Malaysia's 2005–2006 refugee stand-off with Thailand: a security culture analysis

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Abstract

In September of 2005, Malaysia–Thailand relations were stressed by an incident in which 131 Thai Muslims fled across the Southern Thai border to seek refuge in Malaysia. The Malaysian government initially refused to return these 'asylum seekers,' and eventually chose to internationalize the situation by calling on the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). Malaysia's decision to internationalize the issue points to potential instability in Malaysia-Thailand bilateral relations and reflects several internal political problems faced by United Malays National Organization (UMNO) central decisions makers. This paper seeks to explain the Malaysian central government's security perspective on the northern border region. To do this, I employ Muthiah Alagappa's framework for security culture analysis in an attempt to understand Malaysian security culture from the perspective of that culture's central decision makers themselves. (Alagappa, M ed., (1998) *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.)

1 Introduction

This paper considers the problems faced by the Malaysian central government in maintaining amiable relations with Thailand in the face of the Malay-Muslim insurgency which has plagued southern Thailand, and has

occasionally spilled over to become a political issue involving Malaysian actors. As violence and insurgency on the Thai side of the border garners more and more scrutiny from mass-media and scholars alike, my paper will be an attempt to see the conflict in a different light: from a Malaysian security perspective. Although much has been written recently about the security situation in the South of Thailand, few authors have considered the view of Malaysian central decision makers towards the contemporary situation.

In the last several months of 2005 and opening months of 2006, tensions were high in the border region, and Malaysia–Thailand relations were stressed by an incident in which 131 Thai Muslims fled across the border to seek refuge in Malaysia. The Malaysian government refused to return the 'asylum seekers' immediately, and eventually chose to internationalize the situation by calling in the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR).[1] The internationalization of this issue by the Malaysians highlights the present instability of Malaysia–Thailand bilateral relations and reflects several internal political problems faced by the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) central decisions makers.

2 Theoretical framework

In his book entitled *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences*, Muthiah Alagappa (1998, p, 14) introduced a new framework for discourse on security cultures and issues in Asia. The structure of this framework is relatively simple because it is based around just three main categories: referent, scope/domain, and nature of the security problem. By working within these categories, one is able to undertake a broad-based, non-ideological description of almost any given security situation. This paper uses Alagappa's framework to first analyze the general security environment inhabited by Malaysian central decision makers, then to show what kind of security problem the Muslim insurgency in the south of Thailand presents to this perspective.

The first category, the 'referent' identifies whose security issue is under consideration. This could be that of a current regime, a nation-state, a religious or ethnic group, or any number of other possibilities. Referents can change of course, and thus it has become common practice among those employing Alagappa's framework to note cases in which the primary referent of security under consideration is contested by another group. This is an important point for Malaysia, because though the moderate *Bumiputera* majority of the UMNO are undoubtedly the current referents of Malaysia's security concerns,

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1   The 131 Thai-Muslims who fled to Malaysia were called 'asylum seekers' only in the Malaysian press. In the Thai press, they were simply 'Thais.'

their power is somewhat contested by more radical Islamic factions in the north, the Chinese, and others.

The second category in Alagappa's framework is scope/domain, and this seeks to identify the referents' core values, perceived threats, and the nature of the security problem presented by these threats.

Finally, Alagappa's framework provides a category called 'approach' Here, the analyst must attempt to describe how the security referent goes about dealing with a given security issue. In the case of Malaysia, here I have described the strategies and techniques used by central decision makers to solve the problem of their relations with their counterparts in Thailand in light of the southern Thailand conflict.

3 An overview of malaysia's contemporary security culture

Here, I will consider the security concerns of the dominant moderate Muslim Malays represented by the UMNO political party. The UMNO party is the founding and still dominant member of the *Barisan Nasional (BN)* – Malaysia's ruling coalition government. It is thus the central decision makers of the UMNO who represent the nation-state in bilateral negotiations with Thailand, and it is also this group of Malays who set border policy in the sensitive northern provinces.

