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MINORITIES AND THE STATE IN MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE:
Provisions, Predicaments and Prospects

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Working Group or the United Nations

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1. Introduction

One of the enduring legacies of colonialism in Southeast Asia is the ordering and engendering of ethnic identity based on the geneological myth of common ancestry. Typical of the stuff that myths are made of, the myth of common ancestry does not need to be enamored with substantive content nor accord with factual history[1]. In colonial Southeast Asia, the state's institutionalization of ethnicity based on an ethnic division of labor, engendered the emergence of Furnivallian plural societies where the different ethnic communities 'mix but did not combine'[2].

This divisive social environment was exacerbated by the favoring of particular ethnic and religious communities in a classic divide and rule colonial strategy where issues pertaining to citizenship, equal rights and democracy were peripheral. The lack of a common historical experience of the ethnic and religious communities meant that they were often as socially divorced from each other as they were to their colonial masters. It is thus paradoxical but not altogether surprising that post-colonial Asian nationalism continues to bear a strong resemblance to the western colonial imagination - insightfully characterized by Anderson as both imitative and hostile of western nationalism[3].

Post-colonial Southeast Asia captivated the attention of social scientists for its sustained levels of high economic growth and reputation as the fastest growing regional economy in the 1980s and 1990s. Enamoured by the region's economic successes, the relatively stable state of ethnic tension in Singapore and Malaysia, and the protracted struggles for self-determination by regional minorities in Burma, Indonesia and the Philippines were commonly regarded as secondary sideshows that would eventually be resolved with continued economic growth. However, with the 1997 collapse of the 'East Asian miracle', bloody secession of East Timor from Indonesia, turbulent struggles of regional minorities for self-determination and violent ethno-religious clashes, the grievances and claims of ethnic, regional and religious minorities have increasingly assumed center-stage.

The post-1997 economic and political convulsions in Southeast Asia have precipitated a questioning of putative economic models, political paradigms and ideological perspectives. Furthermore, the legitimacy of authoritarian states and their conception of the nation-state have come under intense interrogation. In particular, the authoritarian state's lack of accountability and transparency, propensity to trample on the rule of law, derail the separation of powers principle, infringe upon basic human rights and its reluctance to seriously consider contending national visions on areas such as citizenship rights, territorial boundaries and national identity are increasingly recognized as serious fault-lines in the nation-building process.

Importantly, the favoring of particular (often dominant) communities by implementing public policies that further entrench their dominant status has served to intensify minority insecurities whilst fostering exclusive group identities. Having entered the new millenium in the shadow of a severe regional economic crisis and considerable political turbulence, many Southeast Asian states are under domestic and international pressure to qualitatively incorporate the aspirations, concerns and rights of minorities within a more democratic, equitable and accountable political and socio-economic framework. This climate of economic and socio-political reform has brought Southeast Asia to an historical crossroad.

Of the ten politically, economically and socially diverse and heterogeneous states that make up Southeast Asia, this paper primarily focuses on the status of ethnic and religious minorities in Malaysia and Singapore. Commonly regarded as the region's most dynamic and industrialized economies that is governed by the same political party since attaining political independence, the former British colonies of Malaysia and Singapore are exemplary case studies of semi-authoritarian states with sizeable ethnic and religious minorities.

2. Malaysia

2.1 Background

Map

Source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/malaysia_sm97.gif

Table 1 Ethnic Breakdown

Total population in 1998 was 22.2 million

Ethnic group	Percentage
Bumiputera*	57.8
Chinese	24.9
Indians	7.0
Others	3.1

Source: *Mid-Term Review of the Seventh Malaysia Plan 1996-2000*, (Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, 1999)
*Malays make up the largest *bumiputera* (indigenous) community.

Table 2 Mean Monthly Household Income by Ethnic Group

Average household income in 1995 was RM 2020.

Ethnic group	RM*
Bumiputera	1600
Chinese	2895
Indian	2153
Others	1274

Source: Zainal Aznam Yusof, 'Income Distribution in Malaysia' [for 1995], in Colin Barlow (ed), *Modern Malaysia in the Global Economy*, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2001), p.91.
*RM refers to the Malaysian currency (*ringgit*)

2.2 Constitutional recognition, legislative and policy directives

Malaysia's federal constitution recognizes the special position of Islam as the state religion, the special status of royal families, Malay as the national language and the rights of the indigenous (*bumiputera*) community. In the aftermath of the 1969 race riots, which represented a major watershed in Malaysia's political economy, these constitutionally sanctioned privileges and safeguards were reinforced by the Sedition Act which prohibited criticism of the official language policy, *bumiputera* rights, sovereignty of Sultans, citizenship questions and other sensitive policy issues.

An ethnic-based affirmative action initiative, the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1970-1990), was also implemented after the May 1969 race riots, commonly attributed to the Malay resentment over their socio-economic marginalization despite their status as the dominant *bumiputera* community. At the time of the riots, *bumiputeras* controlled 2.4% of the corporate sector compared to 22.8% for the Chinese community. With 62% of *bumiputeras* engaged in rural-based agricultural activities where poverty stood at close to 60%[4], the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) dominated coalition government recognized the imperative of restoring its image as the 'protector' of Malay and *bumiputera* interests to alleviate *bumiputera* frustration and recover its weakened political position after its poor electoral performance in the 1969 elections[5]. It is worth noting that even though Malays attributed Chinese economic dominance for their socio-economic marginality, the Malaysian economy up to the late 1960s was in fact dominated by foreign capital[6].

