Ethnic Resurgence, Minority Communities, and State Policies in a Network Society: The Dynamics of Malay Identity Formation in Postcolonial Singapore

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While much has been written about identity formation and the politics of ethnicity among minority communities in various parts of modern-day Southeast Asia, the same cannot be said regarding the Malay community of Singapore. This article seeks to address this scholarly neglect by bringing into sharp focus the dynamics, processes, and circumstances that shaped Malay identity in postcolonial Singapore during the 1980s. By interweaving historical data with theoretical insights derived from the works of Andrew Willford, Manuel Castells, and Richard Jenkins, among others, this article provides an analytical reading of the global, regional, and local developments that brought about an ethnic resurgence within one of the largest minority groups in this island city-state. Such developments prompted the Singapore government to devise new laws and employ multi-faceted strategies to regain its legitimacy in the eyes of a certain segment of the population, and to enhance its ruling capacity. The problematics embedded within the state’s interpretation of Malay identity and the effects of citizen resistance against state policies are considered in detail in the final sections of this article.

Key Words: State policies, identity, ethnic resurgence, minorities, network society

One of the major developments in scholarship on identity formation and the politics of ethnicity in multicultural nation-states in Southeast Asia in recent years has been in the area of state-minority relations as seen through the paradigm of social constructivism. From this standpoint, minority identities are perceived as constructed in part through political processes and social interactions that occur in a given context. Familial networks, the media, religious sites, social movements, and legal structures in pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial settings are among the other factors that have received special attention by scholars who take the constructivist approach to minority identity formation. According to this argument, the subjective meanings that state apparatuses ascribe to social behaviors, attitudes, and lifestyles further contribute to the complex, fragmented, multilayered,
hybrid, and synthetic nature of minority identities (see, e.g., Ho 2005; Duncan 2004; Lombard 2000; Sanjugta Vas Dev 2009: 34–35; Shamsul 2005).

Intriguing and influential as it is, the social constructivist approach to the study of minorities in Southeast Asia is not without limitations. As the noted anthropologist Joel Kahn aptly observed, it has not provided adequate explanations of the interplay between local and global forces in shaping the appeals to natural rights, race, and territory among many minority communities in Southeast Asia. In point of fact, much of the available work on these minorities is framed within the boundaries of nation-states, which, in effect, has led to the neglect of the study of the flows of global ideas and influences in local contexts (Kahn 1998: 1–28). Furthermore, the continued persecution of minorities by ruling majority populations over the past three decades calls into question the social constructivist view that primordial ties and loyalties would be in inexorable decline with the advent of modernity. Ariel Heryanto summarizes this well in his article on the marginalization and routine violence perpetrated against the localized third-generation minority Chinese population in Indonesia: “Yet, something beyond theorists’ constructs and constructionists’ theories asserts itself in the everyday life of ordinary people” (Heryanto 1998: 95). This is not to say that the social constructivist approach to the study of minority identities and state policies is irrelevant. What is needed here is a refinement of current theories and methods of analyzing the ways of being and becoming for ethnic groups in the region.

It is for these reasons that Andrew Willford’s recent book on religious resurgence among the minority Tamil community in contemporary Malaysia is so important. Drawing upon psychoanalytical and anthropological theories and situating his work at the intersections of not only the constructivist approach but also the situationalist, instrumentalist, and primordialist approaches, Willford provides a nuanced approach to the study of minority identities in Southeast Asia that takes into account the complex relations between local forces and global pressures. He explores how working-class Hindu Tamils have helped create new forms of religiosiy while preserving their cultural traditions, even as they have struggled against the dominance of Malay-Muslim politicians and upper-class Tamil elites. Ironically, these struggles have led to the reinforcement of colonial stereotypes of the Tamil community and the bolstering of the authority of the ruling Malay-dominated polity. Coupled with the machinations of postcolonial capitalism, along with its attendant relations of production and authoritarian structures, the upshot of these intertwining processes is the exacerbation of social and economic disparities along class lines.
Despite being an integral component of the mainstream society, working-class Hindu Tamils in Malaysia perceive themselves as the unique “Other” and thus suffer from a sense of alienation from affluent members within their own community, as well as being stigmatized by the predominantly Malay-Muslim populace (Willford 2006).

The following pages will build upon and extend some aspects of Andrew Willford’s ideas, while focusing on a different ethnic group in a different country. I aim to combine the multidimensional approach pioneered by Andrew Willford with the ideas of Manuel Castells and Richard Jenkins, among others, to capture the continuous interactions between minority identities and that of global, regional, and local developments. I also seek to explore the dynamics and politics of identity formation within the Malay-Muslim minority community in postcolonial Singapore, which, much like its Tamil counterpart in Malaysia, has generally been left at the margins of scholarly discourse. There is a general tendency among scholars in the field of identity studies to portray developments in Singapore as a subset of the “greater” and far more dramatic events, ideologies, groupings, and other processes at work in the constitution of identities in Malaysia and Indonesia (Aljunied 2006; 2009). Moreover, Singaporean scholars have asserted that recent studies of the Malay identity are essentially “irrelevant” because the long-standing boundary markers that define the Malay identity are Islam, the Malay language, and the sense of belonging to the “Malay world.” According to this line of reasoning, any scholarly arguments or popular perceptions that do not correspond to the prevailing notions of how a Malay is to be defined must be viewed as part of the colonialiszt project of representing ethnic groupings in Southeast Asia in ways designed to render their identities ambiguous.

