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The Impact of Ethnic Politics on Javanese Muslims in Malaysia: Integration, Identity, and Political Leadership

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of ethnic politics on Javanese migrants and their descendants in Malaysia, focusing on their social, economic, and political realities. It explores the historical context of ethnic politics in Malaysia and how it has shaped the experiences of the Javanese community, from their integration into Malay society to the emergence of a Malay-Javanese middle class. The article argues that ethnic-based policies, such as the New Economic Policy (NEP), have provided opportunities for the Javanese to gain citizenship rights and participate in Malaysia's development while also contributing to the strengthening of identity politics. It highlights the political role of Javanese Muslim leaders, who have risen to prominent positions within the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the government. The article draws on historical sources, government policies, and scholarly works to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Javanese experience in Malaysia amidst the complexities of ethnic politics. It concludes by emphasising the need to understand the dynamics of ethnicity and religion in Malaysia's nation-building process and their impact on minority communities like the Javanese. The article contributes to the ongoing debate on leadership, ethnicity, and representation in contemporary Malaysia while offering insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by migrant communities in multi-ethnic societies.

1. Introduction

The interplay between ethnicity, politics, and leadership in multi-ethnic societies has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry (Hooker and Othman, 2003). In the context of Malaysia, a nation characterised by its diverse ethnic composition, the dynamics of ethnic politics have played a pivotal role in shaping the country's social, economic, and political landscape (Noor, 2003). This article examines the impact of ethnic politics on Javanese migrants and their descendants in Malaysia, with a particular focus on the emergence and role of Javanese Muslim leaders within the Malaysian political sphere.

While previous research has extensively explored the broader themes of ethnic politics in Malaysia (Marzali, 2021; Tan, 2012), there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific experiences and contributions of the Javanese community within this framework. This study aims to address this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of how ethnic-based policies, such as the New Economic Policy (NEP), have influenced the integration and socio-economic mobility of Javanese migrants and their descendants (Dwijayanto et al., 2020). Furthermore, it seeks to illuminate the ways in which Javanese Muslim leaders have navigated and shaped the political

landscape of Malaysia, particularly within the context of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and governmental structures (Kamil and Mohamed, 2016).

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the intersection of Javanese identity, Islamic leadership, and Malaysian politics. By examining the historical trajectory of Javanese migrants from their initial settlement to their current status as part of the Malay-Muslim majority, this study offers new insights into the processes of ethnic assimilation, identity formation, and political participation in Malaysia (Sunarti and Fadeli, 2018). Moreover, it explores the emergence of a Malay-Javanese middle class and its implications for religious expression and consumer culture, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between ethnicity, class, and religion in contemporary Malaysian society (Dwijayanto, 2020).

This article argues that the politics of ethnicity in Malaysia has had profound and multifaceted effects on the Javanese community. On one hand, it has provided opportunities for socio-economic advancement and political participation, as evidenced by the rise of prominent Javanese Muslim leaders to key positions within UMNO and the government (Tun Sardon Foundation, 2016; Malaysia Kini, 2010). On the other hand, it has contributed to the strengthening of identity politics and the potential reinforcement of ethnic divisions (Aminnuddin, 2020). By analysing these dynamics, the study aims to shed light on the complexities of managing ethnic diversity and promoting national unity in Malaysia.

Through a critical examination of historical sources, government policies, and scholarly works, this research offers a comprehensive analysis of the Javanese experience in Malaysia amidst the complexities of ethnic politics. It contributes to ongoing debates on leadership, ethnicity, and representation in contemporary Malaysia while offering insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by migrant communities in multi-ethnic societies (Besar, 2015; Bayu, 2009). By doing so, this study not only enhances our understanding of Malaysia's political and social landscape but also provides valuable perspectives on the broader issues of ethnic integration and national identity formation in diverse societies.

2. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach, primarily utilizing historical analysis and literature review, to examine the complex phenomenon of ethnic politics in Malaysia and its impact on Javanese migrants and their descendants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research methodology draws upon a diverse range of sources, including historical documents, government policy papers, scholarly works, and primary data, allowing for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject matter (Flick, 2018). The study focuses particularly on the regions of Johor, Perak, and Selangor, which have significant populations of Javanese descent (Kamil & Mohamed, 2016). This geographical focus enables a detailed exploration of how ethnic politics has shaped the experiences and identities of Javanese Malaysians in these areas.

Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, the analysis integrates insights from history, political science, sociology, and religious studies (Repko & Szostak, 2020). This approach allows for a holistic examination of the multifaceted nature of ethnic identity and political dynamics in Malaysia. The research employs content analysis of literary sources, enabling a systematic interpretation of textual data (Krippendorff, 2018). Additionally, comparative analysis is used to contrast various historical periods and perspectives, providing a longitudinal view of the subject matter from the colonial era to contemporary Malaysia (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003).

