is made available in Appendix Two.

lamenting voices caused by Islamization began to repeatedly emerge as signs of distress signals, both from the speakers as well as the participants.

During the second NCC, the duress caused by Islamization was openly discussed, leading one of the resolutions to directly address the issue:

The rights of all religious bodies were being suppressed by the government. Thus, a consultative body amongst religious leaders had been started to discuss these problems. It was proposed that the National Christian body to be set up, should take the initiative to liaise with the leaders of other faiths on such matters.⁴²³

This resolution, which came as a direct response to effects of Islamization, became an important mandate that led to the formation of the Christian Federation of Malaysia as an ecumenical body that would represent the interest of both Catholics and the Protestants. Moreover, it also empowered the new body to liaise with leaders from other faiths.

At the third NCC, the topic of ‘Christian and the State’ was discussed, in order to understand a Christian’s role in the increasingly Islam influenced nation. The speaker, Balan Seling from East Malaysia noted that Christians must firstly strive to be responsible citizens of the State because the Bible required them to do so. However, he also recognized that due to the difficulties that Malaysian Christians were facing due to Islamization, this scriptural mandate had become something difficult to follow. Moreover, he further noted that based on his experience, ‘many a time we do meet with many problems and difficulties. And many times the problems remain unsolved’.⁴²⁴ He then went on to highlight the difficulties caused by the banning of the import of Bibles from Indonesia, ‘when the ban was imposed we were put in a great dilemma and confusion and fear ... and as to how we would exist as a Christian community without our holy book.’⁴²⁵ He lamented that the sale and distribution had become

⁴²³ Report of the Second National Christian Conference, *Witnessing in a Multi-Religious Society*, 10th to 13th August 1982, Kuala Lumpur, 105.

⁴²⁴ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, *Christian Commitment: Imperatives, Implications and Impact*, 17th to 20th February 1987, 40.

⁴²⁵ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 40.

very much restricted where, ‘we are not allowed to sell it even in our own Church bookshop in town’.⁴²⁶

The respondent to the topic, Dr Lee Kam Hing, re-iterated that the religious climate of Malaysia was indeed moving towards a challenging trend due to increasing Islamization and therefore needed ‘serious questioning as fundamental Islamic groups insist on radical changes.’⁴²⁷ He then asked an audacious question, ‘Are Christians to accept oppressive governments and interpret these as God’s way of chastising the community?’⁴²⁸ In the process of answering the question, Kam Hing pointed out that certain difficulties were not only caused by the state mechanisms but also by ‘some political leaders who had been careless in making unsubstantiated statements and allegations against Christians and the church in this country’.⁴²⁹

The participants of the fourth NCC continued to vocalize their dissatisfaction over the government’s preference towards Islam at the cost of side-lining other religions. One speaker predicted, ‘In the 1990s the Malaysian Church will probably need to be even more vigilant and courageous to speak out against further erosions of human rights, not the least of which is freedom of religion.’⁴³⁰ As a response, one respondent noted that increased solidarity through ecumenism could become one of the ways to fight against the limits on religious freedom. He said,

Already we are in a weak bargaining position ... Any group that has disunity can be broken up on the principle of divide and rule. Now, ecumenism is a God sent reversal of our previous history of church division.⁴³¹

At the sixth NCC, Bishop Yong Ping Chung delivered the keynote address and highlighted the issue of Islam’s dominance over other religious expressions in Malaysia and

⁴²⁶ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 40.

⁴²⁷ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 43.

⁴²⁸ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 43.

⁴²⁹ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 46.

⁴³⁰ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 62.

⁴³¹ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 48.

iterated that in order for a multi-religious nation such as Malaysia to flourish in its diversity, a middle way that does not tolerate one community dominating the other was needed.⁴³² However, he then urged Christians in Malaysia to work towards peace and reconciliation. He stated,

Amidst hatred and hostility, we preach Christ and work for peace among people. In a world of power politics, we work to protect the weak and build a just order. In a world torn apart by religious intolerance, we work for reconciliation.⁴³³

The Bible study leader, Paul Tan also noted that ‘the violations against human rights, which often lead to torture and even death in the name of security and progress of the country, are shameless acts by politicians to remain in power. We have and are experiencing these violations in Malaysia.’⁴³⁴ Tan Kim Sai, who spoke on the topic: The Changing Religious and Cultural Scene of Malaysia, touched on Islamization as affecting the harmony of the multi-religious society of Malaysia. He expressed his anxiety on Islamic law taking precedence over Civil law and expressed his disappointment at the government’s decision to omit Christianity in the compulsory Islamic and Asian Civilisations course for school students.⁴³⁵ He felt that the exclusion was unfair on the part of the government as it omitted Christianity’s contribution to world civilisation. He also expressed his unhappiness over the government’s decision to ban the animated movie, *Joseph: The Prince of Egypt*. The movie was banned due to protest from Muslims who did not want Islamic prophets to be depicted in any form or image, which then resulted in Christians being denied the choice of watching the movie. Such highhandedness by the government caused him to ask the participants, ‘The question is if such a measure is to be applied consistently, where would the limits be?’⁴³⁶

At the seventh NCC that took place in 2005, the collective grievances of the Malaysian Christian community were continued to be expressed, despite the change in the

⁴³² Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, *With Christ into the New Millennium – Bearing Hope in a Changing World*, 5th to 8th April 1999, 9.

⁴³³ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 9.

⁴³⁴ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 13.

⁴³⁵ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference. 28.

⁴³⁶ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 29.

premiership that saw Prime Minister Badawi taking over from Mahathir in 2003. The participants were informed that the government had recognized that the racial and religious polarities had been taking place and had since formed two departments to attempt greater integration and unity. The first department was known as, *Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional* (Department of National Unity and Integration) and the second was called *Jawatankuasa Keagamaan Panel Penasihat Perpaduan Negara* (Religious Advisory Council for National Unity). However, Bishop Paul Tan mentioned that although these organisational efforts of the government were commendable, the main cause of the failure of integration and unity was because the government had positioned Islam above other religions. He said:

What is more essential is a change of mindset. No matter what the government does, if a group of people refuses to accept others as equals and is determined to discriminate against them, failure is sure to meet us. ⁴³⁷

He also expressed that, ‘any other kind of unity would only last for a short time because of injustice and lack of acceptance of others as they will inevitably break into difficult conflicts and even battles’.⁴³⁸ These were bold statements from a leader who was not afraid to point the finger at the hegemony of Islam as one of the causes for lack of integration among the different races. At the same NCC, a Muslim lawyer, Malik Imtiaz, was invited to present a paper titled: *Our Journey towards National Integration*. He too commented on the effects of increasing dominance of Islam in Malaysia. He then quoted from his presentation in another forum, ‘Read the news and one begins to wonder what is happening to this country, whether this is the same country they were born in. Islam is being touted, directly and indirectly, as a superior religion’.⁴³⁹ He argued that with the increasing Islamization of the socio-political

⁴³⁷ Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, *National Integration and Unity - The Church's Response*, CFM, 20th to 22nd October 2005, 13.

⁴³⁸ Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, 15.

⁴³⁹ Quoted from ‘Human Rights, Good Governance and a Harmonious Society: Contemplating the Freedom from Discrimination in Malaysia’ - Paper presented at the 2004 Human Rights Commission of Malaysia Annual Conference, September 2004, Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, 37.

sphere, Malaysian society had moved from being a multi-religious, free democracy to become 'a monolithic, pseudo-theocracy'.⁴⁴⁰

At the eighth NCC, a Ten Point Summary was produced as a condensation of the two-day session. In the summary segment, the aim of the particular NCC was stated clearly, 'The goal of the 8th National Christian Conference is to initiate a strategic response towards the Islamization process in Malaysia and to propose appropriate action plan for Christian communities and churches in Malaysia.'⁴⁴¹ It was an upfront and open verbalization of the growing pressure that the Malaysian church was facing from the increased Islamization of the nation. During the NCC, the predicaments faced by Christian students was highlighted as one of the serious issues. One speaker alleged that some children from the kindergarten level were being taught Islamic prayers, even in Christian mission schools that were under the control of the government. He expressed dismay at the injustice in the government policy which prohibited Christian prayers from being said in Christian mission schools.⁴⁴² Another speaker, Jerry Dusing, a pastor who worked in the interiors of East Malaysia, highlighted several cases where tribal Christians were told to register new births with Malay sounding names in order for them to be issued with birth certificates. As a result, Christian children who were given Malay sounding names faced difficulties when they went to school, as they were being told by Muslim teachers to attend Islamic classes.

Consequently, all these expressions of grievances from the NCC gatherings strongly indicate that Malaysian Christians came together ecumenically mainly to connect with those who were undergoing similar predicaments, as it became a useful way to deal with their difficult experiences caused by the effects of Islamization. However, this observation leads us to ask, if they had come together in the name of ecumenism primarily to share their anxious concerns, how can we consider these initiatives as genuine efforts towards ecumenical solidarity?

⁴⁴⁰ Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, 39.

⁴⁴¹ Eighth NCC Plenary Sessions - 10 Points Summary.

⁴⁴² Record of proceedings of the Eighth NCC, 40.

In order to analyze the question further, the results from a particular sociological research experiment could become useful for our investigation purposes. The sociologists who conducted a study to discover different aspects of solidarity were able to distinguish between two different forms of solidarity. One was defined as, Generalised Exchange, which is understood as an indirect form of solidarity as opposed to, Restricted Exchange, which is a direct form of solidarity.⁴⁴³ In the experiment, group members in the Generalised Exchange category were enabled to enjoy benefits from anyone, while groups in the Restricted Exchange category were only allowed to give and receive benefits from specific individuals. The findings of the experiment concluded that the Generalised Exchange form of relationship had brought about a greater sense of affiliation and solidarity.⁴⁴⁴ When we bring these findings to make a comparative analysis with the Malaysian context (whereby we take ecumenical affiliation to mean Generalised Exchange and denominational affiliation to reflect Restricted Exchange), ecumenical affiliation could be recognized as being able to invoke a greater sense of solidarity. This would then mean that the Malaysian Christians' sense of solidarity with the larger ecumenical body was greater in value as compared to their solidarity with their own denominations. In other words, being affiliated with fellow Christians in Malaysia was something that was able to give worth and significance for them.

Moreover, another query will also need to be investigated, was the ecumenism efforts a temporary endeavour or a sustainable solidarity initiative? In order to understand the inner motivations of Malaysian Christians, the findings of another sociological study becomes relevant. In his research entitled, *The Effects of Religious Discrimination on Ethno-Religious Protest and Rebellion*, Jonathan Fox tested three hypotheses statements.⁴⁴⁵ His first hypothesis stated that religious discrimination, whatever its cause, is likely to result in grievances. His second hypothesis stated that religious grievances cause protest to emerge among those who have formed these grievances. His third hypothesis stated that religious

⁴⁴³ Linda D. Molm (*et al*), 'Building Solidarity through Generalized Exchange: A Theory of Reciprocity', in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.113, No.1, 2007, 208.

⁴⁴⁴ Molm, 'Building Solidarity', 238-239.

⁴⁴⁵ Jonathan Fox, 'The Effects of Religious Discrimination on Ethno-Religious Protest and Rebellion' in *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol. XX, No.1, 2000.

grievances are also likely to cause rebellion. After testing the three hypothesis statements on the experiences of specific ethnic communities, he was able to made empirical conclusions. To begin with, he found that his first hypothesis could be confirmed as being valid as his observations revealed that religiously discriminated ethnic communities actually accumulated grievances and tried to make collective responses to their difficulties. However, the results of the investigation of his second and third hypothesis did not come to the conclusions that he had anticipated.⁴⁴⁶ Based on the findings, he found that although the affected ethno-religious groups did harbour grievances due to their experiences of discrimination, these grievances did not automatically result in either protest or rebellion.

Fox then attempts to offer specific deductions based on his research. Firstly, he affirms that religion based discriminations become valid reasons for potential conflicts to emerge. Secondly, religious discrimination also becomes accentuated when other forms of grievances, like ethnic issues, become related to it as well. Thirdly, he found that religious grievances only move to become rebellion when the prevailing conditions become suitable for such an action to emerge.⁴⁴⁷

Fox's findings became very useful in understanding the Malaysian context of ecumenism. Firstly, the Malaysian church as a non-Muslim religious caucus, could be noted to have accumulated grievances as a result of the Islamization process. Moreover, similar to Fox's findings on his second and third hypothesis, the Malaysian church has not seen the need to stage either a physical protest or resort to rebellion as their preferred method of response. One possible reason is because of what Fox himself has suggested, that the absence of protest may be due to the overbearing nature of the government, 'the more repressive the government, the more difficult it is to engage in protest activities'.⁴⁴⁸ Moreover, it is also possible that the Malaysian church may have become resigned to the fact that since they are already living within the ambit of an Islamic nation, therefore they would not be able to challenge its dominion. Additionally, it is also possible to think that the Malaysian church

⁴⁴⁶ Fox, 'The Effects'.

⁴⁴⁷ Jonathan Fox, 'The Effects'.

⁴⁴⁸ Jonathan Fox, 'The Effects'.

did not seek ways to engage in outward physical protest because they already had an avenue to express their feelings of discontent within themselves, through their periodical ecumenical gatherings.⁴⁴⁹ Therefore, the availability of ecumenical avenues to share their grievances could be construed as the creation of a form of coping mechanism. Consequently, it would not be wrong to propose that the organising of ecumenical bodies and the subsequent ecumenical gatherings have since been able to provide an avenue for the Malaysian Christians to come together to voice their protest, albeit among themselves first.

4.2.2.2 Participants.

The need to investigate the composition and role of the participants of the NCC becomes vital as they represent the foundational blocks of Malaysian ecumenical solidarity. The First NCC was mostly attended by the members from the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM), as it was CCM that was instrumental in organizing the first NCC in 1979. They could only work within their own scope of influence, which was the mainline protestant churches. The Catholic Church in Malaysia and the later established Pentecostal churches had not been keen to become part of the CCM partly because they did not see the need to become part of another organization which had its own policy and direction. Moreover, up until Mahathir's becoming into Prime Minister and his efforts to bring about Islamization, there was no impending urgency for any collaborative efforts.

Nevertheless, the responses to the NCC gatherings indicate that groundswell support began to emerge for concerted ecumenical endeavour in Malaysia. For example, despite the limitations of the CCM's scope of influence, the first NCC that was themed, 'Working Together for Christ' was attended by 150 participants from both East and West Malaysia. It was an indication that Malaysian Christians were willing to give their time and attention to something that they had considered vital to the life of the Malaysian church. Furthermore, it is also possible to suggest that these participants came with the belief that the NCC could provide them a valuable platform to discuss pertinent issues as no such national level ecumenical gathering had been organised thus far. Moreover, the fact that these participants

⁴⁴⁹ However, Christians in Malaysia have sometimes joined with other civil society groups to display their protest. This aspect will be dealt with in later parts of this chapter.

were not just passive observers but put forth ideas as to how Malaysian church solidarity should be established in the future emerged at the end of the First NCC, especially when the participants unanimously called for new ways to move forward. They framed resolutions to urge the Christian community in Malaysia to maintain a stand of solidarity on all social, economic and political issues. Moreover, the seriousness of the participants became even more evident when they pushed for a second NCC to be organized, to address national-level issues that needed attention.⁴⁵⁰

Subsequently, the second NCC that was organized in 1982 saw 270 participants coming together as registered delegates. It was very much a follow up to the first gathering and was able to exude an important signal that ecumenical solidarity in Malaysia was beginning to gain traction. Moreover, it was proof of seriousness on the part of the different denominations, who encouraged more people to attend the NCC and were willing to pay for their registration costs. It is then possible to think that these developments became signs of change in the way the Malaysian church was shifting its attitude towards ecumenism. The earlier salient tendency of the Malaysian church which asked, do we really need ecumenism, was gradually being replaced by the query, how best can we do ecumenism?

The third NCC, convened in 1987, became a landmark event for the Malaysian church as it was organised by the newly formed Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), the single-most representative body that encompassed all the churches in Malaysia. Moreover, it is important to note that the successful formation of the CFM itself came about as a result of a resolution by the participants of the second NCC. The CFM was inaugurated in 1985 and became officially registered with the government in January 1986.⁴⁵¹ For the first time, the NCC was attended by participants from the three main blocs that constituted the gamut of the Christian community in Malaysia. The three blocs were, Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM), which represented the traditional mainline churches, the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) which was instituted in 1983 to represent all of the

⁴⁵⁰ Report of the First National Christian Conference, *Working Together for Christ*, 20th to 23rd February 1979, 80.

⁴⁵¹ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 1.

Pentecostals, Assembly of God and independent churches⁴⁵² and the Catholic Church, through its Catholic Bishops Conference. The subsequent fourth NCC in 1991 saw a record number of participants in attendance with a total of 310 persons in attendance.

It would be useful to ask, why did the number of participants increase and why did the second NCC push for the formation of a single representative body for all Christians? Ecumenism has sometimes been identified as a movement for unity as part and parcel of being God's church.⁴⁵³ However, not all forms of ecumenism can be thought of as being similar. James Kelly, a Sociology professor, suggests that there are actually different levels of ecumenical partnerships and shows that ecumenical activity mostly results from different yet inter-related causes. In his study, he claims that because the mythical core identity of Christianity is universal, it contains 'powerful aspirations towards human solidarity' which is the basic level ecumenism.⁴⁵⁴ He then attempts to prove his claim by showing that most Christians have the tendency to be involved in some form of 'folk ecumenism', where they give to charities from other denominations and are willing attend services of congregations other than their own.⁴⁵⁵ The next level of ecumenism could be observed when solidarity is interrelated with other issues and illustrates that these types of ecumenism could be found among Christians when it is related to social justice issues.⁴⁵⁶ Accordingly, he believes that in order for Christians to move beyond folk ecumenism, ecumenists need to evolve to become planned coalitions. To explain his claim, he gives the example of pro-life activists who work together as a planned coalition and even succeed in bringing people from different churches

⁴⁵² In line with the main thrust of this thesis, it would be useful to understand that the formation of the NECF itself has been noted to be birthed due to the effects of increased Islamization. The history section of the NECF website notes that: The National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) Malaysia was birthed in trying and testing times... These constraints were the partial banning of Malay Language Bible ..., the limiting of the number of sites for worship which affected the status of independent churches. <<http://www.necf.org.my/index.cfm?menuid=3>>, Accessed 12th August 2012.

⁴⁵³ Gustave Thills, 'From Ecumenism to Ecumenicity', in Hans Kung (Editor), *Post Ecumenical Christianity*, Freiburg: Herder and Herder, 1970, 142.

⁴⁵⁴ James R. Kelly, 'Spirals Not Cycles: Towards an Analytic Approach to the Sources and Stages of Ecumenism', in *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 32, No. 1, September 1990, 6.

⁴⁵⁵ Kelly, 'Spirals Not Cycles', 9.

⁴⁵⁶ Kelly, 'Spirals Not Cycles', 10.

together.⁴⁵⁷ Through such types of organized engagements, people begin to learn about others and engage with one another, which for him, is the process of ecumenism. Therefore, because it is a process, he points to the spiral-like quality of ecumenism which ‘becomes an unending work of the church’.⁴⁵⁸ It is a spiral because ecumenists begin from a particular point and those after them continually carry the past achievements forward to form deeper collective consciousness and inevitably grow wider in their influence.⁴⁵⁹ He differentiates this from a cyclical process, where one cycle is completed before another begins, within the same sphere.

When we relate his finding to the Malaysian context, it would be possible to recognise that the NCC gatherings became platforms for ‘planned coalitions’ as stated by James Kelly and were significantly different from the occasional ‘folk ecumenism’ way of interaction. Moreover, it is also relevant to understand that although Islamization had given impetus for Christians in Malaysia to bring themselves together, they now needed to learn how to understand and grow in their relationship with each other. Furthermore, the beginnings that were provided through the first few ecumenical solidarity gatherings set the outward growth of the spiral into motion. Therefore, the role and function of the NCC participants cannot be underestimated, as most of those who attended these ecumenical gatherings took back fresh insights and new relationships. Furthermore the NCC had also provided them with the unique experience of worshipping together with Christians from other confessions. These experiences of worship have sometimes been recognized as invaluable milestones that lead to the growth of ecumenical convictions.⁴⁶⁰ Consequently, it becomes possible to postulate that through the NCC gatherings, the thinking together and worshipping together in ecumenical solidarity eventually caused their own faith dimensions to be extended. These experiences then helped them to impact others as they themselves unconsciously became the

⁴⁵⁷ Kelly, ‘Spirals Not Cycles’, 11.

⁴⁵⁸ Kelly, ‘Spirals Not Cycles’, 12.

⁴⁵⁹ Kelly, ‘Spirals Not Cycles’, 12.

⁴⁶⁰ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Worship With One Accord: Where Liturgy and Ecumenism Embrace*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

conduits for ecumenism, as the grass-root, local level inter-connectedness of ecumenical solidarity of the Malaysian church.

4.2.2.3 Speakers.

Evidence from research suggests that the inspiration to engage ecumenically mostly came from the speakers of the NCC gatherings who challenged the participants to expand their vision on ecumenical solidarity. Theologians like Charles West, who is an academic who functioned as the Director of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute in Switzerland and went on to become the Academic Dean of Princeton Seminary, has articulated that learning about ecumenism very often takes place only when specific persons take efforts to foster such thinking.⁴⁶¹ Furthermore, he also suggests that ecumenical thought and understanding cannot be assumed to emerge on its own but needs facilitators who can challenge learners to move out beyond their comfort zones. If we consider his postulations to be valid, from whom did the Malaysian church learn to come together in ecumenical solidarity?

Although the pressures arising from Islamization brought the Malaysian church together, it is the speakers and facilitators who spoke at the NCC that challenged them to stay together to function as an ecumenical enterprise. The speakers for the themes and workshops spoke of the need to cultivate an inclusive mindset. For example, at the first NCC itself, ideas on how Malaysian Christians could work together through solidarity came as direct challenges to the participants. Three speakers were assigned to explore the three topics of: *working together in the work of evangelism*, *working together on Christian social concerns* and *working together for a meaningful Christian presence in our nation*. Moreover, at the second NCC, the speaker Rev Ng Ee Lin spoke on the workshop topic, *witnessing through cooperation*. He stated that witnessing through cooperation would become one of the foremost proofs of churches working together in solidarity. However, he also took the opportunity to address some of the threats to Christian unity in the nation by recognizing a general gulf between laity and clergy. Moreover, he also dealt with the issue of inter-denominational cooperation and stated that to be true witnesses, the different denominations

⁴⁶¹ He has also served as the President of the American Society of Christian Ethics and as the President of the American Theological Society. Charles C. West, 'Ecumenics, Church and Society', in Samuel Amirtham and Chris Moon (Eds.), *The Teaching of Ecumenics*, Geneva: WCC, 1987, 91-92.

have no choice but to cooperate with each other. Subsequently, he touched on existing issues where some denominations exclude members of other denominations from participating in their communion sacraments. He felt that this being the case, there was actually no real communion among Christians and went on to state that theology was only valid if it served to unite the church and any theology that divided the church was no theology at all.⁴⁶² The Catholic Bishop Paul Tan, who conducted three Bible study sessions at the sixth NCC noted that the regular coming together via the NCCs was important as they demonstrated a visible symbol of Christian unity that was vital for the proclamation of Christian hope. He also expressed his confidence that CFM would continue to play a uniting role in bringing Malaysian Christians to pray, discern and take a common stand on issues that touched on the life of Malaysians.⁴⁶³

Moreover, it is also possible to suggest that the NCC speakers attempted to use the common faith of Malaysian Christians as a unifying symbol. Randall Collins, is a sociologist who investigated why people interacted with each another, especially in a group environment. Based on earlier findings by other scholars, he notes that there are four key elements that are found in the Interaction Ritual Theory of social engagement, which are, bodily co-presence, barriers to outsiders, mutual focus and shared mood.⁴⁶⁴ This combined interaction then produces the outcomes of: group solidarity, individual level emotional energy, shared sacred objects or symbols and shared moral standards. When we bring his findings into the Malaysian Church context by analyzing the solidarity gatherings in Malaysia, it is possible to suggest that they needed to come together to meet each other physically (bodily co-presence) through the general conceptual sense of being together by virtue of their shared faith. However, the fact that Christians in Malaysia had a common faith was not enough and needed further development by coming together on a shared platform to discuss mutual concerns, just as Randall indicated. Moreover, the other element of Randall's observations of coming together with a mutual focus and shared emotions fit well with the

⁴⁶² Report of the Second National Christian Conference, 48.

⁴⁶³ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 21.

⁴⁶⁴ Randall Collins, 'Interaction Ritual Chains', in *Princeton Studies in Cultural Sociology*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004, 48.

Malaysian church situation as they experienced the same social conditions as their fellow non-Muslims in Malaysia. Furthermore, Randall also explains that, for any group based solidarity to last, it must be an outcome of shared values that are ingrained in specific symbols which becomes the adhesive that glues them together.⁴⁶⁵ Similarly, a combination of all these factors allowed the speakers to use ecumenical solidarity as a meaningful notion to make the participants' shared faith to become a common, corporate symbol. Randall's observations help us to understand how the speakers of the NCC were able to capitalize on the overall national as well as religious identity of the participants and subsequently showed them the value of working together.

In addition, the 'shared mood' as espoused by Randall is the Malaysian Church's common urge to face-off an encroaching symbol, Islamization, which became a powerful stimulus to work towards embracing ecumenism. Their shared feelings became one of their primary motivators to sustain ecumenical solidarity through the periodically organized ecumenical conferences. Therefore, during these conferences the speakers were able to use the shared experiences of the participants on the effects of Islamization to reiterate the need for solidarity through ecumenism. Although it could be argued that it is only natural for Christian speakers to encourage solidarity through ecumenism, it needs to be noted that not all Christians believe in ecumenical solidarity because there are Christian groups who refuse to have any part with the ecumenical movement.⁴⁶⁶ However, it is unclear if there are any such groups within Malaysia who subscribe to such viewpoints that promote isolation. Research indicates that most Christian groups in Malaysia have been directly affected by growing Islamization and therefore tend to value the solidarity and organizational covering that is provided through the CFM ecumenical umbrella.

4.2.2.4 Leaders.

To analyze the emergence of Malaysian ecumenical solidarity, the role of key leaders of the Christian community who persuaded Christian leaders from other denominations to consider

⁴⁶⁵ Collins, 'Interaction Ritual Chains', 85-87.

⁴⁶⁶ Groups like the Moriel Ministries International refuse to believe in ecumenism. They believe that it's a ruse to establish One World Order, which attempts to bring Christianity under the control of the Anti-Christ. <<http://www.deceptioninthechurch.com/ecumenism.htm>>, Accessed 14th May 2014.

ecumenical solidarity as a desirable element of the Malaysian church needs to be explored further. For example, when the idea for the first NCC gathering was mooted by CCM, the chairman of the organising committee, Bishop C. N. Fang remarked:

To seek after an acceptable basis of co-operation to make its presence felt to the best advantage in all aspects of national life. It is felt that the churches can do much more through corporate action and a united witness.⁴⁶⁷

The leaders of CCM understood that in order for any forms of corporate action and united witness to be established, they required support from non-CCM church leaders as well. Accordingly, as an astute move, they decided to invite the Catholic Archbishop Vendargon and David Boler, who was an important leader in the Pentecostal and Charismatic church circles, to become part of the organising committee of the NCC. Moreover, these strategic moves were not just nominal gestures. Archbishop Vendargon was given the privilege to address the opening service of the inaugural NCC while David Boler was invited to become one of the three workshop speakers.

Subsequently, these inclusive moves augured well for ecumenical relationships to develop. It was Archbishop Vendargon who gave his blessings for the formation of the CFM in 1985, which also saw the Catholic Bishop Anthony Selvanayagam be elected as the first Chairman of CFM. David Boler went on to form the NECF and became instrumental in bringing NECF to become part of CFM and became elected to become one of the three Vice-Chairmen of the first CFM committee. Consequently, these collaborative solidarity initiatives by the church leaders endorsed CFM to function as an ecumenical body that gained the credibility to represent Christian interests in the nation. Moreover, the CFM constitution was drafted to ensure that there would always be a balanced representation between leaders of the three main blocs and also ensured that a balance between clergy and lay leadership would be maintained at all times, enabling CFM to function as a powerful alliance.

However, it is possible to suggest that the role of the leaders in bringing ecumenical solidarity among the different denominations may not be entirely sufficient by itself. For instance, when we consider the role of church leaders in other contexts, especially in their

⁴⁶⁷ Report of the First National Christian Conference, 5.

attempts to bring reconciliation among themselves and others within the nation, there are other related issues that would need consideration as well. One sample that could be considered for scrutiny could be the church in Zimbabwe.⁴⁶⁸ Deprose Muchena wrote about how in the Zimbabwean church context, ‘the three recognisable groups have set aside their differences and begun to co-operate more’.⁴⁶⁹ Calling them ecumenical actors, he believes that ecumenical co-operation is what eventually enabled the church to strive for greater reconciliation within the fragmented Zimbabwean society. In his analysis, he observed how church leaders attempted bold moves to ensure reconciliation, which he identifies as taking place through, ‘political dialogue, the promotion of tolerance among and within society and the peaceful co-existence between peoples and communities.’⁴⁷⁰ However, he concludes that although the church leaders have been able to work among themselves, they have not been able to bring the reconciliation among churches to affect wider segments of Zimbabwean society. Muchena believes that in order to be able to bring positive change, the church needs to show ‘stamina, political will, a fair degree of influence over the people and a serious and committed leadership’.⁴⁷¹

Accordingly, Muchena’s observations could be thought of as being accurate and therefore become relevant for the Malaysian church context as well. For instance, the challenge to affect the larger segments of society is also the greatest challenge that faces the Malaysian church leaders. Comparing the role of the church leaders in forging ecumenical ties, one could argue that the first step of inter-denominational cooperation in both Malaysia and Zimbabwe has already been realized. However, the challenge of reconciling the larger framework of society, which in the case of Malaysia has been caused by polarization due to

⁴⁶⁸ Zimbabwe is observed as it has a very similar three-bloc denominational representation: the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) and the Roman Catholic Church of Zimbabwe.

⁴⁶⁹ Deprose T. Muchena, ‘The Church and Reconciliation: A Mission Impossible?’ in Brian Raftopoulos and Tyrone Savage (Eds.), *Zimbabwe: Injustice and Political Reconciliation*, African Minds, 2004, 260.

⁴⁷⁰ Muchena, ‘The Church and Reconciliation’, 259.

⁴⁷¹ Muchena, ‘The Church and Reconciliation’, 268.

Islamization, is the next challenge that would need attention and action by senior church leaders.

Research indicates that Malaysian church leaders were indeed conscious about extending unity beyond church-based solidarity and looked for possible means to bring reconciliation in society. For instance, this desire could be seen clearly in the choice of themes and workshop topics of their NCC gatherings, which repeatedly brought national concerns into the context of its discussions. Furthermore, the resolutions and recommendations of the NCC indicate that they were sincerely looking for different ways to work alongside other community leaders. Moreover, inviting selected Muslims speakers to share during the NCC gatherings could also be considered as milestone achievements. Consequently, although the task of mending polarization of society caused by Islamization between Muslims and non-Muslims may be considered too colossal a task, it is within the church's Biblical mandate to function as salt, which is a useful imagery of the minority impacting the majority. Therefore, the Malaysian church leaders will need to find new ways of being salt to gradually influence society in ways that would bring healing and reconciliation to the fragmented nation.

4.2.2.5 Use of the Bible.

Research reveals that the Bible became an important tool in the hands of the leaders to instil ecumenical solidarity among the participants of the NCC.⁴⁷² For example, the NCC gatherings always began with worship services where church leaders from the different denominations were invited to present their biblical homilies. Subsequently, these leaders used biblical verses and imagery from scripture to challenge the NCC participants to think beyond the confines of their own denominations. Although it could be argued that such use of scripture was merely selective and superficial as it did not address the deeper theological elements that would lead to inclusive doctrine, it needs to be noted that the denominational leaders were not expected to expound on canonical dogma as they were aware that the participants of the NCC were primarily present to address national level concerns. The main

⁴⁷² A study on how the Bible encourages ecumenical unity can be found in: David Hedegard, *Ecumenism and the Bible*, Banner of Truth, 1964.

concern of the leaders was to instil unity and solidarity within the participants of the NCC, for which the Bible provided the ample resources.

For instance, the Catholic Archbishop Vendargon, who spoke at the opening service of the first NCC, denounced the past divisions by stating that it contradicted the will of God and damaged God's holy cause. He urged participants to express remorse for such divisions and urged them to express their longings for greater unity.⁴⁷³ He used three passages of scripture: John 17:20-26, 1 Corinthians 1:13 and Ephesians 4:45, and encouraged participants to 'respect one another and seek after the truth'.⁴⁷⁴ At the third NCC, the Methodist Bishop C. N. Fang stated that he always found great inspiration from Psalm 133 and called on participants to put aside 'petty and selfish interests'.⁴⁷⁵ Speaking as a key leader who played major roles in the organising of the first and second NCC gatherings, he was able to sense that the Malaysian Christian community had since rallied together ecumenically mainly to find ways of dealing with their common grievances that rose from Islamization measures of the government. It caused him to caution participants against forging solidarity measures only for the sake of facing a crisis and expressed that although coming together on such terms could be considered acceptable, it was far better to be united because of the Biblical mandate which urged acceptance of the other.⁴⁷⁶

However, how did the use of scriptures bring about change in the way participants engaged with each other during the NCC gatherings? Although it would be unrealistic to conduct an examination of each of the participants, one incident could be taken as an example of the positive effect of scriptures on participants. In the closing service of the fourth NCC, Catholic Archbishop Peter Chung offered his personal regret for any previous actions that were hindrances to reconciliation and solidarity. He besought the participants to pardon the past by saying,

⁴⁷³ Report of the First National Christian Conference, Opening Worship Address, (no page number).

⁴⁷⁴ Report of the First National Christian Conference,

⁴⁷⁵ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 7-8.

⁴⁷⁶ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 7.

Division among us in the past years have led to much unpleasant rivalry ... to the great detriment of our Christian faith. I would like to apologise on behalf of our church for all antagonistic attitudes towards your Churches and ask you to forgo the past.⁴⁷⁷

It could be suggested that such statements that express remorse came about very likely due to the repeated use of scripture, both to convict as well as inspire the participants.

Moreover, the Bible was also used to understand and cope with their challenging predicament. For instance, at the fifth NCC, Stanley Mogoba, who was the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of South Africa was invited as the inspirational speaker. This was done especially because of 'his intimate involvement in the churches' fight against apartheid in South Africa'.⁴⁷⁸ Therefore, it is possible to think that the choice of bringing a speaker based on the context of undergoing difficult experiences under an oppressive regime meant that the Church in Malaysia was looking at itself as being in the same predicament. Moreover, by calling on him to speak from the Bible, the organisers of the NCC were very likely looking at scriptures to address their own immediate context of difficulties that were being caused by Islamization.

Consequently, the consistent use of scripture during the NCC gatherings needs to be recognized as a positive sign for the future of the Malaysian ecumenical solidarity. Although the NCC gatherings began as a way of providing a common platform to deal with their common grievances caused by Islamization, it has since appropriately sought to build solidarity relationships based on the foundation of scripture. Some theologians have accurately suggested that it is this biblical focus which would eventually become seeds for an authentic ecumenical theology to emerge. For instance, Paul Avis who is an Anglican theologian who served as the General Secretary of the Church of England's Council for Christian unity, writes of the vital need to approach ecumenism from a theological standpoint. He believes that for any significant theology to develop, it needs both natural theology and theology of reflection to be incorporated. In his view, natural theology arises out of significant life experiences which is contrary to the theology of reflection which emerges out

⁴⁷⁷ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 88.

⁴⁷⁸ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, I.

of a reflection of those experiences.⁴⁷⁹ When we consider his postulations, it means that the members of the Malaysian church would have to connect their own difficult experiences with their journey towards Christian maturity in order to articulate their own theology. Therefore, the opportunities that allow for a collective reflection during ecumenical conferences, using scripture as their guide, is what that would ultimately assist in their promulgation of an authentic Malaysian theology.

Moreover, Gideon Goosen, an Australian theologian whose book on understanding ecumenism was published by the World Council of Churches (WCC), argues that a theology of ecumenism is actually a theology of mutual understanding, which can only develop if one is willing to discover and re-discover new ways of understanding one another and be willing to adapt new ways of doing things.⁴⁸⁰ Hence, for an authentic local theology to develop, Malaysian Christians would need to juxtapose their own difficult experiences in the light of what their fellow Christians in the nation were also experiencing. This would only happen if they met and listened to each other, especially to articulate a collective response during the ecumenical conferences like the NCC. We could then suggest that such discourses would then eventually lead to an in-depth theology that becomes relevant for themselves and also for the future generations, who will need to make sense of their predicaments as a minority community within the Muslim majority nation.

4.3. Prayer as spiritual solidarity.

This section will seek to investigate how the Christian community began to come together to pray together as a way of coping with their experiences of being subjected to the effects of Islamization.

4.3.1. Prayer as a spiritual response to marginalization.

Christians in Malaysia have tried to find different ways of responding to their feelings of being suppressed and marginalized. In 2015, the research department of the NECF produced a book entitled, *Extinguished? Will persecution and hardship extinguish our witness? : A*

⁴⁷⁹ Paul Avis, *Ecumenical Theology and the Elusiveness of Doctrine*, Delhi: SPCK, 1986, 36-37.

