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**The Fall of the Pakatan Harapan (PH): Contesting Nationalism in Malaysia**

Cheng Kidd Sun

Lee Honors College: Western Michigan University

HNRS 4990: Honors Thesis

Thesis Chair Dr. Alisa Perkins & Thesis Committee Dr. Thomas Kostrzewa

December 12, 2022

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## Opening Vignette

Being a twenty-year-old in a deputy minister's office is a privilege and an opportunity that many would not have. But, it turned out to be the antithesis of that when I got a front-row seat to seeing the government crumbling, my boss getting fired by the king, and myself losing my internship in a most unsettling way.

*Langkah Sheraton*, or the “Sheraton Move,” was a political coup d’etat that led to the downfall of Malaysia’s twenty-two-month-old Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition-government on 23rd February 2020. This political betrayal was a critical juncture that featured a democratic backsliding, as it overturned the efforts of the people to vote out a sixty-year-old corrupt and racial-based government.

I joined the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) Deputy Minister’s Office as an intern on January 6, 2020. This was one month after I completed my American Degree Transfer Program (ADTP) at Methodist College Kuala Lumpur. The ADTP was a specific program catering to students who wished to transfer to American universities after graduating. Generally, students would fulfill as many general education requirements as possible during this two-year program and complete the remaining two years in America, thus reducing the cost of an American degree. Methodist College was located at the heart of Kuala Lumpur, my hometown since I was born, and it sat right next to a transportation transit hub, KL Sentral. I commuted from college daily through the Mass Rapid Train (MRT), and sometimes also wandered around the city using the MRT.

When I joined the Ministry of International Trade and Industry as an intern, it was a huge transition for me, marking my first step into what I considered to be the adult world. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry was located just outside of Kuala Lumpur, but was not on the

MRT route, so I drove to work. Throughout my internship, I experienced the challenges and the gravity of the tasks assigned to me. At the start of my internship, I was supporting my supervisor in collecting data and understanding venture capital and private equity firms in the country and the region. This project served a bigger picture, as the Deputy Minister, Dr. Ong Kian Ming, hoped to engage these firms to help revitalize the country's economy. Dr. Ong was a man of precision, and he had a reputation for being an intellectual. He was also then serving as the Assistant Political Education Director of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and was in charge of educating party members about the political landscape. The first month of the internship was particularly challenging for me as the perceived expectations overwhelmed me. The second month of the internship, however, I became more confident and motivated, as I began having more hands-on experience such as company trips to a few industrial factories.

Coincidentally, the day I joined the Ministry of International Trade and Industry and the day I arrived in the United States (US) both fell on the sixth of January, 2020 and 2021, respectively. This is also the date when Malaysia's political betrayal began. Both days marked a turning point in my life. The insurrection symbolized a transition and the tough road ahead for Malaysia. The day I left for the US marked my entry into a foreign environment with new challenges ahead of me.

By the time I got the hang of the internship, around February 2020, the political turmoil in the country had already manifested into an uncontrollable spiral. *Langkah Sheraton* began on the night of February 21, 2020. Twelve hours earlier, the MITI had launched the National Automotive Policy (NAP) 2020, under the supervision of then Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, as well as under both the minister and deputy minister of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry. The launch made me motivated to serve and excited for what this new government could

provide for the country. More importantly, meeting Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad in person for the first time made me even more inspired to be part of the nation-building process. Throughout the launch, I was fascinated with the exhibitions about Malaysia's Fourth Industrial Revolution which showcased the internet-of-things (IoT), industrial internet of things, cloud computing, cognitive computing, and artificial intelligence. The Fourth Industrial Revolution focused on trends towards automation and data exchange in manufacturing technologies. The event gave me a spark of passion for wanting to be part of the bigger picture in efforts toward serving a greater purpose for the improvement of my country.

That feeling of hope was short-lived. On the night of February 21, the presidential council of the Pakatan Harapan coalition held a late-night meeting to discuss handing over power from Dr. Mahathir Mohammad to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. This discussion was in large part due to the promise before the 14th General Election, where Mahathir would transfer his prime ministership to Anwar after two years in government. According to some sources, Anwar conceded to Mahathir to allow the latter to choose his date to resign as the prime minister after the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Malaysia 2020 in November.

The February 21 Pakatan Harapan Coalition Presidential Council meeting was tense and heated. The faction that favored Mahathir to remain as prime minister throughout his tenure argued that he would be a “lame-duck prime minister” if there were to be a deadline to his tenure, while the other faction, who supported Anwar to be prime minister, wanted Mahathir to resign on May 9, 2020, as that was the originally promised deadline. I was relieved, thinking that political turmoil would be resolved as a result of this meeting, but that was not to be.

On February 23, most of the nation’s major political parties held extraordinary meetings. Most notably, Azmin Ali, the deputy president of Anwar’s Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), held a

meeting with several parliamentarians from the party and twenty others at Sheraton Hotel in Petaling Jaya, amidst the rumor that the formation of a new governing coalition was being undertaken. This event led to the political coup d'état infamously known as *Langkah Sheraton*, or the “Sheraton Move”.

I remember a reporter friend of my dad's, who was at that time stationed in the Sheraton Hotel, called my dad and said the government would fall by midnight. When I heard that, my heart sank. My dad has always been the center point of my access to the political world. I was eight when he first brought me to a political campaign for the 12th General Election in 2008. Before 2008, my dad focused more on the corporate world and his involvement in the real-estate industry. But after getting involved in the election, he became very politically active and involved in many party-related events and activities. Since that time, my whole family would watch the news together after dinner. Sometimes, when there was controversial news, my dad would ask me to articulate my opinions. He would applaud me for defending my perspectives even when they contradicted his own. This made me feel safe and secure about thinking critically and asserting my views.

Throughout the day, I diligently followed the progress of *Langkah Sheraton*, as Azmin and his PKR faction went to the palace (Istana Negara) in the evening to seek an audience with the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, or paramount king. Leaders from five other political parties; BERSATU's Muhyiddin Yassin, UMNO's Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, PAS's Hadi Awang, GPS's Abang Johari Openg, and Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan)'s Shafie Apdal were in attendance.

It was speculated that the leaders were there to brief the Agong about the recent political developments and to discuss the formation of a new coalition government. These efforts were meant to effectively block PKR's president Anwar Ibrahim from the prime ministership. After the

meeting, several opposition party leaders, including UMNO's Ismail Sabri Yaakob and PAS's Hadi Awang, joined Azmin's supporters at Sheraton Hotel. Later in the night, Azmin made a statement claiming that his action was meant to protect Mahathir from being removed as prime minister. The statutory declarations presented to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong were meant to cement support for Mahathir, not to elect a new prime minister. As events unfolded during the course of the night, I remember asking my dad if I even needed to show up to work the next day. It already felt like the government had crumbled. My dad advised me that if there was no instruction given, that I should just head to work, so I did that.

On the morning of February 24, I went to work filled with anxiety. In fact, the entire atmosphere of the Ministry was very tense and unfriendly. Nevertheless, a belated Chinese New Year celebration party was taking place. What should have been a festive atmosphere felt bitter. During the celebration, Dr. Ong gave a speech that sounded like a farewell address. He provided a brief report on what the ministry had accomplished under his supervision, and thanked those who contributed to those efforts. After completing the speech, he left the ministry, as he had been summoned by the DAP party headquarters.

At the same time, Anwar Ibrahim, Deputy Prime Minister Wan Azizah Ismail (Anwar's wife), AMANAH president Mat SABU, and DAP Secretary-General, Lim Guan Eng, met Mahathir at his residence to seek clarification regarding the incident. Mahathir told the top leaders of the PH coalition that he did not initiate the political coup d'état and he had decided to resign from the prime ministership as he felt he had lost the majority support.

