Understanding Islamophobia in Asia: The Cases of Myanmar and Malaysia

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ABSTRACT: In June 2013, Alvin Tan, a prominent Malaysian blogger, posted on Facebook a picture of his girlfriend and himself eating bak kut teh (pork) with the caption "Selamat Berbuka Puasa" (Happy Breaking Fast). The duo had described the dish as "wangi, enak, menyelerakan" (fragrant, delicious, appetizing) and also included a "Halal" logo. During the same month, Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar faced one of the community's worst persecution acts, with several hundred people murdered by Buddhist religious zealots inspired by extremist Buddhist monks. These are but some examples of Islamophobia in Asia. Buddhist nationalist groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka and the 969 Movement in Myanmar have encouraged the anti-Muslim violence. In India, the rise of the Hindu nationalist movement has seen the forced conversion of Muslims and increased incidences of violence against Muslims. Despite this endemic rise of Islamophobia, there has been little academic research conducted on Islamophobia in Asian countries. This is contrasted by the trends of Islamophobia as a phenomenon being well-documented in the West. The rise in terror attacks within Europe, the refugee crisis on the same continent, and the strengthening of the right-wing nationalist parties has resulted in the rise of Islamophobia in Europe and North America. This article seeks to better understand Islamophobia in the Asian context through the case studies of Myanmar and Malaysia. It argues that Islamophobia in these countries is largely the result of domestic socio-economic and political issues, rather than the international narrative against Islam and Muslims. There are three parts to this article: first, the discourse against Islam in both countries will be examined. Second, the factors that caused the rise of Islamophobia in both Myanmar and Malaysia will be looked at. Historical ethnic tensions, economic gaps between different communities, state-initiated religious persecution and the rise of right-wing religious organizations will be discussed in this regard. This section will postulate the view that Islamophobia can occur within countries such as Malaysia, especially when the minority groups are dominant in the economic sphere. The article will conclude by analyzing whether the manifestation and raison d'être of Islamophobia in Asia is different from the West. The outcome of the inquiry will provide useful analytical tools in studying Islamophobia within the Asian context.

Keywords: Malaysia, Islamization, Buddhist extremism, 969 Movement

CONCEPTUALIZING ISLAMOPHOBIA

Numerous definitions of Islamophobia currently exist. The 1997 Runnymede Report is notable for being the first attempt at operationalizing Islamophobia, defining it as the "dread or hatred of Islam" that encompasses the "fear and dislike of all…Muslims" (T. H. Green 2015, 11). Here, Islamophobia is primarily conceptualized as a "by-product" of particular individual perceptions. For instance, if an individual perceives Islam as a monolithic belief-system, that

individual is predisposed to perceive Muslims as a uniform group of people with no agency (T. H. Green 2015). Thus, if some Muslims, for instance, commit terrorism or oppress women in the name of Islam, all Muslims are immediately perceived as potential terrorists or sexists (T. H. Green 2015; Meer and Modood 2009, 481). As such, Islamophobia involves the generalization of multiple people who identify as Muslims into a singular and negatively predefined "Muslim Identity." In doing so, Islamophobia ignores the diverse range of identities that an individual is comprised of and reduces that person to *nothing* but a Muslim (Sen 2006). Islamophobia is, therefore, reliant on identity abstraction that not only generalizes, but racializes a plethora of different individuals who may have nothing in common apart from their Muslim identities, into the singular and negatively predefined "Muslim Race" (Bjoernaas 2015). This process of racial abstraction, thus, forcibly classifies otherwise diverse groups (e.g., Arabs, Malays, and Uighurs) into the generic "Muslim Race."

Notably, Sayyid (2014, 14) argues that Islamophobia is not simply a reflection of "attitudes and beliefs" toward Muslims, but rather that is rooted in the political contestation of the signification of Islam and Muslims between Muslims and non-Muslims. One example is the discursive conflation of Islam with terrorism, Islamism, and authoritarianism by some non-Muslims (Helly and Dubé 2014). Crucially, this process of discursive contestation occurs in a world-system that is hierarchized, not just in economic terms (i.e., center vs. periphery), but also across the racial, religious, and gendered dimensions[1] (Grosfoguel 2012). At the world-system level, hierarchies, and, thus, *power*, this contestation necessarily inferiorizes Muslims into objects of ("Western") domination (Grosfoguel 2012). "Islamophobia" is, thus, the "structural organizing principle…employed to rationalize and extend dominant global power alignment" over Muslims (Bazian 2015, 162). Here, Islamophobia is also a manifestation of hegemonic orientalism[2] that seeks to anchor the definitions of Muslims as an existential threat[3] in the "Western" minds so as to justify their continued domination of Muslims (Jamil 2014). In this context, Islamophobia can be defined as perceiving Muslims as one's image of an enemy (Bravo López 2011). This definition entails not only the "fear" or "hatred" of Muslims, but also the belief that Muslims pose an existential threat to one's survival (Bravo López 2011). Consequently, every encounter with Muslims is deemed to contain "the possibility of violence and destruction" (Bravo López 2011, 569).