The UMNO has – at times – had to adapt to changing conditions by reaching-out to other political interests and diffusing power to other parties, but so far, doing this has never been to the detriment of their grasp on government power. The most notable diffusion of power took place in 1973 with the creation of the *BN*, which created a 14-party governing coalition. The creation of BN can be seen as one of several measures designed to re-establish stability after the 1969 racial riots. The coalition has endured to the present, and in the March 2004 election, BN comfortably won 199 of 219 seats in the lower house of parliament. The main opposition groups – the more Islamicist *Parti Islam Semalaysia* (PAS), and the ethnic Chinese-backed *Democratic Action Party* (DAP) – have been reduced to near insignificance in terms of their governing power relative with that of the *BN*, but these groups nevertheless exert influence in various spheres, if not always in Parliament.

The UMNO's ultimate core value is regime security. What this means essentially, is that the moderate Malays who currently hold power in Malaysia are intent on sustaining their interests as the dominant interests of the nation-state. The governmental structure imparted by the British, which left the Malay Sultanate in place, essentially prescribed Malay dominance as a condition of the modern nation-state, but the 1969 riots and other signs of ethnic strife made it clear that the Malays could not simply step into the bureaucratic

void left by their colonial overlords without contest. Neither the Chinese nor the more fundamentalist Islamic factions would allow this, and, (as I shall discuss below) much of Mahathir Mohammed's task was to create a viable Malay business class that could compete with the Chinese on their own terms rather than merely attempting to dictate policy from within the government bureaucracy. To this end, the Malaysian government has employed various strategies to encourage economic growth and diversification. One example is the New Economic Policy (NEP), which was put forth in 1971. This policy sought to eradicate poverty and thus create a stable social order not subject to the instability that comes from feelings of relative deprivation. Indeed, the NEP is generally seen as a more or less direct response to the 1969 riots. And though there may be debate as to whether the NEP should get credit for fixing the situation, there can be no doubt that Malaysia experienced very respectable growth in the 1980's, 90's and also in the new millennium.

The UMNO's remaining core values are all functions of the ultimate goal of regime security. They are each the result of perceived threats to the regime's hold on power. In roughly hierarchical order, these are economic development, Islam, and multi-racial peace and stability.

As a small Southeast Asian export-based economy, Malaysia depends heavily upon economic growth and development as a means of creating a stable political environment. Mahathir's 'Vision 2020: the Way Forward' documents calls for an 'outward-looking Malaysian society,' and represents the impossibility of Malaysia becoming in any way isolationist or radicalized.[2] Malaysia needs trade from all quarters, not just the Muslim world, and thus Mahathir and then Abdullah Badawi have sought to maintain a moderate Muslim state in the heart of Southeast Asia that still holds on to a core Islamic identity. In this sense, outward-looking means being willing to work with regional and global partners within the context of political, religious and economic organizations (I will discuss some of these below) and also bilaterally. It is by virtue of foreign direct investment (FDI), shrewd planning, and the successful growth of a manufacturing sector that Malaysia was able to avoid many of the hardships that came to other Southeast Asian countries in 1997. Malaysia was also thus able to avoid becoming dependant upon the World Bank and IMF for financial rescue.

Broadly speaking, Mahathir restructured the Malaysian economy in order to give it a new manufacturing base and also attract FDI.[3] This, and other diversification measures created added resilience in the face of economic downturn.

