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# Islamist Civilizationism in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** Malaysia is known to have a diverse population across the racial and religious spectrums. However, a majority of the population identifies as Malays, and, thus, legally, as Muslims too. Although the development of the Malay identity had begun immediately after World War II, the stark division between Muslims and non-Muslims came out of the 1971 New Economic Policy that prioritized the Malay population in the name of reducing poverty and stabilizing the country. With the Malay-nationalist party United Malay National Organization (UMNO) being in power for six decades, the position of the Malays became undisputed. At the same time, international and domestic development such as the Islamic revival of the 1970s, the Global War on Terror and the splitting of Malay votes in the 2000s further pushed UMNO and, later, the Islamist PAS to redefine Malay identity as part of the larger Muslim ummah under the framework of 'civilizational populism'. By conflating ethnicity and religion, Islamist and Malay nationalist parties together with their leaders used populist discourses to ensure the people's continued support, even at the expense of non-Muslim Malaysian citizens. Using process tracing, this article shows that civilizationism is effective to unite the majority Muslim population in a divided country such as Malaysia when policies in place failed to engender unity. As a result, Malay-Muslims sought a community beyond its borders, and with the rise of Islamist politics around the world, it has become much easier for the Malay-Muslims to highlight the plight of Muslims over that of their own co-nationalists for the benefit of domestic politics.

**Keywords:** Islamist populism; ethno-nationalism; inter-ethnic; Malay identity; Malaysia

## 1. Introduction

In Malaysia's short history, the country has gone through multiple political evolutions from a more secular nation-state (Sreenevasan 2007) toward a process of Islamization in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by political democratization in the 21st century that saw greater competition. Following these processes and scenarios, Malaysia is now experiencing a rise of populist groups and movements, specifically that of Islamist populism. The country has a majority Malay population that are legally bound to be Muslims according to the Federal Constitution. As political parties compete for the support and vote of these mostly conservative Malay population (Shukri 2021a), they have resorted to instrumentalize the religion of Islam for their benefit. Although Malaysia does not typically come to mind as a country with a populist leader a la Pakistan or the Philippines, there is no doubt that Islamist populist parties and leaders are abound in the current political dynamics post-2018 in which the country witnessed the history-making change in government. Islamist populist rhetoric further increased in 2022 when the Perikatan Nasional coalition used harmful language to delegitimize its opponents, especially the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) (Shukri 2023).

Through process tracing, the objective of this article is to argue that events from the 1960s onwards have paved the way for Malaysian leaders to pick up civilizational discourses as a populist strategy. The civilizational discourse in Malaysia refers to the Malay population as being part of a larger and sacred group of Islamic civilization. The Malays are supposed to be under threat by the Chinese 'others' due to the strong economic position of the Chinese vis à vis the Malays and other ethnic groups (Yeap 2020). As such,

the next section will firstly discuss civilizational populism as the analytical framework of this article followed by a closer look at the Malay–Chinese relationship, which forms the most important element of Islamist populism in Malaysia. Despite a relatively united Malaysia in the 1990s due to economic prosperity, the othering of the Chinese returned in the 21st century. Next, the article identifies the changes in Malaysia's political history, establishes the counterfactual arguments and assesses the evidence. From this process, four key events have been identified that led to the rise of Islamist civilizationism in Malaysia: the 1969 racial riots, the 1970s Islamic revival, the 9/11 attacks, and the defeat of Barisan Nasional at the 2018 general election. Finally, before the conclusion is the analysis and discussion on Islamist civilizationism in Malaysia that has become more evident since 2018.

## 2. Civilizational Populism

After a period of rapid "third wave" democratization, we have seen contemporary democratic backsliding worldwide in various forms such as the return of military rule and the persistence of populist leaders (Wunsch and Blanchard 2022). The year 2016 is typically attributed as when the media started to pay more attention to populism as a movement today with the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the Brexit referendum to bring the United Kingdom out of the European Union. However, populist leaders have been around longer with its beginning traced back to as far as the 19th century such as in the movement surrounding American president Andrew Jackson. Populism today is perhaps the result of the failure of modernization to lead to a more democratic regime (Minogue 1969). On the other hand, populism and democracy were notably equated by Laclau (2005) as the positive democratic expressions of the populace. It's also possible that the failure of democratic political systems to lower levels of social inequality and the subsequent mobilization of social unrest through the use of identity politics contributed to the growth of populism. The recent spotlight on populism has to do with the fact that it has affected even long-standing democracies and, thus, defying the "end of history" hypothesis as purported by Fukuyama with the victory of liberal democracy over communism at the end of the Cold War.

Therefore, discussions about populism frequently relate to the quality of democracy because it entails the concentration of power within a small group of elites at the expense of the common man. Because direct relationship between the populist leader and "the people" are preferred, such as with Trump's active use of Twitter to connect with his supporters, populist politics devalue democratic institutions and processes (Stockemer 2018). Party politics are infamously disliked by populists, who prefer personalistic leadership. The paradox of populism is that populists thrive in a democratic system of competition and participation, but populist leaders simultaneously seek to undermine some of the fundamental principles of liberal democracy such as protection of minorities and the rule of law. This is because the populist view of democracy is a majoritarian one in which the majority 'people' must be protected even if it means using coercive state apparatuses. In other words, populists undermine the democratic processes while legitimizing themselves through elections.

