Ear to Asia podcast

Title: As ethnic tensions rise, is there any real prospect of an inclusive Malaysia?

Description: Malaysian society stands at a crossroads as ethnic tensions simmer, fueled by fiery rhetoric and a rise in Malay nationalism. Recent elections exposed a divided democracy, with populists pushing an agenda that strains the nation's multicultural fabric. Despite the absence of actual violence, social media is amplifying hate speech that paints minorities as threats, thus widening the rift between the Malay majority and other ethnic groups. What's behind this ethno-nationalist trend in Malaysian politics, and why now? What can be done to rein in the hurtful speech and set Malaysian society and politics on a course for genuine national unity? Malaysia watchers Dina Zaman and Dr Nicholas Chan examine the complex fabric of race relations in Malaysia with host Sami Shah. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

**Voiceover:** The *Ear to Asia* podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

**Sami Shah:** Hello, I'm Sami Shah. And this is *Ear to Asia*.

**Dina Zaman:** This green wave. I mean, I suppose it's a very attractive terms, but actually you are looking at the Malays saying we will platform Islam because this is a stronger identity, this is a stronger ideology than our culture or our race. But because we are Malays, it overlaps – in Malaysia, to be Malay means to be Muslim.

**Nicholas Chan:** The thing about social media is that it turns a lot of things that are meant to be private into some kind of public outrage. On the one hand, you have more political freedom, but on the other hand, you might have less cultural freedom because of the kind of mass policing that happens thanks to social media, which is something that's not unique to Malaysia.

**Sami Shah:** In this episode, as ethnic tensions rise, is there any real prospect of an inclusive Malaysia?
*Ear to Asia* is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.
Malaysia appears to be standing at a pivotal juncture as ethnic tensions flare and extreme political rhetoric becomes more commonplace. Recent federal and state

elections underscored divisions in its democracy amid an ascendant conservative majoritarian movement seeking to entrench Malay nationalism onto Malaysia's multicultural society. Malays, who make up well over half the population, are constitutionally privileged as Bumiputra or sons of the soil. Islam is the official religion, though sizeable Chinese and Indian minorities practice other faiths. This governance framework, entrenching Malay supremacy, has long posed a challenge for national unity, and lately such divides seem only deeper as toxic identity politics take greater hold. Hate speech and racist sentiments turbocharged by social media have moved into the mainstream. Influencers and preachers spread the notion that Islam itself is under siege in Malaysia to mobilize Malay youth support, while opposition figures are cast as enemies of the faith, tensions exist within the Malay Muslim majority too, between progressives and conservatives. But right wing voices currently predominate. So what's behind this ethno nationalist shift in Malaysian politics, and why now? How do we separate out the Islamist rhetoric from the more ethnic interests at play? And what would that tell us about what's really at stake, and what can be done to rein in the hurtful speech and set Malaysian society and politics on a course for genuine national unity? To discuss, we're joined by writer and social commentator Dina Zaman of Iman Research, a Malaysia based think tank, and political scientist. Dr Nicholas Chan of Australia National University. Welcome back to *Ear to Asia*, Dina, and welcome for the first time, Nicholas.

**Nicholas Chan:** Happy to be here.

**Dina Zaman:** Hello.

**Sami Shah:** Hello, Nicholas. I'll start with you. Malaysia's 2022 federal elections and 2023 state elections have been called a turning point in the Malaysian political landscape. How so?

**Nicholas Chan:** Um, I would kind of preface that by saying that there's many ways to read about turning points. I think some people would call the 2018 elections as the turning point, because that's the first time Malaysia has a political transition. That was the first time the ruling party at the federal level loses the elections. So the ruling party is the Barisan National. They call it the National Alliance. It's called BN as an acronym, and it is led by this party, United Malays National Organisation, which is a Malay based party. It's called UMNO. So some people call the 22 and 23 elections

as the turning point, because in Barisan National, there were a lot of parties and the non-Malay parties were losing their basically electoral prowess since 2008. So they were kind of on a downward trajectory. And it was UMNO, the Malay party that's holding the coalition together. But in 2022 and 2023, you saw that it was kind of hit quite badly. Some people might even call it the beginning of the end of UMNO. So for some people, this party that has ruled Malaysia for 60 years, uh, since its independence, so that's the turning point. It's like for UMNO, that's turning point – "Do we come back from this?"
On the social front, what the 2022 elections would signify is that it's the first time that the legit voting age from Malaysia is lowered to 18. So you see a lot of young votes coming in. Um, and they are not voting for the establishment party. A lot of those votes, especially for the Malay votes, went to, um, the current opposition party, basically the Malay – Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS, if not Bersatu, which is another splinter party from UMNO. So that kind of gives people a little bit of a shock, um, whereby this is the voting tendency of young voters. But if 1st May put it on a global canvas, it's only in Western societies, let's say in the UK or the US, young voters tend to go for more liberal, if not progressive parties. If one look at the case of India, if one look at the case of Israel right now, young voters actually tend to vote for more conservative parties.

**Sami Shah:** Can you just tell us a little bit more about the ethnic Malay majoritarian sentiments? And are those the same as Islamic religious sentiments, or is there a difference there?

