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"Lim Cheng Po came to tea. He took it in the English manner, enjoyed the tomato sandwiches and the fruitcake, said, in his Balliol voice: 'A pity one can't get crumpets here.' He was a solicitor from Penang.... He was plump and not unhandsome, his Chinese blood hardly apparent . . . He talked now about the troubles in Penang that had just ended—terrorism and a curfew on that one-time peaceful island....

'Who starts it all?' asked Crabbe.

'My dear chap, that's rather a naïve question, isn't it? It just starts. Some blame the Malays, others the Chinese. Perhaps a Malay shakes his fist at a Chettiar money-lender and, for some obscure reason, that sets off a brawl in a Chinese cabaret. Or a British tommy gets tight in K.L. and the Tamils start spitting at a Sikh policeman. The fact is that the component races of this exquisite and impossible country just don't get on. There was, it's true, a sort of illusion of getting on when the British were in full control. But self-determination's a ridiculous idea in a mixed-up place like this. There's no nation. There's no common culture, language, literature, religion. I know the Malays want to impose all these things on the others, but that obviously won't work. Damn it all, their language isn't civilized . . .' He drank his tea and, like any Englishman in the tropics, began to sweat after it. 'When we British finally leave there's going to be hell.' "[1]

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Anthony Burgess's novel *Beds in the East*, from which these words were taken, was first published in 1959. Burgess, a colonial administrator in Malaya and Borneo from 1954 through 1960, knew well the terrain about which he wrote. In the novel, a friend, Lim Cheng-Po, is

talking to Victor Crabbe, a Chief Education Officer in the colonial government. The passage refers to the "three races"—Malay, Chinese, and Indian—that were a social-structural legacy of the British. It illustrates how local minds, such as Lim Cheng-Po's, could be colonized by the overlords who invited an elite few to enter the margins of their "inner circle."

Those who participated in the planning for the new Malaysia were well aware that they had inherited a volatile racial/cultural social structure that had been constructed and defined by the British. From its founding as an independent nation-state, Malaysia had the goal of establishing a successful multicultural society composed of three traditionally isolated and mutually distrustful ethnic/cultural groups, the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians. Malaysia has achieved remarkable economic and educational growth and thus far has avoided almost all of the destructive ethnic violence that has been the fate of too many new nations built, phoenix-like, from the ashes of exploitative colonial regimes. In this essay, I will draw on theories and research from social psychology to offer hypotheses about why, despite success in implementing programs designed to bring about multicultural alliances, many Malaysians remain concerned about the nation's ethnic fragility.

Shamsul A.B. urges us to examine race and ethnicity in Malaysia not only from the perspective of " 'authority-defined' social reality, one which is authoritatively defined by people who are part of the dominant power structure" and whose positions are usually enshrined in political, legal, religious, and academic documents, but also from the perspective of " 'everyday-defined' social reality . . . which is experienced by the people in the course of their everyday life" and which "is usually disparate, fragmented and intensely personal."[2] He notes that everyday social reality is usually encoded orally or in popular visual and verbal media. After a brief historical background, I will use comments, opinions, and news reports gleaned during my January 2002 sojourn in Malaysia to sample some aspects of the everyday multicultural social reality of Malaysians. These comments reveal the underlying tensions among ethnic groups that must be addressed before Malaysia can fulfill its multicultural promise. I note with humility that the United States of America, likewise, has many racial and ethnic tensions that similarly need to be addressed.

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A. The British "Three Cultures" Model

At independence in 1957, Malaysia was a multicultural nation with three "official" major cultural groups in addition to a European governing elite. These were the Malay and indigenous "*Bumiputera*"[3] (people of the soil), the majority of whom were Muslim and spoke a dialect of Malay; the Indians, the majority of whom were Hindu Tamils; and the Chinese, the majority of whom practiced a mix of Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist spiritual traditions, and who spoke one of several Chinese dialects as well as Mandarin. That three and only three "cultures" were recognized reflected British colonial social reality more than that of the *Bumiputera*, Indian, and Chinese communities. Each group was administered differently by the British. Individuals found it in their self-interest to define themselves as a member of one of the communities in order to be officially "recognized" by the colonial overseers.

The *Bumiputera* were predominantly rural farmers or forest dwellers governed by sultans. Family law, but not civil or criminal law, was handled by traditional Islamic family courts. Few Malay children attended school. The Chinese and Indian communities had their own places of worship, community organizations, and schools that taught in Chinese or Tamil and used texts and other educational materials imported from China or India. The British made no attempt to build a common Malayan peninsular identity among the populace; the three communities existed largely segregated from each other. Speaking of Malaysia in 1998, Zaleha Kamaruddin states:

> [T]he most salient feature of the multiethnic society is that colonialism of almost a hundred years, has contributed to a situation in which, until the recent development plan periods . . . , each ethnic group has remained almost entirely culturally distinct from the others. In short, the Chinese and Indians have managed to preserve their own social and cultural identities within a new common environment and this has been made possible through a network of overlapping cleavages in the society in the form of each group's own social institutions, religious institutions and educational system.[4]

