

**DISCOURSES ON POLITICAL REFORM AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN EAST  
AND SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE LIGHT OF NEW PROCESSES OF REGIONAL  
COMMUNITY BUILDING**

Project Discussion Paper No. 10/2001

**Looking for Clues  
Malaysian Suggestions for Political Change**

**by  
Claudia Derichs**

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**Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften (Institute for East Asian Studies/East Asian Politics)  
Gerhard-Mercator-University Duisburg  
D-47048 Duisburg, Germany**

**Tel.: +49'203 379-3728  
Fax: +49'203 379-3728  
E-mail: heberer@uni-duisburg.de**

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## Preface to the Paper Series

The present discussion paper series of the Institute of East Asian Studies accompanies a research project entitled *Political Discourses on Reform and Democratisation in Light of New Processes of Regional Community-Building*. The project is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and supervised by Thomas Heberer.

The central topic of interest is, as the title of the project suggests, the influence exerted on the political reform process by political discourse. The papers published in this series address the public political discussion at the national as well as the transnational, regional level. Accordingly, the papers display a variety of discourses that have emerged in different countries and centre round different political issues. Contributions from authors of the region are particularly welcome, because they reflect an authentic view of the political discussion within the local public. By integrating and encouraging the local voices, the project team intends to compile a collection of papers that document some important debates and states of the research process.

The current political discourses in East Asia are primarily analysed in case studies of two authoritarian states (China, Vietnam), a multi-ethnic, formally democratic state with strong authoritarian features (Malaysia), and a democratic state with significant parochial structures and patterns of behaviour (Japan). In addition to these case studies, contributions from and on other countries of the region are included to provide a broad scope of comparable discourses.

While Claudia Derichs and Thomas Heberer are the editors of the paper series, a project team of eight members conducts field work in East Asia and brings forth regular proceedings. Research reports other than discussion papers shall be published in refereed journals and magazines. Detailed proceedings leading to the final results of the research project will be published as a book. The project team is composed of research fellows associated with the Chair for East Asian Politics at the Gerhard Mercator University of Duisburg. The team members are: Karin Adelsberger (area: Japan); Claudia Derichs, Ph.D. (Malaysia, Japan); Lun Du, Ph.D. (China); Prof. Thomas Heberer, Ph.D. (China, Vietnam); Bong-Ki Kim, Ph.D. (South Korea); Patrick Raszelenberg (Vietnam); Nora Sausmikat (China); and Anja Senz (China).

Paper No. 1 of the series provides a detailed idea of the theoretical and methodological setting of the project. Each discussion paper of the present series can be downloaded from the university server, using the following URL: <http://www.uni-duisburg.de/Institute/OAWISS/Publikationen/orangereihe.html>. Suggestions and comments on the papers are welcome at any time.

Duisburg, June 2000

Claudia Derichs and Thomas Heberer

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Looking for Clues: Malaysian Suggestions for Political Change

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Politische Reform- und Demokratisierungsdiskurse im Lichte neuer Prozesse regionaler Gemeinschaftsbildung

Discourses on Political Reform and Democratization in East and Southeast Asia in the Light of New Processes of Regional Community-Building

**Zusammenfassung/Abstract:**

Malaysian suggestions for political change have been articulated by diverse societal groups and communities. The emerging civil society in Southeast Asia is reflected in Malaysia through the power struggles of old and new political parties and movements. Within this setting, the coalition of Islamic and non-Islamic parties is one of the most striking phenomena to be observed. The paper addresses the question of what theoretical parameters can be applied to analyse the critical juncture at which Malaysia and other Southeast Asian nation-states have arrived at the turn of the century (1999-2001). The approach used in the paper is to analyse the interplay of domestic and international influence factors in order to explain the current political discourse in Malaysia.

**Schlüsselwörter/Keywords:**

Democratization, Islamization, democracy, Islam, orientalism, globalization

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# Looking for Clues: Malaysian Suggestions for Political Change

## Introduction

That Malaysia finds itself in political turmoil since both the regional financial crisis and the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim hit the country, stands beyond doubt. From the man in the street to the upper echelons of the political public, there is hardly anybody who does not have an opinion or an idea of what should change in the country and how it should change in order to achieve political stability. The political awareness has risen and manifests itself in various suggestions, prescriptions and activities. The following pages address the topic of political change as demanded and expected by several political and societal actors in Malaysia. The information has been collected during six periods of field work in West and East Malaysia between 1997 and 2000. The results derive from extended conversations and interviews with intellectuals, politicians and non-governmental activists on the one hand, and content analyses of printed and internet documents on the other hand.

The results presented here reveal a highly heterogeneous if not controversial range of opinions and attitudes towards political change. This is not to say that change, if occurring, would lead to a situation of total disorder because there is no clear line of argument discernible, but that the variety is rather a sign of healthy pluralism developing in a more and more competitive political climate. At least three groups of competitors are struggling for public attention, hence for voters' support in case of political parties and for active engagement and resource mobilisation in case of non-governmental organisations. One group would be the Islamically inclined actors, predominantly but not exclusively formed by Malay Muslims; another one would be the conservative pro-government camp; and a third one would be composed of supporters of an ethnically integrative reform movement, mostly referred to as the *reformasi* movement.<sup>1</sup> Although this categorisation is rough and tends to neglect the cross-grains between the three groups at first glance, it gives an appropriate idea of the political setting in a country whose politics is not characterised primarily by a conservative-progressive dichot-

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<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, the terms 'ethnic' and 'racial/multiracial' are used interchangeably throughout the text. I am aware of the difference, but since the terms are used without any noticeable difference in the public Malaysian discourse, they are used here in a similar manner. – In a nutshell, my understanding of an ethnic group is a historically grown or rediscovered community of people who subscribe to a name, to a specific culture and language, to shared myths of descent or origin, and to a collective memory. Members of the community feel solidarity in the sense of a "we"-identity. Ethnicity is considered as a form of politicised ethnic identity (see also Vivello 1995: 331). The term 'race' carries a biological meaning, but includes here features of ethnicity as well.

omy. The cross-grains merit attention because of their mediatory capacity within the national political discourse. Within the tripartite setting, the conservative camp shows the highest vulnerability, whereas the Islamic-oriented group displays the strongest self-consciousness. Interestingly, the Islamic-oriented group has gained more political credibility among the non-Muslims and non-Malays than the other groups. The Malay-Muslim women though, have been victimised by the race of the conservative and the Islamist camp to “out-Islamise” (Farish Noor) each other (FEER, 27.07.2000).

