

The Gordian Knot of Ethno-Religious Nationalism: Unsettled National Questions and Contested Visions

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Abstract

The early twenty-first century has witnessed a rising number of global crises. These include climate change, widening income inequality, military and nuclear tensions between the major powers, repeated outbreaks of global pandemics, and an ongoing democratic recession. In particular, the deepening democratic recession has afflicted ostensibly both mature and newer democracies – contradicting theories of political development. In many countries, the political alliance between ethno- and religious nationalists has reignited assaults against democratic institutions, processes, and norms. This comparative country-case study, principally of Malaysia and the United States of America (US), explores the alliance between ethno- and religious nationalists by examining the forces and factors that have contributed to this combustible dynamic within the context of unsettled national questions, contested constitutional orders, and foundational national visions. Also examined are the narratives of fear, victimhood and privilege that have galvanised religious and ‘sons of the soil’ ethno-nationalists in resisting the building of inclusive multiracial democracies.

Keywords: ethno-nationalists, religious nationalists, comparative study, Malaysia, United States of America

Introduction: Contradictions Nestled Within Democratic Tradition

When foundational ‘national questions’ and constitutional order are contested, democratic norms and rights are more readily destabilised.¹ This destabilisation often include challenges to the character of the constitutional democratic state as envisioned by the national founders. Paradoxically, many states

¹ Valerie Bunce, ‘Comparative democratization: Big and bounded generalizations’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 33, 2000, p.703-734.

possess political traditions that are inclusive and democratic as well as restrictive and undemocratic. This chequered tradition is manifested in the nuances and ambivalences embodied in constitutions and political systems, as well as the values of the national founders and constitutional framers. Thus, while many constitutions enunciate the principles of liberty, freedom, and democratic rights, there exist articles that have enabled laws, electoral systems, and public policies which accord **privileges for particular communities deemed nativist or indigenous ‘sons of the soil.’**

In keeping with the chequered and contradictory tradition of many constitutions, the bulk of Malaysia’s constitutional articles affirm fundamental citizenship rights whilst also affirming the special status of the numerically dominant Malay and other *bumiputera* (indigenous, ‘sons of the soil’) communities. Article 153 of the Federal Constitution has been appropriated to justify the existence of more than five decades of ethnic-based affirmative action policies (commonly referred to as the New Economic Policy or NEP) which favour *bumiputera* communities.² An ethno-nationalist ‘*Ketuanan Melayu Islam*’ (Malay-Islam dominance) doctrine, constructed around Article 153, has also been deployed to justify the continuity of affirmative action policies for *bumiputeras*.

In the US, the antiquated electoral college system, constructed by the country’s Founding Fathers, has disproportionately benefitted rural White communities and states and allowed Republican presidents to win elections without having to attain the popular vote. In many respects, this electoral system has served as a political affirmative action tool for the Republican Party and its predominantly conservative White support base. Yet, affirmative action policies instituted since the 1960s, geared towards raising the social mobility of women and ethnic minorities, have remained a site of contestation. A controversial affirmative action legal case against Harvard University has been adjudicated in the Supreme Court, dominated by conservative justices appointed by Republican presidents. **Instructively, what has not been as rigorously contested is the ‘legacy’ enrolment system at elite tertiary institutions – where enrolment is facilitated by family ties to the university or generous financial contributions.** Suffice to say, the legacy enrolment system serves as a *de facto* affirmative action program that disproportionately benefitted students from affluent White backgrounds.

² Article 153 states that it is the responsibility of the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (King) to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities.

In recognition of the chequered and illiberal record of ‘liberal democracies’, Jamelle Bouie has insightfully suggested that “It is better, in the US context at least, to think of authoritarianism as something like a contradiction nestled within democratic tradition. It is part of the whole, a reflection of the fact that American notions of freedom and liberty are deeply informed by the experience of slaveholding and the drive to seize land and expel its previous [Indigenous] inhabitants.”³

Bouie’s frank acknowledgement of the “contradiction nestled within democratic tradition” is clearly evident in the US Declaration of Independence, which famously proclaims that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Notwithstanding this grand proclamation, slavery continued to be practiced by Founders such as Thomas Jefferson – a slave owner who deprived slaves of their fundamental rights and freedoms. Women and Whites without property also continued to be disenfranchised in the colonial settler society that had been brutally appropriated from native Americans. Were the republican Founders liberals by the historical standards of their time of more than 200 years ago? Or did they simply not consider non-Europeans fully human?⁴

The moral ambiguities of the founders were reflected in the 1857 Supreme Court Dred Scott ruling which pronounced that the US constitution was not meant to offer American citizenship to those of African descent. As such, the rights conferred by the constitution upon US citizens did not apply to them. This controversial ruling fuelled the eruption of civil war four years later.⁵

The American tradition of moral ambiguity meant that African Americans were only granted the right to vote following concerted civil rights campaigns and the passage of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act in the 1960s. Yet, until the country’s conspicuous democratic backsliding, precipitated by the one-term Trump presidency (2017-2021), the United States was commonly touted as one of the world’s oldest liberal democracies. However, when the country’s history of slavery and institutionalised racial exclusion are considered, it may be more accurate to think of the United States as a relatively recent liberal democracy – along with other White colonial settler societies such as

³ Jamelle Bouie, ‘The US thinks that it can’t happen here. It already has’, *The New York Times*, October 18, 2022.

⁴ Barbara Walter, *How civil wars start*, (UK: Penguin Random House, 2022), p.222.

⁵ Don Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its significance in American law and politics*, (NY: OUP, 2001).

Australia. In the latter case, citizenship rights were granted to Indigenous Australians in the 1960s and the White Australia policy officially ended in the 1970s. These White colonial settler societies continue to struggle with the forging of diverse multiracial democracies based on substantive citizenship rights.

As ‘canaries in the coalmine’ that have endured systemic disenfranchisement, institutional racism, and ongoing discrimination, marginalised communities are acutely sensitive to lofty national narratives and political rhetoric that do not conform to their lived reality. Not surprisingly, they are often the fiercest advocates of national reckonings that confront past and present wrongs – holding the country to its own rhetorical standards. Indicative of this stance and sentiment, famed African American poet and author James Baldwin declared, “I love America more than any other country in the world... and exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” This ‘critical love for country’ sentiment rejects blind nationalism that is intolerant of criticism and reluctant to engage in honest national reckonings.⁶ The Black Lives Matter protests in the United States and Malaysia’s *Reformasi* movement operate along this ‘critical love for country’ tradition. These constructive and bold patriotic movements are often expansive enough to accommodate uncomfortable truths. They raise uncomfortable questions when exercising “demonstrations of dissatisfaction” and reclaiming foundational principles.⁷ They also demonstrate that patriotism and defiance can be constructively combined.