⁴⁸⁰ Gideon Goosen, *Bringing Churches Together: An Introduction to Ecumenism*, E.J. Dwyer, 1993, 9-10.

compendium on the theology of persecution and suffering. The book becomes important for the purpose of this research because it is able to confirm the fact that Christians in Malaysia have begun to perceive themselves as being persecuted due to their prolonged experiences of discrimination and marginalization. It then becomes possible to suggest that due to such experiences, they would then need to find avenues to express their feelings to their God in prayer, very likely as a spiritual coping mechanism.

Moreover, although it becomes possible to suggest that Christian prayer solidarity emerged as a response to their feelings of being marginalized, it is also important to recognize prayer solidarity as having emerged out of a response to the conflict between the Christian minority and the Muslim majority government. For instance, sociologists who study social conflict have found that because humans are social beings, they are prone to be in conflict with each other.⁴⁸¹ They believe that conflicts arise due to power struggles which are defined as attempts by one or more parties to coerce the other party with a motive to dominate. Subsequently, the coerced party within the conflict responds with antagonism towards the domination which leads to further forms of conflicts to fester.⁴⁸² When we attempt to apply this understanding of conflict to the Malaysian context, it is possible to trace the undercurrent of conflict as already being present during the negotiation for citizenship that took place during Independence (this was already noted in detail earlier) However, it is possible to agree that this seemingly settled conflict was given new impetus by Malay supremacists who attempt to coerce other communities into submission by using Islam as a tool for dominance.⁴⁸³ Consequently, it is possible to propose that prayer became one of the ways that Christians in Malaysia have chosen to deal with the conflict, to call upon their God to become the mediator in the conflict.

⁴⁸¹ Randall Collins and Stephen K. Anderson, *Conflict Sociology*, New York: Routledge, 2016, 21.

⁴⁸² Collins and Anderson, *Conflict Sociology*, 21.

⁴⁸³ Yin Ee Kiong, “‘Allah’ Issue about Malayisation and Islamisation of Malaysia, Centre for Policy Initiatives”, 25th October 2013, <<http://www.cpiasia.net/v3/index.php/east-malaysia/219-contributors-sp-642/contributors/2560-allah-issue-about-malayisation-and-islamisation-of-malaysia>>, Accessed 12th March 2014.

Furthermore, because it is possible for social stigma to be associated with a particular communities,⁴⁸⁴ Islamization may have caused Christians in Malaysia to think of themselves as potentially being stigmatized. For instance, during the *Allah* controversy (which will be analyzed in the next chapter), the Christian minority was wrongly projected as a community that sought to challenge the elevated position of Islam in Malaysia.⁴⁸⁵ Such projections may cause certain Muslims to think of Malaysian Christians as ungrateful, insolent and antagonistic, making them justify their stigmatization of Christians. Sociologists who analyse stigma as a phenomenon propose that social stigma could become a repressive tool. They note that:

Minority members and lower-class persons are all likely on occasions to find themselves functioning as stigmatized individuals, unsure of the reception awaiting them in face-to-face interaction and deeply involved in the various responses to this plight.⁴⁸⁶

Therefore, it is possible to think that the stigma that arises from marginalization has the potential to create feelings of isolation from mainstream society which causes pain and distress due to feelings of non-acceptance. Accordingly, it would not be wrong to suggest that when stigma is allowed to continue, it brings about an outcome that entrenches a psychological sense of being an outcast within one's own society.

Consequently, when the Christian community in Malaysia feels stigmatized, it needs to find different ways to address such repressive feeling. Subsequently, the search for solace and relief is what may have led them to view prayer as an available solution. Moreover, it becomes possible to think that prayer gave Malaysian Christians a sense of acceptance, which is a direct contrast to the rejections and marginalization meted out to them by the government.

⁴⁸⁴ Bat Ye'or's research on the social position of non-Muslim communities who lived in Arab lands reveal specific forms of stigmatization that they were forced to experience. See Bat Ye'or, *Dhimmi: Jews and Christians living under Islam*, Associated University Press, 1985 and Bat Ye'or, *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide*, Gazelle Books, 2002.

⁴⁸⁵ Maslinda Mahmood and Sharifah Mahsinah Mufti Abdullah, 'Allowing Non-Muslims use 'Allah' challenges Islam's position', *Malaysian Digest*, 14th January 2013, <<http://www.malaysiandigest.com/features/229091-survey-new-voters-trust-politicians-more-than-cops.html>>, Accessed 12th March 2014.

⁴⁸⁶ Erving Goffman, *Stigma*, Penguin Books, 1963, 173.

Subsequently, since prayer becomes a way of lodging their grievances and hurts that were caused by conflict and social stigma, it is very likely that they also view prayer as an avenue to call on the divine godhead to stand in solidarity with them on behalf of their cause.

Moreover, the theological aspect of perceiving oneself as citizens of a heavenly kingdom but living here on earth under the authority of human kingdoms also has the ability to push them towards prayer. For example, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught them to ask for God's kingdom to come and for his will to be done on earth as it is being done in heaven. Leon Morris, suggests that the prayer phrase, thy kingdom come, should not just be taken to mean the future coming of God's rule in an eschatological context but also a yearning for it to be established now on earth.⁴⁸⁷ It means that a yearning for the righteous kingdom of God in the future should also naturally lead to a yearning for God's righteous rule to be established here in the earth. Commenting on the same verse, Craig Keener has also noted that 'those who long for God's will in the future should live consistently with that longing in the present'.⁴⁸⁸ Furthermore, academic Douglas Hare postulates that it is a prayer that results out of a realization that man 'cannot build God's kingdom on earth, because even our best efforts towards peace, justice and community are compromised by sin. Only God can bring the ultimate transformation'.⁴⁸⁹

Therefore, when we consider their collective thinking, it is very likely that when Malaysian Christians pray for God's rule to come, it is a reflection of their desire to see 'all people submit to God's reign'.⁴⁹⁰ Moreover, since the element of justice is inseparable from God's kingdom and God's will, when Malaysian Christians pray for God's kingdom to be established, it is most likely a longing for God to intervene against unjust systems and the marginalizing behaviour of the government.⁴⁹¹ Such prayers for justice by Christians should

⁴⁸⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Eerdmans, 1992, 145-146.

⁴⁸⁸ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans, 1999, 220.

⁴⁸⁹ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew: Interpretation*, John Knox Press, 2009, 67.

⁴⁹⁰ Curtis Mitch and S.R.I. Edward, 'The Gospel of Matthew', in Peter S. Williamson and Mary Healy (Eds.), *Catholic Commentary on sacred Scripture*, Baker Academic, 2010, 106.

⁴⁹¹ Some authors point to this aspiration as being similar to Asian traditional influences which view *Ratu Adil* (Just Prince) as someone whom they have been waiting for to come and serve justice. See: Paul Trebilco and

not be seen in isolation but also be understood as potentially being part of the aspirations of other Malaysians as well, who generally desire to see remedial actions taken against certain negative excesses of the government. Therefore, it would not be wrong to suggest that when the Christians pray for their government, they are actually echoing the aspirations of their fellow citizens who desire good and fair governance as a reflection of their awaited heavenly kingdom.

However, when Malaysian Christians pray against oppressive governmental structures and also for the leaders who facilitate these systems, they will need to be careful with how they express their feelings of grievances. An academic researcher who discusses the Psalmist's prayers during his experiences of being mistreated, thinks that it is acceptable to emulate such prayers especially when such sufferings are caused by others. Paul Pulikottil offers his study of the Imprecatory Psalms as a resource for those who undergo suffering and especially to those who minister to persecuted churches. He seems to think that most Christians usually excuse and relegate imprecatory passages as belonging to the old order of thinking prescribed within the tenets of the Old Testament.⁴⁹² On the contrary, he is willing to suggest that since curses in the context of Old Testament are usually used as elements of God's covenant mechanisms, therefore the imprecatory Psalms should be understood as symbols of divine violence, which God uses to end all violence and divine justice, which God uses to establish righteousness.⁴⁹³ Moreover, he also suggests that such Psalms also have a missional value to them as 'God's fulfilment of the imprecations could work to induce the wicked to seek him'.⁴⁹⁴ In addition, by highlighting New Testament verses that mention curses, he suggests that the underlying theology that necessitate curses should not be sidelined by Christians. Subsequently, he proposes that Imprecatory Psalms could actually become useful for emulation by modern day Christians who undergo suffering. Moreover,

Simon Rae, *1 Timothy: Asia Bible Commentary Series*, Asia Theological Association and OMF Literature, 2006, 35.

⁴⁹² Paulson Pulikottil, 'Prayer for Divine Retribution in Times of Suffering and Persecution, with Special reference to the Imprecatory Psalms', in *Journal Asian of Evangelical Theology*, Vol.17, No.1, March 2013, 56.

⁴⁹³ Pulikottil, 'Prayer for Divine Retribution', 59-60.

⁴⁹⁴ Pulikottil, 'Prayer for Divine Retribution', 61.

he also suggests that Christians who undergo continuous persecution by others need to know that their God is not aloof in their suffering but would act on their behalf, otherwise it would make them lose hope and even lose faith in God.⁴⁹⁵ Consequently, he states that when Christians pray the imprecatory Psalms against oppressive systems, they are actually standing alongside God who abhors everything evil.⁴⁹⁶

Nevertheless, his suggestions will need to be carefully re-examined within the overall context of the Bible. To begin with, Pulikottil conveniently omits another fundamental Biblical teaching which calls upon Christians to bless their enemies.⁴⁹⁷ Furthermore, although the painful experiences suffered by Christians should not be underrated, they are also reminded by scriptures to emulate Christ who forgave his persecutors.⁴⁹⁸ Moreover, when we bring his suggestions into the reality of the Malaysian context, any cursing of the oppressive government would only lead to further antagonistic attitudes to fester and potentially invite other unwanted consequences. More importantly, although the imprecatory Psalms have been recorded in the Bible as an expression arising out of pain and suffering, it does not automatically mean that they are there for emulation. Therefore, it is possible to propose that praying positively for change is what actually focusses on God. Negative prayers have a tendency to focus on those who hurt us, which could lead us to an unhealthy fixation that eventually breeds bitterness and anger.

4.3.2. New prayer organizations.

Research reveals that many of those who came together to prayer in solidarity for the nation's needs often found themselves to be part of emerging prayer movements. For instance, it is possible to point at the need to pray for evangelistic program that took place in 1999 as one of the key events that gave a definite impetus to the national prayer movement. We discover that,

⁴⁹⁵ Pulikottil, 'Prayer for Divine Retribution', 62.

⁴⁹⁶ Pulikottil, 'Prayer for Divine Retribution', 62.

⁴⁹⁷ Romans 12: 14.

⁴⁹⁸ Ephesians 4:32.

A group of people gathered in 1999 to help mobilize prayer for the NECF Malaysia Emmanuel Celebration evangelistic event. It was a massive meeting ... close to 300,000 people thronged the stadium to hear the gospel. From this event, the seed of national mobilisation for concerted, continuous intercession for the nation was planted into the hearts of the prayer group who felt they had to pray beyond an event.⁴⁹⁹

Subsequently, the need to intercede for national concerns caused the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) to form a Prayer Commission, as a separate wing under its main body. The vision statement of the NECF Prayer Commission reads: 'To develop a strong prayer movement for Revival, Spiritual Awakening and National Transformation'.⁵⁰⁰ Since the NECF is part of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), NECF organized prayer programs received wide publicity and also enjoyed support from non-NECF churches.

Moreover, another group called the MNPN that was launched in March 2008 also called for prayer for the nation. Initially, MNPN stood for Malaysian National Prayer Network but it renamed itself as Malaysia National Prayer Nurturing. Mooted for the purpose of raising prayer warriors for the nation, it promoted itself as an inter-denominational prayer organization. Accordingly, its inaugural service at an Anglican Church was attended by several church leaders from both CCM and NECF churches. To mobilize Christians to pray for the nation in a consistent way, one of MNPN's prayer initiative was called, 'Prayer at 12 Noon: In One Voice for the revival of the church and transformation of Malaysia'. The objective of the initiative is to fulfil MNPN's vision of making the Malaysian Church to become a united entity that would pray for the nation.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁹ Berita NECF, November-December 2008,

<<http://www.necf.org.my/newsmaster.cfm?&menuid=2&action=view&retrieveid=1045>>, Accessed 15th June 2011.

⁵⁰⁰ They have been able to achieve the objective of their vision through: annual 40 day fasting and prayer for the Nation, annual prayer conferences, annual national prayer rallies, annual global day of prayer, annual national children's' prayer conference, organize or partner in united prayer initiatives, organize national and regional level prayer consultation, establish national prayer cells initiative and networking, disseminating monthly prayer alerts, sharing of prayer information and strategies, providing materials, training or mentoring individuals in prayer, spiritual mapping and establishing regional prayer towers.

⁵⁰¹ MNPN Website, <<http://www.prayer.net.my/index.cfm?&menuid=9>>, Accessed 12th July 2013.

Furthermore, MNPN was also able to organize prayer gatherings that brought inter-denominational prayer partnerships. For example, when the MNPN organized its First Malaysian Prayer Convocation in 2010 in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak, the prayer convention demonstrated the inter-denominational solidarity spirit among those who came together to pray for the nation. Moreover, the fact that it was held at the Sibü Diocesan Pastoral Centre, a Catholic facility, denoted a significant breakthrough as a ministry partnerships between Catholics and Protestants. Furthermore, when the Catholic Bishop of Sibü, Dominic Su, was invited to give the opening devotion on the second day of the event, it signified a sense of acceptance between Catholics and Protestants. During the opening of the Prayer Convocation, the speaker emphasised the urgency for the Malaysian church to unite itself, especially through prayer.⁵⁰² In addition, an emotional show of solidarity emerged during the program when the participants were told to pray for one another by confessing their spiritual divisions that were accentuated through geographical and socio-political distancing as West and East Malaysians. It was recorded in video as an emotional session, when many of the participants were moved to tears as they joined hands with each other to bring about a symbolic reconciliation.⁵⁰³ Subsequently, in December 2011, the MNPN organized a Second Malaysia Prayer Convocation, with the theme: For Such a Time as This. It was held in Melaka as a way recognizing it as the first gateway of Christian missions in the Malaysian soil. It became an interdenominational affair as it was organised with the help of Melaka Prayer Network and all the local churches in Melaka.

Research reveals that young Christians in Malaysia have sometimes been encouraged to pray for the country. The Malaysian Youth Prayer Gathering brought together various youth groups in the country to gather in solidarity for the purpose of praying for the nation. A national level prayer gathering that was organized in Johor in July 2008 attracted more than 400 youths from all over the country. However, the vision of the organizers was not just to promote a onetime event but also sought to bring greater networking and solidarity. The organizer said,

⁵⁰² MNPN 1st Malaysian Prayer Convocation Report, 2-4 December 2010, Sibü, Sarawak.

⁵⁰³ It can be viewed in YouTube at, < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-F31-IMTZj8#t=72>>, Accessed 12th July 2013.

This prayer gathering is a call for youth across the nation of Malaysia to come together to pray and seek the Lord. It is also to establish and further strengthening of ties between the other prayer and youth networks in the country.⁵⁰⁴

The feedback from the youths show that the organizers appeared to have achieved their target. One of the youths who attended the event reported, ‘the day ended with declaring our love for the Lord’s promise land to us and our beloved country Malaysia’.⁵⁰⁵ When the organizers worked on the second Malaysian Youth Prayer Gathering (MYPG) in June 2009, their main motive for the prayer event was expressed in their promotion, ‘The main objective of this work is to ignite a passion for prayer and a greater concern among young people to see God move in a powerful way in this country’.⁵⁰⁶ Once again, the nation’s concerns became the foremost agenda.

Furthermore, findings reveal that not all prayer movements became national level organizations, as some groups chose to work within state and city jurisdictions. Groups like the Penang House of Prayer is one such organization that focuses primarily on networking with others within the state of Penang. The Kota Kinabalu Prayer Network is also another example of a local inter-denominational prayer initiative, where people from the local township come together once a month to pray for the nation. One wing of this network called the Mountain Group, is reported to be in prayer every day for the nation.⁵⁰⁷ Hence, it is possible to suggest that these types of prayer initiatives brought together people from diverse denominational backgrounds to stand together in solidarity especially to pray for change in the nation.

⁵⁰⁴ MNPM Prayer Events Calendar,
<<http://prayer.net.my/eventsmaster.cfm?&menuid=5&action=viewevent&retrieveid=6>>, Accessed 8th November 2009.

⁵⁰⁵ 1st MYPG Report,
<<http://mypg.wordpress.com/reports/>>, Accessed 8th November 2009.

⁵⁰⁶ MNPN Report,
<<http://www.prayer.net.my/eventsmaster.cfm?&menuid=5&action=viewevent&retrieveid=4>>, Accessed 18th September 2010.

⁵⁰⁷ God @ work around the prayer networks, *MNPN Newsletter*, May- August 2010, 2.

Similarly, Run for the Nation, is another innovative prayer initiative that promotes athletic events within Kuala Lumpur to encourage Christians from all denominations to pray for Malaysia. It is an annual event, where those who sign up for the run pledge to pray for the nation while running to finish the prescribed course between 5 am and 12 noon. Different teams of runners cover different distances and pass the prayer cards to awaiting teams. As a finale of the event, they usually meet for a time of prayer at a specific church, later in the evening. This initiative was supported by many Christian NGOs and Para-Church organizations. Although the first run that was organized in 2007 only managed to recruit 107 runners, 'Run-Nat 2012' gathered more than 600 participants from 60 different churches.⁵⁰⁸

Consequently, in order to consolidate the different prayer groups that had emerged, an umbrella organization called Prayer United was formed in 2012, with the specific purpose of promoting collaboration among all the prayer networks that had emerged in the nation. Two joint secretaries were appointed, one from CCM and another from NECF, to disseminate the necessary prayer information and program publicities to the churches in their fold. The objective of establishing the network was stated in a circular that was distributed to all the churches in the country. Its first purpose was to 'set up a united prayer movement for the whole church to coordinate prayer and enhance unity among Christians'. The second purpose was, 'to challenge the whole church to pray for the transformation of society and nation'.⁵⁰⁹ Moreover, in order to enable an all-round participation, the interim committee brought together nine different church leaders from all the major denominations from East and West Malaysia. The objectives and the subsequent composition of leadership reveals the aspect of solidarity that is being explored in this study.

However, when we examine some of the possible reasons as to why Christians in Malaysia were responding to their situation of being marginalized by becoming more prone to pray about their predicaments, some answers begin to emerge. To begin with, one of the foremost reason that could be offered is, Christians have generally been taught to be obedient, law abiding citizens and are usually taught to submit to governing authorities. For example,

⁵⁰⁸ Run For the Nation, < <http://runforthenation.com/malaysia/format-of-the-run/>>, Accessed 12th January 2013.

⁵⁰⁹ 'Prayer United: Announcement to all Churches', *Pelita Methodist*, Vol.37, No. 8, August 2012, 13.

Bible commentators who write based on Romans 13:1-5, indicate submission as a mandatory Christian virtue when it comes to dealing with governing authorities. The said passage becomes relevant for discussion because the book of Romans was written to a group of Christians who had begun experiencing ‘signs of anti-Christian activity’.⁵¹⁰ Submission became important for Malaysian Christians because just as Paul makes the call to submit to governing authorities based on theological notions, submission to political leaders in Malaysia became their way of recognising God’s will which permitted these entities to be in power. Moreover, submission also becomes important for Christians because God wants order to be maintained and not allow chaos to rule. When rebellion is allowed as an option, the propensity for chaos to rise becomes a possibility.⁵¹¹ Therefore, even when Roman authority was administered by pagan imperials, it stood as a divinely appointed authority.⁵¹² These could have been some of the Biblical considerations that have pushed Malaysian Christians to adopt prayer as their response, rather than choosing to engage in any forms of aggressive responses to the government.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Christians become pliant in the face of evil but will need to find suitable avenues to voice their dissatisfactions. Moreover, Malaysian Christians’ submission should not be confused with absolute or blind obedience as some limitations could be noted within the Christian’s call to compliance. This is because some Bible commentators believe that Christians could choose to disobey the authorities, especially if there is a dilemma between obeying the laws of God rather than man made law.⁵¹³ Furthermore, Christians should be able to say no to the state if they required them to do anything that is against Biblical teachings, as in instances where evangelism is being curtailed.⁵¹⁴ Consequently, with these aspects in mind, some Christian writers have suggested

⁵¹⁰ Grant R. Osborne (Ed.), *Romans: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, Inter Varsity Press, 2004, 341.

⁵¹¹ N. Thomas Wright, ‘Letter to the Romans’, in *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*. Vol. X, Abingdon Press, 2002, 717-718.

⁵¹² C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans: A shorter Commentary*, London: T&T Clark, 1985, 322.

⁵¹³ James Montgomery Boice, *Vol.4-The New Humanity: Romans 12-16*, Baker Books, 1995, 1651.

⁵¹⁴ Boice, *The New Humanity*, 1651.

that they can even act in limited civil disobedience if needed.⁵¹⁵ However, they qualify their permissions by stating that Christians should only consider civil disobedience when they begin to view their socio-political environment as blatantly going against the teachings of the Bible.⁵¹⁶ Bringing these findings to the context of Malaysia, it is possible to suggest that Christians in Malaysia have preferred to deal with their collective frustrations through prayer solidarity instead of choosing civil disobedience as an option.

The third possible reason as to why Malaysian Christians have chosen prayer as a response to marginalization is because the Bible advises Christians to pray for the leaders of the nations they belong to. For example, some Bible commentators think that prayers for those in leadership includes government officials and also those who hold royal or imperial status.⁵¹⁷ Furthermore, the call to pray should also be seen within the context ‘of the love command’, where prayers for leaders are raised as a consequence of loving one’s neighbour.⁵¹⁸ Moreover, William Barclay proposes that another key purpose of these verses is that prayer must be raised even for those who use their leadership positions to work against Christians.⁵¹⁹ Therefore, there is a strong possibility that this call to prayer for the leaders of the state has become one of the significant factors that motivated Malaysian Christians to come together in prayer solidarity to deal with their situation of marginalization.

4.3.3. Ecclesial leaders.

Research reveals that church leaders personally became involved in prayer solidarity gatherings that focussed on national concerns. For instance, when the first ever Methodist Prayer Convention was organised in the year 2007 with the theme, ‘One in Christ through Prayer’, the need for solidarity as an essential aspect of prayer became highlighted. Although the organizers targeted 3,500 participants, around 3,900 persons registered to attend the two-

⁵¹⁵ Osborne, ‘Romans’, 348.

⁵¹⁶ David Koyzis, ‘Consider Civil Disobedience’, in *Christianity Today*, April 2016, 39-45.

⁵¹⁷ Jerome D. Quinn and William Wacker, *The First and Second letters of Timothy*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, 177.

⁵¹⁸ Raymond F. Collins, *I and II Timothy and Titus: A Commentary*, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, 52-53.

⁵¹⁹ William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy Titus and Philemon*, Kentucky: WJK Books, 1975, 65.

day event. The closing service that was held at a local stadium to accommodate other local Methodist members to participate enabled 7,000 people to gather as one body for the main purpose of praying for the nation.⁵²⁰ Subsequently, when the second Methodist Prayer Convention was held in 2011 in the east Malaysian state of Sarawak, 10,000 people participated in its final gathering at the town square.⁵²¹

It was organized through the episcopal office because the relationship between prayer and its effect on the nation was well understood by the Methodist Bishop Hwa Yung. In his final episcopal address before retirement, he captured the need for consistent prayer for the nation by saying, ‘I have therefore come to the conclusion that we need to plead with God to bring new life ... a revival must so deeply touch our churches that it will lead to true holiness, unity and prayer throughout the nation’.⁵²² The third Prayer Convention was organized in 2014 and the focus of praying for the nation became the core call of the event. Writing to his flock, the new Bishop wrote, ‘the timing of the Holy Spirit’s call and conviction upon Methodist people to rise up in prayer is further vindicated by the current circumstances surrounding our beloved country for the last few years’.⁵²³

Moreover, the Anglican Bishop Ng Moon Hing, in his first Episcopal Address, called for a greater prayer movement to emerge within the diocese. Under the heading ‘Prayer Movement’ he said:

We should be known as a people of prayer... We must be able to gather the people to pray together as a diocese at our Diocesan Prayer Rally if not annually, at least biannually. I am looking at 1,000 people gathering and perhaps, later with 10,000 when the time is ripe.⁵²⁴

⁵²⁰ ‘A Milestone in the Methodist Church’, *Pelita Methodist*, Sept/Oct 2007 issue.

⁵²¹ Jane Moh, ‘10,000 attend Methodist Prayer Convention’, 3rd May 2011, <<http://www.theborneopost.com/2011/05/03/10000-attend-methodist-prayer-convention/>>, Accessed 14th February 2013.

⁵²² Bishop Hwa Yung, Episcopal Address, 10th Session, General Conference, *Pelita Methodist*, Vol. 38, No.10, Nov/Dec. 2012, 9.

⁵²³ Bishop’s Message, Methodist Prayer Convention 2014. Publicity flyer.

⁵²⁴ Script of message presented at the Diocesan Synod, 23rd to 25th August 2007.

He then organized a Diocesan Prayer Conference in 2009 and subsequently appointed one of the priests within the diocese to act as the Diocesan Prayer Coordinator, who was specially tasked to promote prayer events and to coordinate the publishing of a monthly prayer newsletter.

In addition, the Catholic Bishop, Sebastian Francis urged his flock to understand the importance of uniting in prayer for the nation. In his speech before the 13th General Elections of May 2013, he said:

We must also pray seriously for the nation at this crucial point of time ...We appeal to all Christians to remain faithful ... to vote as well as to soak in prayer the nation's well-being ahead, during and after the General Elections.⁵²⁵

It would not be wrong to suggest that this was his way of reminding his members about the need to seek divine intervention to the ongoing issues that were taking place in the nation.

Research also suggests that church leaders did not just organise prayer gatherings within their denominations but were also willing to encourage their members to attend inter-denominational solidarity prayer gatherings. One example of this was seen during the Jubilee Day prayer, which was spearheaded by the NECF Prayer Commission. Solidarity at the top level ensured that events culminated smoothly at local cities and towns where local inter-denominational Pastors Fellowships took the lead from their episcopal heads to come together to organize prayer gathering within their townships. Hence, conscious networking by leaders gave the opportunity for local Christians to come together in prayer solidarity. In addition, Christians in the same towns had the opportunity to attend the event that was held in churches that belonged to other denominations. Subsequently, on the day of the prayer, most of the hosting churches recorded full capacity with Chinese, Indian and indigenous Christians worshipping and praying together. The subsequent report in Berita NECF noted that,

⁵²⁵ Full Speech of Bishop Sebastian Francis, Roman Catholic Bishop of Penang, Delivered on 7 April 2013, <<http://ccm-youth.blogspot.com/2013/04/full-message-by-bishop-sebastian.html>>, Accessed 15th August 2014.

The prayer celebration was a historic moment for Malaysia's churches. Not only was it the nation's 50th year and Jubilee year but it was significant for the unity of evangelical and mainline denomination churches.⁵²⁶

Consequently, it becomes possible to suggest that many Christians in Malaysia were willing to shed their inhibitions to go to a church other than their own and welcomed the opportunity to attend a prayer gathering that was held in a different church simply because their leaders did not curtail them from doing so.

Furthermore, research reveals that Malaysian church leaders themselves gathered privately to pray for the nation. In January 2013, denominational heads met together for a time of corporate prayer in a private Christian retreat centre. It was the first time 170 leaders from all the church bodies met for three days of corporate prayer to fast and wait for God's direction upon the nation. Subsequent to the gathering, a report was circulated to the churches by the Prayer United committee which spearheaded the event. Under the paragraph titled, 'What We Discerned', several key aspects were put forth. One of the main aspects that the leaders sensed was to increase their efforts work towards greater unity. However, they qualified the need for unity by saying, 'unity must be based on the right motives, that is, not because of self-preservation but that we come together because of who we are in Christ'.⁵²⁷

Subsequently, when we need to ask why the leaders of the church gave priority to prayer and also encouraged inter-denominational prayer solidarity. It is possible to think that when the government acted against the interest of Christians, it was these leaders who have had to face the relevant government agencies and deal with the officials concerned. It is very likely that these experiences would have led them to pray and ask God to intervene in the crisis situations. Additionally, when members of their flock face the pressures of marginalization, it is the church leaders who would have been approached to pray, counsel and encourage. Consequently, it is possible to suggest that the Church leaders promoted prayer for the nation as a way of guiding their flock to focus upon God.

⁵²⁶ Philip Mantofa, *Berita NECF* (NECF News), July-September 2013 Issue. It can be accessed at, <<http://www.necf.org.my/newsmaster.cfm?&menuid=2&action=view&retrieveid=1527>>, Accessed 4th February 2014.

⁵²⁷ Report from the Church Leaders' Prayer Retreat, Genting Highlands, 24th to 26th January 2013.

Moreover, when we examine the leaders' role in prayer, it is also possible to think that Malaysian church leaders chose to give priority to prayer because of their need to appeal to a higher entity, to intervene and deliver them from their experiences of marginalization. It could be argued that this is the reason why theologians have often sought to frame specific theologies to help others to understand that God was indeed working on their behalf. Those who attempted to describe Filipino Theology noted that Filipino Christology has 'frequently pointed to Jesus as a liberator', both from sin and its consequences.⁵²⁸ Furthermore, African theologians have sometimes looked at God as siding with the powerless in order to showing himself as the Lord of all creation. Writing a chapter on *Political Power and the Power of the Cross*, Mugambi suggests that Africa's successful struggle against racism shows how powerless people were empowered by God who sided with them.⁵²⁹ Moreover, Aloysius Pieris, in his book *An Asian Theology of Liberation* looks primarily at God as a liberator of the poor and suggests that the liberation the Bible speaks of is a joint venture of God and the people covenanted into one saving reality where human effort and divine initiatives merge into one divine enterprise.⁵³⁰ Consequently, it is possible to conclude that one of the key reasons for the church leaders to approach God in prayer is because of their understanding of God as the liberator, who would act upon the call of those affected by the effects of Islamization in Malaysia.

4.3.4 Prayer for National events.

Research reveals that when Malaysian Christians came together to pray during some of the important events of the nation, it made their prayer solidarity initiatives to gain a focussed agenda.

4.3.4.1 Merdeka Day (Independence Day).

Malaysian church leaders used the *Merdeka* Day as an occasion for reflection and celebration and called for increased prayer for the nation. For example, in 2010, the CCM President

⁵²⁸ Dindo Rei Tesoro and Joselito Alviar Jose, *The Rise of Filipino Theology*, Philippines: Pauline Publishing House, 2004, 232.

⁵²⁹ J.N.K. Mugambi, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1989, 117.

⁵³⁰ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988, 124.

reminded all Malaysian Christians to unite in prayer for the nation. In his greeting which appeared in the CCM Newsletter, he wrote ‘we need to be united together in prayer ... let us as fellow Malaysian Christians ... remain united together in prayer and mutual support to one another’.⁵³¹ Similarly, the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) consistently organizes an annual 40 Day Fast and Prayer for Malaysia during *Merdeka* celebrations. In order to do it meaningfully, they usually focus on issues that are of specific interest to Christians and of general interest of the nation. Moreover, because the NECF chooses a particular theme every year and sets them as a 40-day fasting period, it is able to instil a sense of urgency among Christians by reminding them that praying for the nation is something serious and that requires certain forms of sacrifice. Furthermore, in order to ensure successfulness of the prayer effort, the NECF produces prayer booklets that carry specific prayer needs for the entire 40-day period. This booklet is then printed in a minimum of four languages, English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. To ensure wider participation, a children’s edition of the prayer book was also published.

4.3.4.2 Malaysia Day-Jubilee Year Celebration.

The 16th of September, which is Malaysia day, is another day that has been used to rally Christians for prayer. 16th of September is the date when the two East Malaysian territories of Sabah and Sarawak (together with Singapore) joined the Malay Federation in 1963, leading to the present-day name for the nation, Malaysia. In 2013, the Malaysia day celebrations became more significant as it commemorated the 50th anniversary of the nation becoming Malaysia. Hence, in order to bring spiritual significance of 50 years to the nation, the NECF correlated it with the concept of Year of Jubilee, as understood in the Old Testament.⁵³² Relating the biblical descriptions of the 50th year as year of release and liberty,

⁵³¹ ‘A Message from the President: Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day Greetings’, *CCM News*, July-September 2010, 6.

⁵³² The concept of the Jubilee Year is found in the book of Leviticus Chapter 12 from verses 8 to 17. From the passage, we are able to discern that the year of the jubilee was meant to be celebrated as a year of liberty, restoration and rest. It was the way to restore the land that was demarcated primarily by ancestral ownership. It was a system that ensured that there was no significant wealth disparity between the rich and the poor which risked the potentiality to grow to become a social barrier within the Israelite community.

prayer movements begun to encourage Malaysian Christians to pray for a similar type restoration and renewal to take place in Malaysia.

It would be safe to suggest that the idea of a Jubilee Year resonated among Christians in Malaysia because they related it with their own experiences of inequalities and difficulties that were being experienced due to Islamization. Subsequently when prayer solidarity efforts for the Jubilee Year began a year earlier, on the 16th of September 2012, prayer gatherings were organized in different locations throughout the country. The theme for the event was 'Hope of Jubilee', chosen to reflect aspirations and hopes of Malaysian Christians. Research shows that the event became a major success with thirty-three venues having simultaneous prayers, revealing a multi-level solidarity and cooperation among the various denominations. All the event venues had a similar order of prayer, which included the sounding of the *shofar* to signify the beginning of the jubilee year in accordance to the Biblical verses which prescribe the manner of celebrating the Jubilee Year. The commitment to pray based on the concept of the Jubilee Year was also evident in East Malaysia where eight venues were used, including one in the stadium of the state capital in Sabah. One year later, prayer solidarity gatherings similar to that of the previous year were held all over Malaysia with the main event held on the 15th of September 2013, at the newly built Calvary Convention Centre in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur.

4.3.4.3. Elections.

Research also indicates that Election times in Malaysia have since become periods of increased prayer solidarity. It would not be wrong to suggest that the period of elections become times of intense emotions for many Christians in Malaysia due to placement of heightened hopes on either politicians or political parties who have promised to fulfil their expectations. Therefore, it is very likely that these Christians would then attempt to channel these emotions and expectations towards God through their prayers. For instance, during the Sarawak state elections, the MNPN organized a time of uninterrupted prayer. It called for volunteers from all over Malaysia to join its 'Praying Round the Clock for Sarawak Elections' initiative. By providing half hour time slots, it created a roster for all the time slots to be filled. Moreover, it went on to provide updated statistics in its website about the number of people who had taken up each of the half hour prayer slots.

Moreover, the initiatives to pray for the nation during elections were often endorsed and commended by church leaders. In his 'Post Election Pastoral Letter' to the Methodists, the Methodist Bishop Ong Hwai Tek appreciated the solidarity and camaraderie among Christians during the elections when he wrote, 'for we have experienced and witnessed the growing unity, prayer, clarity of vision and voice of response in the church of Malaysia.'⁵³³ Moreover, increase in pre-election prayers among Christians was also observed and documented by some local news portals. One reporter captured the increased prayer momentum amongst Christians in her online article that was later published as a news article in CCM News.⁵³⁴ The report mentioned that Christians all over Malaysia had taken it upon themselves to pray seriously for the nation's elections. Moreover, the journalist also mentioned that apart from involving themselves privately in prayer, Christians were also increasing their public participation in national politics (which will be examined in the next part).

Subsequently, it is possible to argue that praying during defining moments of the country's history may have convinced Christians in Malaysia to believe that they have been active contributors in the life of the nation. Moreover, those who organized these events could also be perceiving themselves as acting prophetically in the life of the nation, as they become convinced that their role as facilitators of prayer for the nation is something that God himself has called them to do. Consequently, these prophetic roles may become further magnified when they plan and execute united prayer gatherings during special events of the nation. Subsequently, as each event takes place, they become contented that more Christians have been mobilized for praying for the nation and that their spiritual calling is being realized.

Consequently, a relevant query arises within the context of increased prayer points to the crux of our thesis. Why did these prayer solidarity organizations only emerge as recent developments in Malaysia? To answer the question, it is possible to suggest that it is because of the growing effects of Islamization that they have now been forced to come together to

⁵³³ "Post 'The 13th General Election' (GE 13), A Pastoral Letter from the Episcopal Office", Bishop Ong Hwai Tek, *Pelita Methodist*, Vol. 39, No.5, May 2013, 4.

⁵³⁴ Aidila Razak, 'Christians hold prayer marathon in lead up to GE13', 6th April 2013, <<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/225991>>.

pray in solidarity, especially by putting aside their denominational differences. Hence, it becomes possible to propose that Islamization has enabled to a sense of urgency among Christians in Malaysia, to seek divine intervention for the predicaments that they were experiencing.

This section scrutinized the emergence of prayer solidarity among Malaysian Christians and found that these developments were new initiatives that were not existent prior to the onset of Islamization, potentially arising as a spiritual reaction towards the marginalization that they were experiencing in the nation. The next section will seek to determine why Christians in Malaysia were not only contented with praying but also chose to involve themselves in national politics.

4.4. The collective political consciousness of Christians.

The last section of the previous chapter analyzed why UMNO needed to promote itself as the patron of progressive Islam in Malaysia and also found that UMNO's quest for an Islamic state was directly related to its quest to establish Malay hegemony. Consequently, it is possible to argue that UMNO's dominance in national politics is what inevitably pushed Christians in Malaysia to increase their involvement in national politics. Therefore, this section seeks to analyze the Malaysian church involvement in national politics by searching for its actual roots and also examine how churches and church-based institutions were used to promote greater political participation.