By the time I headed back to my office, it was announced that Mahathir had resigned, thus, the government had effectively immediately collapsed. It was reported that the Yang di-Pertuan Agong tried to convince Mahathir against resigning, but that Mahathir had insisted. The Agong



accepted his resignation and appointed him as the interim prime minister until the time that a new prime minister would be chosen. The prime minister's cabinet was immediately dissolved, per Article 43(5) of the Constitution of Malaysia. Pakatan Harapan lost its majority in the parliament after BERSATU and Azmin Ali's-led PKR faction of eleven MPs withdrew from the coalition at 2 p.m. A representative of the palace then announced that the Yang di-PertuanAgong would interview all 221 MPs, excluding Mahathir, to weigh their support for prime minister candidates. The interview sessions were held on February 25th and 26th, with 90 MPs on the former and 131 MPs on the latter.

I was so lost and disheartened as the events unfolded. I sat in my supervisor's office not knowing what to do. All of us stopped what we were doing, and just watched the news. Some of us started packing up and brought some government-related documents back home. This was mainly because we hoped to utilize those documents to better understand how our government had functioned internally. Compared to before the 2018 general election, the opposition generally did not know how the government functioned internally. Far more importantly, those documents would help educate party members about how to facilitate the government's transition more efficiently in any possible future scenarios.

On February 25, I reported to work as usual. However, this time it was different. My access card was denied, meaning I could not enter my office and the majority of offices at the Ministry. Civil servants were noticeably ignoring and avoiding all political appointees, like myself and my colleagues. We waited for the internal security department to bring us to our office to pack our items. When we arrived at the floor where our office was located, we found the floor had been fully locked. When we entered the office, we found out that we were denied access to all computers and that all government email accounts were restricted too. The entire atmosphere was hostile. As

an intern, I had nothing much to pack, so I helped the deputy minister pack his office for the next two days. On February 27, I tendered my resignation as my moral compass told me that I should not serve in the incoming administration.

Throughout the whole week, I had panic and anxiety attacks as my future became very uncertain. On February 28, while I was in my Taekwon-do class, Muhyiddin Yassin became the eighth Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Langkah Sheraton has undeniably made me more cynical, but I hold that hope that the country is still worth fighting for. This fundamental hope is what motivates me to write this thesis, hoping to find remedies to the multifaceted problem that has ravaged the nation. The hope was later on materialized as Anwar Ibrahim was appointed as Prime Minister to form a unity government — a government established on a broad coalition that includes representatives of rival parties, after the 15th General Election found no single political party or coalition obtaining a majority of the parliamentary seats.

## Abstract

The collapse of the 22 months-old Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition-government in 2020 was the ultimate manifestation of contestations over nationalism that have continued in Malaysia since the nation's inception more than six decades ago. The “middle ground” platform — a political moderation strategy to win across ethnic lines to obtain multiethnic support — that helped the PH coalition to win the 14th Malaysian General Election was shattered due to identity tensions. The current political discourse has persistently insisted that the betrayal of politicians and political parties, along with economic insecurity and media fragmentation, had contributed to the downfall of this hope-driven coalition. In contrast to these ideas, this paper argues instead that the absence of a cohesive and coherent national identity played a crucial role in the collapse of the PH coalition-government.

This paper primarily explores the construction of national identity through the lens of ethnicity. Since the British colonial period and up until today, ethnicity has played an important role in shaping the political landscape in Malaysia. As a matter of fact, in the post-independence era, top-down approaches to formulating national identity from the national government, such as *Bangsa Malaysia* [Malaysian Nation], *1Malaysia*, and most recently *Keluarga Malaysia* [Malaysian Family] have ideological roots in national assimilation and integration.

This paper will investigate the manifestations of polarizing identity politics and competing nationalism during the PH regime. For example, it will examine how the occurrences of the Seaford Sri Maha Mariamman Temple riot, the Anti-ICERD Movement, and the Jawi Khat Controversy, all within less than two years of one another, demonstrated already brewing tensions over identity. The paper will show how the exponential revitalization of *Ketuanan Melayu* [Malay Supremacy], a political concept of Malay supremacy, and Islamic radicalism, along with

extremisms from ethnic minority Chinese and Indians have hampered the progress of formulating a unified Malaysian national identity. Evidently, the contemporary polarization of identity from the multi-ethnic and multi-religious population indicates that the attempts of national acculturation have failed.

Keywords: nationalism, national identity, ethnic identity, identity politics

## Introduction

On May 9, 2018, Malaysians across different ethnic and religious groups united in an unprecedented show of people’s power to successfully elect the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition and alter the nation’s sixty-year old political landscape. This success left the naysayers dumbstruck, the previous administration in disbelief, and the global community in awe.

The PH coalition, otherwise known as The Alliance of Hope was established in 2015. The initial PH political party coalition was composed of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the People’s Justice Party (PKR), the National Trust Party (AMANAH), and the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU). As illustrated in Table 1, each of these political parties held slightly different ideologies and positions and received different kinds of electoral base support that varied by ethnicity. The formation of the Pakatan Harapan coalition was based on what was called the “middle ground” platform — a political moderation strategy to win votes across ethnic lines by obtaining multi-ethnic and multi-religious electoral support — to win the 14th General Election (Liew, 2013). This electoral strategy was proven even more effective as the PH coalition took advantage of the widely three cornered contest in the First-Past-the-Post electoral system.

<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Ideology</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Electoral Base</b>
Democratic Action Party (DAP)	Social Democracy	Center-left	Chinese/Indian
People’s Justice Party (PKR)	Social Justice	Center-left	Malay/Chinese/Indian
National Trust Party (AMANAH)	Islamic Modernism	Center	Malay
Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU)	Malay Nationalism	Center-right	Malay

Table 1: Pakatan Harapan (PH) component political parties’ ideology, position, and electoral base.

Indeed, the 14th General Election was a critical juncture. The PH coalition, along with the electoral support of the Sabah Heritage Party (WARISAN), obtained a total of 121 parliamentary seats out of the 222. The “Malaysian tsunami” — a political term to describe the huge shift in multi-ethnic and multi-religious electoral support towards a political party or political coalition — was popularly utilized to describe the unprecedented electoral support towards the PH coalition (Ng, Rangel, & Phung, 2020). While it is true that the PH coalition had obtained an overall higher share of votes across ethnic groups as compared to previous elections, the PH coalition was only able to obtain less than 30% of Malay votes (FMT Reporters, 2018). In comparison, the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition-government obtained roughly 35% of the votes and the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) obtained roughly 30% of the votes (FMT Reporters, 2018). In regards to minority votes, the PH coalition was able to garner more than 95% of Chinese votes and about 70% of Indian votes (FMT Reporters, 2018). This not only indicated that Malay votes were divided between the political coalitions and parties, but a competing “nation-of-intent” existed within the Malay ethnic groups as well as the minority ethnic groups.

The “nation-of-intent” framework, a political term coined by Shamsul A. B. (1995), describes the ideas and/or actions to construct or reconstruct a nation by “imagined political communities” in the form of ethnic groups. To put it simply, it's an ethnic group's own vision, or intention, of what the national identity should be (Shamsul, 1996, p. 328). Conceptually, the ‘nation-of-intent’ framework grows out of Benedict Anderson (2016)'s concept of ‘imagined community’ (Shamsul, 1996). Shamsul argues that Anderson's definition of ‘imagined’ does not necessarily mean ‘invented,’ but means rather that although community members will never know, meet, or hear all the other fellow members, they nevertheless are able to envision themselves living in communion with one another (Shamsul, 1996). On the other hand, ‘nation-of-intent’ is a

more open ended, positive, and forward-looking framework that articulates aspirations of an inclusive construct, open to others, and which is employed as the basis for a political platform voicing dissent or a challenge to the established notion of nation (Shamsul, 1996).

