

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

‘Human Rights...But for the Majority’: The Appropriation and Subversion of the Human Rights Agenda by Right-Wing NGOs in Malaysia

Nicholas Chan* 

Australian National University

*Corresponding Author. Email: waiyeap.chan@anu.edu.au

(Received 27 May 2022; revised 29 November 2022; accepted 16 February 2023)

Abstract

Scholarly treatments of the human rights agenda tend to posit civil society organisations (CSOs) as its defender and the state and mainstream political actors as its violators. Even when raising the problem of an ‘uncivil society’, the literature labels these CSOs as reactive and hostile to the human rights agenda they perceive as ‘Western’ and ‘foreign’. I argue that these treatments of the issue overlook another phenomenon: the emergence of CSOs that adopted the language of human rights and participated in its formal processes yet subtly redefined, subverted, and undermined the core commitments of the human rights agenda. This paper discusses such developments by referencing right-wing non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Malaysia that redefined the parameters of the human rights agenda to undercut state commitments to protect religious freedom, sexuality rights, and gender minorities. Through actor and discourse tracing, this paper illustrates how right-wing Islamist NGOs employed a novel two-pronged strategy that no longer openly repudiated the human rights agenda but continued to erode, eviscerate, and reformulate its contents and principles. The first prong involved institutional measures of ‘getting in’ to gain legitimacy by participating as a stakeholder within local and international human rights processes. The second prong encompassed social strategies of ‘pushing out’, whereby actors and their networks mobilised populist pressure to expose, ostracise, and subvert established human rights norms, institutions, and actors.

Keywords: right-wing politics; Islamism; civil society; human rights; Malaysia

Introduction: The Curious Case of Right-Wing Human Rights Activism

When it comes to human rights struggles, a longstanding picture of ‘civil society vs the state’ emerged, with the former depicted as defenders and reformers and the latter as major transgressors and antagonists. Many have theoretically contested and empirically disproven the idea that civil society organisations (CSOs) are necessarily progressive, pluralist, and democratic, yet the assumption that CSOs are generally for liberal and progressive notions of human rights still lingers (Chambers and Kopstein 2001; Eder 2014; Weiss 2015). As they are organisationally distinct and institutionally separated from political society, many assume that CSOs favour an expanded, protected, and autonomous civil space to maintain a competitive edge vis-à-vis the state and other pressure groups to advance their respective causes and interests.

This reading seeps into scholarly treatments of religious CSOs, too, even though their relationship with notions of universal human rights is complicated, if not contentious (Banchoff and Wuthnow 2011; Freeman 2004; Moosa 2001). For example, in his influential book, Casanova (1994: 219) describes a public or deprivatised religion that operates at the level of civil society as “consistent with modern universalistic principles and with modern differentiated structures”. Robert Hefner’s pathbreaking study of civil Islam in Indonesia marries the phenomenon with the broader democratisation agenda that heralded the collapse of the Suharto regime. He painted “civil Islam” as the majority’s counterbalance to “statist Islam” through its commitment to values of “freedom, equality, and justice” (Hefner 2000: 218).

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However, developments in post-Suharto Indonesia that saw the persecution of gender and religious minorities (especially the Ahmadiyahs), entrenched moral policing laws, a contentious mobilisation campaign against a Christian mayor, and the empowerment of Muslim vigilante groups such as the *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI, Islamic Defenders' Front) challenge the idea that civil society's expansion will necessarily boost the human rights agenda.¹ This sense of disillusionment is compounded by the fact that numerous actors and agents associated with Hefner's civil Islam enabled many of these occurrences (van Bruinessen 2021).

The alarming developments in India, Myanmar, and Indonesia that saw the decline of religious freedom and minority rights following the mobilisation of right-wing religious actors reinforced a conceptual binary that divides non-western CSOs into two opposing camps (Ramakrishna 2021). One camp rejects 'Western' interpretations of human rights as embedded in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), whereas the other generally accepts and champions it. Heuristically useful as it might be, this categorical distinction speaks very little about a new breed of right-wing CSOs *who style themselves explicitly as human rights defenders*. These CSOs are willing to work within the international human rights regime, but they also engage in a kind of 'human rights' activism that implicitly (and at times, openly) subverts, undercuts, and reformulates the agenda to move it away from a normative commitment to protect minority rights, social equality, and religious freedom. Specifically, this paper sheds light on the appropriation of 'human rightism'² by right-wing Islamist actors in Malaysia. The picture painted here complicates the idea that nativist political actors most scoffing at the 'Western' human rights regime will always position themselves as rejectionists and outsiders of the enterprise. Rather, what one witnesses is that the more these actors engage in the politics of human rights as fellow activists and putative insiders, the likelier they erode the parameters of what constitutes human rights and the notions of freedom and equality it affords.

Even though the protagonists of this study do not openly identify themselves as Islamists, their nativist positioning are inextricably linked to Islamist ideology, grievances, and networks. I will deal with the nativist and Islamist underpinnings of these actors in a later section. However, discussing the relationship between Islam and human rights is necessary. Scholars have long offered sophisticated treatments on the question of Islam's compatibility with the ideas of universal human rights and, more importantly, whether those are the *only* terms of debate for those seeking a radical vision of global justice and solidarity (Afshari 1994; Li 2020: 9–17; Mayer 1994; Moosa 2001). Those are not the grounds this paper wishes to tread. It does not debate whether human rights should be universal or particularistic, whether its values should be globalised or decolonised, or whether its historical praxis comprises good intentions or hypocrisies (Heinze 2011; Ishay 2004; Mutua 2016). Rather, my inquiry scrutinises a more practical concern: if we accept that discourses about human rights are inevitably subjected to pluralising pressures, what happens when two understandings of human rights coincide and contend in a Muslim-majority state? Do such contestations improve the lives and protections of the socially marginal and disadvantaged? In our case, what transpires is that a struggle portrayed as dismantling an allegedly hegemonic global Western human rights regime actually contributes to reinforcing local hegemonies based on a Muslim majoritarian worldview. In a world where the nation-state remains the perimeters in which dynamics of exclusion and inclusion (as well as protection and persecution) play out significantly, any local reproduction of majoritarian hegemonies in the name of human rights is undoubtedly a cause for concern (Weitz 2019).

Müller's account of "paradoxical normativities" in Brunei and Malaysia offers one way to visualise the encounter of contending visions of human rights (Müller 2016). He underlines the paradox in how Muslim states Janus-facedly complied with the human rights regime by symbolically committing to a "transdoctrinal justification of human rights" on the diplomatic front and simultaneously enforcing an anti-pluralist brand of Islam on the governing front (*ibid.*: 416). My departure from Müller's approach is that I am less interested in documenting various forms of state hypocrisy and violations on human

¹Regarding these incidences, see Hew (2016b); Connley (2016); Mohamed Osman and Waikar (2018); Syechbubakr (2017).

²The term 'human rightism' highlights a sense of irony here. The former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak, first coined it to denigrate humanism, secularism, and liberalism as threats to Islam (*Malay Mail Online* 2014b). The fact that right-wing Islamist actors appropriated the human rights discourse a few years later to pursue conservative causes associated with sexual morality, anti-minority stances, and political authoritarianism is an ironic twist indeed.

rights issues that journalists and groups like Human Rights Watch (HRW) have meticulously accomplished. Instead, I argue that we must focus on how *non-state actors* who position themselves as active defenders of human rights capitalise on the liminal space these paradoxical normativities offer when they appropriate the human rights vocabulary and reframe it to justify exclusivist majoritarian social, political, and religious causes. These articulations are impactful reinventions of the human right discourse because they shed any moral commitment to protecting minorities and the socially marginalised altogether. As such, my account builds on similar observations scholars have made when examining right-wing politics in places such as Israel and Europe that saw a “sweeping acculturation of the universal human rights discourse” to legitimise the racist and chauvinistic agendas of actors whose ideological predecessors might have scorned such symbolic associations previously (Schneiker 2019; Shor 2008: 819). Whereas these studies focus on actors who adopt an anti-Muslim position, this paper’s empirical contribution comes from examining those who advance a Muslim nativist and majoritarian agenda.