Shamsul A. B. elegantly describes how British-trained anthropologists helped construct the core ethnic identities found today in Malaysia that were reified in the Constitution as well as in the New Economic Plan and its successors: "In the Malaysian context, colonial knowledge not only elaborated and explained about but also sustained and justified the whole concept of plural society through the construction of essentialized ethnic categories…[N]ation-states…have become the natural embodiments of history, territory and society built entirely on colonial knowledge."[5]

An elite British school system overlay the other systems of education and helped produce a very small, Anglicized multicultural elite: "Only at the highest level of government and professions, is there extensive, effective contact between members of the three racial groups and even then, it is largely on the common grounds of the adopted British culture within each of the major ethnic societies of Malaysia, this westernized elite remains aloof from the more traditionally united ethnic communities that make up most of the urban and virtually all of the rural population."[6] One of my informants commented that all that this group of people have in common is Britain, a core identity that has supplanted their local Malaysian ethnicities, as in the case of Burgess's Lim Cheng-Po.

In fact, at the time of independence, a much more complex social, linguistic, and religious reality lay beneath this simple tripartite social categorization. That Malaysia has three ethnic groups ignores the diversity within these communities. The categories are a construction of the British who officially treated each group — "native" Malays, immigrants from China, and immigrants from India — as discrete, however great the diversity within them. The architects of the new nation-state of Malaysia inherited these categories and recognized them in the Constitution. In so doing, they helped create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which, over time, individual citizens have became more "Malay," "Chinese," or "Indian." However, even today, the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities actually are composed of many sub-communities of language, culture, and religious practice.[7]

B. Creating a New Nation-State: Malaysia

At the time of independence, elite representatives of the three "races" came together to create a parliamentary democracy composed of states with considerable power over local affairs. A primary goal of the new

national government was to create from the multiple communities a single multicultural nation with a common identity. A common language and a shared educational system were seen as important tools for helping achieve this. Nair-Venugopal quotes the 1956 report of the Education Committee: "The ultimate objective of education policy in this country must be to bring together children of all races under a national educational system in which the national language is the main medium of instruction."[8] Islam, the religion of the Malays, was named the state religion. Malay was chosen to be the national language.[9] In return for giving Malay language and culture priority in the new state, the Chinese and Indian peoples were granted full citizenship for the first time and guaranteed freedom of religion and the right to practice their culture. The governing structure of Malay sultans remained in place, but their authority became increasingly ceremonial and local (affecting the state, not the nation). It was agreed that the sultans would rotate a ceremonial kingship. The Malay majority would hold political power, but only if they worked in partnership with Chinese and Indian communities. The multiethnic United Malay Nationalist Organization (UMNO) has been in power since independence.

At every level, the national government worked to create a shared national culture, one nation, out of the three "racial"/cultural groups present in various settings. For example, the major holidays of all cultural groups were honored as universal holidays, while new national holidays, such as Independence Day, were added. While Malay was to be the primary language used in public schools, pupils were required to learn English as a second language and be introduced to Chinese and Tamil. Malays would also study Arabic. The system of private elementary schools with Chinese or Tamil instruction would be allowed to continue and, ultimately, to receive state support.

Traditionally, the majority of Malays were rural peasant agriculturalists. The majority of Chinese were merchants and businessmen who controlled a disproportionate share of the economy. Most Indians were relatively unskilled laborers. Just over a decade after the nation's founding, the divisive issue of economic and educational disparities among the cultural groups was addressed by the government via the New Economic Policy (NEP). It introduced a broad array of "affirmative action" programs with the goals of "the eradication of poverty irrespective of race; [and] the elimination of the identification of race with economic function."[10] Malays were the principal beneficiaries of

these policies even though the Indian population was, on average, even poorer and less well educated.

Today, many of the goals outlined by the founders and featured in the New Economic Plan have been or are almost met. Malay has become a national language spoken by all who have attended school since independence, with English a secondary language that is widely used in business and diplomacy.[11] Students continue to study in their first language in elementary school if their families choose. The major political parties remain multicultural with a Malay majority. Educational and economic achievements have been very impressive and are no longer tied closely to race, religion, or culture. Each cultural group celebrates its holidays and, via the institution of Open Houses and other mechanisms, invites those of other ethnic groups to share in the festivities.[12] The Prime Minister celebrated this success in his 2001 speech to the political party that he heads:

> In Malaysia we find not only races which are different but these differences are aggravated by different languages, cultures and religions. Indeed, this cultural mix becomes easily inflammable.
>
> But Malay UMNO leaders in times of struggle for independence were able to foster a smart and special system of racial cooperation. While racial identities are retained, cooperation in a mixed party was created which did not ignore the special Malays as the genuine *Bumiputera*…The fact that a majority of Chinese were willing to support an Alliance Party under the Malay leadership who strongly opposed the Chinese terrorists was proof of the ability of UMNO Malay leadership in handling the big racial problem in Malaysia—overcoming it without sacrificing the rights of the Malays. There is no other multiracial country which has succeeded in overcoming the racial problem as in Malaysia under the Malay leadership of UMNO.[13]