RISING ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE WEST

One factor that has contributed to the rise of Islamophobia lies in the history of the "Western" colonial production of knowledge pertaining to the "Muslim world" (Said 1978; 1980). "Western" colonial knowledge was manufactured to justify and enable the political and economic domination of the Orient. In this context, it was only possible to know the Orient through the condescending gaze of the Occident (Said 1978). As such, "Western" encounters with the "Muslim world" produced (and normalized) denigratory definitions of Muslims and Islam (e.g., Muslims are violent, Muslims are sexist, Muslims are backwards) to rationalize the expansion of the colonial enterprise throughout the "Muslim world" as a means of "salvation" of Muslims from themselves (T. H. Green 2015). These definitions continue to perpetuate to this day because they have functioned as reference points for observers to make sense of the social and political turbulence that emits from Muslim-majority states and communities. For instance, (1) Islamism is perceived as an atavistic political orientation that emerges from Islam and seeks to conquer the "Muslim world" (Kundnani 2014), (2) the Iranian Revolution (particularly the hostage crisis) has been viewed by the "West" as a dangerous and natural consequence of Islamism—thus justifying the "West's" hostility toward all Islamist groups (Louati

2015), (3) the Middle-East has been popularly characterized as a region afflicted by political authoritarianism underpinned by Islamist thought (Helly and Dubé 2014), (4) Muslim men are labeled as sexist vessels of oppression because they force Muslim women to subdue to them by making them wear the veil (Bjoernaas 2015; Døving 2015), and (5) terrorism is perceived to be an existential threat that emerges directly from "radical Islam" which, in turn, is deemed to emerge directly from Islam (Jamil 2014). In each of these instances, Islam is discursively conflated with acts of sexism, violent terrorism, and backward political authoritarianism inso-far that Islam is deemed to be individually responsible for each of these phenomena. Thus, Muslims are deemed to exist in a vacuum, unaffected by the contexts within which they are situated. Islamophobia is, thus, an expression of the West's political and intellectual unwill-ingness to interrogate the complex mesh of historical and contemporary shifts that have converged into enactments of sexism, terrorism, and political authoritarianism by pockets of Muslims.

The second factor is the popularization and normalization of Islamophobic narratives in the "West" by the Islamophobia Network/Industry. The Islamophobia Industry refers to the network of politicians (e.g., Trump, Michelle Bachman), academics (e.g., Huntington), jour-nalists (e.g., Sean Hannity), media companies (e.g., Fox News, Breitbart), think tanks (e.g., David Horowitz Freedom Centre), both "liberal" and former Muslims (e.g., Ayan Hirsi Ali, Salman Rushdie), far-right websites (e.g., Jihad Watch), and celebrities (e.g., Bill Maher) across the political spectrum (W. Ali et al. 2011; Lean, 2012). Overall, there are at least 69 groups involved in spreading Islamophobic narratives (Saylor 2014). While organizations like Breitbart News are popular among the American far-right, they are by no means a fringe movement, reaching nearly 70 million readers each month (*SimilarWeb* 2017). It is also worth noting that Steve Bannon, widely perceived as Trump's right-hand man, was the former chief of Breitbart News. Organizations like Fox News are popular among the (much) larger pool of Republican voters. What more, the fact that individuals like Bill Maher are left-leaning implies that politi-cal liberals are also guilty of spreading Islamophobic narratives. Groups that belong in this network stand to profit either politically (e.g., votes) or financially from the spread of Islamophobia (Lean 2012). Indeed, it is estimated that this network made at least US$120,000,000 between 2008 and 2011 by popularizing and normalizing Islamophobia in the US alone (Saylor 2014). Furthermore, Trump's presidential victory ran on the back of an overtly Islamophobic campaign. In addition, the upcoming Dutch and French elections, in which Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen are running on a similarly overt Islamophobic cam-paigns, indicate that this political trend is spreading in Western Europe too (Osborne 2017; Traub 2017). Finally, it is also crucial to note that because of the Internet, the reach of the Islamophobia Industry's narratives is increasingly global (MacDonald 2015). As such, there is little reason to believe that Islamophobic views, otherwise considered to emblematize "Western populism," will remain confined to the "West" (Bayrakli and Hafiz 2015, 7). To sum up, the political and intellectual laziness that resulted in the discursive conflation of Islam with sex-ism, violence, and authoritarianism has been transformed into a politically and financially lucrative industry by the Islamophobia Network to fuel, expand, and legitimize Islamophobia in the "West."

Islamophobia in Asia

Islamophobia in Asia is much more rooted in the historical context of the colonial expe-rience. The rise of religious nationalism in many parts of the region can also explain the rising anti-Muslim feelings as seen from the cases of India and Myanmar which has seen a recent rise

in anti-Muslim violence. These religious nationalisms are often either pushed for by extremist religious civil society actors, or have economic reasons, such as the dominance of Muslim businesses in certain industries, which have also led to the rise of Islamophobia. One of the most interesting aspects of Islamophobia in Asia is the fact that Islamophobia exists in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, where a state-driven Islamization process has led to the hardening of non-Muslims' attitude toward Islam, as will be explained later in the article.

Islamophobia in Myanmar

Violence against Muslims in Buddhist societies is indeed a peculiar phenomenon, given the assumption that Buddhism is a religion of non-violence and peace. Yet instances of violence against minorities have been on the rise in Buddhist-majority countries within Southeast Asia. Most recently, a group of Buddhist monks in Thailand, led by Maha Aphichat, called for violence against Muslims due to perceived notions that their religion is under threat from Islam (PanuWongcha-um 2016). In the case of Myanmar, the anti-Muslim attitude has been there for a long time, caused by the association of Muslims with exploitative economic policies. Muslims account for a mere 4% of the population and is a highly diverse community with many ethnic groups including the Zebadee (Indian Muslim descended), Panthays (Burmese Chinese Muslims), and Rohingya. It is important to understand that Islamophobia is on the rise here due to a multitude of different factors.