Right-wing non-state actors’ active appropriation of the human rights agenda deserves greater scholarly attention for three reasons. First, such appropriation sustains the appearance of compliance and cooperation in the eyes of external (Western) observers, rendering invisible the fact that these actors are working to undermine the human rights agenda significantly in issues concerning the protection of gender, sexual, racial, and religious minorities. Second, because they leverage through a nativist framing, these actors often enjoy the sympathy, if not the tacit support, of political and bureaucratic actors and agents who hold the levers of power in Malaysia’s increasing Islamically-oriented ethnocratic regime (Liow 2009; Mohamad 2020; Wade 2009). Due to a shared scepticism of human rights as a ‘Western’ conspiracy with other state actors, these right-wing activists’ lobbying efforts, unlike their liberal counterparts, can easily translate into concrete policy action (Bielefeldt 1995: 592–593; cf. Freeman 1996; Ignatieff 2001). Contrary to their grievous positioning as underdogs having to contend with a ‘hegemonic’ and ‘foreign’ human rights regime, *these right-wing CSOs work with power holders and brokers, not against them.*³

Third, despite the ‘human rights’ packaging, the positions held by these CSOs overlap with many social conservatives on morality, sexuality, and family values, enabling them to command a sizable local support. As we shall see, this aspect afforded these activists—many of whom are newcomers to the human rights scene—the social capital to leverage populist pressures to undermine other established local human rights agencies’ and activists’ legitimacy by labelling them as ‘pro-Western’, ‘liberal’, and even ‘treasonous’ on social media. By advancing a pro-majoritarian version of human rights, they inject ethno-religious and exclusivist elements, not to mention potentially trans- and homophobic ideas, into local discourses about human rights. The result reshapes public expectations of the role of human rights defenders and overturns the axis of victimhood to portray the majority as the victim of an oppressive Western human rights regime.

In short, this paper examines the (contentious) co-sharing of the human rights rhetorical and institutional space where a globally situated, procedural-centric human rights regime came up against nativist self-proclaimed human rights entrepreneurs who infiltrated its mechanisms and reconfigured its norms while posing as cooperative local partners. It depicts a scenario where semantically recognising an overarching ideal of human rights protection does not necessarily safeguard it against normative and institutional erosion. It shows that CSOs can maintain the human rights façade while acting as cheerleaders of state policies that target, police, and discriminate against socially marginal groupings such as racial, gender, sexual, and religious minorities.

Methodology and Paper Structure

The empirical focus of this paper lies in two areas of interest. The first is the historical and social context in which Malaysia’s right-wing ‘human rights’ activism arose. The second concerns the strategic novelties these right-wing actors introduced, which stood apart from right-wing Islamist actors’ more rejectionist

³This perspective also complicates Hurd’s point about the transformative influence of transnational authorities in defining “the terms of religious conflict and coexistence” (Hurd 2012: 961). In Malaysia, it is local conservative actors who wield such influence, given their proximity to political power. Their appropriation of the human rights discourse further justifies authoritarian exercises of power, as they repackage state-sanctioned religious interventions as protecting one’s ‘rights to religion’.

and hostile treatment of the human rights agenda before the 2010s. It draws heavily from primary sources such as media writings, social media postings, interviews, reports, and publications. It uses a combination of actor tracing and discourse analysis to illustrate the phenomenon. The paper is structured as follows. The first section traces the development of a kind of human rights activism in Malaysia that involves two non-governmental organisations (NGOs): the Centre of Human Rights Research & Advocacy (CENTHRA) and the Malaysian Alliance of Civil Society Organisations in the UPR Process (MACSA) that emerged in the late-2010s.⁴ I argue that these movements are distinctive in their explicit tactical and discursive focus on ‘human rights’. Unlike other Islamist movements, these Islamist NGOs steered clear of party (and partisan) politics. They spent considerable effort positioning themselves as legitimate stakeholders in Malaysia’s human rights agenda, such as participating in the United Nations Human Rights Council’s (HRC) Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and maintaining an active (social) media presence to argue for a more cultural relativist understanding of human rights. Despite their proclaimed ‘human rights’ niche, I argue that we must understand these groups’ activism within the networked effects of other right-wing Islamist affiliates that are also promoting an agenda of Muslim majoritarianism and Islamic cultural supremacy, even as each lobbied in different tones and on different fronts.

The second and third sections provide an account of the two main strategies employed by CENTHRA and MACSA, which I examine under the rubric of ‘getting in’ and ‘pushing out’, respectively. The former refers to how the two groups position themselves as key stakeholders of the Malaysian human rights agenda through vigorous participation in institutional processes and active appropriation of the human rights lexicon and iconography. The latter depicts an aggressive strategy of exposé, shaming, and critique of local human rights agencies and activists, particularly Malaysia’s national human rights institution (NHRI), the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam), for pandering to ‘Western’ understandings of human rights. I argue that these activities aimed to erode the legitimacy of many established human rights actors in the eyes of Malaysians. At the same time, they hollow out the human rights agenda of its norms and commitments, especially concerning the protection of religious and sexual minorities. Through these empirically-grounded observations, this paper denotes how active participation in the human rights agenda on the procedural and rhetorical front does not necessarily entail its consolidation. Rather, the human rights regime in Malaysia appears particularly vulnerable to this two-pronged strategy that saw right-wing actors infiltrating to earn ‘insider’ credentials, on the one hand, and mobilising external pressures to drive the agenda towards majoritarian and chauvinist ends, on the other.

Setting the Scene: The Historical Context of Malaysia’s Right-Wing Activism

Identifying what constitutes Malaysia’s right-wing activism is challenging because communitarianism is central to the postcolonial nation’s social, political, and cultural fabric (Crouch 1996: 152–176; Vasil 1980). The majority of Malaysia’s mainstream political parties are race-based, with many defining memberships in explicitly racial terms.⁵ For the first 60 years of the nation’s history, a Malay-dominated consociational coalition, the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front, BN), led a government that carefully balanced communal interests with maintaining Malay-Muslim hegemony in both politico-economic and socio-cultural spheres (Wong 2018). The idea of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay Overlordship) further legitimised this notion of Malay dominance under the stewardship of the Malay nationalist party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which several factors consolidated and institutionalised.⁶ They include constitutional provisions that recognise the special positions of the Malays,⁷ the political dominance of UMNO vis-à-vis the other component parties in BN (Case 1996), and the mainstreaming

⁴This paper uses NGOs interchangeably with CSOs, giving preference to the former as it comes with less normative baggage.

⁵For example, the membership for the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) admits members only from the titular races, although the UMNO later expanded its membership to include non-Malay *bumiputeras* (indigenous people) to make its way into Sabahan politics. Even the religiously denominated Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) is defined by an overwhelmingly Malay-Muslim membership.

⁶For a primer on the concept of *Ketuanan Melayu*, see Liow (2015).

⁷Article 153 of the Constitution spells out the special position of the Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak, guaranteeing preferential access to the civil service, education, and business licenses and permits. This special position is augmented by the fact that Malaysia’s Head of State will always be one amongst nine Malay rulers, Islam is its official religion, and the Malay

of Malay-preferential affirmative action aimed at reducing Sino-Malay inequalities in the 1970s. However, the latter has since morphed into a political economy that weaved together statist capitalism, clientelism, and a burgeoning Malay middle class (Gomez and Jomo 1999; Menon 2017; Sloane 1999).