This proposition, which Willford has correctly described as prevalent in Malaysia, even among Malay elites, academics, and politicians, masks the heterogeneous nature of Malayness (Willford 2006: 262–263). In fact, the view that Malay identity is unproblematic has only served to impede meaningful studies of Malays and other minority identities, particularly in postcolonial Singapore and Malaysia.

Indeed, an analysis of the dynamics, processes, and discourses surrounding a public debate on the Singaporean Malay identity, which forms the core of this article, further demonstrates that Malay identity has been a source of continuous controversy and contention. This debate took place during the passing of two bills in the Singapore Parliament on 30 November 1987, which brought into operation the General Representation Constituency (GRC) scheme. Under this scheme, a number of single-seat parliamentary constituencies were welded together into
larger units (called GRCs), each represented by a team of Members of Parliament (or MPs). One of every three parliamentary seats in a given GRC was to be reserved for an ethnic minority member (i.e., an Indian, Malay, or a Eurasian).

Previous analyses of the GRC scheme have tended to propound a tripartite argument, depicting the creation of the GRCs as an endeavor by the Peoples’ Action Party (PAP) government to protect its politicians from electoral challenge, to ensure minority representation in the Parliament, and to promote a political “middle ground” after more than two decades of state centrism. This innovation in the political landscape occurred at a time when the government emphasized the cultivation of “Asian Values” to curb the growing trend of Westernization among young Singaporeans. Through an amalgamation of a domesticated version of Confucianism (which stressed respect for authority, community consciousness, discipline, and hard work) with the cultures of the four major official racial groups in the island Republic (namely, Chinese, Malay, Indian, and “Others”), it was intended that Singaporeans would, in the near future, internalize the concept of a “hyphenated-identity” that would harmonize the ideals of an inherited Asian way of life with the notion of an overarching national identity (Chua 2005: 176; Hill and Lian 1995: 110; Wee 2002: 130). However, such analyses fail to appreciate the Singapore government’s recognition of a series of challenges faced by Muslims worldwide, as well as the movement toward nativistic sentiments among Malays in Singapore, which necessitated a reinvention of the forms of officially sanctioned identification available to members of this minority community. Furthermore, there has been no discussion of the strategies that have been adopted by the state to promote and strengthen the case for a new understanding of the Malay identity or the responses to these strategies.

Here, I find it useful to develop several key arguments that may be relevant to the study of other minority identities in postcolonial Southeast Asia. I argue that the attempt made by the Singapore state to establish a single official definition of the Malay identity is a corollary of two factors: the emergence of a network society that was shaped by global and regional developments and the rise of Malay ethnic resurgence on the island in reaction to state policies and the perceived threats of modernization and deculturation. This ethnic resurgence was exhibited not only by the subalterns and lower classes in society but also by members of a growing professional middle class who asserted their identities by way of ritual acts, dress codes, the forging of primordial and invented ties with transnational communities, and the establishment of self-help organizations—developments
that paralleled the experiences of the Tamil community in Malaysia, albeit with some variations. The Singapore government marshaled academics, the media, and Malay political elites and cultural brokers to produce a broad and institutionalized definition of the Malay identity that would progressively weaken competing sub-ethnic and transnational loyalties. The creation of an official definition of Malayness in Singapore was intended to steer the minority community toward a more inclusive outlook, while recognizing the supreme authority of the state. However, such strategies provoked the resistance of Malay organizations and individuals, culminating in a brief legitimation crisis for the dominant People’s Action Party (PAP).

Some remarks on the nature of the political map of Singapore are in order at this point. The PAP has been Singapore’s ruling political party since 1959, shaping almost all aspects of the everyday life of its citizens. A high level of cohesion among the ruling party elites and a history of successful economic development under the party’s leadership, all guided by the ideologies of strategic pragmatism, multiculturalism, economic rationalism, and authoritarianism, have kept the weak, and often fragmented, opposition parties out of power. Three opposition parties have been particularly active in vying for the political allegiance of the Malay population: the Workers’ Party (WP), the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), and the Persatuan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura (PKMS). As the only surviving communally-based party lobbying for the special rights of Malays in Singapore, the PKMS witnessed a rapid decrease in popular votes following Singapore’s separation from Malaysia and its resulting independence in 1965, winning no seats in Parliament. The WP and the SDP, on the other hand, each made great headway in the 1980s through party reforms and internal cohesion. Both parties won seats in the 1984 elections, in part by attracting the support of Malay professionals. It can be argued that many Malays viewed the WP and the SDP as viable alternatives to the PAP and the PKMS at that time (Mauzy and Milne 2002).

**The makings of Malay ethnic resurgence**

To better understand the makings of Malay ethnic resurgence in Singapore during the 1980s, it is necessary to turn our attention to the cataclysmic shifts in the global and regional environments that influenced the ways in which Muslims worldwide made sense of their identities. In the Middle East and South Asia, the advent of authoritarian regimes, together with the sponsorship of transnational movements by the Persian Gulf states, occasioned an era of international Islamic revivalism. These rapid changes were entangled with the proliferation
of alternative news sources through a variety of television channels, videos, and mass-produced publications that aided in disseminating information of conflicts in Palestine and other problems threatening the foundations of Muslim societies (Schulze 2000: 225–244; Abaza 2002). In Southeast Asia, the mushrooming of da’wah (missionary) activities in conjunction with conflicts between secular states and liberation movements in Malaysia, South Thailand, and the Philippines all helped reinforce the perception of a dichotomy between Muslims and non-Muslims in Southeast Asia. One of the unintended effects of this wave of Islamic revivalist fervor and subsequent state-sponsored Islamization programs was the rise of radicalism in Southeast Asia and the clamor for the establishment of Islamic states (Nagata 1984; Hussin 1990: 73–99; Weyland 1990; Ahmad 2002). Manuel Castells has perceptively described such developments in the Muslim world as forming an integral part of the emergent “network society.” This was a period when the progress and spread of informational technology, fueled by the forces of capitalism, brought about the creation of “a world of uncontrolled, confusing change,” which compelled people “to regroup around primary identities; religious, ethnic, territorial, [and] national” (Castells 2000: 3).