The two-pronged goals of the NEP included the elimination of the identification of race with economic function and reduction of poverty. It was expected that with the improved economic standing of the *bumiputera* community, inter-ethnic relations would improve. Specific NEP targets included an increase in *bumiputera* share of the corporate sector from 2.4% to 30% in 1990 while the non-*bumiputera* share would increase from 34% in 1970 to 40% in 1990. Significantly, the increased Malaysian control of the corporate sector was to be realized at the expense of foreign ownership, which was to be reduced from 63.3% in 1970 to 30% in 1990. In line with the NEP objective of nurturing a more representative *bumiputera* middle, professional and business class, quotas were established for *bumiputeras* in tertiary institutions and in private sector establishments. Importantly, the wide-ranging social engineering programs of the NEP represent a markedly new direction in nation-building and have provided *bumiputera-ism* with a meaning that extends beyond the cultural and political by venturing into the economic spheres. The NEP has been succeeded by other ethnic-based

affirmative action policy initiatives such as the New Development Policy, generally perceived as less alienating to non-*bumiputeras* because of its focus on growth and eradication of 'hard-core poverty' rather than numerical targets in equity ownership between *bumiputeras* and non-*bumiputeras*.

Prior to the incorporation of the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak into the Malaysian Federation in 1963, constitutional safeguards were offered to appease and allay the fears of the *bumiputera* Dayak and Kadazandusun from both states[7]. Commonly referred to as the Twenty Points, some of these safeguards include the recognition that Islam's status as a national religion was not applicable to Sabah and Sarawak. Thus the provisions relating to Islam in the constitution would not apply to these states. Immigration control was to be vested in the state governments of Sabah and Sarawak. Importantly, the *bumiputeras* of Sabah and Sarawak were to enjoy the same 'special rights' accorded to the *bumiputeras* in West Malaysia[8]. Despite these provisions, the central government's routine interference in state affairs has prompted some observers of federal-state relations to characterize the Malaysian political system as a quasi-federation[9].

2.3 In Need of Reconfiguration: *Bumiputera*-ism and the Malaysian New Economic Policy (NEP)

The NEP and its policy progenies have been regarded as some of the more successful comprehensive ethnic-based affirmative action programs[10]. Many of its expressed goals such as the reduction of poverty[11], improving the *bumiputera* educational position and strengthening the *bumiputera* professional and business class have been attained. With the narrowing of inter-ethnic income disparities, ethnic relations particularly between the politically dominant Malay and commercially influential Chinese communities have stabilized. This state of cordial inter-ethnic relations was in no small measure assisted by the high levels of economic growth during much of the NEP years, a discernibly expanded and confident Malay middle-class and an increased Chinese share of the corporate sector from 22.8% in 1969 to 45.5% in 1990[12]. Confronted with the NEP, many of the larger Chinese business conglomerates pragmatically adopted a two-pronged strategy of working closely with the Malay political and bureaucratic elite whilst strengthening their commercial links with the Overseas Chinese community in East Asia[13]. To be sure, Malaysia's economic dynamism during the NEP years was assisted by the 1970s international commodities boom, the discovery of offshore petroleum and the influx of foreign direct investment with the implementation of full blown export-oriented industrialization.

Notwithstanding the reduction in poverty levels[14] and the narrowing of inter-ethnic income disparities under the NEP, intra-ethnic income disparities particularly within the Malay community have widened as the issue of wealth ownership within ethnic communities has not been a focus of attention. Recognizing this schism, the Islamic party PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) has made efforts at capturing the electoral support especially of the rural Malay poor. With the ethnic quotas for university enrolments[15] and government scholarships restricted to *bumiputeras,* tertiary education opportunities, particularly for the less affluent non-*bumiputeras* who cannot afford an overseas education, have been limited. Non-*bumiputera* anger against these ethnic quotas for public universities has been aggravated by the publication of data exposing the failure of hundreds of young non-*bumiputeras* who attained numerous high distinctions in their high school examinations but could not secure places in local public universities [16].

Chinese resentment towards the NEP's cultural and education is demonstrated by their side-stepping of the national education system and sending their children to independent primary

and secondary Chinese schools. Chinese and Indian alienation with national schools has been compounded by the perceived Islamization of the predominantly Muslim institutions and the restrictive study of Mandarin and Tamil outside of normal school hours[17]. Not surprisingly, 88% of Chinese children attend Chinese schools[18], effectively acting as a shadow education system. This has reduced national schools to the status of Malay enclaves. To be sure, the viability of Chinese education has been assisted by the prevalent usage of Mandarin and dialects in the private sector where the Chinese community continues to hold a commanding position. The cultural capital of Mandarin has also been assisted by the rising economic prominence of China and growing importance of Mandarin as a language of commerce in East Asia.