Further complicating this picture is that the notion of *Ketuanan Melayu* has gradually taken on the rhetoric of *Ketuanan Islam* (Islam Supremacy) since the 1980s (Chin 2018).⁸ Juxtaposed onto the idea of Malay political dominance is a line of Islamist reasoning that conflated a narrative of social justice for the Malays—who were seen as economically backward when compared to the Chinese—with an idea of cultural justice that demanded the public sphere be transformed and regulated based on Islamic understandings of public morality, *halal* consumption, and personal decency (Liow 2009: 69, 191; Mohamad 2010). One sees this transformation in the incremental implementation of socio-cultural policies that outlawed extramarital sex, alcohol, and non-heteronormative relationships among Muslims. Nonetheless, such effects bled into non-Muslim lives due to the co-sharing of public spaces, as the constantly bumbling discord about liquor sales control evinces (Tee 2021). Nativist arguments supported these conservative yet authoritarian policy positions, with proponents claiming that Islamic values must permeate the social and political space because Islam was the original law of the land prior to the advent of colonialism. I call it nativism because it reflects Higham’s classic definition that based it on an “intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign...connections” (Higham 2002: 4). This nativist streak in Malaysia’s right-wing Islamism is most recently seen in campaigns such as the BMF (Buy Muslim First) movement launched in 2018, which co-opted Malay nationalist sentiments to function as an unstated boycott of non-Muslim-, or mainly ethnic Chinese-, produced goods (Zurairi 2019).

Islam’s increased saliency is arguably inexorable given the interlocking of the Malay identity with the religion and the fact that many interpret Malay/non-Malay divisions in Malaysia, though not always neatly, as a Muslim/non-Muslim partition.⁹ The trend was also intensified by dynamics of top-down Islamisation as a result of UMNO’s competition with its Islamist rival, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), on the one hand; and bottom-up Islamisation that was, following global patterns, advanced by Muslim *dakwah* (missionary) movements that peppered the urban landscape since the 1970s, on the other (Liow 2009: 187–189). In short, a conservative ecosystem has long acclimatised Malay politics, especially after the demise of an inchoate leftist streak following (colonial) state oppression (Weiss 2020b). It is a form of conservatism that rewarded racially and increasingly religiously exclusivist discourses and policies that, in turn, reinforced racial categories and religio-cultural hierarchies. Historically, UMNO’s pragmatic leadership circumscribed the parameters of such exclusivism. They were careful to not perturb Malaysia’s multicultural peace, as it was conducive to the nation’s political stability and economic growth (Kuhonta 2011: 80–117). Put differently, since the 1980s, a Malay-Muslim majoritarian ideology was increasingly institutionalised and normalised yet simultaneously curtailed by an authoritarian state that maintained the equilibrium.¹⁰

If UMNO was the metaphorical lid to these majoritarian forces, its dwindling political strength political strength after the 2008 elections, and even more so after the BN’s historic defeat in the 2018 General Elections, saw right-wing majoritarian activism take off via numerous Malay non-governmental organisations (NGOs).¹¹ Right-wing populist groups such as the Malay nationalist *Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa*

language is the national language. See Moustafa (2018: 54). For the historical context under which the constitution drafted the idea of the Malays’ special position, see Fernando (2005).

⁸I have revised the translation of *ketuanan* from ‘overlordship’ to ‘supremacy’ to signify the changing meaning of the term. The discourse of power-sharing premised on the recognition of Malay indigeneity has now shifted towards one of majoritarian identity politics in which Islam functions as a symbolic resource to “justify and perpetuate a hegemonic and exclusivist religious discourse” (Liow 2016: 169).

⁹A Malay is defined as someone “who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay custom” in Article 160 of the Constitution. Nagata (1984: 57) perceptively observed that as language and custom faded away as distinctive identity markers of Malayness due to cultural integration, Islam became “the last bastion” of Malay identity.

¹⁰For example, the existence of the (now-defunct) Internal Security Act, Sedition Act, and the Printing Presses and Publication Act has limited the parameters of free speech, often in the name of maintaining racial harmony. Nonetheless, the weight of the law more frequently impacts those questioning UMNO’s rule instead of those who spewed anti-minority hate speeches (*Malaysiakini* 2012).

¹¹Abdul Hamid and Ismail’s (2014) tracing of how a more assertive form of conservative Islamism has risen during Abdullah Badawi’s leadership (2003–2009) provides a genealogy of said developments, whereby the mutual reinforcement of weakening

Malaysia (PERKASA, Malaysian Indigenous Empowerment Organisation) and the Islamist *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia* (ISMA, Malaysian Muslim Solidarity) painted UMNO's demise as a result of non-Malays and non-Muslims colluding to overturn the long-established Malay political order.¹² Their messaging often signalled the Malaysian Chinese as the main culprit. We may consider these groups populist, as their activism frames their struggle as 'elite vs masses'. However, their underlying worldview is nativist, wherein corrupted Malay elites have forsaken the indigenous Malay masses by selling out to Chinese interests whom they see as *pendatang*s (immigrants/outside rs).¹³ This penchant for populist politics is why social media is so central to their strategies. The platform's aggregating strength allows these right-wing groups to mobilise populist opinion against minority-friendly groups and agendas they oppose, as we shall see later.

I categorise these groups as 'right-wing' because they shift a conservative Malay-Muslim nationalist discourse to extreme positions. These groups did so via fiery rhetoric, such as PERKASA's threat to burn Bibles (*Today Online* 2014); advocating for an extra-parliamentary rule, such as ISMA's proposal for "semi-democratic" rule to preserve Malay-Muslim hegemony (Yahaya 2020);¹⁴ and championing a form of racial exclusivism to replace the old model of Malay-dominated consociationalism with a Malay-Muslim-only government. ISMA, in particular, has spearheaded aggressive online campaigns and electoral strategies to dislodge non-Malay parties from the ruling coalitions of the BN and, later, the *Perikatan Nasional* (National Alliance, PN).¹⁵ Moreover, it is telling that a party with strong connections to connections to ISMA, Berjasa (the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front), have joined a coalition called *Gerakan Tanah Air* (Homeland Movement – GTA), which fielded no non-Muslim candidates in the 2022 General Elections (Cheema 2022). Long-time observers will not find ISMA's total political exclusion of non-Muslims surprising, given that it has been their long-term goal (Ahmad Fauzi and Che Hamdan 2023). What is more concerning is the gradual mainstreaming of these views. In the 2022 General Elections, PN, which won the second highest number of parliamentary seats, fielded a paltry number of non-Malay and non-Muslim candidates, far fewer when compared to the UMNO-dominated BN. This trajectory of mainstreaming Malay-Muslim majoritarianism appears to mimic that of the Hindu majoritarian Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, which currently has no Muslim representation in parliament and does not seem to care about changing the situation as they continued to field a negligible amount of Muslim candidates in elections and propagate an exclusivist rhetoric that clearly targeted the Muslim population (Bhatnagar 2022).

Complicating efforts to call out these actors extreme right-wing positions is their mainstream social existence. Even though academic writings have addressed them as worrying trends, these actors were rarely subjected them to the social stigma that befell far-right groups in the West (Harteveld *et al.* 2019). For example, they could still meet or share platforms with ministers and senior civil servants, hold columns in mainstream newspapers, and join umbrella organisations with other more moderate

Malay leadership and UMNO's diminished electoral fortunes served as the backdrop to the rising influence of right-wing ethno-religious populists.

¹²On Perkasa and ISMA's right-wing activism, see Hamayotsu (2018); Hew (2016a); Pusat KOMAS (2016: 8, 16, 18); *Malaysiakini* (2014).