**Nicholas Chan:** The majoritarianism, to some extent is a way to kind of pull – "p-u-l-l", kind of drag. The kind of support to break a national is like this is a more Malay majority, more Malay Muslim dominated coalition. So these votes. That have been eroded from UMNO has to go there. At the same time, it's also a pooling effort that that's what we wrote in an article, uh, me and Dr Hew Wai Weng whereby these votes that go away had to be concentrated somewhere. And it did not go to, let's say, Mahathir's party in the 2022 elections. So they all kind of got pooled together – "p-o-o-l" – in PAS and Bersatu, which are the two major parties of national. And that's why the majoritarianism by itself becomes a salient point because the collusion, although there's a kind of sort of very minor Gerakan presence, they're sort of being the non-Malay presence, but it's more about saying that we are this party, saying these things, that we are the majority and we we need to have a say in how this

country is run and what is the kind of cultural identity of this country. And I think to some extent that is both old and new. Uh, what is old is that it comes from the kind of leadership UMNO enjoyed within BN that this is the head honcho of the party, but at the same time, it's a rather more consociational alliance because you do have substantive non-malay presence. But now if you look at Perikatan Nasional, it's really very much Malay-Muslim dominated, if not some kind of super hegemony. So that's the kind of branding that comes through in the new kind of Malay majoritarian politics, I guess.

**Sami Shah:** I think we need to take an even bigger step backwards then, for people who are not familiar with the ethnic and religious makeup of modern Malaysia, because there's a lot of communities and ethnic groups and religious groups that, for the outsider would be new names, new terms, and including, um, new percentages. So, all right, let's break this down to a simpler version first. Dina, can you give us a nutshell version of the ethnic and religious makeup of modern day Malaysia? What are the dividing lines in Malaysian society? Just, uh, summarize all of Malaysia for me and do it as quickly and cleanly as possible.

**Dina Zaman:** All right. According to Wikipedia, 50% of the population is actually the bumiputras, the princes and princesses of the land, which are made up of the indigenous people of the Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak and of course, the Malays. And of course, that's very contentious. You know, a lot of people have arguments about that. But for the discussion today, these are the Malays – bumiputras, right. Second, then we have the Chinese ethnic community who make up about 30%, then the Indians and then the others, the Eurasians and so forth. And we've got a quite a growing migrant and refugee communities here. When you look at it, because the bumiputras, they tend to be Muslim. And this is where things get a bit really interesting. We have Chinese Muslims, we have Indian Muslims, right? But they are considered Chinese, they're considered Indians, they're not considered Bumiputra because they're not Malays. So when you look at our constitution, the Constitution says that if you are Malay, you're immediately, you know, Muslim. It's like Hotel California – you can't leave. But if you allow me, Sami, to add on to Nicholas's comments now, why is this happening? Okay, I think that from the discussions we've been having for the past one year, and at least with my work talking to Malaysians Malays over the last five six years is that Malay leadership is

totally rudderless. And I think during Covid it proved that Malay leadership was severely wanting.

**Sami Shah:** Just to interrupt you there. Sorry. When you say Malay leadership. And again, this is just for clarification sake, are you saying Malaysian federal national leadership or are you saying of that 50% majoritarian Malay community?

**Dina Zaman:** I would say both, because at the end of the day, when you talk about our governments, they're predominantly Malay and the Malays are going, woo hoo hoo. You know, after Najib Barisan National fell in 2018, and then we had Dr Mahathir coming back, it was nothing, but just like, you know, a court drama, it was very feudal and a lot of us were looking at it during COVID, right? And thinking, okay, what else is going to happen? We had so many political dramas that it actually unnerved a lot of us Malaysians, whether we are Malays or not. Why is PAS so attractive now? You look at UMNO for all its flaws, its faults and all that. UMNO is actually very good at creating leaders. They had UMNO youth. Wanita UMNO, right. So they actually have this leadership program to, okay, we'll start you from small and then you become this. Now the Islamist parties pass or other Islamist groups also believe in that. And they have leadership programs for the young. They talk about humanitarianism. I have to say that one book you really should read, even though it's an old book, it's Chandra Muzaffar's book called *Protector*. It tells you how Malay politics is about and why it's not going to be easy for us to move away from race based, or rather Malay based politics because you're looking at a lot of components here. One: the monarchy. You like them, you don't like them. The royals are still very powerful. They are the moderating factor when you talk about, uh, religious politics in Malaysia. Then, of course, you know, the majority of the Malays now, demographically, we are also quite productive. So, you know, there's a lot more of us and that shouldn't be a reason. But it is here.

**Sami Shah:** Absolutely. And that is the thing that I wanted to come to Nick about as well, Nick, with some of the things that Dina has just mentioned. (a) are you in agreement? But also, how do you think this, um, Malay and Muslim presence in the Constitution plays out in the public life?

**Nicholas Chan:** Yeah, I think one thing I mean, sorry, Dina, I kind of have to correct you. I think now, if I'm not wrong, if one breaks it down by so-called racial groups,

then you have 70% bumiputras. Not all of them Malays, not all of them Muslims. It's very difficult to get the actual numbers of Malays from the Bumiputra category, because the state doesn't quite release that kind of data, and you get the Chinese about 22% and Indians about 6%. So coming back to that point, is that what Dina mentioned, the kind of breaking down of Malay leadership, at least within UMNO, which Dina has kindly and rather succinctly introduced, is that it happened at the same time where you have this kind of demographic ascendancy whereby you get to about 60%, if not 70% majority, but at the same time, you have a lot of political fragmentation. So that in terms of the loyalties of of the Malay votes, it's a bit rudderless. It's like it breaks off into at least 2 to 3 parties. I think there's a lot of kind of sociological factors as to why these things happens, but you can see why there's sort of this anxiety that happens as well. When you get the numbers, but at the same time, you're losing that kind of dominance in politics, one may say.

