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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Convergence or Divergence? An Exploratory Study on Urban Malays and Indigenous People in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching

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Abstract: Malaysia has been celebrated as a diverse nation since 1963. However, interethnic relations remain difficult as distrust appears to continue between the majority Malays and minority groups. This is the common narrative in Peninsular Malaysia. In East Malaysia, there is no clear ethnic majority population, which is also the case in Sarawak. Although the government has usually grouped together the Malays and indigenous people for nation-building purposes, it must be noted that the different backgrounds create a heterogeneous “majority” in Malaysia. This diversity may even explain the different views among the Malays in Kuala Lumpur and in Kuching, Sarawak regarding government policies. This study seeks to discover the perception of these two groups on issues including religion, ethnicity, law, politics, and education. Using elite interviews and a pilot survey, this study found that there seems to be a convergence relating to religious issues but divergence on other matters.

Keywords: Perception, interethnic, inclusivity, peace, co-existence, Malays

Since 2018, ethnic tension in Malaysia has been on the rise following the historic change in government from the Barisan Nasional coalition, which had ruled for more than six decades, to the Pakatan Harapan coalition. Examples can be seen in how issues such as the United Examination Certificate (UEC) and Jawi calligraphy have been politicized to the detriment of national unity in West Malaysia. In Sarawak, however, the UEC is recognized by the state government. Furthermore, in contrast to Peninsular Malaysia, there is no official religion in Sarawak, and in 2017, the Unit for Other Religions (UNIFOR) was established in the Chief Minister’s Department. In response to

Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob championing Bahasa Malaysia, Sarawak has maintained its position of having both Bahasa Malaysia and English as the official languages (Goh, 2021).

As the majority ethnic group in the country, the opinions and perceptions of the Malays and indigenous people are very important in government policymaking. Interestingly, although it is expected to see a divergence in opinion among the Malays, Chinese, and Indians, “Malaysia’s temperature check” (2020) indicated that there seems also to be a divergence of opinion between Malays and non-Malay indigenous peoples. For example, 84% of non-Malay indigenous peoples

agree that religious practice should be separated from politics, but only 59% of Malays agree.

Typically, Malays and the indigenous people are grouped together as “Bumiputera,” a political term that has been used since the 1950s and is linked to Malaysia’s ongoing identity politics (Mason & Omar, 2003). The Bumiputeras claim to be indigenous in Malaysia, and thus the constitution guarantees them a set of indisputable rights. Together with the Malays, other ethnic groups that make up the indigenous population in Malaysia include the Orang Asli, Melanau, Kadazan, Dayak, Iban, and Bidayuh, to name a few. The majority in Peninsular Malaysia are the Malays at 59.71% (Penang Monthly, 2015). But the plurality in Sarawak is the Ibans at 30.3%, and in Sabah, the Kadazan-Dusun at 24.5% (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015).

Rather than reflecting this difference, the Malays and indigenous people are often grouped together, as can be seen from the 2020 census when the Malays and other indigenous peoples are counted as one “ethnicity” at 69.4%. This generalization caught the ire of opposition politicians who wanted to see separate data for Malays and other indigenous ethnicities (Yeo, 2022). It is a mistake to assume the Malays are a homogeneous group. While the Malays are Muslims, the other ethnicities may profess other religions and speak their own ethnic languages.

Even looking at the recent 2021 Sarawak state election result in Malay majority urban areas, the perspectives of the Malay and indigenous community had translated into a large number of votes and seats won for the newly established Sarawak-based party, Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS). The election result showed very strong support for the status quo of Sarawak’s polity. Additionally, Sarawak seems to be more “on its own” from the election result—a possibly divergent trend towards more state autonomy, as was clearly shown in the election campaign manifestos of all Sarawak-based parties. The crushing defeat of the Pakatan Harapan parties in the state election further adds to the absence of alternative narratives about inclusive nation-building. These developments suggest that Sarawak is politically moving towards more exclusive political discourse, which may challenge the national integration initiative, as was understood before.

As the majority ethnic group in Malaysia, it is imperative to understand how the Malay and indigenous

people view matters on interethnic relations, as this will provide a new framework to understand the ongoing narrative of Malay superiority in a diverse country such as Malaysia. The objectives of this exploratory research are twofold: (a) to conduct a pilot study on the different views and perspectives of the Malay and indigenous people in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching on religion, ethnicity, politics, law, and education, and (b) to understand the trajectory of Sarawak politics vis-à-vis current federal politics.

Our pilot study discovered that there is a convergence between Malays and indigenous people in Greater Kuala Lumpur and Greater Kuching regarding religion. We argued that this is perhaps due to the cosmopolitan nature of both cities and their surrounding area. Religious issues, which have been appropriated as a discourse on civilization (Yilmaz et al., 2021), affected Malays on both sides of the South China Sea equally, and a migration of people has moved ideas across Malaysia. For example, as seen in our pilot study, we have Iban and Bidayuh respondents who are living in Kuala Lumpur. This initial finding is significant because it shows that urban Malays have a relatively monolithic view of religion, which may cause rising religious populism in the country where politicians utilize religion to gain electoral advantage. However, the differences of opinion on law, ethnicity, politics, and education stress the regional nature of these issues and may require further devolution by the government to address the different needs of the communities.

Literature Review

Ethnicity in Malaysia

When discussing ethnic identity in Malaysia, there is a need to review the usage of either “race” or “ethnic.” Being the product of European colonization, “race” brings a negative connotation as a pseudo-science based upon biology. On the other hand, ethnicity is more neutral and refers to a community of people with shared cultural practices. In his study on ethnic classification in censuses from the time of colonial Malaya to 1980, Hirschman (1987) discovered that the word “race” was first used in 1891, 20 years after the first census, to replace the previously used term “nationality” to classify people. By 1911, the term “race” had been used almost exclusively. Interestingly,

the Malay word for race, *bangsa*, could connote both race and nationality.