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2 'Vision 2020: The Way Forward,' Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, official website (accessed Friday, 07 April, 2006). {http://www.pmo.gov.my/website/webdb.nsf/vALLDOC/08A1EE6E797AB4FE48256E840034AD0F}

3 CIA Factbook, 'Malaysia' updated 10 January 2006, {http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/my.html}.

This was certainly the case during the 1997 Asian financial crisis when, unlike other Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) members, Malaysia was able to refuse IMF loans and engineer its own economic recovery.[4] Strong economic growth has lasted well beyond the term of the NEP, and this has mainly benefited urban Malays and Chinese business people. And though many still debate the effectiveness of the NEP, economic prosperity can certainly be said to have lessened the intensity of racial strife that existed in 1969. But one unintended consequence of the NEP has been new intra-ethnic class divisions. As an analyst for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) explains:

> Associating improved interethnic relations almost exclusively with reduced interethnic disparities among the respective business communities and middle classes has in fact generated greater ethnic resentment and suspicion on both sides. Ethnic affirmative action policies as implemented and enforced in Malaysia have associated the interests of entire ethnic groups with their respective elites, thus generalizing resentments associated with interethnic, intra-class competition. (Sundaram, 2004)

This quote well-characterizes the problem that exists between the elite business-oriented Malays of the Kuala Lumpur and the less developed northern border region. This also leads to an understanding of how doctrinal issues within the common Malay religion of Islam can become highly politicized.

Islam has always played a significant role as one of Malaysia's important core values. As one leading Malaysian academic puts it:

> Throughout the period of four prime ministers, the focus on Islam in Malaysia's external relations has been consistent and continuous. The emphasis however varies according to the complex interplay of various internal and external dynamics which could pose a threat to the country's stability…[5]

In terms of emphasis, it has been Mahathir's vision of a moderate, tolerant Islamic state that has animated much of Malaysia's peaceful prosperity since the 1969 riots, and though tensions remain in some areas, by and large, Malaysia's economic stability has made it possible for this multi-ethnic state to thrive under moderate Muslim leadership. Still, as I shall discuss in the next section of my paper, various interpretations of how Islamic values should

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4   Wikipedia contributors, 'Mahathir bin Mohamad,' *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, (last accessed on 12 March 2006).

5   Shaikh Mohd Saifuddeen Shaikh Mohd Salleh Suzalie Mohamad, 'Malaysia and the OIC,' in Abdul Razak Baginda ed., *Malaysia and the Islamic World.* London: ASEAN Academic Press, 2004.

function in the Malaysian nation-state have been bitterly contested, especially in the more fundamentalist northern border region.

Finally, multi-racial peace and stability is a related core value that the regime holds very highly because it too is of course closely related to the ultimate value of regime security. Ethnic minorities – particularly the Chinese – have at times posed a palpable threat to the security of the moderate Malay regime. For many years, the indigenous majority Malay-Muslim *bumiputras*[6] have dominated two realms: government and 'peasant agriculture,' whereas the market-oriented resident Chinese have traditionally maintained a large degree of control over the commercial realm.[7] This has inevitably led to ethnic tensions due to a stratification of society along ethnic lines. In 1969, there were racially divisive riots fueled largely by a sense of inequity.

Malaysia's 1969 race riots between the Malays and Chinese still form a significant part of shared historical memory in Malaysia. The 1969 crisis occurred after a Chinese political party – the DAP – celebrated electoral gains in parliament in a victory parade. The subsequent NEP sought to reduce the economic polarization that existed between Malays and the ethnic Chinese who reside in Malaysia, and it also had the stated goal of poverty eradication.

Broadly speaking, the threats faced by the ruling moderate Malays can be said to present an internal–external dilemma. This dilemma lies in the fact that the primary core value of regime security, economic prosperity, Islam, and multi-ethnic peace and stability are threatened both by internal and external political, religious, and economic forces related to the abovementioned threats. Factors such as the actions of foreign governments and the perceptions of national political parties and ethnic groups towards the UMNO coalition must all come into consideration.

To summarize, Malaysian central decision makers can be seen to hold three prominent core values: economic growth and development, multi-racial peace and stability, and the value of maintaining a moderate Islamic state despite internal religious and cultural diversity. The UMNO leadership has perceived inter-related threats from the prospect of economic downturn, and an increase in ethnic and religious-cultural tensions, which it has attempted to deal with through various strategies outlined above – most prominently the Malaysian government's NEP.