While the economic clout and numerical strength of the Chinese community has, to some extent, encouraged the Malay-dominated *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) government to be relatively sensitive to their interests, the concerns of other ethnic minorities such as the Indians and non-Malay *bumiputeras* appear to carry less weight. Unlike the Chinese community, the Indians are both economically and electorally marginal, constituting only 7% of the total population. While there has been an appreciable increase in Malay and Chinese control of the corporate sector, the Indian share has only marginally increased from 0.9% in 1969 to 1.5% in 1999[19]. In an arguably weaker position than other major ethnic-based parties in the Malay- dominated BN government, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) has limited influence in representing the concerns of the community and in shaping public policies. This is manifested in the phasing out of Tamil as a medium of instruction except in primary schools catering to Indian estate laborers[20]. With a significant proportion of Indians in the lower socio-economic strata of Malaysian society with limited prospects for social mobility, it is not altogether surprising that the more recent ethnic riots have erupted in neighborhoods strongly populated by working class Indians, Malays and unskilled foreign workers. In particular, Malay-Indian clashes have occurred in the working class villages of Kampung Rawa, Penang in April 1998 and Kampung Medan, Kuala Lumpur in March 2001. Opposition politicians and civil society activists assert that the March 2001 clash, which left six people dead and 50 injured [21], was triggered off not by race but by frustration over poor living conditions and the uneven development during the 'boom years' of the 1990s[22]. As these 'ethnic clashes' suggest that ethnic tension is most volatile among socially disadvantaged communities, the ethnic-based affirmative action approaches of the state may be in need of a reconfiguration to more effectively address the concerns of the economically marginal across all ethnic communities.

The indigenous *Orang Asli* (Original People) of Peninsula Malaysia have remained one of the most marginalized communities in Malaysia. Comprising 0.5% of Malaysia's total population, a staggering 81% of *Orang Asli* live below the official poverty line compared to the national average of 7.5% in 1997[23]. Denied land rights and paternalistically subjected to the dictates of the non-*Orang Asli* run Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHOA), the *Orang Asli* are arguably the most controlled and regulated community in Malaysia. Without prior consultation, the state can repossess their land settlements without having to pay any compensation. As such, the *Orang Asli* have routinely lost their land to state land schemes, private plantations, mining concessions, highway and dam projects, housing projects, golf courses and international airports. By contrast, it can take as long as 35 years for an *Orang Asli* application for the gazetting of a reserve to be processed. Restricted in their legal claim to their traditional homelands, the community has become reduced to the status of squatters. By 1997, only 15% of *Orang Asli* villages had been gazetted as reserves[24].

The paternalistic approach of the state towards the *Orang Asli* is manifested in the relationship between the predominantly non-*Orang Asli* JHOA bureaucracy and the *Orang Asli* community. The Director General of JHOA, a position that has never been occupied by an *Orang Asli*, has the final say in all matters relating to the community. The JHOA decides who is allowed to visit an *Orang Asli* settlement, appoints the headmen and determines the crops that are grown, programs to be implemented and the religious proselytizing that occurs. As the JHOA does not have to consult the community before a decision to resettle them is made, the *Orang Asli* have effectively been reduced to the status of state wards[25]. Even though the community is ostensibly represented in Parliament by a senator in the Upper House, in a real sense, the *Orang Asli* lack effective representation in decision making bodies. In an attempt to better assimilate the community into Malay society, the *Orang Asli* have been systematically encouraged to convert to Islam. Since 1991, more than 250 mosques have been built and aggressive state-directed missionary activities are encouraged in *Orang Asli* settlements[26].

East Malaysians have long possessed a deep-seated fear of 'colonization' by West Malaysians. This fear has been fuelled by the widespread perception that the Federation has disproportionately benefited West Malaysians, particularly in economic and political terms[27]. To date, the federal government has insisted on paying only 5% of oil revenue found in Sabah and Sarawak and both states remain the least developed in the federation despite their considerable natural resources.

Federal policies which facilitate the resettlement of West Malaysians to Sabah and Sarawak have been viewed as a threat in economic, religious and cultural terms. This perception has been compounded by the influx of Muslim Filipinos particularly into Sabah from the early 1980s. As these Muslim Filipinos have been able to obtain Malaysian identity cards and citizenship easily, many non-Muslim Sabahans believe that the federal government is attempting to create a Muslim majority in the state[28]. These suspicions have been fuelled by the federal government's policy of actively campaigning to convert the Kadazandusuns, the largest indigenous ethnic group, to Islam. Kadazandusun conversions to Islam have been encouraged by generous federal support of development projects to newly converted Muslim communities. In addition to the federalization of bureaucracies in Sabah and Sarawak, the BN government has actively assisted in the electoral success of the Muslim-dominated political coalition in state government through the processes of gerrymandering[29]. These Islamization initiatives have been perceived by many East Malaysians as a breach of the Twenty Points agreement which guarantee that all religions practiced in Sabah would be safeguarded[30].

The resurgence of conservative Islam in Malaysia has, to some extent, inhibited gender, ethnic and religious interaction and contributed towards a climate of intolerance for other religious faiths. In particular, the conservative Islamic dress and dietary code and social behaviour have discouraged Muslims from eating and socializing with non-Muslims at the workplace and the broader social environment. Moreover, the conservative Islamic environment in national schools has alienated non-Muslims, with Muslim female students under pressure to wear the headscarf (*tudung*) and all female students encouraged to wear the the long Malay dress (*baju kurung*) on Fridays. Public libraries in Penang and Perak have also prevented women from wearing shorts using its facilities[31]. In the states of Kelantan and Trengganu, governed by the Islamic party PAS, *karaoke* lounges, pubs, unisex hair salons and checkout counters and gaming outlets have been banned. *Hudud* laws, which provide for draconian punishment such as stoning to death for particular crimes, have also been adopted in both states. Not to be outdone by PAS, the West Malaysian state of Selangor, governed by the ruling *Barisan Nasional* coalition, has directed all hawker centers and coffee shops to

remove beer advertisements, banned Muslim women from participating in beauty contests and conducts regular raids on unmarried couples in public parks.