Despite Malaysia's remarkable achievement in creating a single multicultural nation-state, there is alarm about its continuing fragility.[14] While a "common ground" among the cultural groups has been built, the Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultural groups have become more internally uniform and more ethnicized, described by some as "hyper-ethnicized."[15]

The Malay government may be observed defending itself against two major sets of critics at home and abroad. Proponents of democracy and human rights criticize the laws that restrict free speech and political dissent, and Malaysia's continuing use of affirmative action to priv-

ilege Malays. Simultaneously, the government must counter the charge of fundamentalist Muslims that Malaysia is not a genuine Muslim state because it does not impose on all its citizens the *hudud* laws described in the Quran. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad addressed both sets of critics in a speech to the 55th General Assembly of his political party, the UMNO, on June 21, 2001. Speaking of Western, especially American, critics who oppose economic and educational preferences for Malays, he states:

> Foreigners who once colonized us, who have done nothing to help us… attack the Malaysian Government and its leadership because seemingly the government has not been fair to a certain group, has not been democratic . . . They claim that to protest and demonstrate is a basic human right and democratic. But when this happens in their own country, they beat, shoot and arrest these fighters who uphold these rights. They do not act as they preach.[16]

After defending the UMNO's policies against liberal democratic critics, Dr. Mahathir immediately defended it against Muslim fundamentalist critics:

> Is Malaysia not an Islamic nation?…What criteria should we use before a nation can be regarded an Islamic nation? Please state clearly. Does it mean that only after *hudud* laws are implemented that this group will accept this government as not an infidel government, non-secular? (p. 43) As far as we can verify, no country has implemented the *hudud* law, i.e., from court proceedings till the implementation of the *hudud*. This does not mean they have rejected the religious tenets but it is because the society today differs from that of the Prophet's time.[17]

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The Malaysian government has done a superb job of creating contact among members of different cultural groups in the workplace, in schools, and in neighborhoods, where formerly there was little mixing. And these opportunities to get to know people across ethnic boundaries have resulted in many successful working relationships and friendships. But despite this, tensions between ethnic groups remain high and may be increasing.

Table 1 contains a series of everyday observations representing underlying interethnic tensions in Malaysia that were made by indi-

viduals or that appeared in the newspaper during January 2002. From the perspective of understanding multicultural relations, it is not important whether the statements are "true" or not; they represent the often widely shared perceptions of many individuals. These observations form a subtext to my main arguments. They reveal that many Malaysians feel discomfort and distrust when with strangers of other ethnic groups. Non-Malays do not trust the government to look out for their interests, especially as Malay identity becomes increasingly Islamized in a world in which religious cleavages beyond the borders of Malaysia are becoming deeper and more dangerous. There also continues to be strong criticism of the laws that limit freedom of speech and academic freedom. Many continue to resent affirmative action policies.

Table 1: Everyday Observations Suggestive of Interethnic Tensions—January, 2002

A. Observations about Affirmative Action

1. If there are ten slots at the university for *Bumiputera* and only six qualified candidates, the university will still accept ten students. The result is too many mediocre Malay students in competition with non-Malays who are more qualified.
2. Once admitted to the university, Malay students get first choice of popular majors in science and engineering. As a result, Chinese and Indian students and women are overrepresented in the liberal arts majors that are least likely to lead to lucrative careers.
3. Malay students have sometimes charged faculty, both non-Malay and Malay, with being racist when they are unhappy with their grades.
4. About 99 percent of the students at Malaysia's 600 private colleges are non-Malay. They tend to be very good students. Ironically, they often have poorly trained faculty. The public universities have excellent faculties but too many poor (Malay) students.
5. Several years ago, a Chinese girl received the highest scores in Malaysia on university qualifying exams, yet she was not offered a scholarship by the government until there was extensive public protest.
6. It is not easy for the Chinese to get over their bitterness about the affirmative action policies. They feel pride when they note that educationally they perform, on the average, even better than the Malays, without having had the help that Malays receive. The Chinese who go to the United States to study win scholarships at premier selective colleges and universities. The Malays who study abroad do so on Malaysian government scholarships at less prestigious universities.

B. Observations about Freedom of Speech

7. At one time, most of the professors at the universities were Chinese. They were biased in grading Malay students, especially females. To be successful, Malays had to learn how the oppressors thought. Once they did that, they could get good grades.

8. On Monday, "Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad . . . [stated] that there might be a new law to stop kindergartens from spreading the culture of hatred against the Government . . . There have been claims that children in kindergartens are being taught to hate the Barisan Nasional [sic] Government by spitting on the pictures of its leaders."[18]

9. The Universities and University Colleges Act of 1971 made it illegal for faculty or students to have political activity on campus. In 2002, faculty, students, and other government employees will have to sign "an agreement of good conduct…[that] requires them to, among others, be loyal to the King, Government and university, and to heed orders."[19]

10. Some students spy on their teachers. "On a list compiled by UMNO Youth containing the names of lecturers spreading anti-Government messages, Musa [the Education minister] said he would be taking action."[20]

C. Observations about the Balance of Political Power in Favor of the Malays and Muslims

11. In contrast to the world pattern that the fertility rate goes down as female education and affluence rises, Malay middle-class couples continue to have many children. They know that they do not have to worry about paying for higher education and many other social needs because of affirmative action. The birth rate is much lower for middle-class Chinese couples. The result is that Malays will become a larger and larger proportion of the Malaysian population, which will further increase their political power in comparison to the Chinese and Indians.