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6   This term, which translates to 'sons of the earth' (Sanskrit), or 'princes of the earth' (Malay) is meant to signify indigenous Malays and inhabitants of Borneo – the groups which have benefited from affirmative action under the New Economic Program.

7   Hussein, S.A. 'Malaysia after Mahathir: Continuity and Change,' The Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawaii, {http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/papers/syed.html} p. 3.

4 The nature of the Malaysia–Thailand Border region problem

4.1 Historical memory in the border region

The three provinces of southern Thailand of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala, as well as the northern Malaysia provinces of Kelantan and Terengganu form a border region between Malaysia and Thailand. This is a unique area within Southeast Asia that exhibits a transition between a country with a majority Buddhist population from one that contains mostly Muslims. Like other borders negotiated by the British, the Malaysia–Thailand border does not actually mark any sort of natural, cultural, geographical, or political divide. Instead, it cuts through the heart of a Malay-Muslim sub-region once united by powerful sultanates such as that which once thrived in Pattani (now on the Thai side). Historical memory of past glory in the (modern-day) border region is an important factor in defining the political climate for Malay nationalism, and also for adding legitimacy to opposition parties such as the PAS.

Recent and longer-term historical patterns and interpretations of these patterns by contemporary actors can also be said to inform Kuala Lumpur's (and Bangkok's) relations with the northern border region. One such pattern exists in the collective memory of the region's once powerful ethnic-Malay Sultanate of Pattani. Pattani is believed to have acted as a buffer to Thai hegemony in the classical era[8] at which time it was also a center of Islamic learning. The city-state then competed with other Malay powers such as Johor, Ligor, and Pahang. (Andaya *et al.* 1983). Pattani's past glory thus represents a point of regional pride and identity in present-day northern Malaysia, which in turn informs ethnic-Malay nationalism – a movement and sentiment that exists on both sides of the border.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the current border region was a peripheral zone, which with varying degrees of regularity paid tribute to the Siamese crown, and/or maintained relations with the more secular Malay Muslims to their south. Neither British colonialism nor its aftermath (the modern political divide) was ever embraced by the inhabitants of the present-day border region, and throughout the cold war and into recent years, the area has remained troubled by violence, banditry, and economic deprivation.

In the modern era the border region has been characterized by instability, communist insurgency, and most recently, Islamic fundamentalism and separatist movements. It is in this context that the contemporary refugee crisis has presented Malaysian central decision makers with a unique 'Malaysian

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8   By the term 'classical era,' I am referring to the time before 1511, and the arrival of the Portuguese at Malacca.

dilemma':

> If [Malaysia] sends them back the government risks the wrath of local Muslims, but if it gives them shelter, Kuala Lumpur would violate the non-interference accord that exists between southeast Asian countries and risk alienating Bangkok.[9]

As professor Surat's analysis accurately concludes, Malaysian central decision makers face an internal/external dilemma in deciding how to deal with issues like the abovementioned refugee crisis. Both Thailand and Malaysia have always had a need to maintain good relationships with each other and with international partners, and yet both central governments need to deal with constituents from the border sub-region who will be critical of their responses to issues that arise there. For Malaysia, the issue is very delicate because it has the potential to inflame religious, ethnic, and socio-economic issues that exist within Malaysia.