HISTORICAL FACTORS

Resentment toward the Colonial Migration of Indians

The first factor that accounts for the Islamophobic treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar is historically rooted in the colonial migration of Indians from British India into Burma. After the first Anglo-Burmese war (between 1824 and 1826), the British annexed Rakhine (modern-day Arakan) into its colonial territory (Nemoto 2013), being able to facilitate the large-scale movement of Indian laborers into British-controlled Burma (Egreteau 2013). In Burma, Indian migrants were primarily employed in the colonial administration (Yegar 1972). For instance, they commonly worked as moneylenders and tax collectors (Smith 1991). Because of their occupations, their interactions with native Burmese were primarily centered around issues of land exploitation, and financial and resource extraction (Yegar 1972). As such, the Burmese began to resent the Indians, perceiving them—as well as administrators of Britain's oppressive reign—as the reason for the exploitation suffered by the Burmese (Egreteau 2013). While it was the British who had designed the exploitative policies, the Indians were the ones executing them and so the Burmese inevitably deemed their experiences of exploitation to have been caused by the Indian immigrants. As such, Indians became objects of fear, suspicion, and hatred (Ethirajan 2015). Today, the Rohingya face the brunt of this historically rooted hatred because their skin color, being similar to the one of Indians, renders them being perceived (1) as descendants of Indian migrants, (2) representations of exploitative actors, and (3) people who, thus, need to be acted toward with hostility (Nithya 2016). This has been institutionalized by the fact that Myanmar's dominant narrative today characterizes the Rohingya as descendants of colonial-era immigrants (Nemoto 2013), a narrative that is contradictory to the evidence that suggests the Rohingya are in fact indigenous to Rakhine (Ibrahim 2016; Khaw 2011). Thus, today's anti-Rohingya Islamophobia is a consequence of

the historical legacy of the reaction the Burmese had to the Indian immigrants and their employment in the exploitative colonial administration.

Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya's Exclusion from Citizenship

The second factor that accounts for the anti-Rohingya Islamophobia is the exclusion of the Rohingya from the national imaginary. When Myanmar first achieved independence, General Aung San sought to construct an inclusive state that awarded citizenship to everyone who lived within the country's territorial boundaries (Ibrahim 2016). This was likely done in recognition of the fact that Myanmar's diverse ethnic composition—it continues to be home to over a hundred ethnic and ethno-linguistic groups—required strategic political management to minimize communal strife. While the Rohingya were not granted citizenship at this stage, they were formally acknowledged as a distinct indigenous ethnic group residing in Myanmar (Haque 2015). In addition, the Rohingya were told that, because they were native to Rakhine, it would only be a matter of time before they would receive the citizenship (Ibrahim 2016), so they were not required to submit formal citizenship applications. In fact, between 1948 and 1961, a small number of Rohingya served as members of parliament (Ibrahim 2016). However, after General Ne Win seized power in the 1962 coup, the state began to politically exclude and relegate the Rohingya from Myanmar's national identity. During General Ne Win's reign, Myanmar's national imaginary came to be defined by Buddhism—that is, to be a Burmese National is to be Buddhist (Rahman 2015).

Buddhism was thus elevated above all other categories as the definitive basis of Burmese national identity. This reinvigorated the fear of outsiders that existed in the colonial era and reversed newly independent Myanmar's definition of the Rohingya. Given that the Rohingya were perceived as descendants of colonial-era Indian immigrants—whom laypeople had been taught over generations to treat with fear, suspicion, and hatred—they were no longer regarded as legitimate residents in Myanmar (Egreteau 2011). As such, the Rohingya were made to apply for Foreign Registration Cards during the 1974 Emergency Immigration Act (Lindblom et al. 2015). Because this policy coincided with Myanmar's economic crisis, the state effectively characterized the Rohingya as the foreign scapegoats for it, in order to distract the attention of the majority of the population from their everyday hardships (Kyi et al. 2000). The government has continued to deny the Rohingya citizenship ever since. This has rendered them the "go-to" targets of discrimination because they are among the largest non-Burmese speaking and non-Buddhist minorities in the country. Having been officially rendered stateless, the Rohingya continue to be the target of Myanmar's oppressive fear of "outsiders." In this context, the Rohingya occupy the role of the internal "foreign enemy" that functions as the basis for the state to organize its national imaginary around and against.

Sasana as State-Driven Fascism in Quasi-Democratic Myanmar

The third factor that has caused the oppression of the Rohingya is the fact that the dominant political groups, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the National League for Democracy (NLD), rely on Buddhist extremists for their electoral success in today's quasi-democratic Myanmar. This has reoriented Buddhist nationalism, wherein to be a Burmese citizen is to be Buddhist, toward Buddhist fascism. The theological justification for this reorientation is rooted in the tradition of *sasana* in Theravada Buddhism (Ibrahim 2016). *Sasana* contains a teaching that claims the mere "tolerance of non-Buddhist religions (will) threaten the existence of both state and (Buddhism)" (Ibrahim 2016, 64-65). As such, *sasana*

justifies the exclusion, oppression, and murder of non-Buddhists to safeguard the stability of a Buddhist state (Ibrahim 2016). In this context, fascist groups like MaBaTha and the 969 Movement have emerged as self-proclaimed bulwarks of Buddhism and use *sasana* to vilify Islam in Myanmar (Biver 2014). Helmed by influential and revered monks, these groups produce and popularize anti-Muslim narratives by (1) delivering religious sermons and speeches to chastise Islam and the Rohingya as violent and terroristic, (2) rehistorizing the growth of Islam in Asia as a strategy of expansionist encroachment onto hitherto existing Buddhist ways of life, and (3) dominating the education system to produce textbooks that (a) demonize and "other" Islam and the Rohingya, and (b) educate young Burmese to embrace hostile attitudes toward the Rohingya (Singh 2013). Thus, the Theravada Buddhist tradition of *sasana* is the theological justification for Islamophobia, Buddhist fascism, and state-driven oppression of the Rohingya in Myanmar.