¹³On populist ideology, see Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 5–19). On a sample of writing by the President of ISMA that belied such elite disillusionment, see Ismaweb (2021).

¹⁴The article uses the pandemic and Malaysia's political instability to justify its advocacy for semi-democratic rule, in that besides the Prime Minister, all ministers and Government-linked Companies appointees cannot be parliamentarians but rather "technocrats and civil servants". To be fair, such calls to nullify parliamentary rule during the pandemic were not exclusive to ISMA. But proponents were mostly politicians as most CSOs in Malaysia favoured parliamentary oversight instead of doing away with it. The article's claim that the political chaos has led to Malay-Muslim interests being "pawned", when coupled with its call for extra-parliamentary rule, reveal its fascistic undertones.

¹⁵The two prongs of ISMA's strategy is as follows. The first is to set up a Facebook page called *Gerakan Pengundi Sedar* (Voter Awareness Movement, GPS) that urged voters to vote for 'credible Muslim candidates'. Of all the candidates they endorse, none of them were from the *Pakatan Harapan* (Alliance of Hope, PH) coalition that advocated for a more multi-ethnic model of politics. Second, during the 14th General Election in 2018, when BN or PAS did not send a Muslim candidate in a Malay-majority area, ISMA, under the banner of Berjasa, would send their own Muslim candidates to contest against the non-Malay candidates, aiming to break the long-term compromise in Malaysia that candidates do not always have to reflect the majority race of a constituency, so that ethnic minorities can still gain meaningful representation. See Abdul Hamid and Che Mohd Razali (2016: 9); Hew (2018b).

Malay-Muslim CSOs with little to no pushback.¹⁶ This situation is appalling if one considers that, according to Mudde's definition, we should regard these groups as the "far right" due to their hostility to liberal democracy characterised by extreme exclusivist attitudes towards minorities, including calling them "invaders" at one point (Mudde 2019: 15; Zahiid 2014). Nevertheless, calling out their ideological positions is fraught with risks, especially if the messenger is based in Malaysia. An academic who called ISMA 'extreme right-wing' in an article saw it withdrawn from its Singapore-based platform after one of the individuals named in the article threatened a lawsuit (Tayeb 2022). The social acceptance of what may look to many as discriminatory, if not extreme, positions further insulate some of these actors from critique, enabling them to infiltrate a traditionally 'liberal' domain such as human rights.

Majoritarianism as Human Rights: The Centring of Human Rights in Malaysia's Right-Wing Islamist Activism

The emergence of right-wing NGOs that position themselves as human rights organisations is connected to the developments above. The gradual weakening of UMNO that resulted in its ouster from government in 2018 and the pervasiveness of what Hew calls "liquid Islamism" emerging from the overlapping between pious, urbane Muslim middle-class aspirations and an increasingly Syariah-minded political consciousness resulted in the mushrooming of numerous Muslim pressure groups in areas ranging from consumerist interests to women's issues (Hew 2017). As a social movement, these Muslim NGOs are comprised of urban middle-class activists seeking to actualise their ideas of Islamic rule in Malaysia through non-electoral means, such as ideas propagation, public pressuring, and stakeholder lobbying. Due to their conservative outlooks, they tend to differ, and at times clash, with the more progressive NGOs on issues of sexual morality, censorship, religious freedom, and social inequalities in Malaysia (Lim 2013; Ahmad Fauzi and Che Mohd Razali 2016: 7–10).

To be sure, Malay-Muslim groups also inhabit the progressive parts of Malaysia's NGO ecosystem, as in the cases of the Sisters In Islam (SIS), the Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF), and *Komuniti Muslim Universal Malaysia* (KMU). Their efforts to advance a more humanistic and feminist reinterpretation of Islamic orthodoxies inform their activism (Basaruddin 2016; Rahim 2018: 197–98). However, by virtue of their professed Malay-Muslim identity, the state and religious establishment significantly censured and ostracised these groups. For example, SIS was labelled 'deviant' in a *fatwa* (religious edict); IRF's book was banned; and KMU activists were doxed and harassed, forcing some to seek temporary asylum abroad (KMU *et al.* 2021: 5; Mohamad 2020: 141; Yatim 2019). The harsh treatment of these liberal Muslim NGOs, often cheered on by their right-wing counterparts, shows how the contestation of norms and rights has expanded from a 'state-CSOs' axis to a 'culture war' *between* the CSOs (Awang 2019). Tamir Moustafa's work traces this 'war' back to a "rights-versus-rites" binary that saw controversial court cases manufactured into public spectacles that, in turn, drew public opinion and competing activists into skirmishes that sought to settle the question of Malaysia's secular/Islamic identity in a zero-sum and high-stakes manner (Moustafa 2018: 6).

These battles' increased stakes eventually leaked into the UPR process, in which Malaysia has participated since 2008. To summarise briefly, the UPR is a process that enables the HRC to review the human rights record of a country every five years. The process involves assessing reports from governments, independent experts, and national stakeholders such as NHRIs and NGOs. After the review, states receive recommendations to improve their human rights condition, which they can accept or simply note. The UPR initially attracted many NGOs from the liberal end of the value spectrum, who organised themselves as the Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the UPR Process (COMANGO). However, by its third round of review in 2018, the participants had diversified, with groups such as CENHRA and MACSA emerging as a conservative Islamist bloc.

CENHRA and MACSA arose as the successor to a coalition of Muslim NGOs, MuslimUPRO (Muslim NGOs in the UPR Process), that came into the scene during Malaysia's second UPR in 2013. MuslimUPRO argued that the Malaysian government's proposals in response to the UPR process must

¹⁶ISMA, for example, is a member of the Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN). In ACCIN, they share a platform with other more moderate Islamist CSOs like the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) and Pertubuhan Ikram Malaysia (IKRAM).

be “properly based on Syariah laws and the Federal Constitution” (*Human Rights in ASEAN 2013a*). When compared to its successors, MuslimUPRo was more confrontational and disagreeable. In 2013, it attacked COMANGO as foreign-funded and successfully pushed for it to be banned (Kamal 2014; Zurairi 2013). They also polemically claimed that “unqualified persons” represented Muslim-majority nations while drafting international human rights conventions (*Human Rights in ASEAN 2013c*). Nonetheless, they had dropped these aggressive stances by the time of CENHRA’s and MACSA’s establishment. They even obscured the Muslim aspect of their identities by eliminating the term ‘Muslim’ from their names.

At this point, a brief introduction of the two groups is due. Azril Mohd Amin, who once headed MuslimUPRo, founded CENHRA in 2014. It calls itself a research and advocacy organisation that

*...provide[s] an alternative to the global human rights perspective in order to offer a more balanced view that is respectful particularly of the Muslim faith and tradition and, in general, the Abrahamic tradition (emphasis original).*¹⁷

Nonetheless, the true successor to MuslimUPRo is MACSA, established in 2018. It claims to represent 52 NGOs (including CENHRA), with most, if not all, being Muslim NGOs. Many of these NGOs were involved in MuslimUPRo, including the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) and ISMA.¹⁸ Co-chaired by Azril Mohd Amin and a University Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) lecturer in physiology, Rafidah Hanim Mokhtar (henceforth: Dr Rafidah), during its founding, MACSA also proclaimed strengthening human rights as its agenda, although it was couched in an Islamist- and nativist-inflected language (something I will return to below).