Regarding the recent political developments, the theoretical interpretation of Malaysian politics as determined by parameters of ethnicity as well as class – in fact ethnicity *cum* class (Khoo 1995) - seems to lose ground. It is thus worth looking for theoretical parameters that are capable of the current complex structure of Malaysian politics and political discourse. The following analysis of the political discourse will provide a first approximation to a theoretical approach that favours a combination of domestic and international influence factors on Malaysian politics. This approach will be tested by examining the opinions and attitudes towards political change.

### **Parameters of international and domestic politics**

In the history of ideas it is the concept of *Orientalism*, followed by its pendant *Occidentalism*, which brought about various critical schools of thought, many of them originating in non-Western cultures. The power of Islamic resurgence may well be attributed to the impact of the idea of *Orientalism*. In the field of international relations it is the term *globalisation* that has opened a floodgate for political and economic debate, accommodated by the idea of *governance* as the leading principle of national and international political management. Within the domestic politics in Malaysia, these global trends have been translated into what appeared necessary in order to keep up with the pace of modernisation, hence to become a fully developed country in the fastest time possible. The specifically Malaysian features of developmentalism were determined by the *New Economic Policy* (NEP), a Malaysian version of affirmative action in favour of the Malay majority. It is the NEP that generated much of the scholarly debate on class structures in Malaysian society, in particular on intra-ethnic class conflict. As Khoo Boo Teik puts it: “One may characterize it as a ‘class-within-community’ approach which investigates class while holding ethnicity ‘constant’.” (Khoo 1995: XIX) It means that ethnicity has not lost its importance as a determining element of societal self-perception, but has been joined by another code of difference, namely class. Class differences arose because



the developmentalist policies produced ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ not merely among the Malay community but among the Chinese, the Indian and the indigenous communities as well.

### Orientalism

The concept of *Orientalism* has provoked positive and negative responses alike. Intellectually, one remarkable and surely positive outcome of the *Orientalism* debate is the revision, reconstruction or re-orientation of historiography. Alert historians searched the established writings for Orientalist views and produced re-writings of history, ranging from a concentration on single countries like Japan (Tanaka 1993; Conrad 1999) or Russia (Sahni 1997) to a regional or East-West perspective (Braudel 1992; Blaut 1993; Clarke 1997). Although Edward Said’s famous work *Orientalism* (1978) referred to the Arab World – in essence the Middle East –, subsequent treatises had no problem applying Said’s thoughts to the Far East or to ‘the South’ in general. History as seen from the eyes of the colonised, from Asia and from the Islamic world, served as a vehicle for the rehabilitation of the neglected non-Western achievements and contributions to world history.

In the Islamic world, the 1970s became the decade of Islamic resurgence, reaching a peak with the Iranian revolution of 1979. The revival of Islamic ideas and the growing self-assertion of Muslims spread to the Muslim states of Southeast Asia as well, being adopted in Malaysia as a central element of the government’s modernisation formula. Reformist Islam in the sense of Islam as a moral and ethic supporter of modernisation, became a significant socio-political and socio-economic feature during the first ten years of Prime Minister Mahathir’s rule, 1981 - 1991 (Hamayotsu 1999; Sloane 1999). It is not Mahathir himself though, who the Muslims in Malaysia identified with as an Islamic leader. Mahathir had chosen the charismatic Muslim youth leader Anwar Ibrahim in 1982 to play this role, and he played it very well until the Prime Minister dismissed him in late 1998 (Derichs forthcoming). The subsequent political development, i. e. the political turmoil that evoked because Anwar was sentenced to 15 years of confinement – the dubious charges: corruption and sodomy – will be treated in more detail below. Aside from the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence, the rapid economic development of Southeast Asia spurred the idea that *Asian values* were the main driving force behind the region’s economic success. Although the debate has been applied more to economics and politics than to history or philosophy, the increased self-assertion of Asian leaders like Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew (in Singapore) can be regarded as yet another outcome of the Western-critical mood since *Orientalism* hit the minds.

## Globalisation

The outcomes of *globalisation* are hard to describe in a few key phrases. It may suffice to stick to the notions of *governance* and *civil society*, while admitting of course that the more visible or perceptible effects of globalisation take place in international economics. Globalisation is understood here as continuously growing trans- and international trade and financial transactions with considerable repercussions on the socio-political development and political management of nation states. Political science treats the term *governance* as a wishful companion of globalisation; the term is frequently mentioned in the combination of *good governance*, indicating a normative notion beyond the concept of governance. Malaysian political scientist Saliha Hassan holds the view that the “dominant current discourse on good governance [in Malaysia] revolves around a general secular and liberal democratic notions [sic] of transparency, accountability and citizens’ participation.” (Saliha 1999: 6) Quoting Adrian Leftwich, one is reminded that the discourse

“appears to limit its definition to democratic or human rights issues. In fact it is at times further reduced to the mere technicalities of western democratic practice such as the holding of multi-party election and the recognition of the role of the opposition [although] at other times it is broadened to include the larger civic and political rights, such as the right to fair and free trial, and the right to freedom of expression and organisation.” (Leftwich 1993: 607, quoted in Saliha 1999: 6)