This paper utilizes Shamsul's analytical tool to examine the contesting nationalisms that have been entrenched in the country since before the independence of Malaysia. This paper investigates critical junctures in phases, namely (1) the crafting of a nation-state, 1946-1969; (2) the reconstruction of socioeconomic fabric, 1969-1991; (3) the development of *Bangsa Malaysia*, 1991-2005; (4) the crossroads of contemporary politics, 2008-2018; and (5) the navigation of political impasse, 2018-ongoing, that portrays the competing "nation-of-intents" that became underlying identity tensions throughout the PH coalition-government regime. These tensions were manifested in the form of the Seafeld Sri Maha Mariamman Temple riot, the Anti-ICERD Movement, and the Jawi Khat Controversy. Undeniably, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) played a primary role in catalyzing these tensions as their "nation-of-intents" drove extremism.

Ultimately, the identity tensions became the backdrop that culminated into *Langkah Sheraton*, or "Sheraton Move." *Langkah Sheraton* was the political betrayal of a number of politicians in PKR and the entire political party of BERSATU that ended the PH coalition-government regime on February 24, 2020. The mandate for a hope-driven political moderation was short lived as *Langkah Sheraton* led to the inception of the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition-government, or "National Alliance," composed of BERSATU, the BN coalition, Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Homeland Solidarity Party (STAR Sabah), Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) and later Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (GERAKAN). The PN coalition positioned themselves as a far-right wing coalition that championed Malay nationalism and conservatism. Table 2 and 3

illustrates the PN and BN coalitions' major component political parties' ideology, position, and electoral base.

<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Ideology</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Electoral Base</b>
Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)	Islamism	Far-Right	Malay/Muslim
Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU)	Malay Nationalism	Right	Malay
Malaysian People's Movement Party (GERAKAN)	Liberalism	Center-Left	Chinese/Indian

Table 2: Perikatan Nasional (PN) major component political parties' ideology, position, and electoral base.

Undoubtedly, the current political discourse has persistently insisted that the betrayal of self-interested politicians and political parties had led to the downfall of the PH coalition-government. While certainly, the PKR members and the BERSATU political party that left the PH coalition-government were self-interested and concerned about electoral performance to garner Malay support, underlying factors like economic insecurity of the Malays, fragmented media environment, and weak political parties played key roles to the regime change as well (Welsh, 2020). However, the absence of a cohesive and coherent national identity was not widely discussed in public discourse.

The betrayal of BERSATU would later work against them. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the largest component party of the BN coalition, pressured Prime Minister and BERSATU President Muhyiddin Yassin to resign from the premiership due to the ongoing political instability and mismanagement of the COVID-19 Pandemic Outbreak. The PN coalition-government collapsed after only 17 months in power and reinstated the six-decades-old BN coalition-government. The BN coalition has been the ruling coalition government since the



inception of the nation and had dominated the national political landscape until the 14th General Election. Thus, Malaysia has and is currently operating in an entrenched BN coalition ‘nation-of-intent’ framework (Shamsul, 1996).

<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Ideology</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Electoral Base</b>
United Malays National Organization (UMNO)	Malay Supremacy, National conservatism	Right	Malay
Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)	Malaysian Indian interest, Social conservatism	Right	Indians
Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA)	Malaysian Chinese interest, Social conservatism	Right	Chinese

Table 3: Barisan Nasional (BN) major component political parties’ ideology, position, and electoral base.

Within a short span of about three years, there were three different Prime Ministers and ruling coalition-governments; from Pakatan Harapan to Perikatan Nasional to Barisan Nasional. The political instability in the country had severe implications not only on the political landscape, but the socioeconomic well-being of its citizens. The need for political stability was echoed strongly. The PH coalition was more deliberate in addressing the matter by negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with BN coalition-government Prime Minister Ismail Sabri. The MOU mainly served to ensure immediate political stability and to foster bipartisan cooperation, but also set ground rules to prevent political instability in the future. One of the ground rules that materialized was the Anti-Hopping Law that discourages Members of Parliament (MP) from switching political party allegiance by having a recall election every time an MP switches parties.

Nevertheless, political instability persisted. The BN coalition-government pursued a snap election, where Prime Minister Ismail Sabri announced the dissolution of Parliament. The 15th

General Election occurred on November 19, 2022 and for the first time Malaysia experienced a hung parliament. The PH coalition obtained the highest number of parliamentary seats — 82, the PN coalition obtained 73, and the BN coalition who lost tremendously obtained only 30 seats. Clearly, none of the coalitions obtained a majority to form the federal government and none of the coalitions were willing to concede to form a coalition with one another, creating an impasse for more than five days. In a surprise turn of events, the PH coalition received electoral support from the BN coalition and the Sarawak Parties Alliance (GPS) coalition to form a unity government — a government established on a broad coalition that includes representatives of rival parties. The PH coalition chairman Anwar Ibrahim, who was labeled as ‘Prime Minister-in-waiting’ for 25 years, was selected to be the 10th Prime Minister of Malaysia on November 24, 2022.

This paper argues that the absence of a cohesive and coherent national identity played a crucial role in the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition-government and the ongoing political instability. This paper primarily explores the construction of national identity through the lens of ethnicity.

### **Methods**

This paper employs a qualitative systematic analysis to examine the work of prominent scholars who studied Malaysian national identity, ethnic identity, and ethnogenesis, and their implications for political institutions. The work of Shamsul A. B., Abdul Rahman Embong, and Tan Chee Beng will be synthesized in this paper to understand the lack of national identity or competing ideas of nationalism. Shamsul’s (1995, 1996) concept of ‘nation-of-intent’ framework will be predominantly utilized in this paper, while Abdul Rahman’s (2014) concept of ethnic paradigm and Tan Chee Beng’s (2000) examination of the relation between ethnicity, the power of the state, and political processes involving different ethnic groups, provides supplementary

understanding to my analysis. The ‘nation-of-intent’ framework, as defined above, serves as a useful tool for identifying the competing national identities in Malaysia. The ethnic paradigm concept, on the other hand, facilitates an understanding of ethnicity’s role in constructing national identities. Additionally, Tan’s study is utilized in this paper to better understand the role of political institutions in cultivating ethnic and national identities.

### **Literature Review**

According to Benedict Anderson (2016, p. 6), a nation is defined as an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. Anderson (2016, p. 7) argues that it is ‘limited’ because all nations recognize their own, and other nations’ defined geo-political boundaries, and is ‘sovereign’ because the nation replaces traditional kinship ties as the foundation of the state. Another concept that is often utilized to understand nationalism is the term ‘nation-state.’ The word ‘nation’ in ‘nation-state’ refers to the shared identity of members, while the word ‘state’ refers to political institutions, sovereignty, and definite geo-political borders. Indeed, Malaysia obtained its independence on August 31, 1957 from the British and became the eighty-second member of the United Nations (UN) about two weeks later. While unquestionably, Malaysia, in the Hobbessian sense, has successfully created an artificially constructed legitimized political system that is recognized by other nation-states as a polity, Malaysia is argued to be a polity that is currently existing as a state without a nation (Shamsul, 1995, p. 80). To put it in other words, according to this conception, Malaysia is a state still in search of a ‘nation’ or a ‘national identity.’

Francis Fukuyama (2018) argues that national identity is not just the legitimacy of the nation, but also extends into the realm of culture and values. He elaborates that national identity consists of the stories that people tell about themselves, concerning where they come from, what

they celebrate, their shared historical memories, and what it takes to become a genuine member of the community (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 126). Fukuyama's analysis facilitates the understanding that it is the failure of Malaysians to cohesively and coherently indicate their collective stories that positions Malaysia as an artificial polity. This is in large part due to the pluralistic society Malaysia inherited due to colonialism and its colonial practices.