We can understand the entry of MuslimUPRo, and later CENHRA and MACSA, into the human rights scene in Malaysia as an act to counterbalance the perceived preponderance of liberal CSOs, such as Suhakam and the various groups within COMANGO in the UPR process. Yet, unlike many Islamist actors who viewed human rights as an outright Western import not worth engaging in, CENHRA and MACSA have fronted human rights activism as their *raison d’être*. They call themselves ‘human rights defenders’ *explicitly* and have positioned themselves as informed stakeholders who should be consulted in the UPR process. They have done so by meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss the UPR, submitting a stakeholders’ report to the HRC for review, celebrating International Human Rights Day on their social media page, and even sending delegates to participate in the UPR process as observers in Geneva.

Key Personalities and Ideological Affiliations

Even as it played down such associations, MACSA’s Islamist and nativist leanings are noticeable in three aspects: its internal composition, right-wing ideological affiliations, and issue positions.¹⁹ Firstly, the groups that came under the coalition are mainly Islamist organisations, including the Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN), one of the largest Islamist umbrella organisations in the country. One of the oldest Islamist NGOs in Malaysia, ABIM, founded by the prominent politician and (as of this writing) sitting Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, is one of MACSA’s members as well.²⁰ Secondly, the group overlaps with the aforementioned right-wing Islamist group, ISMA, in terms of its personnel and public position. Thus, it is hardly surprising that MACSA’s most prominent activists have taken some relatively hard-line positions on issues concerning politics, identity, gender, and religion. For instance, the co-chairperson of MACSA, Dr Rafidah, was the information chief of the women’s wing

¹⁷“Who we are”, at centhra.org/who-we-are/

¹⁸“MACSA IN UPR 2018”, *wafiq.my*, 30 October 2018. Available at <https://wafiq.my/2018/10/30/press-statement-malaysian-alliance-of-civil-society-organisations-in-the-upr-process-macsa/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

¹⁹The confluence of Islamism and nativism can be seen in Vedi Hadiz’s study of Islamic populism, see Hadiz (2018). I hesitate to use the term ‘populism’ to discuss MACSA and CENHRA because they were not involved in the kind of popular mobilisation embarked by populist movements, nor were they enjoying sizeable popular support as groups like the *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defenders Front, FPI) in Indonesia has.

²⁰See <https://macsa.com.my/who-we-are/>. In any case, ABIM was not actively involved in the daily operations of MACSA (Interview with senior ABIM member, 19 January 2022).

of ISMA, which, according to Abdul Hamid and Che Mohd Razali, maintains an “anachronistically xenophobic and ethnocentric worldview” (Abdul Hamid and Che Mohd Razali 2016: 7). Back in 2014, Dr Rafidah was herself involved in ISMA’s push to get COMANGO banned for challenging “the position of Islam in Malaysia and spreading ‘liberalism teachings’ backed by Western powers” (*Malay Mail Online* 2014). She claimed that the “sacrosanctity of Islam is at stake” because COMANGO was pushing for “the flourishing of LGBT culture” (Mokhtar 2014).

The other co-chairperson of MACSA since 2019, Lukman Sheriff Alias, is a lawyer involved in opposing the Malaysian government’s ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) (Othman *et al.* 2018).²¹ ISMA also took a vehemently anti-ICERD stance, engineering a massive protest by galvanising Malay-Muslim political parties and NGOs (Hew 2018).²² Lukman was reportedly part of a conservative Islamist faction trying to gain hold of Malaysia’s relatively liberal Bar Council and a key proponent of legal reforms that would elevate the power of Syariah courts in Malaysia’s parallel court system (*Malay Mail Online* 2017).²³ The former co-chairperson of MACSA and current chief executive of CENHRA, Azril, was once caught in a controversy for reportedly calling for a ban on Christian evangelicalism, claiming that a “high number” of Muslims were “leaving the faith” (Jalil 2017).²⁴ ISMA similarly propagated a moral panic through an (as yet unproven) conspiracy of Christians “infiltrating” Putrajaya (Choong 2019).

Thirdly, MACSA primarily directed its human rights advocacy at issues of most interest to proponents of Islamism. On the domestic front, these focused on conceptions of moral sins, such as the LGBT issue, extramarital sex,²⁵ and alcohol consumption (Mokhtar 2020b). Their ‘human rights’ worldview is linked to their push for increased Syariahisation of Malaysian laws, which they believe to be a solution to such social ills (Abdul Hamid 2018). For example, MACSA activists supported a bill called RUU 355 that would have removed the constitutional barrier for the state government of Kelantan to implement Hudud laws that criminalise adultery with punishments that included stoning to death or 40 to 80 lashes for any Muslim caught drinking intoxicating substances (Abdullah Sani 2015). MACSA also criticised many non-Muslim politicians who questioned the bill as politicising “Islamophobia” (MACSA 2022: 17). These MACSA activists justified their religio-conservative positions through either revisionist legal arguments that claim the constitution underscores Islam’s supremacy as the “religion of the federation” in Article 3(1),²⁶ or nativist, majoritarian reasoning that “the national identity must be based on the indigenous culture of the nation, with Malay civilisation and culture as well as Islam being the main and important component” (MACSA 2018: 44). On the international front, issues of Muslim persecution such as the Rohingya refugee crisis, the Palestinian issue, and the Xinjiang problem remains the mainstay, if not the sole focus, of their advocacy, with much energy spent on highlighting the hypocrisy of the Western liberal order.

To summarise, we can view MACSA and CENHRA as Islamists because they demonstrate notable features of political Islam-in-action. Their activism sought to impose doctrinal purity in public spaces and Muslim private lives, relied on victimhood discourses (and, at times, conspiracy theories) to create a sense of empowerment, and championed increased Syariahisation (in law, if not in cultural norms and practices) as a bulwark against secularism (Abdul Hamid 2018; Roy 1994: 79–82; Yilmaz and Albayrak 2021). However, as newcomers to the human rights scene, MACSA and CENHRA made little effort to combine the universalistic aspiration in the conventional human rights tradition with Islamic teachings.²⁷ Instead, they have focused on championing an Islamist agenda reframed in nativist and cultural

²¹ICERD was ratified by 55 out of the 57 Organisation of Islamic Cooperation nations, so Malaysia is not the norm but an exception.

²²On the fracas about ICERD in Malaysian politics, see Jayasooria (2021).

²³On Malaysia’s parallel legal system, see Tew (2011).

²⁴Nonetheless, all demographic projections have shown that the Muslim population in Malaysia is bound to increase to 72 per cent in 2050 from 64 per cent in 2010. See *Malay Mail Online* (2015).

²⁵See, for example, Dr Rafidah’s position that Malaysia’s “education system should teach students that sexual intimacy should only exist within a legal marriage” at Mokhtar (2020a).

²⁶To what extent the clause dictates the theocratic or secular nature of the Malaysian state is far from clear; see Moustafa (2018).

²⁷See an example of such effort at An-Naim (2021).

relativist terms. Their ideological worldview also made their ‘human rights’ agenda exclusionary to the religious, sexual, racial, and gender minorities that historically and today remain the usual target of human rights abuses in Malaysia, although CENHRA has highlighted issues of statelessness concerning Malaysian Indians and the *Orang Asli* (MACSA 2018: 28).

Discursive Framings and Strategies

There is nothing inherently problematic or unique about conservative religiopolitical activism, which one can trace historically to the Asian values debate in Southeast Asia and geographically to conservative evangelical politics in the United States (Hoon 2004; Smith 2000). However, case studies in Israel, where a human rights vocabulary is used to justify a right-wing discourse of ‘settler justice’, or in Europe, where Generation Identity’s “rights to identity” ultimately championed a xenophobic cause, should warn us from taking these ‘human rights’ turns at face value (Schneiker 2019; Shor 2008). In Malaysia, right-wing actors’ appropriation of the human rights agenda is a concerning development for two reasons. First, these campaigns redefine the language of human rights to limit its parameters of protection and undercut its potential for emancipation, thereby justifying extending state authoritarianism and the continued marginalisation of disadvantaged and stigmatised minorities. Second, their discourse subverts the content of human rights traditionally aimed at securing the rights of marginalised minorities living under majoritarian pressures. Right-wing ‘human rights’ narratives flip the discourse by reinventing the ‘majority’ as the persecuted group, going squarely against academic and activist findings of Malaysia’s narrowing religious and cultural space due to state-backed Islamisation pressures (Dettman 2020; Liow 2009; Mohamad 2020).