Ethno-Religious Nationalists: Reimagining the Passive Secular State

The founders of the American republic envisioned a secular democracy based on passive separation of religion and state – even though the majority of White settlers identified as Christian. In the passive secular state, religion is not restricted to the private sphere. The state, however, is expected to remain neutral with regard to religious matters.

By the twenty-first century, the passive secular moorings of the United States have come under intense pressure from ethno-religious nationalists. Emboldened by their growing political clout within the Republican Party under Trump and encouraged by Supreme Court rulings during his administration, White Christian nationalists have boldly proclaimed that the US is a Christian country – rejecting the long-standing separation between church and state.

⁶ Theodore Johnson, ‘The challenge of Black patriotism’, *The New York Times*, November 18, 2020.

⁷ Theodore Johnson, 2020.

Reflective of the emboldened Christian nationalist sentiment, Republican congresswoman Lauren Boebert declared at a church service in June 2022 that “the church is supposed to direct the government. The government is not supposed to direct the church...I’m tired of this stinking letter, and it means nothing like what they say it does.”⁸ The “stinking letter” letter refers to Thomas Jefferson’s 1802 missive to the Danbury Baptist Association that the First Amendment builds “a wall of separation between church and state”. Boebert’s call for a Christian theocracy echoes the goal of conservative Christian nationalists determined to overturn the vision of the Founders. Troubled by the erosion of constitutional principles by Christian nationalists and the rulings of the predominantly Republican nominated conservative justices to the Supreme Court, liberal Justice Sonia Sotomayor observed that the court “continues to dismantle the wall of separation between church and state that the Framers fought hard to build”.⁹

Following decades of White Christian nationalist campaigning and the deliberate appointments of ‘pro-life’ Christian justices by Republican presidents, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022. For the first time in US history, the Supreme Court had taken away a fundamental constitutional right premised on rendering abortion care legal, accessible, and safe. Consistent with earlier Supreme Court rulings, *Roe v. Wade* recognised the right to privacy and the protection of personal decisions from government interference in areas such as child-rearing, marriage, procreation, and contraception. With the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the campaign of Christian nationalists and their Republican Party allies, in destabilising the passive secular foundations of the country, has taken an assertive turn.

It is not commonly recognised that most Muslim-majority states were initially conceived as passive secular states.¹⁰ While Islam may have been declared the national religion in these states, religion assumed a largely ceremonial role. However, following the global Islamist revivalism, which swept through the Muslim world from the late 1970s, many political elites expediently responded to this challenge by becoming ‘opportunistic Islamizers’, while the more enthusiastic were transformed into ‘thoroughgoing Islamizers’.¹¹ Eventually, many opportunistic

⁸ Shawna Chen, ‘Boebert’s call to collapse separation of church and state spurs alarm’, *Axios*, June 29, 2022.

⁹ Shawna Chen, 2022.

¹⁰ Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and state policies toward religion*, (NY: Cambridge Uni. Press, 2009); Lily Z Rahim (ed), *Muslim secular democracy: Voices from within*, (NY: PalgraveMacmillan, 2013).

¹¹ Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the Making of State Power*, (NY: Oxford Uni Press, 2001).

Islamizers joined the growing Islamist wave by implementing thoroughgoing Islamization policies. The de-secularisation of Muslim-majority states contradict the vision of many Muslim nationalist founders, who were inspired by the modernising secular state model.

It is commonly acknowledged that the global Islamic revivalist phenomena from the late twentieth century had been facilitated by Islamic states such Saudi Arabia. Flushed with petro-dollars, the monarchical Saudi state promoted Saudi *Salafi Wahhabi* Islam¹² as a means of countering secular nationalist sentiments, thwarting the spread of Iranian Islamic republicanism and stymying the influence of proselytising Christian organisations operating in Africa and beyond. The promotion of Saudi *Salafi Wahhabi* Islam, based on notions of divine sovereignty, as interpreted by conservative state *ulama* (clerics), included the bankrolling of mosque building, funding religious schools, distributing religious literature, and providing religious education scholarships in Saudi Arabia to Muslims around the world.¹³

Inter alia, *Salafi Wahhabi* Islam appeals to many conservative Muslims from the non-Arab world who are inclined to perceive older generation Muslims as tainted by an affinity to local cultures and therefore not ‘authentic’ Muslims.¹⁴ To purify Islam against local cultures, Southeast Asian Islamists are inclined to dress in conservative Arabic attire and be fastidious in regulating the attire and restricting the citizenship rights of Muslim women. In contrast to the liberal attire for Muslim men, the perceived *aurat* (private parts) for Muslim women has continued to expand – from covering the hair, neck, ears, arms, hands, legs, and beyond. While Arabic attire, appearance, and salutations are perceived as emblematic of genuine Islamic piety, indigenous cultural and linguistic traditions have been downplayed. Mimicry of Arabic culture has obfuscated the rich heritage of inclusiveness and hybridity inherent in traditional Southeast Asian culture. Moreover, the dissemination of *Salafi* Islamist theology has engendered a disconnect from the social realities of multi-religious pluralism and fostered a truncated Southeast

¹² *Salafi Wahhabi Islam* theology is derived from the ideas of 18th century Saudi cleric Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792) who was opposed to theological innovation and sought a return to the pure Islamic practices of Prophet Muhammad and his companions. This theology adopts literal interpretations of the Quran and focuses on ritual correctness rather than substantive meanings and notions of social justice.

¹³ Peter Mandaville (ed), *Wahhabism and the world: Understanding Saudi Arabia's global influence on Islam*, (NY: Oxford Uni. Press, 2022), p.3-5.

¹⁴ Peter Mandaville, 2022, p.11.

Asian Muslim identity.¹⁵ Consequently, social interactions with non-Muslims have contracted as exclusive Muslim social and economic enclaves proliferate.¹⁶

Steeped in *Salafi Wahhabi* doctrine, conservative and radical Islamists reject concepts such as pluralism, democracy and equal citizenship rights for women and non-Muslims, ironically perceiving these concepts as foreign for contradicting Saudi *Salafi Wahhabi* interpretations of *sharia* law. This includes male guardianship of adult women and leadership by Muslim men only. Constitutional democracy based on the principles of popular sovereignty are downplayed or disregarded for contradicting notions of divine sovereignty. Inclusive national ideologies such as Indonesia's *Pancasila* and Malaysia's *Rukun Negara* are also downplayed for contradicting *Salafi Wahhabi* doctrine.