Research materials that analyze the political involvement of Malaysian Christians are both recent and sparse. The main reason for the lack of such material could very well be due to the fact that the political involvement of the Christians in Malaysia as being relatively new and emerging phenomenon. For instance, when Chong Eu Choong offers some suggestions that discuss Malaysian Christians' increased involvement in politics, it only amounts to a two page write up within his overall work.⁵³⁵ The research of Arnold Puyok seeks to highlight possible ways through which Christians developed a 'political consciousness' which led

⁵³⁵ Choong, 'The Christian Response', 304-305.

them to mobilise in ways that they had not done before.⁵³⁶ The term, ‘political consciousness’ is borrowed from his work to signify Malaysian Christians’ awakening need to increase their involvement in politics. In his academic study, Alwyn Lau thinks of Malaysian Christian political engagement as being a form of ‘theo-political’ activism and explores some of the salient psychoanalytical dimensions that may be attached to it.⁵³⁷ However, none of them have been able to trace the possible formative roots that served as catalysts to bring about the political consciousness.

4.4.1 The struggle to correlate faith with national politics.

Research clearly indicates that prior to the effects of Islamization in Malaysia, Christian political engagement in Malaysia could be defined as being very minimal. For instance, when the nation was approaching independence, the Anglican Bishop Baines longed to see Christians participating in the various levels of political processes that were taking place during the period. However, he was disappointed with the general attitude of Malaysian Christians at that time who felt that politics was not directly related to church matters, causing him to chide their stance of non-engagement in national politics as a ‘flight from responsibility’.⁵³⁸ Moreover, when Tan Chee Koon, a local Christian parliamentarian wrote a two-page article on Malaysian church involvement in politics during the early 1990s, he expressed his observation that most Malaysian Christians were either not sufficiently informed or desired to be involved in political matters. He wrote, ‘to be involved in politics, Christians have to increase the level of political consciousness ... there is no harm in Christians taking an interest in the politics of our country’.⁵³⁹ He further lamented that, ‘our church leaders should at the same time need to speak from the pulpit loudly and boldly on

⁵³⁶ Arnold Puyok, ‘Rise of Christian Political Consciousness and Mobilization’, in Meredith Weiss (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia*, New York: Routledge, 2014.

⁵³⁷ Alwyn Lau, ‘Intimating the Unconscious: A Psychoanalytical Refraction of Christian Theo-Political Activism in Malaysia’, in *Critical Research on Religion*, Vol.2, No. 3, 2014.

⁵³⁸ As quoted in: Northcott, ‘Two Hundred Years’, 64-65.

⁵³⁹ Tan Chee Koon, ‘The Challenge of Wawasan 2020: Christian Involvement in Politics’, in Batumalai Sadayandy (Ed.), *Wawasan 2020: A Malaysian Christian Response*, Batumalai, 1992, 167.

the important events in our country. I regret to say that up to now the time this has happened has been few and far between'.⁵⁴⁰

However, research reveals the stance of minimal engagement in politics gradually evolved when churches and Christians Malaysia began to seriously consider the compelling reasons for a more direct involvement. Evidence indicates that the impetus to become politically engaged was only taken seriously after the NCC assemblies began to meet. For example, when a paper that addressed the relationship between Malaysian Christians and the government was presented at the third NCC that was held in 1987, it forced them to address the need to find a consensus on the church's political involvement in the nation. The paper was presented by Lee Kam Hing, who noted that hitherto Malaysian Christians were not significant participants in National level politics and therefore needed to seriously consider a greater involvement. He said,

Ours is a society where so many aspects of our life, including religion are subject to some form of government regulation ... Church articulation here is vital in a political process that places premiums on representation and consensus.⁵⁴¹

Furthermore, he went on to suggest that political mechanisms and available political forums should be used for the benefit of Christians because politics should not be politely sidestepped or naively ignored. As a response, when the NCC participants were told to discuss the statement, Politics and Religion Should Never Be Mixed, the feedback indicated that 'an overwhelming majority of groups disagreed with the statement'.⁵⁴² In addition, the participants strongly recommended that church leaders should use political channels to address issues of religious discrimination and religious polarization.

However, when the possibility of Christian political party to be formed was floated during the NCC, the participants out-rightly rejected such notions as they thought that it would further fragment the already divided political scene. Moreover, they articulated that the formation of a Christian party would eventually lead to a religious polarization that could

⁵⁴⁰ Chee Koon, 'The Challenge', 167.

⁵⁴¹ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 48.

⁵⁴² Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 75.

potentially lead to a religious confrontation, which must be avoided at all costs. In addition, when the participants were directed to discuss another question, are there circumstances which should necessitate the church's direct participation in politics? the question was unanimously answered in the affirmative by the participants. However, they also raised a caution, that it would be better for the Malaysian Church to provide a subtle influence on the political processes rather than being seen as overtly supporting specific political parties. Furthermore, the participants thought that church institutions supporting one particular party would not be a healthy development as individual Christians had a right to choose any political party according to their convictions. Subsequently, the participants concluded that in all political matters the primary stance of the church should always be a negotiation based approach rather than adopting a confrontational stance.

At the fourth NCC that was held in 1991, the issue of Christian participation in politics was further deliberated. The speaker who discussed the topic, Issues Facing the Malaysian Church in the Nineties, correctly observed that hitherto, 'Christians in this country have generally been hesitating and unsure as to the kind of political involvement they ought to adopt.'⁵⁴³ However, for him, it did not mean that Christians should hastily rush into politics and went on to warn them of the risks involved in impulsive and careless involvement in politics. Moreover, he also cautioned the participants that, since politics was almost always a contestation for power, the Malaysian church itself faced the risk of being 'drawn into uncritical association with particular political factions'.⁵⁴⁴ Consequently, when Fourth NCC concluding statements were released, one of the resolutions openly stated, 'Christians should be encouraged to go into politics'.⁵⁴⁵ It was a defining moment that gave clear mandate on political involvement from the leaders of the Malaysian church.

However, approaches that encouraged cautious involvement in politics were not the only type of thinking that was present at the NCC. During the fifth NCC, one of the speakers boldly suggested that affiliating directly with political parties should be considered a serious

⁵⁴³ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 45.

⁵⁴⁴ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 45.

⁵⁴⁵ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 90.

option of the Malaysian church. He stressed that the time had come for the Malaysian church to begin asserting themselves through a more specific involvement rather than adopting a general stance. He went on to suggest that Churches should engage specifically ‘through parties that approximate most to ... Christian emphases and ideals.’⁵⁴⁶ Nevertheless, his postulations did not garner support, as the resolutions and suggestions that came about at the end of the NCC did not allow his views to be considered as part of concluding statements as reflection of the NCC’s collective thinking. Consequently, it confirmed the understanding that most participants preferred the previously articulated view, that Christians increased their personal engagement and the churches take a more general approach, to continue to be the norm. Nevertheless, it would be accurate to suggest that the NCC assemblies managed to provide the platform which enabled new ideas on political engagement of the church to become discussed. Furthermore, it is also possible to suggest that these discussions may have had the ability to stimulate the participants to consider how their own churches could play a positive role to encourage its members to participate in politics.

Nevertheless, it would also be important to ask, why were the Malaysian Christians struggling with an apparent juxtaposition between faith and politics? It is very likely that their hesitant position could be related to an under-developed understanding of the relationship between faith and politics. This is because, those who study Christian involvement in politics strongly suggest that a correct exegetical understanding biblical scholarship both mandates as well as demands political engagement.⁵⁴⁷ Alan Storkey, who holds a Doctorate from the University of Stirling and went on to become the Chair for the movement for Christian Democracy seems to think that political ideals need to be thought of as emanating from Jesus’ teachings. He is willing to suggest that ‘through Jesus, we have clear intimations of the lovely government of God and the deepest truths that define our politics’.⁵⁴⁸ Furthermore, academics like Robert Benne who teaches at the Institute of

⁵⁴⁶ Report of the Fifth National Christian Conference, 56.

⁵⁴⁷ It would be beyond the scope of this study to narrate all the different schools of thought on political engagement. A Comprehensive overview summary which provides a detailed view of the different schools of thought is found in: Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh (Eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, Blackwell, 2007.

⁵⁴⁸ Alan Storkey, *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005, 287.

Lutheran Theology propose that despite what appears to be lack of political innuendos in the Old Testament, its underlying themes, like justice and equality become useful to form a Christian view of politics and governance.⁵⁴⁹ Moreover, by analyzing the teachings of Jesus and Paul, he appears to insist that Christians should actively participate in politics. Subsequently, he states that it is a combination of all the Biblical themes that would eventually help the church's role in government to emerge. Consequently, he finishes his findings by affirming that Christians should and could embrace politics wholeheartedly. He notes,

It seems clear that Christians are called to active involvement in political life. God has established government for the benefit of the human community. Though it is a fallen institution, it nevertheless carries great possibilities as well as great dangers.⁵⁵⁰

Similarly, Ronald Sider, a professor of theology, seems to suggest that Christians must be willing to be involved in politics, in order to make it become a just institution.⁵⁵¹ After suggesting biblical frameworks on what he thinks should constitute the components of ideal societal systems, he proposes that a sure way to live out Jesus' call to love one's neighbour was through faithful political engagement.⁵⁵²

Moreover, Christians in Asia have sometimes struggled with the issue of how to engage in politics especially when political systems are seen as unjust and oppressive. For example, in 1988, a consultation was held in Bangkok to generate more thought on the subject and offer possible suggestions on how Christians in Asia could become more involved in politics.⁵⁵³ A key objective of the consultation was to clarify Christian identity and contribution in politics through 'a clear theological underpinning'.⁵⁵⁴ Subsequently, all the

⁵⁴⁹ Robert Bene, 'Christians and the Government', in Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 326-327.

⁵⁵⁰ Bene, 'Christians and the Government', 340.

⁵⁵¹ Ronald J. Sider, *Just Politics: A Guide for Christian Engagement*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008.

⁵⁵² Sider, *Just Politics*, 191.

⁵⁵³ *The Church and Political Reform in Asia: Theological Bases for Participation*. CCA-IA Consultation Report, Bangkok, 26-29 October, 1988.

⁵⁵⁴ *The Church and Political Reform*, 2.

nine presenters of the consultation arrived at the conclusion that Christians must not abdicate their role in politics but seek to find ways to impact it with their Christian ethos. Similarly, Christopher Choong, who teaches political science at a local university seems to suggest that Malaysian Christians must be involved in politics to stop further damages from taking place in the public square. He noted that,

It is time for us to reclaim the public square as a forum for responsible and civil discussions on the social and political malaise that we are facing, rather than allowing it to be deformed and impair the health of our democracy'.⁵⁵⁵

Moreover, it is also possible to reason that the churches' need to be involved in politics only became critical when Mahathir's efforts of Islamization began to intensify in the socio-political sphere of the nation. Subsequently, it would not be wrong to propose that it was Islamization that became the main element that forced Christians to discern and discuss the equation between national politics and its relationship with their faith as a matter of urgency.

Research findings indicate that the emerging ideas on political engagement that were garnered within the NCC discussions found ways to influence others outside gatherings. For example, one of the leaders who attended NCC gatherings has articulated the need for a more considered political response through their writings. Goh Keat Peng who served as the executive secretary of the Christian Federation of Malaysia published a book that was titled, 'A People's Politics'.⁵⁵⁶ Availing his book for wider Malaysian readership, he encouraged Malaysians regardless of religious affiliation to take politics as a serious matter. Similar to what was articulated at the NCC, he postulated that political process of the country was something very pertinent to the life of its citizens and not to be left at the hands of others. Consequently, it is possible to suggest that because he was a participant of several NCC gatherings, the discussions during the NCC gatherings could have had a major influence on his thinking about politics.

⁵⁵⁵ Christopher Choong, 'Strengthening Democracy in Malaysia', in Joshua Woo and Tan Soo-Inn (Eds.), *The Bible and the Ballot*, Kuala Lumpur: Graceworks, 2011, 18.

⁵⁵⁶ Goh Keat Peng, *A People's Politics*, Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2013.

Furthermore, Goh Keat Peng also went on to influence others in a more direct way. For example, Hannah Yeoh who is a Christian politician in Malaysia and served as the speaker for the State Assembly of Selangor attributes her participation in politics to Goh Keat Peng. In her book entitled, *Becoming Hannah: A Personal Journey*, she wrote that her desire and involvement in active politics was being directly related to the Christian convictions that she holds. Saying that, ‘God wants to reclaim politics and public service in Malaysia for righteousness’ sake. He is looking for God fearing men and women who are willing to roll up their sleeves in this very demanding field’,⁵⁵⁷ she pays tribute to Goh Keat Peng as ‘someone who had made all the difference’ in her political journey.⁵⁵⁸

Research further suggests that some of the church leaders who were part of the NCC gatherings sought to influence their members on the need for Christians to see involvement in politics as a welcome offshoot of their Christian virtues. For instance, former Bishop, Hwa Yung, a seasoned participant of several NCC, gatherings pointed out that,

Christians often are unaware or forget that the foundational ideas upon which modern forms of democracy and civil society are built, have their roots firmly embedded in western civilisation’s Christian history.⁵⁵⁹

Moreover, he goes on to postulate that because Christian ideals were the foundational ideas of modern democracies, Christians need not be afraid of getting involved in any forms of democratic political processes. Furthermore, he added that although democracy could wrongly be used by the Muslim majority to coerce the non-Muslim minority, it may not necessarily be so as Christians could always work with the Muslims who held the majority vote as well. Subsequently, he went on to caution that, ‘the task of nation-building in Malaysia requires us to enter into such intellectual and political engagements with love and respect with Muslims in our country’.⁵⁶⁰ His thoughts on politics found fertile reception as

⁵⁵⁷ Hannah Yeoh, *Becoming Hannah: A Personal Journey*, Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2014.

⁵⁵⁸ Yeoh, *Becoming Hannah*, 111.

⁵⁵⁹ *CCM News*, October-November 2012, 20.

⁵⁶⁰ *CCM News*, October-November 2012, 20.

his successor, Bishop Ong Hwai Teck felt it necessary to congratulate those who helped as volunteers and poll booth assistants during the general elections.⁵⁶¹

However, what could be some of the other reasons for Malaysian Christians' change in attitude towards politics? Some social scientists have suggested that it is possible to correlate political participation with specific types of religious beliefs. One such study found that different belief systems actually resulted in different forms of political participation.⁵⁶² Although the study is based on American context, the survey-based study found that when Christians believed that God was actively involved in the world, they were less likely to become involved in politics. In other words, they felt that God was already sufficiently involved in the affairs of their society and therefore there was no urgent need to change anything at the political level. Consequently, when we relate such a finding to the Malaysian context of increased involvement in politics, it is possible to think that due to their negative experiences of marginalization, Malaysians may have begun to believe that God is not actively involved in society as much as they would want him to. These tendencies then lead them to think that because God was being slow in changing their predicament, the time to wait was over and they needed to do something about their situation by becoming politically involved. Therefore, these types of considerations may also be one of the key psychological reasons for Malaysian Christians' greater involvement in politics.

Moreover, the same study also found that religious communities that are involved in politics seek to reinforce their group solidarity as a way of, 'strengthening the ties between individuals and society'.⁵⁶³ This research finding also becomes relevant for the Malaysian context because it tends to confirm the view that it was within the ambit of the NCC gatherings as solidarity platforms that the idea of politics as being relevant for the Malaysian church was adequately developed. Thus, we could safely suggest that Malaysian Christians began involving themselves in national politics because of their need to do something about

⁵⁶¹ 'Post General Elections: A Pastoral Letter from the Episcopal office', *Pelita Methodist*, Vol. 39, No.5, May 2013, 4.

⁵⁶² Robyn Dryskell (et al), 'Faith and Politics: The influence of Religious beliefs on political participation', in *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 89, No.2, 2008, 294.

⁵⁶³ Dryskell, 'Faith and Politics', 295.

their predicaments, which then became further reinforced through their collective discussions during the NCC gatherings.

Likewise, it is also possible to suggest that Malaysian Christians' conviction to be involved in politics became more pronounced when they recognized politics as means to express their collective grievances which arose out of the feelings of being marginalized. For instance, academic Arnold Puyok who teaches at a local university has suggested that Christian political consciousness rose in tandem with problems associated with the Institutionalization of Islam, the growing dominance of UMNO and also as a reaction to the *Allah* issue.⁵⁶⁴ Subsequently, he believes that Christian leaders have begun to encourage their members to seek greater political engagement with the state in order to 'speak against misuse of power'.⁵⁶⁵ Moreover, according to him, religion being inter-twined with politics should not be viewed as something unfamiliar as Islam has already been used extensively in Malaysian politics and he allocates one section of his writing to highlight the nuances of political Islam in Malaysia.⁵⁶⁶ Subsequently, academic Peter Riddell has also noted that participation in politics became one of the ways that the non-Muslim community used to speak out about their experiences of discrimination that were caused by the UMNO led government.⁵⁶⁷

Therefore, upon examining the research findings, it would be possible for us to safely conclude that the NCC gatherings have indeed become seedbeds for ideas on political involvement to germinate. Furthermore, the NCCs also inspired some of its participants to go on to influence others to become involved in the political life of the nation as well. Moreover, Christians in Malaysia began to take politics seriously when they realised that politics could potentially be used to change their predicaments due to Islamization, vis-à-vis

⁵⁶⁴ Puyok, 'Rise of Christian Political', 60.

⁵⁶⁵ Puyok, 'Rise of Christian Political', 62.

⁵⁶⁶ Puyok, 'Rise of Christian Political', 61.

⁵⁶⁷ Peter G. Riddell, 'Islamization, Civil Society, and Religious Minorities in Malaysia', in K.S. Nathan, and Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Islam in Southeast Asia: political, social and strategic challenges for the 21st century*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2005, 176.

through challenging the political party UMNO. However, how did the churches in Malaysia move on from discussions and articulations to initiate specific actions?

4.4.2 Guidance and assistance during elections.

Research shows that deliberations on politics at the NCC gatherings brought about specific changes in the behavior of churches and church-based institutions. For example, as a tangible outcome of discussions on political engagement during the NCC gatherings, CFM began to assert its leadership role more seriously by issuing press statements and communiques to churches when needed. One of the press statements criticized politicians who used denigration of non-Muslim religion as political fodder for their campaigns. The CFM expressed its caution and hope by saying, ‘the coming election campaign will be fair and that there will be no attempt by politicians to publicly misinterpret or miscast any religion or subject any particular religious community to unfair or adverse publicity for political gain’.⁵⁶⁸ In 2012, it produced a communique entitled: *CFM Letter to the Malaysian Churches and Christians on the forthcoming 13th General Elections*. Signed by its chairman and made available in four different languages, it highlighted the role of churches in politics by stating, ‘Churches have a responsibility to help guide their congregations to use wisdom in their exercise of their right to vote’.⁵⁶⁹

Subsequently, it becomes possible to propose that due to these types of bold actions of the CFM leadership, churches began to organise activities and programs on election awareness and procedures. For example, one of the ways that this was accomplished was by encouraging their members to register themselves as voters.⁵⁷⁰ One pastor gave his reason for such an exercise, ‘to help them to be aware of their rights and responsibilities to vote.’⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁸ As quoted in: Riddell, ‘Islamization’, 179.

⁵⁶⁹ CFM Letter to the Malaysian Churches & Christians on the Forthcoming 13th General Elections, 18th July 2012.

⁵⁷⁰ In Malaysia, all citizens above the age of 21 are entitled to vote but can only do so if they have registered themselves with the Election Commission.

⁵⁷¹ ‘Church helps to register voters’, The Star, 11th May 2010, <<http://www.thestar.com.my/Story/?sec=central&file=%2F2010%2F5%2F11%2Fcentral%2F6215345>>, Accessed 20th July 2012.

Moreover, research also reveals that churches had organized talks and seminars on national level issues. One of the churches attracted around 400 people for such an event which openly discussed Islamization of the East Malaysians and other national issues that were relevant for Christian voters. The same news report indicated that apart from this particular church, several Catholic churches in Penang and Kuala Lumpur had also conducted similar programs.⁵⁷² Moreover, just before the 2013 General Elections, the CCM youths took it upon themselves to conduct a two-hour workshop at a local church, training volunteers on how to register new voters in their own churches. It was not meant to be a one-off event as a ‘national roadshow on voter registration together with partner organisations, political parties, members of Parliament and state assemblymen and volunteers’ were also being planned.⁵⁷³

Furthermore, research also indicates that Christian publications were consciously used to encourage Malaysian Christians to involve themselves during the elections. For instance, the CCM News began to publish articles that had bearing on national politics and election related issues. Moreover, CCM made a bold step to support BERSIH⁵⁷⁴, an NGO that functioned as a pressure group that called for reforms in the election procedures.⁵⁷⁵ As a result, when *Berita* CCM editors permitted a full-colour page of their demands to be printed at the back page of the publication, it conveyed an inferential message to its readers that electoral reforms were important to churches and that CCM was now endorsing the BERSIH’s demands. Moreover, the same *Berita* CCM issue also carried several short testimonials and two lengthy reflections from those who had participated in a protest march that had been organized by BERSIH. Though the Bersih Walk (the name of the protest march) was touted as an apolitical rally, it was commonly perceived to be opposition backed, organized to express anti-government sentiments. Therefore, when a participant of the rally wrote, ‘My BERSIH walk was my personal act of worship to my most high God, who loves

⁵⁷² ‘Methodist church helps register voters’, 21 July 2010, <http://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/2010/07/21/methodist-church-helps-register-voters&post_id=61036>, Accessed 20th July 2012.

⁵⁷³ Chrisanne Chin, ‘CCM Youth: Prayerful Action for Justice, Peace and Reconciliation’, *CCM News*. July-September 2010, 12.

⁵⁷⁴ *Bersih* means clean in the Malay language.

⁵⁷⁵ Chin, ‘CCM Youth: Prayerful Action’, 28.

justice and righteousness’, participation in the rally became spiritually justified.⁵⁷⁶ Therefore, it becomes possible to propose that by giving recognition and expression space to those who participated in the rally, CCM sent a signal to its readers that participation in such rallies, even if it was viewed as anti-establishment, was actually a welcome development.

Furthermore, the NECF also discussed the subject of Christians participating in politics in its publications. For instance, in its *Berita* NECF September-October 2001 issue, it discussed the topic, Christians and Political Realities.⁵⁷⁷ The article was written by a former politician who noted that, ‘Christians must concern themselves with politics for it affects our daily lives. By the passing of a law and the stroke of a pen, our lives can be changed’.⁵⁷⁸ He then strongly urged Christians to participate in pressure groups, joining political parties, stand as candidates for the parliament and if possible,

Form a political party of their own and field candidates in the state and parliamentary constituencies in the next general election. If elected, the party can be the mouthpiece and platform for upholding Christian principles and ideals’.⁵⁷⁹

When we consider his bold assertions, it would not be wrong to suggest that the editors of *Berita* NECF allowed such statements to be presented, most likely to force their Christian readers to consider an increased involvement in politics.

Moreover, research also indicates that churches and denominations had encouraged their members to participate in the official duties as party representatives during the General Elections. This backing enabled some Christians to take on voluntary roles to oversee the ballot counting and also to ensure that the elections were conducted in a free and fair manner. These initiatives were then welcomed by church leaders who considered it a worthwhile

⁵⁷⁶ Chin, ‘CCM Youth: Prayerful Action’, 12.

⁵⁷⁷ *Berita NECF*, September-October 2001, <<http://www.necf.org.my/newsmaster.cfm?&menuid=2&action=view&retrieveid=112>>, Accessed 12th November 2013.

⁵⁷⁸ *Berita NECF*, September-October 2001.

⁵⁷⁹ *Berita NECF*, September-October 2001.

effort that needed appreciation. For example, after the 2013 elections, the Methodist Bishop wrote,

We also appreciate those who have taken every effort to be trained to play the official roles in the polling stations. It is indeed most commendable that we as the Methodist family take the process, duty and responsibility of casting our votes seriously.⁵⁸⁰

Subsequently, the Malaysian Church involvement in politics became noted in neighbouring Singapore. When a Singaporean news agency wrote under the heading, ‘Prayer guide, video to help Christians to vote wisely’, the article showcased ongoing efforts of the churches to motivate and guide its members to participate meaningfully in the election process.⁵⁸¹ It noted that one of the measures included the production of an election video guide which was distributed for use among congregations, an attempt by the Malaysian church to increase its participation in politics. Therefore, it becomes possible to suggest that the Malaysian churches gradually progressed from rhetoric on politics during the NCC gatherings to a noticeable increased involvement through concerted efforts.

Moreover, research also indicates that the involvement and support of the churches did not stop when the election periods ended, as church leaders often continued to shape the thinking of Christians through their writings even after the elections. For example, the principal of a local seminary in Malaysia dealt with issues arising from the concluded elections in the front page of the seminary’s periodical. It was issued one month after the May 2013 elections and was titled, ‘13th General Elections and Challenges to Christian Ministry’. He encouraged Malaysian Christians to persist in their commitment to the election process by saying, ‘we all wish to be treated equally as citizens with proper due and respect...the long march to democracy and transparency will continue to go on’.⁵⁸² Subsequently, when he expressed his thoughts by saying, ‘Let us continue to remain calm and pray for God’s authority to overrule everything’, it was his way of iterating that God’s government should always be perceived as being greater than the government of the day. His

⁵⁸⁰ ‘Post General Elections, A Pastoral Letter’, 4.

⁵⁸¹ Yong Yen Nie, ‘Prayer guide, video to help Christians to vote wisely’, *Straits Times*, <<http://www.straitstimes.com/st/print/981645>>, Accessed 16th February 2011.

⁵⁸² *Berita STM* (STM News), June 2013, Vol. 13, No.2, 1.

statement also alluded to the fact there was still a long way to go before Christians could enjoy another government that could offer greater religious liberties.

In addition, the Methodist Bishop also addressed the general sense of disappointment among Christians and duly advised them to choose their responses carefully. He wrote,

In the wake of expectations unmet for many, let us next, all the more take the time to solemnly to ask the Lord what he is further saying to us. This includes studying sound, fair and objectively wise analysis ... rejecting the ones that come from wounded reactions that would only deepen our social fractures and alienation'.⁵⁸³

In closing, he reminded the readers that the election process and its outcome should actually be perceived as part of 'unfinished business of transformation' of the nation.⁵⁸⁴ Subsequently, these types of post-election messages by senior church leaders need be understood as attempts to ensure that Malaysian Christians would not give up their involvement in politics, despite the outcome.

Therefore, it would not be wrong to conclude that the NCC gatherings managed to bring about significant changes in the way Malaysian churches understood and engaged in national politics. Evidence shows that churches and leaders took specific steps to encourage their members towards a greater political participation and sought to give input both before and after elections. This was a noticeable change from their own previous stance of distanced political engagement.

4.4.3 A leaning towards the opposition.

Research on the political preference of the Malaysian Church indicates that most Christians opted to support the opposition, very likely as a show of defiance against UMNO. For example, when Christian leaders articulated their sore feelings in their post-election writings, it is very likely that they were expressing their disappointment that the UMNO-led government had been given another fresh mandate to rule the nation. Moreover, although some Christian leaders have sometimes sought to be careful not to be seen as openly supporting the opposition parties, they have given strong hints in that direction. When Goh

⁵⁸³ 'Post General Elections, A Pastoral Letter', 4.

⁵⁸⁴ 'Post General Elections, A Pastoral Letter', 4.

Keat Peng, the former CFM secretary wrote the book 'A People's Politics', he argued that no one politician or political parties should be trusted all the time. This was possibly a direct reference to the then ruling government, as it had been enjoying uninterrupted power since independence. However, when he suggests that factors in the current system of governance in the country were becoming deteriorated and therefore needed rectification through change in governance, it indicates a preference for the opposition. Additionally, when he wrote about his active involvement in the BERSIH rally that called for clean and fair elections, he devoted an entire chapter of his book on the matter because he believes it was the right of the people to express their discontent even if it meant taking an anti-establishment stance.⁵⁸⁵ Moreover, his affinity for the opposition became clear the two persons he invited to write the foreword to his book were opposition politicians.

Additionally, opposition leaders were often invited to give talks in churches and church organized programs. The fact that opposition leaders were invited to churches to present talks on socio-political issues could be perceived as being visible evidence of church leaders' willingness to sympathize with the opposition's causes. Furthermore, since these local church leaders would have invited the opposition members with the knowledge and sanction of their regional and national church superiors, it becomes another indication that the opposition politicians were being favoured. For example, opposition politician Yusoff Rawa from PAS was invited to speak on the *Allah* issue in the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Penang, The Nativity Church in Butterworth, The Immaculate Conception Church in Penang and St. Anne's Church in Bukit Mertajam.⁵⁸⁶ Similarly, other opposition politicians like Nurul Izzah were called to speak on the concept of Islamic State at the Full Gospel Tabernacle church in Subang Jaya. Moreover, DAP member Kulasegaran was invited to speak in St Louis Church in Taiping and Anwar Ibrahim spoke at the Holy Family Church in Kajang after their Sunday Mass. All these examples show that many of the Malaysian churches were willing to listen to and engage with opposition politicians.

⁵⁸⁵ The chapter was titled as, 'A People's Protest'.

⁵⁸⁶ Mujahid Yusoff Rawa, *Berdialog Dengan Gereja* (Dialogue with the Church), Malaysia: Ilham Centre, 2013,139.

Moreover, opposition leaders themselves have sometimes sought to establish cordial ties with the Christian leaders. This was seen when opposition leaders from the opposition party PAS visited the new Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur to congratulate him on his appointment.⁵⁸⁷ Moreover, in 2012, PAS leaders visited the newly installed Catholic Bishop in Penang, Sebastian Francis.⁵⁸⁸ One PAS leader stated that his engagement with Christians and churches was his way of challenging the notion that Christians and Muslims in Malaysia were generally not keen to foster better ties with each other.⁵⁸⁹ Moreover, as a gesture of friendship, he invited the Catholic Bishop Sebastian Francis to write one of the two forewords in his book with the other being his own party supremo.

However, research shows that UMNO was not comfortable with the church leaders' relationship with opposition politicians. Using its ability to manipulate media, it often vilified Muslim opposition politicians who got invited to visit churches. For example, when opposition politician Nurul Izzah spoke at a Christian gathering, she was alleged to have supported the idea that Muslims should be allowed to renounce their faith⁵⁹⁰ Moreover, UMNO backed ISMA had sometimes criticised Anwar Ibrahim and the opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) for working with Christians. They insinuate that such collaborations have since caused Christian evangelists to become '*kurang ajar*', a Malay idiom that signifies someone as being uncouth, crude and bad-mannered.⁵⁹¹ Furthermore, an UMNO backed newspaper sensationalised the attendance of an opposition Member of Parliament at a

⁵⁸⁷ 'High-level Pas delegation visits new KL Archbishop Julian Leow', Anilnetto.com, 22nd October 2014, <<http://anilnetto.com/religion-and-ethnicity/christianity/high-level-pas-delegation-visits-new-kl-archbishop-julian-leow/>>, Accessed 30th May 2015.

⁵⁸⁸ 'Pas makes courtesy call on new Penang Bishop', Anilnetto.com, 23rd September 2012, <<http://anilnetto.com/religion-and-ethnicity/christianity/pas-makes-courtesy-call-to-new-penang-bishop/>>, Accessed 1st June 2015.

⁵⁸⁹ Rawa, *Berdialog Dengan Gereja*, xii.

⁵⁹⁰ Hafiz Yatim, 'Nurul Izzah files defamation suit against Utusan', 23rd November 2013, <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/214920>>, Accessed 17th May 2014.

⁵⁹¹ '*Pengaruh liberal yang dibawa Anwar dan puak PR jadikan Evangelis Kristian kurang ajar*', (The liberal influence of Anwar and the PR clan has made Christian evangelists to become ill-mannered), 23rd January 2013, <<http://www.ismaweb.net/2014/01/pengaruh-liberal-yang-dibawa-anwar-dan-puak-pr-jadikan-evangelis-kristian-kurang-ajar/>>, Accessed 19th May 2014.

Christian dinner event and implied that it was a sign of a conspiracy to topple the UMNO led government (cited earlier).⁵⁹²

We are then led to ask, why is it possible to correlate invitations to speak in churches as an indication of support for the opposition? It is possible to answer that query by coming to an understanding that opposition politicians coming to churches is a new phenomenon, something that did not seem to exist prior to Islamization. Moreover, when we compare the new reality with the fact that there have rarely been any instances where churches invite ruling party politicians to speak on national level socio-political issues, it is possible to think that their preference for the church becomes clear.

Moreover, there could be possible reasons as to why Malaysian church leaders appear attracted to the opposition parties. Firstly, it may very likely be caused by the lure factor of opposition parties who choose to project themselves as being sympathetic towards Christians and their causes. Moreover, attraction also emerges when the ethical and moral standards that the Christians point to during elections tend to be similar to what the opposition parties claim to be fighting for. Christopher Catherwood who holds a Doctorate from the University of East Anglia suggests that even when Church leaders do not want to be openly seen as partisan in their political preference, their stipulations as to what constitutes acceptable politics will eventually appear partisan. He claims that the 'political check list that Christian groups give out at election times has a lot of partisan points on it'.⁵⁹³ Therefore, it is possible to think that even when Christian leaders in Malaysia do not want to be seen as favouring the opposition, their election guidance documents during elections may give an impression that they are being pro-opposition.

However, despite the Malaysian church leaders' inclinations were leaning towards the opposition, their actions have sometimes been criticised as being too superficial and therefore not forceful enough to influence their church constituents. Alwyn Lau, who holds a Doctorate in Political Philosophy and lectures at a local university, has suggested that

⁵⁹² Rokiah Abdullah and Mohd. Khuzairi Ismail, '*Malaysia Negara Kristian?*' (Malaysia a Christian Nation?), <http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2011&dt=0507&pub=Utusan_Malaysia&sec=Muka_Hadapan&pg=mh_01.htm>, Accessed 17th May 2011.

⁵⁹³ Christopher Catherwood, *Whose Side is God on? Nationalism and Christianity*, SPCK, 2003, 97.

Malaysian church leaders lack the needed resolve to make a difference, especially since they choose not to take a definitive stand to endorse specific candidates or specific political parties. Moreover, he feels that churches should actually compel their members to vote as he holds the view that Malaysian leaders' neutral advice as being too limited and very general. He argues that if the Malaysian church leaders were indeed convinced of the ruling government's wrongs, they should be willing to speak in ways that they directly endorse opposition candidates.⁵⁹⁴ Offering some possible reasons for them being in such predicament, he postulates that the reason for their lack of engagement is because Christian leaders in Malaysia have since taken to 'political theologizing', which for Alwyn means they are only having conversations among themselves about politics, albeit from theological perspectives. According to Alwyn, this has led to 'incoherence, inconsistency, a diminished view of the political and an over-reliance on the rational'.⁵⁹⁵

Moreover, Alwyn also proceeds to conduct a psychoanalytical evaluation of their inner motivations and suggests that the Malaysian church leaders are going through what he thinks is a 'fetishistic disavowal', a condition where someone knows what to do but is not able to get to the full distance to get it done.⁵⁹⁶ To underscore his claim, he gives examples of NECF and CFM publications which call on Christians to assess election candidates through specific Bible-based criteria but stop short of endorsing specific election candidates. His suggestions are actually reflections from his earlier writings where he laments that the Malaysian pulpit was still not able to 'name names' of specific candidates.⁵⁹⁷ In the particular work, he questioned the hesitance of church leaders who seem to have no qualms in selecting one brand of equipment over another to be purchased for their churches but have difficulty in expressing their political preferences.

Although Alwyn may have some merits to his arguments, there are difficulties associated with some of his proposals. Firstly, his proposal that churches should not merely

⁵⁹⁴ Lau, 'Intimating the Unconscious', 282.

⁵⁹⁵ Lau, 'Intimating the Unconscious', 283.

⁵⁹⁶ Lau, 'Intimating the Unconscious', 284.

⁵⁹⁷ Lau, 'Intimating the Unconscious', 284.

encourage people to vote but insist on it as part of the divine commandment, in the same way that churches would not merely encourage people not to sin but insist on it as a divine commandment, needs scrutiny.⁵⁹⁸ It is possible to suggest that he has erroneously come to this conclusion based on an overly simplistic understanding of scripture. For instance, whenever the Bible commandments are referred to, or taught as spiritual principles in sermons, they serve as guideposts that are beneficial to the believer's personal faith journey. However, Christians could always choose not to heed the prescribed commandments. For instance, the Bible encourages Christians to give their money generously but gives them the liberty to give what their own hearts have desired to give. Similarly, when Jesus encouraged his followers to give up their lives for the sake of the kingdom of God, he wanted them to do willingly out of their own accord, which is in essence the element of free will that was given by God to mankind. Therefore, when churches preach about the responsibilities involved in being a conscientious voter, members are usually given the freedom to choose whom to vote for or alternatively, choose not to be involved in the voting process at all.

Subsequently, when he takes offence to the fact that, 'there is no clear explanation for why the CFM refuses to publicly denounce the ruling Barisan National regime and urge Christians to vote against the alliance', it also needs further examination.⁵⁹⁹ Building his argument by referring to Bishop Hwa Yung's 2012 series of writings on Christians and nation-building where the Bishop, 'appears to say almost all the right things but hesitates on what some would insist is the right thing to do, i.e. vote out the oppressive'.⁶⁰⁰ For Alwyn, such stances tantamount to a false form of neutrality.⁶⁰¹ In his judgement, this is the reason the church has taken on a psychoanalytical term called 'unconscious disavowal' where there is a desire to enjoy pleasures minus their side effects, like caffeine-less coffee or chocolate laxative, which was not really chocolate. Consequently, he believes that this is why non-partisan sermons related to politics become 'politics *sans* politics'.