If major developments in the international and regional spheres in the 1980s exercised powerful influences upon the thinking of many Malays in Singapore, the social, economic, educational, and political marginalization of Malays on the domestic front further hastened the process of identity formation. Newspaper articles, census reports, and various studies conducted in the years leading up to the introduction of the GRC scheme indicated that the Malays were 99.5 percent Muslim and formed 14.6 percent of the total population of two million people in the 1980s. Although Malays were categorized by the official censuses as one of the largest minority “races” in Singapore, it is pertinent to highlight here that the term “race” was also used interchangeably with “ethnic groups” to “connote groups or communities belonging to the same stock or ethnological origin having common bonds of culture, customs, and language (Saw 2007: 46).” In other words, while the terms “race” and “ethnicity” are often used in distinct ways, such is not the case in Singapore. Malays, for example, often refer to themselves as Orang Melayu (or “Malay People”) and Bangsa Melayu (the “Malay Race”) without making any distinction between the two.

Yet, far from being a homogenous ethnic group, Malays were fragmented along sub-ethnic, class, educational, gender, and organizational lines in the 1980s, and consequently also along ideological and political lines. Among the major sub-ethnic groupings were the Bugis, Boyanese, Banjar, Batak, Orang Laut, and Javanese, all of whom
willingly identified themselves as Malays when the situation demanded it. The vast majority of Malays were working class. Malays were employed as office clerks, factory workers, delivery personnel, storekeepers, drivers, firefighters, police officers, and teachers. Despite government policies to resettle the Malay working classes from traditional villages to new high-rise public housing estates, many Malays gravitated to public housing apartment blocks in certain places, such as Eunos, Geylang, Bedok, Kembangan, and Telok Blangah, which had been Malay ethnic enclaves since before World War II. The middle and upper classes, with monthly household incomes of between 2,500 and 3,500 Singapore dollars, formed a tiny minority within the Malay community. They were largely businessmen, politicians, and technocrats working in the private and public sectors, and they resided in landed properties and condominium apartment complexes concentrated in the central parts of the island. Some working-class Malays believed that the middle and upper classes held themselves aloof from other members of their community. For example, when a petrol station attendant named Abu Samah bin Awang was interviewed in 1987, he lamented that “the educated and wealthy do not participate in the communal activities. They tend to keep to themselves.”

Educational levels among Malays in Singapore were relatively low in the 1980s, as indicated by the fact that Malays made up only 5 percent of the total university enrollment in 1986. An alarming 10.4 percent of Malay PSLE (Primary School Leaving Exams) students were channeled to the monolingual stream, which meant that they would be instructed with one vernacular language in a country where English is the principal language. These students were later sent for vocational training rather than secondary schooling, limiting their employment and educational opportunities. Another development in Singapore’s education that had a great impact on the Malays was the “Religious Knowledge” course that was introduced into the school system in 1984. This was part of a governmental strategy to resist the tide of Western individualism, but the plan backfired because it unexpectedly intensified religious fervor among Muslims and, even more so, among Buddhists and Christians in Singapore. Taught in local schools as a component of the moral educational program, Religious Knowledge required secondary 3, 4, and 5 students (aged between 15 and 17 years old) to choose between Buddhist Studies, Bible Knowledge, Confucian Ethics, Hindu Studies, Islamic Religious Knowledge, and Sikh Studies as an examination subject. Five years into its implementation, it was found that the course had contributed to the resurgence of Buddhism and Christianity of the Protestant evangelical charismatic variant among students and members of the Chinese middle classes. This
raised alarm among local Muslim leaders who were informed of rumors of the conversion of several Malays. The government reacted by commissioning three sociologists from the National University of Singapore to investigate religions and religious revivalism in Singapore. The researchers recommended that the Religious Knowledge course be converted from an examinable subject to one that was optional. Religious teachers who were actively involved in missionary work were replaced by schoolteachers and volunteers (Tan 1997: 603–624; Lily 1998: 198–199; Rigg 1988: 340–352; Kahn 2006: 4).

Viewed from the perspective of gender, the Malay sex ratio was quite balanced at 1,040 males per 1,000 females. Marriages of Malay women to Chinese, Eurasian, and European men were less common than marriages of Malay women to Arabs and Muslim Indians, some of whom identified themselves as Malays or Malays with Arab or Indian descent. Fertility rates among the Malays were the highest of all racial or ethnic census categories, with a rate of 2.17 in 1987. The shift in state policy from the promotion of a two-child family to a three-child or more family received widespread support from the Malays, who generally view children as blessings from God. This period also saw the growth of female labor participation, with Malay women aged 30–34 constituting more than 50 percent of the factory workforce in the 1980s. In some cases, the entry of Malay women into the labor market led to a significant increase in household incomes and living standards, although this was not without some unanticipated consequences. Long work shifts that stretched for twelve hours per day or more meant that many female factory workers had little time to spend with their families. Poor environmental conditions and short rest intervals in factories also contributed to a host of other problems, such as injuries suffered while operating machines and mental depression (Straits Times, 29 September 1987).