**Sami Shah:** If I may interrupt that, what does that anxiety look like? You know, you've described a Malay supremacy. You've described, you know, parties that on the surface seem to be dominating federal politics in Malaysia. However, at the same time, I like you've said, they have inter-party problems and fragmentation, etc., but for the average Malaysian and that's whether they may be Malay or any other ethnic minority. How does this play out in terms of human rights? How does this play out in terms of getting jobs or upward mobility, etc.?

**Nicholas Chan:** I think one has to kind of think about dominance in relatively sophisticated terms. On the one hand, some people would say that because ruling party UMNO is losing power, at least now it's sort of the minority party within the government. That's where some people would take it as the Malay community losing power. And then second thing is voting patterns. A lot of the Malay votes went to Perikatan Nasional, and that coalition is not within the government. So some people would take that as losing power. But on the other hand, as one sees it, the government establishments, in terms of the civil service, most of them are Malay-dominated. So some people might say that you're not actually losing power on that end. So a lot of these things, as you see, it's very perception based. And of course recently there's I mean, and this is sort of a global phenomenon in terms of youth unemployment, underemployment, and because you're the majority and these things hit you quite significantly because your numbers are higher, right? You kind of feel it. And of course, being the majority, you kind of felt that there's a stronger

ownership of this country. So you're kind of entitled to more protection. So when those things does not translate to someone on an objective sense, like if you're losing money, you're not earning enough, you're you feel like you're marginalized in terms of the party you voted. It's not getting into government. And on the other hand, it's a subjective thing as well. And you see that in global politics, there's a lot of talk about how the liberals have seized government, how there's a lot of outside influence. In the Malaysian case, it becomes a little bit more complicated with kind of the influx of both American, if not Chinese interests into Malaysia and then these things boil into perceptions. It's like we are losing ownership of the country.

**Sami Shah:** That's a really good point for me to kind of bring in this question. And, um, it's for Dina particularly, you've been observing political and social sentiment across Malaysian public over several years now. What are you seeing in recent years? You know, we talk about this changing point that's happening, what's been happening in recent years that wasn't present, let's say ten years ago in Malaysia.

**Dina Zaman:** I'm going to be referring again, back to the study, because, you know, we're talking about the data we're gathering, right? I think one thing the pandemic did, Covid did for all of us. Many of us started questioning governance and leadership in Malaysia and the fact that it's impacted our livelihoods. Things are getting more and more expensive that this is actually influenced and propelled many Malays to fall for rather extreme ideologies or, you know, right wing, uh, narratives because they feel like, look, I don't have a job, I don't have this, I don't have that. What I am seeing now and some people have disagreed with me. And this came from ultras, ultra nationalists who feel that the Malays need to be taught civilisational Malayness. You know, I'm just using that tum loosely. Right? Uh, they feel that the reason why we are absolutely lost, bereft of leadership is because we've lost our civilization.

**Sami Shah:** You know, we've recently been talking about the loaded term that is civilization, particularly with regards to China and its Global civilization initiative in the previous episode. When you say “Malay civilization” for example, what are they harkening back to here? Is it something 15 years ago? Is it something a thousand years ago?

**Dina Zaman:** Okay. When I talk to these people, they feel that the Islamization in Malaysia was actually very foreign to Malay Islam, Nusantara Islam. Yeah. So they say, why are we aping the Arabs? No wonder we don't know our language. No wonder we are like this. We are not proud of who we are, our national costumes, our language. You know, the Wahhabi stroke, Salafis, they are the ones who are bringing us down. One of the things which I see the growing class gap among the Malays, and this is also for the Chinese and Indians. Right. I see this because when I talk to my non-malay friends and they're like, oh, you know, those are the poor working class so-and-so's who we don't deal with them. I've been writing about the Malays for past one year for Jakarta Post and The Star, just based on our work. And I get a lot of angry emails or even WhatsApp from friends saying, “why are you covering these Malays? They have absolutely no presence in our lives.”
And I just said that, well, you know, “It's nice that you live in a nice house, you've got a nice car, you have left poverty or wherever you want to call it, you've entered the T20, T1, but what about the rest of Malaysia?”
So for me, this is the reason why when we talk to kids, we've been talking to skinheads, punks, you name it. Yes. One gangster who supplies meth. And he just said, “Look, what's a kid like me going to go? You are not going to help me. The government's not going to help me. I will make my own way, whether it's criminal or not.“
And yes, they start believing in all these narratives in Freemasons, you name it, UFOs, and all because they said there is nothing else left to believe. And while they may not agree with politicians, while they may not agree with the current politics, what they do agree with is the fact that we Malays have to band together. If not, we're going to collapse.