Unlike the more inclusionary nature of left-wing populism as experienced in early 21st century Latin America, the wave of populism affecting North America and Europe represent exclusionary populism based on identity politics. These populist leaders arise in response to what is viewed as the failure of the neoliberal world order to uplift the people's economic position vis à vis the established elites. Despite its economic undertone, populist leaders are actively blaming the ethnic, religious, and national 'others' as being the perpetrator that is destabilizing the political order of a specific system. Unfortunately, this 'othering' is justified as a means to protect the identity of the nation that is based on religious civilization.

The content of populism varies depending on the situation as either a discourse, political strategy, or ideal. Mouffe (2016) famously argued that it is not an ideology. Nevertheless, it shares some characteristics across interpretations such as the separation of "the people"

from "the others" (Mudde 2010). The others can stand for a variety of groups, such as the liberal political elite, the wealthy upper class, who frequently collaborate with the political elite, and, more recently, the ethnoreligious minority, who may also overlap with the wealthy, as in Asia. 'The people' are depicted as experiencing injustice, especially in the neoliberal political economic system, needing political attention through inclusive actions. According to Taguieff (1995) and Brubaker (2017), the polarized "us vs. them" opposition has both vertical and horizontal dimensions, with the vertical dimension referring to the people's resistance to the elite and the horizontal dimension referring to the people's antagonism to those of a different background. Because it is frequently preoccupied with defending a majority that already holds a position of relative privilege in society, this horizontal right-wing populism is typically regarded as authoritarian (Morelock 2018).

In making the case on Malaysia, this article will use the concept of 'civilizational populism' proposed by Yilmaz and Morieson (2022b) to argue that the ethnic Malays in Malaysia have recently adopted a civilizational discourse relating to the Muslim ummah in its antagonism against the Chinese 'others'. A civilizational identity becomes the people's defining characteristic in civilizational populism in juxtaposition to an out-group that comes from another civilization (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022b). Often, religion and the social construct of race are intertwined with the notion of civilization. It is not surprising that populist discourse today would take on civilizational dimensions given that many of the forces influencing contemporary cultures are of a global nature especially with the ubiquity of information and communication via the internet.

Under civilizational populism, the rhetoric is of a civilization as well as a nation in danger. The language of many civilizational populists is nationalist since it emphasizes the individual and identification with "the nation" (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022a, p. 24). Given the current nation-state system, wherein leaders frequently give the domestic audience priority, this makes perfect sense. Nationalism, however, is positioned within a greater global society by civilizational populists. Right-wing populists vow to restore a civilization to its former grandeur as a reactionary force, despite the fact that the past existed inside an altogether different structure that is difficult to recreate now.

The "civilizational turn" in European populism is a typically right-wing response to the large-scale immigration of Muslims into Europe, particularly in the wake of the civil wars that resulted from the failed so-called Arab Spring (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022b). Islamist populism and Buddhist populism, to mention a couple, are observed in Turkey and Myanmar, respectively, proving that civilizational populism is not limited to the West. However, it has been noted that civilizational populism in the developing world differs significantly from its politics in the Western world, with Western values and ideas under attack as well as ethnic and religious minorities who have historically lived in these countries (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022a).

The existence of civilizational populism in multiple contexts across the world demonstrates the transnational character of socioeconomic conflicts that paved the way for exclusionary right-wing populism. These conflicts still exist in post-colonial settings such as Malaysia, where the Chinese are criticized for allegedly controlling the economy by Islamist civilizational populists. As we can see in Malaysia, religion and ethnicity are used in conjunction with populism to represent Malay-Muslims as the country's original inhabitants whereas the minority 'others' and foreigners are endangering Malaysia's Islamic identity. Due to its combination of ethnicity, religion, civilization, and economic status, criticisms of the Chinese community may be perceived as harsher than others such as Indians.

## 3. Relations between Malays and Chinese

Malaysia has always been a diverse nation. This fact does not just extend to the time of British colonization when the Chinese were brought into Malaya as laborers, miners and merchants, but dates to hundreds of years ago during the time of the Malacca Sultanate when "[b]y the close of the fifteenth century, Malacca was one of the world's most important cities for trade and home to a cosmopolitan community of over 100,000. Arabs prayed with

Chinese. Armenians traded with Javanese. Indians and Japanese saw each other in the street" (Vann 2014, p. 23). Nonetheless, the Malays are considered the 'original inhabitants' of the land because their ancestors came to the peninsula roughly 3000 years ago, with much migration across the archipelago up until mid-20th century. The relationship between the different ethnic groups was harmonious back then because of the laissez-faire attitude in both cultural and economic practices (Wan Husin 2012; Ibrahim 2004). The assimilation was so great that the Chinese *Baba* and *Nyonya* in Malacca are known for adopting the local clothing, hairstyle, food, and language. This *Baba* and *Nyonya* identity of the Chinese, combined with growing awareness of transnational Chinese culture, has created a unique Chinese identity in Malaysia (Matondang 2016).

The good feelings and relationship between the main ethnic groups suffered during British colonization. When the Chinese elites demanded to join the civil service, the British repudiated and responded that Britain are trustees of the Malays. This act, thus, reversed centuries of acculturation for a more racially defensive identity for the Chinese (Goh 2019). The Chinese once made up 43% of the population to the Malays' 41% on the eve of World War II (Purcell 1967). In other words, before independence, the non-Malays were the majority population in then Malaya. Given these numbers, it is not so much that the relationship is complex as it is misunderstood given the civilizational nature of both ethnic groups—the Islamic and the Chinese.