Thematic analysis is applied to identify key themes related to ethnic politics and the role of Javanese Muslim leaders in Malaysia (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method allows for the identification of patterns and recurring ideas across the diverse data sources, facilitating a coherent narrative of the Javanese Malaysian experience. While the methodology is not explicitly detailed in the article, the approach is evidently qualitative, combining literature study, historical analysis, and primary data to explore the themes of ethnic politics and the role of Javanese Muslim leaders in Malaysia (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This multi-method approach enhances the validity of the findings through triangulation, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the complex socio-political dynamics at play (Patton, 2015).

The study's longitudinal scope, spanning from the colonial era to contemporary Malaysia, allows for an examination of how ethnic identities and political roles have evolved over time (George & Bennett, 2005). This historical perspective is crucial for understanding the current position of Javanese Malaysians within the country's ethnic and political landscape.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Ethnic Dichotomy

The formation of Malaysia's post-independence political landscape was inextricably linked to ethnic politics, a process that profoundly influenced the integration of Javanese migrants into Malay society (Hooker & Othman, 2003). The Malaysian government's adoption of ethnically-based policies was primarily aimed at addressing population inequalities among the three main ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians (Noor, 2003). This

approach played a crucial role in shaping Malaysia's national identity and influencing the citizenship status of Javanese migrants (Marzali, 2021).

The heterogeneity of community groups in Malaysia led to ethnic identity becoming a primary focus in state formation. The presence of various ethnic groups created complex political dynamics, prompting the government to develop policies aimed at managing inequalities and addressing inter-ethnic tensions (Haque, 2003). As a result, ethnic politics became the principal means for the Malaysian government to achieve balanced social and economic goals among the groups (Sofjan, 2007).

A significant step taken by the Malaysian government was the implementation of affirmative action policies, such as the New Economic Policy (NEP). This policy aimed to reduce economic and social disparities between ethnic groups, giving priority to the Bumiputera (including Malays) under the principle of "Ketuanan Melayu" (Malay supremacy) (Dwijayanto et al., 2020). The NEP also provided opportunities for Javanese migrants and other ethnic groups to actively participate in Malaysia's state development and gain citizenship rights (Bayu, 2009).

In post-independence Malaysia, ethnicity has become a significant marker of identity, with the trichotomy of Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnicities. Religion is also inherently tied to ethnicity, as the "Malay" category, as regulated in the Malaysian constitution, must be Muslim (Aminnuddin, 2020). This ethnic trichotomy eventually gave rise to the dichotomy of "Malay and non-Malay" (Tan, 2012). The categorization of Javanese people as ethnic Malays, despite their strong Javanese cultural identity, stems from the ethnic politics of 1957, which marked independence and the formation of the Federation of Malaya (Sunarti & Fadeli, 2018). This categorization presented ethnic Javanese in Malaysia with a choice: become Bumiputera citizens or be repatriated to Java, potentially leaving behind their assets in the Malay Peninsula. The majority chose citizenship for economic reasons, leading to a shift in identity and an increasing adoption of Malay culture, albeit without completely abandoning Javanese traditions (Uddin et al., 2014).

The adaptation of Javanese migrants to Malay traditions and culture intensified after independence, particularly as they were recognized as part of the Bumiputera and classified as Malays (Miyazaki, 2000). Interestingly, gender played a role in this cultural adaptation process. According to Rofil (2016), Javanese-Malay women often took the lead in adopting Malay cultural practices within the domestic sphere, including changes in names, food, language, and clothing. This gendered aspect of cultural adaptation adds another layer of complexity to the integration process of Javanese migrants in Malaysia.

The ethnic politics in post-independence Malaysia has had far-reaching effects on the Javanese migrant community. While it provided opportunities for integration and citizenship, it also led to complex processes of identity negotiation and cultural adaptation. The experience of Javanese migrants in Malaysia offers valuable insights into the dynamics of ethnic identity, political participation, and social integration in multicultural societies, highlighting the intricate relationship between state policies, ethnic categorizations, and individual or community responses to these forces.

3.2 Ethnic Rivalry

The transition of Malaysia from a mono-ethnic to a multi-ethnic society, driven by Western colonial economic policies, brought ethnic considerations and rivalries to the forefront of national politics (Tan, 2012). Despite being the majority, Malays viewed themselves as the indigenous people, tracing their claim back to the Malacca Sultanate era in the 15th century (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). This sentiment of Malay nationalism intensified after World War II, leading to the formation of a centralized federation, even though Malay ethnic values were initially sidelined during the colonial era (Crouch, 1996).