When I asked former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim about this issue, his answer pointed to the complexity of Kuala Lumpur's relations with the northern provinces on the Malay Peninsula.[10] Ibrahim first criticized Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's handling of the southern Thailand insurgency, a response that would play well in northern Malaysia. But if this type of criticism had been given in Kuala Lumpur, it would have been just the kind of 'megaphone diplomacy' that the Thai Prime Minister and former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir had recently agreed to try to control.[11] Leaders in Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur recognize common interests in maintaining amiable bilateral relations, but both governments face internal minorities (sometimes the same people on both sides of the border) who threaten such stability, and have almost nothing to lose by provoking conflict. Ibrahim also extended his criticism to his own country though – criticizing the Malaysian government for not doing enough to alleviate poverty and support primary and secondary education in northern Malaysia. His free criticism of both governments accurately cuts to the core of this situation – highlighting the almost paralytic dilemma that UMNO leaders face in dealing with a minority population that has ties on both sides of their border, and a religious, political, and cultural ideology that is quite at odds with the pervasive

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9 Surat Horachaikul, Professor of International Relations at Chulalongkorn University of Bangkok. Quoted by Adnkronos International Contributing writer in 'Thailand: Refugees Put Malaysia in Tight Spot,' Adnkronosinternational, 5 September 2005. {http://www.adnki.com/index_2Level.php?cat=Politics&loid=8.0.204525360&par=0}

10 At a February 21st lecture on the University of Hawaii at Manoa campus, I posed the following question to Mr Ibrahim: 'What do you consider to be the trajectory of Malaysia–Thailand relations in light of the southern Thailand insurgency and recent events such as the issue over 131 Thais who crossed the border to seek asylum in northern Malaysia?'

11 A. Asohan, 'No More 'Megaphone Diplomacy' Malaysia and Thailand Agree,' Asia News Network, 23 November 2005.

ideologies that rule the national center. Ibrahim, since his political exile began, has been angling towards a role in Malaysian politics that bridges this gap between Kuala Lumpur and the northern provinces.[12] He accurately recognizes that the problems of northern Malaysia, and the cross-border tensions there can only destabilize Malaysia's rapid economic growth.

The most logical and effective way to balance the internal and external forces, which tear at the UMNO party is through economic development. But, the politicization of the southern Thailand insurgency into a trans-national issue may be having the effect of destabilizing joint Malay-Thai development projects. Certainly this has had the effect of straining relations at the state level, and since development projects are led by state entities, it follows that there is considerable risk to economic development initiatives in the region.

5 Approaches to the border dilemma

Malaysian central decision makers have employed four primary approaches towards solving problems presented to them by the southern Thailand insurgency: economic development cooperation with Thailand, internationalization, the 'federalization of Islam,' and broad-based regional cooperation.

5.1 Economic development cooperation

The first and foremost approach to stabilizing the Malaysia–Thailand border sub-region has been economic cooperation between federal and regional governments in an effort to stimulate economic growth and development. One example is the *Indo–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT–GT)*. This is a trilateral initiative aimed at developing the sub-region. As Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website puts it:

> The Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT–GT) was established in 1993 with the aim of promoting a growth area under a new trilateral scheme of sub-regional economic cooperation. Its focus is on investment, technology transfer, production cooperation and use of natural resources in southern Thailand, northern Malaysia, and most of Sumatra Island. It also seeks to promote development of infrastructure and transportation linkages in the triangle area.[13]

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12 In 1998, Ibrahim was fired from his post as Finance Minister in the Malaysian government amid allegations of corruption and sodomy. The sodomy charges were subsequently overturned by a Malaysian court, but the corruption charge stuck, and Ibrahim served six years in prison before being released. As part of his corruption conviction, Ibrahim is banned from Malaysian politics until April 2008.

13 'Indonesia – Malaysia – Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT – GT),' May, 2005 Economic Relations and Cooperation Division, Department of International Economic Affairs, {http://www.mfa.go.th/web/1706.php}.

Many critics would argue that the current situation in the region reveals such initiatives as failed and irrelevant. But to be sure, Malaysia has cooperated with Thailand on attempts to diversify and grow the economies in the region. The most profitable of these attempts, however, relates with the tapping of off-shore natural gas reserves – although the three provinces of southern Thailand have been mostly left out of the prospect of profiting from these.