Colonial practices like the 'divide and rule' policy that the British imposed by incentivizing huge migration of ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians from their respective homelands to Malaysia, then known as the Malay Peninsula, were mainly for economic exploitation and to pacify any rebellion or revolt from the locals. The consequent result of the divide and rule policies and strategies that constantly sought to organize the pluralistic people into distinct and separable groups has now ultimately been signified by the four categories of 'Malay,' 'Chinese,' 'Indian,' and 'Other' on official documents that are provided in descending order of the ethnic hierarchy. On official forms, Malaysians must slot themselves into only one specific ethnic category (Gabriel, 2011). It is intriguing to note that many scholars and perhaps the majority of the country frequently utilize the term 'race' instead of 'ethnicity.' As a matter of fact, the term 'race' is utilized in official government documents, media, public discourse, and even student textbooks. Yet, Malaysians mainly do not distinguish and/or exclude others on the basis of the real or imagined genotypic and phenotypic characteristics, rather, they do so based on perceived differences in history, cultures, customs, behaviors, practices, and beliefs (Gabriel, 2011). This phenomenon is largely attributed to the fact that British colonialism has heavily influenced and redefined the term 'race.' After all, the usage of 'race' in Britain would make a lot of sense as genotypic and phenotypic characteristics would be applied there. Evidently, the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' are social constructs of identity and their meanings and implications are continuously debatable.

This paper examines national identity through the lens of ethnicity for a number of reasons. First, the plural society structure in Malaysia, inherited from British colonialism, is described by many scholars as an ethnically fractured society, and it has been the predominant source of conflicts and tensions. Second, Malaysian political institutions, parties, and policies are primarily influenced by ethnic identities, and vice versa. Third, the scholarly study of ethnicity has been very pervasive in the social science field in Malaysia, which facilitates this study. Understandably, dissecting national identity and “nation-of-intents” mainly through the lens of ethnicity does pose limitations. An inclusive sense of national identity, as Fukuyama (2018) states, requires a consideration of factors such as physical security, quality of government, economic development, trust between society and political institutions, and mitigation of economic inequality. Nonetheless, this paper maintains the approach of emphasizing ethnicity, as it is the most ubiquitous factor in understanding and continuing the search for a Malaysian national identity.

The quest to comprehend the Malaysian political instability since *Langkah Sheraton* requires examination of several critical junctures throughout the nation’s history. These critical junctures serve as indicators of ethnic tensions entrenched in the nation that manifested into political turmoil after a six-decade wait of regime change. This paper highlights these critical junctures in phases, depicting contesting “nation-of-intents.” These phases are (1) the crafting of a nation-state, 1946-1969; (2) the reconstruction of the socioeconomic fabric, 1969-1991; (3) the development of *Bangsa Malaysia*, 1991-2005; (4) the crossroads of contemporary politics, 2008-2018; and (5) the navigation of political impasse, 2018-ongoing.

### **The crafting of a nation-state, 1946-1969**

#### ***Federation of Malaya Agreement: The Two Constitutional Proposals***

The crafting of the nation's constitution and negotiating for independence right after the Second World War marks a critical juncture for the nation in 1946. The immediate postwar period oversaw two prevalent socio-political forces that drew two different ideological lines. The first was the Malay ethno-nationalism formed by United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in May 1946 with the slogan "*Hidup Melayu*," or "Long Live the Malays," and worked with the British (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). The second was the espoused progressive nationalism and cross-ethnic solidarity formed by the Malay Nationalist Party in October 1945, six months before the formation of UMNO (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). This party was distinctly anti-British with its battlecry "*Merdeka*," or 'Independence' (Andaya & Andaya, 2017).

Each party crafted distinct constitutional proposals. The first was the top-down Federation of Malaya Constitutional Proposals that became the basis for the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948 and later 1957 (Abdul Rahman, 2018, p. 296). The Federation of Malaya Constitutional Proposals were formulated during the British-Malay Conference of UMNO and representatives of the Malay rulers between June and December 1946 (Abdul Rahman, 2018, p. 297). The Federation of Malaya Agreement came into effect on February 1, 1948, establishing a Malayan Federation without Singapore (Andaya & Andaya, 2017).

On the other hand, the People's Constitutional Proposals formulated by *Pusat Tenaga Rakyat*, or the Center for People's Forces (PUTERA), — All-Malaya Council for Joint Action (AMCJA) in December 1946 and early 1947 provided an alternative to the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Proposals (Abdul Rahman, 2017, p. 297). Even though there was common ground between the two proposals with regard to the position of the Malay rulers, language, religion, and customs, there also existed stark differences (Abdul Rahman, 2017, p. 297). Table 4 illustrates the

differences between the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Proposals and the People's Constitutional Proposals.

<b>Federation of Malaya Constitutional Proposals</b>	<b>People's Constitutional Proposals</b>
A federation of the Malay states and the former Straits Settlements excluding Singapore	A united Malaya including Singapore
Birth qualifications, language test, and long residential terms imposed to restrict access to citizenship of non-Malays.	A citizenship granting equal rights to all.
No provisions for a Malayan nationality was adopted	Melayu to be the title of any proposed citizenship and nationality in Malaya
Malay customs and religion placed within the sole jurisdiction of the Malay Rulers	Malay customs and religion to be fully controlled by the Malay people through special councils
An appointed Executive Council headed by a British High Commissioner in Malaya and an appointed Federal Legislative Council of fifty unofficial members, fourteen official members and eleven free members	A popularly elected Central Government and popularly elected State councils
No such provisions were provided for	A Council of Races to be set up to block any discriminatory legislation that is based on ethnicity or religion
Malay Rulers recognised as sovereign monarchs with inherent prerogatives, powers and privileges	Malay Rulers to have real sovereign power responsible to the people through popularly elected Councils

Table 4: The differences between the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Proposals and the People's Constitutional Proposals.

As shown in Table 4, the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Proposals held a more ethno-nationalist and status quo approach, while the People's Constitutional Proposal advocated for a more inclusive multiethnic nation and aimed at achieving independence and sovereignty. Another

important distinction was that the former were drafted by British officials and UMNO Malay elites, while the latter were formulated based on broad-based consultations from the people through rallies and mobilization efforts (Abdul Rahman, 2018, p. 298). It is also important to note the significance of the PUTERA-AMCJA coalition and model of consultation as it featured an interethnic coalition that held a multi-stakeholder approach including various social forces like workers, peasants, women, youth, intellectuals, and businessmen throughout the country (Abdul Rahman, 2018, p. 298).

The PUTERA-AMCJA and its People's Constitutional Proposals changed the course of Malaysia's history as the British and local leaders of the United Malays National Organization responded aggressively to shut down the cross-ethnic movement. The British responded by first pushing through their constitutional proposal by instituting their version of the proposal in the Federation of Malaya Agreement proclaimed on February 1, 1948 (Andaya & Andaya, 2017, p. 256). Then, the British used force by declaring a State of Emergency later that year accompanied by mass arrests and the launch of a full-scale war against anti-colonial forces (Abdul Rahman, 2018, p. 299). The PUTERA-AMCJA united front and the organizations within the coalition were banned, and many of the leaders were arrested and imprisoned (Abdul Rahman, 2018, p. 299).

The formulation of the two constitutional proposals served as a landmark for Malaysian history. The PUTERA-AMCJA coalition, in particular, was marked as an unprecedented movement in the country's history and became a pioneering model for political cooperation, coalition, and joint nation-building. . The essence of this cooperation and coalition can be cross-ethnic, like the PUTERA-AMCJA, or ethnicity-based like the Alliance Party coalition, which later expanded to become the BN coalition comprising UMNO, MCA, and MIC (Abdul Rahman, 2018, p. 299). Clearly, both constitutional proposals highlighted "nation-of-intents" that the country still



inherits; the ethno-nationalism ‘nation-of-intent’ that dominated the political landscape by the extensive six-decade rule of the BN coalition, and the cross-ethnic ‘nation-of-intent’ that is articulated currently by the PH coalition.