The Rohingya as a domestic "Muslim Threat"

The fourth factor that accounts for the anti-Rohingya Islamophobia is the fact that anti-Rohingya discrimination has been layered with narratives that define the Rohingya as the domestic "Muslim threat." There are four dominant narratives that characterize the Rohingya as such. First, the Rohingya are dramatically perceived as agents of Islamization who are threatening to eradicate Buddhism from Myanmar by marrying Buddhist women and forcibly converting them to Islam. Second, the Rohingya are perceived as increasingly susceptible to the conservative, exclusivist, and hostile Deobandi tradition. While Deobandi missionaries do travel around villages in Rakhine to reorientate existing Islamic traditions, their influence is small (Walton and Hayward 2014). Third, the Rohingya are conceptualized as a threat to Myanmar's national security because they have been engaging in violent (but unsuccessful) insurgencies against the state since Myanmar's independence (Singh 2013). Historically, the Rohingya have been ethnically, culturally, and linguistically distinct from the rest of Myanmar (Ibrahim 2016). Arakan was a kingdom that only fell into Burmese control in 1784 (Ahmed 2012). As such, the Rohingya do not feel like they belong in Myanmar's national imaginary and would rather live in an independent state (Ibrahim 2016). Finally, because they have engaged in violent insurgencies, the Rohingya have been conflated with groups like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, and characterized as domestic symbols of "global jihad." While the state has attempted to establish links between the Rohingya Islamists and transnational Islamists, the supporting evidence the state offered lacks credibility (Brennan and O'Hara 2015). As such, the potency of the anti-Rohingya sentiment in Myanmar has constructed four Islamophobic narratives that have characterized the Rohingya as a domestic "Muslim threat" in four ways: (1) as agents of Islamization, (2) as adherents of the Deobandi tradition, (3) as violent insurgents, and (4) as domestic terrorists with links to transnational terrorists.

THE ROLE OF EXTREMIST MONKS

Islamophobia has also been created as a direct result of the actions of Buddhist monks. To understand this phenomenon, it is important to characterize the role that Buddhist monks play within Burmese society. Fielding Hall noted that "the king is feared, the wise man admired, perhaps envied, the rich man is respected, but the monk is honored and loved. There is no one beside him in the heart of the people" (Harold 1898, 145). Other scholars have also described how the Buddhist monks of Burma are the most respected and honored clergy in the world (Spiro 1982, 396). Religion (particularly Buddhism) forms an integral part of many Burmans'

lives, as described by Furnivall (1956, 12): "it is Buddhism that has molded social Burman life and thought and, to the present day, the ordinary Burman regards the terms "Burman" and "Buddhist" as practically equivalent and inseparable."

As early as 1938, Buddhist monks in colonial Burma called for the boycott of Muslim businesses by fueling the fear of the disappearance of Buddhism and the existential threat that Muslims posed (Maung 1959; Nyi 2016). *Yahanphyu Aphwe* (All Burma Young Monks Association), an influential organization that played a vital role in post-colonial Burma, was formed at the height of the anti-Muslim riots in 1938. Smith notes of the *Yahanphyu Aphwe* in Mandalay:

> *The basic aim of the movement, U Zawtika, was to unify the monkhood in facing the threat which the Indian Muslims were thought to pose to Buddhist religion and Burmese culture. The growth of the organization was disrupted by World War II, but has grown substantially since independence.* (Smith 1965, 189)

The *Thathana Mamaka* (Young Monks Association) in Yangon was indicted by the Inquiry Committee for their involvement in the anti-Muslim riots (Nyi 2016).

In the more recent expressions of violence, the role of the monks can be seen in the 969 Movement which has played a vital role in the spread of Islamophobia in Burma. Although their Islamophobic actions will be detailed in the next section, two points are important to note here. First, the leaders of the 969 movement have skirted criticism regarding their actions by claiming that the movement is protective in nature and is targeting "Bengalis who are terrorizing ethnic Rakhine (Buddhists)" (Agence France Press 2013). This ignores the fact that many Bengalis are Hindus and the actions of the 969 Movement have exclusively targeted Muslims. Second, government leaders have been ambivalent toward the activities of the 969 Movement. On one hand, prominent state politicians have defended leaders of the movement (*BBC News*, 2013) while governmental religious authorities have rejected some of the 969 initiatives (Ferrie and Oo 2013). What is clear is that there is very little political capital for politicians to gain by disavowing or criticizing the actions of the 969 Movement. Not only are Muslims a minority in Myanmar, attacking the monks of the movement can be counterproductive as the public who revere the monks may perceive the state as being anti-Buddhist or anti-monk.

MANIFESTATIONS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA IN MYANMAR

There are three significant manifestations of Islamophobia in Myanmar. First, the state denies the Rohingya legitimate access to political, economic, and social resources by depriving them of citizenship in Myanmar, despite the fact that they are indigenous to Rakhine (Ibrahim 2016). State barriers were implemented first to restrict Muslims from full political participation. In post-independence Myanmar, the Rohingya were not listed within Myanmar's official list of 135 "indigenous races," a requirement for gaining citizenship. However, the Rohingya qualified for citizenship under a separate provision. This lack of formal recognition as a Burmese ethnic group left the Rohingya vulnerable to Myanmar's military regime.

The 1982 Citizenship Act was implemented by the military dictator at the time, General Ne Win who robbed the Rohingya of their citizenship and enshrined racism in law (*Human Rights Watch* 2000). Ne Win claimed that all immigrants with foreign roots were in Burma due to the British colonial rule. The Citizenship Law of 1982 split citizens into three categories—full, associate, and naturalized (ILO 1982). The Rohingya do not qualify for full citizenship by virtue of not being listed by the government as one of the recognized 135

national races in Myanmar. Associate citizenship is meant for those whose applications were pending under the 1948 law. To be granted naturalized citizenship, a person would have to provide evidence of residence in the country before 1948, be fluent in one of the national languages and be one whose children were born in Burma. Many Rohingya found these to be difficult to prove. However, those who submitted identification documents for the reregistration and verification process did not receive updated replacements (P. Green, MacManus, and de la Cour Venning 2015, 57). In 1989, when color-coded security cards were issued to citizens, the Rohingya were excluded and left stateless. They were eventually issued in 1995 white Temporary Registration Cards which indicate residence in Myanmar but not citizenship. By 2015, these white cards were withdrawn and declared invalid (Gerin 2015; Siddiqui 2015).