The study of ethnic relations in Malaysia generally focuses on the three largest communities, specifically the Malays, Chinese, and Indians, as well as the polarization among them. For example, Welsh (2020) discussed the causes of Malaysia's polarization, which she narrowed down to three causes: ethnic, religious, and the desire for reform. Even though Malaysia witnessed a vote swing across ethnicities towards the Pakatan Rakyat coalition in 2008, Lian and Appudurai (2011) also argued that ethnic tension never went away as the Pakatan Rakyat coalition simply appealed to the notion of justice and equality within each ethnic group. This has led to intercommunal tensions that are stirring beneath the surface.

A more recent study on multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore by Goh (2019) focused on the relationship between Malays and Chinese as they compete for political and economic power. This national discourse does not translate across the South China Sea, as the demographic makeup is different in Sabah and Sarawak. In Sarawak, specifically, the largest ethnic group is Iban, followed by the Malays in recent years, and thirdly, the Chinese ("State statistics," 2014). This difference in ethnic composition may explain the different perceptions of the Malays and indigenous peoples in East and West Malaysia pertaining to matters of national identity. Unfortunately, scholars and laymen may prefer to focus on the Klang Valley because it is the economic center of the country.

When Sarawak and Sabah agreed to form Malaysia with Malaya and Singapore, the incoming Malays and natives were viewed as indispensable to offset the incoming 1.2 million Chinese from Singapore. Tilman (1964-1965) argued that this might explain one of the reasons for including Sarawak despite the foreseeable troubles it might cause Malaysia. This group of indigenous people, however, are not homogeneous and are concentrated in specific geographical locations with their own languages and social organizations. Due to a lack of connectivity and geographical topography, the indigenous people in Sarawak appear less united. In fact, among the indigenous people of Sarawak, there is even frustration among the Ibans over the dominance of the Melanau despite the Iban being the majority population in Sarawak (Lian, 2018). Hazis

(2011) argued that leaders from this ethnic minority, especially Rahman Ya'kub and Taib Mahmud, were able to hold power because of the patronage system that was left alone by the federal government.

On the contrary, the Chinese in Sarawak are much more assimilated than the Chinese in the rest of Malaysia and are more involved in agriculture (Tilman, 1964-1965). The non-indigenous people are accepted as *anak Sarawak* (children of Sarawak) instead of being viewed with hostility as *pendatang* (a derogatory term for immigrants especially heard in West Malaysia). Thus, we see that the group dynamics are different in Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia.

Looking back at the Sarawak Gazette, the Sarawak government's local paper and mouthpiece, on its September 30, 1963, publication, nowhere was ethnic tension reported in Sarawak—or its economic, social, and political consequences. Instead, in the Politics section of the paper, it was reported, "By the end of the year a very substantial body of opinion in Sibu had accepted the view that although in some ways far from ideal, *Malaysia offered the best hope for Sarawak in the future.*" (p. 234, emphasis added)

In 1963, Sarawak was still in the process of envisaging the people's future in the blueprint of the Federation of Malaysia. Unity, to Sarawakians, meant direct and meaningful participation in the referendum held by the Cobbold Commission, as shown by the 400 young people who were strenuously trying to get their opinions heard by the inquiring Commission. This is very salient to the politics of the young today, who want a slice of their share in the national narrative of nation-building in addition to the vision of the status quo, which plays a very important aspect of national convergence.

Modern politics has changed the landscape of Sarawak Malays culture. Abang Yusuf Puteh observed that

...[politics] has a multiple role in the value systems among which are to act as: a. the greatest destabilizer, b. a major corruptor, c. a forceful disruptor, and d. an effective eye-opener, e. the most ambitious motivator. The pre-politics culture of the Malays has been characterised by gentility, high sense of integrity and above all a community of contentment. Politics has changed all that, from status quo to sky is the limit. (2000)

This reflection can be extended to the apparent evolution of interethnic relations that bear from traditional power-politics-based relationships—the mainstay of what is normally understood as ethnic or racial politics in Malaysia today.

From this perspective, it is quite evident that Sarawak Malay political norms seem to merge with the mainstream power politics of nation-states, which tend to concentrate in urban areas where a community of urban Sarawak Malays resides, especially within the Kuching-Samarahan division. Thus, their qualities regarding interethnic relations may resemble similarities with the Peninsular Malays—a breakaway from the traditional notions of politics to competition-based politics that goes beyond the status quo of culture-based value systems. It is in this context that we will view the notion of “race” and “ethnicity” that is understood within the converging trends of what may be cursory similarities observed among urban Malays in one of the Malay centers in Peninsular Malaysia and one in East Malaysia.

Malay Identity

Malay as an identity marker is difficult to conceptualize because of the different origins of the communities from Sumatra to Borneo. Their characteristics and cultural practices are not uniform. In fact, Milner (2008) wrote that “The ‘Malays’ of Sarawak or Kelantan . . . are likely themselves to point to the way they differ from those of Johor” (p. 10). If anything, the concept of *kerajaan* or polity is what matters to the Malays. Even in Borneo, the sultanates were often concerned about bringing non-Muslim Dayak leaders into their *kerajaan*, and these people eventually adopted the Malay language and customs, even sometimes converting to Islam (Milner, 2008, p. 81). This is not a straightforward phenomenon because it was also observed for Dayaks in a region in west Kalimantan. Converting to Islam does not necessitate becoming Malay as they maintain their cultural identity (King, 1979). The idea of “Malayness” came to the forefront with colonization, as the British brought with them European obsession with racial categorization (Shamsul, 1999). However, as argued by Milner (2008), there appears to be a localization of the concept of race, which means community in relation to the idea of *kerajaan*. In the case of Sarawak, Babcock (1974) pointed out that a person may be both Malay and Melanau, depending on the situation. These

differences in the construction of Malay identity partly explain the expectation of divergence between Malays in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching.

The political history of the Malays in West Malaysia is obviously quite different from that of the communities in East Malaysia. Following the end of the Japanese occupation, the Malays rose against the British Malayan Union to demand the concept of *bangsa* or race to become a political community as opposed to just based on shared culture. This new community, however, cannot unite the different Malay communities in Malaya as they continue to identify with different *kerajaan* (Omar, 1993). By extension, it has become a constant hurdle to establish national integration in Malaysia and the divergence in opinion and identity is expected. Although people may become loyal to their “imagined community” of a nation, this is usually in conjunction with a sense of ethnic identity and sentiment (Anderson, 1996). Barring this, even among the indigenous communities in Malaysia, national unity is yet to be achieved.