The consolidation of the Malay identity post-World War II was in response against the British imposed unitary system of Malayan Union that threatened the special positions of Malays and the hereditary rulers (Omar 1993). The Malays used to be divided among subethnic groups such as Javanese, Bugis and Minangkabau, but, when faced with the threat of Chinese Communism between 1948 and 1960, the Malays came together as one. As they were learning to unite under a single definition of Malayness in the 1940s, the Chinese already understood that they could easily fall back to a civilization that is supported by Confucian values.

Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, a leading figure in Malay nationalism, once proposed that the concept of 'Malay' should be based on the spirit of patriotism and not ethnicity. The Communities Liaison Committee, which was responsible to address sensitive issues relating to ethnicity as a precondition for independence, also proposed the idea of a Malayan nationality. With these ideas rejected by Malay nationalists, Malaysia's approach towards inter-ethnic relations was to be based on state-managed tolerance and accommodation (Adnan 2020). The laissez-faire approach of the past had failed. Despite these challenges, the Chinese community were fervent in working with the Malay elites to achieve independence assuming it would mean greater autonomy for the community. They were quick to realize that independence in 1957 unfortunately led to the dismissal of autonomy over Chinese affairs.

Article 160 of the Constitution of Malaysia defines a 'Malay' as someone who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay custom. In other words, a Malay must be a Muslim and legally there cannot be a non-Muslim Malay. Thus, special privileges that are afforded to Malays as the 'indigenous' population also mean privileges to Muslims. This unique position of the Malays contradicts the reassurance by Article 3 of the Constitution which refers to Islam as the religion of the Federation limited to personal and customary laws (Neo 2006). In fact, Malaysia's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman once said, "Unless we are prepared to drown every non-Malay, we can never think of an Islamic Administration" (Von der Mehden 2013, p. 590). All of these guarantees assuaged the Chinese of their position in an independent Malaya (Malaysia). Thus, it was a mild shock when, in 2001, the then-prime minister Mahathir declared that Malaysia is already an Islamic state in response to the 9/11 attack.

Inter-ethnic relation in Malaysia was made worse following the New Economic Policy adopted in 1971 with the stated goals of eradicating poverty and restructuring society. Unfortunately, by highlighting the differences among so-called racial groups, the reliance of "administocrats" (Heng 1996, p. 32) on affirmative action only perpetuates further division as opposed to uniting Malaysians (Gabriel 2016). This of course follows the 1961 Education

Act and 1967 National Language Bill which limited funding for Chinese education to the six years of primary instruction and the establishment of Bahasa Malaysia as the only official and national language. Wan Husin (2012) emphasized the Chinese response to the introduction of the 1971 National Culture Policy in which non-Malays, including the Chinese, were expected to assimilate into Malay culture and customs which undoubtedly invited consternation by the minority Chinese who were proud of their civilizational history that spanned at least 3000 years. The possible erosion of Chinese culture would threaten the social–cultural structure of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia.

Just as the Chinese community were proud of their Confucian civilizational identity, the Malays also experienced a revival of their religious identity in the 1980s during the administration of Mahathir Mohamad. It has been argued that Islam was the last identity marker that has not been adopted by minority groups (the others being Malay language and acceptance of the royalty) (Shamsul 1996). With Islamic rhetoric and appeal translated into policies to entrench Malay hegemony, it had put a dark cloud over inter-ethnic relations in Peninsular Malaysia. It is clear today that Islamist populism in the form of political parties and leadership has come to the forefront of national politics and policies that threaten an already capricious democratic system in Malaysia.

## 4. Populism and Institutionalization

Malaysia as a nation-state was formed in 1963 between Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. While Singapore's population was mainly Chinese, Sabah and Sarawak were mostly populated with ethnic groups such as Kadazan-Dusun, Murut, Iban, Bidayuh and Melanau. In order to offset the incoming 1.2 million Chinese from Singapore, these natives, together with the Malays, were grouped into one dominant (yet diverse) group in Malaysia called the Bumiputera (Tilman 1964). This was executed to maintain the ethnic balance of the Bumiputera majority in a country affected by post-colonialism. This ethnic balance was soon tested following the expulsion of Singapore in 1965 and the general election in 1969. There was a racial riot in the capital city Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor on 13 May 1969, in which 196 people died during clashes between the Malays and Chinese. This dark event in Malaysia's history marked a punctuation in the equilibrium of ethnic relations in Malaysia.

In response to this event, the government attempted to manage ethnic relation through the introduction of affirmative actions that are meant to reduce poverty and to eliminate the identification of race with economic activities. As discussed earlier, the overlapping of economic status and ethno-religious identity allows for populism to thrive in a polarized society. The government of Abdul Razak believed that the laissez-faire economic policies of the first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, had unfairly benefited the Chinese at the expense of the Malays. Since the Malays make up a majority of the working class in rural areas, these policies known as the New Economic Policy was in practice a pro-Malay agenda especially in education, government procurement, equity market, and public service. Although this policy was supposed to end and be re-evaluated in the year 1990, some have argued that subsequent policies are still based on the NEP (The Economist 2005).

From a laissez-faire economic policy, state intervention marked the beginning of a developmentalist state. Unfortunately, "increased wealth ownership for any particular ethnic group actually only involves a very small minority" (Jomo 2004). While absolute poverty has been under control at 8.4% in 2020 (DOSM 2021), wealth discrepancies between classes, ethnicities and nationalities is still extant. Instead of forging closer national ties, the NEP wedged a divide between Malays (who mostly benefit from the policies, especially those with close relations to the United Malay National Organization or UMNO) and non-Malays. Any criticism would be branded as anti-Malay and of questioning the Constitutional provision of special rights for the Malays.