### ***Merdeka and Malaysia***

The state eventually gained independence, widely known as *Merdeka*, from the British on August 31, 1957, and took the name “Federation of Malaya.” The Federation included the Malay states in the Peninsula and the Straits Settlements of Melaka and Penang, excluding Singapore (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). On September 16, 1963, the Federation of Malaya, along with Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah formed the Federation of Malaysia (Tan, 2000, p. 447). Since independence, Malaysia has operated from an ethno-nationalist approach with a Malay-interest dominated landscape.

On August 9, 1965, Singapore was expelled from Malaysia. From the very beginning, the inclusion of Singapore, with its overwhelmingly Chinese population, and the multi-ethnic politics that is not based on Malay dominance threatened the Malay sense of security and their Malayness (Tan, 2000, p. 447). The People’s Action Party (PAP)’s leader, Lee Kuan Yew, officially proposed the ‘Malaysian Malaysia’ concept in early 1965. ‘Malaysian Malaysia’ argues for a nation-state in which all Malaysians, irrespective of ethnicity, color and creed, enjoy equal status and the total rejection of Malay political hegemony (Shamsul, 1995, p. 60). In broader terms, the concept was the antithesis of the ethno-nationalism framework of a Malay Malaysia, a Chinese Malaysia, or/and an Indian Malaysia. The concept was viewed negatively by the then-Alliance coalition-government. As a matter of fact, the expulsion of Singapore showed the underlying tension between the Malays and the Chinese and the limits to which the Chinese could push their vision of a multicultural Malaysian nation, and indicated the determination of Malay nationalists in

seeking a Malay-dominated nation (Tan, 2000, p. 447). Without a doubt, Lee's vision of a 'Malaysian Malaysia' is an effort for a cross-ethnic 'nation-of-intent' that created tremendous national identity tensions in the nation that led up to Singapore's expulsion.

## **The reconstruction of socioeconomic fabric, 1969-1991**

### ***May 13 Incident***

On May 13, 1969, an episode of Chinese-Malay ethnic violence took place in the capital of the country — Kuala Lumpur. The riot occurred in the wake of the Third General Election when opposition parties, predominantly comprised of ethnic minority Chinese, made significant electoral gains at the expense of the then-ruling coalition government, the Alliance Party (National Operation Council, 1969). Since then, May 13 has been a date which has lived in infamy in Malaysian history as it has, arguably, the highest casualties from an act of ethnic violence, and led the nation to a state of national emergency by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, paramount king (Horowitz, 2001). The Malaysian Parliament was suspended and the National Operations Council (NOC) was established as a caretaker government to temporarily govern the country until 1971 (National Operation Council, 1969).

Evidence points to three parallel and related developments culminating in the events of May 13, 1969. First, there was growing disillusion with the Alliance government's policies among the ethnic Malays especially in the economic and cultural spheres (Jomo, 1990, p. 471). To put it into perspective, ethnic Malays felt that their ethnic identities were not defended by the federal government. This eventually led to the rejection by the growing Malay low and middle class of the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's accommodative policy to Chinese and foreign capital (Jomo, 1990, p. 471). Due to the legacy of the 'divide and rule' colonial policy, different ethnic groups had different socioeconomic status as the British would categorically create

economic opportunities based on ethnicity. For instance, Chinese nationals were brought in from China to run the tin-mining and the business industry, while Indian nationals were brought in to run rubber plantations, and to build roads and railways (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). While the Malay elites were trained and controlled to serve as civil servants, Malay peasants worked in plantations (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). This colonial practice led to an ethnically fractured society where the majority of the Malays found themselves in lower socioeconomic statuses than the ethnic Chinese (Jomo, 1990, p. 472). Thus, the Malays were angered with Abdul Rahman's continuous receptiveness to the economic dominance of the ethnic minority Chinese that eventually led to the ethnic riot. Last and most importantly, the Alliance party faced electoral rejection, particularly in Peninsular Malaysia, in favor of an ethnically divided opposition (Jomo, 1990, p. 471). The electoral rejection made ethnic Malays insecure of their prospect and their political resentment against ethnic Chinese grew.

### ***National Economic Policy (NEP)***

The May 13, 1969 ethnic violence provided the opportunity for Malay nationalists to push for Malay dominance and Malay participation in all fields through government intervention (Tan, 2000, p. 448). The riot eventually resulted in the formulation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) that was implemented from 1971 to 1991. The NEP formulated a two pronged approach — namely the eradication of poverty and the advancement of affirmative action — to reduce interethnic differences and to provide the socioeconomic conditions for achieving "national unity" (Jomo, 1990). For many, the NEP was seen as a commitment to reduce inequality along ethnic as well as class lines. The NEP seemed to some to respond to what appeared to be the critical issues of the late 1960s and the significance of May 1969. It was initially generally welcomed by some Malaysians as a sincere effort to transcend the problems generated by the British colonizers and

Malay elites since independence in 1957 (Gomez, 2013). The NEP seemed to respond positively and even progressively to the apparent major distributional problems generated by the national economic development policies of the 1960s (Gomez, 2013). Implicitly, it assumed continued economic growth on the 1960s pattern, boosted by export-oriented industrialization and greater public sector expenditure. While it is tempting to criticize this as rather naive in retrospect, this formula seems quite reasonable, when judged with the circumstances of the time in mind (Jomo, 1990).

The NEP was deemed a success. The policy successfully reduced the poverty rate in Peninsular Malaysia from 49% in 1970 to 17% in 1990 (Jomo, 1990, p. 472). As a matter of fact, when considered on a per-capita basis, rather than on a per-household basis, the official poverty rate in Peninsular Malaysia had been reduced to 13% by 1987 (Jomo, 1990, p. 472). The poverty rate in Sabah and Sarawak remained higher with 35% per capita and 25% per household (Jomo, 1990, p. 472). The second prong of the NEP, which was to restructure Malaysian society so as to eliminate the identification of race with economic success has also shown tremendous progress. This second aim eventually became the primary agenda over the years. This agenda included 30% of Bumiputera participation in the economy, as well as increasing Bumiputera representation from 5% in 1970 to 25% in 1988 in eight professions; doctors, lawyers, engineers, veterinary surgeons, dentists, accountants, surveyors, and architects (Jomo, 1990, p. 475). Bumiputera is a socially constructed term that describes indigenous people; “Bumi” refers to “earth” or “soil” in Malay, while “putera” refers to prince (Siddique & Suryadinata, 1981). The NEP also facilitated the creation of an enrollment quota for Malays in the education system (Jomo, 1990, p. 475). While accounting for many successes, the inception of the NEP also marked the official rise of the Malay ethno-nationalist ‘nation-of-intent’ that until this day dominated the Malaysian political landscape.