**Nicholas Chan:** Sami, I mean, you made a very good point asking about what's the difference from ten years ago? And I guess one is that Malaysia kind of goes into this sort of paradox where on the one hand, there's more political freedom. Malaysians are now maybe generally do enjoy more political freedoms than some of its immediate neighbours due to the looser political environment. But at the same time, there's this paradox of I think this is also because of the advent of social media and all that. And this goes back to the whole question of Islamization as well. There's also kind of growing conservatism in society. So that means that on the one hand, you have more political freedom, but on the other hand, you might have less cultural freedom because of the kind of mass policing that happens thanks to social media,

which is something that's not unique to Malaysia. And I guess another thing I want to add on Dina's point about the civilizational stuff in inverted commas. Like Dina said, this is a country with a growing class gap, which only happens because of a growing sort of middle class group, which on the one hand feels a lot of frustrations that they aren't able to kind of go further than that. And on the other hand, they see themselves as different from the so-called lower classes. And with a growing middle class, what you get is also some kind of a intellectual, if not a pseudo intellectual reading culture. And that's where people start to question, like, what's my civilization? Where do I come from? Whereby this kind of identity question gets hooked into something larger? And I think identity is important to all classes. People care about that. But for people to have that kind of space, resources and leisure time, to actually care so much about this thing, about civilizational survival, however you want to put it, is actually a product of some kind of social growth, some kind of social change. But at the same time, there's a lot of frustration because people see those changes as not happening fast enough to catch up with their own aspirations, if not with the changing economic social environment.

**Sami Shah:** So one of the things that you've both hinted about and spoken about, I'll ask in more direct terms then, is things like racism is things like hate speech and how much that seems to have entered the Malaysian social fabric in recent years. And I don't know whether that is something that is an outside observation and it is inaccurate to the reality. Or is that true? Has Malaysia, in the last few years seen a rise in extremism and hate speech and polarization that was not there before? Nicholas?

**Nicholas Chan:** Yeah, I think when one thinks about hate speech, it's sometimes it's up to your level of tolerance, if not your definition. It can go from casual racism to actually explicit calls for war or whatever. I think it's not wrong to say that one observes some kind of uptick, but that's also due to the result of having social media, because you just get exposed to these things more and you actually get more spaces to say these things, because unless you are a really bad person, you don't tend to kind of spew racism everywhere you go. But then the online space allows you to do these things, and it allows certain kinds of activism to do these things all the time. I think in terms of polarization, in a way. It's also because Malaysia is very much exposed to global currents of social and political change. And you see that in a lot of countries where these things are fought in the name of the culture wars, and

there's sort of the conservative stance about things. And then there's sort of the more liberal stance about things, and then people plug themselves into these kind of conversations, because in the online discourse, there's often this very binary way in terms of people kind of portray themselves, “If you're not with us, you are against us. “

And then those stakes are being made as if it's very high. Like, I find it very difficult to just say that people are just being more racist. I think you do have to look at the environment like, how do people choose to live their lives both on and offline? And these things are interconnected. And I see that in terms of the larger trends, it's not on a healthy trajectory, if I may put it that way.

**Sami Shah:** Dina, do you agree that some of these complexities around, um, racism, extremism, hate speech are maybe exaggerated? Uh, or are they, you know, local versions of this in Malaysia that are particular to Malaysia that we don't understand?

**Dina Zaman:** No, I don't think it's exaggerated at all. You know, I think that racism, the way we talk about each other to each other, has become so ingrained in our psyche that sometimes you don't think it's racist. I mean, let me use this word “Keling”. So it's a very derogatory terms when you describe Indians in Malaysia. Right? So I remember telling a friend, I said, “I don't think you should use that word. Just say the orang India, He's an Indian person, right?”

And they said, “But look, I live right up in Perlis, right up north. Everyone calls each other, you Melayu, you Keling. You know, uh, we do this out of jest, but we love each other.”

But do we really love each other? I think such slurs actually can be very, very harmful to each other. I don't think Nick and I are saying this because we're researchers, we've been working on this for so long. I'll give you an example. Right. My mom. My mom is a miss WhatsApp queen. Okay. And she'll come and say, “You know, lAunty so-and-so said this. Uncle so-and-so said this. What do I do? It really hurts my feelings. I'm not this.”

For an older generation who doesn't understand what race relations is, you know, this is something very new, something which they don't know how to handle. For the younger ones, it's like, especially when I look at TikTok now. Woo – Tiktok is a different thing altogether. The comments. Yeah. And what I'm getting. But of course this is not substantiated by proper data. It's just looking at the comments, right? The fact that they feel very emboldened to say really nasty stuff, it's because they feel,

“Okay, I may be working class, I've got a lot of problems that everyone but I'm Malay and Muslim, and you are the outsider; I can say whatever I want.”

**Sami Shah:** Has the Malaysian government regulated any of this, any of the social media, any of the hate speech, any of the extremist commentary?

**Dina Zaman:** I don't think they're able to. Looking at TikTok, for example. I mean, the other day I was looking at one influencer's TikTok, oh, my poor head. But I was thinking, if you are going to regulate this, you're going to moderate this, right? Every second, every half a second, there's a comment, right? You're going to go mad. That's no way. So yes, there's one thing about freedom of speech, okay, everything can't be too clean. But at the same time, if you allow this conversation to go on where people don't really care about how you feel, it will implode. But how are we going to regulate this? It's not going to be easy. And I think a lot of the regulators, the moderators are also asking, what if I stamp out that comment? But it does offend me because I'm Muslim, I'm Malay, but at the same time I must stamp it out because it's work. It's not an excuse. Yes, it's a tightrope. I know Nick and Dr Hew Wai Weng have been studying this. How does one do this? How does one counter this? There's so much talk about, oh, we have to do counter narratives. How many counter narratives do we have to do? You know, Sami, I think it needs a little bit more than just that.