Even though *kerajaan* has something to do with the state, as a modern understanding of post-colonial Andersonian nation-state would have it, *nama*—reputation or status—of personas and people holding positions of influence play an important role in defining the state of the State (Milner, 2017, p. xvii). This includes a notion of belonging to a community based on the historical continuity of *kerajaan* and its *nama* with a narrative that sustains a communal sentiment and a sense of belonging. In this case, we are looking at being Malay and Muslim as one such sustaining narrative presently understood by urban communities of Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak who perceive themselves as belonging to such sentiments because of their communal prescription of Malay-Muslimness.

Nonetheless, Sarawak Malay politics are different due to their history. For example, in Sanib Said’s seminal work, *Malay Politics in Sarawak 1946-1966: The Search for Unity and Political Ascendancy* (1985) viewed Sarawak Malay’s political-historical development as an inheritance from ancient negeri such as Sarawak, Samarahan, Saribas, Kalaka, Melanau, and Brunei (p. vii). He saw that Sarawak has a long and proud history, which is presumably quite independent but not detached from the larger sentiment of the Malay Archipelago throughout the ancient right up to the modern period. Sanib pointed to a crucial puzzle to understand the wholeness of Sarawak Malay politics:

the definition of *the Malays* itself. There were multiple disconnected, if not conflicting, understandings about the Sarawak Malays, which Said pointed out to the famous phrase *masuk Melayu*, which literally means to become Malays (1985, p. viii).

This notion persists because of the assertion to include *Sarawak* to precede the word Malays, comprising the term Sarawak Malays. Politically, this has been construed as a socio-political distinction between the historical memories of the Malays living in Sarawak and their Malayan counterpart. Socially, *masuk Melayu* has always been an ongoing scene in Sarawak to describe people from other faiths (or without faith) who convert to Islam, usually by virtue of marriage and personal conviction. These are usually locals who are Bidayus, Ibans, or Kenyah, among others, that comprise the multi-tribal, multi-ethnic, and multi-regional composition of Sarawak Malays. Therefore, they become solidified as a community and cultural entity (Amir, 2015).

Again, following Said's idea, the heterogeneity of the Sarawak Malays does not represent a fundamental contestation of the term Malay. Rather, it signifies the cultural and geographical zones over long and short durations that define the *Sarawakness* of Malays as far as their political consciousness is concerned. Therefore, there is a longing to resonate with the Malay World or the Malay Archipelago, which is not much different from the Western World or the Arab World. We see a certain trend towards "liberality" or "freedom," underpinned by a colonial past that considerably erases the memory of belonging to a common civilization: the Malay World, so to speak, to build a society based on collectiveness unique to the Malay Archipelago (Ngu, 2017).

An important difference between the Malays and indigenous people in East and West Malaysia is the matter of religion. First, most Sarawak Malays converted to Islam relatively recently during the rule of the Brunei Sultanate, thus creating a community of Malays among the indigenous people. The Muslims in Sarawak are arguably more liberal and tolerant in that they are more inclusive with less suspicion towards non-Muslims in the country, likely because of their societal structure where no single ethnic or religious group has an outright majority (Chin, 2004, 2019). This fact also explains the abhorrence of the indigenous people in Sarawak over the concepts of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) and *Ketuanan*

Islam (Islamic supremacy). However, instead of the absence of religious and ethnic politics in Sarawakian political discourse, we argue that ethno-racial politics are translated into a regionalist sentiment that has evolved into Sarawak local-based political party that unites various races and creeds as a call for unity in state and federal elections.

Malaysian Unity and Regional Divergence

Because ethnic identity is more malleable, Hirschman (1987) argued that certain arrangements would allow better group solidarity at the expense of division with others. Without a doubt, in Malaysia, the social engineering coming out of the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1971-1990) has been cited as one of the major reasons for solidifying ethnic differences between the Malays and other ethnicities. The NEP came about following the 1969 riot and the growing dissatisfaction of Malay elites towards the leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman (Jomo, 1990-1991). According to Welsh (2020), the NEP also solidified the feudal mindset of the Malays to see leaders as protectors instead of dutiful servants of the people.

The resulting effect of the Malay middle class rising at the expense of other ethnicities is an intensified division within the country. With the reluctance of the Malays to compete on a level playing field, state protection for them is projected to continue (Ratuva, 2013). As observed by Goh (2019), the role of the strong state is important in putting off ethnic conflict, but the need to meet the demands of a globalized world has only increased inter-ethnic tensions. The role of the state today is to ensure that Malaysia retains its unique identity that celebrates unity in diversity (Kumar, 2012)

Maintenance and acculturation of this unique identity under the one umbrella of Malaysia are pivotal points, especially if we are to view the converging lines between Peninsular Malaysia and the Borneo States. In this, Michael Leigh wrote,

The excision of Singapore meant that the racial and political arithmetic of Malaysia changed dramatically. Kuala Lumpur was able to take an active role in reshaping the political landscape of Sabah and Sarawak, to accord much more closely with the pattern of rulership that prevailed throughout the Peninsula. (Leigh, 2018, p. 83)

To this day, this presumption commands the political landscape and conversations about Malaysia. There is not much influential communique in East Malaysia that is able to influence Malaysian unity, except perhaps party politics at both the Federal and Sarawak state levels.

We follow Shamsul (2021) on the gradual evolution of the concept of *Perpaduan*, or Unity, when we relate to convergence in the context of this paper. Shamsul noted that Unity has been widely discussed, promoted, and researched since May 13, 1969, when Malaysia's ethnic conflict manifested in a bloody racial riot in Peninsular Malaysia. *Perpaduan* is an evolution from *Kesatuan*, or Union, which was more commonly used by colonial and post-colonial governments up until 1970. Unity was introduced over Union because it was perceived that there was a breakdown in society on May 13th, when a series of violent conflicts that necessitated the unifying effort of the society with a more extensive framework formed Malaysia's 5-year development plan—a centralized approach to Malaysia's socio-political Federal government-led policy target. Fast forward to 2013, the concept of unity is further expanded to “unity, cohesion, and reconciliation,” which were the main concepts of the National Unity Consultative Council. In 2020, the National Unity Plan adopted the same expanded concept with the reintroduction of the Ministry of Unity. Further, the concept was also implemented in the National Unity Action Plan and the National Unity Index.