12. The government has funded the International Islamic University, which has students from 130 countries. The vast majority are Muslim. Non-Muslim Malays may attend the university, but when they do, they often convert to Islam.

13. If a non-Muslim marries a Muslim, he or she must convert to Islam. It is illegal to try to convert a Muslim to another faith. The edifice of laws that protect Muslims from the religious influence of non-Muslims and which prohibit them from leaving the faith create barriers and resentment, especially since there are no parallel laws protecting and restricting the practitioners of other faiths.

14. The state government helps enforce charitable donations by Muslims in the form of *zakat* money, which, according to Islamic law, is to be used only to benefit Muslims. Non-Muslims comment that there are no social

service safety nets in Malaysia. They feel threatened by their official exclusion from benefiting from these charitable donations even when the rules are sometimes interpreted to include them.

D. Observations about How Groups Block the Ability of Other Groups to Practice their Culture

15. A non-Malay group wanted to build a temple. They were given land by the sultan to do so. They laid the foundation, but then the Malays in the area complained that the temple would be an affront to them, so permission to build the temple was retracted and the sultan took his land back. The non-Malay group purchased land and built a second foundation; again, Malays complained and they were ordered to stop. Now the group does not have enough money to build a temple even if it had permission to do so.

16. The sounds emanating from Hindu and Buddhist temples disrupt the lives of Malays. There should be restrictions on placing them in areas where Malays have a large majority presence.

17. Muslim girls and women are increasingly dressing in headscarves or traditional Muslim garments of the type that Arabic women wear. This is an affront to the non-Muslims. In the past, when you saw a group of children playing, they all looked the same. Now the Muslims are marked as different. In government offices, there is a lot of pressure on women to cover. If you do not, you may be isolated or treated as decadent.

18. At large public events, food that conforms to Muslim dietary laws are always served; the food preferences and dietary laws of other communities are ignored.

19. "Nanyang Siang Pau and Sin Chew Jit Poh reported that Chinese community leaders . . . felt confident that the Government would not amend the Education Act to make Bahasa Malayu the sole medium of instruction for all schools. The Chinese education movement, Don Jiao Zong, in championing the cause of Chinese education development has often expressed fear that the Government has an ultimate aim to make Bahasa Malayu the sole medium of instruction in the education system."[21]

20. Malaysia cannot escape a second invasion and colonization of the mind via the West's a) global economic dominance, b) dominant voice in demanding that all nations adopt Western democracy, human rights, and press freedom, and c) intrusive media — news, music, films, Internet, etc. "And we are in danger of losing our identity." (Professor Dr. Zawiah, UKM-Macalester Seminar.)

E. Observations about Continuing Racial/Ethnic Separation in Malaysia

21. Now that people find themselves increasingly living in multiethnic communities, they are beginning to build fences.

22. Headline: "USM to conduct polarization study." "Universiti Sains Malaysia will conduct a polarization study to determine if racial segregation among its 15,000-odd students exists."[22] The article reports that in a pilot study the year before, racial segregation was not observed. The study no doubt was stimulated in part by an attempt by the University to assign Muslims and non-Muslims to be roommates, which was strongly resisted by the students and later abandoned. On campus, both students and faculty speak informally of segregation as an everyday state of affairs. Visually, it is evident also in students moving about the campus and seated in classrooms.

23. In Malaysia, "You live in your own cocoon. You interact, but you don't cross dangerous boundaries." The racial groups respectfully coexist. "Is that enough?" (Professor Doctor Zawiah, UKM-Macalester Seminar.)

I will argue that the cultural tensions in Malaysia have multiple complementary sources. First, the construction of inter-ethnic relationships requires people to accommodate to each other's cultures in ways that are threatening to their cultural groups taken as collectivities. Second, increasing interdependence creates increasing vulnerability, especially in groups that must rely on the good intentions of a more powerful political majority. Third, as the Malays have moved away from their *kampongs* to urban areas and have become more affluent, Islam has become a far more important component of their cultural identity, a source of disquiet for non-Muslim Malaysians. Finally, criticisms of affirmative action plans are intensified when the group in political power enacts plans that selectively benefit its own cultural group.