**Sami Shah:** Nick, any solutions for all of social media?

**Nicholas Chan:** Um, can I not go to the solutions first? And pile in onto what Dina talk about – the K word and the problems of it. And I think this goes back to my point about the explosion of social media being another lived reality of people, because let's say the talk about using those kind of slurs, I think there's different implications of it if it's sort of a private speech. But the thing about social media is that it turns a lot of things that are meant to be private into some kind of public outrage, and then it becomes a little bit more complicated because of the interconnectedness of the social media space, because let's say you've talked to someone said you shouldn't use this word because it's not nice. We should move to a more kind of egalitarian and more decent society. I think that's a healthy thing. But what if that kind of conversation is kind of twisted into some kind of culture war conversation? It's like now Malaysia is getting more westernized, like we have to follow this kind of political

correctness of the woke people, and that's why they are telling you that you cannot use this word. It's not because they want you to be decent people because they want to police you. Solution part. Um, I think sometimes people tend to see these things, often just through the lens of freedom of speech. I think that's very simplifying it. I think my general position is unless people say things that are genuinely dangerous, like calling for war, or if not, something that's paedophilic, I think people should not go to jail for what they say.

**Nicholas Chan:** But then if we just think about that on binary terms, that really limits our options. I think there's also the question of the right to audience and the right to platform. So the right to audience is basically the question of who gets to listen to what you have to say. And the right to platform is where do you get to say it? Right. Um, I'll put it in a real life example so that it's easier to wrap this concept around your head is that let's say you have some kind of dangerous conspiracy theory, so maybe your family has to suffer you telling them that. So you kind of have their right to audience to them unless they tell you to stop. But let's say if you want to kind of go on a car with a megaphone and then just drive around your community just shouting out these ideas, do you have that kind of right to audience in real life? We would say that's absurd, right. Um, and do you have that right to platform? Do you get to have the megaphone to say those things? And if one translates these things onto social media, I think it really opens up options for you to take action, because the right to audience question goes up to some questions people ask these days. It's like, when is it right for the platform to amplify certain kind of comments because these things are fed to you. It's not like you go out and seek for them sometimes. Right? And then can you say it in a chat group with three people? Can you say it in a chat group with 50 people? Can you say it in a chat group with a hundred, a thousand people? So why do you.

**Nicholas Chan:** Have the right to say to that audience, why do you have the right to that audience? I think that's a question to be asked if you want to do something about it. Second thing is like the right to platform. And this gets into a lot of campus politics who gets invited and who cannot be invited to a university. I think these are legitimate questions. And then, um, like, in what form do you get to say it? Let's say if someone writes something rather dangerous in a book form, then at least you could say, like, okay, it's a full book form. It might come with a lot of nuance and sophistication, even if the idea I don't like it. But then if you say it in a 15 second

video whereby a lot of these things are dogwhistling and it's out of context and it's just some kind of call to action, do we allow that to pass? Do we privilege certain forms of communication over others? I think when you kind of go down to the basics of asking these questions, you actually have a lot of options. It's not that we are running out of options, it's just that we tend to go back to this like, is it freedom of speech or is it not? And I think we just kind of tie ourselves in the shoes based on these kind of binaries.

**Sami Shah:** You're listening to *Ear to Asia* from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures. It's called the *Melbourne Asia Review*. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. So you will find articles by some of our regular *Ear to Asia* guests and by many others. Plus you can catch recent episodes of *Ear to Asia* at the *Melbourne Asia Review* website, which again you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Sami Shah and I'm joined by political scientist doctor Nicholas Chan, and writer and social commentator Dina Zaman. We're talking about the growing rightward ethno-nationalist shift in Malaysian politics. Dina, we've been skirting a bit around one of the main issues that seems to be coming out of Malaysia right now, which is the rise of Islamist influence in politics as well as in urban areas, you know, particularly like Kuala Lumpur, etc.. How prevalent is this?

**Dina Zaman:** Okay, as I said earlier, much earlier on, it's not a new thing. Now, why has this become more and more prevalent in the country? I think it really, really kick started in the 90s, slightly before the Reformasi happened. I still remember before I left to do my masters, right? Suddenly all this Islamic groups, Muslim groups started popping up. One of them is a Muslim professional forum, etc. etc. and you're going, okay, you see the people, the Muslims that were sent on scholarships by the government were very impressed by what you call the Islam that they saw there. And we're not talking about the Islamic revolution in Iran. They went to the States, they went off to England and they said, “You know, we've really, really liked this. This is the kind of Islam that should be brought back to Malaysia and we should educate our young.”
And it was a lot more hip when you compare to our, you know, local ustaz ustaza, who seemed very rural in their approach. Right. And they're very Malay.

**Sami Shah:** By “uztaz” you mean the Islamic teachers.

**Dina Zaman:** The Islamic teachers who teach you the Islamic calligraphy, you know, tajwid, alibata and all. Okay, everyone, you know, I have friends now who are sending their kids online religious classes, how to read the Quran with a teacher who's in the States or in Saudi Arabia. So what happened was Reformasi happened? Anwar was sent to jail. That generation that fought for Anwar and for Reformasi were also the generation that was educated abroad. You know, they're brilliant. They are doing very, very well in life. Right. But they're also Islamists. And they started sending all the children to private Islamic schools. There was such a boom, Sami. I went off to do my master's. When I came back, my friends were pulling out the children all from government schools to whatever private Islamic school that they could afford. And you go, “Wow. This is really different.”
So that Islamic consciousness, that Muslim consciousness started coming in in the late 90s, after that, in the 2000s.