Shamsul's (2021) conclusion is that Malaysia's notion of unity is still an elusive concept and phenomenon for some (p. 214). He preferred instead Cohesion (*Kesepaduan*) as the viewpoint and translation to the evolving Malaysian discourse of national conversion. To him, unity changes according to time and circumstance, but Cohesion possesses two concomitant components that depict contradictory realities between positive and negative cohesion. It is the dialectical relationship between these two components that, despite their opposition, they are always connected by a continuum and are not dichotomous (two mutually opposing components) or binary (two mutually exclusive components).

Therefore, developing politics still defines Sarawak up to this day. This has been, and still is, a point of contention to assess a general notion of Malaysian unity and divergence—an equitable development between

Peninsular and East Malaysia would manifest “unity” and “Malaysian harmony” through festivities that usually show collegiality between various Malaysian ethnic, religious, and cultural communities across states and regions. This notion of developing together has long been in Sarawak's political mainstream, as stated by the former Chief Minister and later Governor of Sarawak, Tun Taib Mahmud, in 1983:

Bersikap adil kepada semua kaum di Sarawak bukan sahaja ideal tetapi satu-satunya cara untuk memastikan Sarawak mempunyai masa depan yang cerah, tetapi melakukan sesuatu di sebaliknya hanya akan memusnahkan Sarawak. [To be fair to all races in Sarawak is not ideal but the only way to ensure Sarawak's bright future, and to commit otherwise will only destroy Sarawak]. (Jitab & Richie, 1992)

Applicable to Malaysia's national politics, even Sarawak Malays share the feeling of being left behind within the general agenda of the Federal government at the time, which supports the necessity to be fair in the partaking and the benefits of Sarawak development, which has been the main narrative of Sarawak's political status quo.

This could explain the surprising religious convergence between Sarawak Malays and their Peninsular counterpart. Noting the “feeling of being left behind,” Sarawak Malays do share the general political sentiment that they contextualize their current standing in Malaysian society at large by prioritizing economic standings with collective identity politics to an extent. The nuances lie in Sarawak Malays' politicization of such factors; for example, Islamic religious and Malay cultural identities are not in the government or opposition political parties' top agenda, nor do they bear significant grassroots issues. Instead, whenever a certain idea about political renewal and unity (i.e., *perpaduan*, *kesatuan*) is introduced, even a religious or ethnic idea, they are inevitably tied to the idea of economic development and equitability.

Sarawakians, including Sarawak Malays, are more regionalist, which could be attributed to the fact that different state politics influence East Malaysian Federal politics. Arguably, chief among the reasons for the composition of Sarawak's political parties based on one segment of a major ethnic group is the potential displacement of established leadership in

each community (Leigh, 1974). Thus, the process of constant political realignment due to a lack of communal unity serves as the basis for conflict resolution. The lack of exclusive Malay versus non-Malay dichotomy is also evident in Sarawak-based political parties. Hence, while at times Sarawak politics may be defined by religion-ethnic national ideals, such discourses can never fully materialize because they are limited by this constant political alignment within Sarawak's local political parties. Furthermore, this arrangement also affects national political parties that operate locally in Sarawak. What results is a narrative of the "Sarawak agenda" proposed by the government and opposition parties, in which the Malays are actively participating.

From this literature review, we gauge that those studies have either focused locally on Sarawak, or nationally at the expense of Sabah and Sarawak. Because of this lack of coherence in research, the literature suggests that divergence between the communities in East and West Malaysia is expected. This current study aims to fill the gap in knowledge by comparing East and West Malaysian perspectives on religion, ethnicity, politics, law, and education to test the idea of divergence. This comparative study between two major cities in Malaysia may provide a better understanding of the perspectives of Malays and the indigenous people regarding religion, ethnicity, politics, law, and education.

Methodology

As argued by Hall (1997), "'difference' matters because it is essential to meaning; without it, meaning could not exist" (p. 234). A meaning, therefore, may not be inherent except in juxtaposition to its opposite. To understand the urban Malay in Kuala Lumpur, perhaps a more meaningful understanding may be found in the comparison between urban Malays and the indigenous people in Kuching, Sarawak. Kuching was chosen as opposed to a Sabah city because of the strict resistance of Sarawakians against the intrusion of racial politics through an exclusive Malay-based party. As the capital city, Kuala Lumpur was selected as it would provide a microcosm of Malaysia.

We decided to compare Kuching and Kuala Lumpur because these two cities are among the major cities in the country, have higher incomes for their people

(Salary Explorer, n.d.), and an expectation of being politically liberal. We expect urbanites to identify as cosmopolitan, which would lead to a convergence of identity in certain aspects. Whatever differences found may be due to the different lived experiences in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching.

This comparative study will use elite interviews, primary documents, and a survey questionnaire. As we are interested in national policies, elite interviews using purposive sampling will provide insight into the perception of politicians on differences between Malays in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching. A total of nine politicians were interviewed for this study. Unfortunately, we were unable to interview politicians from Kuching because of their reluctance to participate during an uncertain time following the dissolution of the Sarawak State Assembly. Instead, we triangulate the interview data with speeches by Sarawak politicians in the public domain.

Due to movement limitations during COVID-19, we were only able to conduct a pilot survey that is limited to voluntary internet respondents in two waves between April–August 2021 and again in May–July 2022. The survey was distributed on social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Due to the convenience sampling, 71.3% of respondents are between the ages of 20 and 29, 80% are Malays, 63.3% are females, 41.1% work in professional and administrative careers, 66.2% have a bachelor's degree, and 34.5% have an income between RM3000 and RM6000.