Despite this Western bias, the term governance has become popular in non-Western societies, particularly among NGO and social movement activists. Distinctively, the concept of governance stresses the participatory role of civil society in the political process. The popularity of the term civil society in Malaysia traces back to the mid-1990s, when then-Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim introduced the *masyarakat madani* as the Malaysian concept of a modern, progressive civil society within an Islamic ethical framework. According to Anwar’s vision of the *masyarakat madani*, ethics and morality are inevitable ingredients of the Malaysian civil society. Ethics apply to politics as well as to economics. In his view, Marxism for instance is condemned because it has no place for ethics, morality and spirituality. The appeal of Marxism to developing countries, which cannot be denied of course, was due largely to its anti-imperialist rhetoric, promising the liberation of man from the tyranny and exploitation of colonialism (Anwar, 1998: 75f.) History shows that Marxism failed, while free trade, competition and the return of the market are held in high esteem in the capitalist industrial countries. However, many forms of deprivation remain in contemporary capitalist states, living below the poverty line, to mention but one example, has not yet come to a halt. Anwar thus suggests a “middle path” to go, which is

composed of devices taken from Islam and from other ethical and philosophical traditions. Islamic devices are *hisba* ('mutual fairness', see below), *zakat* (tax or 'tithe' on income, business and property), *waqf* (endowment; charitable foundation), and the concept of the 'virtuous man', the *insân sâlih*. From Confucianism he borrows the images of *chun tzu* (the upright, morally perfect human being; the 'Superior Man') and *jen* (humaneness; love of fellow men), *chung* (the doing to others what one likes oneself) and *shu* (the not doing to others what one does not like oneself).<sup>2</sup> As for Western devices, Anwar departs from the *homo oeconomicus*, because this type is characterised by self-interest and not at all by altruism; disapproving the *homo oeconomicus* concept which is a brainchild of John Stuart Mill's liberal utilitarian philosophy, he sympathises with the school of thought propagated by another no less eminent and influential scholar of Western classical economic theory as well as moral philosophy, namely with Adam Smith. Anwar employs "the moral philosophy of Adam Smith in its more integral form," which means the preference of wisdom and virtue over material riches (Anwar, 1998: 82).

### New Economic Policy

In the realm of domestic politics, the *New Economic Policy* has been mentioned above as a promoter of the socio-economic developments accentuated by the change of ethnic and class structures in Malaysia. The NEP is also called the *bumiputera* policy. The term *bumiputera* bears the connotation of the country, or the soil (*bumi*), and the notion of the son as the male descendant (*putra*) who inherits the land from his father and is therefore the legitimate inhabitant of the country (the native, the aborigine). The term *putra* in Malay carries several connotations, reaching from its original meaning in Sanskrit, which is 'prince' (*putri* then means 'princess'), to the reminiscence of Malaysia's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra. In the PM's name, 'Putra' indicated the royal lineage of this man. The word is widely used in names of vehicles, buildings, places and so on – last but not least the newly constructed government site south of Kuala Lumpur is called *Putrajaya* ('prosperous city of Putra') to honour Tunku Abdul Rahman. The NEP was formulated immediately after the racial clashes of 1969 and launched in 1971, when the concept of *bumiputera* had already been invented. Shamsul (1996: 27) dates the first official application of the concept back to 1965, when the ruling party UMNO<sup>3</sup> held a Malay economic congress as a result of which the Bank

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<sup>2</sup> The same as in the case of the Islamic terms applies to the Confucian philosophical terms. For a detailed explanation and discussion I refer to Fung Yu-lan's *History of Chinese Philosophy*, and for a general approximation to Schuhmacher/Woerner's *Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion*.

<sup>3</sup> UMNO is the acronym of the *United Malays' National Organisation*, the strongest party of the ruling coalition *Barisan Nasional* (BN). UMNO is the de facto ruling party; Prime Minister Mahathir leads the party since 1981.

Bumiputera was established as a financial institution to support and encourage Malays' business efforts and to break the Chinese and foreign monopoly of the banking segment of commerce. After the congress, the term *bumiputera* came into popular use to signify the Malays and the indigenous communities (Shamsul 1996: 27; Mahathir 1998: 46).

With the help of the NEP, the *bumiputeras* were encouraged to participate in the world of business through several preferential measures like government contracts, licences, set-up of state-owned companies to exploit the timber and mineral resources, a 30% allocation of shares of every new or expanding company, and others. A new key figure for the distribution of national wealth was agreed upon by representatives of all major ethnic groups. The proportional allocation to be reached in 20 years (1970-1990) was 30% for *bumiputeras*, 40% for Chinese and Indians, and 30% for foreigners. (Mahathir 1998: 11, 24f., 56, 80f., 90) That Chinese and Indians would be able to increase their share was not doubted, but the Bumis would well need special incentives, privileged access and preferential treatment. Capital, opportunities, education and know-how were deemed necessary to narrow the gap between Bumis and non-Bumis. As Mahathir himself admits, the NEP did not achieve every target, especially in terms of *bumiputeras'* involvement in the economy (Mahathir, 1998: 64). But it did at least serve to lift up the standard of living of *bumiputeras* and non-*bumiputeras* alike by way of the country's successful economic performance. To continue the program of affirmative action and hopefully reach the targets, the NEP was succeeded in 1991 by the New Development Policy (or National Development Policy as it is also called, NDP). The NDP showed slight shifts from quantity to quality focus (Mahathir, 1998a; Milne and Mauzy, 1998). Along with the National Development Policy the Vision 2020 was launched. The objective of this vision is to make Malaysia a fully developed country until the year 2020. The Prime Minister speaks of the knowledge economy (k-economy) as the mould for increasing success rates in the realm of education, technology, growth and productivity (Hng 1998). Malaysia is of course not the only country in the region to boost the idea of a knowledge-driven and IT-savvy economy. Governments throughout the region pour remarkable sums of money into IT-related business; in 1999, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* recalls, "[g]overnments in the region rushed in to build facilities to encourage the IT industry and e-commerce." Cyberports were created in Hong Kong, Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore and even the "hardest-hit of the Asian economies," Indonesia. (FEER, 30.12.99–06.01.00: 22) The domestic target of a k-economy in Malaysia thus relates to the requirements of regional competitiveness.

## **Suggestions for Reform and Political Change**

The question of reform and political change became a hot topic in the end-1990s, when the financial crisis and in the wake of it the split of the former prime ministerial power team Mahathir-Anwar moved the political structure deeply. As a reflection of the ethnic representation of the population in party politics, the Malays had traditionally been represented by the United Malays' national Organisation (UMNO). UMNO is the strongest party of the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (National Front; BN), which consists of 14 parties altogether. The biggest component party representing the Chinese Malaysian community is the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA); Indian Malaysians are represented in the BN by the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).