**Sami Shah:** Well, my question there then, is this what is being described that increased Islamic consciousness as the green wave? Is that what we talk about when we say the green wave?

**Dina Zaman:** All right, let me get back to you on the green wave. Right. So now you have to look at two things. The people with money send the kids to Islamic private schools. The Malay people with some money would send them to Islamic schools that are funded by the government Sekolah Agama. So religious schools, the schools are good. They teach leadership. There's a lot of things that they have there that government schools, you know, that you see now don't have. And that's one thing about Muslim education. They teach about leadership from young, they teach about humanitarian aid, etc. from young. Now that actually is a generation that you're seeing now who have voted for PAS or at least support Islamic political activities because they feel that it's not just about Malaysia becoming so secular. Look at corruption. Look at how the country is being run. People are not eating. People are finding it hard to live. So this green wave, I mean, I suppose it's a very attractive to term. Right? But actually you are looking at the Malays saying we will platform Islam because this is a stronger identity, this is a stronger ideology than our culture or our race. But because we are Malays, it overlaps.

In Malaysia. To be Malay means to be Muslim, and there's a lot of intersections with each other. And that green wave. You know, we've been discussing this with Dr Hew, with Nick, with friends, right? In some ways, yes, the Green Wave has arrived. But what you're also looking at is Malay majority politics. The Green Wave, I think, was a very visual phrase to capture what had happened. But this thing, what you see here, PAS's influence, Perikatan Nasional's influence. Right. It has been going for the last 15, 20 years. It's not just in Kelantan and Terengganu, in Kuala Lumpur now, during the state elections, I went to Sungai Buloh, right. So it was really interesting where I was at. The Perikatan Nasional, PAS, they were talking about "What we [would] do if you voted us."

Now where I was was a few, you know, a few minutes away from The Curve, Ikea and a few minutes away from the T20. And right smack in it was the low cost housing, and people were turning up in cars, in droves to support them, including working class non-Malays because they were fed up of UMNO, PKR and all. I mean we were just sitting there and just observing this.

**Sami Shah:** So by UMNO and PKR, you mean the major political parties. So, Nicholas, is that correct? Is the Green wave something that's a class-based movement, or is there an identity aspect to it for the Malay majority?

**Nicholas Chan:** Um, I want to kind of go back to what Dina said just now about the kind of Islamic revivalism that one sees from the 70s, if not 80s onwards. And I think one thing that came out of that kind of social transformation process, uh, one sees that in a lot of societies with substantial kind of so-called pious populations, is this tension between private beliefs and public expressions. People often think that in a secularized society, you're kind of free to hold private beliefs, as long as you don't publicly express that. And that's not humanly possible. Because we are humans, we express who we are. And that causes the whole question of urbanization – a bit more complicated, because then who gets to decide how the space looks like? And this when you kind of overlap it with kind of racial, if not inter-religious dimension to it, it becomes more contentious because people want to decide, like, let's say, "Can I have a bar in this precinct" for example?

These things become more contentious. And I suppose in a way, those kind of normalising certain kind of conservatism that helps the Green wave to take shape. Because when politicians use this kind of master discourse of Islam under threat, then you have a lot more receptive audience because these audience kind of see

their aspirations as living in a society where the ethical codes kind of hew closer to their own religious beliefs. Uh, when it comes to green waves, I think that's why Wai Weng and I, when we wrote that article, as of the Green Wave as being this right wing turn, as we call it, of Malay Muslim majoritarianism, we sort of differentiate it from socio cultural Islamisation, because I don't think one process necessarily leads to another. Like just because you have a more pious population, it doesn't mean that those support would necessarily go to PAS, for example.

**Sami Shah:** By pass you mean the Pan-Malaysian.

**Nicholas Chan:** Uh, Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, the largest and longest Islamist party in Malaysia. Because I think for a wave to happen, you have to have something going from somewhere to another place. It also came from the decline of UMNO as this major vessel for Malay politics. That means that the votes that got out of UMNO. But when people talk about the green wave, I think it is a political moment. This is where those votes go from one direction to another.

**Sami Shah:** But one of the things you've just mentioned was the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, which is PAS. And if my understanding is correct, in the previous years they've had a very inclusive approach to, you know, national politics. And now it sounds like it's more exclusivist it sounds like it's more only for the ethnic Malays and not for anybody else. Is that correct assessment.

**Nicholas Chan:** I think PAS has its sort of back and forth swinging, if I may put it that way, people can correct me. I don't think it has ever been an exclusively liberal party. I think it moderated. It stands when it joined the firstly, the Pakatan Rakyat coalition, whereby it had a substantive non-Malay partners. So then it had to moderate its messages and it did produce a moment like there were a lot of non-Malays who were hesitant to vote for PAS, actually voted for PAS in in at least 1 or 2 elections. But I think there has always been a lot of challenges for the party to maintain that stance. And that's why when when a key figure Tok Guru Nik Aziz, who's the champion of this more moderate version of PAS, when he passed away, the party basically reverted to its older, more exclusivist stance. And that's why it excised a lot of members from its party. And those more, some would say more inclusive party members would start another party called Amanah.