5.2 Internationalization

The Thaksin Shinawatra regime in Thailand had made it clear that they would like for the southern Thailand insurgency – with its spill-over into northern Malaysia – to be nothing more than a bilateral issue. But there are two opposing forces on the Malaysian side that would like to see the issue 'internationalized' – though in opposite ways. First, there is the ruling UMNO regime: their appeal is to the international community represented by the U.N. By following the letter of international law and shifting international attention to focus on this issue the ruling Malays hope to prevent the border region insurgency from becoming a divisive internal issue which can be exploited by PAS. Such an exploitation would likely take the form of an Islamic criticism of the UMNO government that would highlight their unsympathetic attitude towards fellow Muslims.

An example of UMNO's internationalizing strategy is the appeal that was made for the UNHCR to help deal with the 131 ethnic Malays who fled across the border from their southern Thai village. Although calling in the U.N. politicizes the issue, it also in some ways protects the UMNO from having to take their own stand on the issue – a tactic that might inflame factions within Malaysia.

The other group that stood to benefit from internationalizing the problem were the oppressed minority groups themselves. If the southern Thai insurgency is also viewed with sympathy as a humanitarian crisis in the Muslim world, separatist groups stand to benefit by means of aid resources, international support, and perhaps even foreign fighters for their cause.

At the time Thai officials accused Malaysia of 'internationalizing' an issue that should they claimed should have been solved by the neighboring countries who were directly involved.[14] Malaysia, like it neighbor to the south, Singapore is a country, which is very dependant upon foreign investment, exports, and trade. Though much has been done to build solid foundations for Malaysian economic security, there is no way to avoid Malaysia's need to

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14 As the crisis of the 131 Thai-Muslim refugees expanded, Thai ministers made several statements to this effect in the popular press. Officially, the government outlined its position via a Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release issued on 7 September 2005 by Mr Sihasak Phuangketkeow, Director-General of the Department of Information and Spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Available at: {http://www.mfa.go.th/web/162.php?id=13974}.

maintain strong trade relations with various partners. Ideology, even religion, has always been a key element – a kind of meta-ethos, – which can set an either positive or negative environment for trade. And it is with this knowledge that Malaysia has staked its claim to moderate Islam. Moderate Islam is a middle ground which has the benefit of not threatening Western trading partners while also appealing to Muslim countries who of course recognize common values. When Mahathir claimed that he wanted to create an outward-looking society in Malaysia, he was not envisioning the way that PAS looks out towards in (some cases) radicalized Islamic groups throughout Southeast Asia and the world.

5.3 'Federalization of Islam'

One approach that the UMNO has used to anesthetize more radical Islamic groups has been called the 'Federalization of Islam'.[15] What this refers to is the state's attempt to inculcate its moderate Islamic values throughout the nation. Means to this end include the use of state education, the prime ministership's bully-pulpit, state-sponsored building projects, and even Malaysia's *Internal Security Act*.[16] But since the Malaysian nation-state does not only contain different degrees of Islamic piety – there is the Chinese minority and others to contend with – merely overwhelming extremist Muslim groups with moderate Islam is not always effective. Malaysia's diversity mandates an ethos of tolerance and pluralism from the state. This means that only Islamic terrorist groups can be forcibly suppressed. Extremist, but non-violent groups must be dealt with using a softer touch, and this has allowed parties such as PAS to remain forceful opponents to UMNO power.

Under the Mahathir administration, 'counter-terrorism' rhetoric and action was an effective way of marginalizing PAS, but there are signs that this method may be starting to back-fire as Mahathir had feared.[17] Under Badawi, the external international political landscape – especially the 'global war on terror' – has created a more palpable polarization in Malaysia society between moderate and radical Muslims. Southern Thailand's insurgency has a distinct potential for exacerbating this polarization by pushing the moderate UMNO coalition to take a principled stand on the issue.