### The conservative camp

UMNO, the de facto ruling party, never adhered to a certain ideology. It was and is a conservative, Malay nationalist party. To work and rule for the cause of the Malays secured the party a stable support rate among them. The majority of the Malays voted for UMNO, because UMNO's policies were advantageous to them. To lose the Malays' votes would mean to lose the party's basic support. This is why UMNO fears the factionalism of the Malays that has evolved because of the recent electoral gains made by Malaysia's Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, PAS). PAS had been traditionally strong in the north of peninsular Malaysia, particularly in the state of Kelantan. Says former UMNO Supreme Council member Affifudin Hj. Omar:

“UMNO has since the founding of PAS [1951] been able to survive the appeal of PAS. Whenever there was a threat from PAS, UMNO utilised the rural Ulama of the Pondok institutions<sup>4</sup> to secure the support of the Muslims. When the Pondok system disappeared, UMNO co-opted Anwar Ibrahim, and Anwar brought with him all the Islamic scholars and followers of ABIM,<sup>5</sup> who substituted the Ulama. Between 1980 and 1995 PAS had no significant inroads because of Anwar.” (Affifudin, interview, 07.08.00)

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<sup>4</sup> Pondok literally means a hut or a small house. Within the indigenous education system, Pondok means a place where Islamic religious teachers (*ustaz*) or scholars (*ulama*) privately teach the Qur'an, Arabic letters and religious knowledge. Before the British introduced modern and religious schools in early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Pondok schools were about the only institutions in rural areas to train literacy. Today, they co-exist with other formal schools. Politically, Pondok schools became a nurturing ground of Islamic-oriented Malay nationalism; they played a crucial role in shaping Malay nationalist politics in Malaysia. Through the Pondok, political ideas could diffuse into the grassroots and, vice versa, grassroots' interests could be transmitted to village chiefs and party politicians by the teachers. UMNO made ample use of the system until Anwar joined the party; as the former leader of the Islamic Youth Movement (see fn 5), his access to the grassroots was just perfect. See also Funston 1980.

<sup>5</sup> ABIM is the acronym for the Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia. Anwar had lead this movement from 1972 until he joined UMNO in 1982.

When PAS gained the majority in the two northern states Kelantan and Terengganu in the 1999 general elections, this victory signified a backdrop in Malay politics.

People like Affifudin who stayed in UMNO after 1998 although belonging to the 'Anwar camp', do not really like to admit that there is something attractive about PAS. "UMNO lost over 200 seats [in the 1999 elections; C.D.]; to over 65% the loss was caused because of the sacking of Anwar, not because of the attractiveness of PAS," the former Deputy Finance Minister holds (Affifudin, interview, 07.08.00). During the 1990s, the ruling coalition BN always had a comfortable 2/3 majority, so UMNO as the de facto ruling party could bull through every bill it wanted. But not everything UMNO achieved under Mahathir' leadership was a success. Although the development of the country on the whole made a good progress, Mahathir tended to neglect the rural areas' development. In systems with a one-party dominance like Japan, Singapore or Indonesia under Suharto, pork barrel politics and electoral bribery are likely to accompany the development strategy for urban and rural constituencies. Malaysia is no exception in this regard. Where the party base is weak, the launching of development projects depends to a considerable extent on the voting behaviour of the population.

Many of the Anwar-friendly UMNO members think that reforms are necessary for the country and for the party because of the appeal of PAS to the Malays. In an attempt to foster a more participatory intra-party decision-making, UMNO members formulated some reformist demands like "a greater say in choosing party leaders. But on October 30 [2000], Umno's Supreme Council approved a set of proposals that fails to meet the reformist demands of most party members and looks set only to strengthen the leadership's grip on power." (FEER, 16.11.00: 20). The Hongkong-based weekly prints what many comments in internet news-groups share as an opinion. "The decision to drop the steps toward greater democratization suggests opposition to reform." (FEER, 16.11.00: 20) Time will show whether the Supreme Council has been wise in turning down the desire for intra-party reforms or not.

#### Criticism of the ruling party

According to religiously inspired Malays, another end for the party to meet is to serve the moral demands and spiritual needs of the Muslims in the country (Azman, interview, 31.07.00). UMNO desperately tries to adjust to such requirements, although it is not an easy way to go after having discredited the party's most popular Muslim figure Anwar Ibrahim. Whenever the Prime Minister or other members or UMNO organisations come up with a

statement to underline the party's Islamic credibility, they are either scathingly commented or contemptuously smiled at by those who doubt about it. While the BN-friendly mainstream press reports on UMNO's true Islamic struggle and *jihad* ('holy war'), the papers of the opposition parties – PAS in particular – condemn such efforts. From time to time the government reacts by banning or restricting publications. PAS' widely distributed paper *Harakah*, for instance, was curtailed to be published only fortnightly instead of twice a week soon after the 1999 elections. It now comes out daily in a Malay and English internet version. The virtual paper is not very polite in commenting on the Prime Minister's Islamic activities. In a report on a speech of Mahathir before some 100 selected Muslims in October 2000 in London, *Harakahdaily.com* noted:

“As far as the talk was concerned, anyone who has heard the PM before or has been regarding his speeches which are printed full in Malaysian local government dailies for the last 5 years will know that it was the same old recycled stuff. The Muslims are weak, the Muslims are disunited, Muslims need to master knowledge and technology and Muslims should take Malaysia (and implied, its great leader) as a model.” (04.10.00)

The *New Straits Times* reports in quite a different tone on a similar event, emphasising how the Prime Minister explains the meaning and necessity of *jihad*. It strikes one that Dr. Mahathir is as concerned about the future of the Muslim world as he used to be about Asia's future during the high time of the Asian values debate.