Riding on the wave of the international Islamic resurgence from the 1970s and the systematic promotion of Islam by the Mahathir administration[32], Islam has been further politicized by the *reformasi* (reform) movement which was spearheaded by the East Asian economic crisis and the subsequent dismissal and persecution of former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. Suffice to say, Anwar and Islam have also become rallying points for public disquiet with the vexed issues of corruption, cronyism and nepotism associated with the UMNO-dominated BN government. Benefiting from the large number of Malays turning away from UMNO because of its harsh treatment of Anwar, PAS was able to comfortably retain the state of Kelantan, capture the state of Trengganu and make significant electoral inroads into the predominantly Malay states of Kedah and Perlis in the 1999 federal elections. While PAS claims to be opposed to the BN's ethnic- based affirmative action policies and race-based politics, it could well be argued that it has exchanged racial for religious based politics. To be sure, religious-based politics can be just as divisive and detrimental to the rights of minorities and the promotion of undifferentiated citizenship. Indeed, the experience of religious minorities in Iran, Sudan and Afghanistan (under the Taliban) bear testament to this.

Civil society activist Zainah Anwar asserts that the coalition *Barisan Nasional* federal government has been unable to meet the PAS Islamic challenge because its Muslim leadership does not possess the intellectual capital to effectively articulate a progressive vision of Islam since Anwar's removal from government[33]. This lack of intellectual capital has allowed the proliferation of conservative *ulama* (religious scholars) who are educated in conservative Islamic institutions, share PAS's obscurantist Islamic worldview and occupy senior positions in Islamic Affairs Department at both the federal and state level[34]. As many of UMNO's supporters also subscribe to PAS's conservative Islamic worlview, not many Muslim politicians in UMNO are willing to express concern about the rise of conservative Islam for fear of being branded un-Islamic[35]. As a result of these factors, UMNO has become hostage to PAS's conservative Islamist agenda and allowed PAS to define the ideological parameters of Islam. Zainah Anwar succinctly observed that UMNO is playing a dangerous "*… catch up game that it can never win"*[36].

Importantly as the Malay-based UMNO and PAS ostensibly champion the cause of Islam, the religion has become inexorably racialized. This racialization of Islam has been assisted by the constitutional conflation and interchangeability of Malay and Muslim. Martinez has observed that this conflation and interchangeability has contributed to Islam becoming a source of empowerment to Malays and a symbol of difference to non-Muslims[37]. In this increasingly politicized Islamic environment, non-Muslims understandably feel threatened, alienated and defensive about being marginalized on both ethnic and religious grounds.

3. Singapore

3.1 Background

Map of Singapore

Source : http://www.geographic.org/maps/new1/singapore_maps.html.

Table 3 Ethnic Breakdown

Total population in 2001 was 4,131,200 million

Ethnic group	Percentage
Malays	13.9
Chinese	76.7
Indians	7.9
Other races	1.5

Source: Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, *Singapore 2002*, p.45.

Table 4 Average Monthly Household Income by Ethnic Group (Sing$)

Year	Ethnicity			
	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Other
1990	3,213	2,246	2,859	3,885
2000	5,219	3,148	4,556	7,250

Source: Singapore Department of Statistics, cited in www.singstat.gov.sg/FACT/ fact.html.

3.2 Constitutional recognition, legislative and policy directives

Section 152 of the Singapore Constitution clearly affirms that, *'It shall be a deliberate and conscious policy of the Government of Singapore at all times to recognize the special position of Malays who are the indigenous people of the island and who are in the most need of assistance and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government of Singapore to*

protect, support, foster and promote the political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language'.

This unambiguous constitutional responsibility has been complicated by the Peoples Action Party (PAP) government's meritocratic philosophy which purportedly provides equal opportunities to all Singaporeans regardless of race, religion or language. This philosophy has become a founding national myth in the island republic and allows the PAP dominated semi-authoritarian state to claim a neutral status that is above ethnic partisanship.

Having denounced the special rights of indigenous Malaysians during Singapore's brief merger with Malaysia from 1963-1965, the PAP leadership subsequently championed a multiracial Singaporean Singapore. This Singaporean Singapore ideal of equal rights and protection to all communities was provided by Articles 12 and 16 of the Constitution.

Despite its responsibility under Section 152 of the Constitution, the PAP government failed to implement programs to address and ameliorate the Malay community's relative socio-economic marginality in the 1960s and 1970s. Confronted with the deteriorating socio-economic and educational position of the Malay community relative to the other ethnic communities, a state-sponsored ethnic self-help body Mendaki was established in 1982 to address this issue. However, in the opening decade of the 21st century, the relative socio-economic and educational position of the Malays has not only showed negligible signs of improvement but in many areas continues to deteriorate. (For example see Table 4) . The performance and enrolment rates particularly at the secondary and tertiary educational level of the Malay community compared to the national average have continued to widen in the 1980s and 1990s[38].

The right to religious freedom is recognized by Article 15(1) of the Singapore Constitution which affirms that *"Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and to propagate it"*. However, this affirmation has been contradicted by legislation such as the 1990 Religious Harmony Law and policies such as the no-*tudung* (headscarf) for Malay/Muslim girls in national schools. The Religious Harmony Law prohibits the use of religion for political ends in order to depolitice religion and religious leaders[39]. As Islam is *as-deen* (a complete way of life) to orthodox Muslims and thus encompasses all aspects of life, this legislation remains contentious to the community.