⁵⁹⁸ Lau, 'Intimating the Unconscious', 284.

⁵⁹⁹ Lau, 'Intimating the Unconscious', 285.

⁶⁰⁰ Lau, 'Intimating the Unconscious', 286.

⁶⁰¹ Lau, 'Intimating the Unconscious', 286.

However, while his call for a definitive endorsement from the church leadership sounds like a workable idea, in reality it has certain difficulties attached to it. For instance, James Davidson who taught Sociology of Religion, wrote an article on *Why Churches Cannot Endorse or Oppose Political Candidates* where he proposes credible reasons for stating so.⁶⁰² Although it is based on the American context and focuses mainly on how supporting specific political parties led to legal problems that caused churches to lose tax exemption status, he is able to offer two suggestions as to why being neutral is actually desirable. Davidson correctly reasons that if churches or denominations were not neutral, church leaders could face expulsion if they did not support the church's official preference.⁶⁰³ Moreover, if a particular church denomination ceases to be non-partisan, it could only hire clergy who explicitly supported their preference. This would be erroneous, as hiring someone for church work should ideally be based on competency in ministry and not be encumbered by political convictions. Moreover, Davidson seems to think that any attempt to be partisan may potentially cause divisions within members that may lead to 'threaten congregational civility'.⁶⁰⁴ Since Alwyn himself has also observed that the Malaysian church had already found ways of working together to deal with national issues, which in his view 'attests to the desire for a unified voice among the country's denominations',⁶⁰⁵ it is possible to think that attempts to force partisan politics may have the inherent risk of break up the existing solidarity among Malaysian churches. Consequently, any attempts to force denominations or churches to be partisan may well lead to disunity within the CFM coalition.

Moreover, it would also be possible to argue that not all lay members would prefer partisan politics to be preached from the pulpit. It is possible to suggest that members may actually desire a church that is non-partisan because it denotes that the church respects their individual ability to make the right decisions and therefore gives them the needed space rather than confining them by curtailing their options. Furthermore, Alwyn's thinking that church

⁶⁰² James D. Davidson, 'Why Churches Cannot Endorse or Oppose Political Candidates', in *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 1998.

⁶⁰³ Davidson, 'Why Churches Cannot Endorse', 29.

⁶⁰⁴ Davidson, 'Why Churches Cannot Endorse', 29.

⁶⁰⁵ Lau, 'Intimating the Unconscious', 284.

members should be explicitly told who to vote for potentially paints an inferior view of members because it would infer that they are unable to make right choices by themselves during elections. Consequently, the attitude of Malaysian Church leaders as being non-partisan should not be viewed as an abrogation of responsibility as Alvyn seems to be suggesting but should be viewed as a reflection of trust in their members to make correct decisions when it comes to politics.

In addition, it is also possible to offer other reasons as to why Malaysians Christian leaders did not want to publicly position themselves with the opposition. It is very likely that they wished to maintain existing ties with the ruling government. For instance, it is possible to submit that they appreciated the government leaders for taking time to attend the annual open-house Christmas celebrations that are hosted by the CFM.⁶⁰⁶ Moreover, the former Prime Minister himself has met Christian leaders on several occasions to discuss difficult issues over a meal. Furthermore, state and federal monarchs have sometimes conferred honorific titles to episcopal leaders of churches as a way of recognising their positive role in society. Likewise, the government has also given financial grants to churches and Parachurch organisations, as goodwill gestures. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that although Malaysian church leaders' seem to show a leaning towards the opposition the church leaders may not be willing to sever its existing relationship with the ruling government.

Summary

This chapter analyzed the Malaysian Christian community's roots of ecumenical solidarity, the evolution of prayer solidarity and some of the reasons for an increased engagement in national politics. It discovered that the Malaysian church used all these three avenues as useful tools to counter the overbearing Islamization about brought marginalization and discrimination. The next chapter intends to explore the *Allah* controversy as a serious issue which affected Christians in Malaysia, in order to note the three specific solidarity responses that were highlighted earlier in this study.

⁶⁰⁶ Rahimy Rahim, 'Multicultural gathering in Xmas open house', The Star Online, 29th December 2016, <<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/12/29/multicultural-gathering-at-xmas-open-house-zahid-racial-unity-prime-mover/>>, Accessed 5th January 2017.

CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY RESPONSES TO THE *ALLAH* CONTROVERSY

Chapter Five

The ‘*Allah* issue’ is an impromptu label used by the media in Malaysia to identify the controversy that emerged when the government bans were placed on the usage of the word *Allah* by Christians.⁶⁰⁷ It developed into a public controversy in Malaysia when Prime Minister Mahathir used a Home Ministry order to stop non-Muslims from using the word *Allah* in their publications. This chapter seeks to scrutinize the *Allah* controversy by investigating it from two angles, both as an outcome of Islamization as well as the three solidarity aspects of the Christian community that were examined earlier in this study.⁶⁰⁸

5.1. The *Allah* Issue in Malaysia.

5.1.1 The *Allah* issue as a wedge between the Government and the Christian community.

5.1.1.1 Total ban to conditional use.

Observers of Islamization in Malaysia have suggested that the Islamization initiatives that were undertaken during the administration of Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad (1981-2003) affected all areas of Malaysian society.⁶⁰⁹ Hence, it becomes possible to think that these measures have then caused Christians as part of the non-Muslim caucus to develop

⁶⁰⁷ A comprehensive fact sheet comprising the timeline of the letters and from the Government was compiled and distributed by the Christian Federation of Malaysia to all the churches in Malaysia. *CFM letter to Church Leaders*, 30th March 2010.

⁶⁰⁸ *Courts Continue to Ignore Rights of Christian Minority*, Christian Federation of Malaysia, Media Statement, 14th October 2013.

⁶⁰⁹ See Patricia Martinez, ‘The Islamic State or the State of Islam in Malaysia?’ in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 2001, 474-503 and also Maznah Mohamad, ‘The Authoritarian State and Political Islam in Muslim-Majority Malaysia’, in Johan Saravanamuthu (Ed.), *Johan Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia*. Routledge, 2010.

reservation and became fearful.⁶¹⁰ For instance, in 1981 when Christians in Malaysia were told that the Home Ministry had decided to ban the import of the *Alkitab* (Indonesian language version of the Bible) as it contained the word *Allah*, it was difficult for Christians in Malaysia to accept the order. As the order stated that it was, ‘prejudicial to national interest and security of the federation’, it raised feelings of resentment among Christians towards the government for viewing their holy book as propaganda material.⁶¹¹ It then led the heads of churches to conduct high-level, private negotiations with Home Ministry officials to find an amicable solution to the matter.

Subsequently, a compromise deal was reached when Church leaders agreed that henceforth the *Alkitab* would only be used and distributed within Christian circles. On its part, the government amended the ban order to read as, ‘subject to the possession and use in church of such publications by persons professing the Christian religion, throughout Malaysia’.⁶¹² However, in 1986, the Home Affairs Ministry sent another circular to all the Christian publishers in Malaysia and specified that four specific words were now under the forbidden list. They were: *Allah* (God), *Kaabah* (sacred house) *Baitullah* (house of God) and *Solat* (prayer).⁶¹³ Once again, the issue of protecting national interest was put forward as the reason, stating that the prohibition was necessary to maintain public order and prevent misunderstanding between Muslims and Christians.⁶¹⁴ When the Prime Minister was asked if the ban infringed on the religious freedom of Christians, he was quoted as saying that the

⁶¹⁰ Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence*, 87-88.

⁶¹¹ Internal Security Act, Prohibition of Publications (No. 3). Order made 2nd December 1981. (KHEDN: 0 59/3/9/Jilid 4, PN (PU2) 24 Pt. 11).

⁶¹² Internal Security Act, Prohibitions of Publications (No.4). Gazette on March 1982.

⁶¹³ Letter from K.D.N: S.59/3/9/A, Klt. 2 - (17), 5th December 1986.

⁶¹⁴ *CFM Letter to Church Leaders*, 30th March 2010, 3.

Government was actually being lenient and flexible, as no non-Muslims had actually been prosecuted for using the banned words thus far.⁶¹⁵

However, research reveals that this seemingly tolerant stance changed in 1998 when the Home Ministry officials decided to enforce the ban in a serious manner. This was when a warning letter was issued to the publishers of a Catholic weekly called, *The Herald*, for using the word *Allah* in its Malay-language publications and when the publishers chose to ignore the letter and continued with the usage of the word, it caused the Home Affairs Ministry to issue a more serious letter in the year 2002. Consequently, when their orders went unheeded, the Home Ministry refused to renew the publication permit of *The Herald*.⁶¹⁶

Subsequently, this action by the government forced the publishers of *The Herald* to seek legal amends and received a legal victory that surprised the Christian community who did not expect the verdict to be in their favour.⁶¹⁷ However the verdict was not well received by some which then caused several arson attacks against a number of churches and with a few mosques also being affected.⁶¹⁸ The Government then pursued the case with the Appeals Court which eventually overturned the earlier verdict and maintained the Home Minister's order.⁶¹⁹ Next, the Catholic Church then moved their case to the Federal Court as the apex appellate court of the nation, where in June 2014, the panel of judges rejected their grounds to launch an appeal.⁶²⁰ A newspaper article called the Catholic Church's exhaustion of

⁶¹⁵ As quoted in: Baturalai Sadayandi, *Islamic Resurgence and Islamization in Malaysia: A Malaysian Christian Response*, Ipoh: Charles Greenier, 1996, 262.

⁶¹⁶ C.F.M Letter to Church Leaders, 30th March 2010, 3.

⁶¹⁷ Eileen Ng, "Malaysian court rule Christians can use 'Allah'", *The Guardian Online*, 31st December 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/8879021>>, Accessed 12th June 2013.

⁶¹⁸ Niluksi Koswanage, 'Fourth Church attacked in Malaysia as *Allah* row deepens', *Reuters News*, 9th January 2010, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/01/09/us-malaysia-religion-idUSTRE6080MV20100109>>, Accessed 13th June 2013.

⁶¹⁹ Joseph Sipalan, 'Court of Appeals quashes *Allah* Judgment', *The Malaymail Online*, 14 October 2013, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/court-of-appeal-quashes-Allah-judgment>>, Accessed 14th June 2013.

⁶²⁰ Vathani Panirselvam, 'Federal Court denies *The Herald*'s appeal on *Allah* ban', *The Sun Daily*, 23rd June 2014, <<http://www.thesundaily.my/news/1089653>>, Accessed 15 June 2015.

available legal options as the ‘last nail’, alluding to its inability to pursue any other legal recourses.⁶²¹ Christians in Malaysia then voiced out their despondency through a CFM Media Statement which lamented that Christians were ‘extremely disappointed’ but would ‘stay steadfast in their faith in the face of prolonged adversity’.⁶²² Consequently, the prolonged legal battle for the word *Allah* by the Catholic Church became a major sore point in the relationship between the Malaysian Church and the government, causing a divisive wedge between the Christian community and the Muslim majority government.

5.1.1.2. Confiscations and embargoes.

Research revealed that while the legal processes were still continuing in the courts, several other incidents produced increasing friction between the Christian community and the government. For example, in December 2007, the Home Ministry seized three boxes of Malay-language Christian books that belonged to the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) denomination which imported them from Indonesia. Although they filed a lawsuit to overturn the Home Ministry’s decision, the courts delivered a verdict in the Home Ministers favour.⁶²³ Moreover, in 2008 Customs officers detained a consignment of *Alkitab* which contained 30,000 copies of the *Perjanjian Baru, Mazmur dan Amsal* (New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs) in the state of Sarawak. As Sarawak is the only Christian majority state in Malaysia, the detention of the Bibles caused alarm and concern within the larger Christian community of the nation.

Moreover, when in 2008, 32 English language Bibles were confiscated from a Malaysian woman who purchased them from the Philippines for her church use, it bought

⁶²¹ Ida Lim and Shaun Tan, ‘Last Nail in Catholic Church’s *Allah* case as Federal Court again says no’, The Malay Mail Online, 21st January 2015, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/last-nail-in-catholic-churchs-Allah-case-as-federal-court-again-says-no>>, Accessed 16th October 2016.

⁶²² Christians extremely disappointed with refusal to grant leave to appeal to Federal Court, CFM Media Statement, 23rd June 2014.

⁶²³ Shazwan Mustaffa Kamal, ‘Malay groups hail latest *Allah* ruling as victory for Muslims’, The Malay Mail Online, 5th May 2014, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/malay-groups-hail-latest-Allah-ruling-as-victory-for-muslims?hc_location=ufi>, Accessed 24th June 2014.

negative feelings among Christians.⁶²⁴ Customs officials told her that they could only return them to her after receiving clearance from the Publications and Quranic Text Quranic Control Division which is under the ambit of Internal Security Ministry. The incident began to cause much consternation among Christians simply because the English language Bibles do not even use the word *Allah* in it. Consequently, the issue became resolved only after Christian leaders sought the intervention of the Deputy Internal Security Minister. Furthermore, in May 2008 when the Home Ministry seized eight Compact Disks from Jill Ireland which were only returned to him in 2014 after a prolonged legal battle,⁶²⁵ the Federal counsel said that the case was being pursued based on the Home Minister's original order that was issued in 1986.⁶²⁶

Therefore, based on the recurrent and hostile nature of the incidents, some commentators have suggested that the *Allah* controversy has since led Christian minorities to think of them as part of their marginalization experiences.⁶²⁷ Furthermore, it becomes possible to think that the prolonged controversy has since led to feelings of distrust and antagonism. Moreover, whenever the Christian community expresses its dissatisfaction and protest, these types of expressions are then sometimes considered to be an annoyance by certain Muslims who feel that the Christians are constantly complaining about their situation despite enjoying the freedom of religion accorded to them by the government (an aspect that will be discussed in upcoming parts of this chapter).

⁶²⁴ Hands off our Bibles, C.F.M Media Statement, 5th February 2008.

⁶²⁵ Qishin Tariq, 'Court orders 'Allah' CDs returned to clerk', 21st July 2014, <<http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2014/07/21/Jill-Ireland-Allah-CD-case/>>, Accessed 17th April 2015.

⁶²⁶ V. Anbalagan, 'Court Orders return of CDs with 'Allah' to Sarawakian Christian', The Malaysian Insider, 23rd June 2015, <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/courts-orders-return-of-cds-with-Allah-to-sarawak-christian#sthash.IPBhyENi.dpbs>>, Accessed 14th July 2015.

⁶²⁷ Nesrine Malik, 'The Malaysian 'Allah' ban is about putting the minorities in their plac', 16th October 2013, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2013/oct/16/malaysian-Allah-ban-minorities-in-place>>, Accessed 13th December 2014.

5.1.2. Translation dynamics.

Is there a real need for Christians in Malaysia to use the word *Allah* as part of their religious vocabulary to develop their religion? Christians usually translate their religious texts in order to relay what they themselves have received through the original manuscripts. Moreover, it is possible to think that translations are typically done very carefully to reproduce the closest natural equivalent in the receptor language, by finding the priority of meaning while remaining true to the significance of style.⁶²⁸ However, Eugene Nida, who was sometimes described as a theoretician of translation,⁶²⁹ thinks that although translations, ‘may be reasonably close to the original but they cannot be identical in detail’.⁶³⁰ Moreover, since some words have referential and even connotative meanings, translations only become close to ideal when they are focused on the recipients of the translated work, as words become difficult to understand if the recipient cannot relate them to their own memories and experiences.⁶³¹ Hence, it has been correctly proposed that because no two languages are identical, ‘there can be no fully exact translations’.⁶³²

Even the old question: is this a correct translation? must be answered by another question, namely: For whom? Correctness must be determined by the extent to which the average reader for which a translation is intended will be likely to understand it correctly.⁶³³

Therefore, in order to be effective and accurate, translators must be able to ‘respect the genius of each language’ and harness resources from it in order to make it as accurate as possible,

⁶²⁸ Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982, 12.

⁶²⁹ Philip. C. Stine, ‘Eugene A. Nida: Theoretician of Translation’, in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol.36, No.1, January 2012, 38.

⁶³⁰ Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translation: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures involved in Bible Translating*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964, 156.

⁶³¹ Nida and Taber *The Theory and Practice*, 56-99.

⁶³² Nida, *Toward a Science of Translation*, 156.

⁶³³ Nida, *Toward a Science of Translation*, 1.

within the context of the receptor language.⁶³⁴ Consequently, when we consider the convictions of the translators, it becomes possible to suggest that the word *Allah* was chosen particularly because it was identified as the closest equivalent to a conceptual reference to a monotheistic supreme being, with which the Malay and Indonesian cultures were already familiar to due to the earlier arrival of Islam.

Nevertheless, it is also possible to suggest that despite the best efforts of translators, there is always the likelihood of an inherent risk in undertaking any translation attempts. For example, it is very likely that when a particular idea that the Christian translator attempts to put across may not convey the same idea to the non-Christian recipient. Lamin Sanneh who teaches at the Yale Divinity School, compares this dilemma with an analogy of a gun and its bullet. He likens the translator's work to a gun and the translator's idea with a bullet, where once the trigger is pulled, it has no power to recall the bullet.⁶³⁵ In other words, once a word is released to be utilized in a translation, it may have the potential to be understood very differently compared to what was originally intended by the translator. Consequently, Christian translators who used the word *Allah* may have also had a particular image in their mind which could be significantly different than the picture that non-Christian readers have in their minds.

Subsequently, a corresponding query further emerges, why is it then important to translate the Bible into vernacular languages especially when it contains inherent risks? It could be proposed that translating the Bible has been considered an important aspect of Christendom because translations have played a key role in Christian mission activity. For instance, Sanneh himself has suggested that it is through the translations of the Bible that Christianity rendered itself as a translatable religion that is compatible with all cultures.⁶³⁶ He is also prone to think that, 'translation is the church's benchmark as well as its missionary

⁶³⁴ Nida and Taber, *The Theory and Practice*, 3-4.

⁶³⁵ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009, 60.

⁶³⁶ Sanneh, *Translating the message*, 56.

benchmark: the church would be unrecognisable or unsustainable without it.⁶³⁷ Moreover, according to him translations have become useful for two main reasons. Firstly, they become useful for edification and spiritual growth of believers who learn to worship and draw near to God through the translated contents. Secondly, through the reading of the translated texts, non-Christians gain the option of coming to know the God of Christianity. Moreover, Sanneh correctly proposes that such measures should not be considered a ‘tactical concession to win converts. It is rather an acknowledgment that languages have intrinsic merit for communicating the divine message’.⁶³⁸

Nevertheless, research suggests that some Muslim translators do not actually consider such merits as being fully adequate, as they argue that it is only a small price to pay, as there would always be a risk of error that may possibly arise in the course of the translation. These types of thinking have led some Muslims to defend the inimitable nature of the Quran. Muhammad Baqir Behbudu who edited the book, *The Quran: A new interpretation. Textual Exegesis*, has stated that:

The fear of misinterpretation may be imputed to those who have ... declared God’s message to Muhammad inimitable and therefore untranslatable ... A survey of Quran translations, especially those produced by non and anti-Muslim translators reveal that such a fear was not without a foundation.⁶³⁹

Furthermore, Islamic scholars like Miraj Ahmad, who is a professor in the Arabic Department of the Aliah University in Calcutta, India believe that Quran’s uniqueness is something unparalleled, even when it is compared within the scope of the Arabic language itself. He says that:

The Quran achieved this unique literary form by fusing together metrical and non-metrical speech. This fusion of metrical and non-metrical composition is present

⁶³⁷ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity: The Gospel beyond the West*, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003, 97.

⁶³⁸ Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity*, 100.

⁶³⁹ Muhammad Baqir Behbudi, (Ed.) and Colin Turner (Translator), *The Quran: A new interpretation. Textual Exegesis*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1997, xii.

throughout the whole of the Quran and cannot be found in any Arabic text, past or present.⁶⁴⁰

Therefore, such these types of thinking may very well be one of the possible reasons for the refusal of Muslims in Malaysia to share the word *Allah* with Christians, as they could be thinking of the term itself as being inimitable as well. Accordingly, one of the main reasons that the Malaysian government has put forward for their refusal to allow Christians to use *Allah* is to avoid weak or ill-informed Muslims from becoming confused.⁶⁴¹ However, it is also possible to challenge such insecurities, that although the word may be similar, the person who uses the word would very likely use the word within the context of their own experiences and therefore would be able to differentiate which god-head it actually refers to.

However, it is possible to propose that because the use of the word *Allah* is only a contentious issue where Malaysia is concerned, it may not just be a translation issue alone but interconnected with other national socio-dynamics that are peculiar to the nation. For example, a scrutiny of the standard Malay-English dictionary that was used extensively in the 1960s and 1970s reveals a useful insight. In the said dictionary, the word *Allah* was given a one-word translation 'God'⁶⁴² and the word *Tuhan* was translated as 'god'.⁶⁴³ Observed carefully, the only difference that could be noted is by way of capitalization. However, the inspection of a more recent Malaysian Bi-lingual Dictionary reveals an added definition, the word *Allah* has since been defined as 'Muslim name for God'⁶⁴⁴ with *Tuhan* simply rendered to as 'God'.⁶⁴⁵ Therefore, when we ask what could have been a possible reason for the change in definition, we could propose that the contestation for the word *Allah* could very well be a monopolization attempt, in order to ensure that the word belongs to Muslims alone.

⁶⁴⁰ Ahmad Miraj, 'Literary Miracle of the Quran', in *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Studies*, Vol. 3, Issue 3, November 2016, Karimanj: Scholar Publications, 318.

⁶⁴¹ CFM Letter to Church Leaders, 30th March 2010, 3.

⁶⁴² Zainal Abidin Safarwan, *An Advanced Malay-English Dictionary*, Singapore: Marican and Sons, 1966, 6.

⁶⁴³ Safarwan, *An Advanced Malay-English*, 351.

⁶⁴⁴ *Kamus Dwi-Bahasa Longman* (Longman Bilingual Dictionary), Pearson, 2009 Edition, 10.

⁶⁴⁵ *Kamus Dwi-Bahasa Longman*, 367.

Furthermore, in addition to understanding translation dynamics, it would also be pertinent to raise a connected query of whether the Christians are worshipping the same divine godhead. Research reveals that Christians are mostly divided in their thinking of whether the monotheistic *Allah* of the Muslims is the same monotheistic deity that they worship. Scholars like Miroslav Volf, who is a Professor of Theology at the Yale Divinity School has argued that both are essentially the same.⁶⁴⁶ He arrives at this conclusion based on the fact that both religions essentially point to a monotheistic creator who is benevolent towards creation. Moreover, a Bishop in Netherlands, Martinus Muskens has claimed that it is actually profitable for Christians to use the word *Allah* as it would promote better understanding when Christians come to engage with Muslims.⁶⁴⁷ However, other Christian academics, like Albert Mohler, the President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary have refuted such claims and argue that it would actually cause more confusion.⁶⁴⁸ Nevertheless, it needs to be clarified that in Malaysia, the *Allah* controversy is a different dispute altogether, as it is primarily centred over Malaysian Christians' right to use the word *Allah* to denote God in the translations of their religious literature. Moreover, Islam itself shuns any possible attempts to dilute or misrepresent *Allah*'s uniqueness among all other world religions.⁶⁴⁹

5.1.3. Rights and claims.

A deeper investigation into the controversy reveals that some Muslims in Malaysia became increasingly vociferous to disallow Christians from using the word *Allah*. For instance, when the *Allah* controversy began to gain public interest, many local Muslim scholars began to

⁶⁴⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, Harper One, 2011.

⁶⁴⁷ 'Dutch Bishop Says Christians should call god *Allah*', Catholic News Agency, 15th August 2007, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/dutch_bishop_says_christians_should_call_god_Allah/>, Accessed 5th July 2014.

⁶⁴⁸ Albert Mohler, 'What Does God care what we call Him?' 22nd August 2007, <<http://www.albertmohler.com/2007/08/22/what-does-god-care-what-we-call-him/>>, Accessed 16th July 2014.

⁶⁴⁹ For further discussion on the matter, see: E. Dada Adelowo, 'Islamic Monotheism and the Muslim Reaction to Christian and Traditional African Concepts of the Godhead', in *Islamic Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No.3, 1st January 1980, 116.

openly express their views which supported the government ban. Their writings and articles began circulating in the newspapers and online media, explaining why Christians in Malaysia should not be allowed to use word *Allah*. Local Islamic scholars like Mohammad Zaidi bin Ismail, who is a senior lecturer in a local university, articulated that the theological idea of monotheism that the word *Allah* conjures was significantly different from the Trinitarian concept of Christianity. He also argued that when someone chooses to translate the term *Allah*, they need to be faithful to the core theological idea that is contained within its outer epistemological frame. Subsequently, he accused the Christian community of having committed an error by using the word *Allah* in their translations and suggested that ‘the only sensible way forward in the Malaysian multiracial and multi-religious context is for the parties who have committed such linguistic errors to correct them wherever applicable.’⁶⁵⁰

Moreover, another Islamic scholar, Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, who was a Vice Chancellor of a local university accused Christians of being inconsistent and insensitive in their use of the term *Allah*. He argued that *Allah* is not the same god that Christians worship and suggests using *Tuhan* (Malay word for God) instead of *Allah*. He went on to accuse Christians of undertaking selective translation as they had translated some other Quranic names differently, such as *Yahya* to be *Yohanes* or *Isa* to be *Jesus* and went on to propose that the word *Allah* must only be translated as *tuhan* by Christians.⁶⁵¹

Additionally, another local Muslim academic, Al-Aidrus, has written a book on the issue and has offered his own interpretation of the matter.⁶⁵² For instance, he argues that although the word *Allah* pre-dated Islam, he contends that Arab Christians use the word *Allah* to mean god in a general way while Muslims use the word to call upon him specifically by name. He believes that when the Arab Christians say God the Father (*Allah al-Ab*), God the Son (*Allah al-Ibn*) and God the Holy Spirit (*Allah al-Ruhul al-Quddus*), they understand that

⁶⁵⁰ Mohammad Zaidi Ismail, ‘Understanding the *Allah* controversy’, 23rd June 2014, The Star, <<http://www.ikim.gov.my/index.php/ms/the-star/8065-understanding-the-Allah-controversy>>, Accessed 30th May 2015.

⁶⁵¹ Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, ‘Inconsistent, Insensitive translations of the word *Allah*’, The Sun Daily, 11th March 2009, <http://www.prn.usm.my/vc_articles_archives09_.php?vcID=326>, Accessed 16th April 2012.

⁶⁵² M.A.A.R, Al Aidrus, *Christians in Search for A Name for God: The Right to Allah*, Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2013.

it is not the same *Allah* of the Muslims.⁶⁵³ Moreover, due to such theological reasons, Islamic clerics like Harussani Zakaria who has been a longstanding *Mufti* in the state of Perak, openly warned that any Muslim who allowed non-Muslims to use the word *Allah* risked becoming infidels themselves.⁶⁵⁴

However, there are some Muslim scholars in Malaysia who have chosen to offer a divergent view. For example, the *Mufti* for the state of Perlis, Dr Asri Zainul Abidin has openly proposed that non-Muslims could to be allowed to use the word *Allah* and offers verses from the Quran to justify his reasons. By quoting from *Surah Al Imran*, verses 59-61 which calls non-Muslims to take their oath in the name of *Allah*, he believed that the Quran actually encourages non-Muslims to use the term.⁶⁵⁵ He also quoted from *Surah Al Ankabut*, Verse 63, which reminds the non-Muslims that it is *Allah* who has caused rain to come upon their lands.

However, despite these types of contestations, most local Christian scholars have insisted on using the word *Allah* in Christian literature and have given their own reasons for their persistence. For instance, they dispute the simplistic view of substituting the Arabic term *Allah* with the Malay word *tuhan*. Ng Kam Weng who is a Christian academic, pointed to the reality that the terms *tuhan* and *Allah* were both currently used in the Malay Bible in order to denote different words. He noted the fact that translators have specifically used the word *Allah* for God and *tuhan* for Lord. Moreover, *El* or *Elohim* is translated as *Allah* and the word *Yahweh* is translated as *Tuhan*.⁶⁵⁶ Likewise, he has also explained that this is the reason why the term ‘LORD God’ has been translated as ‘*Tuhan Allah*’ in the Malay Bible. Therefore, he believes that any attempt to remove the word *Allah* from the Bible or simply

⁶⁵³ Al Aidrus, *Christians in Search*,

⁶⁵⁴ ‘Muslims Become Infidels if they let others use the word *Allah*’, Malaysiakini, 26th January 2013, <<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/219992>>, Accessed 10th November 2014.

⁶⁵⁵ Boo Su Lyn, ‘Quran encourages non-Muslims to use *Allah* says ex- Perlis Mufti’, 18th October 2013, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/quran-encourages-non-muslims-to-use-Allah-says-ex-perlis-mufti>>, Accessed 11th November 2014.

⁶⁵⁶ Ng Kam Weng, ‘*Allah and Tuhan in the Bible Translation: Why it is not possible to substitute Allah with Tuhan in Bible translation*’, 5th January 2010, <<http://www.krisispraxis.com/archives/2010/01/Allah-and-tuhan-in-bible-translation/>>, Accessed 16th February 2011.

use *Tuhan* for everything would not be helpful to Christians, as both these words are needed in the Malay Bible to signify different terms, especially in relation to the concept of the trinity.

Moreover, an Indonesian academic, Daud Soesilo, also expressed his perspective on the matter, especially based on his experience of working with Bible translation committees in Indonesia and Malaysia. In his paper entitled, *Translating the Names of God: Recent Experience from Indonesia and Malaysia*, he gives several reasons as to why Christians should continue to use the word *Allah* in their Malay and Indonesian Bibles.⁶⁵⁷ He begins by observing that *Allah* is the closest Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew names of God. Furthermore, he argues that because Arab Christian theologians have always used *Allah* in their Arabic Bibles to denote God in their writings, it should not be any different for Malaysian Christians as well. Accordingly, he also raises the query of why countries that use the Arabic language have not forbidden Christians from using *Allah* to refer to God. Subsequently, he points to the fact that the earliest translations of the Malay language Bibles have always been using the word *Allah* in a consistent way and therefore accusations that claim it as a present day invention to confuse Muslims, cannot be justified. Consequently, based on his experience of working with Indonesian and Malay Bibles translation teams, the translators used a translation method called 'Dynamic/ Functional Equivalence'⁶⁵⁸ that emphasizes on the transfer of meaning and function of the original language, which necessitates the use of the word *Allah*.

However, further research reveals that not all Christians in Malaysia insist on using the word *Allah* and have sometimes offered their own alternatives. For instance, in 2008, a local pastor belonging to the Reformed Baptist tradition expressed his own thoughts on the controversy.⁶⁵⁹ He offered five reasons as to why Malaysian Christians should drop their

⁶⁵⁷ Daud Soesilo, 'Translating the names of God: Recent Experience from Indonesia and Malaysia', in *The Bible Translator*, Vol.52, No.4, October 2011, 414 – 423.

⁶⁵⁸ Daud Soesilo, Malay Bible Translation: What's in Store for Malaysian Churches? In Thu En Yu, (*et al*), *Christian Reflections within an Emerging Industrialized Society*. Seminari Teologi (Sic) Sabah, 1998, 81.

⁶⁵⁹ Poh Boon Sing, Should Christians use the word 'Allah'? *Gospel Highway Magazine*, Issue 6, 2008.

claim to use the word *Allah*. In his opinion, he claims that the word *Allah* was never been part of the Malay vocabulary for god in the first place and therefore would be wrong for Christians to use them in Malay translations to denote god. Subsequently, since *Tuhan* is also the Malay common noun and a generic term for god, it would be more appropriate to use in translating Bible words like *Elohim* and *Theos*. Moreover, although the word *Allah* predates Islam, he thinks that it has already been appropriated by the Muslim world and therefore has fundamentally become Islamic in character. Furthermore, he insisted that the Biblical uncton of not insisting on one's right for the sake of the weaker conscience of others must also become the guiding principle in this issue. He asked, 'Why must Christians whose native languages are not Arabic stir up anxiety among the Muslims by insisting on their rights to use *Allah*?'⁶⁶⁰ Subsequently, he proposes a different term, *Yamtuan*, to be used as a replacement for *Allah*. *Yamtuan* is a Malay word that is used to describe a supreme ruler that is occasionally used by royalties in Malaysia. In 2010, he wrote a second article which reiterated the use the word *Yamtuan* be used as a replacement for *Allah*. Concluding his article, he writes, 'The task of promoting the use of these replacement words in a revised version of the Alkitab among Christians will not be smooth and easy. We foresee opposition ... arising from fear of change and insistence on the legal right to continue using *Allah*'.⁶⁶¹ However, most Christians in Malaysia have not supported his views but have preferred to maintain the use of *Allah*, both as a way of preserving continuity and to preserve their right to use any suitable word that fits the translations of their own holy scriptures.

5.1.4. The possibility of a biased Judiciary.

Research suggests that the Malaysian judiciary may not have been entirely impartial and accurate in their findings which disallowed the use of the word *Allah*. When Christians brought their case to the Federal Court for final remedy, the judges dismissed their grounds for appeal.⁶⁶² It then caused the MCCBCHST, as the representative voice of Non-Muslims

⁶⁶⁰ Poh Boon Sing, 'Should Christians'.

⁶⁶¹ Poh Boon Sing, 'The Use of 'Allah': What Next?' *Gospel Highway Magazine*, Issue 2, 2010.

⁶⁶² A summary of the High Court, Appeals Court and the Federal Court verdicts have been attached as Appendix Three to ensure brevity.

in Malaysia to release a press statement that asked, ‘The Verdict on the Word *Allah*: Whose Loss, Whose Gain’? ⁶⁶³ As it began with the words, ‘Shocking, disappointing and unbelievable’, it called the verdict a ‘sad decision’ and a ‘tragic episode’, implying that the verdict was an unfair decision.⁶⁶⁴ Its accusations emerged clearly when it expressed despondency by stating,

If the political intent of this unfavourable verdict was to subjugate the minority religions to bow to legal pressure then the powers-that-be have misread the people's love for their respective religious way of life’ ... Having recourse to political expediency to boost supremacy and power and using the courts to trump everything, including religious practices of minority religions, will not help in the promotion of *1Malaysia*.^{665 666}

It shows that the MCCBCHST as the representative body of non-Muslim concerns in Malaysia, did not believe the verdict as a neutral decision of the judiciary but perceived it as a decision that was influenced by certain political actors, that the government had interfered in what is supposed to be a neutral judiciary. Subsequently, it becomes possible to suggest that the verdict cemented the non-Muslim community’s perception that the UMNO-led government may have manipulated the decision of the courts as a way of discriminating non-Muslim religious expressions.

Moreover, a certain study which investigated the executive wing of a democratic government affecting the independent workings of the judiciary becomes helpful. The particular study, which scrutinized the role of the judiciary in Pakistan, divulges certain prejudicial dynamics that indicate possible similarities with the Malaysian situation. The study was conducted Mahmud Tayyab, who is a Law Professor at the Seattle University and is licenced to practice law in both in California and in Pakistan. In his study that is based on

⁶⁶³ *The Verdict on the Word Allah: Whose Loss? Whose Gain?* MCCBCHST Press Statement, 21st October 2013.

⁶⁶⁴ *The Verdict on the Word Allah*.

⁶⁶⁵ *The Verdict on the Word Allah*.

⁶⁶⁶ 1 Malaysia was a slogan that was used by the Barisan Nasional government to portray a notion of inclusiveness.

Pakistan's legal discourses against the *Ahmadiyya* which is a sect within Islam, he strongly suggests that discrimination can sometimes become legitimised. This happens through the use of judicial mechanisms and weak constitutional governance, two key reasons for such tendencies to become develop. Furthermore, he noted that when 'the judicial branch is insufficiently insulated from political currents, it resulted in dominant political forces and ideological constructs asserting a determinative influence over judicial pronouncements'.⁶⁶⁷

Subsequently, when we relate his finding with the Malaysian situation, it is possible to postulate that since UMNO has used its own brand of Islamization to sway public matters pertaining to Islam and Muslims, it is very likely that it sought to influence the outcome of the courts' verdict. If UMNO had permitted the courts to allow Christians to use the word *Allah*, UMNO could risk being perceived as weak for its inability to use its political clout to protect the sanctity of Islam. Hence, it would not be wrong to suggest that UMNO needed to intervene in the verdict in order to protect its own power base through its own claim as the defender of Islam in Malaysia. However, it then becomes correct to agree with Tayyab who thinks that by allowing such tendencies, 'the judiciary becomes party to the erosion of its own independence and legitimacy which renders its effectiveness to safeguard rights of politically vulnerable minorities to become suspect', the very aspect that the non-Muslims in Malaysia were wary of encountering.⁶⁶⁸

Moreover, the portrayal of religious practices of minorities as being detrimental to the well-being of the state is the other stark similarity in both the verdicts. Based on his findings, Tayyab shows that the Pakistan court managed to portray the requests of the *Ahmadiyya* minority as having a potential effect on the law and order situation of the nation.⁶⁶⁹ Notably, the Malaysian courts also made the same allegation, that the free use of *Allah* could bring confusion among Muslims and thereby constitute a threat to the overall well-being of the nation. For example, one of the Appeal Court Judges opined that Article

⁶⁶⁷ Tayyab Mahmud, 'Freedom of Religion and Religious Minorities in Pakistan: A Study of Judicial Practice', in *Fordham International Law Journal*, Vol.19, No. 40, 1995, 44.