Malay youths also paid a price for state policies. The government’s policy of excluding Malay men from military conscription (called “National Service”) from the 1960s to the mid-1970s meant that Malay youths faced difficulties finding jobs, as many employers saw National Service as a crucial criterion in their selection of potential employees. The policy to exclude Malays from military service was largely based on the idea that Malays might be sympathetic to their Muslim brethren in neighboring countries in the event of conflict. The government perceived this as dangerous, given the over-representation of Malays in the military and the fact that Singapore was situated in a region dominated by Muslim-led states. As a result, appointments and promotions of Malay military personnel were curtailed, and long-serving Malay officers were encouraged to retire early. Other unforeseen consequences of the exclusion of Malays from National Service included high levels of drug
abuse among Malay youths, the proliferation of street crimes, and the mushrooming of alternative lifestyles (Huxley 2000: 102–104). It was thus unsurprising that when Singapore's economy fell into a deep recession in 1985, Malays were the most seriously affected segment of the population (Khoo 1983; Kuo, Quah, and Tong 1988).

All of these developments contributed to an ethnic resurgence among Malays in Singapore that was manifested in several forms. One was the appearance of enclaves located in various parts of the island where Malays had gravitated to public housing blocks after World War II and where they were the dominant ethnic group. The sense of belonging to these enclaves was preserved through activities such as Maulud, kenduri, marriage, circumcision ceremonies, and leisure activities organized by informal groups that were established by community activists. Recounting his role as the chairman of an informal committee known as “Badan Kebajikan Masyarakat (Community Welfare Organization) Islam Queens Close,” Abu Bakar bin Abdul Rahman highlighted the fact that the resettlement of Malays from the villages to flats meant that members of the community had to develop new ways to maintain close social connections. Moreover, there was widespread anxiety that the youths would be more exposed to negative influences from gangsters and other riffraff who loitered in the neighborhoods.

Former villagers from Radin Mas and other Malays who are staying in Queens Close set up the committee to help one another and stay in touch. Our activities included the reading of Yasin, Berzanji and we helped to resolve personal and marital conflicts... We got our children involved in our activities. My youngest son helped out in most of the events. Links are also made with other friends from our former village who are now residing in other estates.\(^4\)

The second form of ethnic resurgence transcended communal enclaves and manifested its peculiarities through what were seen by elite Malays and the state as “deviant acts.” Members of Malay gangs, unregistered silat (Malay pugilistic arts) groups, mystical brotherhoods, certain cultural groups, and the only Malay political party in Singapore, the Persatuan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura (PKMS), all belonged to this category. Their main concern was to safeguard Malay rights and traditions in the areas pertaining to indigeneity, cultural practices, language, and folk religious beliefs (Hussin 2004: 199–212; Nurliza 1986).\(^5\)

At the same time, another type of self-identification began to take root within the community, and it was directed toward empowering its adherents to excel in all areas of life while observing the core precepts of transnational Islam. Most of the men and women adherents were
educated in tertiary institutions and other institutes of higher learning in Singapore, the Middle East, and Europe. Influenced by the call of Muslim revivalist thinkers, they were heavily involved in Islamic activist organizations, such as Muhammadiyah, Himpunan Belia Islam (HBI), PERDAUS (the Association of Adult Religious Class Students of Singapore) PERMUSI (the Association of Singapore Muslims), and the Jama’ah Tabligh. Some were members of a Muslim political party by the name of Angkatan Islam Singapura (AIS) and had conducted reading circles (usrah) and discussion groups (halaqah) to imbibe a transnational understanding of the Muslim identity. The prescribed readings in most of these sessions are familiar to pundits of the so-called “Islamic terrorism” and “political Islam” of today—the works of Maududi, Hassan Al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam, and persons affiliated with the Ikhwanul Muslimun (the Muslim Brotherhood; Mariam 1989).

During my interview with Djamal Tukimin, who has been a member of the Muhammadiyah Organization since the early 1970s, he noted that the 1980s was a period of resurgence for a majority of the Malay-Muslim populace in Singapore. Lectures, conferences, camps, workshops, and publications pertaining to Islam mushroomed in the city-state. Hence, while Malays who maintained communal identities turned their vision inward and sought to build enclaves and collectives to resist the tide of nationalization, those who had internalized and advocated a transnational identity looked outward to the international Muslim Ummah (Community). They sought to build networks with Islamic movements overseas, and their common rallying cry was the call for the establishment of a God-conscious society ruled by Muslims and guided by the syariah (the Islamic ethical code). Both secularism and Western military and cultural imperialism were seen as evils that were corrupting the Muslim community from within (Hussin 1990a: 884; Kamaludeen and Syed Muhd Khairudin 2009). These sentiments were captured in the following excerpt from an article written in 1986 by a Malay-Muslim activist Anita Muhammad who was a student in the National University of Singapore:

Are we not aware that the Mujaheedins in Afghanistan are fighting a holy war, a Jihad? They fight to defend Islam against communist penetration. They fight to defend the truth. They fight with such a strong spirit of brotherhood among them. Such a spiritual bond touches the hearts of men all over the world. They are united against a common enemy. In this way, they represent unity in Islam. But what do we think of them? Are we ready to take up such a challenge? These are all important questions that will shape our concern for our Muslim brothers. (Anita Muhammad 1987: 24)
By November 1986, government officials believed that ethnic resurgence within the Malay community would contribute to internecine conflicts, inter-religious tensions, and, even more importantly, a rapid loss of popular support for the ruling party. In the minds of political elites and community leaders, this was evidenced most glaringly during Israeli President Chaim Herzog’s first visit to Singapore in 1986. Herzog’s visit provoked fierce protests from Malays in the island city-state, as well as in Malaysia. Members of the Malaysian UMNO party and other prominent civil society leaders in Malaysia portrayed the visit as a calculated stratagem on the part of the Singapore government to incite political animosities between the two countries. Malaysia and Indonesia both registered their displeasure and withdrew their High Commissioners from Singapore during the period of Herzog’s visit. Malays in Singapore staged a peaceful demonstration outside the Istana (the residence of the President of Singapore) with the support of opposition parties and wrote letters to the press deploring the visit of the Israeli President. Among the organizations that were prominent in voicing such criticism were Jamiyah and the Singapore Malay Chambers of Commerce. Tensions came to a head when the then Senior Minister, S. Rajaratnam, was quoted as having said, “We are not Muslims. Egypt is Muslim and so are Morocco and Jordan.” This was just an unofficial comment made by Rajaratnam but it was enough to invite strong reactions from the Malays. Rajaratnam later explained that he meant that Singapore was not a Muslim state and that Malay journalists had interpreted his earlier statements in such a way as to provoke “religious and communal feelings among Singaporean Muslims” (Straits Times, 20 November and 6 December 1986; see also Leifer 2000: 90–94).

Just as the tensions provoked by the Herzog controversy were beginning to fade, a remark made by the Second Minister of Defence (now the Prime Minister of Singapore), Lee Hsien Loong, revived the passions of Malays in Singapore and Malaysia. Lee mentioned that the limited number of regular Malay soldiers assuming sensitive positions in the Singapore Armed Forces was due to the geopolitics of the region. “We live in Southeast Asia. If there is a conflict, if the SAF is called upon to defend the homeland, we don’t want to put any of our soldiers in a difficult position, where his emotions for the nation may be in conflict with his emotions for his religion” (Straits Times, 22 February 1987). Seen through the eyes of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the leaders of ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia or Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) and religious elites in Malaysia, Lee’s comments were “discriminatory,” not only toward Malays in Singapore but toward the Malays in the region as a whole. Such accusations were immediately challenged by the Majlis Pusat (the Central Council of...
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Malay Cultural Organizations), a conglomeration of forty-six Malay and Muslim grassroots bodies in Singapore. Arguing that the minority community did not face discrimination from the Singapore government and expressing its hope that Malays would have the opportunity to hold posts in sensitive units in the SAF, Majlis Pusat called upon the Malaysian government and civic organizations to refrain from interfering in Singapore’s domestic affairs (Straits Times and Berita Harian, 27 February, 4 March, and 15 March 1987).

Notwithstanding the stream of protests emanating from both sides of the causeway that connects Singapore to Malaysia, the Singapore government was convinced that affirmative steps needed to be taken to ensure that dissenting parties within minority groupings were integrated into the national mainstream. What was not acknowledged was that the remarks made by politicians had heightened the ethnic resurgence among Malays that had taken place prior to these controversies. Three Muslim organizations, PERDAUS (Pelajar-Pelajar Agama Dewasa Singapura or the Association of Adults Religious Class Student of Singapore), PEGAS (Persatuan Guru-Guru Agama Islam Singapura or the Singapore Religious Teachers’ Association), and the Association of Islamic Welfare, for example, resigned from Majlis Pusat in protest against what they perceived to be its “un-Islamic” stances and its close connections with the government (Straits Times, 2 September and 8 October 1987).7

To remedy this impasse, government officials resolved that a new interpretation of the Malay identity had to be invented to further legitimize the authority of the state with regard to Malay and Muslim affairs. This could only be achieved through a multi-pronged strategy, which, drawing on Richard Jenkins’ work, might be described as “the manner in which different modes of domination are implicated in the social construction of ethnic and other identities” (Jenkins 2008: 76). Using the influential work of Michel Foucault, Jenkins delineates several strategies commonly employed by power elites in modern states for the purpose of disciplining the ethnicity of their subjects, the foremost being political rhetoric that singles out a given community as problematic and as a source of moral panic. Recognizing that rhetoric alone would not suffice, the state seeks the support of “moral entrepreneurs,” specifically the press, academics, and spokespersons of interest groups, to justify legislative acts and administrative regulations (Jenkins 2008: 71–72). The next section of this article will examine these strategies.

Rhetorical strategies, moral panic, and the use of laws

The state and its interlocutors deployed several strategies that created the conditions for a new definition of the Malay identity in
Singapore. The first was to lay emphasis on the notion that the Malays in Singapore were different from Malays in Malaysia, as well as Muslims in other neighboring countries, due largely to many decades of shared experiences among Singapore Malays that developed their sense of rootedness and belonging. Malays in Singapore, according to Juri Wari, a Majlis Pusat spokesman, viewed the island city-state as their country. “We have nowhere else to go and it is not up to others to accept this reality.” The “others” referred to in this statement were Malaysian politicians who were “painting an inaccurate picture of the position of the Malay community in Singapore” (Berita Harian, 15 March 1987). Kept from public knowledge was the fact that a large number of Muslims in Singapore were migrants who had come from different parts of Southeast Asia and the wider Muslim world during the immediate post World War II period. Familial links with the home communities were still maintained well into the 1980s, especially among Indian businessmen, Hadhrami Arabs, and Malays who originated from mainland Malaya (Harper 1998: 337; Turnbull 1989: 220–267; Li 1989). A letter from a member of the public sent to the Malay-language Singapore newspaper Berita Harian in response to Juri’s statement illustrates this point well. “Wanchu” stressed that the issues affecting Malays in Singapore had implications for other Malays in the region, because the regional ties of kinship remained strong despite the existence of national boundaries (Berita Harian, 28 March 1987).