Socially, Abdul Razak attempted to strengthen national identity by mentioning the term "united Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian Nation)" in his speech in Parliament in 1971, but it was not developed into a full-fledged national policy by his administration or that of

his successor Hussein Onn. It was in 1988 that Mahathir Mohamad made a speech about *Membina Bangsa Malaysia* (Creating a Malaysian Nation) that became part of his Vision 2020 policy (Razak 2009).

Had the 1969 racial riots not happened, perhaps there would not have been pro-Bumiputera policies in the form of the NEP. However, this scenario is unlikely given that people within UMNO were unsettled with Tunku Abdul Rahman's dependence on Chinese tycoons even before the riots. Thus, events in the 1970s led the way to the current Islamist populism as the NEP affirmed the position of the Malays as the supposed 'true people' of the country that requires support and protection from exploitation by the Chinese 'others'. However, it is yet to become a civilizationist discourse because the focus was still on Malay identity instead of a wider Islamic civilization.

The bolstering of Islamic identity occurred in the 1980s due to the institutionalization of Islam because of competing Islamic narratives among the government, the Islamist PAS party and other Muslim organizations such as the progressive Malaysian Islamic Youth Association (ABIM—Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia). As part of his populist strategy, Mahathir used fearmongering to drive votes away from PAS by labelling the Islamist party in derogatory terms such as 'fundamentalists' and 'deviationists'. He also criticized PAS' campaign to establish Islamic hudud law, which was portrayed as efforts to curb the rights and freedom of non-Muslims such as to eliminate drinking alcohol and socializing with people of the opposite gender even though hudud law does not apply to non-Muslims. It has also been argued that Mahathir's Islamization efforts were not merely an attempt to circumscribe PAS, but as a response to the people's wishes for a Malaysia that better reflects the wishes and values of post-colonial Malay-Muslims in Malaysia (Schottmann 2018). In other words, Mahathir is a proto-Islamist populist that is willing to portray himself as a man of the people in his bid to stay in power. However, his rhetoric was initially within the boundaries of Malay nationalism.

UMNO as the ruling party has always been concerned with an Islamic agenda from Tunku Abdul Rahman's depoliticization of Islam, Abdul Razak's cultural elevation of Islam, Hussein Onn's complicity in the developing of Islamic resurgence, Mahathir's overt Islamization policies, Abdullah Badawi's Islam Hadhari and Najib Razak's *wasatiyyah* (moderation) policy (Hamid 2013). Yet, Mahathir was perhaps the staunchest advocate of a Malay-infused Islamization agenda as his premiership coincided with the global resurgence of Islam in the 1970s, especially after events in 1979 such as the Iranian Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the introduction of shariah criminal law in Pakistan, the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the peace accords between Egypt and Israel. By championing Islamization, Mahathir gained the support of the majority Malay population, including those who envisioned a more 'Islamic' Malaysia. Instead of Malay nationalism, the language changed to reflect the people's demands for Islamization for the purpose of entrenching his popularity among Malay-Muslims in Malaysia.

In 1981, Mahathir's government announced a symposium on "The Concept of Development in Islam", which was later adopted by the government, including the creation of Bank Islam in 1983 to provide Islamic insurance and mortgages (Mauzy and Milne 1983). As Malaysian Muslims eagerly voiced their desire for an Islamic financial system to replace conventional banking, the founding of the Islamic bank was possibly one of the most significant milestones during Malaysia's Islamization process (Mutalib 1993). As a populist, Mahathir projected the image of Islam throughout his administration. In his efforts to improve the mental and physical capacity of Malaysians, Mahathir introduced the 'Clean, Efficient and Trustworthy' campaign to eliminate inefficiency and corruption, as well as the 'Leadership by Example' campaign, and, more importantly, the policy known as the 'Inculcation of Islamic Values in Administration'. His aim was to create employees and leaders from all levels and sectors that practice value-based responsibilities according to religious teachings, i.e., Islam, and, therefore, forever altering Malaysia's economic, political, educational and bureaucratic landscapes. Had there been no global resurgence of

Islam in the 1970s, there might not be a need for Mahathir to lead Malaysia's Islamization process. Since then, Malaysia's identity is forever transformed to become more Islamic.

Another step taken by Mahathir was to co-opt Anwar Ibrahim, the charismatic head of ABIM. Mahathir has been credited as the person who wooed Anwar into UMNO. Before joining UMNO, Anwar was known as an active student leader who openly criticized the ruling party. As an Islamist, it was surprising when he joined UMNO in 1982, and, subsequently, rose to prominence within UMNO's hierarchy including his first deputy ministership of Islamic Affairs in the Prime Minister's Department the same year he joined the party. By swiftly promoting Anwar within the government ranks, Mahathir was seen as placating Islamists and, thus, winning their support towards his administration. As a populist leader, Mahathir knew how to instrumentalize Islam to the advantage of his career. It was a choice made by Mahathir to locate the Malays within the larger Islamic civilization in order to bolster support for his government. This shift in Malaysian politics is best described by Mahathir's own quote: "We are all Muslims. We are all oppressed. We are all being humiliated" (Berger 2010, p. 20).