To deal with the Islamicist threat, Abdullah Badawi – Mahathir's hand-selected successor – has continued in a tradition of moderate Islamic

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15 K.S. Nathan, 'Malaysia: Reinventing the Nation,' in Alagappa, (ed.), *Asian Security Practice*, p. 523.

16 Ibid.

17 Reyko Huang, 'Al Qaeda in Southeast Asia: Evidence and Response,' Center for Defense Information 8 February 2002, p. 4.

leadership consistent with the concept of Islam Hadhari, or 'civilizational Islam.' As Badawi explained in a 2005 speech:

> We view Islam Hadhari as the way to good governance, that is to say the way in which the government hopes to administer to the wellbeing of the country and the welfare of its multi-religious and multi-racial population. the teachings of Islam are undoubtedly the foundation and inspiration for our actions but the benefits are intended for equitable sharing by all Malaysians, Muslims as well as non-Muslims alike.[18]

But by dichotomizing Malaysians into the categories of Muslim and non-Muslim, such a seemingly liberal philosophy can also be seen to advance a single, somewhat hegemonic interpretation of Islam within the nation-state's current borders. It reinforces the cultural, religion, and political legitimacy of the state apparatus in Kuala Lumpur, and in turn necessarily negates potential peripheral religio-political centers such as Pattani. In relation to this struggle, Badawi portrays particular strength because of his widely recognized 'Islamic credentials'.[19] As Syed Ahmad Hussein puts it: '... Abdullah is as competent in citing Quranic verses in its original Arabic as any PAS ulama'.[20]

5.4 Regional cooperation

Perhaps, Malaysia's most notable approach to internal and external challenges has been its leadership role and active participation in regional and sub-regional cooperative organizations such as the ASEAN, and the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC). Malaysia has also been a key player in economic initiatives such as the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC), the IMT–GT.

In addition to the intended benefits of regional cooperation and economic development, Malaysia's involvement in such organizations, economic forums, and development projects has the effect of legitimizing state power. Such involvement also provides the opportunity to use a multi-national approach to attempt to solve regional problems. Involvement in the Organization of Islamic Conference is also an effective means of dealing with some of the internal/external issues related to Islam's role in Malaysian politics. Importantly, Malaysia can use the OIC as a means of promoting its own moderate version of Southeast Asian Islam. At the OIC, Thailand has observer status and has generally been effective in lobbying Malaysia and Indonesia not to stir up sentiment against Thai interests. They have generally cooperated by not allowing insurgence groups such as Pattani Liberation Organization

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18 The Honorable Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Prime Minister of Malaysia. 'Islam Hadhari and Good Governance.' Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, 31 March 2005. http://www.pmo. gov.my/WebNotesApp/PMMain.nsf/0/d33361f0890dd06548256fe700190019?OpenDocument

19 See footnote 7.

20 Ibid.

(PULO). This group, for one, has lobbied aggressive for support from sympathetic Muslims abroad to have a forum through their meetings. (Surin, 1982)

If Malaysia's relations with Thailand deteriorate any further, there is a possibility that Thailand's special status on the OIC could be in jeopardy. Thailand's observer status on the OIC can perhaps be seen as a modern continuation of a tradition whereby Thai kings and the Malay regional Sultans have negotiated accommodations of each other's regional interests, irrespective of religious differences. If Thailand loses its position at the OIC, and/or cooperative regional organizations such as ASEAN loose there effectiveness, there is risk of a further polarization of the Muslim/non-Muslim divide in Southeast Asia.

6 Conclusions and potential outcomes

The ruling moderate Malay–Muslim leadership of UMNO is the primary referent for Malaysia's state security. As I have outlined in this paper, the UMNO leadership operates on the basis of several core values that inform their actions in the realm of security. These core values are regime security, economic growth and stability through what Mahathir has termed 'an outward-looking Malaysian society,' Islam, and multi-racial peace and stability.