The perceived rejection of Malay values and identity in the national government sparked anger among the Malay community, who felt their indigenous status was not adequately recognized (Aminnuddin, 2020). This resentment culminated in resistance movements, particularly as Malay nationalists mobilized against British actions they deemed threatening to their indigenous dignity (Abd Rahim et al., 2013).

In response to this resurgence of Malay nationalism, the British abolished the Malayan Union constitution, replacing it with the 1948 Treaty of Federation of Malaya. This new treaty acknowledged Malay nationalism and tightened citizenship requirements, including birth in the Federation, residency duration, good behavior, and proficiency in Malay or English (Lau, 1989).

The influence of ethnic Malays in the 1948 Federation was not limited to UMNO's resistance but also manifested in the joint struggle of PUTERA and AMCJA, the first multi-ethnic coalition in Malaya (Rudner, 1970). While UMNO advocated for 'Malay cultural dominance', PUTERA-AMCJA pushed for 'Malay assimilation' from a citizenship perspective (Saat, 2015). During the independence negotiations in 1957, the influence of Malay values and identity strengthened further. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) proposed converting Penang and Malacca into Malay states to protect the special position of Malays (Ahmad Tajudin et al., 2021). However, some Malay leaders, including the Sultan of Johor, opposed the federation due to concerns about administrative changes (Shafruddin, 1982).

The Reid Commission, tasked with drafting the Federal Constitution in 1957, had to balance the principle of 'Malay cultural dominance' with the interests of other ethnic groups (Purcell, 2021). The resulting constitution recognized the special position of Malays, established Malay as the official language, and Islam as the official religion, while also granting citizenship rights to non-Malays (Hawkins, 2021). The formation of Malaysia in 1963, incorporating Sabah and Sarawak, was partly motivated by the need to balance the ethnic composition, particularly in response to concerns about Singapore's predominantly Chinese population (Jones, 2002). This decision demonstrated how ethnic considerations influenced the formation of asymmetric federalism in Malaysia (Harding, 2018).

Throughout Malaysia's political history, ethnic Malays have maintained dominance in the central government, consistently securing a two-thirds majority in parliament. This has allowed for the preservation of Malay ethnic identities in key aspects of governance, including the monarchy, leadership positions, official religion, and national language, while ostensibly not discriminating against non-Malay identities (Ahmad Tajudin et al., 2021). The evolution of Malaysia's political landscape has been profoundly shaped by ethnic considerations, particularly the assertion of Malay rights and identity. The delicate balance between acknowledging Malay privileges and accommodating a multi-ethnic society has been a defining feature of Malaysian politics since independence. This complex interplay of ethnic politics continues to influence Malaysia's governance and social dynamics in the contemporary era.

3.3 Impact of Ethnic Politics

The politics of ethnicity in Malaysia, primarily through affirmative action policies, has significantly shaped the social, economic, and political realities of Javanese migrants (Dwijayanto, 2020). The New Economic Policy (NEP), a cornerstone of these affirmative action measures, has particularly affected the involvement of Javanese people in the economic sector, as they have been recognized as part of the Malay ethnicity (Marzali, 2021). Historically, Javanese migrants who obtained Malaysian citizenship received substantial support in developing businesses as part of an inclusive economic policy, which opened up opportunities for increased economic contributions in regions such as Johor, Perak, and Selangor (King, 2008).

This ethnic politics through affirmative action has not only supported the Javanese migrant community but also other ethnic groups under the Malay ethnic umbrella to prosper (Sofjan, 2007). Beyond the economic sector, generations of Javanese descendants in Malaysia have gained increased access to education, enabling many to pursue higher studies both domestically and abroad (Dwijayanto et al., 2020). This enhanced access to higher education has fostered social mobility among Javanese descendants in Malaysia, contributing to an improved quality of life. Moreover, ethnic politics has strengthened the political participation of Malaysians of Javanese descent, amplifying their voice in policymaking (Besar, 2015).

The current identification of the Javanese community with ethnic Malays in Malaysia, considered a subset of the Malays, is a product of historical processes (Sunarti & Fadeli, 2018). This ethnic categorization can be traced back to the British colonization of the Peninsula region, with the 1824 London Treaty providing legislation that divided the boundaries of the Malay Peninsula and the Dutch East Indies (Husin, 2016). This agreement fundamentally shifted the context of the Malay world, creating new colonial civic and territorial identity structures (GENALAN, 2003).

The British colonial administration deliberately engineered a transition from a mono-ethnic to a multi-ethnic society through plantation and mining labor activities (Hugo, 1993). This process involved bringing in Chinese and Indian immigrants, who eventually replaced the Javanese migrant community. From the early 20th century, attempts to extract labor from Java faced numerous obstacles, including Dutch prohibitions on bringing Javanese to the Peninsula, Sabah, and Sarawak, as Java was their most significant revenue-contributing area (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2015).