UMNO started to act as an Islamist populist party as the government's version of Islam was promoted as the only correct version to be practiced in Malaysia, which was Sunni Islam based on the Shafiee madhab (school of thought in Islamic jurisprudence). The government began developing substantial federal bureaucratic infrastructures and expanding the National Council for Islamic Affairs' (JAKIM) power. Additionally, Islamic judges were given higher status, and the Shariah Court was elevated to the same level as the civil and magisterial courts. Interestingly, Mahathir's attempts to expand the federal government's authority on Islamic affairs infringes upon the authority of state hereditary leaders as guardians of Malay rights and the position of Islam as the state religion (Munro-Kua 1996). Instead of genuine concern over the state of Islamic affairs in Malaysia—which was guaranteed by the constitution and the hereditary rulers—the government wanted to establish its apex position when it came to Islamic affairs by limiting what Islam could mean to the population. By limiting what the people could practice and believe in, the mass population could be easily persuaded on the government's rightful place to protect Islam against imagined 'threats'. Mahathir's administration went ahead and banned Islamic groups deemed deviant, such as the Shiites, Ahmadis, and the Al-Arqam organization, through violent repression in the name of national stability similar to claims of other populist leaders. His use of harsh measures during this period lent credence to Mahathir being called an authoritarian populist (Munro-Kua 1996). He went on to become Malaysia's longest-serving prime minister until his first retirement in 2003. During this period, the Malay-Muslim population went global and Malaysia as a leading Muslim nation was put on the world stage with Mahathir's persistent anti-Israel stance.

## 5. Islamist Populist's Response to Challenges

Yilmaz and Morieson (2022b) wrote that "civilizational populism is not merely a European or Christian based phenomenon, but a global phenomenon in which national identities are increasingly defined via civilizational belonging, and as products of religion-defined global civilizations". (p. 18) Instead of explaining a civilizational clash at the international level, civilizationism as a discourse has been used within a national framework. Similarly, in Malaysia, having faced international challenges, the choice to respond through religious themes and languages was more directed at the Malaysian people. Starting with 9/11 and George W. Bush's Global War on Terror, there has been a necessity for Malaysia to act in defence of Islam. In 2002, Mahathir declared in the Malaysian Parliament that the country is "a model of Islamic fundamentalist state" instead of using the more conventional and acceptable term of a moderate Islamic state. According to Mahathir, there is nothing to fear of the fundamentalist label as Muslims need to reclaim for themselves what being a fundamentalist entails (CNN 2002). During his speech at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 2003 as an outgoing prime minister and host, he stressed the importance for Muslims to abandon extremism and embrace science and development to improve the conditions of Muslims worldwide (CNN 2003). Mahathir believes that Muslims should

embrace material progress as opposed to shunning it in the name of religion. His speech successfully placed him as a global Muslim leader. Had 9/11 not happened, there might not have been a reason for Malaysia and Mahathir specifically to take centre stage in reclaiming Islamic identity to be promoted at home. Although Mahathir had always been known for his anti-Western rhetoric, 9/11 provided further justification for Malaysia to team up with other Muslim countries as part of a larger civilization. If no terrorist had attacked America on that fateful day, Malaysia might continue on a more liberal path as witnessed in the 1990s.

Unlike Anwar Ibrahim who has written and spoken extensively on his concept of "Madani", or civilization, Mahathir's conception of Islamic civilization is in juxtaposition to the West. According to Mahathir, key ideals of an Islamic civilization are centred on hard work and a scientific mindset founded on Islamic notions of fairness, as most evident in his discourse among world leaders. According to Schottmann (2013), Mahathir proposed the individual believer's conscience as the central site for the revitalization of Islamic civilization.

Mahathir tried to inculcate these values domestically as he believes in its importance to bring Malaysia to become a developed nation at par with the West. However, despite these rhetoric and Mahathir's stature as a respected stateman, the justification for his call to this modern Muslim man is to differentiate his political movement from PAS. By promoting a 'modern' Islamic civilization, he wishes to coax the Malay votes away from what he termed as PAS' more radical views on Islam. In many ways, Mahathir's description of Islam's core values as being based on progress was particularly liberal and supportive of efforts to democratize and strengthen civil society (Schottmann 2013). On one hand, Mahathir appears to be supportive of robust inter-racial harmony; however, with his main support base coming from the Malays, he needs to continuously engage with the idea of Islamist civilizational populism.

Shifting geopolitical realities in the Muslim world combined with the spread of social media usage in the first two decades of the 21st century further brought the plight of Muslims in other countries to the consciousness of Malays in Malaysia. Beginning with the Arab Uprising in 2011 and subsequent wars in Syria and Yemen, Malaysians are now fully aware of the persecution faced by Muslims living in faraway places. This further enhances the discourse on Islamist civilizationism in which the West's involvement—or even lack thereof—to diffuse tension in the Middle East through proxy actors and allies are blamed for the continued hardships Muslims endure daily. This current geopolitical reality has forced Malaysia's hand to posture itself with Turkey, Pakistan and Indonesia to represent a bloc of moderate and neutral Muslim countries. When Mahathir, as prime minister for a second time, organized the Kuala Lumpur Summit in 2019 to ostensibly "address the social, political, and economic issues affecting Muslims globally" (Waikar and Osman 2020), he courted criticism by Saudi Arabia and her allies for stepping into the role typically played by the OIC which is based in Jeddah. More importantly, the Malaysian government was signaling that it is serious in becoming a leader of the larger Islamic civilization.