Saudi *Salafi Wahhabi* doctrine has been comprehensively disseminated by *ulama*, many of whom have been educated at seminaries in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. Typical of clerics of many Southeast Asia clerics, Hadi Awang, President of the Malaysian Islamist party PAS (*Parti Islam Malaysia* or Islamic Party of Malaysia) received his Saudi funded degree in Islamic studies at the University of Medina.¹⁷

Like many conservative Islamists, Hadi is inclined to dismiss his Muslim political opponents and critics as '*kafir*' (non-Muslims). PAS' electoral struggle against other political parties and non-Muslims has even been classified as a form of righteous '*jihad*' (holy war). In this *jihad*, the large number of outwardly pious Muslim politicians embroiled in corruption scandals, including former Prime Minister Najib Razak (since convicted and jailed for corruption), have been downplayed. Hadi has advised Muslims that it is preferable to support corrupt Muslim politicians rather than non-corrupt Muslim politicians in order to maintain 'Muslim unity' – a code word for maintaining Muslim political dominance. Elaborating on this rationale, Hadi pronounced that "Islam has to be the leader and ruler, those who are not of Islam must be followers (*pak turut*). Let's not place religion and politics in separate corners."¹⁸

¹⁵ Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 152.

¹⁶ Refer to Maznah Mohamad, *The divine bureaucracy and disenchantment of social life*, (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p.274; Patricia Sloane-White, *Corporate Islam: Sharia and the Modern Workplace*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Philip Rodrigues, 'Hadi Awang - Deeply flawed envoy with deeply flawed strategy', *Aliran*, May 26, 2020.

¹⁸ Cited in S. Thayarapan, 'Why wasn't Hadi guest of honour at Chinese community dinner?', *Malaysiakini*, March 7, 2022.

Despite Malaysia's descent towards kleptocracy, following more than six decades of Muslim leadership under the UMNO (United Malay National Organisation)-led *Barisan Nasional* (BN or National Front) government, Hadi ironically warned, "As long as the power of Islamic governance isn't upheld, then those who rule would not care about sin and reward, would rob the people's wealth and so on."¹⁹ Notwithstanding PAS's past alliance with secular parties such as the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), the Islamist politician has accused non-Muslims of promoting corruption for giving bribes to Muslims and charged the DAP with being "pro-communist" and supportive of the LGBTQ community.²⁰

Passive Secular States in Muslim-Majority Southeast Asia

Founding nationalists such as Indonesia's Sukarno and Malaysia's Tunku Abdul Rahman were attracted to the inclusive passive secular democratic states in the West, as well as the modernising secular states in the Middle East. The 'soft separation' between religion inherent in the passive secular state was perceived as being more attuned to the realities of multiple affiliations in multireligious societies. They recognised that Islam, like other religious traditions, is "multi-vocal" and embodies a diversity of perspectives.²¹

Sukarno and Tunku recognised that civic nationalism does not seek to homogenise society but can unify it around shared values based on citizenship and constitutional rights and obligations. Elaborating on the unifying dynamic of civic nationalism, Shashi Tharoor observed, "Rather than ethnicity, religion, language, or fear of the 'other' serving as a unifying force, the nation is held together by a sense of mutual commitment to a common set of ideals, values and rules."²² Much like passive secularism, civic nationalism offers the possibility of devotion to the nation as well as sectarian (ethnic and religious) affiliation by valuing diversity and pluralism. In the promotion of diversity, civic nationalism can assist in averting democracy from "descending into crass majoritarianism by collectively protecting the rights of religious, linguistic, sexual, cultural, and other minorities".²³

Indonesia's founding nationalists did not view the modern state in Islamic terms, nor did they see the need to implement comprehensive *sharia* law. Having

¹⁹ S. Thayarapan, 'Why wasn't Hadi guest of honour at Chinese community dinner?', *Malaysiakini*, March 7, 2022.

²⁰ MalaysiaKini. 'Minister hopes Act 355 amendments can be tabled after GE15,' October 20, 2021.

²¹ Alfred Stepan, Religion, democracy and the 'twin tolerations', *Journal of Democracy*, 11 (4), 2000, p.37-57.

²² Shashi Tharoor, *The struggle for India's Soul*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2021), p.62.

²³ Shashi Tharoor, 2021, p.63.

rejected the *sharia* law dictates of the Jakarta Charter, the founding nationalists instead proposed five inclusive principles as the philosophical foundation of the inclusive secular-oriented state – known as *Pancasila*.²⁴ Nevertheless, conservative and radical Islamists have long contested the legitimacy of the *Pancasila* state, resorting to armed struggle in the early post-colonial era and after the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998. Inter alia, they were driven by the *Salafi Wahhabi* vision of an Islamic state based on comprehensive *sharia* law.

Following the fall of the Suharto regime, significant concessions were made to Islamists, in part to appease secessionists and conservative Islamists inspired by the Islamic state ideal. This has contributed to a deepening *Salafi-Wahhabi* Islamisation of the state and society in Indonesia, as manifested in the expansion of *sharia* by-laws at the local level, restrictions on the rights of Muslim women, and the rejection of non-Muslim leadership. Islamist hysteria against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (also known as Ahok), a Christian politician aligned with President Joko Widodo. Ahok was Governor of Jakarta in 2014-17 following Widodo's election to Presidency, and his re-election campaign serves as an example of the political upheaval that can be triggered by the weaponization of conservative Islamist doctrine. Instructively, 'moderate' Muslim politicians and political parties that benefitted from the hysteria whipped up by Islamists against Ahok, did little to robustly defend the civil rights of the beleaguered politician. Ahok was not only electorally defeated but charged and convicted of blasphemy against Islam.²⁵

In the Muslim world, religious actors and organisations commonly perceived as moderate may not consistently support democratic principles.²⁶ 'Moderate' Malaysian and Indonesian Islamist organisations exhibit both democratic and authoritarian values. They have been willing to forgo civil pluralist principles with regard to allegations of blasphemy against Islam, inclined to support male Muslim leadership in senior positions, restrict the expression of non-orthodox approaches to Islam, and oppose non-Muslim involvement in matters pertaining to Islam. These tendencies are consistent with conservative interpretations of Islam commonly found in authoritarian Muslim-majority states in the Middle East.²⁷

²⁴ Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton Uni. Press, 2000). p.39.

²⁵ 'Ahok trial: The blasphemy case testing Indonesian identity', BBC, February 14, 2017, Available at <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38902960>>

²⁶ Robert Hefner, 'Whatever happened to civil Islam?', *Asian Studies Review*, Vol.43, No.3, September 2019.

²⁷ Jeremy Menchik, 'Moderate Muslims and democratic breakdown in Indonesia', *Asian Studies Review*, Vol.43, No.3, 2019.