Under the Administration of Muslim Law Act (1968), the highest Islamic Council, MUIS (*Majlis Agama Islam Singapura*) advises the President of Singapore on matters relating to the Islam and the Muslim community. Instructively, the President of MUIS is appointed by the President of Singapore on the advice of the government. The MUIS council is made up of the Mufti, who is the highest religious authority among Muslims, five community members appointed by the President of Singapore on the recommendation of the government and seven members appointed by the President from a list of nominees.

Established in 1969, the Presidential Council on Minority Rights (PCMR), is an appointed advisory body of non-elected members tasked to represent ethnic minority concerns and scrutinize legislation and public policies which impact them. The PCMR consists of a chairperson and 15 members appointed by the President on the advice of the Cabinet[40]. It is particularly instructive that the PCMR has yet to issue a statement that is critical of a particular legislation or public policy that contradicts the constitution or adversely impacts on minority communities.

3.3 Dereliction of the Singaporean Singapore multiracial ideal

Singapore's national identity has been strongly shaped by its colonial past, brief but tumultuous merger experience, ongoing tenuous relationship with Malaysia and the PAP government that has ruled the island republic uninterruptedly since 1959. Other significant influences include its unique status as the only country in Southeast Asia that is numerically dominated by the Chinese community. In particular, the Chinese- dominated island lies at the very heart of the Malay-Muslim region, between the larger and densely-populated states of Malaysia to the north and Indonesia to the south. The island's geographic location and demographic complexion thus goes some way towards explaining the logic underpinning the state's management of ethnicity, security and public policies.

Typical of colonial settler societies uncomfortable with the question of indigenous dispossession and enduring marginality, Singapore's pre-colonial indigenous identity has been systematically downplayed while its colonial heritage celebrated. As such, the British imperial agent Thomas Stamford Raffles has been elevated as the visionary founder of modern Singapore and his arrival in 1819 commonly marks the beginning of the 'Singapore Story'. By contrast, Singapore's pre-colonial Malay history as a thriving trading port called *Temasek* when it was part of the *Sri Vijaya* Empire, has been relegated to the realms of myth. Importantly, the propagation of the notion of the island being virtually uninhabited and devoid of a memorable past prior to 1819 purposefully blunts any future primal claims by the indigenous populace or neighboring Malay states to Singapore[41]. Indeed, Singapore's first Prime Minister and current Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and other non-Malay opposition politicians in Malaysia have repeatedly pronounced that none of the major races can claim to be more native than the others[42].

The tumultuous events surrounding the short-lived merger with Malaysia (1963-1965) and the resource poor island's subsequent struggle for economic and political survival facilitated the promotion of Lee Kuan Yew as the father of modern Singapore and the PAP as the indispensable guardians of the nation. The rapid transformation of the island to Southeast Asia's most successful economy that has been repeatedly ranked by agencies such as the World Economic Forum as one of the most competitive economies in the world has provided the PAP government with a legitimacy that is strongly performance-based despite its authoritarian corporatist style of governance. Singapore has also been referred to as an administrative state where politics has dissipated[43] but where the level of social engineering and intrusive state intervention is almost Orwellian.

In this administrative corporatist state run largely by technocrats, economic considerations are accorded priority. The government functions like a major corporation and nationhood is perceived primarily as a problem of human resource management. As such, national identity is strongly based on notions of economic survival and success[44]. Unpopular and controversial public policies have been justified by reminding Singaporeans of the island's small size, limited talent pool, lack of natural resources and economic vulnerabilities. The geographical vulnerability associated with being a predominantly affluent Chinese nation in a sea of less prosperous and potentially hostile Malay-Muslim nations is also highlighted. Sensationalized reporting of attacks against minority Chinese communities and the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism in Southeast Asia have been given prominent coverage by the government-controlled mainstream media while Malaysia's *bumiputera* affirmative action policies have generally been portrayed in a negative light. Importantly, the massaging of Singaporean Chinese insecurity serves to enhance the stature of the PAP government as the guardian of Chinese interests in a volatile Malay-Muslim region. Without doubt, this crisis discourse has assisted in justifying the continued existence of detention without trial legislation such as the

Internal Security Act (ISA), more recently projected as a necessary tool in combating racialists and religious extremists in the post-September 11 struggle against terrorists.

Importantly, the crisis discourse and a siege mentality within the Chinese community have served to justify discriminatory policies against Malay/Muslims in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). For nearly 20 years (from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s), Malay/Muslims were systematically excluded from compulsory national service. Their participation in the SAF continues to be restricted to 'sensitive' units for 'national security' reasons. This state-directed institutionalized discrimination is premised on the PAP leadership's belief that the Malay/Muslim community's loyalty to the state is precariously divided because of their ethnic and religious affiliation with surrounding Malay-Muslim nations. In justifying this hitherto covert discriminatory policy, Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted in 1987 that, *"If there is a conflict…we don't want to put any of our soldiers in a difficult position where his emotions for the nation may come in conflict with his emotions for his religion…they will be two very strong destructive forces in opposite directions*[45]*"*.