## 6. Democratization and Islamist Populism at Home

Despite these international challenges, the biggest alleged crisis faced by Malay-Muslims in Malaysia is in the rise of the opposition. Since 1999 and the *reformasi* movement started by Anwar Ibrahim, the opposition in Malaysia had slowly garnered support and strength, especially through various political coalitions. These coalitions are made up of Malay and Chinese leaders sharing power as opposed to the Barisan Nasional model in which UMNO is considered the first among equals. In the 2008 general election, the opposition succeeded in denying the ruling government its traditional two-thirds majority in parliament in what has been termed as a political tsunami (Newsweek 2008). The situation further worsened in the 2013 general election when the Anwar Ibrahim-led opposition won the popular vote (but lost the election due to the first-past-the-post system). This is the beginning of a growing disparity between rural and urban Malays with the

former supporting the incumbent and the latter supporting the opposition. On top of Malay divide, Najib Razak, who was the prime minister in 2013, even termed the outcome as a Chinese tsunami, in essence, blaming the Chinese community for the government's showing at the polls (Grant 2013). Thus, in the 2010s, the 'others' who were threatening the stability and security of the country were narrowed down to the Chinese and urban Malays. Even if Malays were Muslims, the argument is that they were 'less Islamic' for working together with the Chinese and, thus, threatening Islamic civilization as well.

Malay politics have been split especially since 1999 when the opposition showed a respectable showing at the polls by garnering more than 40% of the popular vote. Malay voters have been offered multiple choices since then, including UMNO, PAS, the People's Justice Party (PKR—Parti Keadilan Rakyat), Amanah and Bersatu. Of course, there are Malays who vote for non-Malay parties such as the DAP. In such a crowded space, there has been a need for parties that depend on the Malay-Muslim vote to out-Islamize each other. This has led to ethnic bickering and polarization with Malay parties playing the race card as a warning to non-Malays to not act out of bounds. For example, in 2005, the then leader of the UMNO's youth wing Hishammuddin Hussein famously brandished the *keris*, a dagger that typically represents Malay culture. His act has been observed to mark UMNO's turn to the right (Liew 2015). It is worth noting that this incident occurred a year after Barisan Nasional won a landslide victory in the general election which undoubtedly emboldened the Malays. Although he was reprimanded, there is no mistake that the tide has turned against the more moderate leadership. The Malay siege mentality espoused the discourse of 'othering' non-Malays as *pendatang* (immigrant), a derogatory term to paint a picture that the non-Malays are not part of 'the people'. This is especially true for Islamist populists as their platform is based on identity politics steeped in Malay and Islamic discourses. UMNO continued to grapple on to power in the 2010s with its rhetoric as defender of Malay and Islamic identity in Malaysia.

At the height of people's anger and dissatisfaction over Prime Minister Najib Razak's 1MDB scandal, coupled with the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax, the opposition Pakatan Harapan coalition succeeded to defeat Barisan Nasional at the federal level for the first time in Malaysia's history. Make no mistake, however, that, despite the change in coalition, a lot of the people in the Pakatan Harapan government leadership in 2018 were the same people who had previously led the country under Barisan Nasional, foremost being Mahathir Mohamad himself. Therefore, the fall of the Pakatan Harapan government a mere 22 months later should not be surprising as there was friction on which way the country was headed: liberalism or continued Malay feudalism.

The rise of Pakatan Harapan was another punctuated equilibrium in Malaysia's political history that further led to the rise of Islamist populists. Pakatan Harapan as a government included parties such as the DAP, which was known to be a Chinese-based party that promoted a secular Malaysian Malaysia idea where unity in diversity takes precedence. The accusation of threatening Muslim rights was immediate and forceful, supposedly 'proven' by the appointment of non-Muslims to important posts in the administration—Lim Guan Eng as Finance Minister, Tommy Thomas as Attorney General and Richard Malanjum as Chief Justice of Malaysia. With non-Muslims heading matters relating to finance and law, Islamist populists vigorously claimed that Malaysia's identity as a Muslim country was quickly eroding, even though, as previously mentioned, the position of Islam was secured within the constitution. Their populist effort was so effective that in July of 2018 about 2000 people gathered in the capital city to protest what they viewed as the loss of Malay-Muslim rights (Fuad 2018). Among the issues that were brought up during this protest were the government's effort to recognize the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) for Chinese private schools, the attempt to ratify the International Convention of the Elimination for All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), and the appointments of non-Muslims into important posts as described earlier. The fact that thousands of people participated in the protest shows that these Islamist populists are not operating in a vacuum. If Pakatan Harapan did not win the 2018 general election, there might not have been the

rapid rise of Islamist populism because there would not have been an immediate 'threat' to the position of the Malays in Malaysia.

Alas, their effort proved fruitful as the government was toppled in a soft coup in February 2020 when Bersatu left Pakatan Harapan. The pressure on the Malay leadership in Pakatan Harapan, especially among Bersatu members, to show their commitment to protect Malay and Islamic identities was so strong that in October 2019 government leaders, including Mahathir Mohamad, attended a so-called Malay Dignity Congress alongside other Malay leaders such as Hadi Awang from PAS to discuss the uplifting of Malays and Islam. It was during this congress that the head secretariat, Zainal Kling, remarked that "Malaysia belongs to the Malays" (Teoh 2019). These populist rhetoric on Malay rights appear to resonate with the people because a study performed after the fall of Pakatan Harapan found that more Malays are satisfied with UMNO, PAS and Bersatu, while more Malays are dissatisfied with Pakatan Harapan (Merdeka Center 2020). Further proof can be found in the subsequent state elections held during the pandemic in which Pakatan Harapan miserably lost in the states of Sabah, Malacca, Sarawak, and Johor. A youth leader from the ruling Bersatu government also reiterated that, "The Malays need a protector. They have a neo-feudal mentality and are not ready to embrace a full-blown liberal democracy yet. At the end of the day, the societal nature of embracing a tribal mentality will persist" (The Vibes 2022). Despite acknowledging facts that the Chinese and Indians are part of Malaysia's development story, these populists still pander to the Malays' emotion of needing crutches to survive against the 'others'.