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A. Inter-ethnic Friendships; Inter-group Conflict

An influential model about how to reduce inter-ethnic hostility has been the contact hypothesis. It asserts that members of groups who have negative stereotypes about each other and who are mutually suspicious and hostile will become more friendly and less prejudiced when they interact in situations in which they share common superordinate goals and relate to each other as cooperative equals. But the data have not always supported the hypothesis. In fact, as political scientist H. D. Forbes shows, the contact hypothesis seems to apply only to interdependent individuals who interact frequently and share com-

mon goals.[23] When entire groups come into contact, such as in desegregated schools, tensions are sometimes reduced but sometimes not. The larger the size of groups in contact, the less likely it is that distrust, prejudice, and hostility will be lessened. Forbes reports that when groups as large as "whole countries, cities, counties or neighborhoods are compared . . . greater contact is generally associated with greater conflict and hostility."[24]

There is much evidence that many individual Malaysians have indeed begun to forge mutually beneficial, friendly relationships across ethnic and religious boundaries. Mansor Mohd Noor[25] describes a series of five studies, conducted from 1990 through 1998, with Chinese and Malay business people, workers, and students. The majority made responses that suggest that they would readily engage in a wide variety of business and personal relationships with persons outside their cultural group. For example, a majority of people in both communities indicated that they would choose an inter-ethnic relationship over an intra-ethnic relationship if the shopkeeper of the other ethnicity charged less than the shopkeeper of the same ethnicity. But the examples that Mansor investigated all involve individual, personal interactions. He invited participants in his research to respond to a variety of hypothetical situations in which a Malay Malaysian or a Chinese Malaysian must decide whether to interact with someone of the same ethnicity or choose someone of a different ethnicity who offered a better financial outcome, a more prestigious social outcome (e.g., your child could play with a same-ethnicity laborer's child versus the child of a doctor of another ethnicity), or someone to whom one had a personal obligation (e.g., support your boss versus support someone of the same ethnicity). Reviewing his results, Mansor concludes:

> The findings of the five studies observed . . . proved that ethnic identity and group strength in Malaysia is a case of secondary ethnicity . . . The increasing importance of societal goals that can be pursued by individual action has reduced group consciousness. The consciousness of being *Malay*, *Chinese*, or *Indian* in Malaysia resembles the secondary ethnicity of North America more than the primary ethnicity that has contributed to the tensions in the former Yugoslavia.[26]

A proponent of rational choice theory, Mansor attributes this to self-interest: "These changes have been made possible by Malaysia's high rate of economic growth which has enabled the Malaysian-Malays to

catch up with the Malaysian-Chinese without the latter suffering any decline in their economic circumstances."[27]

Buried in Mansor's data, however, are some cautionary findings that serve to amend his conclusions. First, on average, the Chinese persons in his samples endorsed making inter-ethnic choices more strongly than did the Malays. For example, 82 percent of the Chinese middle-class residents of Petaling Jaya made inter-ethnic choices that would benefit them materially in contrast to only 62 percent of the Malays.[28] In the same study, only 22 percent of the Malays preferred a higher status inter-group social choice over a lower status intra-group choice as compared to 56 percent of the Chinese.[29] In general, Malaysian Malays and Chinese were much more likely to prefer same ethnicity social relationships than same ethnicity economic relationships even when they might gain greater social status from choosing an inter-ethnic partner. The results suggest that Malays are more likely to make within-group ethnic choices than are the Chinese.

Mansor also asked people about their actual pattern of inter-ethnic contact at the group level. The results were very different. The same individuals who support having inter-ethnic individual relationships report rather low levels of actual inter-ethnic contact in their own lives in every sphere except the workplace. While these rates are undoubtedly far higher than they would have been at independence, and therefore can be said to represent a great deal of progress, they still are not high. Across Mansor's five samples, about 50 percent of both Malays and Chinese had frequent inter-ethnic contact in the workplace, but only about 22 percent did in their residential area, and only 5 percent did at the place where they went shopping.

More ominously, the Malays are much more likely than the Chinese to *disagree* with the statement that "Malysia is not just for the Malays" (Malay average=27%; Chinese average=7%), and much more likely to agree that "those individual Malaysians who are dissatisfied with this country should migrate out to another country of their choice." (Malay average=63%; Chinese average=47%).[30]

Mansor's data, together with the observations in Table 1, suggests to me that while individual Malaysians welcome friendly relations with individuals of other ethnicities, there continues to be distrust at the group level. Forbes explains why this can be expected to occur in his linguistic model of ethnic conflict.[31] He first analyzes the situation when people who speak different languages must learn to communicate with each other. They do so, he argues, by developing a common

language and a common set of interpretive frameworks. The two parties accommodate to each other, in the process assimilating some of the worldview and language of the other; they become more alike. But in most cases, one person or group has had to adapt more than the other. In Malaysia, it was decided that the Chinese, Indian, and English-speaking communities would have to learn Malay if they were to be full participants in Malaysian society.[32] Forbes argues that this model of linguistic accommodation applies more broadly to cultural groups in contact. Adaptations occur that result in the groups becoming more alike, with the less powerful group usually forced to change more. Forbes concludes that: a) "contact leads to conflict between groups in situations of mixed competitive and cooperative incentives,"[33] b) when contact reduces tension, it does so by bringing about assimilation, and c) this assimilation into the culture of the other will precipitate a negative response at the group level, as the group perceives its boundaries and identity to be threatened. In the case of Malaysia, then, one would predict that the Chinese and Indians would feel greater ethnic threat from the other cultural groups than would the Malays, and this appears to be the case.