⁶⁶⁸ Mahmud, 'Freedom of Religion', 45.

⁶⁶⁹ Mahmud, 'Freedom of Religion', 50.

3.A of the Federal Constitution was expressly put in to ‘protect the sanctity of Islam as the religion of the country and also to insulate against any threat faced or any possible and probable threat to the religion of Islam’.⁶⁷⁰ He wrote, ‘it is reasonable to conclude that the intended usage will cause unnecessary confusion within the Islamic community and is surely not conducive to the peaceful and harmonious tempo of life in the country’.⁶⁷¹

However, how is it possible for minority communities to become a threat to the majority, especially when all the instruments of power reside fully in the hands of the majority? Researchers have sometimes suggested that state actors in Malaysia have often tried to speculate that the rights of Muslims in Malaysia were constantly being challenged by the non-Muslims.⁶⁷² The main reason for doing this is to ensure that the majority will always be conditioned to be in a state of alert and therefore strive to continually maintain a defensive posture to retain their dominant status. Consequently, it appears that the state actors in both Pakistan and Malaysia appear to have a need to ensure that minorities are reminded of their minority status in society, whose subservient position in society does not allow them to challenge the majority’s interest.

Furthermore, Tayyab’s finding which shows the Pakistan court’s unwillingness to share what had previously been used by the *Ahmadiyya* minorities, also becomes a striking parallel. For instance, when the Pakistan court ruled that the *Ahmadiyya* must now replace certain Islamic terms that they had been using thus far, it readily assumed that they would not ‘face any difficulty in coining new names, epithets, titles and descriptions for their personages, places and practices’.⁶⁷³ When we compare this ruling with the Malaysian scenario, it is possible to see that these postulations are uncannily similar to the Malaysian situation, where judges claimed that the word *Allah* was not essential or integral to Christians’

⁶⁷⁰ In The Court of Appeal of Malaysia (Appellate Jurisdiction), Civil Appeal No. W-01-1-2010, Para 30-33.

⁶⁷¹ In The Court of Appeal of Malaysia, Para 53.

⁶⁷² Mohammad, ‘The Authoritarian State’, 68-69.

⁶⁷³ Mahmud, ‘Freedom of Religion’, 49-50.

faith and implied that it could easily be replaced.⁶⁷⁴ However, such judgements only seem to betray the majority's tendency to depreciate the faith symbols of the minorities, despite the reality that the minorities have traditionally used these terms as part of their religious expressions. Subsequently, it becomes possible to suggest that by depreciating the faith symbols of the minority, these judgements seemed to place a lesser value on the religious identity of the minority. Hence, it is safe to propose that both courts had failed to realize that introducing changes in religious terms was not merely changes in vocabulary but it would lead to an uprooting of theological ideas that were attached to the words.

Consequently, it can be strongly argued that the judiciary of both the countries chose to either ignore or side-lined the minority community's religious rights and have instead given priority to the biddings of the executive arm of the government, making them biased. Such findings then compel us to ask, can the *Allah* issue then be viewed as a straightforward legal struggle related to translation issues alone, or should it be understood as a manifestation of other underlying symptoms related to the phenomenon of Islamization?

5.1.5. The *Allah* controversy as a Muslim versus Christian dispute.

5.1.5.1. Allegations of Evangelism to Muslims.

Research evidence suggests that one of the key reasons for the *Allah* controversy to manifest as a national issue is due to Malaysian Muslims' inward suspicion that Christians may have a hidden agenda for using the word *Allah*.⁶⁷⁵ This suspicion was highlighted earlier by a Malaysian academic Ghazali Basri who wrote a book entitled, *Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah*. In his book, he suggests that Christian evangelism efforts towards the Malays have been an ongoing agenda, which has not been successful because the Malays often tend to see Islam as the religion of their Sultans with whom their loyalty lay.⁶⁷⁶ Moreover, he also thinks

⁶⁷⁴ Mohd Zawawi Salleh, Court of Appeal of Malaysia (Appellate Jurisdiction), Civil Appeal No. W-01-1-2010, Para 29.

⁶⁷⁵ Mohd Aizam Masod, 'The Arguments to Reject the Use of 'Allah' by the Christians', in *JAKIM Research Journal*, No. 21, 2008, 14 -15.

⁶⁷⁶ Ghazali Basri, *Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah*, Kuala Lumpur: Nurin Enterprise, 1990, 14.

that evangelism among the Malays has since become unsuccessful because the Malays have mostly viewed Christianity as the religion of the colonial imperialists.⁶⁷⁷

Furthermore, research also reveals that suspicious attitudes are given credence due to the situation in neighbouring Indonesia where there have been alleged successes in Christian evangelism efforts towards Muslims.⁶⁷⁸ For instance, this was a specific aspect that was pointed at by Ridhuan Tee Abdullah, who was a member of the Panel of Islamic Consultative Council and *Wasatiyyah* in the Prime Minister's Department. He made an allegation that rapid Christianization of Indonesia was rampantly taking place and presented his own statistics which showed that although Indonesia used to be 90 per cent Muslim, only 83 percent were now Muslims.⁶⁷⁹ Moreover, Tee also cited a passage from the *Surah Al-Anfal* of the Quran and interpreted it to suggest that because evangelism efforts towards Muslims was an effort against Islam, Christians could now be construed as enemies of Muslims. Subsequently, he warned that the global Christian community had financial power and the Malay Archipelago had now become their main target for proselytization efforts, all the more reason for Muslims in Malaysia to become vigilant against Christians' evangelism efforts.

Research suggests that such vigilant and even hostile attitudes may have risen due to the need to guard the elevated position of Islam in Malaysia. For example, those who analyze apostasy in Islam have sometimes proposed that the need to fight apostasy is actually a matter of honour for Muslims because when a desertion of Islam occurs, it has the ability to bring disgrace and dishonour to the community.⁶⁸⁰ Accordingly, when the *Allah* controversy became an ongoing issue due to the lengthy judicial process, it made some local Muslim NGOs vehemently voice their dissatisfaction. In 2011, a gathering called HIMPUN was organized by several Islamic NGOs, who felt that Muslims and their religious rights were

⁶⁷⁷ Basri, *Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah*, 14

⁶⁷⁸ Saeed and Saeed, *Freedom of Religion*, 110.

⁶⁷⁹ 'Selamatkan Aqidah Umat Islam (Save the Faith of the Muslims)', Ridhuan Tee Abdullah, *Sinar Harian*, 6th August 2010, <<http://www.sinarharian.com.my/kolumnis/ridhuan-tee-abdullah/selamatkan-akidah-umat-islam-1.73955>>, Accessed 12th October 2012.

⁶⁸⁰ Saeed and Saeed, *Freedom of Religion*, 118-119.

being challenged by Christians. In their Malay language website, one of its organizers stated that reason for the gathering is to save the dignity and the unity of Malays and Muslims of the nation.⁶⁸¹ Moreover, one of the speakers, Ibrahim Abu Shah, a Vice Chancellor of a local University, likened Christian evangelists who use the word *Allah* as militants who were planned and systematic in their efforts.⁶⁸² Consequently, the incidents of the 1950 Natrah riots of Singapore were evoked as a warning to non-Muslims who dared to challenge the Muslims.⁶⁸³

Even when Muslim scholars write on the *Allah* issue from an academic perspective, they have often felt the need to mention evangelism to the Muslims as a supplementary remark. For example, Zaidi Ismail (cited earlier) hinted at the motive behind Christians' insistence on using *Allah* in their translations by saying, 'it is particularly noteworthy that they were mainly attempted by the non-Malays, to be more specific, started by the colonialists, whatever their real intentions were'.⁶⁸⁴ Another local academic, Al Aidrus who wrote on the *Allah* controversy allocated three chapters of his eight chapter book to the issue of Christian evangelism to Muslims.⁶⁸⁵ Nevertheless, it would be useful to note that not all Muslim scholars are against Muslims who decide to convert out of Islam. In his book, *Freedom of Expression in Islam*, local academic Mohammad Hashim Kamali devotes an entire chapter to the question of freedom of religion in Islam and thinks that 'the *Quran* has explicitly declared freedom of religion a norm and principle in Islam'.⁶⁸⁶ However, it would

⁶⁸¹ 'HIMPUN : Pangilan Selamatkan Maruah dan Perpaduan Umat Islam (The call to save the dignity of Islam)', 11th October 2011, <<http://www.ismaweb.net/v4/2011/10/himpun-panggilan-selamatkan-maruah-perpaduan-umat-islam/>>, Accessed on 12th February 2014.

⁶⁸² "HIMPUN's 11 speakers remind the faithful of the evils of apostasy", Alyaa Alhadjri, The Sun Daily, 22nd October 2011, <<http://www.thesundaily.my/news/185851>>, Accessed 21st June 2013.

⁶⁸³ The Natrah riots occurred when a Singapore court (which was then part of Malaya) ruled that a Dutch child who was raised by Muslim parents during the Second World War to be returned to her natural Christian father. It evoked religious and racial sentiments which caused three days of rioting that left many buildings damaged and around 18 people dead.

⁶⁸⁴ Ismail, Mohammad Zaidi, 'Understanding the *Allah* controversy', The Star, 23rd June 2014.

⁶⁸⁵ Al Aidrus, *Christians in Search*,

⁶⁸⁶ Mohd. Hashim Kamali, *Freedom of Expression in Islam*, Kuala Lumpur: Ilmiah Publishers, 1998, 105.

not be wrong to suggest that his input could be interpreted as a lone academic voice against government's religious initiatives that often uses rehabilitation to coerce those who opt out of Islam.⁶⁸⁷

However, open allegations that accuse Christians targeting evangelism efforts towards Muslims in Malaysia, especially through their cunning use of the word *Allah*, will need verification. Firstly, although some Christians may attempt to introduce their faith to Muslims, they have often been reminded to go about this in a way that respects their Muslim belief and to always ensure that such efforts do not disrupt harmony or cause tension within the community.⁶⁸⁸ Moreover, some Christian NGOs have felt it necessary to iterate that such accusations were mostly untrue and that Christians should not be viewed as extremists who coerced others.⁶⁸⁹ Furthermore, Christian leaders in Malaysia have many times denied allegations of evangelism towards Muslims and have called such claims as 'unfounded accusations'.⁶⁹⁰ One possible reason as to why Christians in Malaysia do not attempt to readily evangelize Muslims is mainly because Malaysian law stipulates that it is a criminal offence to convert Muslims.

Research has revealed that government statistics show that in a period of ten years, a total of 686 people applied to the *Shariah* courts to leave Islam. From this number, only 135 persons were actually permitted to leave Islam.⁶⁹¹ However, it should be noted that most of the applicants who applied for a change in their religious status may have been new Muslims

⁶⁸⁷ Saeed and Saeed, *Freedom of Religion*, 132.

⁶⁸⁸ 'Issues in Christian Muslim Relations: Ecumenical Considerations', Published by the office on Inter-Religious Relations, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 13-14.

⁶⁸⁹ Jennifer Gomez, 'Christians don't use *Allah* to convert others', says new group, 2nd June 2015, <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/christians-dont-use-Allah-to-convert-others-says-new-group>>, Accessed 3rd August 2015.

⁶⁹⁰ 'When, Why and How Christians use the word *Allah*', Christian Federation of Malaysia: Letter to Churches in Malaysia, 16th May 2013.

⁶⁹¹ Shazwan Mustafa Kamal, 'Minister: 135 left Islam within 2000-2010', 14th June 2011, <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/135-left-islam-from-2000-2010-says-minister/>>, Accessed 16th September 2014.

who converted to Islam for the sake of marriage but decided to come out of Islam after divorcing their partners. More importantly, it is not possible to verify how many from this list have actually applied to leave Islam in favour of Christianity, especially because of their confusion over the word *Allah*. Moreover, it needs to be iterated that Malays who attempt to renounce their Islamic faith immediately lose their preferential status as *Bumiputera* citizens and almost certainly become considered as social outcasts by other Muslims.⁶⁹² Hence, it is possible to think that because conversions out of Islam pose a challenging psychological barrier for Muslims, not many will attempt to do so in the first place. It would then be safe to suggest that evangelism to Muslims may not be the key reason for Christians in Malaysia to insist on using the word *Allah*, especially not in the way that some Muslims in Malaysia speculate.

5.1.5.2. Hegemonic perspectives.

Research also suggests that the *Allah* controversy will need to be examined from another angle, whether a hegemonic perspective could also be found to be entwined in the issue. For example, when the government out rightly stated that the usage of the word *Allah* by Christians is prejudicial to national interest, it then evokes another question.⁶⁹³ Does the government definition of national interest encompass the entire citizens of the country or the interest of Muslims alone? Moreover, since Islamic resurgence could be construed as an accentuation of a community's reaction to the possible losing of their own identity, it is possible to think that some Muslims in Malaysia may be perceiving that the contest for *Allah* by Christians as primarily being a contest to remove the key religious identity marker that they currently possess.⁶⁹⁴ Therefore, it becomes likely to suggest that Muslims in Malaysia have intensified their efforts to lay claim to the word *Allah* partly because of their perceived risk of loss of their Islamic identity that is central to their ethnic identity.

⁶⁹² Saeed and *Freedom of Religion*, 144-145.

⁶⁹³ Walters, *We Believe in One God?* 76.

⁶⁹⁴ William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions*, London: Routledge Books, 1991, 119-125.

Therefore, it becomes possible to propose that the desire to monopolize the word *Allah* may also be part of hegemonic aspirations of the Malay community. For instance, Amritha Malhi, an Australia based researcher points to the Malay need to protect ethnic hegemony as one of the key reasons for the emergence of the *Allah* issue in Malaysia.⁶⁹⁵ Moreover, she also proposes due to the synonymy that between Islam and the Malay race, it has now become inevitable that when the government talks about protecting the word *Allah* in the interest of Islam, it is actually talking about protecting the interest of the Malay ethno-religious identity. These are not new thoughts, as they have already been explored earlier by academics like Kamarulnizam Abdullah who have since correctly suggested that Islam has become ‘a social instrument to create one’s self-consciousness and self-identity’ for the Malays in Malaysia’.⁶⁹⁶ This is the reason why Albert Walters has argued that in the light of such reality, Islam has become a potential wedge between the Muslim Malays and the non-Muslim others in Malaysia.⁶⁹⁷ He noted that the government’s sanction to protect the special position of the Malays has caused Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia to become ‘mutually antagonistic communities’.⁶⁹⁸

In addition, because Mutalib⁶⁹⁹ and Von Der Mehden⁷⁰⁰ have already established the link between Islam and its bearing on the identity of the Malays in Malaysia, it becomes possible to suspect that the *Allah* issue may have well moved from being a religious

⁶⁹⁵ Amritha Malhi, ‘*Allah* Ban and Church Arson in Malaysia’, East Asia Forum: Economics, Politics and Public Policy in East Asia and the Pacific, 22nd January, 2010, <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/01/22/Allah-ban-and-church-arson-in-malaysia/>>, Accessed 2nd May 2015. Also in: Amritha Malhi, ‘Identity Politics’, 20th January 2010, <<http://insidestory.org.au/identity-politics/>>, Accessed 5th May 2015.

⁶⁹⁶ Kamarulnizam Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam*, Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2003, 51.

⁶⁹⁷ Walters, *We Believe in One God?* 73-74.

⁶⁹⁸ Walters, *We Believe in One God?* 80.

⁶⁹⁹ Hussin Mutalib, *Islam in Malaysia: From Revivalism to Islamic State*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1993, 104-107.

⁷⁰⁰ Fred R. Von Der Mehden, ‘Malaysia: Islam and Multi-ethnic Politics’, in John L. Esposito, *Islam in Asia: Religion Politics and Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 177-190.

contestation to become an ethnic contestation as well.⁷⁰¹ Therefore, where non-Muslims in Malaysia are concerned, government policies that affirm the Islamic hegemony agenda in turn, ‘accentuate their feelings of vulnerability’ and gives them a sense of insecurity.⁷⁰²

Accordingly, research shows that some Malay politicians have occasionally felt the need to take a confrontational stance on the matter which sometimes causes hostility. For instance, a former member of parliament chastised those who challenged the Federal Court ruling on the *Allah* issue as being rude and equated them to insolent extremists.⁷⁰³ He warned that such expressions could eventually cause the Malays to attempt a repeat of May 13.⁷⁰⁴ Moreover, evidence also reveals that the some government funded Islamic bodies have sometimes accused those who insist on using the word *Allah* as actually working to confuse and split the Malay community. In 2013, the Selangor State Islamic Council (MAIS) produced a booklet entitled, *Obligation to Preserve the Sanctity of the Name Allah* to explain the government’s position on the *Allah* controversy. In answering the question of why Muslims need to be tenacious on the issue, the book’s reply stated that ‘we must also be alert to the cunning and systemic threats of the enemies of Islam striving to deviate the Muslims and to destroy Islam’.⁷⁰⁵ Accordingly, it vilified the Christian community by saying: ‘The use of the word *Allah* in the Malay version of the Bible is actually to split the Muslim Malays.’⁷⁰⁶ It then added that the insistence on using the term was actually a ploy to ‘emasculate the special position of Islam in the Federal Constitution as the Religion of the

⁷⁰¹ Jaclyn Neo, “‘what’s in a name? Malaysia’s ‘*Allah*’ controversy and the judicial intertwining of Islam with ethnic identity””, in *ICON*, Oxford University Press, Vol.12, No.3, 2014.

⁷⁰² Mutalib, *Islam in Malaysia*, 109-110.

⁷⁰³ ‘Do you want another May 13th. Zul Noordin asks ‘extremists’ who question *Allah* decision’, The Malaysian Insider, 27th June 2014, <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/do-you-want-another-may-13-zul-noordin-asks-extremists-who-question-Allah-d>>, Accessed 11th April 2015.

⁷⁰⁴ He was referring to the racial riots of 13th May 1969 which was a minor civil war with Malay Muslims on one side with the non-Muslim Chinese and Indians on the other.

⁷⁰⁵ *Obligation to Preserve the Sanctity of the Name Allah*, Selangor State Islamic Council, 2013, 42.

⁷⁰⁶ *Obligation to Preserve*, 45.

Federation'.⁷⁰⁷ Subsequently, spread of these types of thinking has sometimes led Islamist groups to tell Christians to migrate out of Malaysia if they are not comfortable to live within an Islam inundated environment.⁷⁰⁸ Consequently, since hegemony has been defined to mean one group's attempt to control over others,⁷⁰⁹ the examples that show the aggressive claims made by Malays over the word *Allah* could be thought of as possible struggles to establish hegemonic dominance.

Additionally, hegemonic expressions also became apparent when calls were made to eradicate the holy books of Christians. For example, a former Member of Parliament called for the burning of all Malay Bibles if they were found to contain the word, *Allah*. Speaking as the President of PERKASA, which is a Malay rights pressure group, he told the participants of a convention,

Muslims must unite to protect their religion. They must seize those Bibles, including the Malay editions, which contains the term *Allah* and other Arabic religious terms, and burn them.⁷¹⁰

He told reporters, 'this is the way to show our anger against those who disrespect our sensitivity'.⁷¹¹ Although, such extreme views may not be necessarily considered as the opinion of most Muslims in Malaysia, the voice of the leader of PERKASA which claims to have more than 500,000 members was disquieting.⁷¹² Moreover, his statement also became significant for Malays because the event was attended by the former Prime Minister Mahathir

⁷⁰⁷ *Obligation to Preserve*, 66.

⁷⁰⁸ Boo Su-Lyn, 'Get out if can't accept Islamic Sovereignty: Christians told', The Malay Mail Online, 14th October 2013, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/get-out-if-cant-accept-islamic-sovereignty-christians-told>>, Accessed 12th May 2014.

⁷⁰⁹ Jonathan Crowther (Ed.), *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1995, 555.

⁷¹⁰ Athi Shankar, 'Burn *Allah* Bibles, Perkasa Chief to Muslims', 19th January 2013, <<http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2013/01/19/burn-Allah-bibles-perkasa-chief-tells-muslims/>>, Accessed 15th June 2013.

⁷¹¹ Shankar, 'Burn *Allah* Bibles'.

⁷¹² Mohd. Farhan Darwis, 'Perkasa to spread beyond Malaysia, beginning with London Branch', 27th May 2014, <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/perkasa-to-spread-beyond-malaysia-beginning-with-london-branch>>, Accessed 17th November 2014.

Mohammad.⁷¹³ It needs to be noted that Mahathir himself has called on Christians in Malaysia to stop irritating the feelings of Muslims as they were purposely raising the *Allah* controversy as an issue even when it was not important to them and advised them not to act in ways that may annoy others.⁷¹⁴

Furthermore, some Muslim NGOs have since suggested that Malaysians Christians who insist on using the word *Allah* must be willing to convert to Islam. The Malaysian Islamist group *Hizbut Tahrir* suggested that, in order to qualify to use the word freely, Christians should choose to say the Islamic *shahada* (declaration of faith). The group leader proposed that, ‘by uttering this phrase, you will become Muslims and do not need the permission of the courts to use the word, *Allah*’.⁷¹⁵ Such postulations have since caused social researchers like Aloysius Gng to perceive the *Allah* issue as a contestation for power. His research analyzed the politicised rhetoric of the media which was used by the state to control information related to the *Allah* issue appears to suggest that the controversy needs to be fundamentally understood as a power struggle issue. He observed that, ‘one cannot simply ignore the *Allah* issue as one that is also politicised and legitimised by different state actors drawing on the different ethnic and religious representations and legitimacy as means to address their respective political objectives’.⁷¹⁶

Hence, it becomes possible to submit that the hegemonic aspects of the *Allah* controversy may carry an inherent risk of causing divisions, especially when some Muslims may be wrongly led to think that Christians who challenge government’s rulings and policies

⁷¹³ ‘Mahathir to officiate Malay education transformation convention’, 15th January 2013, <<http://www.themalaysiantimes.com.my/mahathir-to-officiate-malay-education-transformation-convention/>>, Accessed 23rd June 2013.

⁷¹⁴ Boo Su Lyn, ‘Why irritate others on *Allah*, Dr M asks Christians’, 1st January 2014, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/why-irritate-others-on-Allah-dr-m-asks-christians>>, Accessed 4th March 2015.

⁷¹⁵ ‘Want *Allah*? Just Convert, hard-line Islamists tell Christians’, 23rd January 2015, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/want-Allah-just-convert-hardline-islamists-tell-christians>>, Accessed 17th March 2015.

⁷¹⁶ Aloysius Gng, *In the Name of God: The Legitimation Strategies on the use of Allah in the Malaysian Media*, unpublished M.A. Thesis, *Upsala Universitet*, 2014, 42.

are actually challenging Islam and the Malays. Similarly, there is always a risk for un-enlightened Christians to think that due to the backlash caused by the *Allah* issue, all Malays as Muslims are against Christians. Such situations may not remain hypothetical possibilities as some authors have since noted that Muslim voices often describe Christianity and Islam as religious rivals, who may eventually need to use political power to ensure their own survival.⁷¹⁷

Moreover, researchers like Chong Eu Choong have already suggested that the level of mistrust and anxiety between Muslims and non-Muslims has grown concurrently with the growth of Islamization in Malaysia.⁷¹⁸ Moreover, it is made worse in Malaysia when politicians⁷¹⁹ and political parties⁷²⁰ constantly use race and religion issues to garner Malay electoral support. Therefore, it is possible to think that it is because of this potential division that local Christian scholars like Batumalai have chosen to advise the Christian community to respond to the realities of living in Malaysia through ‘love, confidence, and courage’.⁷²¹ He believes that these attitudes would then be able to preserve the overall friendship, unity and fellowship among all the communities in Malaysia. Similarly, others like John Azumah, a former Muslim who is now a Christian academic has since suggested considering peaceful options for Christians to respond to such discrimination and other forms of opposition.⁷²² However, it could be possible that the highhandedness of the government that was displayed in the *Allah* controversy may have instilled a sense of fear that could potentially develop into bitterness and hatred in the hearts of Christians. As a result, such emotions would then force

⁷¹⁷ Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians: Face to Face*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2000, 158-159.

⁷¹⁸ Chong Eu Choong, ‘Christian Response to state-led Islamization in Malaysia’, in Bernard Platzdasch and Johan Savarimuthu (Eds.), *Religious Diversity in Muslim- Majority states in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: ISEAS, 311.

⁷¹⁹ Walters, *We Believe in One God?* 68-69.

⁷²⁰ Amritha Malhi, ‘The PAS-BN Conflict in the 1990s: Islam and Modernity’, in Virginia Hooker and Noraini Othman (Eds.), *Islam Society and Politics*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2003, 236-258.

⁷²¹ Batumalai Sadayandy, *A Prophetic Christology for Neighbourology: A Theology for a Prophetic Living*, Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, 1986, 259-256.

⁷²² John Azumah, ‘Christian Responses to Islam: Between Naivety and Hostility’, in John Azumah and Peter Riddell (Eds.), *Islam and Christianity on the Edge*, Victoria: Acorn Press, 2013, 252-265.

them to respond crudely and rudely towards the government or towards the Muslim community, which would then make Christians lose their love for the neighbour, a scripturally wrong outcome.⁷²³

5.2 Solidarity as the response of Malaysian Christians.

This section of the chapter will seek to inspect the *Allah* controversy and its connection with the three solidarity aspects of: ecumenical solidarity, prayer solidarity and their shared political consciousness that were examined in the previous chapter.

5.2.1 The Allah controversy and ecumenical solidarity.

Research indicates that the *Allah* controversy was considered an important issue to be discussed during the NCC ecumenical gatherings. For example, at the Third NCC one of the speakers, Joseph Balan, expressed his disappointment at the developments that were taking place. He was quoted as saying, ‘when the ban was imposed we were put in a great dilemma and confusion and fear ... and as to how we would exist as a Christian community without our holy book.’⁷²⁴ Moreover, he also stated that although he was glad that the import ban was lifted after intervention by the Christian leaders, its sales and distribution had become very much restricted. He mentioned the difficulty by saying, ‘we are not allowed to sell it even in our own Church bookshop in town’.⁷²⁵ Subsequently, he raised a query about the possible motive of the government by asking why only the Malay *Alkitab* was singled out to be banned as its contents were exactly the same as in other language versions.

At the Fourth NCC, the problems related to the *Allah* controversy were repeatedly brought up by several of the speakers during their presentations. Moreover, participants were also informed that a consultation among CFM leaders was already held in the East Malaysian town of Kuching to discuss the use of Malay as the national language in Churches, especially

⁷²³ Alexander Pierce, *Facing Islam: Engaging Muslims, Constructive Dialogue in an Age of conflict*, Washington: Redemption Press, 2012, 110-11.

⁷²⁴ Report of the Third NCC, 40.

⁷²⁵ Report of the Third NCC, 44.

in relation to the restrictions and bans that were being instituted by the government. They were told that church leaders met twice, once in 1985 and another in 1989 which led them to come up with a unanimous decision to retain the word *Allah* in all the existing and upcoming Malay translations of the Bible.⁷²⁶ The leaders then called the consensus based, unified stand on the matter to be recognized as the Kuching Declaration.⁷²⁷ Finally, the participants were also informed that the CFM had written a Letter of Concern, to the Prime Minister to express the feelings of Christians in relation to the issue.

Subsequently, it becomes possible to suggest that since the beginning of the controversy, denominational differences were consciously put aside in favour of ecumenical solidarity. For instance, when East Malaysian Christians expressed their difficulties during the NCC gatherings, the West Malaysians stood together with them in solidarity by forcing church leaders of their denominations to deal with the issue more seriously. Moreover, although it was the Catholic Church that was forced to seek legal remedy over its usage of the word *Allah* in The Herald, the Christian community in Malaysia has not side-lined the matter as a problem of the Catholic Church. This is because the NECF, CCM and CFM continuously rallied alongside the Catholic Church by joining together with them in this struggle, especially by releasing periodical press statements in support of the Catholic Church and by expressing their dissatisfaction on the manner in which the controversy was handled by the government leaders.⁷²⁸

In addition, this solidarity was not just expressed with words alone but became visibly evident when denominational leaders were seen present in the High Court, the Appeals Court

⁷²⁶ When, why and how Christians use the word *Allah*, Letter to Churches in Malaysia, Christian Federation of Malaysia, 16th May 2013.

⁷²⁷ The NCC participants were told that the foremost reason that was considered by the leaders was to ensure continuity with previous Malay and Indonesian translations. Moreover, their decision was on the basis that the Arabic loan word *Allah* is largely considered a cognate of the names of God in Hebrew, such as 'El', 'Elohim', 'Eloah' in the Old Testament. Furthermore, the leaders felt that the Arab Christians who predated Islam had already been using the term in their prayers as well as their theological writings. Moreover, they pointed out to the need to be consistent with *Allah* as the name of God that is being used both in the old version of the Arabic Bible as well as its modern version.

⁷²⁸ A collection of Press Statements made by the CFM specifically on the *Allah* issue can be retrieved at the CFM website, <<http://www.cfmmsia.org/Allah-Alkitab-issues>>.

and the Palace of Justice during the times when the court judgements and verdicts on the *Allah* controversy were being issued. They were willing to be present despite the presence of vocal Malay NGOs which crowded the courts while displaying intimidating banners and placards to show their feelings on the matter. Hence, it is possible to think that this was evidence of moral support to showcase the camaraderie of a minority community when it faced a formidable opponent. Consequently, it is possible to propose that the *Allah* issue became a wake-up call for Christians in Malaysia to rally together in solidarity beyond their denominational boundaries, cementing the ecumenical solidarity that was forged during the NCC gatherings.

5.2.2 The Allah controversy and prayer solidarity.

Research shows that during the development of the *Allah* issue, the element of prayer solidarity emerged as a recognizable response of the Malaysian church. For example, in November 2009, just before the High Court verdict on the *Allah* case was about to be announced, the CFM sent out a letter to all the Malaysian churches which urged them to rally together in prayer. The letter stated that,

A season of prayer and fasting be called for in your churches as two *Allah* word cases come before the High Courts in Kuala Lumpur this month. Please disseminate to your churches our request for prayer and fasting as we mobilise all Christians for a time of prayer.⁷²⁹

Moreover, the NECF also called upon its churches to pray during the development of the *Allah* issue. In January 2010, when Muslim groups were planning to protest against the High Court Judgement in favour of the Christians, it released a ‘Prayer Alert’ which outlined five specific prayer items related to the issue.⁷³⁰ The fifth item called for specific prayer on behalf of Christians in Sabah and Sarawak which became a way of affirming solidarity with

⁷²⁹ *Allah* word cases before the K.L High Courts: A call to Prayer, CFM Letter to Churches, 30th November 2009.

⁷³⁰ NECF Prayer Alert Concerning the *Allah* issue, 8th January 2010.

them. Subsequently, NECF also sought to raise more prayer for the *Allah* issue through its various prayer bulletins⁷³¹ and advisories on the matter.⁷³²

Furthermore, the CCM as the representative caucus of mainline churches also organized a prayer gathering which a specific focus on the *Allah* issue. Those who attended the prayer gathering were reminded that standing in solidarity for those in Sabah and Sarawak to use their *Alkitab* freely was paramount because it was a relevant issue for all Christians in Malaysia.⁷³³

Subsequently, the inter-denominational prayer groups that were identified in the previous chapter of this study also focussed on the *Allah* issue. The MNPN Prayer Newsletter for February-April 2010 reported that representatives from eight prayer networks met on the 1st of February 2010 for a time of extended prayer, especially to pray for the *Allah* issue.⁷³⁴

5.2.3 The Allah controversy and political considerations.

Research suggests that the *Allah* issue inevitably became related to the political responses of Malaysian Christians. For instance, one particular study clearly noted that the *Allah* issue became one of the major concerns of Christians which then affected voter perception during the General Elections.⁷³⁵ Moreover, other researchers have also suggested that the *Allah* issue has since been able to highlight the realities of fragmented nature of communal, albeit religion tainted politics in Malaysia.⁷³⁶ Furthermore, another study that scrutinized the reasons for the ruling party's loss of its two-thirds majority in parliament during the 2008

⁷³¹ *Allah* issue, NECF Monthly Prayer Bulletin, March 2011, 1.

⁷³² Advisory to National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) Malaysia member churches on the use of *Allah* by non-Muslims, 10th January 2013.

⁷³³ 'Church Group Says Not Fighting Just For Alkitab But Rights Of All', Malaysia-Today, 14th April 2011, <<http://www.malaysia-today.net/church-group-says-not-fighting-just-for-alkitab-but-rights-of-all/>>, Accessed 12th June 2015.

⁷³⁴ God@work Around Prayer Networks, MNPN Report, February to April 2010, 1.

⁷³⁵ Joseph Chinyong Liow and Afif Pasuni, 'Debating the Conduct and Nature of Malaysian Politics: Communalism and New Media Post-March 2008', in *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 29, Issue 4, 2010, 54-59.

⁷³⁶ Mohd Azmir Mohd Nizah (*et al*), 'Selangor Voters Perception toward Issues in 13th Malaysian General Election', in *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol.7, No.1, Series 1, 2016, 46.

General Elections, strongly proposed that the *Allah* issue was one of the reasons as to why Christians withdrew their support for the ruling party.⁷³⁷

Subsequently, it is also safe to suggest that the government itself was able to realize that the *Allah* issue was a serious factor that needed intervention which could otherwise lead to detrimental results for the ruling party during elections. For example, when the government discerned that the *Allah* issue had become a key concern for Christians, it released a *Ten Point Solution* as a document to ease voter anxieties. Moreover, since it was released five days before Sarawak State Elections, it becomes possible to think that the solution was offered to appease the Christian voters who constitute a majority in the particular state. In the *Ten Point Solution*, the government promised leniency on the issue, especially by making concessions towards the two east Malaysian States of Sabah and Sarawak.⁷³⁸ Furthermore, when the Prime Minister himself visited the Christian leaders in Sarawak to explain the *Ten Point solution* two days before the state elections, it showed the keenness of the government to address the issue.⁷³⁹ Consequently, by observing the urgency of the timing when the *Ten Point Solution* was issued and the Prime Minister's meeting with Christian leaders in Sarawak, it is possible to suggest that the government did not want the *Allah* issue to jeopardize its political prospect, especially among Christian voters. However, although the ruling government was able to win the elections by retaining its majority, it is unclear whether it could be directly attributed to the last minute, *Ten Point Solution* that was offered by the government.

Nevertheless, the legal validity of the *Ten Point Solution* that was offered by the government will also need further scrutiny. The legal validity of releasing such a document

⁷³⁷ Lim Kim Hui and Wai-Mun Har, “ ‘Political Volcano’ in 12th Malaysian General Election: Makkal Sakhti (People Power) Against Communal Politics, '3Cs' and Marginalization of Malaysian Indians”, in *Journal of Politics and Law*, Vol.1, No. 3, 2008, 93.

⁷³⁸ Ten Point Solution: Point 4., For Sabah and Sarawak, in recognition of the large Christian community in these states, there are no conditions attached to the importation and local printing of the Bibles in all languages, including Bahasa Malaysia/ Indonesia and indigenous languages. There is no requirement for any stamp or serial number.

⁷³⁹ Andrew Ong, ‘PM meets Sarawak church leaders as polls loom’, *Malaysiakini*, 13th April 2011, <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/161454>>, Accessed 12th November 2015.

has been called into question by Malaysian constitutional law experts who seem to think of it only as a gimmick to win voters. Abdul Aziz Bakri, who taught in a local university said,

The 10-point solution was flawed from the start and it was a mistake for the Sarawak folk to believe in it ... 10-point solution is not law. At the most, it is just a government policy or worse, an election gimmick or political ploy.⁷⁴⁰

However, apart from the question of whether it needs to be perceived as a political gimmick or otherwise, it is also possible to think of the solution itself as being problematic as the *Ten-Point Solution* was not an equal solution for all Christians in Malaysia but offered one solution for East Malaysians and another for West Malaysians.^{741 742} Nevertheless, despite the dissatisfaction over the *Allah* issue, research indicates that the opposition parties who capitalized on the issue as part of their campaign strategy were not very successful because ‘in rural East Malaysia ... vote-buying and cash are still rampant’.⁷⁴³ Nevertheless, those in urban areas continued to perceive it as a relevant issue that needed further solutions. Moreover, church leaders immediately raised the *Allah* issue with their newly minted Chief Minister right after the particular election.⁷⁴⁴

Therefore, based on the evaluation of the collected evidence, it would be safe to propose that the *Allah* issue did have an impact on Malaysian politics, especially in the way it affected Christian voters’ perception during elections.

⁷⁴⁰ ‘10-point solution backed by Putrajaya has no legal basis, says constitutional law expert’, 26th January 2014, <<http://www.mahwengkwai.com/10-point-solution-backed-putrajaya-legal-basis-says-constitutional-law-expert/>>, Accessed 12th November 2015.

⁷⁴¹ Ten Point Solution: Point 5, Taking into account the interest of the large Muslim community, for Peninsula Malaysia, Bibles in Bahasa Malaysia/Indonesia, imported or printed, must have the words ‘Christian Publication’ and the cross sign printed on the front covers.

⁷⁴² Boo Su-Lyn, “Ten-Point solution to the ‘Allah’ Stalemate? Not all agree”, The Malay Mail Online. 19th October 2013, <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/ten-point-solution-the-answer-to-Allah-stalemate-not-all-agree>>, Accessed 12th November 2015.