Survey respondents' views on ethnicity, religion, the law, politics, and education were measured on a five-point Likert scale. The survey questions were amended from "Malaysia's temperature check" (2020). A lower confidence interval of 90% was chosen rather than the conventional 95% because of the low number of respondents. For a pilot survey, our data is valid because it is more than the required sample size of 30, as proposed by Roscoe (1975) and Stutely (2003). According to Roscoe (1975), a minimum of 30 respondents is required if the data is to be broken into subsamples, which we do in this study. On the other hand, the sample size for multivariate research should be multiple times the number of variables in the study, preferably 10 times larger. However, this study does not seek to analyze multiple datasets. With 142 respondents from the Greater Klang Valley and 133 respondents from Kuching, we recognize that our

sample size is very small, and thus, it is meant as an exploratory study.

Table 1

Alpha Coefficient

Variables	Cronbach alpha coefficient
Education	0.663 (6 items)
Ethnicity	0.703 (11 items)
Law	0.613 (8 items)
Politics	0.738 (5 items)
Religion	0.798 (11 items)

There are five main constructs of this study: education, ethnicity, law, politics, and religion. Initially, there were six constructs, including the economy, but the items were found to have a low Cronbach alpha coefficient value and were removed from the analysis. All the constructs had multiple items on a five-point ordinal scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). As shown in Table 1, all the constructs have an alpha value of above 0.6, indicating inter-item reliability. The way the questions are asked would indicate that the closer the means are to 1, the more conservative the response is, with conservative implying a preference for the status quo. Some negatively worded questions were introduced to disrupt a response set in which people responded positively or negatively to every item. These items were later re-coded to reflect the conservative-liberal direction. An independent sample t-test was utilized to compare the means between the respondents from the Greater Klang Valley and those from Kuching. The alternative hypothesis of this study is that there is a difference in means between the respondents in the two regions.

Findings: Convergence or Divergence?

Perception of MPs

To triangulate data from our survey, we conducted interviews with selected members of parliament (MP). Based on the elite interviews, it seems that politicians on the western side of Malaysia hold the perception of Sarawakians being more tolerant. Nik Nazmi (personal

communication, August 3, 2021) of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) suggested that because Malays are the minority in Sarawak, they are more comfortable mixing with people from other ethnicities and religions, as can be seen in the relatively frequent occurrences of intermarriage. His opinion was supported by Hasan Baharom (personal communication, August 20, 2021) from Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH), who mentioned the existence of long houses inhabited by people of different faiths who live together peacefully. This is common because of the intermarriage of people from different religions who live together with their families in communal homes.

In contrast, Mahathir Mohammad (personal communication, May 18, 2021), who has been Malaysia's prime minister twice, argued that Malays are the original and majority inhabitants of Peninsular Malaysia, which explains the relative rigidity of ethnic relations in West Malaysia. Other politicians concur that one of the main reasons for this perceived inter-ethnic harmony in East Malaysia is its history, which is different from the socio-political history of Peninsular Malaysia. For example, Amiruddin Hamzah (personal communication, March 16, 2021) of the Malay-based Pejuang Party acknowledges that ethnic relations in Sarawak, in general, have been more peaceful since the 19th century, which is when Chinese migrants came to the island. As Sabah and Sarawak were under British direct rule, as opposed to having a hereditary Raja or Sultan, the different ethnic groups could mix with one another (Mahathir Mohamad, personal communication, May 18, 2021). Mahathir's argument is in line with the literature in that the polity, or *kerajaan*, is more important to the Malays. Furthermore, Liew Chin Tong (personal communication, April 6, 2021) of the multi-ethnic Democratic Action Party (DAP) reminded of Milner's (2008) argument that the construction of a Malay identity in British Malaya was based on its difference with "the others" (Chinese migrants) post-1945.

These politicians also believe in a divergence when it comes to religious issues. For example, Fadhli Shaari (personal communication, June 24, 2021) from the Islamist Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) party suggested that the approach to religion is different between East and West Malaysia, and that anything "Islamic" is less attractive in East Malaysia. However, our survey shows no statistical significance between the two groups. Furthermore, Mujahid Yusof Rawa (personal

communication, March 10, 2021), Amiruddin Hamzah, and Hasan Baharom mentioned that the people in East Malaysia are more receptive to non-Muslims using the words Allah, Kaabah, Baitullah, and Solat because it has always been normal. However, our survey reveals that respondents from both Kuala Lumpur ($M=3.46$) and Kuching ($M=3.56$) are more likely to be neutral or support the right of non-Muslims to use the word Allah, showing a convergence. The different results may be due to the politicians speaking in general terms when comparing East and West Malaysia, whereas our pilot survey is specific between urban Malays in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching.

Based on public statements by Sarawak MPs, religious tolerance is important to Sarawakians. For example, in response to a statement by an MP from PAS that the Bible is manipulated, PKR Sarawak State Leadership Council member Josephine Mawat commented that it “goes against the spirit of Malaysia’s Independence and Merdeka which emphasised mutual respect, tolerance, and harmony amongst all communities” (Borneo Post Online, 2020). Similarly, Kelvin Yii, who is the MP for Bandar Kuching, said that there is “growing dissatisfaction on top of other extreme sentiments that is brought in by parties like PAS, right-wing of UMNO, that is a threat to the multicultural fabric that Sarawak always enjoys” (Noorshahrizam, 2021). This supports the literature on regional divergence in politics. Sentiments on tolerance are not unique to the opposition but are also shared by the government. Chief Minister Abang Johari also commented that “Sarawakians are able to unite despite religious and racial diversities, and clearly only Sarawakians can understand the culture.” (Nais, 2018)

So, how can the Malays improve their relationship with other ethnicities? Nik Nazmi suggested that with small pockets of migration of people from Kuching, such as into Klang and Wardieburn Camp in Setiawangsa, there is a possibility that they might export their tolerance to the Malay community in Greater Klang Valley. With the migration of people between Klang Valley and Kuching, there might be a convergence of values between these two urban centers. A place to start is to foster close relationships with others to establish trust and better inter-ethnic relations. However, Isnaraissah Munirah from the Sabah-based Warisan party believes that it might take a long time for that to happen (personal communication, August 19, 2021).

On politics, Amin Ahmad (personal communication, June 1, 2021) opined that politics in Sarawak are more organized and successful because they prioritize local leaders. In fact, the absence of UMNO in Sarawak means that the rhetoric of *Ketuanan Melayu*, or Malay Supremacy, is decreased. They are relatively more politically united and thus do not place much emphasis on political reform.