One uncovers MACSA’s subversion of the human rights agenda in three aspects of its framing. First, MACSA’s stated agenda dilutes the human rights agenda by situating the UDHR within the triple confines of cultural relativism, doctrinal supremacy, and statist exceptionalism. These elements emerge in MACSA’s message concerning human rights improvement measures undertaken following the UPR:

‘...in addition to upholding international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 (UDHR), the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam 1990 (CDHRI) and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration 2012 (AHRD), [they must] also be in tandem with Malaysia’s own laws and customs, particularly with the Federal Constitution and the Constitutions and positions of the States existing within the Federation’.²⁸

There is no question that the human rights agenda has always struggled between universalistic ideals and particularistic contexts, including in Western settings (Sekvon 2003). However, by ringfencing the discourse of human rights within the CDHRI, AHRD, and national laws,²⁹ MACSA narrows the usual scope of protection that the human rights project affords. By conflating higher and humanistic ideals with a meshwork of declarations and national exceptionalisms that preponderantly skew towards protecting pre-existing patriarchal and regime-affirming hierarchies, its version of human rights risks eroding whatever checks and balances against state and majoritarian excesses the project promises—even if only as moral support—to victims of oppression and discrimination (Feher 2000).

Second, the discourse that MACSA employs obscures and subverts human rights guarantees of freedom and choice with euphemisms such as “religious and health rights of LGBT persons”—the language it used in its stakeholders’ report to the UPR Process (MACSA 2018: 6). These euphemisms diverted the LGBT rights discourse in two directions. The first was a medicalised discourse that depicted LGBT communities as (treatable) public health issues culpable for the transmission of HIV and other “high-risk

²⁸“MACSA Formed to Strengthen Human Rights in Malaysia”, November 16, 2017, at <https://macsa.com.my/macsa-formed-to-strengthen-human-rights-in-malaysia/>. One should note that the legislation behind the founding of Suhakam only mentioned the UDHR and the Federal Constitution as its reference (see Section 4(4) of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia Act 1997), which has been a bugbear for right-wing Islamist activists.

²⁹On the CDHRI, and especially contentions about its cultural relativism and the gap between rhetoric and practice in Muslim states, see Afshari (1994); al-Ahsan (2008).

behaviours” (Cheh 2018).³⁰ MACSA activists also condemned the phenomenon as a “lifestyle” stemming from a “liberal fascist” ideology that “goes against the prevailing sentiments and religious concerns of the general public” (Amin and Mokhtar 2018). They actively pushed for state intervention to protect the “Muslim public against immoral and indecent acts”.³¹ With a handful of Christian representatives, MACSA activists also invoked the idea that the LGBT ‘lifestyle’ is against *all religious traditions* and the principles of “courtesy and morality” within Malaysia’s *Rukun Negara* (National Principles).³²

The second direction was a ‘religious rights’ discourse that stressed the LGBT communities’ right to “religious input” and education.³³ What these narratives concealed was their support of controversial state-sponsored religious programmes. One example is the Mukharyam programme that claims to inculcate “spiritual awareness through a religious approach (tauhid) to face the challenges of life and abandon the practice of unnatural sex”, which led to comparisons with ‘conversion’ therapies in the West (Jain and Ghoshal 2018; Rahman 2020). Human Rights Watch (HRW) even describes these programmes as “manipulating LGBT people into believing they are deviant” (HRW and Justice for Sisters 2022: 19–20). Although MACSA insisted these programmes are voluntary,³⁴ the HRW’s research disputed that notion by demonstrating that participants received inducements to participate (*ibid.*: 21). MACSA’s preoccupation with defending these controversial programmes from criticisms contrasts against its silence on Malaysia’s criminalisation of homosexuality and transgender people through Penal Code and Syariah enactments (Tan 2019: 201–204). Put differently, rather than addressing legal and religious-moral stigmatisation of LGBT communities, MACSA shifts the problem to their alleged deprivation of religious and spiritual care, which it never substantiated empirically (MACSA 2018: 38–41).

Third, MACSA’s appropriation of the human rights agenda aims to strengthen a majoritarian-nativist agenda through the creative engineering of majoritarian victimhood. The majoritarian-centricity of MACSA’s human rights discourses appears in its founding statement. It argued that the term “indigenous people” in human rights discourse must include the Malay majority.³⁵ In reality, however, the term occurs specifically in human rights discourses to refer to the aboriginal *Orang Asli* who face severe social and economic marginalisation (Gomez 2014). Given their small population, approximately 0.7 per cent of the peninsula’s population, this specific term sets the *Orang Asli* apart from the Malay community in Malaysia, who “constitute the majority and are politically, economically and socially dominant”.³⁶ Even though many of the *Orang Asli* were not Muslims, MACSA still advocates for their assimilation through “educational and Islamic outreach” to encourage them “to adopt Malay language and to assimilate to Malay culture and customs”.³⁷ The irony is certainly not lost here that, despite their pro-Uyghur positions, MACSA is adopting a vernacular that could easily be construed as entering cultural genocide territory (Finley 2021).

MACSA’s many statements and articles also propagated a victimhood narrative that pictures the majority Malay-Muslim community as systematically subjected to Islamophobia (MACSA 2018: 5–8;

³⁰One of the complaints lodged in MACSA’s stakeholders report was about liberal NGOs’ criticisms of a research academy—an academy headed by Dr Rafidah herself—accused of medicalising the LGBT issue for a religious agenda despite not having the credentials. Interestingly, the report calls the criticism an assault on “academic freedom”. See MACSA (2018:40).

³¹“Uphold Religious and Spiritual Values on Sexual Morality and Family Unit.”, July 23, 2020 at <https://macsa.com.my/uphold-religious-and-spiritual-values-on-sexual-morality-and-family-unit/>

³²The *Rukun Negara* was drafted as a national philosophy after Malaysia’s devastating racial riots in 1969. Its five principles are (i) Belief in God, (ii) Loyalty to King and Country, (iii) Supremacy of the Constitution, (iv) Rule of Law, and (v) Courtesy and Morality. The principles themselves are not legally binding and remain a source of contention and semantical acrobatics for proponents of various forms of politics, whether secular or religious.