Juri’s statement was reinforced by a speech made by the then Environment Minister and Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs, Ahmad Mattar, who was also the PAP Malay Bureau chairman. He maintained that Malays must recognize that they are Singaporeans above all other forms of identification. Malays, in his words, “must order our hopes and aspirations in the context of the realities of Singapore society . . . And even in maintaining our Islamic identity, we should remember that we are Singaporeans” (Straits Times, 15 March 1987). Expressed in Benedict Anderson’s terminology, Muslims in Singapore were instructed to yield their conception of a global imagined community (the Ummah) to the territorial edifice and unifying myths of the nation (Anderson 1991).

Having marked the boundaries between “Malay Singaporeans” and “other Malays,” the second line of rhetoric was directed toward imbibing the success of multi-racialism in Singapore, and assuring the Malay community that Malay rights were protected by the state. These goals were achieved through a series of public dialogues organized by the Malay Members of Parliament, with the support of leading nonpolitical Malay organizations. Aside from obtaining feedback
from participants on the Herzog controversy and other related matters, such as the educational and social problems in the country, the main purpose of the dialogue sessions was didactic: to restate the loyalty of “Malay-Singaporeans” to the existing regime (*Straits Times*, 15 March and 28 August 1987).

To this must be added the construction and amplification of moral panics and social problems. Research conducted by state bodies surmised that Malays were, in general, not taking part in the range of activities that were organized by the Peoples’ Association through its community centres. Some of these activities include mass gatherings, cooking classes, and recreational activities that were open to all communities on the island. This problem was compounded by the tendency of Malays to form “enclaves” in certain residential areas and to send their children to schools where Malay students were in the majority. Recent findings by MUIS of the rapid spread of deviant Islamic teachings generated a public perception that the Malay community was under the influence of fundamentalist and extremist ideologies emanating from outside Singapore. To address this predicament, four foreign *ulamas* (or religious scholars), namely, Ahmad Deedat from South Africa, Immaduddin Abdul Rahman from Indonesia, Palani Baba from India, and Haji Mat Saman Khuti from Malaysia, were banned from delivering talks in the island city-state. The reasons behind this prohibition were that the four *ulamas* had stirred up Muslim feelings by calling upon the minority community to unite against the majority non-Muslim population in Singapore. As a case in point, Haji Mat Saman was reported to have preached that Singapore was a lost possession of the Malays. He stressed that Malaysian Malays sympathized completely with their Malay compatriots in Singapore and saw his banning as an act of severing ties with Malaysia (*Berita Harian*, 14 March, 5 May, and 20 July 1987; *Straits Times*, 7 June, 20 September, and 26 September 1987).

Proscriptive measures against foreign *ulamas* were not the only methods employed by the state to quell potential dissent, to consolidate support from the Muslim public, and, as Stephanie Lawson (2001) has perceptively put it, to “sanitize” the ethnic identities of the citizenry. On 24 April 1987, four Malays were detained without trial for manufacturing rumors about an imminent clash between Chinese and Malays in Singapore. During a televised confession, all four men admitted to their involvement in violent and Islamic activist groups. Pictures of confiscated weapons were published in local newspapers with the main message being that such intended acts of violence could revive tensions and disharmony that characterized the island city-state during the colonial period. In an almost predictable manner, the...
Maria Hertogh riots of 1950 and incidents of mass violence in 1964 and 1969 were cited as evidence of the disruptive potential of communalism and religious extremism (Straits Times, 24 June 1987; Hill 2003: 120, 2004: 349; Aljunied 2009: 1).

These measures, coupled with extensive media coverage of high rates of drug addiction and high divorce rates among the Malays, culminated in Singapore’s Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, describing the Malay community of Singapore as being caught in a “psychological trap.” Granted that there had been marked improvements in terms of educational attainment, employment status, and housing since independence, there was still much to be done to imbue a strong consciousness of nationhood among the Malays. During an interview with the Berita Harian editor, Lee highlighted:

“...The unhappiness at Herzog’s visit and at the discussion of the role of Malay Singaporeans in the Armed Forces turns upon the sense of identity and loyalty among Malay Singaporeans in given situations. We have made progress. But despite progress, conflicting emotions are still a reality. A Malay Singaporean brought up in a multi-racial English medium school will feel a Singaporean. He thinks of his Chinese and Indian friends with whom he recites the loyalty pledge every morning as his fellow citizens. But there can be situations where religious emotions are stronger than civic or national feelings or military discipline” (Straits Times, 7 July 1987; see also Berita Minggu 5 July 1987) [italics mine].

Reiterating his earlier points during a speech delivered on National Day, Lee mentioned that the Malays were still not part of the national mainstream and that it would take another generation to achieve that end (Straits Times, 18 August 1987). This sparked yet another round of debates on whether or not the Malays had been fully integrated into the national mainstream. Cognizant that a broad section of the Malay community disagreed with the prime minister’s observation that Malays had yet to be fully integrated into mainstream society, Malay elites urged the minority to “not mix religion with politics” and to “shed [the] minority complex” (Straits Times, 20 September 1987). Sidek Saniff, the Parliamentary Secretary for Trade and Industry, remarked that Muslims in Singapore should be more tolerant of other ethnic groups and religions and should be “thankful that Muslims in our country are mature in their thinking and follow closely their religion” (Straits Times, 8 November 1987). By then, the stage was set for the introduction of new laws to officially define Malayness in Singapore.
Defining Malay identity

On 30 November 1987, two bills pertaining to the GRC scheme were introduced in the Singapore Parliament. Written comments from members of the public regarding the bills were invited, and the closing date was set for 15 January 1988. The introduction of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment No. 2) and the Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) bills were, according to the Select Committee, aimed at ensuring minority representation in Parliament. From historical evidence and discussions carried out by governmental bodies six years before the introduction of these bills, it had been concluded that ethnicity had been the determining factor behind electoral behavior and party choices. Most Chinese would vote for candidates from their own race. If left unattended, the government was concerned that minority communities would be under-represented in the policy-making processes of the state.