Pilot Survey

The aim of this study is to explore whether there are differences in perspective on various issues between Malays and the indigenous people living in Klang Valley and Kuching. With different histories and lived experiences, as discussed in the literature review, it is expected that there would be differences in how people view inter-ethnic relations and other matters. The previous section shows that these views are also held by politicians across the political divide. How true are the perceptions of divergence between Malays when we narrow it down between those living in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching?

Based on Table 2, the result from our pilot survey indicates that we failed to reject the null hypothesis, and there is no difference between respondents from Kuching and Kuala Lumpur on questions about religion. The detailed list of items asked in the survey is attached in Appendix A. Our result shows that there is no significant difference at a 90% confidence level in religious perception ($t=-.614, p=.539$). For our sample of respondents, it appears that those who live in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching have a somewhat conservative perception when it comes to religion, especially those in Kuala Lumpur. Interestingly, the only statistically significant differences are when respondents are asked if they are knowledgeable about other people’s belief systems ($t=1.952, p=.052$) and if they are offended when Islam is criticized ($t=1.924, p=.055$). More respondents from Kuching are offended if Islam is criticized, and they are less knowledgeable of other religions and beliefs.

Moving on from religious issues, Table 3 shows that there are significant statistical differences at a 90% confidence level on the perception of ethnicity, law, politics, and education. We believe that this is an important contribution of this study because it shows that rather than with religious identity, the divergence between urbanites in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching is

Table 2*Independent Samples Test for Research Constructs*

Construct		Locality		t-value	prob.
		Kuala Lumpur	Kuching		
Education	M	2.744	2.935	-2.659	.008
	SD	(.580)	(.609)		
Ethnicity	M	3.128	3.227	-1.854	.065
	SD	(.457)	(.420)		
Law	M	2.971	2.829	1.735	.084
	SD	(.678)	(.679)		
Politics	M	2.920	2.687	3.029	.003
	SD	(.645)	(.628)		
Religion	M	2.581	2.637	-.614	.539
	SD	(.772)	(.749)		

more related to government policies. If we look at Table 3, which is comprised of data for the selected variables that are statistically significant at $p=.10$ level, respondents from Kuching are more likely to be more liberal when it comes to education and its language of instruction. In other words, respondents from Kuching are more agreeable to vernacular schools, teaching Science and Mathematics in English, and the recognition of the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC). Similarly, the only variable under ethnicity that is statistically significant is due to the more liberal attitude of Kuchingites when it comes to assimilation. More respondents from Kuala Lumpur believe that minorities should assimilate.

However, if we look at variables under law and politics, respondents from Kuala Lumpur are more likely to support political changes and a limited government. For example, more respondents from Kuala Lumpur believe in the right to protest, and that party hopping should be criminalized. The political theatre in Kuala Lumpur has seen multiple allegiance and loyalty changes, which has caused people to demand changes. Our findings show that there is divergence on separate issues that warrant different responses from the government. Because more respondents in Kuching are liberal when it comes to education and language, the state government have more say in these matters vis-à-vis the Federal government. On the other hand, the demands by respondents in Kuala Lumpur are

for a more progressive law and political system. The government needs to balance these demands with other Malays in other parts of the country.

The 12th Sarawak State Election ended in November 2021. Although it was not a surprise that Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) won a two-thirds majority, it was a surprise that it won 75 out of 82 seats contested. Helming the victory is none other than Sarawak's now-elected Chief Minister, Abang Johari Abang Haji Openg. The election result demonstrates, yet again, the central importance of development politics in Sarawak's political landscape. GPS has proven that it is the party that continued to guide the development of the political manifesto for the pre-2018 Sarawak's Barisan Nasional. To relate this finding with our interviews, we found it quite puzzling that the Malay urban constituencies in Sarawak did not seem to believe the Islamic religio-political narrative that is currently popular in Peninsular Malaysia. The naming of an award-winning Malaysian-made whiskey as Timah, thought as the short-form name of Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatimah as (Peninsular) Malaysian politics articulated (Wong, 2021), somehow did not translate into Sarawak state election results in any notable way. In this paper's case, the urban Malays in Kuching paid less attention to this politically stoked religious sentiment than the necessity to accelerate Sarawak's development.

Table 3*Independent Samples Test for Selected Variables*

Variables	Locality		t-value	prob.	
	Kuala Lumpur	Kuching			
Education					
Abolish vernacular schools	M	2.56	2.94	-2.102	.036
	SD	(1.466)	(1.501)		
Quota for non-Bumiputera should not be increased for matriculation	M	3.77	3.52	1.771	.078
	SD	(1.093)	(1.210)		
Science and Mathematics should be taught in Malay	M	3.02	3.72	-4.4.59	.000
	SD	(1.318)	(1.287)		
UEC should not be recognized	M	2.71	3.01	-2.099	.037
	SD	(1.280)	(1.055)		
Ethnicity					
Minorities should learn to assimilate		2.00 (.989)	2.49 (1.165)	-3.737	.000
Law					
Don't ban underage marriages	M	4.437	4.04	2.402	.017
	SD	(1.048)	(1.209)		
Malaysians should not Have the freedom to protest	M	3.63	3.22	2.505	.013
	SD	(1.329)	(1.373)		
Sedition Act is important	M	2.57	2.22	2.076	.039
	SD	(1.391)	(1.363)		
Politics					
GLCs may be headed by political appointees	M	4.46	4.17	2.258	.025
	SD	(.942)	(1.182)		
Party hopping should not be criminalized	M	4.06	3.57	3.350	.001
	SD	(1.135)	(1.257)		
Government should regulate social media to prevent fake news	M	2.04	1.74	2.028	.044
	SD	(1.299)	(1.199)		

It is obvious that the recent Sarawak State Election result is not about passionate electioneering on a religio-political basis but rather the continuity of governance to enable the State and the people to pass through the difficult health, economic, and social conditions that were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. "Sarawak First" has become a motto for GPS in the previous Sarawak state election, and the narrative is expected to continue. What this means for national integration is that Sarawak will prefer its own definitions of interracial, inter-ethnic, and inter-regional narratives, both at popular and

governmental levels. This is confidently uttered by Sarawak's now-elected and mandated Chief Minister, Abang Johari Tun Openg, when he remarked, "only GPS understands [the ...] needs and aspirations of Sarawakians," during the election campaign period (Banji, 2021).