Notwithstanding the ambiguous proclivities of ‘moderate’ Islamists, the more radical Islamist demands in Indonesia have been tempered somewhat by the promotion of ‘civil Islam’.²⁸ Employing the lens and language of progressive Islamic scripture and philosophy, advocates of civil Islam and ‘*Islam Nusantara*’ (‘Islam of the Indonesian archipelago’) have been relatively effective in resisting demands for the implementation of an Islamic state. However, the passage of a new criminal code by the Indonesian parliament in December 2022, that will regulate morality in authoritarian measures, suggests that *Salafi Wahhabi* doctrine has made considerable incursions. The new code represents a potential setback, in terms of undermining the democratic gains accrued after the fall of the Suharto regime. In Malaysia, decades of throughgoing institutionalisation of *Salafi Wahhabi* Islamisation, unmediated by the absence of a critical mass of civil Islam actors, have enabled conservative Islamists to severely destabilise the secular underpinnings of the post-colonial state.²⁹

Contingent Moderates

Political scientists have long contemplated the following question: Do religious political actors have a ‘commitment problem’ with respect to political and religious pluralism?³⁰ The European experience illustrates that the inclusion of ‘radical’ (anti-system) parties into the parliamentary system can contribute to their ‘moderation’, as they engage in trade-offs between participation and radicalism. This was the trajectory of Christian and socialist political actors in Western Europe and Latin America.³¹ In the first wave democracies of Western Europe, the short-term political aspirations of elites rather than their democratic motivation and ideals, produced “political by-products that led over time to democratic politics”.³² The political trajectory of religious actors in Europe and North America has,

²⁸ Robert Hefner, 2000, p.218.

²⁹ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, ‘Careful what you wish for: Salafi Islamisation and Authoritarian governance in Malaysia’, In *The Politics of Islamism: Diverging Visions and Trajectories*, Edited by John L. Esposito, Lily Zubaidah Rahim and Naser Ghobadzadeh, (NY: PalgraveMacmillan, 2018), p.179-206

³⁰ Stathis N. Kalyvas, ‘Commitment Problems in Emerging Democracies: The Case of Religious Parties’, *Comparative Politics* 32, no. 4 (2000).

³¹ Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, (London: Routledge1999); Adam Przeworski and John Sprague, *Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988); Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

³² Valerie Bunce, “Comparative Democratization: Big and Bounded Generalizations,” *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 6-7 (2000): 726.

however, been contradicted by more recent research³³ on conservative American and European Christian nationalists that have forged alliances with ethno-nationalist, populist, and authoritarian political actors and parties.

Studies of Islamist political parties have found that ostensibly ‘moderating’ shifts often emerge not from a normative revision of ideology but, like non-religious parties, through pragmatic or tactical calculation.³⁴ Brower’s study of cross-ideological alliances in the Middle East found that rather than ideological convergence, these political and policy shifts are strongly reflective of the integration of some liberal discourses whilst maintaining illiberal positions such as resistance to equal citizenship rights for women and non-Muslims as well as the imposition of *sharia* laws. This perspective aligns with Jaffrelot’s contention that bouts of political moderation by Hindu nationalists in India are inconsistent and often oscillate, shaped by broader political contexts.³⁵

Importantly, the growing number of Islamist actors and organisations engaged in electoral politics have raised pertinent questions. What constitutes ‘political moderation’? Should religious political parties be loosely characterised as ‘moderate’ even though they may reject equal citizenship rights for women, non-Muslims, and non-orthodox Muslims, and are opposed to freedom of religious belief and unbelief for Muslims? These questions go some way towards untangling the conundrum of Islamist political parties and organisations benefitting from being labelled as moderate without having to satisfy minimum procedural and democratic standards. These standards include a commitment to civil and political liberties, freedom of speech and religious belief, and equal citizenship rights for women and religious minorities. Loose conceptual labelling has contributed to the phenomenon of conceptual stretching³⁶ and renders the term ‘moderate’ misleading.

³³ Refer to Katherine Stewart, *The power worshippers: Inside the dangerous rise of religious nationalism*, (NY: Bloomsbury, 2020).

³⁴ Michaëlle Browers, *Political ideology in the Arab world: Accommodation and transformation*, (NY: Cambridge Uni. Press, 2009).

³⁵ C. Jaffrelot, ‘Refining the moderation thesis: Two religious parties and Indian democracy’, *Democratization*, Vol.20, No.5, 2013, p.876-894.

³⁶ David Collier and Steven Levitsky, ‘Democracy with adjectives: Conceptual innovation in comparative research’, *World Politics*, Vol.49, No.3, 1997.

Unsettled National Questions

More than six decades after Malaysia attained political independence in 1957, the country remains beset by unsettled ‘national questions’ pertaining to the following:

Whether the Malaysian state is secular or Islamic; Whether the civil courts have the constitutional power to override *sharia* court rulings and *fatwas*; Whether the *sharia* courts have the power to override the letter and spirit of the secular constitution; Whether Malay/*bumiputera* status entitles those individuals to special rights and privileges in perpetuity; Whether ethnic and religious minorities are entitled to equal citizenship rights.

These unsettled national questions have impeded the forging of a cohesive nation based on shared constitutional principles and civic values. As Malaysian scholar Mavis Putucheary presciently observed, “No nation can be securely grounded if the founding charter of its existence is confused and contested. A frail or fractured foundation is no basis for ‘sharing a nation’.”³⁷

Malaysia’s founding nationalist Tunku Abdul Rahman repeatedly affirmed the secular foundations of the country’s liberal-oriented constitution. He asserted that “the whole Constitution was framed on the basis that the Federation would be a secular state” and envisioned the Federation as a “multiracial society... a successful and progressive nation, a true democracy and an example to the world of harmony and tolerance”.³⁸ Shortly after Malaysia gained independence from the British, Tunku Abdul Rahman declared in a parliamentary address that “this country is not an Islamic state as it is generally understood, we merely provide that Islam shall be the official religion of the state.”³⁹ Indicative of the status of the Malaysian post-colonial state, Article 4(1) of the Federal Constitution clearly stipulates that the constitution, not *sharia* law, is the supreme law of the Federation, with Islam only applying in 24 areas specified in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution. Consistent with this stipulation, contractual issues are not resolved by the *Sharia* Courts, even when both litigants are Muslims. Prime Ministers such as Abdul Razak Hussein and Hussein Onn had also affirmed that Malaysia was conceived as a secular democratic state based on equal citizenship rights.⁴⁰

³⁷ Mavis Putucheary, ‘Malaysia’s social contract: The invention and historical evolution of an idea’, in N. Othman, M. Putucheary and C. Kessler, *Sharing the nation*, (PJ: SIRD, 2008), p.26.

³⁸ Cited in J. Soper and J. Fetzer, *Religion and nationalism in global perspective*, (NY: Cambridge Uni. Press, 2018), p.145;156.

³⁹ Cited in Ahmad Ibrahim, ‘The position of Islam in the constitution of Malaysia’, in A. Ibrahim, S. Siddique and Y. Hussain (eds), *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 1985), p.217.

⁴⁰ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, 2018.