To justify the continued institutionalized discrimination of Malay/Muslims in the SAF, evidenced by the conspicuous dearth of senior Malay officers, the PAP leadership has, in the last few years, increasingly charged the community with failing to integrate with the larger society. As such, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has advised that *"…more Malays may enter the armed forces and attain high office as the Malay community becomes more integrated into Singapore society"*[46]. At a Malay community forum to discuss the government's discriminatory practices against Malay/Muslims in the SAF in March 2001, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew lectured the community on their lack of national integration by pointing out that they tended to hold more activities in mosques[47]. Prime Minister Goh has also called on more Muslims to study in secular kindergartens and not restrict their social activities to mosques[48]. In all of these pontifications on the supposedly parlous state of Malay integration, the less than robust inter-ethnic integration of the dominant Chinese community has not been seriously considered. For example, a 2000 Straits Times survey found that 21% of Chinese surveyed professed to having no friends from another race, compared to 10% of Malays and 7% of Indians[49]. Additionally, government policies such as the promotion of ethnic-based welfare organizations and mono-ethnic Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools for Chinese students, which have impeded inter-ethnic integration, have not been acknowledged. Importantly, a discerning analysis of the PAP leadership's statements on the supposedly weak Malay national integration reveals a distinctly assimilationist attitude as its inferences suggest that the Malay community should be more like 'us' – the secular oriented ethnic Chinese community.

The specter of weak Malay/Muslim national integration and suspect loyalty to the state has been boosted by the post-September 11 detention-without-trial of 36 terrorist Singaporean Malay and Indian Muslims accused of belonging to the terrorist Southeast Asia *Jemaah Islamiah* network and intent on establishing a regional Islamic state. Muslim organizations have been repeatedly advised by PAP leaders to publicly denounce the JI detainees and radical Muslims or risk being perceived as the disloyal 'other' in the larger community. The perception of Malay/Muslim radicalism, disloyalty and resistance to integration has been reinforced by the insistence of a handful of Malay parents in 2002 and 2003 that their young daughters wear the *tudung* (headscarf) to school even though it contravenes the Ministry of Education's strict uniform code. This uniform code is supposedly based on promoting ethnic integration in public schools and engendering social cohesion.

Senior Malaysian politicians and civil society activists have demanded that the no-*tudung* ruling be revoked as it violates the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights[50] and Article 15(1) of Singapore's constitution which clearly states that *"Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and to propagate it"*[51]. Other critics of the no-*tudung* policy have also pointed out that even in Christian-based societies in the West, Muslim schoolgirls are permitted to wear the *tudung*. Unmasking the PAP government's contradiction in the no-*tudung* policy, veteran Singaporean opposition politician J.B. Jeyeretnam observed that *"It is not the wearing of tudung by Muslim girls and women that will divide the communities…It is the policies that have been carried out by the government that divided the communities*"[52]. Similarly, Secretary General of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) Chee Soon Juan has cautioned that *"racial harmony cannot be preserved by coercing citizens to conform to a certain dress code"*[53].

Despite the strong constitutional position of the schoolgirls-in-*tudung*, Muslim PAP politicians and the government-appointed Mufti Syed Isa Semait urged the schoolgirls to return to school without headscarves on the grounds that Islam accords higher priority to education than the wearing of headscarves. Importantly, the failure of PAP Malay/Muslim leaders, MUIS and the Mufti to adopt a position independent from the PAP on this complex religious issue clearly reveals their relatively weak position within the government. There appears to be limited political room available to PAP Malay/Muslim politicians to maneuver particularly on sensitive issues pertaining to minority discrimination and religious practices[54]. As all PAP Malay parliamentarians have been voted into public office by the largely non-Malay/Muslim electorate due to government policies, such as the stringent ethnic quotas on housing estates, which ensure that Malays remain a numerical minority in every electoral constituency, they have consistently defended unpopular and controversial PAP government policies. Put simply, PAP Malay/Muslim MPs have been more effective in representing PAP interests than the concerns of the Malay/Muslim community[55]. Not surprisingly, their support base within the Malay/Muslim community is at best tenuous.

In addition to the questionable constitutionality of the no-*tudung* policy, the intransigent position of the PAP government represents an attempt to impose cultural and social conformity in schools and exposes its religious insensitivity. It has been pointed out that the PAP's form of secular fundamentalism is not much different from the Malaysian Islamic Party PAS's insistence that all Muslim shop assistants wear the headscarf in the states of Kelantan and Trengganu where they control government. Both the PAP and PAS governments have, without seeking public consensus and debate on sensitive issues, seen fit to paternalistically impose their will[56]. Importantly, the lack of genuine public debate on the *tudung* issue in Singapore has more than likely hardened non-Muslim perception of weak Malay/Muslim national integration and dubious loyalty to the state, further aggravating inter-ethnic relations and religious understanding.

The multiracial and meritocratic credentials of Singapore's long-serving PAP government have been severely challenged by its policies of ethnic and cultural favoratism, particularly from the late 1970s. They include the systematic promotion of Mandarin, racialist immigration and population policies which maintain Chinese numerical dominance, and the establishment of the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools for 'meritorious' Chinese students. Belying an assimilationist tilt, Chinese students are compelled to study Mandarin as their 'mother tongue' while non-Chinese students are allowed the choice of studying Mandarin or their 'mother tongue' as a second language. The promotion of Mandarin can be attributed to the PAP leadership's belief that it is an effective transmitter of positive Confucian values, supposedly responsible for Singapore's economic dynamism and social

discipline[57]. Inter alia, the all-Chinese SAP schools are geared towards grooming a new generation of bilingual Chinese elite, through the study of China's culture, literature, history and modern developments in politics, economics and business. The ethnic exclusivity of the SAP schools has provoked minority resentment as they are inclined to see such schools as symbolic of their marginality and part of a trend towards ethnic polarization[58].