The colonial government's division of administrative areas not only separated the Malays and Javanese in social relations but also severed their functional ties (Husin, 2016). Consequently, the presence of the Javanese was gradually marginalized, with the Malay world becoming defined exclusively by three major races: Malays, Chinese, and Indians. This population engineering by the British effectively excluded the identity of the Javanese as part of the Malay world (Andaya & Andaya, 2017).

The complex interplay of colonial policies, ethnic categorizations, and post-independence affirmative action measures has profoundly shaped the position and identity of Javanese migrants and their descendants in Malaysia. While these policies have provided opportunities for economic advancement and social mobility, they have also contributed to a reconfiguration of ethnic identities, highlighting the enduring impact of historical processes on contemporary social and political realities in Malaysia.

3.4 Political Role of Javanese Muslim Leaders in Malaysia

The political landscape of Malaysia has been significantly shaped by the involvement of Javanese Muslim leaders, particularly those from the second and third generations in Johor, Perak, and Selangor. Many of these leaders have

aligned themselves with the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant ethnic Malay party, often holding influential positions within both the party and government structures (Kamil & Mohamed, 2016).

Prominent figures of Javanese descent have played crucial roles in Malaysian politics. For instance, Tun Haji Sardon Jubir (1917-1985), a highly educated individual of Javanese ancestry, served in various ministerial positions and as the Yang Dipertua Negeri (Governor) of Pulau Pinang (Tan, 1986; Tun Sardon Foundation, 2016). Similarly, Tan Sri Mohamed Haji Rahmat (1938-2010) founded the Johor Javanese Children's Association and held several high-ranking positions, including Deputy Minister of Finance, Minister of Information, and Secretary General of UMNO (Malaysia Kini, 2010).

In contemporary Malaysian politics, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi stands out as a notable figure of Javanese descent. As the President of UMNO and Deputy Prime Minister, Zahid's multilingual abilities and diverse ministerial experience exemplify the successful integration and political ascendancy of Javanese descendants in Malaysia (Itawrah, 2024; Chai, 2023). The emergence of a Malay-Javanese middle class, particularly since the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, has further reinforced the Bumiputera Supremacy agenda. This development has implications for ethnic-based identity politics in Malaysia, often favoring majority groups, including Malay-Javanese, under the banner of Bumiputera Supremacy (Dwijayanto, 2020). Concurrently, the Javanese Muslim generation in Malaysia maintains strong ties to both ethnic and religious identities, contributing to the consolidation of identity politics in the Malay Peninsula (Rozak et al., 2019).

The Malay middle class has significantly influenced the political landscape through involvement in established parties like UMNO and PAS, as well as in organizations dedicated to advocating for their rights. The growth of this middle class has also impacted opposition dynamics, as evidenced by PAS's expansion into new regions during the 1980s, leading to increased party rivalries (Bayu, 2009). Interestingly, the political behavior of the Malay-Javanese middle class appears to differ between urban and non-urban areas. In non-urban regions, there is a tendency to support parliamentary candidates who align with ethnic and religious identities, with a strong preference for Malay politicians from Malay parties. This voting pattern reflects a deep-seated trust in the ability of these politicians to defend Islamic positions and pursue Malay agendas (Besar, 2015).

Conversely, the urban Malay-Javanese middle class exhibits distinct political preferences. They often distance themselves from active political involvement, prioritizing professionalism, independence, and integrity. This approach results in a more rational, selective, and impartial political stance, without strong allegiance to any particular party (Haque, 2003).

The political engagement of Javanese Muslim leaders and the evolving preferences of the Malay-Javanese middle class demonstrate the complex interplay of ethnicity, religion, and class in shaping Malaysia's political landscape. These dynamics highlight the ongoing negotiation of identity and political representation in Malaysia's multicultural society, reflecting broader trends in ethnic politics and social mobility.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the politics of ethnicity in Malaysia has significantly impacted the social, economic, and political realities of Javanese migrants and their descendants. Ethnic-based policies, such as the NEP, have provided opportunities for the Javanese community to integrate into Malaysian society and gain citizenship rights. However, these policies have also contributed to the strengthening of identity politics and the emergence of a Malay-Javanese middle class that plays a crucial role in shaping the political landscape of Malaysia. As Malaysia continues to grapple with the challenges of managing ethnic diversity and promoting national unity, understanding the complex dynamics of ethnic politics and its impact on minority communities, such as the Javanese, remains crucial. By examining the historical, social, and political factors that shape the experiences of Javanese migrants and their descendants, this article provides valuable insights into the ongoing debate on ethnicity, religion, and nation-building in contemporary Malaysia.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

All authors confirm contribution to the paper. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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