Due to the fact that the Rohingya are officially characterized as stateless, they have been the target of removal policies. As such, the military (1) seizes private property owned by the Rohingya on the grounds that stateless people cannot be property owners, (2) detains and tortures them since they are perceived to be living in Myanmar illegally, (3) traffics and enslaves Rohingya men into forms forced labor, and (4) kidnaps and rapes Rohingya women (Lindblom et al. 2015). Their interaction with the state is defined by their elimination and nonparticipation in political structures and communities. In Myanmar's 2015 elections, the Rohingya were declared ineligible to vote or run for reelection on the basis of their statelessness (The European Rohingya Council, 2015; Lun, 2015). Institutionalized discrimination is evident in many state laws and policies targeted at the Rohingya. The state has also ceased issuing birth certificates to Rohingya children since 1994. Violence against Muslims has been one manifestation of Islamophobia in Myanmar. The anti-Muslims riots in 1938 killed scores of Muslims (Yegar 1972, p.32). Subsequently, numerous mosques and properties belonging to Muslims (such as shops, houses, etc.) were damaged. Violence between the Buddhist and Muslim communities erupted at Taungoo in 2001 as the Buddhists were enraged by the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas and sought retribution (*Human Rights Watch* 2000). These riots again saw scores of Muslims killed and mosques destroyed. Anti-Muslim riots also took place in 1997 in Mandalay over a minor dispute (Centre for International Development and Conflict Management 2007). Between June and October 2012, there was widespread violence between Buddhists and Muslims in the Rakhine State (Nyi 2016).

Anti-Muslim Rhetoric by Extremist Buddhist Monks

After this, sectarian violence spread to other parts of Myanmar—Meiktila, Okkan, Lashio, Kanbalu, and Mandalay (Nyi 2016). The 969 Movement has openly voiced out Islamophobic sentiments and, although there is a lack of explicit links between members of the movement and the perpetration of violence, it would be disingenuous to claim that the 969 Movement has had no role to play in the violence seen. Sermons from leaders of the 969 Movement have made inflammatory claims such as "Muslims are fundamentally bad. Mohammed allows them to kill any creature" (*The Diplomat* 2013), "With money, they become rich and marry Buddhist Burmese woman who convert to Islam, spreading their religion. Their businesses become bigger and they buy more land and houses, and that means fewer Buddhist shrines" (Szep 2013). "Muslims are like the African carp. They breed quickly and they are very violent and they eat their own kind" (Tin 2013).

Wirathu also claimed that "Muslim men try to win the love of poor Buddhist women for their reproductive tactics. They produce a lot of children, they are snowballing. We have a duty to defend ourselves if we don't want to be overwhelmed" (*The Diplomat* 2013). Ashin Wirathu has also claimed the following: "I see that Muslims make up a larger percentage of the perpetrators in rape and murder cases" (Nyi 2016). The 969 Movement has spearheaded an

initiative aimed at banning non-Buddhist men from marrying Buddhist women (Nyi 2016). Although not targeting Muslims specifically, it seems fair to assume that it is specifically referring to Muslim men based on the previous statements made. The violence was not limited to Myanmar. A number of instances of anti-Muslim violence was noted in several other Asian cities around this time. In June, at least four killings in Malaysia were linked to the ethnic tensions in Myanmar. All the victims, including a man slashed to death by a machete-wielding mob in Kuala Lumpur, were Buddhists from Burma. Malaysian police had arrested approximately 60 Burmese immigrants to control tensions.

The government of Myanmar, the military, the police, and Buddhist fascists have been complicit in the targeted massacre of the Rohingya since 2012. With roughly 938,000 of the Rohingya having been either stripped of or denied citizenship (i.e., officially rendered "aliens"), they have become the target of state-backed genocidal persecution (*Al-Jazeera* 2016). This has resulted in a refugee crisis, with hundreds of thousands of Rohingya displaced in South Asia and Southeast Asia (AFP News Agency 2017; Goh 2017). To this date, Myanmar maintains that it is not persecuting the Rohingya (*BBC News* 2017), but claims that the Rohingya have been burning down their own homes and villages to create the impression that they are under persecution (Solomon 2016).

Islamophobia in Malaysia

Similarly, Islamophobia in Malaysia strongly differs from its permutations in other parts of the world. It seems strange that there would be Islamophobia in Malaysia given the fact that a casual observation would not pick up anti-Islamic feelings. However, several incidents and expressions online have emerged to challenge the narrative of that sentiment.

The context of Islamophobia must be understood from the prism of history. Malaysia's multicultural mix came about largely due to immigration encouraged by the British colonials to further their economic interests. British colonial policies were responsible for enacting changes that have had lasting consequences in Malaysian society, namely by (1) heightening ethnic group distinctions and (2) reinforcing a statist approach to religious administration of Muslim affairs. The British had allocated specialized occupations to the different ethnic groups in Malaysia, and—by doing so—created distinctions between the *bumiputera* group (natives of Malaysia, which includes the Malays and indigenous peoples) and the immigrant Chinese and Indian groups (Hefner 2001). For example, the Malays and indigenous peoples were mostly in agricultural occupations, the Chinese in trade and business, and the Indians worked in services and on the plantations. The British also reinforced the Malay rulers' authority in matters of Malay custom and religion, and Islamic education, which had the effect of giving the "Malay-Muslim culture a more conservative, statist mien than was the case" elsewhere in the Malayo-Indonesian archipelago (Hefner 2001). As a result, the Malay rulers had much control over the religious discourse and practice of Muslims during the British colonial rule, and this has continued into contemporary times where the administration of Islamic affairs is still in the purview of state royalty.