³³“Uphold Religious and Spiritual Values on Sexual Morality and Family Unit.”, July 23, 2020 at <https://macsa.com.my/uphold-religious-and-spiritual-values-on-sexual-morality-and-family-unit/>

³⁴“Mukharyam: Honour the Religious Rights of LGBTQ People”, August 5, 2020, at <https://macsa.com.my/mukharyam-honour-the-religious-rights-of-lgbtq-people/>

³⁵“MACSA Formed to Strengthen Human Rights in Malaysia”, November 16, 2017, at <https://macsa.com.my/macsa-formed-to-strengthen-human-rights-in-malaysia/>

³⁶International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA). “Malaysia”, at <https://www.iwgia.org/en/malaysia.html#:~:text=A%20of%202017%2C%20the%20Indigenous,collectively%20known%20as%20Orang%20Asal.>

³⁷“MACSA Formed to strengthen Human Rights in Malaysia”, November 16, 2017, at <https://macsa.com.my/macsa-formed-to-strengthen-human-rights-in-malaysia/>

Alias and Mokhtar 2021). For example, referencing a case where the court ruled that the consent of *both parents* is needed before a child can be converted to Islam (as a safeguard against the controversies of unilateral conversions), the stakeholders' report MACSA submitted calls it "the discrimination against parental rights of Muslim reverts", effectively invoking the idea of Muslim supremacy in what is supposedly an issue of co-parenthood (MACSA 2018: 67–68).³⁸ Echoing the use of Hinduphobia to stymie dissent by Hindu nationalists (Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective 2021; Masih 2021), MACSA also published a report on Islamophobia that condemned perceived negative media depictions of Islam, as well as any criticisms of Malaysia's "Muslim-dominated government", as 'Islamophobic' (MACSA 2021). By citing (without context) scholarly critiques of Islamophobia meant to highlight the plight of Muslim minorities subjected to majoritarian treatment (*ibid.*: 19–20), the report appropriates the moral indignation behind the term to justify its narrative of majoritarian victimhood.³⁹ Unsurprisingly, it is utterly silent about legitimate minority fears of assimilative pressures and the continuous erosion of their political, economic, and cultural rights in Malaysia (Harding *et al.* 2018).

It is also worth noting that MACSA's majoritarian and revisionist interpretation of the human rights agenda did not refer at all to pressing issues that needed international pressure to overcome state inaction, such as two well-reported cases of enforced disappearances in Malaysia.⁴⁰ Instead of targeting the socially and politically marginalised, the human rights agenda that groups like MACSA advance merely reproduces the political mainstream that saw minority interests tossed aside when the competition in Malaysia for Malay-Muslim votes intensified from the late 2000s (Case 2021). In other words, such majoritarian appropriation and derailing of the human rights agenda does not broaden the terms of debate but constricts and narrows the circle of victimhood to favour the status quo and all its attendant power imbalances. Worse, it portrays the many racial, sexual, and religious minorities as victors and persecutors, effectively gaslighting minority woes and individual experiences of injustice amidst the rising currents of Muslim majoritarianism in Malaysia (Hew 2020b).

This section has thus far laid out the broader political context, the social ecosystem, and the ideological worldview that sparked the infiltration of a kind of right-wing Islamist activism into the human rights domain. The following section will focus on two aspects of 'human rights' politics that groups such as CENHRA and MACSA undertook to mainstream their religious majoritarian version of 'human rights'. They include institutional and discursive strategies of '*getting in*' that help right-wing actors gain legitimacy in formal human rights processes and aggressive strategies of '*pushing out*' that ostracise liberal rivals and status quo gatekeepers through tactics of *exposé* and public shaming.

'Getting In': Gaining Legitimacy as a 'Human Rights Defender'

Despite their efforts to reformulate and resist what they see as 'foreign' human rights norms, actors from MACSA and CENHRA actively position themselves as 'insiders' to the cause. Their nativist positions notwithstanding, these groups often resort to English (instead of the national language of Malay) as their primary medium of communication. This strategy dovetails with the fact that English remains the working language for human rights advocacy in Malaysia and internationally. Echoing Generation Identity's appropriation of symbols associated with Amnesty International (Schneiker 2019: 160), MACSA's full name, the Malaysian Alliance of Civil Society Organisations in the UPR Process, bears a striking resemblance to COMANGO's (The Coalition of Malaysian NGOs in the UPR process). Notably, both use a similar blue hue in their logos. Most tellingly, when COMANGO raised concerns about MACSA having an almost identical name yet adopting abjectly contradictory stands on issues of "female genital mutilation (FGM) or cutting, whipping, polygamy, and women's and girls' unequal

³⁸Note the use of the term 'Muslim revert' in the report, which is the preferred terminology of some *dakwah* movements, implying a return to an 'original' (born-again) state. The term contrasts with 'convert' that highlights change, which arguably speaks better to a scenario that necessitates readjustments from all parties, such as in the case of a child's religious upbringing when one parent converted.

³⁹Notwithstanding the empirical fact that Malaysia's Head of State, all its Prime Ministers and deputy Prime Ministers, all senior ministers in the PN government (2018–2022), its head of police and military, and more than 80 percent of the civil service are Malay Muslims.

⁴⁰See the two cases of enforced disappearance of Pastor Raymond Koh and Amri Che Mat at Suhakam (2021).

inheritance” (COMANGO 2018: 1–2), MACSA fired back at COMANGO for their “unprovoked, malicious attacks on their *fellow human rights defenders* (emphasis added).⁴¹

This effort to build ‘insider credentials’ as a human rights defender benefitted from MACSA’s active participation in the UPR process, such as submitting their stakeholders’ report and sending a delegate to the UPR sessions in Geneva. The group also provided training for those wishing to participate in future UPR processes, a move aimed at breaking the hold of liberal human rights actors on these mechanisms. This newfound proclivity towards technocratic activism that departs from the kind of protest and mobilisational politics in MuslimUPRo days helps sharpen MACSA’s image as a civil and legitimate stakeholder within the human rights agenda. Despite their synergistic origins and alignment in ideological positions, MACSA’s leaders have softly distanced themselves from ultra-conservative groups such as ISMA to focus on their human rights activism.⁴² This decision, in turn, enhances MACSA’s appeal to the (upper) middle-class Malay-Muslim bourgeoisie that prefers a more intellectual outlook in one’s activism (Abaza 1999).

This strategy of ‘getting in’ appears to be astonishingly successful given that, despite being a newcomer to the scene, MACSA was one of the few ‘human rights bodies the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) consulted in 2018 when formulating a new foreign policy framework (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019: Annex 3). MOFA cemented their legitimacy as ‘human rights defenders’ by engaging MACSA as the putative Islamic bloc alongside other human rights stakeholders such as Suhakam and COMANGO during the UPR process in 2018. Astoundingly, this event happened during PH’s administration (2018–2019). Logically, PH should have been less friendly to actors with putative ties to right-wing Muslim NGOs like ISMA, as they led a vehement oppositional campaign against the PH government they deemed anti-Malay and anti-Islam (Hew 2020a). Interestingly, media reports had labelled MACSA as “human rights defenders”, even as one journalist acknowledged COMANGO’s and MACSA’s clashing interpretations of human rights, not to mention the latter’s smear campaign against the former a few years earlier (Zurairi 2018). By 2021, MACSA and CENHRA gained column spaces in Malay and English mainstream newspapers, such as *New Straits Times*, *Berita Harian*, and *Utusan Malaysia*, where their activists frequently wrote about human rights issues (Amin 2021; Meor Mazli 2021; Mokhtar 2021a).

Nevertheless, successfully ‘getting in’ was not unexpected, as MACSA activists already enjoyed considerable ‘insider’ access. For a start, the group’s conservative Islamist take on human rights issues has always enjoyed some degree of sympathy and support from many within Malaysia’s civil service, particularly the Islamic bureaucracy. The Federal Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (JAKIM) has collaborated with various Islamist NGOs, including ISMA, to counter ‘liberal’ causes in Malaysia (Mohamad 2020: 144–145). The *Majlis Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan* (the Islamic Council of the Federal Territories, MAIWP) reportedly sponsored MACSA’s delegation to Geneva.⁴³ Moreover, Azril Mohd Amin, the head of CENHRA, was a special officer to Malaysia’s 8th Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin (2020–2021), giving him insider access due to the “social and Islamic affairs” clusters he oversaw (Solhi 2021). After Muhyiddin’s resignation, Azril was appointed Chief Executive Officer of the Institute Masa Depan Malaysia (MASA), a think tank linked to Muhyiddin’s party, the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU) (*Berita Harian* 2018).⁴⁴ Dr Rafidah, on the other hand, is a public university professor who, as of this writing, serves as a member of the Women’s Council of the *Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia* (Islamic Dakwah Foundation of Malaysia, YADIM)—a state-funded body coordinating the *dakwah* activities of Muslim NGOs.⁴⁵ She is also the President of The International Women’s

⁴¹“MACSA : COMANGO Attack Of Fellow Human Rights Defenders Smacks Of Diversion And Desperation.”, 28 June 2018. Available at <https://wafiq.my/2018/06/08/comango-attack-of-fellow-human-rights-defenders-smacks-of-diversion-and-desperation-macsa/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁴²For example, MuslimUPRo’s push for COMANGO to be banned in 2013 was complemented by ISMA’s (which was one of its members) campaign to collect one million signatures in support of the call. See *Human Rights in ASEAN* (2013b).