## **The development of Bangsa Malaysia, 1991-2005**

### ***Wawasan 2020 and Bangsa Malaysia***

Wawasan 2020, or Vision 2020, was an ideological framework proposed by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in 1991. The vision sets out nine challenges involving aspects such as economic prosperity, social well-being, world class education, political stability, psychological balance, and a good moral compass in hopes to build Malaysia as a fully industrialized, independent, and prosperous country by the year 2020 (Nur Azura Sanusi & Normi Azura Ghazali, 2014). The ultimate goal of this vision is to formulate a *Bangsa Malaysia*, or a Malaysian nation/race. Mahathir introduced Bangsa Malaysia as:

An inclusive national identity for all inhabitants of Malaysia . . . of all colors and creeds”, as “people being able to identify themselves with the country by speaking Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay and national language) and accepting the Constitution,” as well as “a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one ‘Bangsa Malaysia’ with political loyalty and dedication to the nation. (Mahathir Mohamad, 1991)

Bangsa Malaysia was considered the first attempt by the Malaysian government to formulate a multi-ethnic state narrative (Liew, 2022, p. 5). However, there was confusion and lack of consensus among the general public as well as academic circles over the collocation’s emancipatory potential largely stemming from the fact that two different meanings accrue from the word *‘bangsa,’* which is commonly translated from the Malay language to mean ‘nation’ (Gabriel, 2011, p. 369-370). This is the translation that the government itself has openly endorsed and put into circulation through its invocation of Bangsa Malaysia as “a united Malaysian Nation.” Yet, the implications become radical and far-reaching when *‘bangsa’* is translated according to its second definition, to mean “race,” leaving a controversial notion of formulating a “Malaysian race” (Gabriel, 2011, p. 370). Nevertheless, the Wawasan 2020 and Bangsa Malaysia concepts were

electorally fruitful as the BN coalition-government won the 1995 general election with a huge margin. Interestingly, the BN coalition-government was able to draw significantly higher non-Malay votes as compared to Malay votes (Chin, 1996).

In 2005, the infamous keris-wielding speech, by then-UMNO youth chief, Hishammudin Hussein, during the UMNO youth general assembly symbolized the end of the attempt to build a multi-ethnic national identity and marked UMNO's turn to right-wing politics since then (Liew, 2015). The keris is a historic dagger that was often used for war during the Malaysian pre-colonial period (Fong & Md Sidin Ahmad Ishak, 2013). Today, the keris is not only a ceremonial dagger, but also a symbolism of defending Malay supremacy (Fong, Md Sidin Ahmad Ishak, 2013). The general assembly produced a resolution to introduce a kind of 'Malay Agenda' and pushed for the reintroduction of the New Economic Policy (Liew, 2015).

## **The crossroads of contemporary politics, 2008-2018**

### ***Rise of the Opposition & 1Malaysia***

During the period between 2008 and 2018, Malaysia oversaw the exponential rise of the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition and its successor, Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition. This ten-year period was marked by economic stagnation and policy drift, which was accompanied by the UMNO's move rightwards and the shrinking of its support (Liew, 2022, p. 6). The 2008 general election saw the PR coalition, composed of DAP, PKR, and PAS gaining 82 parliamentary seats, denying the ruling BN coalition-government a supermajority it held comfortably since the 1969 general election. In response to that, Prime Minister Najib Razak introduced the 1Malaysia slogan (Liew, 2022, p. 6). 1Malaysia was a concept and economic program to promote ethnic harmony, national unity, and efficient governance (Najib Razak, 2018). It was arguably a desperate attempt to regain support from the non-Malays and moderate Malays. The 1Malaysia campaign failed to

appeal to the voters, as the 2013 general election further cemented the opposition's electoral strength. The PR coalition was able to obtain 51% of the popular vote. Despite that, the ruling coalition retained power by winning 133 of the 222 parliamentary seats largely due to gerrymandering (Liew, 2022, p. 6).

### **The navigation of political impasse, 2018-ongoing**

As stated throughout the introduction of this paper, Malaysia is currently at a political impasse. Coalition politics — a political situation when no political party or coalition is able to obtain absolute majority after an election — has dominated and tensions remain high since *Langkah Sheraton*.

It is interesting to note that when the BN coalition took over the PN coalition, another attempt to foster ethnic harmony was made by the then Prime Minister Ismail Sabri. *Keluarga Malaysia*, or Malaysian Family, was another desperate attempt to appeal to the Malaysian public, especially the non-Malays and moderate Malays after the nation had undergone severe political polarization.

### **Findings**

Throughout the PH coalition-government regime, ethnic tensions exacerbated exponentially as the perceived threats towards the entrenched UMNO-led Malay ethno-nationalism 'nation-of-intent' and the competing "nation-of-intents" ultimately led to political instability and the downfall of the regime. In this paper, three issues, namely the Seafeld Sri Maha Mariamman Temple riot, the Anti-ICERD Movement, and the Jawi Khat Controversy will be examined to highlight the competing "nation-of-intents" as they have been the most divisive matters that the government experienced.

## **Seafield Sri Maha Mariamman Temple riot, November 2018**

The Seafield Sri Maha Mariamman Temple is a Hindu Temple that currently sits on a piece of land belonging to a private company, MCT Bhd, who are the founders of One City Development (Tay, 2017). On November 26 and 27, 2018, riots broke out in the vicinity of the temple and its surrounding area, stemming from a misunderstanding between the temple administration and the developer for almost a decade (Nasrul Hafiz, 2018). The misunderstanding started when One City Development wanted to relocate the temple from its current location, during which the developer successfully applied for a court order (Menon, 2017). In response, the temple authorities sought the help of politicians to handle the issue of the temple's relocation (Menon, 2017). Following political involvement, the Selangor Executive Committee Official affirmed that the courts had decided that it was the right of the developer to relocate the temple as they were the registered proprietors. However, attempts to take possession of the land by the developers proved futile (Nasrul Hafiz, 2018).

The misunderstanding eventually led to the riots on November 26 and 27, 2018 (Nasrul Hafiz, 2017). In the wee hours of November 26, provocateurs entered and threatened people in the temple while devotees were praying (Nurul Hidayah Bahaudin, 2018). The chairman of the 'pro-stay' faction of the temple — Save Seafield Sri Maha Mariamman, S. Ramaji, claimed that approximately 250 people had barged in the temple premises wielding knives, axes, rakes, parangs and wooden sticks, ordering all within the temple to vacate the premises immediately (Today Online, 2018). Enforcements arrived almost an hour later and the aftermath of the altercation led to 18 cars and two motorcycles being burnt (Tan et al., 2018).

The second wave of the riot occurred late evening on the same day, progressing until till the early morning of November 27, 2018. During that phase of the riot, vehicles were set on fire



and rioters prevented firefighters from entering the vicinity of the temple (Nasrul Hafiz, 2018). The rioters even attacked the firefighters, which ultimately led to the critical injury and later on, the death of a firefighter named Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim (Timbuong, 2018). After a detailed forensic investigation, it was revealed that Muhammad Adib sustained fatal injuries when he was crushed between a Fire and Rescue Department vehicle's door and chassis as the provocateurs dragged him out of the vehicle while kicking the door which slammed against him repeatedly (Hariz Mohd, 2019). The then-Home Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin also unveiled that two lawyers employed by One City Development paid RM150,000 (approximately US \$36,000) to the provocateurs (Irwan Shafrizan Ismail, 2018). The lawyers and developers denied any connections to the riots and are currently under police investigation (Irwan Shafrizan Ismail, 2018).

While the riots grew out of a misunderstanding, ethnicity played a huge factor in their aftermath. However, the then-six-month old PH coalition-government attempted to downplay any ethnic or religious tensions in the country (Sukumaran, 2018a), while public discourse emphasized ethnocentric narratives in the following weeks of the riots. Among ethnic minorities, narratives emerged that it was the 'Malay gangsters' that caused the riots, while the Malays argued that it was the 'Indian gangsters' that killed Adib, who they hailed as a hero. The narratives went as far as saying Indians don't belong in this country and that the position of the Malay is threatened by the then-new government and ethnic minorities. Incomplete information from the authorities and the media facilitated assumptions that it was a 'Malay problem' and an 'Indian problem' (Tan, 2018). Nevertheless, the nation itself failed to recognize that the tensions occurred because of those who were actively fanning the ethnocentric discourse of a 'Malay problem' or an 'Indian problem.' A misunderstanding revealed the deeply entrenched different "nation-of-intents" that the Malays

and non-Malays have.