During the later years of colonial rule and the post-colonial period, a competitive attitude developed between the Malay rulers (and their political elites) and the non-Muslim minorities, as each group sought political power and rights. The Malay elites had very little incentive to cooperate with the other ethnic groups toward a political framework based on equal rights precisely because the heightened ethnic differences were accompanied by unequal class differences. Therefore, the Malay ethnic identity was "explicitly marked" as being Muslim and their religion (Islam) was harnessed as a tool for ethnic rivalry and state control because

doing so excluded other ethnic groups (Hefner 2001). As a result, the conflation of ethnic and religious identities of the Malays became progressively narrower and more entrenched (Mutalib 1990; Nagata 1984).

The primacy of the ethno-religious identity of the Malays was later reflected in the specific political arrangements of an independent Malaysia, after a political compact was formed between the three main ethnic political parties and enshrined in the 1957 Constitutional Bargain. In the constitutional framework, Malay political dominance was accepted by the minority ethnic groups in exchange for the recognition of ethnic minority rights.

Principle of Malay Dominance

The principle of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance) was established in various clauses in the Malaysian Federal Constitution, which recognizes the Malay rulers as heads of the religion of Islam, accords the Malay language and religion (Islam) official status, and provides special rights to protect the Malays. The special rights were later extended to the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak when the two states joined the Malaysian Federation in 1963. Since independence, the Malay-dominated government led by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in an alliance with minority ethnic political parties (the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and other smaller parties) has mediated ethnic demands through a consociational-like democratic model. However, the emphasis was not on a citizenship based on individual rights, but rather one that was an "ethnically differentiated citizenship" (Hefner, 2001), and, by the 1970s, this distinction became starkly visible.

Race-Based Affirmative Action Policies

After independence, political power may have been in Malay hands, but economic power was still predominantly in the hands of the Chinese and foreign investors. The government's failure to adequately address the problems of Malay poverty in the rural areas and the lack of a Malay capitalist class in the early post-independence years sparked off post-election ethnic violence between the Malays and Chinese in 1969 (Zawawi 2004). The government responded to the growing Malay disaffection with an affirmative action policy, the New Economic Policy (NEP), which was intended to help increase Malay participation in the Malaysian economy and to reduce poverty in general. One of the larger objectives of the NEP was to diminish the inter-ethnic tensions caused by socio-economic inequalities so as to create the necessary conditions for national unity (Sundaram 2004).

With the NEP, the government was implementing the Constitutional provisions in Article 153, which highlighted Malaysia's Constitutional Monarch's responsibility to safeguard the special position of the *bumiputeras* (Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak), and to establish quotas in federal public service positions, federal scholarships, federal trade or business licenses, and university education enrollment. The NEP was largely credited with increasing the proportion of the Malay middle class, raising educational levels of the Malays, and significantly reducing the Malay agricultural population. However, because "race" became a governmental criterion for the allocation of scarce resources, the NEP was also responsible for further heightening the ethnic distinctions between the Malay and non-Malay citizens (Peletz 2005).

The minority ethnic groups were unhappy over the codification of unequal treatment based on "race," but had to reluctantly acquiesce to the new system for the most part. Despite such changes, the ethnic minority business elites, the Chinese ones in particular, adapted and managed to retain economic influence in Malaysia by entering into profitable

business coalitions with ethnic Malays who had access to government-determined business opportunities (Sundaram 2004). However, this only reinforced negative perceptions of collusion between the Malay political elites and Chinese business elites, particularly among those who could not benefit from such business coalitions, including a significant proportion of Malays. During this period, the UMNO-led government adopted a mostly "secularist" governance approach with a focus on economic progress, while balancing various ethnic minority demands such as the need for vernacular schools to preserve minority culture and language.

CONTEMPORARY ELECTORAL POLITICS AND PERPETUATING THE PRINCIPLE OF MALAY DOMINANCE

At its inception, the NEP was billed as a temporary policy initiative aimed at leveling the economic playing field for the Malays. One of the measurements of success was to be an increase in the *bumiputera* share of corporate stock ownership from 1.5 percent in 1969 to 30 percent by 1990. This target was either already reached or close to being reached in 2004 (Sundaram 2004). Nevertheless, although the official term of the NEP had ended in 1990, its underlying principles continued to be implemented through other subsequent national economic plans such as the National Development Policy, National Vision Policy, National Mission, and the 10th and 11th Malaysia Plans.

In recent years, there has been a growing perception that the affirmative action policies mostly privilege the elites within the different ethnic groups and perpetuate a culture of social inequity and corruption. This creates intra-ethnic group resentments about class and socioeconomic inequalities, even within the majority Malay ethnic group. Therefore, it is unsurprising that a 2008 poll indicated that a majority (71%) of all Malaysians, including 65% of Malays, agreed that the "race-based affirmative action policy is obsolete and must be replaced with a merit-based policy" (Teoh 2008). However, despite both the government leaders and the opposition politicians agreeing that race-based affirmative action policies have become an unhelpful crutch for the Malay ethnic group and discriminates ethnic minorities, little is done to actually change the current system (*The Economist* 2013). One probable reason for the continued governmental inaction on race-based affirmative action policies is that the UMNO-led government has vested interests in upholding the *ketuanan Melayu* principle as a means to differentiate itself from other Malay-based opposition political parties that are not averse to the dismantling of such policies. This has been the modus operandi of Islamophobia in Malaysia and is more difficult to discern due to the fact that Muslims form a majority of the populace in the country. Malaysia is a multi-religious state with a populace of about 65% Muslim. For much of its history, this conservatism can be attributed to political reasons, as UMNO seeks to consolidate its main Malay voter base as it loses support from the Chinese and Indian groups. Indeed, research post-GE13 strongly suggests this as the main strategy employed by the ruling party, at the expense of alienating the rest of Malaysian society (S. H. Ali 2015; Barr and Govindasamy 2007; Gomez & Saravanamuttu 2013; Jomo 2004; Lemiere 2014). A key element of this conservatism is the Malay ethno nationalism, which goes hand in hand with "Islamization" due to the Malay-Muslim identity paradigm where one's religious piety is strongly associated with "Malayness." The purpose of this is to use *ketuanan Melayu* or "Malay dominance" to evoke ethno-nationalist sentiments and galvanize Malay support for the party while dividing the populace along ethnic lines. In light of this political upheaval, public life in Malaysia has experienced an upturn in Malay nationalism alongside an increased conservatism. News reports of Islamization, mob violence, and challenges to the Malay dominance have