“Reminding the Muslims and the Muslim countries of a ‘tremendous and frightening challenge’ they were facing, he [= Mahathir; C.D.] said globalisation in the form that it took now was a threat ‘against us and our religion’. ... He said all Muslim countries were developing countries and would become a part of the empire of the North Atlantic countries if globalisation as currently conceived went through. When Europeans came up with an idea, he said, it was intended to result in their domination over the world.” (13.11.00)

What is called “the same old recycled stuff” by the opposition paper then, is remarkably Western-bashing in Mahathir's diction and in his ambition not to leave the world-political hegemony to Europe or the North Atlantic. This rhetoric is well known from the mid-1990s, when the wave of literature about Asian values and an ‘Asia that can say No’ filled the shelves. What is new though by now, is the strong Islamic intonation. Comparing the two press reports, it is obvious that PAS and UMNO are competing for voter support through the use of different arguments. The Prime Minister is indeed true when he points out that there is disunity among the Muslims and that many Muslim countries give at least the impression that they need to improve knowledge and technology. Malaysian political scientist and human rights activist Farish Noor who frequently writes on the topic of Islamisation, Islamic moder-

nity and Islamic politics, shares the impression in a certain context. Looking at the performance of Islamic nation-states and the ambiguities of modernity, Farish observes that it is exaggerated to claim that Muslims have a problem or even an 'inconsistent' relationship with modernity. But he also states that "it is undeniable that in most of the Muslim world today Muslims themselves have a problem with trying to decide on who they are and what they want." (Farish 2000a). In political terms, it has become common that "Muslim leaders condemn the vices of modernity but are quite happy to import modern methods of coercion and social control into their states" (Farish 2000a).

These observations indicate that Islamic politics is not an exclusively Malaysian problem of opposition versus government, of Muslims versus non-Muslims or of ethnic Malays versus non-Malays, but rather a problem of the Muslim world with the project of an Islamic modernity. When the Malaysian Prime Minister switches his image now from a Third World leader to a leader of the Muslim World, he is naturally criticised by those who claim the right to define what is Islamic and what is not. In case of the Asian values debate it was legitimate to ask what 'Asian' means to a region so heterogeneously organised. In the case of the Muslim world, it is legitimate too to ask what 'Islamic' means in a theocentrically defined but otherwise very differently organised world.

The discourse on reform among the conservatives of the ruling coalition focuses the problem of regaining voters' confidence. But the ways to achieve it differ among the rank and file of the ruling coalition and the BN leadership. The rank and file demand more democratic mechanisms in the decision-making process, whereas the leadership sticks to the belief that too much liberty will lead to instability and chaos, be it inside or outside the party structures. In an interview with the Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of National Unity, the attitude was articulated that "once the people take to the streets, the danger arouses that a spark flies over and we have another 1969." (Veerasingam, interview, 10 Aug. 2000; see also NST, 07.08.00) One should notice that the reference date is 1969 – the historic year of violent racial clashes in Malaysia - and not 1998, when mass demonstrations forced President Suharto in neighbouring Indonesia to resign. It is only the *reformasi* people who dare to speak out that something similar like in Indonesia could happen in Malaysia, too. For others the idea seems to be a forbidden thought; if you don't speak about it, it won't happen.



## The Islamic camp

The core of the Islamic camp is formed by the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party or PAS. The 1999 elections were the first elections in which PAS joined a coalition of different opposition parties, composed of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Some parties in the coalition are Malay-dominated (e.g. Keadilan), some Chinese-dominated (e.g. DAP), and some are multiracial by definition (e.g. PRM); PAS is the only religiously-based party. To join the Alternative Front (Barisan Alternatif, BA) required compromises by every party of the young coalition, but the will to challenge the rule of the National Front (BN) worked as a glue to keep the diverse pieces together. PAS turned out to be the strongest party in the 1999 elections, in particular because it managed to win the majority in Terengganu State and controls two northern States now. Nasharudin Mat Isa, the Secretary General of PAS, gives his interpretation of the elections:

“After November 1999 it was clear that a new political structure came up. PAS has been selected as the alternative. For the first time in history, these elections have proved that ethnic background is not the base of elections any more - PAS and DAP [which is a Chinese-dominated party; C.D.] sit together in one coalition. PAS is looking for good governance: good governance in the sense of justice for all and just distribution of wealth. UMNO spent too much money for themselves; it could have given the money for scholarships, for example, and exercise a multiracial distribution, but it didn't.” (Interview, 14.08.00)

Although not mentioned *expressis verbis*, the point which hits UMNO (and the BN) is cronyism and *bumiputera* enrichment. PAS members seem to have a better way of handling money. Voters notice that they live a very simple life and give endowments of their income instead of spending their money for themselves. Among the Muslims at the grassroots level, this is considered a righteous way of practising Islam. As a religiously-based party, PAS has the opportunity to reach the grassroots in mosques and *suraus* (public prayer rooms) and to express everything in an Islamic rhetoric. In Terengganu, for instance, PAS tries to install an ombudsman system in order to provide a structure for bottom-up interest articulation and critique. It is not called ombudsman system though, but instead wrapped in Islamic terminology and legitimated by referring to the concept of *hisba*. *Hisba* in Islamic history has two meanings, but both can be applied to the mechanism of mutual control and responsibility of rulers and ruled. On the one hand, the term means “the duty of every Muslim to promote good and forbid evil;” on the other hand, it means “the function of the person who is effectively entrusted in a town with the application of this rule in the supervision of moral behaviour and more particularly with the markets.” (The Encyclopedia of Islam, III, 1986: 485) Accordingly, the government of a State or even a federal territory has to supervise morale and business, and

when it does not function in the right way, the people have the not merely the right but the duty to criticise the government's malfunctioning. They possess the structural means to demand change.

PAS would certainly like to initiate more structural change in its territories, like abolishing the toll system on highways or introducing a special scheme for housing. The party has, however, to keep to the limits of the State Law and the Federal Law. It cannot bull every policy through. Reforms are necessary though, PAS leaders insist. And with reforms they refer to political change affecting not only the Malays but all Malaysians. (Nasharudin, interview, 14.08.00) Towards a gesture of UMNO to discuss the issue of Malay unity, PAS party president Fadzil Noor was quoted telling that "PAS will only agree to a discussion with UMNO if the issue is on national unity and not just only on Malay unity." (Malaysiakini, 05.01.01) In Kelantan, the PAS-led State government proposed to build a 'multicultural mosque' that reflects the influences of various different cultures on the Malay world and architecture. "Should this project come to fruition," writes Farish Noor, "it would be one of the few occasions when there has been a conscious attempt to reflect the multiculturalism of Malaysia in concrete terms." (Farish 2000b) PAS thus plays the card of racial integration with diplomatic care and consciousness. But, it should not be completely forgotten that PAS had once been a strong proponent of the view that the Malays were the 'sons of the soil' and thus entitled to own the land and enjoy special rights (Crouch 1996).