In cardinal order, five of the most popular political parties by the percentage of votes are (a) GPS (60.2%), (b) Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB) (18%), (c) Parti Sedar Rakyat Sarawak (SEDAR) (8.4%), (d) DAP (7%), and (e) Independent (3%; Sarawak Voice, 2021, p. 10). By looking closer at the popular vote percentages, we

can assess the normative aspects of the quantitative results of the election. First, we notice that the top three popular vote winners are all Sarawak local-based parties, regardless of their alignments. The federal opposition, Pakatan Harapan, is only represented by DAP in the fourth standing. Additionally, independent candidates, as a collective, surprisingly stand at fifth, which is more than Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) (2.2%), Amanah (0.4%) and PAS (0.3%). Therefore, we hypothesize that Sarawak local issues and sentiments, including those raised in this paper such as education and law, potentially have increased importance at the normative popular level, reflected by popular votes rather than by the number of seats won.

Discussion

Based on our findings, there are multiple salient issues that can be raised. First, we highlight the concept of Malaysia as a Federation and how its evolution of ethnic politics is still underpinned by identity issues, specifically ethnicity, race, religion, class, and region. The cosmopolitan results presented in this paper support the further development of identity politics. Cosmopolitanism refers to a way of life beyond the national scale, that is, on a worldwide scale (Beck, 2002). A Muslim's shared collective identity has been rising since the 1970s and especially so in the 2000s following the Global War on Terror (Peek, 2005). The rise of global Islam since the 1970s has resulted in a convergence of religious beliefs, as the cosmopolitan nature of Kuala Lumpur and Kuching allows people to feel connected to the struggles of Muslims from other countries. On the one hand, Malays in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching may seek to live more harmoniously as a close-knit community in the increasingly urban setting. On the other hand, the representation of urbanity and examples of living harmoniously as a "good Malaysian" is still concentrated on the values and norms defined by elite Malay-Muslim politicians and the community at large in Klang Valley. Today, those values are steeped in religious rhetoric that spans the seas. Consequently, this limits the concept of harmony and the more general concept of a Malaysian Family because this interpretation is specific to a region yet is somehow perceived to define the norms of people in other regions, even in smaller urban places such as Kuching.

Next, the concept of race and ethnicity, as dated and even unpalatable as some may find, seems to be relevant as far as Malaysia's identity politics are concerned. These concepts are still important in grassroots politics and policymaking deliberations. Even the detractors of such policies, as well as political theorists, will find that ethnicity plays a role when investigating the systemic operation of polity and the system of power underlying the political nomenclature of the Malaysian Federation. Perhaps this is why the Triune Malay-Chinese-Indian harmonics is often repeated and is well-understood by those who agree with ideas of unity and cohesion. One may point out: what about the Dayaks, Kadazans, and Dusuns? They are emitted from the "mainstream discourse" of Malaysian politics, where the political mold of unity is about socio-ethnic recognition of one's identity, which is translated into politically salient, nationally recognized, and defined ethnic markers. This is translated into public and affirmative policies from an array of politicking now prevalent on social media, in addition to traditional spaces like conventional media and canvassing as election approaches.

We also found, to our surprise, that Malays in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching are not very different in terms of their "Malay Worldview." Although popular politics and politicians rigorously attempt to project an almost utopian ethno-racial harmony in East Malaysia, the reality in urban areas is much more mundane. Perhaps the concept of being urban and modern in Malaysian is sifted by the common values of city living, such as a national and vernacular education system, similar types of media consumption about politics regardless of political stripes, and valorization of old-time major political figures, with an appreciation for political promises, propositions, and values.

The major difference we found was the shariah legal take of Malay counterparts in both urban cities. Based on our data, those in Kuching are more religiously conservative. However, this did not change their opinion of the socio-political realm into an active legal discourse relative to those in Kuala Lumpur. The most famous Shariah case law that originated in Sarawak is seldom heard, if ever, to spearhead political discussions and public opinions. Even mainstream discourse about ethno-racial deliberations in Sarawak is deliberated within the realm of anthropology and sociology. Where ethnic politics are concerned, not much political

science, legal study, political philosophy, or similar abstract and humanities-based fields are discussed.

Conclusion

This article examines an age-old narrative in contemporary Malaysia, the homogeneity of the Malay and indigenous communities, by analyzing the diverse perspectives of Malays in Kuching and Kuala Lumpur on themes such as religion, ethnicity, politics, law, and education. This is significant because, in Malaysia, Malay and indigenous people have always been collectively referred to as Bumiputera, as if they all share the same goals. Thus, we interviewed politicians to learn about the distinctions and similarities between Malays in Borneo and those in Peninsular Malaysia. It is critical to understand the perspectives of policymakers, as they are responsible for creating a better future in Malaysia through government actions. We also ran an online pilot survey with 275 respondents to assess their perspectives on the five themes mentioned above. It is worth noting that, despite the two regions' distinct lived experiences and histories, there is a religious convergence in which Malays and indigenous people from both cities are quite conservative. This differs from the perspective of certain policymakers, who feel that the people in Borneo are more liberal than those in Peninsular Malaysia. In the case of the other themes, there was a divergence in views, which we believe is the result of distinct government actions that affect both cities differently. There is still substantial support for a liberal education system in plural Kuching; however, in Kuala Lumpur, the concept of Malay supremacy pervades politics, and there is a larger desire for reforms within the political and judicial structures.

To conclude, we reassert our hypothesis that ethno-racial politics are translated into regionalist sentiments, evolving into Sarawak local-based political parties uniting various races and creeds, which is a political staple as a call for unity in state and federal elections. Looking to West Malaysia, politics continue to shift to the right, as observed in the Malacca State Election, in which 62.71% of votes went to Barisan Nasional and Perikatan Nasional candidates (Ahmad, 2021) as well as the subsequent 2022 General Election and 2023 Six State Elections. This paper, however, compared Kuching and Kuala Lumpur due to their urban

nature. Unfortunately, there is no assembly election for Kuala Lumpur because it is not a state. Based on our exploratory quantitative results, the Malayness of Kuala Lumpur and Kuching inhabitants are not that different, given that their identity has become more mired in civilizational Islamic ideas and vision. However, when it comes to non-identity issues, there are divergences in politics, law, and education.