become regular news features, while the ruling elite appears to have adopted a strategy to appeal to its Malay base at the exclusion of other minorities within the country.

THE POLITICAL EMPLOYMENT OF ISLAM

The process of political Islamization has begun in the 1980s, when Islamization was undertaken by the regime of Dr Mahathir Mohamed namely to buttress the Islamic credentials of his government. This was done with the cooption of a number of activists from the Islamic movements and creating a large religious bureaucracy. The turn to Islam intensified in the 1990s and 2000s. As the political elites alongside Malay/Islamic nongovernmental organizations continue to perpetuate their ethnic and religious identity, so too does the Malay populace take up this emphasis of exclusive self-identification. Malay-Muslims constitute the majority of the population of the country, and, as a result of this conservatism, have begun to impress their ethnic and religious identity openly and outwardly onto the Malaysian society as a whole. This exclusive reassertion of Malay-Muslim identity risks fracturing the country into a Malay/ Non-Malay dichotomy.

This article thus seeks to identify whether such a fracture has already begun, by examining non-Muslim sentiments and attitudes toward the religious conservatism in the country. The research contends that Islamophobia among the non-Muslim minority groups exists and is part of a direct reaction of the increasing "Islamization," while the racial discrimination is the fuel that feeds the Islamophobic sentiment. Certain terms need to be defined to better suit the Malaysian context. "Islamization" tends to be a blanket term used to describe all or any form of renewed Islamic conservatism. For the purposes of this research, "Islamization" will refer to the adoption of stricter Islamic practices and principles working in tandem with a more exclusionary attitude toward non-Muslims. This can also include an imposition of Islamist systems on mainstream society, as will be explored later.

Thus, Islamophobia from non-Muslim minorities can be read as a reaction to the Islamization and the imposition of Islamic norms and values on the Malaysian society. It reflects the minority's attitude toward the Malay supremacy and the ruling government, given the Malay-Muslim identity paradigm where the two identities are virtually inseparable. Furthermore, Islamic and Malay nationalist rhetoric plays on the sentiments of the Malay population, perpetuating a siege narrative and thus emboldening Malays and the ruling elite, further antagonizing their non-Muslim counterparts.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MINORITIES: CAUSES FOR DISSENT

Several incidents involving prominent politicians and members of Parliament from UMNO highlight the extent of racialization in Malaysian politics. Following an anti-discrimination statement by the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia,[4] Deputy Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry Minister Tajuddin Abdul Rahman said that Chinese Malaysians should stop imagining that an external power such as China could defend their interests, and warned that he would slap the Chinese in Malaysia if they complained about their well-being outside of the country (*The Rakyat Post* 2015). UMNO Youth Leader Armand Azha Abu Hanifah followed this up by accusing the Chinese community for disturbing the peace by provoking the Malays and their leaders (*Malaymail Online* 2015).

The rights of the bumiputera group have always been a contentious issue in the Malaysian public sphere. In 2015, former deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin

insisted that Malay-bumiputeras should not be considered racist for claiming what is rightfully theirs, since they have been sidelined by the mainstream economy (Pusat Komas Malaysia 2016, 24). Furthermore, although he said the government would not forsake other races, failing to protect bumiputera rights would lead to conflict and crises within the country (*Free Malaysia Today* 2015).

Finally, derogatory remarks are not uncommon in Parliamentary sessions. UMNO lawmaker, Datuk Seri Abdul Azeez Abdul Rahim, made racist remarks toward an opposition member of Parliament, telling him to "Sit down apek" (old man) and "balik tongsan" (go back to China) (*The Malaysian Insider* 2015). This, along with the above episodes, gives an idea on how members of the ruling elite exercise discrimination for their own political gain.

Islamophobia at the Margins

Anti-government and anti-Islamic sentiments are found in the margins of society and media, as traditional broadcast and print media is heavily regulated in Malaysia. Comment sections of online news articles and social media posts generally contain these views, especially if the article is related to something Islamic or has to do with an imposition of Malay norms. This section explores some of these comments as a reaction to the increasing Islamization of the country.