A clear example of the dereliction of the multiracial Singaporean Singapore ideal amidst a reality of the increasingly Sinified polity is the policy of encouraging Chinese to migrate to Singapore to make up for the high emigration and low fertility rates of the Chinese community viz-a-viz the Malay and Indian communities. In 1988, the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew identified the declining birth rate of the Chinese as one of the three pressing national problems that required redress. Over-riding the PAP government's hitherto hardline policy of not accepting refugees, Indonesian Chinese refugees were accepted into Singapore in the aftermath of attacks against the community in the political chaos leading up to the fall of Indonesian President Suharto in 1998[59]. A believer of eugenicist ideas, Lee has on numerous occasions purported that Singapore's economic success stems largely from the positive cultural and biological traits of the Chinese community. By contrast, he has purported that the negative biological and cultural values of the Malays explains their persisting relative socio-economic marginality[60] and that the contentious orientation of Indians contributes to a political culture that is detrimental to rapid economic growth.

These cultural deficit and eugenicist perspectives purported by the PAP leadership have without doubt contributed to the negative stereotyping and discriminatory practices against Malays and other ethnic minorities in the workforce. Studies by the Association of Malay-Muslim Professionals have found that Malays are commonly confronted with a glass ceiling particularly when seeking employment in local firms[61].
This may explain the strong representation of Malay professionals in Western multinational corporations. Emboldened by government policies which actively promote Mandarin, it is not uncommon to see Mandarin proficiency requirements in job advertisements. Ethnic minorities tend to interpret the Mandarin requirement by local firms as a surreptitious device used for ethnic screening and the lack of Malays in senior positions in the civil service and military as examples of the less than meritocratic and level playing field in the workforce[62]. At a government-sponsored Feedback Unit session in early 2001, Malays complained of companies refusing to hire non-Mandarin speakers and Muslim women wearing headscarves[63]. Muslims have also complained that some Muslim students and teachers have been barred from performing their daily prayers during school hours[64]. Indian discontent with opportunities in Singapore is evidenced by the fact that professional Indians have been emigrating at a rate up to three times higher than the national average.

Complaints of the 'glass ceiling' and ethnic, religious or gender discrimination cannot be seriously addressed as the state has not established an Equal Opportunity Office, Anti-Discrimination Board or Ombudsman's Office despite the rhetoric of a multiracial and meritocratic Singapore. These bodies are necessary in view of the fact that the Presidential Council of Minority Rights has consistently failed to publicly address minority concerns such as the restrictive SAF policy against Malays, complaints of discrimination in the workplace and immigration and education policies which favor the Chinese[65].

4. Conclusion

Ethnic, religious and regional tensions often arise out of a complex intermeshing of specific historical, socio-economic and political circumstances generated over a prolonged period of time. The experiences of post-colonial states in Southeast Asia suggests that these tensions

become problematic and potentially explosive when particular ethnic, religious or regional communities are accorded favored treatment or when other communities persistently remain along the socio-economic and political margins of society. These tensions can also be aggravated when ethnic, religious or regional identities are manipulated for political gain. Inter alia, the deliberate politicization of ethnic, religious or regional identity serves to blunt other forms of identity, making horizontal alliances and the development of a healthy civil society problematic.

Public policies and political ideologies such as Malaysia's *bumiputeraism* and Singapore's *multiracialialism* have served to regulate and politicize identities. In Malaysia, the dominant UMNO party in the BN coalition government is projected as the guardian of Malay and *bumiputera* interests while Singapore's PAP government subtly promotes the image of being the protector of the Chinese community in the otherwise hostile anti-Chinese Southeast Asian environment. As such, Malaysia's ethnic-based affirmative action initiatives and Singapore's multiracial and meritocratic rhetoric, in some respects, are mirror images of one another as they both privilege the politically dominant Malay and Chinese ethnic communities. The overt and covert forms of racial and religious politics have occurred at the expense of minority communities and undermined national cohesion. It is thus hardly surprising that after more than 40 years of independence, Malaysians and Singaporeans still identify primarily in terms of their ethnicity and religion rather than their nationality. Ethnic interaction, has remained largely superficial and laden with negative ethnic and religious stereotyping. There is thus a need for governments, policy makers and civil society actors to avoid the politicization of religion and essentialism of ethnicity. Instead, ethnic, religious and regional identities should be allowed their natural expression, evolutionary course and the various communities encouraged to genuinely interact with one another as social equals.

On a more optimistic note, political actors and policy makers in Malaysia and Singapore are increasingly cognizant of the long-term economic benefits of forging a stronger national identity that transcends ethnicity, religion and region. Recognizing that the economic interests of both Malays and non-Malays are inextricably intertwined in Malaysia's quest to develop a knowledge-based economy, the BN government and the major opposition coalition *Barisan Alternatif* have toned down appeals based on ethnicity. This suggests that communal politics may have lost some of its legitimacy and appeal as an organizing principle of politics[66]. Prime Minister Mahathir has also flagged a national vision whereby all Malaysians by 2020 will enjoy equal citizenshiprights regardless of ethnicity. His call for the forging of a stronger *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian national identity) has generally been positively received by ethnic minorities. The gradual dismantling of the economic prioritization of *bumiputeras* is evident in the opening up of the state investment fund *Amanah Saham 2020* to all Malaysians[67]. In the last few years, the Malaysian government has been assiduously wooing highly skilled Malaysian emigrants, most of whom are Chinese and Indians, back to the country in an attempt to shore up its plans to promote a knowledge-based economy and prevent industries from relocating to other countries due to a shortage of skills.