As strongly as the evidence demonstrates that many individual Malaysians have an increasing number of inter-ethnic friendships and congenial working relationships, the data also supports Forbes' argument that at the group level such inter-ethnic relations may actually intensify the development of in-group solidarity and out-group antagonism. Taken collectively, the Malays and Chinese feel threatened by the erosion of the traditional patterns of segregation, which helped to maintain their communities as culturally distinct. Signs of a growth of a 'single' Malaysian culture are responded to with renewed efforts to reinforce and even extend cultural distinctiveness. The Malaysian tradition of the "Open House" is a good example of a ritualized way in which, simultaneously, difference as well as multiculturalism are marked.

B. Increasing Interdependence Brings Increasing Vulnerability

As Malaysia's three central cultural groups have become more interdependent, they increasingly have the power to aid or to interfere with the other groups' ability to fulfill their goals. Fiske and Ruscher believe that interdependence helps explain why in-groups tend to dislike or fear out-groups in situations such as that found in Malaysia, where the

societal outcomes for each single cultural group is viewed as contingent on the interactions of all three groups.[34] They suggest that mere difference is threatening, for in-groups may not be able to control or predict what out-groups will do and how they might facilitate or hinder the in-group. The unpredictability of others is aversive and creates dislike, distrust, anxiety, unease, uncertainty, and other negative emotions. There is often considerable pressure to avoid contact and intimacy with the out-group. Out-groups also have the power to block the fulfillment of in-group goals, which places them in a relationship of "negative interdependence." This is enhanced if the groups are also in direct competition. This is, of course, exactly the case in situations in which race/ethnicity-based affirmative action is practiced. But even when there is no direct competition, negative interdependence can be created by the mere fact that members of the two groups may be compared to each other to the advantage of one versus the other. When groups have different goals, the attainment of their goals may interfere with each other. When groups are in asymmetrical interdependence, "one party has more power to block the other's goals and hence more power over outcomes . . . In asymmetrical relationships, the relations among negative affect, prejudice, interdependence, and stereotyping are thus particularly insidious."[35] In Malaysia, the Chinese and Indian communities find themselves in an asymmetrical relationship with the Malays, who hold greater power. They vigilantly monitor events so that they can "read" the intentions of the majority in order to assess whether they can trust the government to be respectful of their community and trustworthy in acting equitably for the good of all citizens, Malay or non-Malay. The increasing Islamization, some call it the Arabization, of the Malay middle class is viewed with alarm in a world in which the actions of Muslim fundamentalists fill the news.

Chinese Malaysians are also concerned that they make up a declining proportion of the population, which further erodes their political power. Since independence in 1957, some Chinese have chosen to emigrate. The Chinese birth rate is much lower than that of the Malays. In addition, any non-Muslim who marries a Muslim will have children who are defined as Malay.

C. The Islamization of the Malay Middle Class

In the West, it has been assumed that as people become better educated and as they move into an urban middle class, they will become

more liberal and more secular. But this has not happened in Malaysia. Instead, if anything, Malay identity has become more singularly tied to Islam than it had been prior to educational and economic development.[36] Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan provides a fascinating analysis of Islamization among newly middle-class Malays.[37] It illustrates how a separation from the previous moorings for an ethnic identity can be followed by an intense effort to reconstruct the original identity and protect it, sometimes redefining the core identity in the process. In the 1960s and thereafter, many Malays moved from rural areas into cities where traditional forms of support for their identity—the village, the extended family, etc.—were absent. In addition, having been isolated from other cultural groups, they found themselves confronted with difference: "They needed for example, to live in close physical proximity with the non-Malays, imbibe Western cultural habits and practices, adhere to norms of individualism, and subscribe to an acquisitive lifestyle."[38] In response, for many newly middle-class Malays, Islam became a more important component of their Malay identity than it had been. Sharifah offers a case history of the growing importance of the Muslim component of Malay identity in Bandar Baru Bangi (Bangi), a new town in Selangor located near several research centers and universities, including Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Most of the residents who began to move there in the late 1970s were employed at these institutions and were well-educated professionals, administrators, or middle-class business people. Both in Bangi and at UKM a strong Islamic revival movement emerged in the 1980s. When first opened for residents, Bangi had only houses and a few shops. On their own initiative, Bangi's Muslim residents formed study groups, places for prayer, charitable groups to serve needy Muslims, and a variety of other community services. "Within the general climate of heightened religious consciousness . . . the preacher [of a *surau* or place of worship smaller than a mosque] would draw the attention of those present to issues of moral decadence and disunity among Muslims and the need to observe as closely as possible Islamic prescriptions with regard to worship, dress code, dietary habits and the proper way for men and women to interact with one another."[39] At the time of the case study, there were about 40,000 people in Bangi, of whom about 85 percent were Muslim Malays. Most were strongly committed to *dakwah*," the task of proselytizing to non-Muslims and making Muslims better Muslims."[40]

Sharifah argues that when rural peasant Malays became middle-class urbanites:

> [I]t was no longer possible for the Malay middle class to defend existing identities that were constructed on the presumption that social bonds could be effectively forged through descent, ethnic origin, loyalty to the state, the village, the local patron and religious . . . Thus they had to rely on Islamic institutions to forge and activate new identities . . . [T]here emerged in Bandar Baru Bangi Malay-Muslims who were forward looking, present-oriented, and who were constantly striving to bring common Malay-Muslim identity to a higher level of Islamicity.[41]

Johan Saravanamuttu suggests that the issue of what it means to be both an Islamic state and a multicultural state is a critical one in Southeast Asia.[42] He proposes that despite some Muslim voices who would argue that an Islamic state must impose Muslim laws on all, there are others who strongly believe that "universalist and humanist Islamic perspectives can accommodate multicultural practices."[43]

D. Affirmative Action in Malaysia and American Higher Education

For over three decades, both Malaysia and the United States have practiced affirmative action in higher education. In both countries race/culture-sensitive admissions and financial aide policies, and a variety of enrichment programs, have made it possible for many persons to achieve university degrees who were from groups that were historically underrepresented in higher education: the Malays in Malaysia; and African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and, sometimes, Asian-Americans in the United States. In both countries, these programs have been successful in greatly expanding the representation of persons from groups who were beneficiaries of the policies in middle class business, educational, administrative and professional careers.[44]

Controversial from their beginning, criticism of the programs in both countries has intensified as what were originally meant to be short-term programs to remedy past discrimination have continued. Critics charge that the programs contravene the ideal of equal opportunity under the law that is a foundational value in both countries. In both countries, the ideal is to have individuals compete for admissions and for jobs, etc., with the "best qualified" being selected. Affirmative

action was justified in both Malaysia and the U.S. because it was supposed to undo the racist policies and practices of segregation and exclusion that had violated the principles of equal opportunity and meritocratic selection under British colonial rule in Malaysia and under systems of white privilege in the United States.

Those who support affirmative action in Malaysia and the U.S. note that while much has been accomplished, progress toward economic and educational parity in all racial/ethnic groups has been harder to achieve than originally anticipated. They argue that affirmative action policies continue to be needed until persons of all races/ethnicities have an equal probability of educational and economic success. In addition, in the United States, supporters of affirmative action have begun to argue that in educational settings, persons of all races and ethnicities benefit from the enriched learning environment that occurs when the student body and faculty are from multiple cultures.[45]

Both in Malaysia and in the U.S., there are many who perceive affirmative action to be unjust. They argue that the ends do not justify the means, that affirmative action is a procedural injustice designed to bring about a "false" distributive justice, which thus poisons the outcome. In other words, process is important. Social psychologists have shown that even when people are unhappy with outcomes, they will accept them and even help implement them if they believe that the outcome was arrived at in a fair, just way. Tyler, Degoeu, and Smith[46] demonstrate that individuals and groups view a process or procedure to have been *just* when the decision makers are perceived to have been neutral (unbiased, thorough, and honest), trustworthy (benevolent and concerned about all), and when they have honored the status of all parties (polite and respectful of "rights and entitlements due to every group member"[47]). In a series of experiments, Tyler, et. al. showed that individuals and groups interpret procedural fairness to their group as indicative that they and their group are respected and valued, and it is this that motivates them, in turn, to accept even decisions unfavorable to them, and to put group interests above their own. In the context of Malaysia, this suggests that the Chinese and Indian communities would be more willing to accept affirmative action or other programs that limit opportunity based on merit if they perceive the Malay authorities to be neutral and trustworthy, and they view the Malays as valuing their contribution to Malaysia, and respectful of their beliefs and culture. They will resent and resist policies that they perceive to have been enacted selfishly and disrespectfully.

One might anticipate that it is much harder for the Malay-dominated government to make the case that their affirmative action programs are neutral, trustworthy, and respectful of the status of all cultural groups even if they are wise policies from the standpoint of developing a well educated, economically successful populace. A major structural difference between the affirmative action policies implemented in the U.S. and in Malaysia is that the people who benefited from affirmative action were not the same people who enacted it in the U.S., whereas they were in Malaysia. In the United States, European-American men held political and economic power. Affirmative action to benefit women and persons of color could not have been introduced without their support. In Malaysia, the majority in political power is also the beneficiary of affirmative action, therefore it is much harder to defend against charges of bias and self-interest.

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Malaysia has undergone profound social change since independence. It has achieved unprecedented economic and educational growth in a climate of relative harmony. Inter-ethnic relations have been both helped and threatened by these changes. In this essay, I have suggested that Malaysia's minority ethnic groups have conflicting evidence about the extent to which the Malay majority listens to their concerns and is responsive to their needs. Malaysia's political leaders must become even more responsive to the perspectives of the Chinese and Indian communities. Because Malays are a growing majority, it could be all too easy to ignore the significant contributions — and needs—of the minority Chinese and Indian cultural groups.