We admit the limit of our research in terms of its breadth. First, we only examined urban Kuala Lumpur and Kuching samples, leaving out other major centers such as Georgetown and Kota Kinabalu. Furthermore, because we employed convenience sampling to gather a limited number of 275 respondents, our results cannot be generalized to the larger population. Instead, these data are meant to provide insight for future projects that could overcome our limitations, such as the movement restrictions. We discussed our practical results from this research as an exploratory project that could be used to develop conceptual interrogations.

Although we noted that there are indeed dividing lines between Malaysian Federal politics of race and ethnicity, as well as efforts to bridge any gaps under the notion of ethnic-racial and regional harmony, we discovered a conceptual gap still left uncovered. It is normal for us to rely heavily on the category of Malay, Shariah, Islam, Peninsular Malaysia, East Malaysia, and other categorical markers that are sometimes used in conjunction with descriptors such as *Ketuanan*, without much interrogation about how such categories and their meanings were formulated. Additionally, we relied on existing concepts of these categories to propose a policy and a way forward to the nation-building project of Malaysia while being fully aware that such concepts need a major review and reconstruction at their axiomatic fundamentals—but this is not addressed here. Perhaps in the future, those who seek to bridge this multidisciplinary gap between the normative and the practical, and between the past and the contemporary, will also find several pressing issues to interrogate in a multidisciplinary manner regarding contemporary social imaginations that define the norms of mainstream Malaysian political discourse and its inevitable ethno-racial politics.

Declaration of Ownership

This report is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

None.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by our institution.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Demographic Data: Please choose one answer for each question.

1. Age
 - a. <20
 - b. 20-29
 - c. 30-39
 - d. 40-49
 - e. 50-59
 - f. >59
2. Ethnicity
 - a. Bidayuh
 - b. Ibans
 - c. Malay
 - d. Melanau
 - e. Orang Asli
 - f. Orang Ulu
 - g. Penans
 - h. Mixed Parentage
 - i. Other
3. Gender
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
4. Locality
 - a. Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur
 - b. Wilayah Persekutuan Putrajaya
 - c. Daerah Petaling (Example: Subang Jaya)
 - d. Daerah Klang (Example: Kota Kemuning)
 - e. Daerah Gombak (Example: Selayang)
 - f. Daerah Hulu Langat (Example: Kajang)
 - g. Kuching Utara (Example: Petrajaya)
 - h. Kuching Selatan (Example: Stampin)
5. Occupation
 - a. Blue Collar (agriculture, livestock craft, machine operations, elementary occupation)
 - b. Outside labor force (Housespouse, student, retired)
 - c. White collar (services, clerical, associate professionals)
 - d. Professionals & managers
 - e. Self-employed
 - f. Unemployed
6. Highest Education Level
 - a. Primary School
 - b. Secondary School
 - c. Diploma (and its equivalent)
 - d. Bachelor's degree
 - e. Postgraduate
7. Monthly Household Income
 - a. <RM3000
 - b. RM3000-6000
 - c. RM6000-9000
 - d. RM9000-12000
 - e. >RM12000

Views on religion: For each statement, choose the degree of your agreement or disagreement.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Religious practice is a private matter and should be separated from politics					
It is more important to protect religion than protecting the economy					
Non-Muslims should not be required to convert to Islam to marry Muslims					
It is more important that a political leader is religious than law abiding					
Conversion from Islam should not be allowed in Malaysia					
Homosexual intercourse should be decriminalized in Malaysia					
Non-Muslims should not be allowed to use the word Allah					
I am practically religious					
I feel offended if my religion is criticized					
I am generally knowledgeable about other people's belief systems or religion					
Gender identity is a religious issue					

Views on ethnicity: For each statement, choose the degree of your agreement or disagreement.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Racial minorities deserve less of a say in Malaysia					
Racial minorities should learn to assimilate (e.g., be proficient in Malay) in order to maintain racial harmony					
Malays deserve special rights because they are the original inhabitants (Bumiputera) of Malaysia					
Malays deserve special rights because they are economically disadvantaged					
Employers should not be allowed to prescribe race in job applications					
Employers should not be allowed to prescribe language requirements in job applications					
The Race box/column needs to be removed from all official forms/documents					
The Race box/column needs to be expanded to include mixed race/other minorities					
Political parties should stop aligning based on race and focus on putting together fair policies instead					
Homeowners should not be allowed to rent/sell their property to only a specific race/religion					
Economic assistance should be provided based on income rather than race					

Views on education: For each statement, choose the degree of your agreement or disagreement.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Malaysia should abolish vernacular schools (e.g., SJKC, SJKT)					
Malaysia should abolish religious schools (e.g., SK Agama)					
Malaysia should abolish public-funded boarding schools (e.g. SBP)					
The quota for non-bumiputra students in the pre-university matriculation program should be increased					
The Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) should not be recognized for public University admissions					
Science and Mathematics should be taught in Malay					

Views on law: For each statement, choose the degree of your agreement or disagreement.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Hudud laws should be implemented in Malaysia					
The Sedition Act is important to preserve peace in Malaysia					
The government should ban underage (below 18) marriage					
Malaysians should have the freedom to protest without government permission					
The monarchy should play an active role in governance					
Civil court has the right to declare the unconstitutionality of Syariah law					
Students should be able to freely participate in politics without consequences					
The government should punish people who insult racial or religious groups					

Views on politics: For each statement, choose the degree of your agreement or disagreement.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
GLCs (government-linked companies) should not be headed by political appointees					
Political party hopping after an election in politics should be criminalized					
The government should regulate social media sites to prevent fake news and misinformation					
The government should enforce that social media companies take down all content that invokes hate, prejudice, or violence					
The government should impose a penalty for inappropriate content being shared by users of social media sites (e.g., content that invokes hate, prejudice, or violence)					