



Malaysia's Quest for Unity Favors Integration Over Assimilation



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BY MICHAEL J. HERSHMAN

The bloom seems to have worn off the Arab Spring. Tensions and unrest, often due to differing religious views, have left countries ranging from Egypt to Yemen with uncertain futures. Whether the conflicts are between Sunnis and Alawites or Shiites and Christians, the world has begun to wonder if Islamic countries are able to lead a peaceful existence.



Sunset at the beach in Malaysia (Photo credit: epSos.de)

The answer to that question might be found in a country like Malaysia.

The Institute for [Economics](#) and Peace's 2012 Global Peace Index (GPI) placed Malaysia in 20th position. The GPI ranks nations —158 in total on the current index—by peacefulness and is composed of 23 indicators, including “relations with neighboring countries” and “the level of respect for human rights.” The index has been tested against determinants of peace, including “education,” “material wellbeing” and “democracy and transparency.”

It is no coincidence that Malaysia ranks this high—the second highest of all Islamic nations, being outdone only by Qatar in 12th position—on the GPI. Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib has emphasized the practice of tolerance, moderation and dialogue among a diverse population. He has publicly stated: “In managing our plurality, we have decided on integration as opposed to assimilation. Malaysians accept their diversity. We do not merely tolerate each other but we also embrace and celebrate.” In addition, Najib has been

consistent in trying to engage with the various communities throughout Malaysia, from funding both Chinese and Tamil schools to being the first federal leader to visit the Batu Caves Temple during the Hindu festival of Thaipusam.

Malaysia is broadly 60% Muslim and 40% other faiths (which include Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and others). Although the Constitution does provide for Islam as being the country's religion, it also sets out provisions to protect the rights of all Malaysians to practice their faith in peace and harmony. This is in stark contrast to other countries, such as neighboring 63rd-ranked Indonesia, which has subscribed to assimilation practices. While Indonesia has made great progress in consolidating a stable, democratic government after five decades of authoritarian rule, it nonetheless has significant difficulty with national religious tolerance.

Over the past few decades Malaysian leaders have, by and large, sought to encourage both national unity and individual diversity through integration, not assimilation. In order to do this more systematically than ever before, in 2009 Najib introduced the 1Malaysia concept, calling on his government to put even greater emphasis on ethnic harmony, national unity and efficient governance. At its core, 1Malaysia is based on the importance of cultivating a more unified country, irrespective of race or religious belief: it is much more than just a national goal—it is delivering tangible improvements. For example, the 1Malaysia clinic has provided healthcare to more than 4.6 million people; the 1Malaysia People's Store and 1Malaysia Menu are approaching their respective targets of 85 stores and 3,000 shops and restaurants by December, providing Malaysians with access to their basic necessities at low cost; and the 1Malaysia Housing Programme (PR1MA) and My First Home Scheme are helping middle income families buy their own homes at a reasonable cost.

Najib's mission does not stop at national borders: his call for leaders of the world's major faiths to censure and reject their own extremists and jointly support a "movement of moderates" at the 65th Session of the United Nations General Assembly was reiterated at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHGM) in October 2011. This resulted not only in the concept of a 'Global Movement of Moderates' being included in the CHGM's communiqué but also in the inaugural conference of the [International](#) Global Movement of Moderates being held in Kuala Lumpur in January this year.

Bilaterally, Najib has also been encouraging cordial relations with Western nations. In April 2010, the Prime Minister heralded a "new beginning" to relations between the United States and Malaysia. He pledged to provide Muslim doctors to assist in Afghanistan and signed a transnational crime memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Ties with the U.K. have likewise been reinvigorated: As [David Cameron](#) said on this recent visit to Malaysia: "the era of benign neglect is over, Britain is back to do business with Malaysia, back to build our partnership on vital global issues."

Along with improvements in international relations, major domestic legal reforms have been undertaken under Najib's leadership. The [Government Transformation Programme](#) has targeted various archaic pieces of legislation and wrought changes which include the ending of Malaysia's State of Emergency by revoking all existing proclamations of emergencies and their legislations; the repeal of the colonial-era Internal [Security](#) Act and putting in

its stead the Security Offences (Special Measures) Bill 2012; the repeal of the 1948 Sedition Act and the proposal to enact in its place a National Harmony Act; the introduction of the Printing Presses and Publications (Amendment) Bill, which removes the requirement for newspapers and printed publications to renew their license to print annually; and a review of laws relating to freedom of assembly, resulting in the new Peaceful Assembly Act.

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In spite of all these very promising elements and undertakings, it has to be said that much still remains to be done and that some of the policies and laws referred to above have vociferous critics. For example, Hasmy Agam, the Chief Commissioner of the [Human Rights](#) Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), has pinpointed what he sees as a dichotomy between apparent reform and actual repression in the Peaceful Assembly Act: “While we laud Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak on his reforms to give greater prominence to civil liberties, it’s important for the government to meet international human rights standards.” The new act, he feels, fails to do this.

Similarly, the Bumiputera Affirmative Action Policy is regarded by many non-Malays as culturally divisive, a criticism which is echoed internationally by the U.S. government, the European Union, international organizations and others. In the words of the Bertelsmann Stiftung BTI 2010—Malaysia Country Report, “In order to advance reform and improve Malaysia’s competitive capacity...the government needs to terminate its Bumiputera affirmative action policy, which continues to encourage rent-seeking behavior, impedes competition and facilitates corruption.” The report goes on to note that the Malaysian government has repeatedly rejected such call for reforms, considering international criticism on the issue to be undesired political interference.

Finally there have been less than positive appraisals of the core 1Malaysia concept. A recent article penned by a senior Islamic scholar highlights the fact that “there are still many sectarian and exclusive groupings—ranging from Chinese educationists, Indian-Hindu rights activists and Malay ethno-nationalists—who represent strong centrifugal forces that run counter to the inclusive appeal of ‘1Malaysia.’”

Malaysia’s high ranking in the GPI is no coincidence, but rather the result of strong and effective leadership resulting in increased national unity and wide-reaching development. Malaysia can thus be a role model, clearly showing that a predominantly Muslim nation can be at peace with itself, its neighbors and the world.

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