Both Malaysia and the United States represent noble experiments whose founders conceived of a "nation of intent"[48] that offered equal opportunity and full human rights to all of its citizens. In both countries, these nations of intent have not yet been fully realized for all racial/cultural groups. To more closely achieve this goal, both nations must address the concerns of their constituent communities, and work to build a stronger infrastructure of mutual trust and respect. ◉

Notes

1. Burgess 2000, pp. 414–415.

2. Shamsul A.B. 1998, pp. 18–19.

3. *Bumiputera*, people of the soil, refers to the descendents of the indigenous peoples of what is now Malaysia prior to the arrival of European colonizers from Portugal and Great Britain. The Malay people of Malaysia include those from neighboring "nation-states" with similar cultural roots.

4. Zaleha Kamaruddin 1998, p. 11.

5. Shamsul A.B. 1999, p. 152.

6. Kamaruddin, p. 12.

7. In addition to the indigenous Malay population, people now designated "Malay" include the descendents of immigrants from "Indonesia, Aceh, Mandiling, Rawa, Kerinchi, Batak, Bugis and Javanese. There are also Arabs who form a small but very influential group in trade and religion" (Zalaha Kamaruddin 1998, p. 15). The indigenous Malay also are comprised of populations with somewhat different cultures and languages. The Malay language itself, now known as Bahasa Malayu, today actually consists of two main variants of one dialect of common Malay (as opposed to a royal form). There is also a pidgin Malay, "Bazaar Malay," and a Creole, "Baba Malay," which is spoken by the descendents of Chinese-Malay intermarriages dating back hundreds of years. The Chinese came to Malaysia from many different provinces. In order of frequency, they came speaking Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, and Teochew, with several smaller linguistic communities speaking Hokchiu, Hokchia, and Hengua. (Nair-Venugopal 2000; Zaleha Kamaruddin 1998, p. 37.) Malaysians from the Indian subcontinent may speak Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, or Punjabi; they may be Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, or Christian. There are also speakers of a Portuguese Creole, Cristang, which grew in the community of descendents of Portuguese-Malay intermarriages.

8. Nair-Venugopal 2000, p. 42. English might have been an "efficient" national language because it was the one spoken by some people from all of the Malaysian subcontinent's populations, but it was an unpopular choice due to its association with colonial rule. Malay was chosen both because it was the language of the indigenous majority and of the sultanates.

9. The Constitution defines a Malay as: "A person who professes Islam, habitually speaks Malay, conforms to Malay customs and was born before Merdeka Day [Independence Day in August, 1957].in the Federation or born of parents, due to whom was born in the Federation or was on Merdeka Day domiciled in the Federation; or is the issue of such a person" (Zaleha Kamaruddin 1998, p. 13).

10. Mahathir Mohamad 1998, p. 80.

11. Nair-Venugopal 2000.

12. Abdul Rahman Embong 1998, 2001; Saravanamuttu 2001; Noor Aini Abdullah-Amir 2000.

13. Mahathir Mohamad 2001, p. 29.

14. Musa 1999.

15. Maznah and Wong 2001; Saravanamuttu 2001.

16. Mahathir, p. 40.

17. Ibid., p. 44.

18. *New Straits Times* (24 January 2002): 4.

19. Suat Ling Chok, *New Straits Times* (24 January 2002): 3.

20. *New Straits Times* (24 January 2002): 3.

21. *The Star* (19 January 2002): 24.

22. *The Star* (5 January 2002).

23. Forbes 1997.

24. Ibid., p. 168.

25. Mansor Mohd Noor 1999.

26. Ibid., p. 82.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., p. 68.

29. Ibid., p. 70.

30. Ibid., p. 75.

31. Forbes 1997.

32. In practice, the languages needed to participate fully in a community may vary. For example, English is essential in business and in diplomacy. In other contexts, one must know Malay or a Chinese language. In one seminar, a Malay participant noted that it was hard for non-Chinese to be an equal partner in a Chinese enterprise because of language and other cultural barriers. A Chinese Malaysian commented privately that exactly the same kind of exclusion could occur when a Chinese Malaysian from a different Chinese linguistic and cultural subculture joined a Chinese firm. The key was not whether you were Chinese or not, but whether you were expert at the particular cultural style of those in power.

33. Forbes 1997, p. 168.

34. Fiske and Ruscher 1993. Fiske and Ruscher's analysis concerns interactions among individuals with different group memberships. They believe that the same phenomena would apply to groups in interaction and note: "Our hunch is that group-level disruption and prejudice is a more intense version of the phenomena identified here" (p. 263).

35. Ibid., p. 254.

36. Saravanamuttu 2001.

37. Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan 2001.

38. Ibid., p. 121.

39. Ibid., p. 128.

40. Ibid., p. 123.

41. Ibid., p. 136.

42. Saravanamuttu 2001, p. 19.

43. Ibid., p. 22.

44. Abdul Rahman Embong 1998, 2001; Bowen and Bok 1998.

45. Orfield and Kurlaender 2001; ACE/AAUP 2000.

46. Tyler, Degoeu and Smith 1996.

47. Ibid., Procedural Justice Research section, paragraph 2.

48. Shamsul A. B. 1998

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