### **Anti-ICERD Movement, December 2018**

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) is a United Nations (UN) convention that commits its members to the elimination of racial discrimination and the promotion of understanding among all races (UN General Assembly, 1965). The convention was passed on December 21, 1965 by the UN General Assembly, and a total of 182 countries have ratified the convention since then (UN General Assembly, 1965). Yet, there are still multiple countries that have not ratified the convention, including Malaysia (UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2022). Thus, when the PH coalition-government came to power, the need to demonstrate the nation's commitment to fight against discrimination on the global stage manifested in the means of ratifying the convention. On September 28, 2018, then Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad addressed the UN General Assembly announcing the PH coalition government's need to ratify all remaining core UN instruments related to the protection of human rights, which included ICERD (NST Online, 2018). On November 19, 2018, National Unity and Social Wellbeing Minister, Waytha Moorthy, officially announced the government's intention to ratify ICERD in the Malaysian Parliament (Carvaho, Sivanandam, Rahim, & Tan, 2018). Although the government announced that there would be consultations with relevant stakeholders taking place early 2019, PAS and BN MPs protested against the decision and started chanting 'racist' against the Minister (Carvaho, Sivanandam, Rahim, & Tan, 2018).

The PH coalition government's attempt to ratify ICERD invited controversy as it was perceived as a threat towards the special position of the Malays and the special position of Islam as granted in Article 153 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution (Abdul Muqit Muhammad, Awang

Azman Awang Pawi, & Mohammad Tawfik Yaakub, 2022). Even though the principle of the convention reflects the objectives of fighting against discrimination against ethnic and religious differences, the fact that the terms of equality provide the cornerstone of the convention is perceived by some as a threat towards the Malays (Sukumaran, 2018b). On November 23, 2018, the government announced that they would be abandoning efforts to ratify the convention and would continue upholding and defending the Malaysian Federal Constitution (Sukumaran, 2018b).

The primary reason for rejecting the convention was the perceived potential removal of the special position of the Malays and Islam. This rejection resonated not only with politicians but also with various religious scholars such as the Federal Territory Mufti Dr. Zulkifli al-Bakri, the Malaysian Scholars Association (PUM) and the Malay Economic Action Council (MTEM). Mufti Dr. Zulkifli al-Bakri argued that the attempt to ratify the convention would not only challenge the validity of Article 153 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution, but also Article 3(1), which terms Islam as the official religion of the country (Zuklifi Al-Bakri, 2018). The President of PUM, Datuk Al Syekh Abdul Halm Abd Kadir concurred with the Mufti and added that Malay customs and the harmony of society will be jeopardized (Nurul Riduan, 2018). The Malay Economic Action Council later expressed similar sentiments and argued that the ratification of the convention would put Bumiputera institutions at risk, including the People's Trust Council (MARA), the Royal Malay Military Regiment (RAMD), the MARA University of Technology (UiTM), and the land reservations for Bumiputeras (Ahmad Yazid, Lukman Sheriff Alias, & Aidil Khalid, 2018).

These perspectives are warranted, as the convention requires the commitment of ratified states to fulfill Article 2(1)(c) of the convention which states that:

Each State Party shall take effective measures to review governmental, national and local policies, and to amend, rescind or nullify any laws and regulations which have the effect

of creating or perpetuating racial discrimination wherever it exists. (UN General Assembly, 1965)

Further, the convention requires ratified states to guarantee equal rights to all citizens in arenas such as education, real estate, economy, and politics. Article 5 of the convention clearly states that:

In compliance with the fundamental obligations laid down in Article 2 of this Convention, States Parties undertake to prohibit and to eliminate racial discrimination in all its forms and to guarantee the right of everyone, without distinction as to race, colour, or national or ethnic origin, to equality before the law, notably in the enjoyment of the following rights. (UN General Assembly, 1965)

As quoted, the perceived threat towards the special position of Malay and Islam is legitimate. The fear was that the current advantages of Malays over Malay land reservations, public employment, admission to UiTM, admission quota to colleges and universities would be taken away due to the ratification of the convention justified the rejection (Abdul Muqit Muhammad, Awang Azman Awang Pawi, and Mohammad Tawfik Yaakub, 2022). Far more importantly, if ratified, international pressure would be applied by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which requires ratified states to report their compliance towards the clauses laid out in the convention. Therefore, the doubt of whether the PH coalition-government was able to continue to uphold Article 153 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution after the ratification of ICERD also fed into its ultimate rejection. Article 153 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution was included to not only ensure the establishment of Malay ethno-nationalism, but also to address the socioeconomic discrepancies between the Malays and the Chinese. Thus, an affirmative action provision was introduced to uplift the socioeconomic and political status of the Malays when the Malaysian Federal Constitution was drafted. The clause was meant to be temporary as the original

drafters hoped that once economic inequality was addressed, the provision would be removed. However, the provision stayed on, becoming entrenched in the nation's system.

### **Jawi Khat Controversy, July to August 2019**

The *Jawi Khat* is an Arabic-based writing system of calligraphy that is used by Malaysian Malay Muslims to decipher Islamic texts. It was introduced by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) in Year Four Malay language subjects in all National Schools (SK) and also National-type School (SJK(C/T)) — vernacular Chinese and Tamil primary schools — as a method to reduce intra-ethnic polemics in the country, particularly between Malays and non-Malays (Zubir Sulaiman, 2020). The intended outcome for the *Jawi Khat* introduction was to provide knowledge to all students about the art, heritage, and history of the Malay language (Zubir Sulaiman, 2020). The policy decision to introduce six pages of *Jawi Khat*, as a matter of fact, was made by the former BN coalition-government and the planning process began in 2014 (Choong, 2019; Mohd Awar, 2019).

The *Jawi Khat* Controversy began when Sin Chew Daily, Malaysia's leading Chinese language daily, reported on the front page of the newspaper about the *Jawi Khat* syllabus introduction. According to DAP's then-political education leader Liew Chin Tong, Sin Chew constructed a false perception of the *Jawi Khat* introduction which triggered anxiety among the Chinese (Liew, 2019). Nevertheless, the *Jawi Khat* introduction received widespread rejection from the non-Malays, including 'Dong Zong' — the United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia, 'Jiao Zong' — the United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia, and the Tamil Foundation (Chie, 2019; Mohd Anwar, 2019). Dong Zong also claimed that there were more than 900 national-type schools rejecting the introduction of *Jawi Khat* in

students' syllabus (Samadi Ahmad, 2020). The rejection became even more apparent when banners reading "We do not support and will not teach calligraphy and Jawi writing" were hung in parameters of a few national-type schools (Nur Farhana, 2019). Forums were also organized to discuss the next course of action. One of them was organized by Dong Zong at New Era University College that managed to engage about 100 Chinese organizations across the country (Wan Noor, 2019).

The rejection of the syllabus introduction of the *Jawi Khat* by the non-Malay communities was based on a number of reasons. First, the non-Malay communities believed that the *Jawi Khat* introduction was the initiation of Islamization (Alfian, 2019). On top of that, national-type schools argued that such introduction was not beneficial and did not coincide with the requirements of learning the Malay language (Mohd Anwar, 2019). In addition, it was stated that it would not help students to master Malay well and burden students as well as teachers (Mohd Anwar, 2019). However, contradictingly, the six page introductory to *Jawi Khat* was merely connecting the dots of *Jawi* letters and reproducing the letters in the form of *khat*, which approximately took about 10 minutes class time (Bernama, 2019). Far more importantly, no assessments included *Jawi* (Bernama, 2019). Thus, the fear of Islamization superseded the teaching and learning logistics of the *Jawi Khat*.