Apart from today's progressive image, some of the Islamisation policies of the party seem to be inspired by staunch orthodoxy rather than by a sense for integrative reformism. Encouragement to introduce Islamist thought comes from the global trend in the Muslim world of Islamic resurgence and the symbols of that trend (clothing, music, literature, science and more). In many Muslim countries and not surprisingly in Malaysia, too, the conservative Ulama (renown and respected Islam scholars) lead the battle against what is called secularism. The Ulama exert influence especially as religious teachers in Pondok schools and in the communities they serve (neighbourhoods, villages, municipalities, universities, think tanks). PAS has a special intra-party organ of such scholars, the Dewan Ulama (Chamber of Ulama). The most popular and influential of the PAS Ulama is Nik Aziz Nik Mat, the spiritual advisor and ideological head of the party. Nik Aziz has become famous for his remarks concerning women, who he does respect in a certain dress and function only. Progressive women's groups like the *Sisters in Islam* criticise the party leader more or less successfully, but what is

important to bear in mind is that Nik Aziz does not stand alone with his principles and attitudes. Indeed he represents a whole stratum of conservative Muslims who are eager to see their own narrow view of Islam gaining momentum. The issue at hand is not to force women 'back to the kitchen' or to introduce Islamic capital laws (*hudûd*)<sup>6</sup> – although this is also a topic of discussion. It is rather simple ideas like the rule to have man and women line up separately in the cashier queues at the supermarket. In a multireligious country like Malaysia, such simple requirements may not affect the non-Muslims as badly as they would affect non-Muslims in a predominantly non-Muslim country like Germany, but if it adds up to more discriminating restrictions, the non-Muslim Malaysians might well oppose the policies of Islamisation. It has hitherto been accepted that the Malay Muslims enjoy privileges in public life – for example no sale of alcohol in supermarkets, no pork in public universities, the designation *halâl* for products which have been produced according to Islamic requirements. Demanding from Hindu pupils in mixed schools to stay away from bringing non-*halâl* sandwiches while having to watch the Muslim pupils munching beef however, strikes the borderline of non-Muslim tolerance (The Star online, 03.09.2000).

#### Joined Promotion of Islamic Resurgence

It is not exclusively the conservative Ulama who introduce ideas and rules like the ones mentioned. The whole process of Islamisation which has taken place in Malaysia since the 1970s and was promoted by UMNO during the 1980s and 1990s in many ways.<sup>7</sup> It gradually took root within the Muslim youth. An important difference, however, exists between ideas and concepts of a progressive Islam like Anwar and Mahathir adhere to, and an orthodox, conservative understanding of Islam found particularly among the traditional Ulama. PAS leaders thus have to find the middle path between a multiracially oriented Islamic politics and an exclusivist, traditional Islamic politics. Predictions are uttered among non-Muslims that after the next elections, there will be a considerably secularised PAS besides the BA. BA will be a secular forum with strong Islamic overtones and function as a credible opposition with a perceived sense of multi-racialism. (Pillai, interview, 14.08.00) The "godfather of Malaysian journalism" (Malaysiakini, 25.11.01) M.G.G. Pillai explains why the tolerant and progressive face of PAS is more popular and appreciated also by those who demand democratic reforms:

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<sup>6</sup> Capital laws means severe punishments like stoning, cutting off hand/foot, flogging with lashes.

<sup>7</sup> Well-known examples are the opening of an International Islamic University, numerous think tanks, research institutions the federal Islamic Centre, which is attached to the Prime Minister's Office. On the politics of Islamisation under Mahathir see Hamayotsu 1999.

“Great dissatisfaction is felt with the government. There is a great resentment within the ground, and the only place to address this resentment is the PAS headquarters in KL. They are really able to mobilise masses of people. Many people who one never had thought of to be PAS members turn up at PAS gatherings - civil servants, for example. - There is no ‘opinion’ in this country; UMNO killed all the political debates and political processes. PAS challenges that. If you give PAS the space in the media, it can generate a debate. Political opinion is reflected in the mosques – that is the only place where political debate of any kind takes place.” (Pillai, interview, 14.08.00)

Armed with the policies of racial and ethnic integration, the image of the Islamic Party is not bad. Although some observers assume that the politics of integration and multi-racialism is only valid until PAS is strong enough to gain parliamentary majority, the party earns respect. For the time being, PAS seems increasingly on the winning track even among non-Muslims because of its good performance. Political scientist P. Ramasamy recalls that in “comparison with UMNO, PAS not only practised clean politics, but it was moral, legitimate and most importantly was perceived as the defender of the Islamic faith.” In terms of attracting the support of the non-Muslims, PAS would not have crowds of followers, “but more and more non-Muslims began to think that they can discuss and sort out things with PAS.” (Ramasamy 2000) Again, it may not be forgotten that PAS has campaigned for decades on Malay communal issues, at least before the 1980s, and blamed UMNO for its alliance with non-Malay parties (Crouch 1996: 56-69). Changes take place when opportunities occur, so PAS is not different from other political parties in this regard.

The political program of PAS is based on the building of an Islamic state. In a comparable nation-state like Turkey, such commitments would lead to a hasty reaction of secularist civil and military political forces. In Malaysia, the non-Muslims do not react panicky as long as their fundamental rights are not touched upon. The *shari’ah* (Islamic law), for instance, does not apply to non-Muslims, so they do not have to fear the introduction of the *hudûd*. For the economically strong segment of non-Muslims, the formula is even simpler: “When the situation becomes unbearable for us non-Muslims, we will move our enterprises and take the business out of this State. You will see what happens when the economy goes down,” a Chinese businessman from Terengganu said.<sup>8</sup> Economic strength is thus a lever in the political power game.