⁷⁴³ James Chin, ‘So close and yet so far: Strategies in the 13th Malaysian Elections’, in *The Round Table*. Vol.102, Issue 6, 2013, 539.

⁷⁴⁴ ‘ACS wants Adenan to convince federal gov’t to reverse ‘Allah’ ban’, Malaysiakini.com, 3rd May 2016, <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/340146>>, Accessed 14th May 2016.

Summary

This chapter analysed the *Allah* controversy which caused friction between the Christian community and the government. It was able to note that ecumenical solidarity, prayer solidarity and a political reactions could be detected as noticeable responses to the *Allah* controversy by Christians in Malaysia.

CASE STUDY FOR TRIANGULATION: SINGAPORE

Chapter Six

Introduction

This chapter attempts to investigate whether any of the three emergent solidarity measures of the Malaysian church could also be found as being present in the life of the Singaporean churches, especially as responses to any forms of government backed initiatives.

6.1. A common heritage.

The Singaporean church is considered a suitable case study candidate because of its shared roots with the Malaysian church. For instance, denominations like the Methodists saw Missionaries from India being sent to the shores of Singapore first, as it was largely seen as a vantage point and a strategic post for future ministries. When Methodist missionaries landed in Singapore in February 1885, it became their primary base before venturing out into Malaya.⁷⁴⁵ Furthermore, the Assemblies of God (AOG) missionaries also began their mission work in Singapore before venturing into other parts of peninsular Malaysia. Their churches were established through the first AOG missionary couple Cecil Johnson and his wife who arrived in Singapore in 1928.⁷⁴⁶ On the other hand, the Catholics had several religious orders, namely De La Salle Brothers, Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus, the Canossian Sisters, the Little Sisters of the Poor and the Brothers of St. Gabriel who embarked on their work northwards towards Malaya beginning from Singapore.⁷⁴⁷ The Presbyterians on the other

⁷⁴⁵ Nathalie Toms Means, *Malaysia Mosaic: A Story of Fifty Years of Methodism*, Singapore: Methodist Book Room, 1935, 18-21.

⁷⁴⁶ Lim Yeu Chuen, 'Historical Timeline of the Assemblies of God in Malaysia and Singapore', in *1957-2007: 50 Years of Spirit Empowered Ministry in Malaysia*, Assemblies of God Malaysia, 2007, 14.

⁷⁴⁷ John Roxborough, 'The Roman Catholic Church', in Lee Kam Hing (*et. al*) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 17.

hand, managed to work towards realizing the formation of an autonomous Singapore Presbyterian Synod by January 1901.⁷⁴⁸

Singapore also served as the geographical leadership base for Bishops and other church leaders. The first Methodist Episcopal Church was dedicated in Singapore in Coleman Street on December 1886.⁷⁴⁹ The Catholics had their Cathedral built there in 1888, which also served as ‘a centre for evangelization’.⁷⁵⁰ Accordingly, it would not be wrong to suggest that most of the mission organizations and the denominations which sought to establish their own brand of churches have generally sought to begin their work in Singapore with a view to seek growth in the Malay Peninsula.

Consequently, up until the year 1965, when Singapore pulled out of Malaysia to become an autonomous nation, the different denominations in Malaysia and Singapore were always functioning as part of one entity where they were amalgamated in all areas of administration by sharing from the same pastoral pool, monetary assets and leadership resources. However, the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 saw them functioning separately as two nations, forcing all the denominations to become two separate entities for functional purposes.

6.2 The composition of the NCCS.

The reality of common roots led to the formation of the National Church Council of Singapore (NCCS) in 1974. They functioned with the same unity agenda of the CCM which had been formed in 1948, prior to the independence of Malaya that took place in 1957. The historical statement of the NCCS clearly states that, ‘the National Council of Churches of Singapore was duly constituted in Singapore on 24th July, 1974 to carry on and fulfil the

⁷⁴⁸ John Roxborough, ‘The Presbyterian Church’, in Lee Kam Hing (*et. al*) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 82.

⁷⁴⁹ Hwa Yung and Robert Hunt, ‘The Methodist Church’, in Lee Kam Hing (*et. al*) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 149.

⁷⁵⁰ Roxborough, ‘The Roman Catholic Church’, 13.

vision and aspirations of the founders.⁷⁵¹ Moreover, its founder member churches were, the Anglicans, the Methodists, the Presbyterians and the Lutherans, which was similar in composition with their counterparts (CCM) in Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, it would not be wrong to suggest that the NCCS has then always sought to be conscious of the vision for ecumenical networking as per the aspiration of the founders of CCM. Subsequently, together with the founding members the NCCS, they have since managed to bring in Assemblies of God churches, the Evangelical Free Church and the Church of Singapore (a group of 5 churches in its fold) to be part of NCCS.⁷⁵²

However, we will also need to ask, why has then the Catholic Church in Singapore not sought to join the NCCS, to form a new body that encompasses all the denominations, similar to the CFM in Malaysia? It is quite possible to suggest that the Catholic Church in Singapore has not found the need to align itself with the NCCS primarily because there has been no urgent need for it to do so. This is a noticeably different stance compared to the Malaysian Catholic Church which was forced to work together with the Protestants to contend with the emerging effects of Islamization.

6.3 Issues highlighted by the NCCS.

Since its inception, the NCCS has dealt with issues and concerns that were significantly different than the Malaysian ecumenical bodies.⁷⁵³ For instance, in 2006 the NCCS released a media statement that deplored the cartoons that depicted Muhammad in bad light and cautioned against offending the sensitivities of any particular religious groups. Subsequently, in 2008, the NCCS issued, 'A Guide to Common Issues in Inter-Religious Relations' as an advisory for churches that participated in Inter-religious activities. Moreover, in the same year, the NCCS condemned the release of the movie 'Fitna' which hurt the sentiments of Muslims. Furthermore, it also spoke out against the burning of the Quran by Pastor Jones in

⁷⁵¹ Historical Statement, Constitution of the National Council of Churches of Singapore, 1.

⁷⁵² NCCS List of Full Members, NCCS Website, <<https://nccs.org.sg/full-members/>>, Accessed 17th May 2016.

⁷⁵³ NCCS Official Statements, NCCS Website, <<https://nccs.org.sg/statements/official-statements/>>, Accessed 17th May 2016.

America as it had the potential to affect the sensitivity of Muslims in Singapore. In addition, the NCCS also dealt with bioethical issues and issued media statements on euthanasia, donation of human eggs for research, human stem cell research, human / animal combinations for biomedical research and the sale of human organs. Moreover, when we scrutinize the list, we find that out of 32 public statements that were issued, none expressed any form of distress signals or frustrations with their government's actions.

Likewise, even in its periodical 'Letter to Churches', which could be interpreted as a form of in-house communication, there are no distress signals, especially against the ruling government of Singapore. The letters mostly refer to national and international issues that possibly affected some of the local churches.⁷⁵⁴ The contents of the letters are mostly guidelines that could be considered as being advisory in nature.

6.4. Absence of pressure from the government.

The constitution of Singapore does not place any specific religion to be above other religious expressions but expressly calls for the protection of all religious minorities. Article 152 (1) of the Singapore Constitution mentions that, *it shall be the responsibility of the Government constantly to care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities in Singapore.*⁷⁵⁵

Nevertheless, the need to protect the special interest of the Malays and the Muslim religion is specified in Article 152 (2),

The Government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognise the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard,

⁷⁵⁴ NCCS responds to "Singapore pastor apologises to Muslim leaders for US preacher's alleged statements on Islam". Celebration of Hope – A Pastoral Letter (2). Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods – Causes, Consequences and Countermeasures. Dialogue with Minister K Shanmugam on "Terrorism and Radicalisation in Southeast Asia and Our Challenges". NCCS President's Pastoral Message. A Note to Members, National Council of Churches, NCCS Message to our Friends in the Muslim Community. A NCCS Advisory on Disney's Beauty and the Beast. Letter to Pastors of NCCS Member Churches. Mufti of Singapore on bombing in Lahore. URA Guidelines and Places of Worship. Letter to Churches on Isis Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Letter to Member Churches regarding HPB FAQ on sexuality. Letter to members regarding NCCS position to FCBC recent judicial review appeal.

⁷⁵⁵ The Constitution of the Republic of Singapore. Part XIII: General Provisions.

*support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language.*⁷⁵⁶

Moreover, Article 153 specifies that legislation could be made for regulating Muslim religious affairs. This clause then led to the Parliament of Singapore passing the Administration of Muslim Law Bill on 17 August 1966, which enabled Muslims to make provision for regulating Muslim religious affairs and to constitute a council to advise on matters relating to the Muslim religion in Singapore and a Syariah Court.⁷⁵⁷

However, evidence clearly indicates that although the Malays and affairs relating to the Muslim religion have been given unique positions in Singapore, it is stipulated only to protect the particular minority community's interest. Some commentators have likened these special privileges as being caring mechanisms, likening them to a shield rather than a sword.⁷⁵⁸ This is distinctly different than Malaysia, where there is a need to enforce Islam as a religion of the state and the religion of the Malays as the majority community, making it to become a force to be reckoned with by the minority communities. This is one of the key reasons why the Singaporean church has not been forced to undergo difficult situations, unlike their Malaysian counterparts. This could be the foremost reason why the NCCS statements do not show any distress signals in relation to its religious rights being curtailed or discriminated against by the government.

Therefore, compared to CFM, where many of its press statements were made to express their difficulties and disappointments with the government's actions, the NCCS of Singapore has not expressed any protest voices against the government. Two possible reasons could be suggested as to why there have been no protest voices. Firstly, the Singaporean government has not put the Singaporean church in a situation where it needs to rally together in solidarity to voice its grievances against the government. Secondly, unlike Malaysia, there is no one single religion that has been given the privilege to dominate and therefore

⁷⁵⁶ The Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Part XIII, General Provisions.

⁷⁵⁷ Administration Of Muslim Law Act, Chapter Three, Revised Edition, Singapore, 2009.

⁷⁵⁸ Eugene Tan, 'Special Position of the Malays: It's a shield, not a sword', *The Straits Times*, 25th August 2009, 18.

potentially override the privileges of other religions. The Singaporean constitution has not empowered any particular religion to function as the official religion of the state.

Subsequently, it becomes possible to note understand clearly that since the Singaporean church has not been forced to undergo difficult situations as what was being experienced by their Malaysian counterparts, there has been no need for distress signals or protest voices to be raised. Consequently, the absence of a dominating Muslim majority government has caused the Catholics and Protestants to continue to co-exist separately without being pressured to come under a single ecumenical body.

Therefore, it would not be wrong to propose that while CFM was consciously formed to bring together Catholics and Protestants to amplify the minority Christian voice against the Muslim majority government, the NCCS in turn was formed to continue the solidarity efforts that were passed on to them by CCM. Accordingly, it is possible to suggest that this situation is a direct contrast to the Malaysian situation, where a united voice by three parties (CCM, NECF and The Roman Catholic Church) was very much needed in order to find strength through solidarity in their struggle against the encroachment of their religious rights.

Summary

This chapter noted that the needed impetus to push for a greater ecumenical solidarity agenda, prayer solidarity or political engagement were conspicuously missing among the Singaporean churches. This is very likely due to the absence of any religious or ethnic superiority agenda that could have otherwise pressured them to do so.

CONCLUSION

Chapter Seven

This study sought to discover whether the phenomenon of Islamization in Malaysia could be considered a causative factor for the Christian community to undertake solidarity measures that were previously considered either negligible or non-existent. It scrutinized three specific social factors that emerged as symptomatic outcomes of Islamization and also analyzed the emergence of three distinct forms of Christian solidarity.

7.1 Original contribution to knowledge.

This study was able to show that three specific pressures that were caused by Islamization inadvertently led to the emergence of three discernible elements of solidarity within the Christian community in Malaysia.

7.2 Evaluation of the research data according to the stipulated research design.

As indicated in chapter one of this study, the research format design was based on the principles of qualitative analysis and primarily modelled after its case study variant. To satisfy case study requirements, the research identified the contextual influences of this study which in this case were the pre-independence cradles that legitimized the development of Islamization in Malaysia. Accordingly, the work was able to discern that Islam, due to it being the religion of the Malay royalty and their Malay subjects, was accorded elevated status by the British colonialists, principally in order to appease them as political allies who controlled the individual states in Malaya. Moreover, it found that the British policy of non-involvement in Islamic religion and Malay affairs then successfully portrayed a notion that Islam was superior to the other non-Muslim religions that existed during the period. These elements led to the need to use Islam as an identity marker of the Malays to achieve constitutional privileges that were not accorded to the non-Malays as non-Muslims. These factors were examined in detail in chapter two of this work.

Furthermore, in order to investigate the implications of Islamization towards Christian solidarity in Malaysia in a precise way, this study examined three different socio-political aspects which emerged as discernible outcomes of protracted Islamization in Malaysia. Evidence from research found that Islamization gave rise to: polarization of society, marginalization of non-Muslims and accorded UMNO the opportunity to establish a political hold over the nation. Research evidence also revealed that Prime Ministers as Presidents of UMNO began to use Islamization as a useful tool to establish Malay-Muslim hegemony within a multi-religious, multi-racial society. These aspects were inspected in chapter three of the research.

Subsequently, the research was conducted in order to ascertain why and how new Christian solidarity mechanisms were actually forced to develop. The gathered evidence demonstrated that the roots of the ecumenical movement, prayer solidarity and the birth of political consciousness were directly related to the pressures that were being caused by the effects of Islamization. Moreover, the study was also able to discover that all the three measures were either noticeably absent or negligible prior to the effects of Islamization. The development of these three solidarity mechanisms were scrutinized in chapter four of the study.

The research then verified how Islamization and Christian solidarity could be safely considered as actually being inter-related by investigating the *Allah* issue as a unique controversy that was found only in Malaysia. Subsequently, by holding the *Allah* phenomenon in tandem with the three Christian solidarity outcomes that were examined earlier, the study found that they could safely be considered reactionary outcomes to Islamization in Malaysia. This was examined in chapter five of the study.

Furthermore, in order to triangulate the findings with another equivalent social setting, a comparison with the churches in Singapore found that the detectible solidarity elements in Malaysia were found to be absent primarily due to the lack of a single religion dominating the socio-political environment. These factors emerged conclusively in chapter six of this work.

Therefore, it is safe to suggest that the adopted research design and methodology has been adequate to provide a comprehensive analysis of the topic. The case study model within the scope of qualitative analysis enabled the research to draw out specific answers to the four key research questions which provided the needed focus for this study.

7.3. Answers to research questions.

- i. Why did Islamization become a national phenomenon?

The findings in chapter two discovered that when the British gradually took control of the state administration, it began to arouse the Malay community to seek ways of protecting their psychological independence, especially by holding on to their Muslim identity. Moreover, when British colonialists forced the Sultans to relinquish some of their administrative authority to the British Residents and only allowed the domain of Malay customs and Malay religion (Islam) to come under the purview of the Sultans, it made Islam become viewed as an exclusive religion. Additionally, when the British brought migrants from China and India to improve the local economy, their presence as non-Muslims further accentuated the need for Malays to placard Islam as an integral part of their identity and sought to separate, albeit elevate their religion above the religion of the other races. Moreover, when the special position of the Malays and their Islamic concerns were allowed to become woven into the Federal Constitution by the British, the thinking became further consolidated. The constitution also permitted other Islam related legislations to flourish which subsequently gave increased powers for Islam related affairs to take root in the nation. Consequently, the combination of all these factors became fertile seedbed for Prime Ministers to introduce an Islamization agenda which positioned the Muslim Malays as being distinct and more privileged than their non-Malay, non-Muslim counterparts.

- ii. How can Christian solidarity be considered an identifiable reaction to the Islamization agenda of the government?

The need for Prime Ministers to elevate the socio-economic position of Muslim Malays through their own political vehicles inadvertently led to the polarization of society and the marginalization of non-Muslims. Consequently, the pressures caused by persistently being

disenfranchised by the government produced an urgency among Christians in Malaysia to find ways of consolidating their loose network of relationships, forcing them to come together in ecumenical solidarity to find camaraderie through their common faith with Christians from other denominations. It then led them to form ecumenical caucuses that met periodically to frame responses to the growing Islamization initiatives of the government.

Moreover, when the continual marginalization of non-Muslims by the government began to hamper their efforts to develop their religious initiatives, they began to turn to prayer as a possible way of finding divine solutions and spiritual comfort to their malady. Subsequently, they began to find that praying in solidarity with other Christians accorded a greater sense of unity and purpose. Moreover, because denominational leaders and other key leaders had already been discussing and working together through the periodical NCC gatherings, there was discernible support to the grassroots level networking for prayer that took place at local townships. Likewise, landmark events like the Independence Day and General Elections provided the needed impetus and resolve to gather together in solidarity at the national level.

Furthermore, when Christians began to realize that politicians from UMNO were instrumental in facilitating the continual momentum of Islamization in order to fulfil their own Malay supremacy agenda, they began to perceive politics from a different perspective. Evidence indicates that the NCC solidarity gatherings helped to create a platform where they could crystalize their thoughts on politics by having elaborate discussions on the subject. The discussions began to change their initial perception of non-involvement in politics to a more full participation mode. Moreover, because UMNO had been in un-interrupted power since independence, challenging UMNO's dominance would mean that they would need to align themselves with the opposition.

- iii. Is the emergent Christian solidarity an external reaction or a reflection of a deeper core of unity?

Evidence gathered from the findings strongly indicate that the Christian solidarity mechanisms identified in this study could be considered as internal manifestations. Firstly, this could be discerned through both the overwhelming and the continual response of

participants from various denominations at the NCC Ecumenical gatherings. Participants took the opportunity to forge new relationships and openly share their thoughts and feelings during the lively discussions which were then recorded in the NCC Journals. Secondly, grassroots solidarity relationships have also emerged when Christians move beyond existing denominational barriers to attend prayer rallies organised by ecumenical prayer organizations. Moreover, theological boundaries were crossed when Catholic Bishops attended prayer rallies that were organized by Protestants, highlighting a camaraderie that extended beyond official ecumenical events. Moreover, the fact that Protestant Church leaders attended court hearings related to the Catholic Church during the *Allah* issue also exemplifies the generic nature of their solidarity.

Moreover, an observation of the overall findings of this research safely suggests that the solidarity efforts of Christians in Malaysia can be expected to continue. As Islamization in Malaysia is expected to be an ongoing phenomenon, the corresponding solidarity responses of the Christian community are also most likely to continue. Moreover, because of the shared experiences of the Christian community, which has since recognized the value of the strength that comes from the solidarity initiatives, it is not likely that they would be able to find reasons to give up solidarity measures so easily.

- iv. Can this solidarity be compared with other contexts for triangulation purposes?

As examined earlier, the churches in Singapore have not rallied together in solidarity against its government to either form ecumenical caucuses or organize ecumenical gatherings as platforms to discuss their difficulties. Furthermore, Singaporean churches have not published a single press statement to express dissatisfaction or voice their protest feelings against their government as opposed to the repeated press statements of such nature that were made by the ecumenical bodies in Malaysia. Therefore, it would become safe to postulate that the absence of Islamization becomes the foremost reason for the lack of impetus for the three main blocs, the NCCS, the Evangelical Churches of Singapore and the Catholic Church in Singapore to express solidarity through a single-nucleus body like the CFM in Malaysia.

7.4 Unanticipated Research Findings.

During the process of undertaking research, we found that the three elements of Islamization, namely: polarization, marginalization and the hegemony of UMNO were essentially interlinked. For instance, the polarization of society through Islamization was consciously condoned by UMNO, which sought to function as a political party which sought to socio-economically elevate the Malay race above the non-Malay races. This agenda UMNO has then led to the marginalization of non-Muslims to take place, especially through the use of government instruments that were available for UMNO as the dominant partner of the ruling coalition.

In a similar way, the research also discovered that all three solidarity elements of the Christian community could also be considered as being interlinked. For example, it was during the ecumenical solidarity gatherings that discussions on how to explore other solidarity efforts at the grassroots to develop. It eventually led to the organization of events of praying together in more tangible and concerted ways. Moreover, the need to consciously be involved in politics also emerged directly through the NCCs as ecumenical solidarity gatherings. The NCC gatherings were able to create space to generate discussions pertaining to political engagement of Malaysian Christians and also produced resolutions which expressly encouraged Christians in Malaysia to increase their involvement in politics and made become unafraid of political engagement. Moreover, when Christians began to organize solidarity prayer rallies during elections to pray for politicians and the political process, prayer and politics became inevitably connected.

Moreover, this research was also able to notice that church leaders within the Christian community could be recognised as being the primary initiators of all the three solidarity initiatives. Chapter three of this research found that church leaders in Malaysia initiated the NCC ecumenical gatherings which gave rise to CFM as a single Christian ecumenical body to be formed. In the same chapter, research revealed that church leaders both encouraged and participated in emerging prayer movements, which in turn became a motivating factor for their members to follow. Moreover, the chapter also the study found that Church leaders began to use church premises as well to undertake specific programs and events to encourage Christians to become more politically involved, either as voters or election assistants.

7.5 Implications to be considered.

As this study has since discovered that the Christian community used the three specific emergent solidarity mechanisms as useful instruments to deal with growing effects of Islamization in Malaysia, the possibilities of finding other solidarity mechanisms should also be explored. However, it is possible to think this may not be an easy task to be accomplished.

To begin with, the existing differences caused by theological differences need to be addressed in a conscious manner as the current stance of promoting solidarity without engagement in theological matters should not be allowed to remain as status quo. For now, the stance of non-engagement in theological matters is presently being accepted by church leaders mainly as a way of ensuring a safe stance to avoid misunderstanding. However, if fear of misunderstanding becomes the reason for a distanced stance, the element of fear itself will need to be consciously addressed. Is it the fear of being challenged by opposing thoughts and principles? Or is it the fear of the possibility of theological discussions ending in discord? Any form of fear that causes refusal of engagement is a negative element and when it is used with a reason of maintaining a safe stance, it is in actuality a false-positive position. A position which appears to be positive which is however a false sense of security. As such, leaders of the Malaysian church will need to understand that although fear could jeopardise and even cripple existing solidarity, genuine relationships may not emerge if two parties are only willing to stand together in solidarity but not willing to engage with the other.

Moreover, if Christians do not attempt to understand or engage with each other's theological positions, how could they then expect the non-Christians in Malaysia to understand Christians and stand in solidarity with them? Therefore, it would not be wrong to propose that a deeper theological engagement needs to be seriously considered, which will then eventually lead to a deeper level of solidarity.

Moreover, since the solidarity aspects that were uncovered in this study have primarily been a solidarity that is based on the need to engage a common adversary, it is possible to define Malaysian Christian solidarity as a reactionary form of solidarity. Although it could be argued that reactionary solidarity is better than the absence of solidarity, it also raises other related queries. Would the present aspects of Christian solidarity have emerged

if Islamization had not emerged in Malaysia? Furthermore, if self-starting solidarity was indeed possible, why was it mostly non-existent prior to the encroachment of Islamization? Research in chapter four has revealed that because of the nature of mission in Malaysia, which primarily focussed on denominational priorities, it is very unlikely that Christians in Malaysia would have chosen to come out of their ecclesiastical boundaries in a willing manner. Consequently, the questions that address their willingness to cross certain denominational boundaries would need to be addressed with the equal vigour and force that the Church in Malaysia utilized to address the encroachments caused by Islamization.

Furthermore, the need for the Christian community in Malaysia to establish solidarity with members of other faiths also becomes an important factor for consideration. It would not be wrong to suggest that the Christian community needs to explore new modes of solidarity with the other non-Muslim communities in Malaysia as well. Because the future of Christians in Malaysia is intricately tied together with the non-Muslims, they should not be viewed in a simplistic manner, either as potential converts or as allies against the encroachments caused by Islamization. Christians in Malaysia should find ways to respect and accept them, just as the Christian community expects the Muslim government to respect and accept them. It is possible to think that when the Christian community does not want to accept non-Christians on equal terms but only choose to work with them to stand against the effects of Islamization, it is tantamount to exploitation. Exploitation occurs when one party procures the services of another party only to fulfil its own agenda and very likely to discard the other after the particular agenda is achieved. Therefore, because such a behaviour is considered morally wrong, unethical and un-Christian, the need for the Christian community in Malaysia to find new modes of engagement becomes all the more imperative.

In addition, it is noteworthy that ecumenical institutions in Malaysia have developed to become instruments to fight for against the injustice caused by the growing polarization and marginalization of society. Although this is a welcome development which strives to ensure that the needs of minorities are not side-lined by the government, ecumenical institutions should also seek justice for all other minorities, which includes non-Christian concerns. Moreover, ecumenical institutions should also be more willing to give a voice to others who also require justice, especially for those who have been disenfranchised in society.

Affected groups like the poor, the disabled and the indigenous community will need the collective voice of the Christian community to speak on their behalf. Fighting only for their own religious rights will only make Christians to appear self-centered and aloof. Consequently, the ecumenical bodies in Malaysia must be conscious enough of the plight of others and be willing to rally together to struggle in solidarity on their behalf.

Lastly, it would also be vital to propose that there is a serious need for Christian-Muslim relations in Malaysia to be raised to a different level. Since the polarization of society has taken place directly due to the effects of Islamization, Christian leaders will need to take more conscious efforts and explore different methods to relate with Muslim leaders as well as grassroots Muslims. Christian-Muslim relationships could safely be developed primarily through dialogue and interaction sessions. At present, there is a glaring lack in this area which in turn implores the need for a conscious agenda by the church to explore such relationship building initiatives. Although, it may not necessarily begin with theological interactions but initial efforts may well lead to dialogue if both parties are open to it.

7. 6 Future research.

There appears to be two main consequential questions that may need to be considered by future researchers.

- i. What will the Christian community need to give up in order to gain acceptance and cooperation from the Muslim-majority government?
- ii. How can this disenfranchising of society caused by Islamization be addressed as it could become detriment to the unity that is vitally needed to build the future of the nation?

7.7 Contribution of this study.

This study will be able to assist researchers who desire to study religious minorities who live amidst prejudicial circumstances, especially in the context of non-Muslim minorities living under a Muslim majority government in Southeast Asia.

Appendix One: A brief historical overview of the denominations in Malaysia

The Catholic Church in Malaysia is recognized as one of the earliest denominations in Malaysia. Catholicism arrived when the Portuguese desired to monopolize the spice trade in Southeast Asia during sixteenth-century. Attempts to assert dominance led to military conquest, when in August 1511, Alfonso de Albuquerque occupied the port of Malacca with a force of 19 ships.⁷⁵⁹ Although trade was the primary motivator, it needs to be noted that the Portuguese came to Malacca under the banner of the ‘Military Crusading Order of Christ’.⁷⁶⁰ The invasion involved a multi-purpose entourage that included eight military chaplains. Subsequently, the increasing number of soldiers and Portuguese traders led to religious structures being erected to accommodate spiritual needs. Alfonso de Albuquerque built ‘Our Lady of Annunciation’ in December 1511 as the first church building erected on Malaysian soil.⁷⁶¹ In 1521, another church, ‘Our Lady of the Hill’, was built on a nearby hill. Maureen Chew, who chronicled the history of the Catholic Church in Malaysia noted that by the close of the 16th century there were around 7,000 Christians in Malacca consisting mostly of Indian converts and a sizeable number of Chinese adherents.⁷⁶² With this increase, the need for a parish priest became inevitable. In 1515, Alfonso Martinez came to Malacca and ministered to both Portuguese and the local converts.⁷⁶³ The replacement to Alfonso Martinez was Francis Xavier who served from 1545 to 1552 and became one of the seven founders responsible for the Jesuit Order of the Roman Catholic Church.⁷⁶⁴ In 1558, Melaka was made a Suffragette See and recognised as the Diocese of Malacca which enabled direct association

⁷⁵⁹ Manuel Teixeira, *The Portuguese Missions in Malacca and Singapore (1511-1958)*, Agencia Geral Do Ultramar, 1961, 39.

⁷⁶⁰ M. J. Pindato, *Portuguese Documents on Malacca*, Vol. 1, 1509-1511, National Archives of Malaysia, 1993, 173.

⁷⁶¹ Felix Gordon Lee, *The Catholic Church in Malaya*, Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1968, 3.

⁷⁶² Lee, *The Catholic Church*, 43.

⁷⁶³ Teixeira, *The Portuguese Missions*, 97.

⁷⁶⁴ Maureen K. C. Chew, *The Journey of the Catholic Church in Malaysia: 1511-1996*, Catholic Research Centre, 2000, 54.

with Goa in India.⁷⁶⁵ It is possible to suggest that this nearer spiritual link, rather than Rome, was advantageous as it brought other new missionary orders into Malacca.

The Anglicans (Church of England) came through the British who controlled the Straits Settlement territories of Penang, Melaka and Singapore. Subsequently, through the Pangkor Treaty of 1874, they began intervening directly in the other states in the Malay Peninsula (cited earlier). The growing administrative mechanism eventually led to the increase in the number of British officials which caused the East India Company (EIC) to bring chaplains from Britain to service their spiritual needs. The first resident chaplain of the Church of England in Malaya was Rev. Atwill Lake who was appointed in 1805.⁷⁶⁶ As expected by the EIC, he focused on servicing the British and their spiritual needs but his successor Rev Hutchings who came in 1814, engaged with the locals.⁷⁶⁷ With EIC funding, the church of St George the Martyr was built in 1819 in Penang.⁷⁶⁸ For administrative purposes, church matters in Malaya came under the supervision of the Anglican Bishop of Calcutta. However, due to the number of growing congregations, the need to divide into geographical sub-jurisdictions to provide direct Episcopal supervision became inevitable.⁷⁶⁹ In 1868, Bishop Chambers became responsible for Anglican work in West and East Malaysia. In 1870, the St Andrew's church in Singapore was rebuilt and designated as a Cathedral where Rev. Chambers was enthroned as bishop.⁷⁷⁰

⁷⁶⁵ Teixeira, *The Portuguese Missions*, 109.

⁷⁶⁶ Batumalai Sadayandy, *A Bicentenary History of the Anglican Church of the Diocese of West Malaysia: 1805-2005*, Percetakan Muncul Sistem, 2007, 13.

⁷⁶⁷ Sadayandy, *A Bicentenary History*, 13.

⁷⁶⁸ Sadayandy, *A Bicentenary History*, 13.

⁷⁶⁹ Michael S. Northcott, 'Two Hundred Years of Anglican Mission in West Malaysia', in Lee Kam Hing (*et al*) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992 38.

⁷⁷⁰ Northcott, 'Two Hundred Years', 38.

The Methodists arrived in Malaya through the initiatives of the American, Methodist Episcopal Church.⁷⁷¹ In 1884, the South Indian Annual Conference assigned James Thoburn and William Oldham as missionaries to Singapore as an extension of its existing work in Burma.⁷⁷² They arrived in Singapore in February 1885 and held evangelistic meetings in the town hall.⁷⁷³ A year later, a Methodist Episcopal Church was built in Coleman Street Singapore in December 1886.⁷⁷⁴ Subsequently, the mission that began in Singapore spread all over Malaya and became recognised as, The Malaya Mission. An amalgamation of all the Annual Conferences in Burma, Malaya, Singapore and Sumatra in 1950 gave birth to the South-east Asian Central Conference (SACC).⁷⁷⁵ Subsequently, in 1966 the Annual Conferences in Malaya decided to push for an autonomous Malaysian Methodist Church with a single episcopal leader to preside over a Malaysia-based, General Conference. This was accepted by the American General Conference which enabled the Methodist Church of Malaysia and Singapore to be constituted on the 9th of August 1968, with Yap Kim Hao becoming elected as its first Asian Bishop.⁷⁷⁶

The Lutherans in Malaysia could be identified as being composed of four distinct segments which function with their own leadership and church polity. The first is the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Malaysia and Singapore (ELCMS) which came into Malaysia mainly to service the Lutheran Tamils who came as migrants to Malaya. Its roots could be traced to 1887, when German missionaries from the Leipzig Evangelical Lutheran

⁷⁷¹ John Russel Denyes, *The Malaya Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, Open Door Emergency Commission, 1905, 14-15.

⁷⁷² Hwa Yung and Robert Hunt, 'The Methodist Church', in Lee Kam Hing (*et. al*) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 148.

⁷⁷³ Means, *Malaysia Mosaic*, 18.

⁷⁷⁴ Means, *Malaysia Mosaic*, 21.

⁷⁷⁵ Theodore R. Doraisamy, *The March of Methodism in Singapore and Malaysia*, Methodist Book Room Publication, 1982, 95.

⁷⁷⁶ Doraisamy, *The March of Methodism* 97.

Mission surveyed the possibilities of beginning missionary work in Malaya.⁷⁷⁷ The second, is the Lutheran Church in Malaysia and Singapore (LCMS). This work began in 1954, when the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) began sending missionaries to Malaya to see to the progress of Chinese Lutheran work. By the year 1958, thirty-two missionaries worked in Malaya alongside twenty-one Chinese evangelists.⁷⁷⁸ The third, is the Basel Christian Church of Sabah (BCCS), which was established when the Basel Mission Society in Switzerland came to begin mission work among the Chinese in Sabah. It started through Rev. Lechler, who brought Chinese Christians who were affected by the Taiping rebellion in China to settle in Sabah.⁷⁷⁹ The fourth, is the Protestant Church of Sabah (PCS) whose mission work began in 1951 when Rev H. Bienz from the Basel Missions Society took the initiative to reach out to the indigenous persons in Sabah.^{780 781}

Presbyterian influence initially came into Malaya when the Dutch conquered Malacca in 1641.⁷⁸² However, it was only able to take root in 1814 when William Milne was sent to expand missions in Malaya through the London Missionary Society (LMS).⁷⁸³ Milne was able to establish new congregations for both Scottish expatriates and the Chinese community. The English-speaking Presbyterian churches were located in the British concentrated areas of Singapore, Penang, Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur. The Chinese outreach work gained impetus when Rev JAB Cook was posted to Singapore in November 1881.⁷⁸⁴

⁷⁷⁷ Goran Wiking, 'History of the ELCM', Solomon Rajah (Ed.), in *One Hundred Years of Ministry and Lutheran Service: 1901-2001*, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Malaysia and Singapore, 2001, 18.

⁷⁷⁸ Duan William Vierow, *A Comparison of Tamil Churches in Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore*, Unpublished B.D. Thesis, Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, 1979, 49.

⁷⁷⁹ Karl Wilhelm Rennstitch, 'The Basel Mission and the Early Basel Christian Church', in Zhang Delai (Ed.), *The Hakka Experiment in Sabah*, Kota Kinabalu: Sabah Theological Seminary, 2007, 125.

⁷⁸⁰ T.A. Forschner, *History of the Protestant Church in Sabah, Malaysia*, Kudat, 1993. A translation of *Usuran di Gorija Protestant sid Sabah*. Original text is in the Momogun language.

⁷⁸¹ Both the BCCS and the PCS are mainly concentrated in East Malaysia.

⁷⁸² Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 71-72.

⁷⁸³ Robert Greer, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in Singapore*, Malaya Publishing House, 1956, 4.

⁷⁸⁴ Anne Johnson, *The Burning Bush*, Dawn Publications, 1988, 79.

The Assemblies of God (AOG) churches were established through the first AOG missionary couple Cecil Johnson and his wife who arrived in Singapore in 1928.⁷⁸⁵ Subsequently, in 1932, Carrie P. Anderson and Esther Johnson came to work among the Chinese in Malaya.⁷⁸⁶ Their working together with Leong Shik Ngon from Hong Kong led to many conversions. In 1940, the Malayan AOG churches became officially affiliated with the Assemblies of God in USA.⁷⁸⁷ In 1955, the government gave a piece of land in Jalan Sayur where a new church building was raised.⁷⁸⁸ In 1957, the AOG became a registered body under the Registrar of Societies with the government.⁷⁸⁹

The Brethren mission in Malaysia started when John Chapman from Bristol, England arrived in Penang in the year 1860.⁷⁹⁰ He worked in partnership with London Missionary Society (LMS) who availed the use of their premises. He studied Malay language and conducted Malay services that were attended by the Malay-speaking *Peranakan* Chinese. In 1891, E. Eager arrived as a Brethren missionary to work in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur.⁷⁹¹ He spoke Mandarin and focussed his mission activity on the Chinese community and began a Chinese assembly in Kuala Lumpur in 1893.⁷⁹²

The Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) churches who are clustered in East Malaysia, began as mission work of the Borneo Evangelical Missions (BEM) which was a mission venture of the Australian Evangelical Missionary Society. In 1928, it sent three missionaries to work on

⁷⁸⁵ Lim Yeu Chuen, 'Historical Timeline of the Assemblies of God in Malaysia and Singapore', in *1957-2007: 50 Years of Spirit Empowered Ministry in Malaysia*, Assemblies of God Malaysia, 2007, 14.

⁷⁸⁶ Derek Tan, 'The Assemblies of God', in Lee Kam Hing (*et al*) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 230.

⁷⁸⁷ Tan, 'The Assemblies of God', 231.

⁷⁸⁸ Derek Tan, 'Malaysia', in Stanley M. Burgess (Ed.), *International Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements*, Zondervan, 2002, 171.

⁷⁸⁹ Tan, 'The Assemblies of God', 233.

⁷⁹⁰ Lee Kam Hing, 'The Christian Brethren', in Lee Kam Hing (*et al*) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 112.

⁷⁹¹ Kam Hing, 'The Christian Brethren', 116.