The extensive rejection of the *Jawi Khat* by the non-Malays eventually drew displeasure from the Malay community, particularly in the aftermath of both the Seafeld Sri Maha Mariamman Temple riot and the Anti-ICERD movement. The Malays felt that Malay ethnic identity and Islam was openly rejected by the non-Malays (Nor 'Asyikin, 2020). More specifically, the already entrenched and dominated Malay ethno-nationalist 'nation-of-intent' had been perceived as threatening and disrespectful. Malay and Islam-based political parties and

organizations such as the Malaysia National Alliance Party (IKATAN), UMNO, PAS and the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) became ethnic solidarity platforms for the Malays. Counter-protests against the anti-*Jawi Khat* faction were also mobilized, advocating for the ban of Dong Zong (Faisal, 2019). Consequently, the anti-*Jawi Khat* movement sparked a nation wide “Buy Muslim First (#BMF)” movement (Lee & Wong, 2020).

The non-Malay community, on the other hand, extensively rejected the syllabus introduction of *Jawi Khat* as they had their own ‘nation-of-intent’ where their ethnic identities were also protected and they were allowed to fight against potential Islamification in national-type schools. These national-type schools were built during the British colonial era and became part of the education system after the Education Ordinance of 1952 (Sivalingam, 2020). The Education Ordinance was the reconciliation effort between the Barnes Report of 1951, which advocated to transform all ethnic-based schools into single stream national schools, and the Fenn-Wu Report of 1951, which recommended the preservation of Chinese schools as Chinese felt their language and culture will be eliminated (Sivalingam, 2020). Since then, the national-type schools were primarily preserving the “nation-of-intents” of the non-Malays.

The *Jawi Khat* controversy was eventually mediated by the PH coalition-government as it made some adjustments towards the *Jawi* syllabus. The then Education Minister Mazlee Malik announced that the six page syllabus will be reduced to three pages and it will be optional (Juani Munir, 2019). The compromise that arguably favored the anti-*Jawi Khat* movement was widely criticized for not protecting the ethnic identities of the Malays and perhaps the ‘nation-of-intent’ of the Malays. The ethnic tension after all came from the expectation that the government would protect both the Malays and non-Malays identities. As much as the media played a huge role in

falsely and negatively framing the syllabus introduction of *Jawi Khat*, it only actually exacerbated the already underlying lack of national identity that the country has been facing.

## **Discussion**

The fall of the Pakatan Harapan coalition government and the ongoing political instability is clearly the result of the manifestation of contesting nationalism since the inception of the country. The political instability that the country experienced for the past three years is arguably a symptom of a country that is still in search of a national identity. To clarify, countries that have political instability do not necessarily correlate to a lack of national identity, thus the purpose of this paper is to justify the causation of the political instability in Malaysia. Some scholars have argued that Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, and China all had well-developed national identities, based on common history, culture, and ethnicity, and did not need to settle internal questions of identity when they began to modernize (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 126). They too suffered from political instability to the extent of civil wars, but they could build on traditions of statehood and common national purpose once these instabilities were stabilized (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 126). Similarly, western countries like the United States (US) were able to forge common ideals of liberalism such as “all men have inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as their national identity. How those ideals should be demonstrated is hotly debated in their political landscape, but the majority of the foundation and political institutions of the US still persist with those ideals. In contrast, Malaysia does not seem to have any commonality to forge a vision that is shared by the majority of its people. As exemplified throughout this paper, the country has dominant contesting nationalisms such as Malay ethno-nationalism, multi-ethnic nationalism, and the most recent revitalization of Islamic nationalism. These competing “nation-of-intents” have been so entrenched that created an ethnically fractured society. Therefore, it is arguably unrealistic



to use a model of a nation of one people with a common history, culture, and ethnicity to identify the country (Tan, 2000, p. 468).

With that, this paper laid down three features to set a framework for a national identity as the search continues. These three features are formulating a national identity that is based on multiculturalism, a bottom-up approach, and a political moderation blueprint.

First, a nation's soul-searching efforts should focus on promoting inter-ethnic understanding and respect for ethnic differences, rather than on implementing policies which increase pressures for socio-political integration and assimilation. To put it simply, acculturation efforts and ideologies should be abandoned in building a national identity. The Malay ethno-nationalism "nation-of-intents" that dominated the political landscape advocated for non-Malays to adapt to older Malaysian history, culture, and practices. However, this only created further ethnic tensions as the minorities preferred to protect and preserve their ethnic identities. As shown throughout the course of Malaysian history, the trend is certainly true. The *Jawi Khat* controversy during the Pakatan Harapan coalition-government, for instance, exemplified the efforts to protect and preserve ethnic identities by both the ethnic majority Malay and the ethnic minorities. Instead of framing that the *Jawi Khat* syllabus introduction was an effort to educate non-Malays about the art, heritage, and history of the Malay language, it could have been better framed as an effort to promote understanding between ethnicities. While media biases played a huge role in this particular issue, the intention behind the syllabus introduction was an acculturation effort. Thus, if the intention is true in promoting multiculturalism, there should be a more holistic approach in educating *Jawi Khat* to non-Malays, for example, while Malays would learn 'hànzì,' or Chinese characters and Tamil script writing. Perhaps, embracing the ideals of multiculturalism and forging

a Malaysian common destiny could be the foundation of a future strategy of Malaysian national identity formation.

Second, the search for a national identity must be driven by a bottom-up approach. Tan (2000, p. 469) states that the current discourse in generating ethnic identity is clearly linked to the state as a political unit and to the political processes of nation building. Indeed, over the years, slogans like ‘Bangsa Malaysia,’ ‘1Malaysia,’ and ‘Keluarga Malaysia,’ were introduced and implemented by respective Prime Ministers and their administrations. However, this top-down approach to infuse a national identity has only led to confusion among Malaysians. Perhaps, looking back at history, the bottom-up approach taken by the PUTERA-AMCJA that rallied cross-ethnic and different backgrounds to champion an inclusive nation would be more successful. Malaysians across ethnic backgrounds must be receptive to change and be the change that they seek, instead of only demanding the government to overhaul the contesting nationalism landscape.

Third, political moderation, or the middle ground, must be the general basis in forming the federal government, and this political moderation must be geared toward wooing all ethnic groups for their electoral support. Malaysian electoral history has clearly shown that political coalitions and political parties that appealed to the middle ground won with a higher margin in the elections. For instance, the PR coalition that was formed by bridging DAP, PKR, and PAS. DAP and PKR had an arguably more centrist stance but was highly perceived as a left wing party, while PAS appealed more towards the center-right electorate. In regards to the PH coalition, DAP, PKR, and AMANAH similarly had a more center-left stance, while BERSATU would balance out with their center-right wing stance. Even more recently, the unity government under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was established by a far more centrist PH coalition, with a center right BN coalition. It is important for such a government construct to lead the nation in search for this national identity.

This paper is not without limitations. In focusing on a study of national identity through the lens of ethnicity, this paper did not provide an exhaustive analysis on all “nation-of-intents”, particularly in the Borneo states — Sarawak and Sabah. This paper only included dominant theories that have been entrenched in the country that predominantly led to the tensions. The paper failed to carry out a deeper analysis of the Bumiputera to distinguish between Malays and indigenous people. Additionally, this paper did not account for the ethnic composition projection that will observe the Malay population growing significantly. According to a study by the Department of Statistics Malaysia in 2016, the Malay population will increase from 67.3% in 2010 to 72.1% by 2040, while Chinese and Indians population will decrease by 4.5% and 0.9% respectively (Ho, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

Malaysia is currently in a precarious situation. As political instability continues, the search for a national identity becomes even more important; as without a sense of who Malaysians are, political coup d'etat would potentially occur again. Make no mistake that Malaysia has demonstrated its ability to unite all of its people, such as our rich and diverse food options, and the performance of Malaysian Badminton athletes at the world stage. However, those are manifestations of a national identity that we must continuously seek to build a better nation for the next generation.

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