**Sami Shah:** But there is that element of... if you see something like the current rhetoric coming out of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, you see some of the stuff coming out of Malaysian social media. And we've discussed, you know, how you know, Tik Tok, etc. is obviously having a corrosive influence. And then you see some, you know, fairly obvious campaigns like the Buy Muslim First campaign that takes place in retail spaces. It does seem like all of these coming together to create what's being called a green wave might not be encouraging a very ethnically diverse society for Malaysia. Is that fair?

**Nicholas Chan:** Um, in terms of the Buy Muslim First campaign? Yes. And the more interesting things is that these campaigns are not started by PAS; PAS capitalized on them. So you can see that when one it comes to the green wave, there were a lot of this kind of support building that happens based on these ideas of rather exclusivist Muslim politics. And I think it is relatively dangerous now because Perikantan Nasional, using this kind of message, are still on an upward trajectory. I think the way some of the party members have behaved is that they are still trying to push this to the limits. It's like, okay, if we can push this to the limits, we might even get more support. But then we haven't got the chance to push this to the limit yet, so who knows where the limit is. But I think the social damage from these kind of campaigns, when they are done, even if it's not significant on the economical level at least, like you see Buy Muslim First campaign, I think to some extent it's waning, but the social damage has been done. The people that have been vilified the kind of walls that's being erected between communities, I don't think those things go away easily. It's very hard to walk these things back.

**Sami Shah:** Let's move now towards the minority groups and their political representation in Malaysia. Dina.

**Dina Zaman:** I think with what's been happening in the past one month politically that you see in the papers, right, like, you know, with the Najib case, Dr Mahathir. Right? I mean, I'm just putting this briefly here. It has unsettled a lot of my friends who are not Malay. And I think their reasons are valid. They say, look, we love this country. But it would seem that if certain people are let go and they don't face the music, it would seem that this country favors a certain race, a certain faith. But what about me – a law abiding Malaysian? So the voices are getting quieter and quieter. Like I've got friends who are saying we're going to sell our homes, our first homes,

and they're not like big, huge mansions to fund our children's, uh, studies. And we'll tell them not to come back. They don't have a voice here. We voted. Every time there's elections, we vote. And it seems that our voices are not being heard. They say that we're not stakeholders in the country at all. We're just here. We've got the passport. We've got the citizenship. Okay, since you say that, we have to toe the line, we toe the line. I have friends who are saying that, you know what? Once the kids have grown up, maybe we'll, you know, sell whatever we have and move to a quieter place out of Kuala Lumpur and just lead that life.

**Sami Shah:** So is that because they find no representation in the political space for themselves? Are there no parties that they can actually advocate for?

**Dina Zaman:** You have DAP, the Democratic Action Party which represents most of the Chinese, including MCA. Then you've got MIC, the Malaysian Indian party, but they feel and this is coming from my friends, "Okay. Who's saying, yeah, even with these parties, right. They don't even represent our fears. All they do is fight, fight, fight and nothing works."
So they said politics is just crap, "We'll just do what we can and lead a quiet life", which is really a shame.
Having said that, Sami, right. I will say this. I'm really glad that the literary scene in Malaysia is actually pushing. You've got writers like Preeta Samarasan who wrote, you know, *A Tale of the Dreamer's Son*, *Evening is a New Day.* And she's internationally renowned. There are so many who are pushing the boundaries internationally, and Malaysians are reading them and they're saying, like, when I gave a Preeta's book to my friends, they say, "That's my voice. What a pity she lives in France, but that is my voice."
In Malaysia, cultural groups are actually helping, you know, Ramli Ibrahim, there's a lot of, you know, groups, but still it's not enough.

**Sami Shah:** So let me then ask this question. I'll come to you, Dina. Then after this, Nicholas as well, what are your recommendations then? Looking forward, looking towards the future of Malaysia. How do you think social cohesion can be strengthened for Malaysians?

**Dina Zaman:** I think one, you could have put in money. When you put in money, it cannot be just one off project, you know, it's got to be long tum. If you really, really

care about Malaysia, it cannot be within the confines of Kuala Lumpur. You have to go to the ground. You have to go and talk to people. I mean, as I said, we talk to everyone and anyone. You know, we've had hairy adventures, but that's the only way you get to know what people want. And actually like when we talk to the skinheads and the kids, you know, punks there was one group that said, "Oh, we don't like non-Malays."

But after that one hour discussion with them, they're like, "Hey, we're willing to talk more about this. Do you mean the Chinese Indians also have the same problems as us?"

I said, "Yeah. You're living in your own bubble."

But it takes a lot of effort. Activism in Malaysia cannot just be in Kuala Lumpur. So that's one you got to pour in money. You got to invest in Malaysia that way too.

I don't have the answers, but I will tell you this, I have a lot of young friends. Right? And it's very interesting that these young friends, like the girls, you know, they all wear the hijab, right? They're like, "You got to go to this tarot card reader, okay? You got to wear this crystal."