⁷⁹² Kam Hing, 'The Christian Brethren', 116.

the island of Borneo, in East Malaysia. They were Hudson Southwell, Frank Davidson and Carey Tolley who were assisted by Alexander Henderson who made initial contacts and helped to settle the trio in Borneo.⁷⁹³ In 1950, the indigenization of ministries became priority when the BEM adopted a Three Self Church policy.⁷⁹⁴ The policy envisioned an indigenous church that was independent of foreign missionaries by the year 1955. The formal establishment of the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) in the year 1959 brought both confidence among locals and recognition by the government.⁷⁹⁵ In 1963, the president of SIB was invited to sit on the Lawas District Council.

The Baptist Convention in Malaysia started as a missionary initiative to reach the Chinese Baptist who came from China. The Baptist migrants from Canton and Swatow in China pioneered the initial Chinese Baptist congregations in Malaya. The first congregation was established in 1938 in Alor Setar in Kedah.⁷⁹⁶ The mission gained traction when Southern Baptist missionaries who were expelled from China came to Malaya. In 1954, the Penang Baptist Theological Seminary was started, with classes held in Chinese and English.

Mar Thoma churches are were established through the Indian migrants who were already Christians from the state of Kerala. In 1936, their first congregation was established in the town of Klang and was ministered by T.N Koshy a priest from India.⁷⁹⁷ He travelled all over Malaya to hold Malayalam services. These monthly services were either held in homes of believers or in the premises of sister churches. The arrival of Rev V. E. Thomas in

⁷⁹³ Tan Jin Huat, *The Borneo Evangelical Mission and the Sidang Injil Borneo: A Study in the planting and Development of an Indigenous Church: 1928-1979*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Oxford Centre for Christian Missions, 2007, 103-105.

⁷⁹⁴ Jin Huat, *The Borneo Evangelical Mission* 184.

⁷⁹⁵ Jin Huat, *The Borneo Evangelical Mission* 247.

⁷⁹⁶ Hwang Wei Tjang, 'The Baptist Church in West Malaysia', in Lee Kam Hing (*et al*) Editors, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992, 243.

⁷⁹⁷ *The Mar Thoma Church: A Malaysian Perspective*, Malaysian Zone of the Malaysia and Singapore Diocese of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, 1986, 47.

1947 saw the administrative jurisdiction being divided into two parts. Rev Thomas took care of 'Upper Malaya' while Rev Koshy took care of 'Lower Malaya'.⁷⁹⁸

Together with these main denominations, there are independent churches that regulate churches and outreaches that are linked to them. Commonly, the link is the affiliation to a single, senior pastor who had been instrumental to set up their congregations. The senior pastor then controls the ministry personnel, administration and finance.

⁷⁹⁸ *The Mar Thoma Church*, 49.

Appendix Two: The National Christian Conferences (First to the Eighth).

The First National Christian Conference

The CCM organized the first National Christian Conference (NCC) as a three day conference in February 1979 at the capital city Kuala Lumpur. It was attended by around 150 participants from East and West Malaysia and with representatives from denominational churches as well as Para-Church organizations. In his capacity as the secretary of the organizing committee, Denis C. Dutton remarked that the conference had only become possible after two years of planning and meetings. These efforts clearly showed the determination of the working committee to make ecumenical co-operation a successful venture as the persistence to overcome any reservations towards such a conference and the ability to think beyond denominational hegemony was something commendable. He also remarked that the theme, Working Together for Christ, was unanimously chosen. Together with him, the other church leaders who were also part of organizing the conference were very clear in their objectives. The chairman of the organizing committee, the Methodist Bishop C. N. Fang remarked on the focus of the conference:

To seek after an acceptable basis of cooperation to make its presence felt to the best advantage in all aspects of national life. It is felt that the churches can do much more through corporate action and a united witness ... an effort to bring together the whole Christian community and to bear its weight in the national life.⁷⁹⁹

As the Bishop was acutely aware that some forms of divisions already existed among Christians, he added that this co-operation and ecumenical networking did not envisage a common formulation in the areas of doctrines and practices yet. In the opening service of the conference, Catholic Archbishop Vendargon denounced the divisions of the past and stated that the existing divisions among churches in Malaysia contradicted the will of God and damaged God's holy cause. The Catholic primate urged the participants of the conference to express remorse for such divisions and urged them to be bold enough to express their

⁷⁹⁹ Report of the First National Christian Conference, *Working Together for Christ*, 20th to 23rd February 1979, 5.

longings for greater unity. He closed his message by saying that it was high time for the construction for inter-denominational worship sites in order to signal that churches were willing to unite beyond denominational affiliations. He believed that these shared churches would serve as visible symbols of unity where Christians could work together with each other in an attitude of team ministry.

In tandem with the theme ‘working together’, three key areas were identified for discussion. They were titled: Working together in the work of evangelism, Working together in Christian social concerns and Working together for a meaningful Christian presence in our nation. Three different speakers were invited to present their thoughts on the subject and participants were sub-divided into groups to discuss the presentations to come out with relevant responses. The speaker who spoke on Working Together in the Work of Evangelism was Dr David Gunaratnam. He raised some important questions which forced the participants to discuss evangelism in the light of ecumenical cooperation. For instance, he asked, how could the different churches in a particular city come together to organize a combined evangelistic effort amidst their existing differences? Dr Chong Chee Pang spoke on the subject of Working Together in Social Concerns asked how welfare projects could be undertaken at inter-church levels and how Christians could play significant roles in the nation’s trade union movements. These questions compelled the conference participants to think of social concerns issues beyond their own denominational and local church contexts.

The third speaker, Mr David Boler addressed the issue of how Christians in Malaysia could maintain a meaningful Christian presence and be counted as relevant to the nation. He argued that numerically speaking, the challenge to be taken seriously was immense for them as the Christian community was still small and could easily be considered as being insignificant. Asking difficult questions, he even queried whether the Christians counted in the government statistics could really be considered as committed Christians at all, especially whether they actually lived in accordance to biblical principles. He argued that many Christians in Malaysia could only be considered as nominal Christians who were not really keen in the desiring to make their Christian presence felt in the nation. He said, ‘A Christian

presence cannot be maintained if Christians are merely crowd followers'.⁸⁰⁰ Touching on their collective consciousness, he chided the existing lack of mutual cooperation among denominations saying, 'Non-Christians must see less of denominational differences and decisions and a great deal more of their mutual love and unity in the spirit.'⁸⁰¹ He also iterated that Christians could not afford to be politely silent in the socio-political scene of the nation as it would tantamount to disobeying the Biblical call to be the salt and light of the world. He also asked why most Christians in Malaysia shunned politics and were not serious enough about their political engagement when it could easily be utilized as an avenue to bring Christian issues to the forefront. During his session he also touched on the lack of usage of the Malay language in Malaysian churches. He asked why the whole Bible had not yet been translated into the Malay language (at that point of time) and also queried about the lack of Christian literary works that were being translated into Malay. Hence, it could be suggested that the NCC offered a launching pad for these types of difficult yet pertinent questions that had been conveniently ignored for far too long.

The responses of the participants were also forthright. The participants felt that in their eagerness to be salt and light, the Christian community should not attempt to do something that would be considered as out of sync with the rest of the nation. Moreover, on the question of politics, most participants felt that although it could be good arena as a voicing platform, it would be wise to check the agenda of the political parties before attempting to join them. In their discussions, the participants were also conscious about the role of culture in determining their Christian presence. They noted that some cultural practices that were contrary to Biblical teachings disallowed Christians from moving too closely with their own Chinese or Indian communities in Malaysia. The conference participants then made several key recommendations as their next course of action. Because the Malay language had become the key in Malaysian society, it was recommended that the Malay language should be used more extensively in churches and that churches should set target dates when it hopes to conduct a full service in Malay. The participants also recommended that the Christian

⁸⁰⁰ Report of the First National Christian Conference, 68.

⁸⁰¹ Report of the First National Christian Conference, 68.

community should maintain a united stand on all social, economic and political issues. The participants also unanimously agreed for a second National Christian Conference to address all other national level issues that needed attention.⁸⁰²

In many ways the inaugural NCC of 1979 could be counted as a pioneering first in the life of the Malaysian church. Firstly, it proved that Christians could come together as one body to address significant issues that were relevant to them. As it brought together 150 participants from different walks of life and from all levels of church leadership, it proved that Christian leaders were willing to give their time and attention to something that was vital to them. They came believing that the NCC was a worthwhile effort and a forward thinking venture as no such unity gathering had been organized at national level thus far. Secondly, the speakers focussed on the larger agenda of the Malaysian church as opposed to narrow minded denominationalism and local thinking. They were able to ask difficult questions that addressed the existing parochialism within the Christian community. This pushing the limits of existing mind-sets and challenging of comfort zones also meant that these issues were something that the Malaysian church could not dismiss lightly any longer. Also, the organizing of the NCC also meant that Christians from different denominations can no longer cite the lack of a suitable forum for such discussions as an excuse to be reclusive. Because of the NCC, the avenue for open discussions had now become available for them. The NCC was also able to provide a network of valuable relationships that were crucial to jumpstart other forms of further ecumenical networking to begin. Thirdly, it helped the participants to recognize the value of coming together and working together despite their differences. The appreciation came to the fore when the participants made a unanimous proposal that urged the organizers to organize a second NCC similar to the first.

The Second National Christian Conference

Following the success of the first gathering, the second NCC was convened three years later, in August 1982. The theme for the conference was ‘Witnessing in a Multi Religious Society’. It was very much a follow up to the first gathering which had led to positive developments

⁸⁰² Report of the First National Christian Conference, 80.

taking place over the last three years. The Methodist Bishop C.N. Fang in his capacity as the organising chairman wrote in the program booklet:

There have been some obvious good results from the first one. Our churches have continued to explore ways of joining efforts to make a united Christian witness and coordinate our efforts.⁸⁰³

In his opening message that came as the keynote address of the NCC, Bishop C.N. Fang spoke about love as the fundamental ingredient for Christian unity. He reminded that the Christian community's witness was not something that emerged from a vacuum but out of love for each other. He closed his address by saying:

Christian Witness takes place only when we show forth the distinctive mark of Christian Discipleship – when we love each other as Christ loved us ... When we are able to make this kind of witness in our Multi-religious society, we need not be anxious ... we need not fear those who would oppose the church⁸⁰⁴

The Anglican Bishop J. G. Savarimuthu quoted from Biblical passages and commented that, 'the unity that our Lord willed and prayed for, and the mission of the church are inseparable. One without the other is incomplete.'⁸⁰⁵ In essence, both leaders implied that following the 'working together' theme of the first conference which leads to a united Christian witness amidst the plural society of Malaysia was now the correct and sure way forward.

The number of participants who attended the second NCC increased to more than 270, as compared to 150 participants of the first NCC. This too became proof that ecumenism and ecumenical gatherings were being taken seriously by more Christians from the different denominations. This was also proof of seriousness on the part of the churches because the churches not only encouraged many more to attend the NCC but were also willing to pay for their registration costs. The main theme was subdivided into three specific categories, 'Witnessing through Evangelism', 'Witnessing through Co-operation' and 'Witnessing through Culture'. The first speaker, Selvendran addressed the topic of 'Witnessing through

⁸⁰³ Report of the Second National Christian Conference, *Witnessing in a Multi-Religious Society*, 10th to 13th August 1982, 8.

⁸⁰⁴ Report of the Second National Christian Conference, 9.

⁸⁰⁵ Report of the Second National Christian Conference, 10.

Evangelism'. This concern was something increasingly relevant to the Christian community in Malaysia because it often struggled with balancing the Biblical mandate of evangelism without offending the faith of their non-Christian neighbours who lived beside them. Together with this dilemma, the Malaysian Christian community also had to reckon with the law of the land that forbade Christians from witnessing to their Muslim neighbours. Selvendran iterated that the Christians in Malaysia cannot be neutral any longer and cannot be non-committal or be tentative about their witness.⁸⁰⁶ He argued that as witnesses, Christians must be authentic witnesses who should not fabricate the content of the evidence to suit the plural gallery of Malaysia. It was a bold challenge, especially in the larger context of multi-religious and multi-racial Malaysia.

The second speaker addressed the topic, 'Witnessing through Cooperation'. It was presented by Rev Ng Ee Lin who said that witness through cooperation was the proof of Malaysian church working together in solidarity in its mission. He then highlighted some of the threats to Christian unity in the country by addressing a general lack of unity between the members of laity and clergy in the churches. He called on the participants not to drift apart from one another as clergy versus laity but to work as a team with each other. Moreover, he dealt with the issue of inter-denominational cooperation. He said that to be a true witness, the different denominations have no choice but to cooperate. He touched on sensitive issues like the Christian ritual of communion where some denominations exclude members of other denominations from participating in it. He pointed out that this being the case, there was actually no real communion among the denominations. He cautioned the participants by saying that any theology should only be considered as valid if it served to unite the church and iterated that any theology that divided the church was no theology at all.⁸⁰⁷ He also stated that Christians should not just talk about cooperation but must also be seen doing so by the non-Christians. Subsequently, he argued that any cooperation that left out the people of other faiths would only be self-serving and not benefit the multi-religious Malaysia. He suggested that this area of cooperation could start with genuine dialogue with people of other faiths. He felt that these dialogues would then lead to become bridges of mutual understanding and

⁸⁰⁶ Report of the Second National Christian Conference, 27.

⁸⁰⁷ Report of the Second National Christian Conference, 48.

cooperation. He then cautioned against any religious groups with partisan interests, as such groups would become detrimental to the very fabric of the plural nature of Malaysia.

The participants and the respondents to Rev Ng's paper echoed his sentiments and felt that specific steps should be taken to consolidate the different Christians under one umbrella body. One respondent felt that all the existing denominations and Para-church organizations 'should form a united front as representation to the government to safeguard the right of Christians which includes to witness ... and to practice the Christian faith freely.'⁸⁰⁸ A number of discussion groups also recommended for a national level Christian body that comprised of Christians from all denominations to be formed soon. This was because at that point of time there were three separate bodies that represented the Christian community, the Roman Catholics, the CCM⁸⁰⁹ and the NECF⁸¹⁰. This idea augured well among the participants and when the time came for resolutions to be formulated, the following decision was recorded:

The conference requests the CCM to call together 10 members from each of the following, viz. CCM, the Roman Catholic Church and the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship, to form a national Christian body...⁸¹¹

It should be noted here that this resolution of the second NCC became the single most decisive factor that paved the way for the subsequent formation of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) as the sole and united Christian voice of the Malaysia Christian community. The participants also felt that apart from coming together as a united Christian body, there was also an urgent need for the Christian leaders to come together with non-Muslim leaders. This suggestion came about so that the Christian leaders could cooperate with such leaders on matters of common interest, especially in matters that related to the

⁸⁰⁸ Report of the Second National Christian Conference, 55.

⁸⁰⁹ The CCM represented the major protestant groups and some Para church organizations.

⁸¹⁰ The NECF represented the newer renewal churches, most of the independent churches and some other Para church organizations.

⁸¹¹ Report of the Second National Christian Conference, 104.

Muslim government. On the matter of cooperation with leaders of other religions, the following was decided.

The conference was told that the rights of all religious bodies were being suppressed by the government. Thus a consultative body amongst religious leaders had been started to discuss these problems. It was proposed that the national Christian body to be set up, should take the initiative to liaise with the leaders of other faiths on such matters.⁸¹²

Although the second NCC finished with a number of specific tasks for the organisers, two of them proved to be milestone decisions. The first was the call to initiate and form a national level body that would embody the whole gamut of the Malaysian Christians and the second was the call to liaise with leaders of other faiths to further solidify the existing loose consultative alliance. These moves show that the Christian community was now progressing forward in their efforts to promote a greater and more formal solidarity. Furthermore, they were not only working among themselves but were also eager to work with other groups of different religious convictions. They had begun to recognize and value the benefit of standing in solidarity with their non-Christian neighbours. Thus, it can be argued that the NCC gatherings that promoted intra-Christian solidarity had also managed to teach them the value of coming together in solidarity with members of other faiths.

The Third National Christian Conference

Five years later the next NCC was convened 1987 in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. It was a landmark event in the life of the Malaysian church as it was organized by the newly formed Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM). As the formation of the CFM came about as a result of a unified resolution to do so by the participants of the previous NCC, it was attended by 207 representatives from the three main blocs that constituted the entire Christian community in Malaysia, CCM, NECF and the Roman Catholic Church. The CFM was

⁸¹² Report of the Second National Christian Conference, 105.

inaugurated unofficially in February 1985 and registered officially with the government on the January 1986.⁸¹³

In his opening speech Bishop C. N. Fang noted, ‘We can take comfort in the fact that our movement towards unity has been the result of positive and united efforts’.⁸¹⁴ However, he iterated that since the present unity that the Christians enjoyed was a result of previous efforts, he reminded them that they were still in the process of moving further towards greater unity. He also cautioned against forging unity simply for the sake of facing a crisis and mentioned that though unity on such terms could be considered acceptable, it was far better to be united because of what the Bible mandates. Furthermore, he also commented on the newly organized CFM and stated, ‘what we need is not just more and more Christian bodies and organizations ... we need a spirit of unity and co-operation so that we can make best use of what we have’.⁸¹⁵

The organizing committee chose four topics which they considered as relevant to the life of the Malaysian church. Four papers were presented, which were titled, Christian Mission in a Plural Society, Christian and the State, Christian Compassion in a suffering society and Christian Youth in a Rapidly Changing Society. Through the varied topics, most speakers touched on the issue of unity as one of the key ingredient that that was indispensable to their topic. The speaker who spoke on Christian Mission in a Plural Society warned against individualistic motivations for Christian missions. He urged the participants not to act selfishly by saying:

Our common destiny as a church cannot be ignored. The odds are too great for us to continue building our own and little kingdoms. We must put aside pride and for the sake of Christ come and put our hands on the plough.⁸¹⁶

⁸¹³ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, *Christian Commitment: Imperatives, Implications and Impact*, 17th to 20th February 1987, 1.

⁸¹⁴ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 7.

⁸¹⁵ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 9.

⁸¹⁶ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 23.

As he was aware that all most denominations were only eager to implement their own individual plans and agendas for Christian mission, he ended his paper by calling for all the heads of churches to work together to formulate macro and micro strategies for the whole nation. The respondent to the speaker of Christian Compassion in A suffering Society also made references to unity. He mentioned that, ‘The unity of the church must not be a matter of ecclesiastical carpentry’⁸¹⁷, implying that unity of the Church should not just be for outward display but that it should become its core identity. He urged the church to pursue unity as a fundamental component rather than viewing it as an accessory of its existence.

The effects of Islamization were also brought to the forefront. For instance, the paper that addressed the topic of Christian and the State was presented by Joseph Balan Seling, who was a native from East Malaysia. In his paper, Joseph Seling noted that Christians must firstly strive to be responsible citizens of the State, just as the Bible required them to do so. However, he also highlighted the fact that due to the nature of difficulties that Malaysian Christians were facing with the state, it had now become a difficult dilemma. He remarked, ‘many a time we do meet with many problems and difficulties. And many times the problems remain unsolved’.⁸¹⁸ He went on to list some of the difficulties that were encountered. He expressed his difficulty regarding the newly imposed government regulation that limited the length of stay of foreign Christian missionaries. Together with this, the government’s decision that restricted Christian workers from West Malaysia from being employed in East Malaysia was also causing disruptions to its ongoing ministries. He added that this would not be an issue for West Malaysian churches as they already had many resourceful leaders but it was considered a serious difficulty for the East Malaysian churches which still needed qualified personnel. He also expressed his disappointment at the government’s decision to ban the Indonesian translation of the Bible called the *Alkitab* and said: ‘when the ban was imposed we were put in a great dilemma and confusion and fear ... and as to how we would exist as a Christian community without our holy book.’⁸¹⁹ On the same issue, he queried the

⁸¹⁷ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 57.

⁸¹⁸ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 40.

⁸¹⁹ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 40.

motive of the government by asking why only the *Alkitab* was singled out to be banned as its content was exactly the same as all the other Bibles that were used by other Malaysians. Touching on another problem that was related to scriptures, he remarked that when the Malaysian Church produced its own version of the Malay Bible, the government ban on Malay words that had Arabic origins also caused a dilemma. He lamented, ‘we take for granted that as citizens, we are entitled to use every vocabulary found in our own national language ... we still do not know what is the best way to come to a solution.’⁸²⁰ He then closed by saying that Christian churches needed to educate its members on their constitutional rights on freedom of religion. He also urged the church to make use of Christian politicians to raise some of the difficult issues in the parliament as well as State Assemblies. He also felt that the formation of a national level, inter-faith council would be helpful to address some of these issues as the Christian community could also use it as a platform to air their difficulties to the government.

The respondent to the speaker, Dr Lee Kam Hing affirmed most of the thoughts that were presented in the paper and added his own views to the topic. He reiterated that the religious climate of Malaysia was indeed moving towards a trend that displayed increasing Islamization and posed an audacious question by asking, ‘Are Christians to accept oppressive governments and interpret these as God’s way of chastising the community?’⁸²¹ This question urged the participants to undertake serious theological reflection on the current experiences of discriminations that the church was facing through the state. However, Dr Lee was also quick to point out that certain difficulties were not caused by the government but also by political leaders were careless in making unsubstantiated allegations against Christians in this country’.⁸²² In saying so, he implied that some Muslim politicians were using Christians and Christianity as propaganda tools to harness Muslim votes.

The participants themselves were direct and forthcoming in their answers to the discussion questions that were put to them. One of the discussion questions asked, what are

⁸²⁰ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 41.

⁸²¹ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 43.

⁸²² Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 46.

Christians to do when there is a conflict between loyalty to the state and their Christian conscience? Firstly, the participants felt that although it was their foremost duty to be loyal to the government, in cases of difficult conflicts, loyalty to God must always take priority.⁸²³ Secondly, in any arising situations of conflict, all existing measures needed to be exhausted first in order to find ways of rectifying the situation. Thirdly, if all the efforts failed, the next step would be to stage a ‘civil disobedience’. If such actions required them to go to jail, Christians must be willing to pay the price for their conscience.⁸²⁴ Such a bold and calculated response from the participants openly indicated that the Malaysian community was taking its faith seriously and was keen to stand resolutely in the midst of the difficult experiences that they were being forced to face. It was important for the leaders of the Christian community to grasp with such difficult questions at that point of time as there was always a probability that their religious rights were only going to be further challenged.

At the end of the conference, several resolutions were made which reflected the overall attitude of the four day deliberations. One of the recommendations called for all churches in Malaysia to educate their members on relevant national issues that were affecting them. This recommendation was an important one as the local church members needed to be conscious of what Christians in Malaysia were generally facing through the newer government policies and whether their personal religious rights were being infringed upon. Another recommendation asked the CFM to conduct dialogue sessions with Christian politicians so that they would be able to ‘think and act Christianly (*sic*) on issues in the parliament, state assemblies and other platforms.’⁸²⁵ It was basically an attempt to use existing Christian politicians to voice out concerns to protect Christian interests in relevant platforms. Another recommendation called on CFM to consider the government ban of religious terminologies and religious books as a serious matter that required firm reaction. Moreover, as issues related to the Muslim majority government were increasingly coming to the fore, the need to communicate and engage positively with their local Muslim neighbours was also highlighted. On the same note, one of the resolutions asked for CFM to take

⁸²³ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 77.

⁸²⁴ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 77.

⁸²⁵ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 87.

‘immediate steps to initiate formal Christian-Muslim dialogue’.⁸²⁶ It is not known whether the proposal was taken seriously by the Christian leaders but it could be proposed that the Islamic division of the government may not have been too keen to reciprocate upon the idea. Decades later, a proposal by civil society bodies to form a similar body for dialogue was outrightly rejected as a threat to the primacy of Islam in Malaysia as several Muslim quarters considered it a sacrilege to place Islam on the same footing with other religions.

The Fourth National Christian Conference

The Fourth NCC was held four years later, in April 1991. It was a conference that was different from the previous gatherings. Unlike the previous NCCs that were always held in Kuala Lumpur, the fourth NCC was held away from the capital city and organized in the seaside town of Port Dickson. Secondly, the Fourth NCC also created a record when it was attended by 310 participants making it the largest NCC thus far. Such a response indicated the initiative of the leaders of the Malaysian church who chose to come together in solidarity in times of changing socio-religious realities in the country. The theme was that was chosen for this NCC was ‘Sandcastles or Lighthouse? The Malaysian Church in the Nineties’. The introduction in the report of the Fourth NCC explains the rationale for the theme, ‘to attempt a definition of the Malaysian Church and to receive a vision towards its realization, and arrive at an agenda for positive Christian contribution to the life of the nation.’⁸²⁷

However, even as Malaysian church leaders displayed their solidarity by coming together for the fourth time, many of the participants wondered if genuine oneness was actually present at all. Such scepticism was observed when the theme itself came under scrutiny by the participants who queried the definition of what it means to be a ‘Malaysian Church’. Bishop Thu En Yu who was a respondent to one of the papers remarked, ‘The term, A Malaysian Church cannot refer to a united structure as it is still not practical at this point of time.’⁸²⁸ Some of the participants also queried whether the individual identity of a

⁸²⁶ Report of the Third National Christian Conference, 87.

⁸²⁷ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, *The Malaysian Church in the 90's*, Addresses, papers, homilies and recommendations of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 23rd to 26th April 1991, 4.

⁸²⁸ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 49.

Malaysian church would imply that it was projecting a separate identity from the larger, worldwide church of God. Such comments and expressions suggest that the participants were contemplating about their own identity within the country as well as their role within the larger scriptural notion of the body of Christ. Another respondent, M. Selvendran commented,

Whether in using the term ‘Malaysian Church, we give the impression of a national church. It would seem to me that the very nature of the concept of a national church causes it to be inward looking and tends towards ignoring its universal character of the body of Christ ⁸²⁹

The papers that were presented were meant to address the role and function of a national church. The first paper was titled, Issues Facing the Malaysian Church in the Nineties, which addressed some of the struggles that were being faced by the Malaysian Christian community. The second paper was titled, The Vision of a Malaysian Church, where the speaker dealt with the two sub-topics of unity within the church and unity within the nation. The third paper attempted to envisage the direction of the national church with the title, The Mission of the Malaysian Church. Apart from these three topics, one of the evenings was dedicated to a talk on, Special Program for National integration. The topic of the forum was titled, The Church’s Input in National Building: Issues of National Development and National Integration.

Amidst the varied topics, the subject of unity among churches continued to be the repeated cry of all the speakers. In his keynote address, Bishop Denis Dutton remarked that though the Christian community Malaysia came from different traditions, they needed to function as one.⁸³⁰ Calling the church to play a more proactive role in contributing towards the overall unity of the nation, he urged CFM to create opportunities for inter-faith dialogue and contribute towards a tolerant climate for peaceful resolution to inter-religious conflicts. He closed his speech by saying that CFM had managed to consolidate its position and that there was increasing evidence that it was being taken seriously by both fellow Christians and

⁸²⁹ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 54.

⁸³⁰ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 19.

the government.⁸³¹ Moreover, at the closing service, the conference took a personal note when Archbishop Peter Chung extended his hand in repentance and reconciliation. He pleaded,

Division among us in the past years have led to much unpleasant rivalry ... to the great detriment of our Christian faith. I would like to apologize on behalf of our church for all antagonistic attitudes towards your Churches and ask you to forgo the past...⁸³²

Such personal remarks brought a human dimension to the generic issue of unity within the Malaysian church.

The NCC also reverberated with several issues that continued to press upon the Christian community. Almost all the speakers highlighted ongoing issues like the lack of availability of lands for churches, prohibitions on vernacular Bibles, the diminishing influence of Christians in mission schools and the strict enactments against proselytizing to Muslims. One speaker politely called these overbearing actions of the government as, ‘administrative-political limitations on parameters of church activities’.⁸³³ However, he also admitted that that these were actually attempts to limit the exercise of religious freedom as provided for by the Federal Constitution. One respondent to the speaker argued that increased unity was the only way forward to fight against these limits on freedom. He said,

Already we are in a weak bargaining position. We are doing our best but we are still weak. Any group that has disunity can be broken up on the principle of divide and rule. Now, ecumenism is a God sent reversal of our previous history of church division.⁸³⁴

This meant that the participants of the NCC were not afraid to vocalize were their awareness of the prejudice of the government towards Islam at the cost of side-lining other religions. The gradual diminishing of religious rights was also well captured when one speaker predicted that, ‘In the 1990s the Malaysian Church will probably need to be even

⁸³¹ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 22.

⁸³² Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 88.

⁸³³ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 36.

⁸³⁴ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 48.

more vigilant and courageous to speak out against further erosions of human rights, not the least of which is freedom of religion.⁸³⁵ Nonetheless, the participants of the fourth NCC were informed that with the formation of CFM, some of the emerging issues with the government were being looked into and being dealt with. The participants were also informed that a consultation was held in the East Malaysian town of Kuching to discuss the use of Bahasa Malaysia in Churches, especially in relation to the restrictions and bans that it faced from the government. They were told that subsequent to the consultation, the CFM had written a Letter of Concern to the Prime Minister in relation to the issue.

The Fourth NCC ended with several constructive recommendations. As the participants realized that Christian solidarity at the local, grassroots level was still lacking, it was recommended that neighbourhood groups be formed for fellowship, study, worship and prayer. This was a progressive move that would ensure that ecumenism would not just be confined to the discussions at the NCC but would also trickle down to all levels. Another recommendation called for a greater coordination among the existing theological colleges and seminaries, so that ecumenical unity could be inculcated in the theological training of future clergy. This was a far sighted move as almost all denominational leaders were under pressure to train their clergy at theological institutions that only reiterated and affirmed their own theological convictions. The NCC participants understood that if seminarians could be taught to associate and appreciate differing streams of theology without compromising their own, they would be in a better position to work together with other clergy from diverse denominational backgrounds.

The Fifth National Christian Conference

The Fifth NCC was held in April 1995 in the East Malaysian city of Kota Kinabalu. It recorded several new developments that pointed towards the increasing confidence of CFM as a growing and focussed ecumenical body. Firstly, it was noteworthy that it was held in Kota Kinabalu, which is located in the East Malaysian state of Sabah. Despite the discouraging factors like the limitations of travelling from West Malaysia and the corresponding flight costs, the Fifth NCC was attended by 190 participants. Of the total

⁸³⁵ Report of the Fourth National Christian Conference, 62.

number, 87 participants came from the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. This shift of focus from West to East Malaysia could also be thought of as a signal that the CFM was taking its East Malaysian Christians in a more seriously. This was important because both these states were the only two Christian majority states when they joined with the West Malaysian states to form what is now Malaysia. Secondly, this was also the NCC which celebrated the 10th anniversary of CFM, through a thanksgiving service that was held in one of the churches of Kota Kinabalu. The existence of CFM for a decade indicated that it was becoming an increasingly useful grouping that made itself relevant to the Christian community of Malaysia. Thirdly, instead of just conducting meetings and deliberating among themselves, the delegation made an effort to engage with the state government of Sabah. During one of the days of the NCC, a delegation of CFM leaders paid a courtesy call on Sakaran Dandai, the Governor of the state of Sabah. On the part of the state government, the Deputy Chief Minister of Sabah, Yong Teck Lee reciprocated the call by hosting a luncheon for all the participants of the Fifth NCC. These efforts showed a cordial relationship of the church with the state level government officers was something to be welcomed. Lastly, the Fifth NCC saw the introduction of a non-Malaysian speaker, who was Rev. M. Stanley Mogoba the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of South Africa. He was chosen as the inspirational speaker to bring fresh perspectives from the Bible through 'his intimate involvement in the churches' fight against apartheid in South Africa'.⁸³⁶ The choice of bringing a speaker based on the context of his experiences under an oppressive regime meant that the Church in Malaysia may already be looking at itself as being in the same predicament.

The theme for the conference was titled, The Way Forward. Three other papers that were related to the theme were discussed during the conference. The three topics were chosen in line with Prime Minister Mahathir's, Vision 2020, that he presented to the nation in the year 1991 during his unveiling of the Sixth Malaysia Plan.⁸³⁷ With this in mind, the first

⁸³⁶ Report of the Fifth National Christian Conference, The Way Forward, 18th to 21st April 1995, I.

⁸³⁷ In the vision, the Prime Minister set the year 2020 as the target for Malaysia to become a 'fully developed nation' as opposed to its current developing nation status. Though economic growth was the main thrust of the vision, a number of other goals were also attached to it. One goal focussed on a united Malaysia where there was recognition of a common destiny with loyalty and dedication as its hallmarks. Another aspect of the vision focussed on the building of fully moral and ethical societies with imbibed religious and spiritual values. The vision also envisaged a democratically mature society where a consensual, community oriented process of consultation as its feature. A further aspiration of the vision was to develop a mature and tolerant society which

paper was titled, Towards a Caring Society that was presented by Bro. Anthony Rogers. The second paper was titled, Towards a Just Society with Mr Varghese George as the speaker. The third paper, Towards a Moral Society was presented by Dr. Philip Lyn. As in previous conferences, different respondents were also chosen for the three topics, with the participants themselves broken into smaller groups to undertake discussion and generate proposals that were relevant to the topics. The three speakers repeatedly reminded the participants about the crucial role of Christians in Malaysia in achieving the government's aspirations of Vision 2020. Mr Varghese George as the speaker who addressed the topic Towards a just Society said, 'The struggles of the peoples for a just society and economic political and social conflicts in the nation are the Church's own struggle and conflict also.'⁸³⁸ He also added that to be effective partners of the Vision 2020 goal of the government, the Church should not remain to appear 'reactionary and defensive' in its stance.⁸³⁹ Rather, the church should become more proactive in its affairs when it dealt with the government and its policies. The speaker who spoke on Towards a Moral Society, noted that rapid Islamization was already taking place in the social arena of Malaysia. As a result, she felt that the question of how this trend of Islamization would affect the standards and gauges of morality of non-Muslims in Malaysia should also be considered seriously by the participants.⁸⁴⁰

Apart from addressing the common concerns of national issues that affected both Christians and non-Christians alike, the Fifth NCC also addressed the increasingly distressing issue of religious freedom. To do so effectively, a special lecture was planned with the topic, The Constitutional Provision for Freedom of Religion and its Practice in Malaysia. It was presented by Justice Chang Min Tat, a former Federal Court Judge of Malaysia. He began his lecture by highlighting to the participants that religious freedom was one of the

allowed for freedom to practice different types of religions, customs and cultures. It also called for Malaysia to become, a fully caring society, where strong family becomes the focus and society concerns comes before the self.

⁸³⁸ Report of the Fifth National Christian Conference, 34.

⁸³⁹ Report of the Fifth National Christian Conference, 36.

⁸⁴⁰ Report of the Fifth National Christian Conference, 41.

fundamental liberties that were available to all the citizens of Malaysia.⁸⁴¹ Next, he mentioned that this fundamental liberty could not be removed for any reason, even when article 149 and Article 150 of the constitution were being deployed.⁸⁴² Subsequently, he went on to highlight that both Article 11 and Article 12 of the constitution outlined the freedom of religion, accorded all citizens the means to enjoy this freedom. Therefore, he felt that with these legal safeguards in place, Christians should not be overly anxious about their present difficulties. However, he highlighted three specific constraints that would needed to be noted. Firstly, all religions could be practiced freely but only if they did not intrude or disrupt other faiths that were being practiced in Malaysia. This restriction had been placed in the Federal Constitution especially in relation to public order and civil issues. The second restriction is related to the age of a religious adherent. The judge mentioned that the constitution does not allow for any persons who are under the age of 18 to have the liberty of choosing their own religion but could only be determined either by their parents or guardians. The third restriction is related to Islam, which the constitution recognizes as the Official Religion of Malaysia. The constitution then interprets this to mean that non-Muslim religions should not propagate their religious doctrine or belief to Muslims in Malaysia. Touching on the restriction concerning the propagation of religion among Muslims, he argued that although Muslims could not persuaded to accept any other religions other than Islam, theoretically, Muslims could choose do so in their own accord. He iterated that because the constitution guarantees the right of choice to anyone who was above the age of 18, technically this privilege should also be applicable to Muslims. He also told the audience, when a Muslim chooses to renounce his old faith, it should have been by his own accord and it should be entirely voluntary on his part. He said:

If someone asks to be received into the Christian faith, of his own accord, it need not be a case of propagation ... He would be merely exercising his right ... to profess and

⁸⁴¹ Report of the Fifth National Christian Conference, 62.

⁸⁴² Article 149 and Article 150 of the Federal Constitution are about emergency ordinances and its regulations that enable the government to suspend certain privileges of its citizens for the purpose of restoring law and order, especially when it faces threats to its national security. It is a spillover regulation that came from the time when Malaysia faced threats from communist insurgents.

practice the religion of his choice ... There is no reason why this right is not available to a Muslim.⁸⁴³

He reminded the participants that when someone decides to leave Islam, the person should be able to speak for themselves and ‘provide the clearest and unchallengeable proof that his renunciation is entirely his own volition.’⁸⁴⁴

In general, all the discussions and focuses of the Fifth NCC were directed towards the relevance of Christians in the overall Vision 2020 agenda of the government. However, they could not move away from the fact that religious sensitivity issues continued as the sore points in the journey to become a fully developed nation. As such, they continued to question their own freedom and role in the roadmap that was outlined by their Prime Minister.