Their Islamist civilizational populist strategy worked as the right-wing Perikatan Nasional swept most seats in the Malay heartland in the 2022 general election. Fierce competition among Malay leaders led to a rise of populism-laden hate speech during the 2022 general election in which the DAP was accused as being pro-Communism and Islamophobic (Murugiah 2022). Since populism as a strategy relies on emotion, the right-wing populists in Malaysia successfully created a sense of crisis to the Malay-Islamic identity by exploiting their anxiety and fear for an uncertain future under a Pakatan Harapan leadership and a hope for a nostalgic past when Malays were dominant within the government (Shukri 2021b). With Anwar Ibrahim becoming Malaysia's 10th prime minister leading the Pakatan Harapan government since 2022, this strategy is further instrumentalized to form a Malay-based bloc of opposition. While it might be impractical to bring Muslims of different background under one civilizational bloc at an international level, it is better done in a smaller national context such as Malaysia.

A discussion on Islamist populism in Malaysia would not be complete without dissecting the words of Hadi Awang, the current president of PAS. Although he is known as a firebrand party leader, he also embodies Islamist populism from his clear distinction of Muslims as the 'true people' in comparison to the non-Muslim 'others' who are somehow steadfast in defeating Islam in Malaysia. This binary view on the people makes Hadi Awang a typical populist based on Mudde's definition. Among the examples include a warning that, "it is forbidden to be together with enemies of the religion and the ummah" (*Malaysiakini* 2021), conflating his political opponent with being enemies of Islam. In July 2021, Hadi wrote that Pakatan Harapan "set up a government which was not only liberal but also dared to challenge the position of Islam and the Royalty" (Free Malaysia Today 2021). Again, he used the civilizational discourse of Islam against the liberal 'others' in his political effort to stay in power. He accused the opposition of trying to replace the government not to improve the COVID-19 response but to eliminate Islam. Amidst Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Hadi wrote, "Now the Zionists have successfully appointed a new head of state, Volodymyr Zelensky, who in a statement said that Ukraine needs to be saved as much as Israel—showing his true colors" (Awang 2022). As a populist who instrumentalized the most important conflict in the Muslim world—the Israeli occupation of Palestine—Hadi was reflecting Malaysia's anti-West sentiment as found on social media (Azmi 2022). Islamist civilizationism has been a discursive choice of Malay leaders who rely on support of the majority population.

### 7. Discussion on Islamist Civilizationism in Malaysia

Not all Muslims in Malaysia subscribe to the populist idea that they must be a united front in order to defend their rights in the country. Those who oppose these Islamist populists are mostly voters of the Pakatan Harapan coalition, who were promised a more inclusive Malaysia. In his maiden speech as prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim said, "None should be marginalized in my administration" while stressing his commitment to upholding the special position of Malays and Islam in the country (Sinar Daily 2022). Unfortunately, Malay support towards the Pakatan Harapan government went down from roughly 25% in 2018 to an estimated 11% in 2022 with Malay swing votes going to the Perikatan Nasional coalition (Welsh 2022). While support for UMNO has also reduced as a form of protest against the Barisan Nasional coalition, more Malays (estimated 54%) voted for the PAS-led Perikatan Nasional coalition, whose strategy depended highly on their Islamist populist rhetoric against the Pakatan Harapan government before and after the election.

These populists describe the majority Malay population as the 'true people' of Malaysia in contrast to the Chinese as the 'others'. The demand for Islamist populism is a result of the manipulation of emotion to instill fear and anger by the Malays, especially towards the Chinese dominance in the economy. In 2021, as if to stoke this fear, Prime Minister Ismail Sabri retorted in parliament that the median income gap between the Chinese and Malays have widened fourfold since 1989. However, looking at the number clearly, Lee (2021) argued that income of Bumiputera households had increased at a faster rate than for Chinese households. Furthermore, Hadi Awang also blatantly said that a majority of corruption cases were caused by non-Muslims and non-Malays, again playing up the supposed evil of the 'others' (Loheswar 2022). This play on different ethnic groups show how exclusionary civilizational rhetoric has more to do with politics than faith.

Since the majority Malays represent the 'will of the people', their demands for hegemonic power become more important than democratic norms and values such as protecting minority rights and the rule of law. Islamist populism emerged more confidently in Malaysia in post-2018 as the Pakatan Harapan government was portrayed to have failed the Malay populace. As argued by Canovan (1999), the appeal of the populists only grows when people perceive democracy to have failed to 'correctly' represent the people's will. Since populism requires an illusion of democratic practice, it is easy to understand why it has surfaced now. For decades after the 1969 racial riots, Malaysia has had a form of hybrid regime in which civil rights and liberties had been restricted despite holding federal elections every few years. Populism could not rear its head back then as the elite Malay leaders were able to make all the decisions deemed necessary without strong opposition. However, with the opening of the political system since 2007 with the mass rallies for free and fair election by the coalition of NGOs called *Bersih* (which means 'Clean' in Malay), politicians needed to manipulate the emotions of the people to acquire support.