Culturally and intellectually confident, at ease with their Malay identity and the liberal constitutional order, Malaysia's founders recognised the complex challenges associated with applying a constitution based on liberal democratic rights in a society that is less than liberal. They also recognised that liberal democratic rights, the rule of law, and the principle of 'constitutional morality' based on fundamental rights⁴¹ were important instruments in mitigating the slide towards *bumiputera* majoritarianism.⁴² Reflective of the concerns of founding nationalists in containing 'sons of the soil' majoritarian impulses, Malaysia's first Chief Justice Suffian Hashim, in the tradition of early Malay nationalists at ease with liberal principles, noted, "For many generations, the various ethnic groups in Malaya have lived in peace and harmony and there are [sic] no overwhelming desire that the newly independent state should be an Islamic state."⁴³

As 'living' documents, constitutional amendments are expected to meet the challenges of the times by flexibly adjusting to contemporary needs and imperatives. For the democratic constitutional spirit to be sustained, however, these adjustments are most effectively undertaken by democratic processes.⁴⁴ But this has not always been the case in Malaysia, where the BN government's past super-majority status in federal parliament allowed it to initiate constitutional amendments and pass legislation that contradicted the democratic spirit of the post-colonial constitution.

Article 3 of the Malaysia's post-colonial Constitution enshrines Islam as the religion of the Federation but also affirms that other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony. Similarly, Article 8(1), Article 11 and 12 guarantees freedom of religion – albeit conditionally and subject to caveats. Indicative of this caveat, Article 11 (4) provides that state and federal law "may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam".⁴⁵ In the same nuanced fashion, Article 12 states that discrimination against any citizen on the basis of religion is prohibited in the area of public education, whilst allowing the federal and state governments to maintain Islamic institutions and schools.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Shashi Tharoor, 2021, p.98-99.

⁴² Malays and other *bumiputera* make up more about 70% of the population.

⁴³ Suffian Hashim, The relationship between Islam and the state in Malaya, *Intisari*, Vol.1, No.1, 1962, p.9

⁴⁴ Shashi Tharoor, 2021, p.104-108.

⁴⁵ Andrew Harding, 'Malaysia: Religious pluralism and the constitution in a contested polity', *Middle East Law and Governance*, 4 (2012), p.368.

⁴⁶ Andrew Harding, 2012, p.369.

These constitutional articles appear contradictory when understood in ‘black and white’ terms rather than the arguably nuanced logic adopted by the national founders and constitutional framers.⁴⁷ This nuanced logic raises several questions. Did the founders and framers naively assume that the structures of the democratic state would be able to delicately balance and harmonise the nuanced constitutional guarantees? Should their optimism be understood within the context of the tradition of delicate balancing, harmonisation, and syncretism based on the blending of traditional culture (*adat*) and religion which had prevailed for centuries in pre-colonial Malaysia and Indonesia?

In contrast to the nuanced logic of Malaysia’s founders and framers, conservative Islamists are inclined to point to Articles 3 and 153 of the Constitution, which recognises Islam as the national religion and the special position of Malay-Muslims, as evidence in support of their contention that Malaysia was not conceived as a secular constitutional state. But does this Islamist contention expose a deliberate reconstruction of the country’s history or a poor understanding of the diversity of secular states?⁴⁸

Secular states vary from the assertive secularism of France and Kemalist Turkey, to the passive secularism of Indonesia, England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark. In assertive secular states, religion is ostensibly relegated to the private sphere. By contrast, passive secular states have long adopted inclusionary approaches towards the public visibility of religion and prioritised state neutrality towards religion, even when there is an identified state religion.⁴⁹ However, secular states have shifted along the spectrum in a ‘swinging pendulum’ in terms of state approaches and policies to religion. These shifts are often driven by power realignments between ideological and political groups. In an increasing number of countries, the pendulum has swung away from inclusive passive secularism towards states based on ethno- and religious nationalist principles. India, Malaysia, and to a lesser extent the United States, have all swung in that direction.

It is worth noting that pendulum swings are often triggered by critical junctures associated with agency and structural conditions which facilitate systemic change such as the establishment of institutions and narratives that, in turn, generate path dependent processes. Once a new paradigm is consolidated

⁴⁷ Murray Hunter, ‘The struggle between two visions of Malaysia’, *Malaysiakini*, November 20, 2021.

⁴⁸ From their speeches and writings, I have found many Malaysian politicians, even from non-religious parties such as PKR, exhibiting a poor understanding of the varieties of secularism and the secular state and mischaracterising secularism as a belief system that is opposed to religion and religiosity.

⁴⁹ Refer to Ahmed Kuru (2009) for a comparative discussion of the spectrum of secular states and varieties of secularism.

and path dependence created, subsequent change becomes difficult to ignite without the force of a new critical juncture.⁵⁰

Malaysia's shift from passive secularism was reinforced by the 1988 amendment of Article 121 of the Federal constitution, which dictates that the High Courts "shall have no jurisdiction in respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of the syariah courts".⁵¹ Inter alia, Article 121 (1A) generated jurisdictional dualism in the Malaysian legal system without incorporating processes such as comprehensive discussions in federal parliament and the broader community. It is worth noting that the amendment was controversially rushed through a sedated legislative assembly as a result of the detention-without-trial of numerous opposition politicians and civil society activists under the Internal Security Act (ISA) in 1987.⁵²

Article 121 (1A) remains highly contentious, casting a long shadow over freedom of religion and minority rights in Malaysia. The amendment has made it very difficult to safeguard the rights of children in custody cases where the divorced, and often newly converted, former husbands have unilaterally converted their child(ren) to Islam, ostensibly to strengthen their custody application. Article 121 (1A) has also made it very difficult for Muslims to leave the faith, as this process is more commonly adjudicated by *sharia* courts. These examples indicate that the constitutional right to freedom of religion has been diminished for Muslim and non-Muslim Malaysians alike.⁵³

Malaysia's precarious accommodation of *sharia* and civil law⁵⁴ is likely to persist as long as the constitution is not fully recognised as the supreme law of the country, as enunciated in Article 4(1) in the Federal Constitution. Since the 1988 amendment noted above, civil courts have tended to avoid challenging the rulings of the *sharia* courts. However, in the past few years, civil courts have adopted a more assertive stance, particularly under the leadership of Chief Justice Tengku Maimun binti Tuan Mat, the first female Chief Justice appointed by the reformist *Pakatan Harapan* (PH or Alliance of Hope) government.

⁵⁰ James Mahoney, *The legacies of liberalism: Path dependence and political regimes in Central America*, (NY: Johns Hopkins Press, 2001).

⁵¹ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 'Implementing Islamic law within a modern constitutional framework', *Islamic Studies*, Vol.48, No.2, 2009, p.163

⁵² Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 2009, p.163.

⁵³ Thio Li-ann, 'Apostasy and religious freedom: Constitutional issues arising from the Lina Joy litigation', *Malayan Law Journal*, 2, 2006.

⁵⁴ Andrew Harding, 2012, p.385.