The Sixth National Christian Conference

The Sixth NCC was held in the city of Johor Bahru in April 1999. With the year of 2000 looming, the conference was themed, With Christ into the Millennium - Bearing Hope in a Changing World. It focussed on the rapid changes that were taking place in the nation and to discern its influence on the church of Malaysia. Three papers were presented to the participants. The first paper was titled, The Changing Socio-Political Scene and the Challenges to the Church. The second paper presented was headed, The Changing Scene of Globalisation and its Ethical Implications for the Church. The third paper was titled, The Changing Religious and Cultural Scene and the Missionary Challenges of the Church. It brought together 170 participants from all the three components of the CFM. One noteworthy development of the Sixth NCC is the participation of the Catholic Archbishop Luigi Bressan who was attached in Bangkok. His presence and support was encouraging to the participants as he came both as a guest as well as the Pope’s Delegate to the conference. This meant that the Malaysian Church was becoming increasingly conscious of its ties with the larger community of the global church. Another milestone in the conference was the special address by Dr Goh Cheng Teik, as this was the first time that the NCC ever invited a government official to deliver an address. Dr Goh belonged to one of the political parties of the ruling

⁸⁴³ Report of the Fifth National Christian Conference, 66.

⁸⁴⁴ Report of the Fifth National Christian Conference, 66.

government and was serving as the Deputy Minister of Land and co-operative Development. Nevertheless, in all the talks and sessions of the conference, the subject of unity continued to reverberate throughout the assembly. In his preface to the report of the Sixth NCC, Bishop Yong Ping Chung expressed his hope that the papers and findings of the Sixth NCC would ‘inspire and strengthen’ Christians in Malaysia to ‘walk the path of unity more boldly’.⁸⁴⁵ In the Conference Message, which served as the final declaration of the Sixth NCC, the participants expressed their time together as an ‘experience of journeying together in prayer and discernment’. This coming together was also an indication of the Malaysian church was ready to move together with a ‘renewed vision and new vitality into the new millennium’.⁸⁴⁶

In his welcoming address Bishop James Chan reminded the participants that their coming together was ‘a visible sign of Christ’s presence through mutual trust, respect, open dialogue and authentic collaboration in Christian fellowship’.⁸⁴⁷ He then asked the participants to bring the unity that they were enjoying together at the conference to all the other layers of the Malaysian Church as well. He was quoted as saying, ‘translate the close relations we have achieved to meaningful Christian engagement in our local church, our nation and our world’.⁸⁴⁸ This was an important reminder as all the solidarity experiences during the NCC needed to flow into the grassroots. Together with Christian solidarity, Bishop Chan also reminded the participants about the need for greater unity with others in Malaysia as well. He said:

Many are also suffering from the effects of an economic recession and socio-political injustices continue to plague our nation. As Christians, we must do something positive to be in solidarity with them.⁸⁴⁹

He ended his speech by saying that solidarity must to be extended to all the people in the country whom God has placed around them. He argued that this would make them effective

⁸⁴⁵Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, *With Christ Into the New Millennium – Bearing Hope in a Changing World*, 5th to 8th April 1999, 2.

⁸⁴⁶ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 3.

⁸⁴⁷ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 6.

⁸⁴⁸ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 6.

⁸⁴⁹ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 6

new century prophets who glorified God through their unity. Subsequently, he urged all parties to take a balanced approach and iterated that any unity which also included the Muslims could only be achieved if those involved chose a middle way, one that does not tolerate one community dominating the other.⁸⁵⁰ Despite the difficulties that were being encountered by Christians in Malaysia, he urged the participants to work towards peace and reconciliation. Touching on Christian solidarity, he reminded the participants about the example of unity that was existent among early Christians of the Bible. He pointed out that during the formative period of the church, fellowship was more important than class divisions and other differences. He concluded his address by saying that the theme of Bearing Hope could only be realized if the church was willing to embrace a vision of ecumenism that embraced the diversity of gifts and church traditions, which would then be a testimony for the surrounding non-Christian communities to believe in the conference's theme that encapsulates hope.

To expound the theme from a Biblical perspective, three Bible Study sessions were conducted by Father Paul Tan. He was chosen as someone who had been present since the beginning of ecumenical cooperation since the beginning of the NCCs. During his first session, he highlighted on issues of justice that were affecting all Malaysians and highlighted on the need for hope in Malaysia. He alleged,

The violations against human rights, which often lead to torture and even death in the name of security and progress of the country, are shameless acts by politicians to remain in power. We have and are experiencing these violations in Malaysia.⁸⁵¹

He argued that because these difficulties did not just affect particular persons in Malaysia, Christians needed to bring hope of positive change to all Malaysians. During his second Bible study session, he spoke briefly about the emergent solidarity of the Christian community and mentioned that the regular coming together via the NCCs were important as they demonstrated a visible 'symbol of Christian unity' that was vital for the proclamation of

⁸⁵⁰ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 9.

⁸⁵¹ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 13.

hope.⁸⁵² He also expressed his confidence that CFM would continue to play a uniting role in bringing ‘Malaysian Christians to pray, discern and take a common stand on issues that touched on the life of Malaysians’.⁸⁵³ During his third Bible study session, he spoke on the prophetic role of Christians as bearers of hope and admonished the Christian community by warning them not to inadvertently become false prophets who bore false hopes. He argued that any prophet would only be considered a genuine prophet if they practiced what they preached. As such, he argued that if Malaysian Christians were not united, they could not genuinely bring a message of prophetic reconciliation and unity. He mentioned that such accusations had already been directed towards the Christian community. He alleged,

How many times have we heard the people of other faiths accusing us of being hypocrites because we do not live what we proclaim? We preach the love of Christ which unites but we remain divided? How many people have we put off from believing in Jesus Christ because of the scandal of Christian division?⁸⁵⁴

Moreover, apart from touching on solidarity among Christians, he also stressed on the need to unite and work together with people of other faiths. He mentioned: ‘We need to unite all the good forces, be it from Christians or from people of other faiths’.⁸⁵⁵ He also indicated that he was aware of some of the Christians feared inter-religious dialogue as they think it could lead to a watering down of their own faith and even lead to the denial of the uniqueness of Christ.⁸⁵⁶ Nevertheless, he reminded the participants that such fears should not dissuade Christians from standing in solidarity with relevant parties from other religions. He cautioned that disunity would only cause those who were being oppressed to become weaker and allow the ‘modern evil monsters’ to become stronger.⁸⁵⁷ Overall, his Bible studies were bold and assertive, which helped the participants of the NCC to understand that solidarity among

⁸⁵² Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 21.

⁸⁵³ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 21.

⁸⁵⁴ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 23.

⁸⁵⁵ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 23.

⁸⁵⁶ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 24.

⁸⁵⁷ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 24.

themselves and solidarity with persons of other faiths as being paramount to bring hope to the hopeless.

Dr Tan Kim Sai, spoke on the topic, *The Changing Religious and Cultural Scene of Malaysia*. He touched on some of the problematic developments caused by Islamization that was affecting the harmony of multi religious society of Malaysia. Firstly, he expressed his anxiety on emerging developments where Islamic law was beginning to take precedence over civil law.⁸⁵⁸ He also expressed his disappointment at the government's decision to omit Christianity in the compulsory Islamic and Asian Civilizations course for school students, as he felt that Christianity itself was a religion that had its origin in West Asia, just like Islam. He was also concerned about the exclusion of Christianity from civilization studies that was being offered in Malaysian universities and colleges. He felt that it was unfair on the part of the government to omit Christianity's contribution to world civilization. Attempting to showing proof that Christians' religious rights being curtailed, he highlighted the government's decision of banning the animated movie called, *Joseph: The Prince of Egypt*. Although the movie was banned as a result of protests that rose from Islamic quarters who did not want their Islamic prophet to be depicted in any form or image, it resulted in Christians also being denied the choice of watching the movie. In the process, he also expressed his apprehension towards the ability of the church to stand in unison to tackle national level issues that were affecting them. He said,

Churches here are generally small and struggling and I am afraid, becoming more and more marginalised ... not a few congregations are paralysed by internal dissension often due to relational problems. If we do not seriously learn from the past two thousand years, the next two centuries will see our demise. The first imperative is to maintain the love and oneness in Christ.⁸⁵⁹

However, the special address by Dr. Goh who came by virtue of being a Deputy Minister, was able to bring the government's perspective on the difficult issues that were affecting the Christians. He started his address by stating that the government was already aware that ethnic and religious harmony was something that was of importance to the life of

⁸⁵⁸ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 28.

⁸⁵⁹ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 30-31.

the nation. He argued that due to this, the government was constantly taking all the needed measures to maintain the harmony between races and religions. He mentioned that despite the negative perspective of some Christians regarding the government, he noted that in his opinion the Prime Minister,

frequently uses his power to influence his UMNO ministers to accept decisions favourable to non-Malays and non-Muslim candidates from the government party ... it is no exaggeration to state that the Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad has become - in practice - a protector of minority rights and interests.⁸⁶⁰

Speaking about the difficulties and limitations that Christians faced regarding lands for building churches and for the burial of the dead, he mentioned that the government had already made the necessary legislations to address this concern. He informed that a National Land Council meeting that was chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister had already discussed the specific concerns that were raised by non-Muslim communities. Subsequently, a proposal paper to the parliament was also prepared by the Land and Cooperative Ministry of which he was the Deputy Minister. He mentioned that the proposal paper was subsequently approved by the cabinet in October 1997 and accepted by the National Land Council in June 1998. He read one segment of the said paper which said,

The Ministry of Land and Cooperative Development, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development, should assist in ascertaining the burial or crematoria needs of the various communities and also in identifying the potential areas to be designated as burial sites, crematoria and cremation grounds.⁸⁶¹

Consequently, he encouraged more Christians to be involved in the realm of national politics, especially by 'joining the government party' so that they could share in the decision making processes of the government.⁸⁶²

Based on the talks by the speakers, the participants of the conference made a number of recommendations that highlighted the need for stronger unity among churches and

⁸⁶⁰ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 56.

⁸⁶¹ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 56.

⁸⁶² Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 56.

denominations. Summing up, Bishop Yong Ping Chung, as the Chairman of the CFM wrote, 'the recommendations that came out of the conference renewed the call that Christians be united and speak with a firm and unequivocal voice ... as a minority religious community of Malaysia'.⁸⁶³ He then recommended the published report to be distributed to the churches so that, 'upon reading it, we shall be inspired and strengthened to walk the path of Christian unity more boldly and serve the interests of the Christian community in Malaysia by living exemplary and moral lives'.⁸⁶⁴

The Seventh National Christian Conference

The Seventh NCC was held in 2005 at the capital city Kuala Lumpur after a lapse of almost six years since the previous NCC was organized. This long lapse itself presented a point for concern, was it because the Christian leaders were becoming tired of gathering together? However, almost 130 participants managed to gather together from various parts of the country. The organisers of the Seventh NCC thought that it would be useful to discuss the role of Christians in the overall integration agenda of the nation and chose the theme, National Integration and Unity - The Church's Response. This main theme was then subsequently broken down into three different topics. The first topic was titled, Harmonious Co-existence in Religious Pluralism and was presented by Dr Maximus J. Ongkili who was an East Malaysian Christian politician, who was serving as one of the Ministers in the Prime Minister's Department. The second paper was titled, Our Journey Towards national Integration - A Critical Appraisal. This paper was presented by Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, a Muslim human rights lawyer. This was a historic moment, as this was the first time ever that a Muslim was invited to speak at a NCC gathering. It becomes likely to suggest that the organizers were since eager to get a Muslim perspective on national integration as well. The third paper was titled, Sustaining and Enhancing Integration through Strategies of Change and presented by Bishop Hwa Yung. Together with these three speakers, Archbishop John Ha and Bishop Lim Cheng Ean were invited to explore Biblical perspectives on the chosen theme.

⁸⁶³ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 2.

⁸⁶⁴ Report of the Sixth National Christian Conference, 2.

The tone of the conference was set by the Catholic Bishop Paul Tan who delivered the keynote address as the Chairman of the CFM. He touched on several issues that were crucial to national integration and unity. Firstly, he noted that the government of the day was already taking different efforts to bring stronger integration and unity in multi-racial and multi-religious Malaysia. He noted that the new Prime Minister, Ahmad Badawi was already aware that progress and prosperity may not be achieved when there is no peace and unity in the country.⁸⁶⁵ The Bishop highlighted the government's positive steps towards this direction and mentioned that two specific departments had been set up for this purpose. The first department was known as, *Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional* (Department of National Unity and Integration) and the second was called *Jawatankuasa Keagamaan Panel Penasihat Perpaduan Negara* (Religious Advisory Council for National Unity). However, he also mentioned that although these organizational efforts of the government were something commendable, he openly suggested that the main cause of the failure of integration and unity was the positioning of Islam above other religions. He said,

What is more essential is a change of mind-set. No matter what the government does, if a group of people refuses to accept others as equals and is determined to discriminate against them, failure is sure to meet us.⁸⁶⁶

This was a bold statement from a Christian leader who was not afraid to point the finger at the hegemony of Islam as one of the main cause for lack of integration among the different races, as they were being judged and segregated according to their religious convictions. He ended by stating that only a loving knowledge and mutual acceptance of one another would ensure lasting unity.

Dr Maximus Ongkili, who spoke on the topic, Harmonious Co-Existence in Religious Pluralism presented several key areas of that contributed positively towards national unity while highlighting some of the negative threats that were affecting integration. Speaking about the threats to national unity, he listed four main areas that could become reasons for lack of integration and disunity. Firstly, he noted that when there is a glaring disparity in the

⁸⁶⁵ Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, *National Integration and Unity - The Church's Response*, 20th to 22nd October 2005, 12.

⁸⁶⁶ Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, 13.

distribution of economic success, it would eventually translate to ill feelings between the rich and the poor. This would then give room for suspicion and envy leading to disintegration among the social classes. Secondly, he mentioned that religious chauvinism that led to bigotry by any one party could also become a serious threat to national integration, as this would increase religious tension and promote disunity. Thirdly, he touched the area of politics. He felt that political parties that were primarily based on the basis of religious struggles were actually dangerous and therefore would not be in any way helpful towards unity.⁸⁶⁷ Fourthly, while discussing the role of culture, he mentioned that no one culture should be allowed to be chauvinistic as it would bring harm to integration among the different races. He ended his presentation by mentioning that there was no need for the nation to develop a new model for integration as he felt that Malaysia was already an exemplary ‘model of inter-racial harmony and religious tolerance’.⁸⁶⁸ What was needed now was only to institutionalize the existing model in order to make it more effective. However, his arguments were challenged by several of the participants. One participant questioned the harmony model that the minister talked about when he shared his recent experience of attending a dinner program at the Prime Minister’s residence. He mentioned that during the dinner, all the Malays who came sat among their own race while the Chinese guests were congregating among themselves. Another participant highlighted some of the disparities that were currently taking place in the social sphere and ended his comments by asking, ‘I am wondering, is the government really serious about this ... or is it another very subtle political propaganda?’⁸⁶⁹ Another participant asked, how the government’s efforts of Islamization, which affected the economy and even politics could be considered as being helpful towards national integration and unity.

Malik Imtiaz, the speaker who addressed the topic, Our Journey towards National Integration presented a critical appraisal of the subject. He argued that very often, the element

⁸⁶⁷ In the Malaysian context, only PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) openly champions Islam as a model for its administration. As it is an opposition party, questions need to be asked whether the Minister who came from the ruling party was using the platform to dissuade the participants from engaging with PAS.

⁸⁶⁸ Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, 27.

⁸⁶⁹ Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, 30.

of compromise, has been touted by many as the key to unity and harmony but personally stressed that this factor had not been addressed adequately. He asked, 'If compromise is one sided, or goes beyond necessity ... how much should one give up or accept, and who decides?'⁸⁷⁰ Moreover, touching on some of the ongoing developments in Malaysia, he noted that the administrators and bureaucrats had been making decisions that showed that the country was steadily increasing its Islamic identity. As a Muslim lawyer, he felt that such moves could seriously overlook the constitution that guarantees freedom for all religions. He said, 'there have also been numerous instances of, what some might describe as, encroachments by the Islamic authorities into areas where they have no jurisdiction.'⁸⁷¹ He then articulated that *Shariah* law should only be codified if they are in accordance with the Federal Constitution. Touching on the subject of dialogue with Muslims, he expressed his concern to the fact that there was largely defensiveness on the part of the Muslims who hid behind the curtain of sensitivity. This effectively blocked their minds and therefore made them to refuse engagement with their fellow non-Muslims in the country. He went on to quote from one of his own previous presentations at another platform,

Read the news and one begins to wonder what is happening to this country, whether this is the same country they were born in. Islam is being touted, directly and indirectly, as a superior religion⁸⁷²

He personally felt that with the ongoing Islamization of the socio political sphere by the government, Malaysian society had suddenly shifted from being a multi-religious, free democracy to become 'a monolithic, pseudo theocracy'.⁸⁷³ He ended his presentation by asking everyone to shake themselves out of the current state of stupor of compromise and to begin asserting their fundamental rights as the stakeholders of the country. Several responses came from the various participants who forwarded their own opinions on the matter. One

⁸⁷⁰ Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, 33.

⁸⁷¹ Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, 34.

⁸⁷² Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, 37. (Quoted from 'Human Rights, Good Governance and a Harmonious Society: Contemplating the Freedom from Discrimination in Malaysia' - Paper presented at the 2004 Human Rights Commission of Malaysia Annual Conference, September 2004).

⁸⁷³ Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, 39.

respondent felt that the reason for the pessimistic outlook of the Christians in Malaysia was due to their own attitude. He said,

We complain about our inferior position. We complain of how we are being suppressed and given a raw deal and demand we be given concessions. When you think of it, we are pretty self-centred and pretty selfish. We have not once said, we want to give to the nation.⁸⁷⁴

He argued that because of such attitudes, others could view Christians as people who were only concerned about building churches and converting people. He then urged the participants to think bigger and to incorporate a more nationalistic agenda into their faith. Another participant expressed that some Christians who engaged in ‘misguided evangelism’ should also to be blamed for inadvertently contributing towards disintegration and disunity.⁸⁷⁵

The Seventh NCC ended with recommendations that were derived from the plenary sessions of the different workshop groups. One recommendation called for all churches to observe a ‘Christian Unity Worship Service’ to be held at least once a year as this would expose church members to the diverse streams within Christianity. Another recommendation called for more seminars, forums and study sessions on ecumenical issues to be held regularly as a way to inculcate unity among churches as well as to expose the work of CFM at the grassroots level. Another recommendation urged Christians to participate in more inter-faith activities and dialogue sessions as this will help them to be part of national integration and unity efforts. The Conference Message as the declaration of the Seventh NCC, acknowledged that some basic civil liberties were already noted to be deteriorating, which eventually led to suspicions among the different communities in Malaysia. It felt that a continuation towards such a direction would not be helpful to the integration agenda of the government. Subsequently, it also iterated the need for the Christian community’s commitment to engage positively with national building efforts of the government, together with other religious groups and the civil society. Lastly, it called on all Christians to unite and pursue open

⁸⁷⁴ Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, 49.

⁸⁷⁵ Report of the Seventh National Christian Conference, 50.

discussions with all sectors of society to find solutions on emerging issues that hindered national integration and unity.

The Eighth National Christian Conference

The Eighth NCC was held four years later in 2009 and saw several new developments taking place. Firstly, it was held only for two days as opposed to the previous conferences where the participants met for either three or four days. The reason for the shorter duration is that it was tied together with the CFM's Biennial General Meeting. Secondly, the choice of venue was a new development. The conference was hosted in the private property of the Full Gospel Assembly's Church premises in Kuala Lumpur. This was unlike to previous years where they were held in public premises of either hotels or resorts. One possible reason for this is that the organizers wanted to make their presentations and discussions a private affair. Another interesting development was the decision of the CFM of not to publish the proceedings of the NCC into any print form for reference as compared to previous NCCs where booklets were published to capture the discussions and resolutions from the proceedings.⁸⁷⁶

The highlights of the NCC were two main plenary sessions that addressed crucial issues that were pressing the Christian community at that time. The first plenary session focused on the overall impact of the Islamization process, including an overview of the legal standing of *Shariah* laws and its effect on constitutional developments. The second plenary session specifically focused on the impact of Islamization on Christians in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. Apart from these, participants were also told to discuss seven topics that were specifically related to the main agenda of the NCC. The findings of these small group discussions were then collated and presented as recommendations for action by the CFM committee. Towards the end of the Eighth NCC, a 'Ten Point Summary' was produced, which served as a condensation document of the two day session. In the Ten Point Summary, the first point stated the aim of the NCC. It reads, 'The goal of the 8th National Christian Conference is to initiate a strategic response towards the Islamization process in Malaysia and to propose appropriate action plan for Christian communities and churches in

⁸⁷⁶ The details of the NCC could only be procured from the CFM office with the express permission of its Executive Secretary. He was kind enough to provide the soft copies of the presentations by the speakers, the 10 point summary of the plenary sessions and the journal records of the two days of proceedings.

Malaysia.⁸⁷⁷ It could be thought of as an outcome of the growing pressures the church was facing from the increasing Islamization moves of the government.

The first plenary session was presented by Lim Heng Seng who was a lawyer experienced in handling a number of *pro bono* cases. He discussed the topic of Islamization, the Federal Constitution and the Malaysian Legal Order by highlighting several important facts that he felt as being fundamental to the establishment of religious freedom in Malaysia. Quoting from documents related to the framing of the constitution, he informed the participants that the framers of the Federal Constitution only established Islam as an official religion for the nation, for the sake of official state function purposes only. Islam as an official religion did not mean that Malaysia would one day become a fundamental Islamic state with Islamic theocracy at its foundation as it was being perceived by some.⁸⁷⁸ Secondly, he felt that any moves to make Malaysia an Islamic state as understood in the traditional Islamic context would only polarize the nation further and sharply divide it according to Muslim and non-Muslim segments. Thirdly, he felt that the idea of Islamic state itself had different interpretations and henceforth had to be approached cautiously. As an example, he cited from the works of Maududi, an Islamic cleric from Pakistan who had promoted his own version of an Islamic state. He quoted from one of Maududi's books which was titled, 'Islamic law and the Constitution'. In it, Maududi argues that non-Muslims 'should neither be called upon to undertake, nor can be entrusted with the responsibility of policy making.'⁸⁷⁹ Heng Seng showed how Maududi argued that in such cases, non-Muslims should not be thought of as being unjustly side-lined by the Muslim majority but they were just not being included in the policy making. This is mainly because, 'it does not permit them to meddle with the affairs of the State which is based on an ideology to which they honestly do not subscribe'.⁸⁸⁰ However, Lim felt that such an argument failed to realize that non-Muslims as citizens of the state had

⁸⁷⁷ 8th NCC Plenary Sessions - 10 Points Summary.

⁸⁷⁸ He quoted from, *White Paper on the Constitutional Proposal for the Federation of Malaya* (Legislative Council Paper No. 41 of 1957).

⁸⁷⁹ Islamization, the Federal Constitution and the Malaysian Legal Order, power point presentation at the 8th NCC. Quoted from: S. Abdul A'la Maududi, *Islamic Law and the Constitution*, Islamic Publication, Pvt. Ltd., 1992, 11th Edition, 274.

⁸⁸⁰ Maududi, *Islamic Law*, 275.

the right to contribute to the framing of policies that eventually governed their daily affairs. Hence, Lim felt that if Malaysia were to move to adopt such an Islamic State, non-Muslims would immediately be placed in a disadvantaged position. Speaking on the same issue, he expressed that the ambiguity of the type of an Islamic state in Malaysia had already caused serious problems for non-Muslim communities. He emphasized that in many people's minds, there were underlying questions on the true nature of the Malaysian nation, whether Malaysia was either an Islamic or a secular state especially since some Muslims were pushing to make *Shariah* as the supreme law of the land by making it the ground norm of the nation's legal order.

Another speaker, Dr Patricia Martinez, highlighted the previous factors that led to the development of Islam and also spoke about the current form of Islamization that was taking place in Malaysia. As an academician who studied and taught Islam in Malaysia, she highlighted three specific contexts and elaborated on their influence on the nation. The first was the historical context, which was recognizable during the 1980's when the then Prime Minister Mahathir framed a budget that released the needed funds from the government to promote Islamization. Since then, this trend had been continuing and in some years, the single largest budget in the Prime Minister's department went to JAKIM for the sole purpose of promoting the Islamization agenda. The second context that she expounded was something she termed as, a Core and Periphery Syndrome. She argued that most South East Asian Muslims considered themselves as belonging to the periphery of Islam as opposed to the Arabic nations of the Middle East which were perceived to be the core of the Islamic world. Therefore, many South East Asian Muslims considered themselves as being second class Muslims and therefore have an inert need to reassert their faith to an extent that it risked becoming more Islamic than of those in Arabia.⁸⁸¹ The third context was something that she called, Manipulation and False Representation. She claimed that some Muslim politicians and Muslim NGOs were making unsubstantiated claims on behalf of the Malaysian Muslim community, which was done primarily for the advancement of their own personal agendas. Dr Martinez then explained that in 2005, an academic survey that targeted Muslims in Peninsular Malaysia was undertaken by her organization found that 97 percent of the

⁸⁸¹ Record of proceedings of the 8th NCC, 3.

respondents believed that it was acceptable for Muslims to live alongside non-Muslims. Moreover, 79 percent of them were of the view that Muslims should take the initiative to learn more about non-Muslim religions. 83 percent of the respondents were agreeable to participate in interfaith dialogue and 76 percent of them were of the view that if there is an interfaith council, Islam should be part of that council.⁸⁸² Based on the findings of the statistics, she argued that much of the media and public discourse that claimed to represent Muslims were being manipulated by those with selfish interests. She then argued that most Muslims in Malaysia wanted a peaceful co-existence with their non-Muslim neighbours and were more concerned about improving their lives and their children's future. She then concluded by asking the NCC participants to make a differentiation between manipulation and actual representation.

Another speaker for the plenary session was the Muslim lawyer Harris Ibrahim. As a Muslim lawyer who had been part of the legal team for several high profile religious conversion cases, he stated that the current trend of Islamization not only affected the non-Muslims but also impacted Muslims as well. He told the participants that there were many Muslims in Malaysia who did not agree to the type of Islamization that was taking place in the country. He felt that the silence of moderate Muslims and the prolonged passive resistance of the non-Muslims made them to be the co-conspirators of the Islamization that was being unfolded now. He then stressed that being vocal only when one's own interests were being affected and choosing to be silent when others were being affected was not the way to freedom and liberty. He then expressed that the current trend of Islamization was tantamount to an erosion of the public and private space that was earlier envisioned by the founding fathers of the nation. He then urged the Christian community to defend this space, not only for themselves but also for all those who came from other religions.

In the second plenary session, the presentations were focussed on affairs that were affecting the East Malaysians. The first speaker Jerry Dusing, was the President of the Sabah Council of Churches and also the president of SIB Churches of Sabah. Chosen due to his first-hand knowledge of the local churches of Sabah, he began by presenting statistics on the

⁸⁸² Record of proceedings of the 8th NCC, 3.

religious demographics of Sabah and Sarawak. He reminded the participants that up until the 1980s, both Sabah and Sarawak were the two Christian majority states in Malaysia. But within the span of over twenty years, this majority status had now eroded to alarming levels. He quoted from the population statistics that were carried out in 2006 where only Sarawak could be identified as a Christian majority state and it too had registered a gradual decline. In the case of Sabah, the Christian community now constituted as being only 28 percent of the overall total population. He mentioned that Muslims had now formed the bulk of the population, standing at 68 percent.⁸⁸³ He then informed the participants that in the state of Sabah, open conversion attempts were being made by Muslims to proselytize young non-Muslims. He alleged that children from kindergarten level onwards were being taught Islamic prayers and expressed sadness that such incidents also happened in Christian mission schools that were funded by the government. He then expressed his dismay at the injustice because government policy prohibited Christian prayers from being said, even in Christian mission schools. He then proposed three strategic areas to strengthen the indigenous churches in Sabah. The first area that he strongly felt needed improvement was the aspect of leadership development. There was a great need for training and developing capable leaders who would then lead the people of Sabah more effectively. Secondly, he also asked for educational assistance for good students who wanted to further their education. This was because many students from Sabah who went on to government run institutions of higher learning were being specifically being targeted by *Dakwah* groups. Thirdly, he asked for assistance to develop better youth ministry in churches as the young were the most vulnerable segment. Together with these three approaches, he also asked for the CFM to work with the churches in Sabah to undertake strategic evangelism efforts by getting in touch with the people groups who lived in the interior regions of the state. He ended his session by calling for CFM to increase its partnership with the Christian politicians from East Malaysia so that they may also be utilized as a voice of the Church to engage with the government.

The second speaker of the second plenary session was Baru Bian, an East Malaysian lawyer who is well known figure who fights for Native Customary Land (NCR) rights in civil courts. He claimed that Islamization in the state of Sarawak started as early as the 1970s and

⁸⁸³ Record of proceedings of the 8th NCC, 7.

spearheaded by Rahman Yakub who was serving as the Chief Minister of the state at that time. He explained that during his tenure, moves to Islamize the tribal groups in Sarawak took place with financial and other remunerations given by the government. Furthermore, he spoke on another ongoing problem in East Malaysia regarding the issuance of birth certificates and NRIC (National Identity Registration Card) to qualified citizens. He accused the government officers of being quick to issue the mandatory documents to those who chose to convert to Islam but unduly delayed the process to those who refused to do so. He cited a number of cases when some of the tribal Christians were told to register new births with Malay sounding names to be registered as Muslims in order for them to be issued with birth certificates. He then mentioned that these Christians who had been given Malay sounding names often faced difficulties when their children went to school as even Christian students with Malay sounding names were being forced to attend Islamic classes. He ended his session by asking the church in Malaysia to take a more proactive approach rather than being silenced by fear and ignorance.

The responses to the two plenary sessions saw many strong views being expressed by the NCC participants. One participant asked how the Christians could engage with the Muslims in the higher echelons of the government when they did not want to sit together with adherents of other faiths, as willingness to initiate and participate in interfaith forums had met much resistance from several Muslim NGOs, which made the government to even ban people from openly speaking about it. Speaking on the alarming situation in East Malaysia, one participant asked why there was still so much of support for the ruling government during the recent general elections. Moreover, another participant asked the validity of the government provided statistics who often projected conversion figures to their own advantage. Some participants also expressed the need for West Malaysian churches to support their eastern counterparts in strategic areas of partnerships, especially in the area of financial assistance which could be then utilized for education and training personnel who could travel to the interiors.

Several strategies were then proposed in the ‘Ten Point Summary’ that was later distributed to all the churches. The Ten Point Summary reminded the Malaysian church to remain united and assertive in order to make their public stand more effective. The document

also identified that there was a need to educate congregations on ongoing issues that affected Christians in Malaysia. Christian parents were also summoned to be on guard of what was happening in their children's lives especially in schools and institutions of higher learning. The Ten Point Summary document also recognized that there was a greater need to raise the economic status of the largely poor population in Sabah and Sarawak.

This NCC was able to highlight a number of factors. Firstly, the church leaders' decision to have the Conference at a private venue leads seems to indicate that they were exceedingly anxious of government's surveillance of their conference. Moreover, the subsequent decision of not bringing out any printed report of the proceedings and findings of the NCC only seems to confirm this allegation, as they did not want the materials to get into wrong hands. These types of reactions to the government's monitoring seem to indicate that the church in Malaysia was already feeling intimidated by the Muslim majority government of Malaysia. Therefore instead of openly discussing matters that affected them, they have chosen to limit themselves to the private domain. Although such actions may seem useful for private discussions within the Christian community, this withdrawal has its own negative implications. For instance, a continuance of these types of gatherings could easily lead to isolation and reclusiveness which would further raise the suspicion of the government. Furthermore, the Christian community could also be accused of promoting a hidden agenda that was not suitable for general viewing of the Malaysian community. It can end up being counter-productive and run contrary to the love and openness that the Christian faith promotes. Even when sensitive or difficult issues need to be discussed, the Biblical mandate of 'speaking the truth in love' can always be used as a useful working guideline.

Secondly, the NCC proceedings also indicated that there was a disparity between the churches in West and East Malaysia. Although the numbers of adherents seem bigger in the East, it was struggling to cope with the *Dakwah* agenda of the government. They were also struggling for resources to keep their young within their fold from crossing over to the Islamic faith. Capable leaders who could consolidate and enhance Christian evangelism efforts were also lacking in the East. With these realities coming to the fore of the conference, this NCC served as a wake-up call for the churches in the West Malaysia to stand in greater solidarity with their eastern counterparts.

Thirdly, the conference participants were also able to recognize that not all Muslim voices that were offered in the mainstream media were representative of the overall voice of the Muslim majority. They were able to hear this first hand from a Muslim lawyer who spoke about the silent majority that was uncomfortable with the direction and slant of Islamization that was taking place in the country. They were also privileged to learn from the statistics of Dr Martinez about the general view of Muslims on inter-religious issues that were going on in Malaysia. These types of voices were needed for the Christian community to recognize that the type of Islamization in Malaysia was not a consolidated effort of all Muslims but rather the result of a forceful group that was influential within the government.

Appendix Three: Court Judgements on the *Allah* Issue,

1. High Court Judgment favouring The Herald.

In her judgment that was delivered in December 2009, Judge Lau Bee Lan found that the Home Minister had overstepped his authority by limiting the religious freedom of the Catholic Church by stopping them from using the word *Allah*.⁸⁸⁴ Her verdict noted that Christians in Malaysia have been using the word *Allah* for a long time and that the translation of the terms God and Lord had indeed been translated correctly as *Allah* and *Tuhan* respectively. Moreover, she opined that since several other Christian publications, like the Malay Bible, the Indonesian Alkitab and the existing Malay-language Catholic prayers books were already using the word *Allah*, any prohibition on the use of *Allah* in the Herald would become inconsistent.⁸⁸⁵ Commenting on the government's claim that there was an inherent danger that The Herald could somehow reach Muslim hands and therefore cause confusion among the Muslims, especially since the Herald was now being made available online, the judge felt that the Catholic Church should not be singled out for using technology to disseminate information as any form of religious information were already available freely to anyone online. Subsequently, she pointed that the Catholic Church had been abiding with the Home Ministry's terms of its permit which required the publication not to be sold or distributed publicly. She also refuted the government's claim that the Catholic Church's insistence on using the word *Allah* could potentially cause public alarm or invoke religious sensitivities by observing that there had been no untoward incidents that were related to The Herald's use of the word *Allah* in all its fourteen years of publication.

2. Appeals Court Judgment favouring the government.

The Appeals Court verdict was delivered by a three-man bench on the 13th of October 2013, with the unanimous judgment in favour of the government. In his Judgment, the Presiding Judge Mohamed Apandi Ali ruled that the Home Minister had indeed acted within the

⁸⁸⁴ High Court grants Catholic publication the Herald the right to use Allah word again, 1st January 2010, <<http://www.thestar.com.my/story.aspx/?file=%2f2010%2f1%2f1%2fnation%2f5399211>>, Accessed 13th May 2014.

⁸⁸⁵ Malaysian High Court, Case No. R1-25-28-2009.

boundaries of his jurisdiction and did not act in any way that merited judicial interference. He also affirmed the Home Minister's power to ban any publication as he deemed fit, especially if he was acting to preserve national security and public order. The judge wrote, 'the intended usage will cause unnecessary confusion within the Islamic community and is surely not conducive to the peaceful and harmonious tempo of life in the country'.⁸⁸⁶ He also used two Latin maxims, *Salus Populi suprema lex* (the safety of the people is the supreme law) and *Salus reipublicae suprema lex* (the safety of the state is the supreme law). However, the use of these terms do not solve the issue but invites other questions.⁸⁸⁷

The second Judge in the case, Abdul Aziz Bin Abdul Rahim wrote that he concurred with the other two Judges that the term *Allah* was not an integral part of the Christian faith.⁸⁸⁸ He added that the High Court Judge was also wrong to dismiss the Home Minister's concern that the use of the word *Allah* could pose a risk in upholding safety and public order. He validated it by saying that the Home Minister's concern was already proven right as immediately after the High Court Judgment was pronounced, several places of worship were damaged by arsons. In Para 48 of his judgment, the Judge stated that since Islam has been recognised as the religion of the Federation, there was a certain obligation on the part of the powers that be to promote and defend Islam in order to protect its sanctity.⁸⁸⁹

The third Judge in the case, Mohd. Zawawi Bin Salleh allocated ten pages out of his twenty-five-page judgment document to show that the Muslim *Allah* was indeed different from Christian *Allah*.⁸⁹⁰ Quoting from several western writers who state that the Christian

⁸⁸⁶ In the Court of Appeal of Malaysia (Appellate Jurisdiction). Civil Appeal, No.W-01-1-2010, Mohammad Apandi Ali, 34.

⁸⁸⁷ He used both the terms to justify the sacrifice of a minority for the benefit of the larger community. Does that mean that the Christian community's use of the word *Allah* should be considered as a threat to the safety of the nation? If the Christian community agrees to such a demand, what other sacrifices would be required of them in the name of national security?

⁸⁸⁸ In the Court of Appeal of Malaysia (Appellate Jurisdiction), Civil Appeal, No. W-01-1-2010, Abdul Aziz Rahim, 25.

⁸⁸⁹ Civil Appeal No. W-01-1-2010, Abdul Aziz Rahim, 29.

⁸⁹⁰ In the Court of Appeal of Malaysia (Appellate Jurisdiction), Civil Appeal No. W-01-1-2010, Mohammad Zawawi Bin Salleh, 12-21.

God cannot be similar in nature and character to the Muslim *Allah*, he attempted to prove that the Catholic Church was wrong in their insistence on using the term *Allah*. He then concluded his judgment by saying, ‘we can conclude that the Christians themselves have not reached a consensus as to how to use the word, *Allah* whether in their many translations and versions of the Bible or in their general usage of it ... *Allah* is a proper name and the only God in Islam’. ⁸⁹¹

⁸⁹¹ Civil Appeal No. W-01-1-2010, Mohammad Zawawi Bin Salleh, 21.

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