To counter the problem of ethnic segregation in schools, the Malaysian government in 2000 proposed the creation of Vision Schools. These schools allow primary schools that teach in three different languages (Malay, Mandarin, Tamil) to share common facilities such as canteens and sports facilities but still remain independent of one another. From 2003, a raft of major educational reforms will be instituted to make the national education system more inclusive and international. Overturning the NEP's ethnic quotas for tertiary institutions, a merit based enrolment system has been introduced for all public universities and colleges from 2003. Additionally, English rather than Malay is now used as a medium of instruction

for subjects such as science and mathematics in universities. Mandarin and Tamil have also been offered to all students in national schools from 2003[68].

While Malaysia's ethnic-based affirmative action initiatives have gone some way towards combating historical discrimination, disadvantage, closed business networks and helped to create diversity in all aspects of society, the Malay community has disproportionately benefited more than other *bumiputera* communities. As such, Malaysia's affirmative action initiatives may now need to be more inclusive by targeting other minority and marginal groups, non-Malay *bumiputeras* and the socially disadvantaged from all ethnic communities. Such a radical restructuring of public policy would no doubt require a major overhaul of the BN government's communal style politics and the politicization of Islam. This represents a major challenge confronting Malaysia at the turn of the new millennium.

For ethnic minorities, the PAP government's rhetoric of a Singaporean multiracial and meritocratic society has been fundamentally contradicted by its policies of cultural favoritism and institutional discrimination. Indeed, genuine multiracialism requires that the principle of equal opportunity is consistently adhered to and that all communities are well represented in the various sectors of society, the economy and equitably represented at all levels of government. While multiracialism at the basic cultural level is encouraged in Singapore, there is much evidence to suggest that multiracialism and equal opportunity, particularly at the institutional and public policy level, are far from satisfactory.

After more than 40 years of the PAP government's purportedly meritocratic approaches, which ignore the significance of historical disadvantage and unearned social capital, the socio-economic and educational gap particularly between the Malay and Chinese communities has failed to narrow. In a major departure from the conventional pledge to uphold meritocracy as a cornerstone of Singaporean society, some PAP politicians are beginning to discuss the failure of meritocracy in forging meaningful inter-ethnic relations. Acknowledging the psychological barriers between Malay/Muslims and the larger community PAP parliamentarian K. Shanmugam in January 2003 called for some form of affirmative action policy which will facilitate more Malays into important positions throughout society. Shanmugam argued that this approach would more effectively counter the appeal to Islamic radicalism and strengthen inter-racial ties[69].

To effectively address a range of minority concerns, there is a need to reappraise legislation and public policies that contradict the spirit of the Singapore Constitution by establishing bodies such as the Human Rights Commission, Equal Employment Opportunity and the Ombudsman's Office. In this regard, the Presidential Council of Minority Rights is also well placed to undertake this watchdog role on condition that its composition is made up of those with close grassroots and are not closely connected with the political establishment. Membership of the PCMR should also be routinely altered to strengthen the body's impartiality.

The positive trends sketched above suggests that a new consensus on citizenship and political rights needs to be forged in the next phase of Malaysia's and Singapore's development which is increasingly reliant on democratic institutions, a healthy civil society and sophisticated knowledge-based economies. This new consensus is likely to more effectively nurture states and societies that are more accommodating, accountable and respectful of the rights of minorities as recognized by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In the final analysis, the test

of whether a society is truly democratic and equitable is the way in which minorities and other vulnerable members in the community are treated.

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[5] In the 1969 Federal elections, half the Malay community and a majority of the non-Malays voted against the UMNO dominated Alliance government. Jomo Sundaram, Malaysia's New Economic Policy and 'National Unity', Paper Presented at the United Nations Conference on Racism and Public Policy, 3-5 September 2001, Durban, South Africa, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, p.1.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Kadazandusuns make up 40%, Chinese 25% and Malay-Muslims 30% of Sabah's population. In Sarawak, the indigenous Dayaks make up 40%, Chinese 25% and Malay-Melanau 25% of the total population. Refer to James Chin, 'Unequal Contest: Federal-State Relations Under Mahathir', in Ho Khai Leong and James Chin (ed), *Mahathir's Administration: Performance and Crisis in Governance*, (Singapore: Times Books International, 2001), p.29.
[8]Ibid, p.32.
[9] Ibid, p.28.
[10] Robert Hefner, Introduction, in Robert Hefner (ed), *The Politics of Multiracialism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia*, (Honolulu: Uni. of Hawaii Press, 2001), p.30.
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[12] Ibid, p.7.
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[15] The *bumiputera* quota for university entry was 55% and 45% for non-*bumiputeras.*
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[19] Jomo Sundaram, opcit, p.8.
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[37] Patricia Martinez, 'Mahathir and the New Malay Dilemma', in Ho Khai Leong and James Chin (ed), opcit, p.229.
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