Rukun Negara: An Inclusive National Ideology

Malaysia's post-colonial constitutional order has been reaffirmed by the *Rukun Negara* or national principles, promulgated by the UMNO-led BN coalition government following the May 1969 race riots. Consistent with the spirit of Malaysia's Federal Constitution, the *Rukun Negara* promotes inclusive democratic values that embody the multiethnic and multi-religious fabric of nation. The unifying *Rukun Negara* principles include the following:

- Belief in God;
- Achieving a more perfect unity;
- Preserving a democratic way of life;
- Creating a just society where the prosperity of the country can be enjoyed in a fair and equitable manner;
- Guaranteeing a liberal approach towards the country's rich and varied cultural traditions;
- Building a progressive society that utilises science and modern technology.

Rukun Negara's core principles and values such as democracy, liberalism, and a progressive society based on science and technology contradict the *Salafi Wahhabi* Islamist goals of establishing an Islamic state based on literal interpretations of the Qur'an, *sharia* law, and divine sovereignty.⁵⁵ As such, Islamists have indicated their intention to revise *Rukun Negara's* first principle 'Belief in God' to 'Belief in Allah',⁵⁶ on the argument that this revision is consistent with the constitutional recognition (Article 3) of Islam as the national religion.

Instructively, *Rukun Negara* resonates closely with Indonesia's inclusive *Pancasila* national ideology. As in *Rukun Negara*, the first *Pancasila* principle affirms the 'Belief in God', without identifying *Allah* or *Islam*. *Rukun Negara* and *Pancasila* emphasise progressive principles such as humanitarianism, nationalism, democracy, and social justice.

Ketuanan Melayu Islam: An Assertive Ethno-Islamist Doctrine

In contrast to the devaluation of the *Rukun Negara*, ethno-religious nationalists champion the *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* doctrine, based on the premise that as the traditional owners of *Tanah Melayu* (Land of the Malays), Malays and other *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) have special rights and privileges, including the right to socio-political dominance in perpetuity. According to this logic of

⁵⁵ Soper and Fetzer, *Religion and nationalism in global perspective*, (NY: Cambridge Uni Press, 2018), p.153.

⁵⁶ Soper and Fetzer, 2018, p.153.

entitlement, non-*bumiputera* cannot expect to hold senior leadership positions in government.

The term *Ketuanan Melayu* does not appear in the Malaysian Federal Constitution and was not articulated by nationalist leaders at the time of independence. For example, UMNO's submission to the Reid Commission's deliberations on political independence acknowledged that the 'special position' of Malays "should not in any way infringe the legitimate interests of the other communities or adversely affect or diminish the rights and opportunities at present enjoyed by them".⁵⁷

Instructively, the *Ketuanan Melayu* doctrine was crystallized after the May 1969 race riots. Following the riots, the Sedition Act was amended, making it illegal to discuss 'sensitive' issues such as the special position of *bumiputera* and the national language, enabling the *Ketuanan Melayu* doctrine to develop without challenge. A comprehensive affirmative action programme, referred to as the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1971-1990), was instituted to enhance the marginal economic status of the Malay and *bumiputera* communities and eradicate the identification of economic function with race.

The 1969 riots constitute a critical juncture in Malaysia's political trajectory. Inter alia, they blunted the post-colonial state's relatively inclusive approach to nation-building. Malaysia's post-1969 model of governance, aided by the architecture of the NEP and electoral gerrymandering, has become increasingly premised on Malay majoritarian dominance.

As the NEP approached its scheduled expiration in 1990, ethno-nationalist exhortations became increasingly pronounced. Not coincidentally, a more fulsome formulation of the *Ketuanan Melayu* doctrine was publicly unveiled by UMNO politician Abdullah Ahmad in 1986. Abdullah claimed that the NEP was integral to the 'social contract' of the 1957 independence negotiations, and that as "the political system in Malaysia is founded on Malay dominance ...the NEP must continue to sustain Malay dominance in the political system in line with the contract of 1957."⁵⁸ Abdullah's controversial speech was purposefully delivered in Singapore, where the Malay minority had been relegated to the socio-economic and political margins in the city-state governed by the Chinese-dominated Peoples' Action Party (PAP) government.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Cited in N.J. Funston 'UMNO – From Hidup Melayu to Ketuanan Melayu', in Bridget Welsh (ed), *The End of UMNO?: Essays on Malaysia's dominant party*, (PJ: SIRD, 2016), p.19.

⁵⁸ *The Straits Times*, September 9, 1986.

⁵⁹ Lily Z Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The political and educational marginality of the Malay Community* (KL: Oxford Uni. Press, 1998/2001).

Abdullah's speech reaffirmed UMNO's shift towards the assertive Malay supremacy doctrine and a retreat from the country's passive secular constitutional moorings. Henceforth, the *Ketuanan Melayu* narrative became integral to UMNO's lexicon and Malay identity, positioning Malays and other *bumiputera* communities at the core of the Malaysian nation whilst relegating non-indigenous Malaysians to the status of the perpetual 'Other'. Having positioned Malays at the core of Malaysian identity, the primacy of the Malay language, culture, and Islam was henceforth considered beyond public discussion and non-negotiable. The *Ketuanan Melayu* doctrine has become so embedded in the national narrative that even Malay politicians from multiracial parties appear to subscribe to or are sympathetic to it.

Donald Horowitz observed that "ethnic politics is a high-stakes game, and there are strong inclinations to stay with what is familiar."⁶⁰ This path dependent attachment to the familiar appears to have been arguably the default position of key leaders in the short-lived (2018-20) reformist PH government, ironically led by an unreformed ethno-nationalist champion who was previously Prime Minister of an UMNO government (1981-2003). Not surprisingly, PH's Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, retreated from the 'New Malaysia' reform agenda when the electoral incentives for persisting with this agenda failed to reap electoral returns, as epitomised by PH's repeated by-election defeats during its 22 months in government.

Pressured by ethno-nationalists from opposition parties and broader Malay society, the PH government withdrew from its intention to join the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination following massive rallies organised by Malay ethno-Islamists. This was a battle the reluctant reformist Prime Minister was not willing to wage. Ironically, by capitulating to ethno-Islamist pressure, the PH government became even more vulnerable to unrelenting ethno-Islamist backlashes, which finally culminated in a soft coup in February 2020.