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<sup>8</sup> Communication reported in an interview with Jainudin Jabidin, 31.07.00

### The democratic reform camp

The opposition front Barisan Alternatif has a strong multiracial orientation. Besides the predominantly Malay-Muslim PAS and the predominantly Chinese DAP (Democratic Action Party), BA hosts the People's Party PRM (Party Rakyat Malaysia) and the National Justice Party Keadilan, who both stress their multiracial composition. PRM dates back to the early 1950s and finds support mostly among intellectuals, whereas Keadilan is the youngest of Malaysia's political parties – founded only in 1999 – with its main support base among the reform movement *reformasi*. Although the ruling coalition BN has tried to sustain the politics and practise of multi-racialism, it has not given substance to it, because the non-Malay parties in the coalition do not enjoy the power that were necessary to let them act as equal partners of UMNO. Within the BN, they are subordinate to UMNO. Within the BA, there is no such hegemony of a single party. Whether this arrangement is viable in the long run though, remains to be seen. According to Ramasamy,

“[w]hat will be the exact political formula of BA and how it will provide representation to the different interests both for class and ethnic is not clear. But from the available evidence, there is strong indication that this coalition, given the electoral support, will be able to transcend the narrow ethnic parameter of the present ancient regime.” (Ramasamy 2001b)

BA's component parties have set out to counter the inequality of the distribution of wealth, corruption in judiciary and politics, nepotism and cronyism, lack of government accountability and lack of transparency. They demand an improved rule of law, access to justice, human rights, free speech and independent media, and more citizen participation in political and societal affairs. In a nutshell, they condemn the failure to follow democratic norms and demand to foster good governance. This is nothing new though, because any political opposition in any country of the world would subscribe to those demands. What makes the case of the Malaysian opposition remarkable is that it breaks the racial and the developmental contracts which have determined the state's politics for the last 30 years.

Since the calming down of the racial unrest of 1969, Malaysia's two biggest ethnic communities, the Malays and the Chinese, have lived under the principles of a 'social contract' that determine the separation of political and economic power: marginal Chinese interference in political affairs, marginal Malay interference in Chinese economic operations. The developmental agenda to underscore this contract was the NEP. With this Malaysian variant of affirmative action in favour of the *bumiputera* majority, the Malays ought to become equal to the Chinese in terms of economic strength. To enable the Malays to catch up, the Malaysian

constitution guaranteed them special rights. Art. 153 of the Constitution assures Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak prior recognition in respect to education and training, positions in public service, and permits and licences for trade and business. The NEP, the special rights and the continuity of political power brought about a Malay middle class and a stratum of young Malays confident to achieve their professional goals. The effect of this development is that the Malays are affected by a division into a lower and an upper class (or: winners and losers of the NEP). The new young urban generation of Malays does not feel the strong need any more of a Malay unity to catch up economically. Moreover, this generation has not witnessed the 1969 racial clashes. It does not really comprehend the necessity of a racial unity when racial integration stands as a much better alternative. This is one essential reason why the calls of UMNO to sit together and discuss the topic of Malay unity is responded to with great reluctance.

A heated debate on the special rights and their importance for today's Malaysians started in August 2000, when the government claimed that two Chinese bodies were undermining the *bumiputera's* privileges. The deputy chairperson of the Second National Economic Consultative Council (NECC II) David Chua allegedly had called to abolish the special rights (New Straits Times, 15.08.00) and the Malaysian Chinese Organisations' Election Appeal Committee (Suqiu) allegedly had done so in some of the 17 points of an election appeal<sup>9</sup> released prior to the general elections of 1999 (New Straits Times, 19.08.00). The allegations, however, did not lead to a united Malays' front against Chinese 'attacks' on their privileges. Conversely, it triggered an ongoing debate on national unity instead of racial unity. In a contribution to the discussion group *Bungaraya* of the Democratic Action Party, a writer stated that

“in a multi-racial country, unity along racial lines is a major stumbling block to national integration, and hence national unity. Corollary to that, a major re-alignment of political allegiance in accordance with one's political ideology irrespective of race would be a great breakthrough in national integration and economic advancement at this stage of our history.” (Bungaraya-list, 15.01.01)

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<sup>9</sup> The official English translation of the Chinese 17-point appeal is available under [www.siqiu.org/Suqiu\\_english.htm](http://www.siqiu.org/Suqiu_english.htm). The appeal relates to the political, economic and social situation in Malaysia before and after the financial crisis of 1997 and demands the following reforms: 1. Promote National Unity; 2. Advance Democracy; 3. Uphold Human Rights and Justice; 4. Curb Corruption; 5. A Fair and Equitable Economic Policy; 6. Review the Privatisation Policy; 7. An Enlightened, Liberal and Progressive Education Policy; 8. Let Our Multi-Ethnic Cultures Flourish; 9. Protect the Malaysian Environment; 10. Develop and Modernise New Villages; 11. Housing for All; 12. Protect Women's Rights; 13. A Fair Media; 14. Restore Confidence in the Police Force; 15. Upgrade Social Services; 16. Respect the Rights of Workers; 17. Provide for Indigenous Peoples. There is no expression in the text claiming the abolition of the special rights. The demands that may be interpreted to indicate the wish of abolition refer to, for example, economic equality: „Businesses must be allowed the opportunity to compete on a fair basis regardless of race, and contracts and shares must not be given out through nepotism, cronyism and corruption.“ (Point 7; op cit.)

The opinion of the writer reflects the opinions of many Malay and non-Malay readers published mostly in the non-mainstream papers. The search for national unity produces a new sense of pluralism: pluralism evolving no longer along ethnic or racial lines, but along political ideas and ideologies. The core of reformist ideas within the democratic reform camp lies thus in the shift from racially determined pluralism to political pluralism regardless of race, or shortly, in the shift from communalist politics to politics of integration. In the background, the concept of Anwar Ibrahim's *masyarakat madani* serves as one potential model for such politics of integration. The developmental aspect of the affirmative action policy NEP is not denied by the reform camp, but it is emphasised that a fully developed country – the objective of Mahathir's Vision 2020 – requires more than privileges for some selected businessmen and entrepreneurs. In a world of IT and globalised communication, communal boundaries change and new social contracts emerge. The lack of spiritual guidance to compensate for increasing materialism is filled by the notions of civil society and democratic values by the reform camp, whereas the Islamic camp fills the gap with Islamic values and rhetoric. The notion of Malay special rights which served as the ideational rallying point for a united Malay community may become out of date.<sup>10</sup>