The decreasing percentage of Malay political candidates vis-à-vis those from the majority Chinese community was also a major source of trepidation, given the provision in Article 152 (2) of the Constitution of Singapore that “The Government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognize the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language.” By legalizing minority representation in a given constituency through the GRC scheme and defining in the broadest way possible “the Malay identity” so as to include a wider segment of the Muslim community on the island, the Select Committee reasoned that “another pillar upon which to build a stable multi-racial society” could be institutionalized (Group Representation Constituencies: A Summary of the Report of the Select Committee 1988: 6). It was proposed that a Malay be legally defined as “someone who is Malay, Javanese, Boyanese, Bugis, Arab or any other person who is generally accepted as a member of the Malay community by that community.” A Malay Community Committee consisting of a Chairman and four other members would be appointed by the president on the nomination of the Presidential Council of Minority Rights to certify whether a given candidate was qualified to be legally regarded as a “Malay” for the purposes of election within a GRC.

Framed against the previous discussion, the justifications given by the Select Committee for the introduction of the bills were no more than partial representations of the actual realities of the day. If racial voting was the main source of concern, why then was there a need to
provide a definition for the Malay identity? Would this not further reinforce ethnic cleavages that were purported to be prevalent among Singaporeans? Even if it is to be acknowledged that it was expedient to define a Malay in clear terms to ensure that the community would be represented in Parliament by acceptable candidates, how could one explain the absence of any bill or sub-clause to define Chineseness, Eurasianess, and so forth? These were some of the pertinent questions posed by opposition parties and civic groups in Singapore in the heat of the debates on the GRC scheme. In the meantime, the proposed definition of a “Malay” met with a range of responses and critiques from across the spectrum of the Malays and other members of the Muslim community in Singapore, which suggests the complex and subtle ways in which the Malay identity was comprehended.

For a select group of Malay elites in Singapore, the whole exercise of defining Malayness was preposterous and would cast doubts over the constitutional safeguards accorded to the minority community by Article 152. Educational subsidies to the tertiary level were among the privileges enjoyed only by Malay Singaporeans (and not by Chinese, Indian, and other Singaporeans.) The new definition would, for all intents and purposes, include Arabs and Indian Muslims who had not necessarily enjoyed similar privileges as the Malays up to that time. Indeed, while some Arab and Indian Muslim leaders welcomed the broad definition of Malayness because of the many benefits that could be derived from it, many others expressed their unhappiness and asserted that, while Arabs and Indian Muslims belonged to the Muslim community, they would not acquiesce to being categorized as Malay. In a letter published in the Straits Times, Mohammad Ahmed Talib, a member of a prominent Singaporean Arab family, explained that:

“I feel the inclusion of the word ‘Arab’ is unnecessary at all and should be deleted from the definition as ethnically it might raise eyebrows and cause confusion among intellectuals, Singaporeans and Singaporean Arabs who want to cherish their cultural heritage. . . . As a Singaporean Arab, I am proud of the past achievements and contributions of the pioneering Arabs in Singapore, and would like to emulate their enterprising spirit in the Singapore context, without being apologetic about it” (Straits Times, 2 January 1988).

Chairmen of leading Malay organizations, Muslim academics, and religious activists called attention to the exclusion of Islam from the proposed definition. Their concern about this issue demonstrates that religion was a fundamental element of the Malay identity in Singapore.
Arguing in contradistinction with the views of a sociologist, Dr Stella Quah, who believed that the institutionalization of religious affiliations as a facet of Malayness would result in tension and conflict in the Singapore society, Professor Syed Hussein Alatas, former Head of the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore, stressed that “Islam is very much a part of the Malay identity and the Malays—just like the Thais—cannot be disassociated from their religion” (Straits Times, 23 December 1987; see also Report of the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Bill [Bill No. 23/87] 1988, D 47). In the same vein, Dr Hussin Mutalib opined that, “the deletion of Islam is conspicuous and may not be accepted by the majority of Malays” (Straits Times, 9 January 1988).

Even more compelling was the fear expressed by Muslims that the proposed definition would allow Malays who had converted to the Christian faith to represent the community. This was seen as intolerable because Christian Malays were apostates (murtad) and, as such, were perceived as having lost their true identity. In truth, there have been sustained attempts by Christian evangelical groups to convert Muslims on the island to the Christian faith (Berita Harian, 7 June 1987; Straits Times, 25 March 1988). Even though the success of these missionary efforts was often exaggerated by Muslims to the extent of creating widespread alarm, the airing of such fears and grievances illustrates how Islam and the Malay identity in Singapore have been conflated in a way that makes it impossible for the majority of Malays to regard any Malay who renounced the Islamic faith, or who converted to another religion, as still being a Malay.