Most articles with anti-Islamic comments can be found on news reports pertaining to religious matters or statements where government officials are involved. A good example of this can be seen in the Malaysiakini article on Annuar Musa's denial of being a racist (Razak 2015), with comments like the one below:

- *We have heard some people say that Islam is a beautiful religion. Could one of the reason be that you can say and do anything you like and then justify it by finding some quotation in the Koran or the hadiths as is done by the Taliban (who deny girls an education), the IS (who chop off some people's heads) and Annuar Musa (who justifies racism). {sic}*

In another article on dress code for hospitals and clinics (Kow 2015), comments alluded to a previous statement made by an Islamic scholar:

Can have sex on top of unta {camel} but wearing short pant cannot. Hanchor Malaysia. (Malaysia is finished)

What Eastern values? Stealing public money and not resigning when caught? Beheading non Muslims? {sic}

I want my tax money to use only on nons {Muslim} activities, as these money are harams—went thru pigs blood and alcohol. Lets split the taxes.... {sic}

A separate article mulling the merits of *halal* trolleys drew the ire of many (*Free Malaysia Today* 2016; Pusat Komas Malaysia 2016, p.14.):

What about banknotes? They have been everywhere. Let's separate halal and non-halal banknotes. And while you are at that taxes from alcohol, gambling and non-halal businesses should not be used by Muslims. {sic}

I suggest all Muslims must wear oxygen mask since the air is so contaminated with pork eating humans inhaling/exhaling into the atmosphere which causes the air to be haram to be breathe by Muslims. {sic}

Abdul Qayyum, extremist bigots like you already considered us as dogs and pigs, no? We love these creatures from God and have no qualms loving them as pets or making delicious pork chops out of the babi too. Pity you'll never know what you are missing. {sic}

These examples provide a quick snapshot of cases where people have expressed anti-Islamic sentiments online. Statements such as these are usually found among other more general dissenting sentiments toward the government; however, such views still exist within the Malaysian society. These views are less likely to appear on articles or media unrelated to Islamic matters in Malaysia.

MOBILIZING AGAINST ISLAM

Islamophobia can be also seen in various campaigns against the state Islamization of the Malaysian government. There has been little attempt to differentiate between political Islam and Islam as a religion. Dr Ng Kam Weng, a Malaysian Protestant theologian and founder of the Kairos Research Centre,[5] was critical of the term "Islamophobia" as he felt that it is a tactic to suggest that Christians are fearful of Muslims, and so it becomes an excuse to put down Christians. He felt this fear is not an irrational one (i.e., Islamophobia), but a fear of those who would wield power to impose Islamic practices on Malaysian Christians. In the past, the sensitive issues in Malaysia centered primarily on race and language, but now this focus has shifted more toward religion. Ng noted that Islam in Malaysia has shifted from being a largely folk religion to an Islamist variant, whereby having an ideological ground for contestation. He further opined that there are elements within Islamic teachings that suggest the religion has total desire to dominate over the rest of society (Ng Kam Weng, personal communication, October 21, 2016, Petaling Jaya).

It can be argued that Islamophobia within some segments of the Malaysian Christian community constitutes an ideological reaction against and a negative perception of an increasingly conservative bend in Islamization of Malaysian politics and society that would encroach upon the religious and public space of non-Muslim minorities. This variant of Islamophobia is mediated through a combination of ignorance on Islamic teachings, real concerns of rights of non-Muslims by a shrinking secular space due to encroaching Islamization, and an existing mind-set of being part of minority in a Malay-Muslim-majority country. It can be added that perceptions among some non-Muslims in Malaysia that a pious practicing Muslim will pose a problem to Malaysia's social fabric (as manifested in Dr Ng's views on folk Islam and Islamism) are increasing.

UNDERSTANDING ISLAMOPHOBIA IN ASIA

Islamophobia in the Asian context

To begin, it is important to note that even within the Asian region there are numerous expressions of Islamophobia and the phenomenon must first be understood within the context of each country. Nonetheless, Islamophobia within the Asian context could be characterized by a number of traits. First, prevailing anti-Muslim and anti-Islam attitudes began during the colonial era. Second, racial policies of governments in the post-colonial period in favor of the majority populace—be it Muslim or non-Muslim—have led to the outcome of increased targeting of Muslims and Islamophobic attitudes. In the case of Malaysia, it took the formation of a majoritarian Malay-Muslim political dominance that led to official discrimination of minority communities in Malaysia, while in Myanmar, the decision by the state to define the state as a Burman Buddhist state led to wide-discrimination against the Indian and Muslim minority

communities. Third, the politicization of religion has encouraged anti-Islamic feelings. In the case of Myanmar, the government targeted Muslims due to the rising Buddhist nationalist sentiments within the population driven by the use of Muslims as a convenient whipping boy. While the initial expression of hate was couched in racial terms, the rise of political Buddhism led to stronger anti-Muslim expressions within the state. In the case of Malaysia, the strong push by the Malaysian government for a form of conservative Islam led to increasing Islamophobic rhetoric as a form of resistance against this state policy. The cases of Malaysia and Myanmar are but two cases of Islamophobia in Asia. The rise of Buddhist nationalism in Thailand and Sri Lanka, Hindu nationalism in India, and Christian extremist movements in Singapore and Philippines has led to increasing expressions of Islamophobia. The increasing political Islamization in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Brunei has also led to the curtailment of rights among non-Muslim minority communities in these countries and so more and more Islamophobic expressions of dissent are permeating these communities as a form of resistance against the Islamization process. To sum up, the current literature on Islamophobia has focused largely on Islamophobia within Western societies. Yet the expression of Islamophobia in the Asian context has often led to more severe consequences for Muslims and hence must be better studied, analyzed, and understood.

ENDNOTES

[1] After all, if societal socio-economic classes are not homogeneous, it is impossible to conceive of a world-system (the amalgamation of societies) that is exclusively hierarchized in homogeneous economic terms.

[2] Orientalism entails that Islam and Muslims can only be known from the gaze of the Occident; see Said (1980).

[3] The conflation of Islam and Muslims with terrorism, Islamism, and authoritarianism renders both Islam and Muslims a threat.

[4] For the saga that led to the Chinese ambassador's statement in 2015, please see http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/324034; http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/cops-arrest-military-veteran-ali-tinju-over-racially-charged-speech-in-low; https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/312526.

[5] The Kairos Research Centre is an evangelical organization that seeks to promote Christian and interdisciplinary scholarship to advance the development of Christianity in contemporary Malaysian society. See Kairos Research Centre, http://www.kairos-malaysia.org/.

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