Ketuanan Melayu Islam's (Unelected and Elected) Power Brokers

As discussed earlier, the expanded state and federal Islamic bureaucracy had the effect of shoring up UMNO's Islamic credentials as well as enlarging the authority of the Islamic bureaucracy and the state *ulama*. In classic *quid pro quo*

⁶⁰ Donald Horowitz, 'Ethnic power sharing: Three big problems', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.25(2), 2014, p.8.

fashion, UMNO rewarded the state *ulama* by expanding their policy jurisdiction and judicial purview.⁶¹

Inspired by *Salafī-Wahhabi* theology from Saudi Arabia and emboldened by their influence within various state agencies, the state *ulama* tend to have scant regard for the civil constitutional underpinnings of the state. At mosque sermons, they have warned Muslims about safeguarding ‘Muslim unity’ and ‘Muslim dominance’. Muslims have also been repeatedly reminded about alleged conspiracies hatched by non-Muslims and other ‘enemies’ of Islam, allegedly intent on manipulating Muslims by promoting concepts such as feminism, liberalism, and constitutionalism.⁶²

Since the 1980s, *fatwās* (religious decrees) issued by the Islamic bureaucracies have been accorded the force of law and rarely challenged, even when these *fatwas* contradict key aspects of the constitution. Given the expanded jurisdiction of the *sharia* courts, civil courts tend to avoid testing the constitutionality of *fatwās* and *sharia* court rulings, prompting the legal scholar Shad Faruqi to caution that a “silent rewriting of the Constitution is taking place” as Malaysia gravitates toward “religious authoritarianism”.⁶³

The state *ulama* also appear indifferent to ethical questions pertaining to economic justice, widespread corruption, persecution of political dissidents, and unsolved disappearances of Christian clerics and *Shia* activists. These disappearances, according to the Malaysian Human Rights Commission, are purportedly the work of state security agents inspired by *Salafī Wahhabi* capital punishments associated with apostasy.⁶⁴ Similarly, the involvement of senior government officials in major corruption scandals appears not to seriously alarm the state *ulama*, who are more preoccupied with expanding the jurisdiction of the *sharia* courts and Islamic bureaucracy, implementing *hudūd* (Islamic criminal law) and maintaining Malay- Islamic supremacy.

As only the *ulama* possess the religious credentials to conduct textual analysis, public discussions of Islam are therefore restricted to the *ulama* and Islamic officials with official accreditation and written authority (*tauliah*).⁶⁵ Indicative of the policing of this norm, international scholars of ‘liberal Islam’ have

⁶¹ Rahim, 2018.

⁶² Rahim, 2018.

⁶³ Shad Saleem Faruqi. 'Shariah Laws, Civil Laws and the Federal Constitution', in G25 Malaysia, *Breaking the Silence: Voices of Moderation*, (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2016), p.74.

⁶⁴ Stephen Ng and Hwa Beng Lee, *Where Is Pastor Raymond Koh?* (Petaling Jaya: Semai Maju Sdn Bhd, 2019).

⁶⁵ Documents that show who the person is or what they claim to be.

been denied visas and deported for discussing reformist interpretations of Islam.⁶⁶

Malaysia's deepening religious authoritarianism is exemplified by the erosion of the rights of Muslim minorities and non-Muslims. *Aḥmadīya* and *Shia* Muslims have been denounced as non-Muslims, Christian publications prevented from using the word *Allah*, and churches and Hindu temples attacked. The country's descent towards religious authoritarianism has been documented by the UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights, Karima Bennouna.⁶⁷ After a fact-finding mission to Malaysia in September 2017, Bennouna prepared a report that raised the following concerns:

- Growing Islamisation of Malaysian society and polity, based on an increasingly rigid interpretation of Islam;
- Pressure on Muslim women to comply with a dress code which is not traditional to Malaysia;
- Proposed adoption of *hudud* legislation which violates international law;
- Banning of books, particularly those that are based on contextual and progressive interpretations of Islam;⁶⁸
- *Fatwas* against women's rights activists;
- Harassment of progressive Muslims.

Since the 1980s, UMNO has been transformed from a soft ethno-nationalist to an assertive ethno-Islamist party. Indicative of UMNO's ideological transformation, then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad declared in 2001 that Malaysia is an Islamic state. The politicisation of Islam went into higher gear following UMNO's relatively poor electoral performance in the 2008 and 2013 general elections, following revelations of billion-dollar corruption scandals which implicated former Prime Minister Najib Razak. These revelations contributed to the defeat of the UMNO-led BN coalition by the reformist PH coalition in the 2018 general elections. Having evolved into an ethno-Islamist party, UMNO's subsequent formal alliance with Islamist party PAS in 2019 was unsurprising. The *Muafakat Nasional* (National Concord) alliance was forged in the name of facilitating 'Muslim

⁶⁶ Refer to Mustafa Akyol, *Reopening Muslim minds: Return to reason and tolerance*, (NY: St Martins, 2021).

⁶⁷ Karima Bennouna, "UN Expert Embarks on Malaysia Mission to Assess Cultural Rights," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, Available at <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2017/09/un-expert-embarks-malaysia-mission-assess-cultural-rights>>

⁶⁸ The banned books include those authored by prominent scholars, authors of Islam and comparative religion and Muslim intellectuals such as Amina Wadud, Karen Armstrong and Irshad Manji, as well as scientific treatise such as Charles Darwin's 'Origin of Species'.

unity'. In periods of electoral setback, Islamic rhetoric tends to be more vociferously invoked as a political refuge and salve.

Ethno-Islamist parties have regularly accused secular-oriented parties of being anti-Malay, anti-Islam, and under the control of the Chinese-based DAP. These allegations paved the way for the collapse of the reformist and democratically elected PH government in February 2020, after being in federal government for only 22 months. The soft coup which toppled PH was successfully hatched by the collusion of unreformed ethno-nationalists within PH and opposition parties UMNO and PAS in the name of upholding 'Muslim unity'. Ethno-Islamists felt aggrieved by non-Muslims holding numerous senior cabinet and executive positions such as finance minister, attorney general, and chief justice, as this was perceived as undermining the 'sons of the soil' status of *bumiputera*. As ethno-Islamist dominance was thought to be under siege, the elected PH government could thus be justifiably dispensed with, ostensibly in the name of defending race and religion. The soft coup may have been arguably countered if the PH leadership had constructed a coherent multiracial 'New Malaysia' narrative which reaffirmed the federal constitution in championing their reformist nation re/building project. Why this initiative was not seriously pursued by PH is worthy of rigorous examination.

In the US, resembling Malaysian ethno- and religious nationalists who successfully ousted a democratically elected PH government, Trump's 'sons of the soil' 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA, arguably code for 'Make America White Again') supporters attempted to prevent the Congressional confirmation of Joe Biden to the presidency by partaking in an insurrection on January 6, 2021. On the day of the failed coup, the defeated one-term president exhorted MAGA insurrectionists to "fight like hell". Like their Malaysian ethno-religious nationalist counterparts, Trump's MAGA supporters and many within the Republican leadership were willing to trample on constitutional and democratic principles and disregard the popular will by overturning the outcome of a democratic election.

Concluding Remarks: Loosening and Tightening of the Global Gordian Knot

The early twenty-first century has witnessed a global shift towards authoritarian governance that is strongly propelled by political alliances between conservative ethno-religious nationalists. In many countries, they have destabilised the foundational constitutional order based on passive secularism and undermined democratic norms and processes in order to reclaim the privileged status of 'sons of the soil' communities. The ethno-religious nationalist narrative is strongly driven by accounts of victimhood, existential threats, demographic displacement, economic exploitation, and supposed incursions by the racial and religious 'Other'.