It has been argued that the Pakatan Harapan government attempted to introduce populist measures on the vertical dimension by portraying the Barisan Nasional government, and, specifically, former prime minister Najib Razak who is embroiled in court cases involving the 1MDB scandal, as corrupt elites (Halim and Azhari 2020). Nevertheless, in Malaysia, the 'corrupt elite' is not as powerful a discourse for populist outcome. The Malays seem to not care so much about the 'corrupt elite' and, thus, playing on that emotion does not win support for the populists. Evidence can be gauged at the Johor state election which was held in March 2022. Najib Razak who has been convicted by the high court on charges of misappropriation of funds was the poster boy for the campaign of the Johor state election with many people—Chinese and Malays—coming out to support him. With a parochial political culture (Moten 2011), corruption may be tolerated if there is economic and political stability. On the other hand, having a strong Chinese presence in government is indicative of imagined instability and cannot be tolerated, as argued by the populists. Islamist civilizational populism in Malaysia provides the discourse of a Malay-based national identity that finds no fault in hierarchical ethnic and religious politics

due to fear of cultural and/or religious identity change within the country. In this sense, civilizational populism best describes Malaysia than an anti-elite discourse.

Similar to India, Malaysia has moved away from its more secular background immediately after independence. Today, the Malay-Muslim population has become sacred and is positioned above others especially in terms of government policies and the bureaucratization of Islam (Abbott and Gregorios-Pippas 2010). Islamist populists in Malaysia speak on Islamic discourses of justice and fairness to establish themselves as somewhat religious to win over followers. However, by emphasizing Islamic justice, these political leaders are alluding to the unique status of Islam in which it has been argued that Islamic justice does not mean equality for all (*Malaysiakini* 2022a). In this way, Islamist populists in Malaysia fulfil the requirements put forth by Yilmaz and Morieson (2022b), which are attaching themselves to a wider Islamic civilization, claiming that non-Muslims in the country pose a threat to the survival of Malaysia's identity and way of life, and encouraging religious practice even if the leaders themselves are of questionable repute and embroiled in corruption cases. It is not so much that Malays have become overly bonded to the wider Islamic civilization than it is that the populist leaders succeeded in bringing them together against a supposed threat under the unifying call of an Islamic civilization. Just as Roy (2013) argued that Christianity has become a culture, Islam has also been co-opted into a cultural identity over faith (Shukri 2021c).

Due to the growing popularity of Islamist populists in Malaysia, even political parties within the more liberal Pakatan Harapan coalition have also used religion to its advantage. For example, during a row over the name of an award-winning Malaysian-made whiskey called Timah (which is usually used as a nickname for Malay females named Fatimah), a so-called progressive Islamist party in the opposition, Amanah, claimed that the name insulted the Malays and, thus, perpetuated the conservative and populist claims that Malaysia's Islamic identity is under threat (Kamarulzaman 2021). Although Amanah appreciated portraying itself as a progressive Islamist party, its race-baiting shows how religion and ethnicity have been instrumentalized to excite voters. This has been the case for decades due to the tenuous relationship between the two largest ethnic groups in the country—the Malays and the Chinese.

## 8. Conclusions

This article is a case study on Malaysia's unique brand of Islamist populism. Instead of having a demagogue as an Islamist populist leader, it is argued that the discourse of Islamist populism as one example of civilizationism cannot be missed in Malaysia. This article has shown through process tracing how different historical events, such as the 1969 racial riots, the Islamic revival in the 1970s, the 9/11 attacks, and, finally, the victory of Pakatan Harapan in 2018, paved the way for the rise of Islamist populism based on the discourse of belonging to the sacred Islamic civilization. The path dependence of these events cannot be separated from the rhetoric of Malay nationalism that evolved into a form of Islamic civilizationism. Since Malays are legally required to be Muslims, they are one and the same in Malaysia. While Malaysia does not have a typical civilizational populist leader, the political space is bursting with different Malay-based parties that try to out-Islamize one another in order to win the ever-important Malay votes. Some parties have become more extreme examples of Islamic populism in Malaysia through their discourse of Malay-Muslims as the 'true people' of Malaysia and non-Muslims as 'others' that are at best merely tolerated and at worst eliminated.

It is true that Malaysia has not seen wide racial riots since 1969. However, racial baiting continues to occur such as the death of a firefighter during a riot at a Hindu temple that was politicized by Malay populist politicians as proof that the liberal Pakatan Harapan government was hiding the truth (Hassan 2019). Inter-ethnic relations are not getting better, but people are simply re-learning to live side-by-side with little interest to sincerely mingle with others from different ethnic groups. Unfortunately, following the 2022 general election in which Pakatan Harapan succeeded to form a government of coalition with Barisan

Nasional, there were attempts to incite racial tension by people who spoke positively of the deadly 13 May 1969 riots on social media (*Malaysiakini* 2022b). Civilizationism as a political strategy has 'succeeded' in putting Malaysia on a path to becoming a nation with 72.1% Malay population by 2040 and, thus, securing the position of Islam in the country (DOSM 2016). This 'achievement' is of course the result of Chinese and Indians leaving the country due to the constant politicization of Islam. Given the 'brain drain' it has caused, it is difficult to see a positive side to Islamist civilizationism in Malaysia.

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