Still, underlying these acrimonious debates was a tacit admission by most Malay and Muslim elites that the GRC scheme would prove to be beneficial for minorities on the island and that a negotiated definition of the Malay identity was achievable through constructive dialogue. No dissension was expressed in regard to the exclusion of culture (adat) and Malay language as crucial markers of the Malay identity. Indeed, there were only two examples of unrelenting censure of the GRC scheme. The first came from a former Minister of State, Haji Ya’acob Mohammed, who called upon the government to issue a referendum or to delay the implementation of the GRC concept until after the looming General Elections. Second, the PKMS maintained that Malay rights would be violated because Malay candidates in any GRC would have to team up with non-Malay candidates in that constituency to get into Parliament. They proposed that a separate election for the Malays could be held simultaneously with the General Elections, and the number of candidates and the allotment of constituencies could be further negotiated through a joint ad hoc committee
Having considered all arguments and evidence presented, the Singapore Parliament passed the proposed bills on 5 May 1988. To be eligible for election as a Member of Parliament (MP) under the new law, a Malay candidate had to be a “person belonging to the Malay community” which was defined as “any person, whether Malay race or otherwise, who considers himself to be a member of the Malay community and who is generally accepted as a member of the Malay community by that community” (Report of the Select Committee on the Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Bill [Bill No. 23/87] 1988: 5).

When scrutinized closely, this loose definition poses a number of unanticipated problems and possibilities. First, it is tautological in that it assumes a pre-existing knowledge of the “Malay community” and the boundaries that differentiate Malays and non-Malays. Second, it is reliant on the authority of the “community” to determine the identity of a particular person, meaning that, for example, if a European Muslim decides that he is Malay but is later told by members of the “Malay community” that he is not perceived as such, then he would be excluded from the Malay category. Self-identification is thus entirely ruled out. Third, the phrase “Malay race or otherwise” implies that the Malay identity is tied to both hereditary and non-hereditary criteria. If this is the case, then it would be possible, for example, for a Singaporean citizen who is of Chinese ancestry and yet accepted by the Malay community as a member of that community, to change his registered ethnic status from Chinese to Malay. By doing so, he or she would thus become eligible to stand for election as a “Malay” Member of Parliament as defined by the constitution.

The Singapore state’s attempt to create its own definition of the Malay identity through the use of political rhetoric, media representations, and the imposition of laws and support elicited from selected Malay elites had an overall negative effect upon its long-standing popularity among the Singapore Malays. The results of the 1988 General Elections showed that the PKMS increased its percentage of the votes cast from 0.5 percent in 1984 to 1 percent in 1988. Moreover, a large number of Malays swung their votes to the Workers’ Party and the Singapore Democratic Party (Business Times, 11 September 1988). Of the numerous reasons behind this shift, one of the most important was the concerted effort of opposition leaders to underline the PAP’s problematic policies toward Malays. Coupled with the enduring problems of social marginalization and estrangement, the visit of President Herzog in the midst of a worldwide Muslim denunciation of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and the questioning of Malay loyalty in an era...
of increased international communication, the long-term objective of forging a sense of nationhood through the introduction of a new interpretation of the Malay identity heightened the transnational sway of resurgent Islam and sub-ethnic particularisms in Singapore. Ethnic resurgence remained an entrenched feature of the Malay community in Singapore throughout the 1980s.

Conclusion

This study shows the need to refine the present social constructivist approaches to the study of minority identities in Southeast Asia—approaches that have thus far been limited to examining identity contestations within the boundaries of modern nation-states, while being determined by the assumption that primordial ties and loyalties would erode with the coming of modernity. Toward this end, I have proposed a new angle of vision, which analyzes the dynamics of ethnic resurgence and state responses to such developments beyond the local universe. By framing the study of minority identity formation among minorities in Singapore to include regional and global processes, I have shown that we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that gave rise to various forms of self-identification, especially the ways in which primordial, as well as constructed, ties are sustained, defended, and promoted. The efficacy of this revisionist approach is heavily dependent upon a nuanced reading and interpretation of the data at hand and the use of relevant theoretical and methodological insights that could advance research on identity formation in Singapore, as it has in other parts of Southeast Asia and beyond. Castells’ conception of the “networked society,” Willford’s methodological pluralism, or Jenkins’ delineation of governmental strategies, if taken critically, can aid in advancing research on the dialectics between ethnic resurgence, minority identities, and state policies. Indeed, it will serve to make us more aware of the challenges faced by those who are at the margins of mainstream societies, their conceptions of themselves and of others, and their responses to state-imposed categorizations, both at present and in the past.

Notes

1. See the series of articles by Shaharuddin Maaruf in Berita Harian, 18 & 25 September 2004, as well as 2, 9, 16, and 23 October 2004.
2. Indeed, while Indian and Latin American historians have refined and applied some aspects of Castells’ and Jenkins’ theoretical formulations as analytical devices to explore uncharted terrains in the study of local communities, the same has not been the case for scholars working on Southeast Asian history (cf. Bayly 1996).
3. “Recorded Interview with Abu Samah bin Awang,” A000815/16, MAS, Reel 16.
5. “Recorded Interview with Badron bin Sainulla,” A 000614/50, NAS, Reel 42, and “Recorded Interview with Mahmud Awang,” A 001214/03, NAS, Reel 01.
6. “Recorded Interview with Abu Samah bin Awang,” A 001099/03, NAS, Reel 16.
7. The President of Majlis Pusat then was Zulkifli Mohamed who was also the Political Secretary in the Ministry of Community Development.
8. The recurrent usage and problems inherent within the state’s portrayal of the Maria Hertogh riots are discussed in my recent book. See: Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, Colonialism, Violence and Muslims in Southeast Asia: The Maria Hertogh Controversy and its Aftermath (London: Routledge, 2009). It should be noted here that another group of sixteen persons were arrested for their involvement in a “Marxist conspiracy” prior to the detention of the four Malay men (Straits Times, 22 May 1987).

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