This paper has used Muthiah Alagappa's framework for security culture analysis to broadly outline the array of threats faced by the ruling regime in Malaysia, and the ways that these threats are approached and dealt with. In order to give a complete picture of the full political landscape faced by central decision makers in Malaysia, I have described all of the major perceived threats, but in the context of the northern border region, I have focused specifically on the destabilizing threat that comes primarily from PAS, the Islamist party which has a strong base in Kelantan and Terengganu.

The inflammation of tensions between Malaysia and Thailand over border issues such as the refugee crisis which occurred in the fall of 2005 presents a very sensitive internal/external political dilemma for Malaysian central decision makers. Their Islamic constituents represent a wide spectrum of religious thought, much of which is sympathetic to the cause of Thai Muslims who reside just across Malaysia's northern border. PAS and their constituents may thus see events such as the refugee crisis as an opportunity to destabilize UMNO elites by forcing them to take a stand on the issue that might be unpopular. The external component to this dilemma is that Malaysia's central decision makers are bound by the ASEAN's principle of non-interference – an ideal approved by ASEAN member-state elites, which essentially serves the purpose of maintaining the kind of regional stability which will encourage the

continuation of FDI and lucrative trade relationships with countries from outside of the region.

Despite bumps in the road, Malaysian central decision makers have, on the whole, shown remarkable skill in navigating the unique challenges presented to them by the border region and the southern Thailand insurgency. They have employed strategies of: economic development, internationalization of sensitive issues, regional cooperation, and the federalization of Islam. It is right to give former Prime Minister Mahathir, rather than current Prime Minister Badawi, credit for most of these strategies – many of which were used under the former administration. Presently, Prime Minister Badawi serves an effective role by virtue of his strong Muslim credentials. At times of crisis though, it is still unclear whether or not Prime Minister Badawi has the diplomatic skills necessary to balance the tempers that flare on both sides of the border. In the 2005 refugee crisis, it was former Prime Minister Mahathir who came out of retirement to help calm tensions. (by engaging in high-level talks with Thai government officials).

In this case it was largely due to Mahathir's help, and that of the UNHCR that the crisis did not spin completely out of control. Without the UNHCR's intervention, the case of the 131 Thai-Muslim refugees who fled to Malaysia would have run the risk of mushrooming into a bilateral crisis, which could have also triggered internal crisis in Malaysia. In future crises though, neither the UNHCR's cooperation, nor Mahathir's involvement can be guaranteed. In the recent refugee crisis, Thailand was vehemently opposed to U.N. involvement, and their diplomats may find a way to avert such action in the future. Further, Mahathir, who is 81-years-old and has had several recent health problems, certainly cannot be counted on for his future assistance.

This paper has attempted to show the complex array of factors that are faced by the ruling Malay Muslims of UMNO in negotiating issues related to the southern Thailand Muslim insurgency. I have shown how insecurity on the Thai side of the border has significant impact upon Malaysian security culture. The politics that go along with Malay-Muslim identity, like the 131 refugees, do not stop at the Malaysia–Thailand border and bilateral relations between Malaysia and Thailand will surely continue to be affected by tensions in the border region. In 2005, whether intentionally or unintentionally, Muslim groups in the area were able to trigger a breakdown in their host country's relations. ASEAN's prized principle of 'non-interference' was certainly violated by Thai and Malaysian officials, and there was significant losses of internal and external political capital, not to mention 'face,' by leaders in both countries. At any rate, the principal, as a sort of gentlemen's agreement among ASEAN countries surely cannot withstand the pressure being exerted upon it by the border region's problems. If similar breakdowns

are to be avoided in the future, leaders on both sides must take care to react soberly, and perhaps systematically, in the event of another provocation.

More research is necessary to determine appropriate steps that can be taken by both sides to avert future crises. Additional research might survey the contemporary security cultures of Thailand and of the border region itself, thus identifying specific core values and threat perceptions that motivate each referent.

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