According to Kua Kia Soong, director of the human rights NGO *Suaram* (Suara Rakyat Malaysia, 'voice of the Malaysian people') and member of the Chinese Malaysian educationist group *Dong Jiao Zong*, the NGOs and intellectuals play an initiating role in the struggle for political change. Initiatives range from established to non-established forms of interest articulation. Legal forms are visits to ministries, memoranda, or collaboration with corporate groups; public demonstrations can easily be declared illegal because of the Internal Security Act (ISA)<sup>11</sup>. Forming coalitions around different issues is considered as an effective form of community-building. Communities act to protect their interests, for example against a dam that is planned, a highway or other development projects. A community in this context is defined regardless of ethnicity, it is a group of people living in a certain area being affected by the same problem or circumstances. (Kua, interview, 15.08.00) The issues of concern do not

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noticed that ethnic/racial conflicts do still exist and are not to be ignored. In public institutions like schools or universities, ethnic difference and racial separation can be well observed (Derichs 2000).

<sup>11</sup> The Internal Security Act or ISA was enacted in 1960 as an extended version of the so-called Emergency Regulations of 1948 which had been constituted by British authorities and served to counter communist threats. Already in the Regulations, human rights were restricted. The ISA allows detention without trial. For the full text of the document see Laws of Malaysia. Internal Security Act (Act 82), updated reprint, published by The Commissioner Of Law Revision, Malaysia, 1999.

have to be political issues in the first line. In regard to dam projects, for instance, issue-oriented initiatives serve to raise awareness for certain problems on the one hand, and facilitate transnational networking on the other hand, because dams are a subject of environmental movements throughout the region.

### **Summarisation and outlook**

The theoretical setting of Orientalism, globalisation and New Economic Policy can be tracked in each of the three camps introduced. On UMNO's account, the attempt to combine both Islamic lifestyle and IT-savvy materialism into the concept of a fully developed country and a 'k-economy' seems to form a second edition of a 'counter culture' against the West. In regard to domestic politics, giving priority to the promotion of Malay unity means to preserve communalism in one form or another. Since the fruits of the NEP have been harvested by a new Malay middle class, communal strife does not affect this well-to-do stratum any more. The Islamic camp and the democratic reform camp take this 'post-NEP setting' as a vantage point now and try to stay away from the developmentalist perception that Malaysia's polity is only thinkable in the structures of Malay unity.

Racial integration, however, does not mean that class divisions were to appear automatically. The reform camp as well as the conservative nationalist camp tend to forget the class element in the social structure. The fact that there are winners and losers of the NEP and its accompanying privileges for selected groups of the population – not exclusively Malays - is a strong indicator of intra-ethnic class differences. The fruits of the NEP have not been harvested equally by *all* Malays, nor have the fruits of the modernisation process on the whole been reaped by *all* Malaysians. There are a class of the rich and a class of the poor in every ethnic community. The only party caring for this part of social reality is PAS and, in extension, the Islamic organisations and movements. Their access to the grassroots is based to a large extent on the people's perception of Islamic leaders leading a 'simple life' (Azman, interview, 31.07.00). The feeling of 'He is one of us' no longer applies exclusively to the Muslims, but to the deprived strata in general. PAS merits attention in this regard.

Global and regional networking promotes the engagement of the reform movement to achieve democratic reforms. The human rights group *Suaram* receives financial support from Europe (Wong, interview, 07.04.00), and on a regional level human rights groups are working together in the framework of ASEAN (Kua, interview, 15.08.00). International networking is



facilitated to a large extent by the use of the internet. NGOs and non-mainstream media take advantage of Prime Minister Mahathir's promise not to censure the internet. With this promise, Mahathir hoped to attract more foreign investors for the Multimedia Super Corridor project around Malaysia's Silicon Valley city Cyberjaya (Gan 2001). Apart from investors, he definitely has attracted the transnational mobilisation of initiatives for political change.

The democratic reform movement and the Islamic movement can both be seen as outcomes of Malaysia's modernisation process. Modernisation has been accompanied by Islamisation since the late 1970s, albeit in a very specific and nationalist shape. The global trend of Islamic resurgence did not stop before Malaysia's borders, so that today the notion of the Islamic *Ummah* as a complement to a spiritually poor knowledge community seems attractive at least to Muslims. Those who are able to mediate between the extremes of each political camp - between radical Islamists, anti-Islamic secularists, ethnic racialists and Malay nationalists - may be called the cross-grains. If the cross-grains had the opportunity to mould the next phase of Malaysia's modernisation project, M.G.G. Pillai's prognosis for the Barisan Alternatif might become reality: that they form a "secular forum with strong Islamic overtones and function as a credible opposition with a perceived sense of multi-racialism." (Pillai, interview, 14.08.00)

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 Sang Kancil list: [sangkancil@lists.malaysia.net](mailto:sangkancil@lists.malaysia.net)  
 The Star: <http://thestar.com.my>

Interview partners quoted:

Dato' Dr. Affifudin Hj. Omar, former Deputy Finance Minister and member of UMNO Supreme Council; Executive Chairman of Juwana Holdings Sdn. Bhd.

Azman Mohamed, M.A., Lecturer for Media, Culture and Technology at University Malaysia Sabah

Jainudin Jabidin, Manager of the Special Training Department. of the Sabah Foundation (Yayasan Sabah)

Dr. Kua Kia Soong, Academic Director of the New Era College, Kajang; Director of human rights NGO *Suaram*; member of educationist NGO *Dong Jiao Zong*

M.G.G. Pillai, freelance journalist, also running the discussion-group *Sang Kancil*

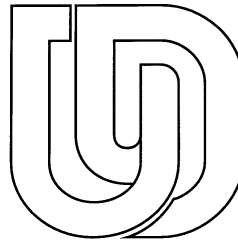
Nasharudin Mat Isa, Secretary General of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS)

Dato' S. Veerasingham, Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of National Unity; member of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)

Elizabeth Wong, Secretary General of the National Human Rights Society (*Hakam*), secretariat member of human rights NGO *Suaram*



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