So I have crystals everywhere now. And I said, "Why are you doing this? I thought you're, you know, pakai tudung, you're supposed to be religious. And they're saying, well, this kind of works for me, but we do this secretly. And you see this little pushbacks, you don't see it unless you're friends with them. You see more people questioning it, but they do it quietly. And I think social media and the internet helps. People are curious. I'm in this group. Right? Um, yes. That goes by credibility. I am in this group where it's about Malay healing. No joke, man – there are jinns everywhere, right? But when you look at the discussion, they are saying that what is happening now is not working for them. So they'd rather do this and talk to spirits, because this works for them. They don't like even what they feel is Islamic politics in Malaysia. So people are moved, but they're doing it in their own little bubbles. I don't have the answers for that, but we definitely need a lot of people backing this initiatives.

**Sami Shah:** Nicholas, what do you think? Do you think the future of Malaysia is strengthened – social cohesion in Malaysia could be brought about by, for example, policy by the youth or is it jinns? That's the answer.

**Nicholas Chan:** I guess it goes back to my question of looking at Malaysia as this juncture. Like I said, it's sort of a paradox. You have more political freedoms. We can

generally say quite awful things about politicians and get away with it. But at the same time, there are a lot of things people say and they would get into trouble for it. And there seems to be a lot of kind of self-censoring because of the way a more majoritarian view of society has gotten mainstream in social media and even in the media. And I think that kind of media literacy is something that Malaysian society needs to have. And even the media themselves need to know that – what are their responsibility in this? For me, it boils down to the first mile connectivity problem. So people often talked about public transport as the last mile connectivity problem. Like how do you you go from the public transport station back to your home. But then for me, the Malaysia thing is that if you wanted a more egalitarian, more socially plural society, you have to start somewhere so that people can find their ways from those spaces to the kind of more pluralistic, more tolerant view. And then those things are not there. Because a lot of what the liberals, they are still doing the the last mile connectivity problem and that what happens is that it goes back to what people say, that the preaching to the choir problem, because they talk about these things as if they themselves could convince people to shift. And of course, it's an uphill battle because the establishment that Malaysia has is that it tends to be majoritarian-friendly, whether it's out of personal belief or it's just a matter of being risk aversive.

**Nicholas Chan:** Because like the Anwar government, despite having two thirds majority, that doesn't really dare to go into any of those kind of basically contentious territories in terms of talking about race and religion, because it doesn't want to alienate the Malay ground, but that goes back to risk aversive behavior, as I said, partly is due to their own subscription to the ideology, and partly it's also based on the kind of misreading of the Malay ground. It's like “These people are inherently conservative, that we have to say these things so that they can believe in us.” And I don't think that's exactly true, because when you kind of get down to the more grounded view of things, actually things are more fluid and often things are more complicated. And that allows you room to talk about difficult things. But that gets to my last point, is that these kind of voices are not out there. These kind of perspectives are not out there because to some extent, the kind of knowledge industry is not producing them. It's been a long while since Malaysia has one very established anthropologist, for example, writing about these things. And on the activist side, I can sympathize with them because on the one hand, if you work on the more liberal progressive side, you don't have the protection in your strength of

numbers, so you tend to be targeted rather easily. And sometimes if you are a minority, you don't get protection even from the institutions, and that puts yourself at a lot of risk.

**Sami Shah:** As a final question, then, is there anything we haven't spoken about today or anything else you think is important for our listeners to know and understand? What would you like to leave them with? Nicholas?

**Nicholas Chan:** There's this very famous podcast in Malaysia. It was hosted by two former politicians. Uh, it's called *Keluar Sekejap*. And in one episode they had as their guest an economist from the world Bank, someone who's specializing in in Malaysia. And then he said that one observation he had about Malaysian society is that there's not a lot of public intellectuals. And I think a lot of the soul searching in terms of Malaysia is that you have to tackle these questions like, why aren't there public intellectuals? And I say this as a relatively young person, because I saw that some of my friends and they are both Malays and non-Malays, and they try to do this, but it's very difficult because they have to juggle jobs, they have career aspirations, they don't earn enough. They don't. Some of them, let's say if you work in a university, you don't want to go against that establishment because that kind of harm your job prospects. So it's very difficult when one wants to put all of these on young people, but then it then goes back to the question, where are the public intellectuals? Why don't people take risks? Is it because there's no risk takers? Or is it just people no longer believe in these more progressive visions of Malaysian society?

**Sami Shah:** Uh, Dina.

**Dina Zaman:** I think it's because the scene is dominated by old, ageing Malay male academic rock stars. I agree with Nick. There are just so many smart Malaysians, right? But there is a lot of space for young Malaysians, even older Malaysians, to articulate their thoughts. I think Nick and I and our friends are always telling our friends, look, stop talking to us and stop writing this out, start going on TV, etc., etc. But maybe, you know, it's not so easy to be very public when you are public, you basically put your your whole self and it's not easy to be vulnerable. I say this as a writer, so you go like, “Hh, maybe I shouldn't have written that.”

But I'm hoping that whatever we do right will actually inspire a lot of people. I don't know whether I inspire anyone, but the thing is, we need this. We need more people and it'll be great, right? If *Ear to Asia* could actually, like, start talking to young people.

**Sami Shah:** I don't know whether *Ear to Asia's* future lies in youth influencing, but it is a direction we need to consider. Thank you very much. Our guests have been writer and social commentator Dina Zaman of Iman Research, a Malaysia based think tank, and political scientist Dr Nicholas Chan of Australia National University. Thank you both for your time.

**Nicholas Chan:** Thank you Sami. Thanks, Dina.

**Dina Zaman:** Thank you so much.

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