Such narratives have been articulated by authoritarian and populist elites, political parties, and the global network of ethno-religious nationalists.

In the United Kingdom (UK), the anti-European Union (EU) Brexit campaign evoked images of swarms of refugees and low-paid foreign workers flooding into the country. The campaign propagated a nostalgia for a 'purer' society by the control of borders against 'the Other'. The Leave EU campaign's 'Make Britain More British Again' (where 'British' can be read as 'White') slogan closely reflected Trump's MAGA slogan in the US, while calls for tighter control of British borders resonated with Trump's border wall project against the immigrant 'non-White Other'. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz Party has also demonised the EU, propagating a Christian nationalist rhetoric geared towards containing the immigration of Muslims and promoting 'traditional families'. At the same time, democratic institutions and norms have been undermined.

Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has been rationalised by recourse to the ethno-religious nationalist narrative of protecting a 'single people' in the Russo sphere who are supposedly threatened by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and more broadly, the West. Putin's sweeping 'single people' concept includes Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians, as well as other communities in central Europe. Indeed, just before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Putin declared that Ukraine is an "inalienable part of our history, culture and spiritual space".⁶⁹

In India, the country's secular post-colonial constitutional order has been severely destabilised following the political rise of ethno-religious nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Under Modi's increasingly authoritarian Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP or Indian Peoples Party) government, India has been reimagined as a Hindu nation (*Hindutva*). Modi and the BJP's historical narrative of Hindu victimhood and humiliation has justified the targeting and persecution of the 'Muslim Other', projected as acts of majoritarian Hindu patriotism.⁷⁰ Thus far, the reimagining of India as a culturally authentic Hindu nation has reaped considerable electoral dividends for Modi and the BJP. The *Hindutva* doctrine of cultural authenticity, based on the belief that non-Hindus cannot claim genuine allegiance to the nation, closely resembles Malaysia's *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* doctrine. These sectarian doctrines have deviated from the inclusive and passive secular nationalist visions of both Indian and Malaysian nationalist founders.

⁶⁹ Peter Pomerantsev, 'Vladimir Putin: What's going on inside his head', *The Guardian*, February 27, 2022; Nathaniel Rachman, 'What is a nation?', *Persuasion* podcast, March 7, 2022. Available at <<https://www.persuasion.community/p/what-is-a-nation>>

⁷⁰ Sashi Tharoor, 2021, p.173-175

The soft coup in Malaysia, which toppled the elected PH government, and the armed insurrection by Trump's MAGA supporters at the Capitol are emblematic of the anti-democratic backlash by aggrieved ethno-religious nationalists – the supposed 'sons of the soil' defending their 'rightful status' as guardians of the nation. On the day of the January 6 insurrection, Trump warned his MAGA supporters that "if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore,"⁷¹ Ethno-nationalist narratives like MAGA and *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* contradict constitutional and democratic principles. In the name of saving the nation, restoring religion and returning 'nativist sons' to their rightful place, the rejection of democratic electoral outcomes (that do not go the way of ethno-nationalists) are justified.

Ethno-nationalism has been reenergised by political parties engaged in strategic alliances with conservative religious movements. Since the passage of US civil rights legislation in the 1960s, the Republican Party has become a predominantly a conservative, White, rural-based party that is increasing reliant on conservative White nationalist Christians for electoral support. As the latter are the Republican Party's most loyal support base,⁷² the party has embraced anti-reproductive rights agendas and other conservative White Christian nationalist platforms, including placing restrictions within school curricula pertaining to topics such as slavery and 'non-traditional' families.

White Christian nationalism and *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* narratives have been fuelled by deep-seated anxieties associated with a fear of (real or imagined) loss of their 'sons of the soil' status. This sense of impending loss has been exacerbated by economic insecurity associated with stagnant wages, precarious jobs, pessimistic prospects for upward economic mobility, and the belief that their 'culturally authentic' way of life is under existential threat. Anxiety and perceived threats from the invasive 'Other' have made insecure religious and 'sons of the soil' communities nostalgic for authoritarian social hierarchies.⁷³

Like MAGA, the *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* agenda is geared towards maintaining Malay political dominance, including a willingness to topple an elected federal government to safeguard this agenda. Also, like MAGA, the *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* narrative has unsettled key national questions and destabilised constitutional principles.

⁷¹ Ruth Ben Ghiat, *Strongmen: Why they succeed and how they fall*, (London: Profile Books, 2020).

⁷² Barbara Walter, *How civil wars start and how to stop them*, (US: Penguin Books, 2022).

⁷³ Diana Mutz, 'Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote', *PNAS*, Vol.115, No.19, 2018, p.4330-339.

UMNO's evolution into an assertive ethno-Islamist party is geared towards maintaining its support base within the numerically dominant but increasingly politically divided Malay-Muslim community. However, the Malay-Muslim unity narrative has become increasingly hollow as the growing number of ethno-nationalist Malay-based parties have diluted the collective clout of the 'sons of the soil' electorate.

However, the global ethno- and religious nationalist 'Gordian knot' appears to be loosening somewhat, following the lacklustre performance of the Republican Party in the November 2022 mid-term elections in the US. President Biden and the Democratic Party's election theme of saving the country's democracy and preserving fundamental rights and freedom against assaults by "extreme MAGA Republicans" resonated with Democrat, independent, and moderate Republican voters. Such voters are recognising that Biden's forebodings about the fate of US democracy and warnings that "we have a problem with this rising tide of White supremacy in America" are real.⁷⁴

Malaysia's November 2022 general election results, where the PH coalition led by Anwar Ibrahim won the largest number of parliamentary seats, suggest that the ethno-Islamist rhetoric of fear, grievance, and victimhood has failed to resonate with Malay-Muslims and non-Muslims - disillusioned by the extensive corruption scandals and poor economic governance record of ethno-Islamist parties. At the same time, multiracial parties and coalitions such as PH, with clear policy platforms based on social justice and inclusive nation-building, appear to be gaining traction amongst largely urban and educated middle-class voters. Like the US, Malaysia has become increasingly polarised along class, ethnic, religious, educational, and demographic lines. The ethno-nationalist Gordian Knot appears to be tightening in rural and predominantly White/Malay locales while loosening in urban and diverse multiracial regions.

As the country case studies analysed in this paper highlight, the struggle for a multiracial democracy based on civic nationalism, citizenship rights and social justice remains a challenging but achievable nation-building endeavour. Integral to this challenge is the role of ethno-religious nationalists in resisting the building of a multiracial and multireligious democracy as they seek refuge in authoritarian values, principles and practices. Ethno-religious nationalists have obfuscated the grand vision of the founders, a vision inflected with contradictions and ambivalences stemming from the truncated lens of an earlier era.

⁷⁴ Steve Phillips, 'How Whiteness poses the greatest threat to US democracy', *The Guardian*, October 4, 2022.

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