⁴³“MACSA Formed to Strengthen Human Rights in Malaysia”, 16 November 2017. Available at <https://macsa.com.my/macsa-formed-to-strengthen-human-rights-in-malaysia/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁴⁴*Institut Masa Depan Malaysia buat kajian mendalam hala tuju parti, orang Melayu* [Institut Masa Depan Malaysia to research about the future of the party and the Malays], *Berita Harian*, December 30, 2018 at <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/politik/2018/12/514530/institut-masa-depan-malaysia-buat-kajian-mendalam-hala-tuju-parti>.

⁴⁵“President’s Biography” at <https://wafiq.my/biodata-presiden/>

Alliance for Family Institution and Quality Education (WAFIQ)—also part of MACSA—working with the religious authorities in Malaysia in their Mukhayyam programmes that claim to serve those who have ‘repented’ from their LGBT lifestyles.⁴⁶ Put differently, despite their polemics that ‘human rights’ is merely a playground for the liberal detached elites, the prime movers of this conservative, nativist, and Islamist version of human rights activism in Malaysia are very much a part of the upper social classes too.

‘Pushing Out’: Networked Assault on Suhakam and Human Rights Activists

CENTHRA’s and MACSA’s strategy of positioning themselves as competent human rights insiders also generated substantial pressure for many established human rights organisations, such as COMANGO and Suhakam. Acting as dedicated ‘human rights’ observers, these groups often resorted to critiques and exposés to *push* ‘liberal’ human rights organisations into public attention to invite state intervention or public backlash. I have already discussed efforts to get COMANGO banned in the early 2010s above. Recently, these groups have directed efforts of ‘pushing out’ at Suhakam, admittedly the most important party to Malaysia’s UPR processes, given its status as the NHRI.

At this point, it is worth briefly surveying Suhakam’s role, which has been a matter of fierce debate. Established in 2000 under the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia Act 1999, Suhakam is a statutory body that enjoys an international mandate established by the Paris Principles, which guarantees it “some measure of financial, personal, and institutional autonomy from the government” (Thio 2009: 1276). In practice, however, Suhakam is still dependent on state funding and appointments (such as the appointment of its commissioners) and plays more of an advisory and educational role in mediating between international norms and local contexts to advance human rights agendas (*ibid.*: 1299–1300; Whiting 2003: 73). By having an investigative mandate that allows the agency to examine and report on allegations of human rights abuse (even though it cannot enforce laws), Suhakam often finds itself in an unenviable position where human rights NGOs accuse it as being “toothless” and the government sees it as a nuisance (Thio 2009: 1334–37). A fair assessment of Suhakam would be that it helps with the “popularization of human rights” (*ibid.*: 1305), even if the agency maintains strict ‘no-go’ zones on issues of race and religion, directly contradicting the Paris Principles’ special emphasis on combatting racial discrimination.⁴⁷ Even as Suhakam’s silence on many racial and religious discrimination issues exasperated critics, human rights NGOs have thus far been able to count on Suhakam as a distant ally to uphold human rights standards that are, at least nominally, anti-authoritarian and committed to protecting minority rights. However, that could change as right-wing ‘human rights’ activists have astutely targeted Suhakam itself as a site for contention, infiltration, and subversion.

Although it has maintained a working relationship with Suhakam on selected issues such as child rights and the Convention against Torture (CAT),⁴⁸ MACSA has resolutely disagreed with Suhakam on topics such as abolishing the death penalty and Sedition Act, child marriage, and tackling discrimination towards ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities. Concerning these issues, MACSA hewed to the position of the conservative pro-Malay, pro-orthodox Islam establishment, whereas Suhakam took more progressive positions.⁴⁹ As noted above, MACSA’s vision of empowerment for the *Orang Asli* aspires to assimilate them as Muslims, whereas Suhakam has criticised covert efforts to convert the *Orang Asli* (Thio 2009: 1323–24). MACSA couched its disagreement with Suhakam in cultural relativist arguments. It accused Suhakam’s positions as primarily based on the UDHR and not the CDHRI and AHRD that better reflected the region’s and Malaysia’s religio-cultural context (Amin 2018). Because the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia Act 1999 did not include the two declarations, MACSA also pushed for its amendment, demonstrating its appetite for institutional reforms that went beyond the aggressive protest politics of the past (Alias and Mokhtar 2019).

⁴⁶“Program Mukhayyam Asnaf Riqab”, at <https://www.mais.gov.my/2020/09/22/program-mukhayyam-asnaf-riqab/>.

⁴⁷Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (The Paris Principles), UN General Assembly Resolution 48/134, adopted December 20, 1993.

⁴⁸Interview with Afiq Md Noor, Head of Law and International Treaties Division, Suhakam, 23 December 2021.

⁴⁹“Concerns And Commendations For Suhakam Over Its 2018 Annual Report”, December 6, 2019, at <https://macsa.com.my/concerns-and-commendations-for-suhakam-over-its-2018-annual-report/>

In any case, any sign of collegial disagreement between Suhakam and MACSA all but disappeared when news about the agency researching the ‘Feasibility of Having Legislation of the Recognition of a Third Gender in Malaysia’ leaked in June 2021. Accusing the agency of being against “all faiths” in an English-language article, Dr Rafidah lambasted it for having “exposed their own lack of independence and blind deference to whatever external pressures that are being wielded upon them to promote this immoral agenda” (Mokhtar 2021a). In another Malay-language article, she argued that, for Muslims, secular principles of human rights were not harmonious with religion and especially singled out the Muslim commissioners for “adhering to the Paris Principles rigidly” to the extent they went against Islamic teachings and the Constitution (Mokhtar 2021b).⁵⁰

This line of critique, and worse, its backsliding to *ad hominem* attacks, was taken up by ISMA and later the *Pertubuhan-Pertubuhan Pembela Islam* (the coalition of Muslim defenders, Pembela), then headed by a former President of ISMA (2018–2021), Aminuddin Yahaya (henceforth: Aminuddin).⁵¹ On one of the Facebook pages that ISMA managed, a posted image contained the faces of Suhakam’s commissioners under the title “those responsible for the maliciousness of Suhakam” (see Figure 1). The post called out Suhakam for its five ‘sins’: (i) striving to recognise the third gender; (ii) legalising prostitution; (iii) pushing the government to provide special facilities to the transgender community; (iv) normalising the idea of non-binary gender by including it in their report, and (v) opposing the criminalisation of Muslim apostasy in Malaysia. Three days later, a MACSA Facebook post again featured the nine Suhakam commissioners with their photos displayed alongside a message protesting Suhakam for allegedly trying to recognise a third gender (see Figure 2). Aminuddin went further by listing the names of the four Muslim commissioners and rhetorically asking, “What were their functions in the agency, if not to protect Islam?”⁵² One of the commissioners, Professor Nik Salida, an Islamic law lecturer, was also singled out. Figure 3 shows an image posted on Facebook where her face, paired with a purported statement of hers claiming “all gender identities and sexual orientation should not be discriminated”, was laid next to the then Minister of Islamic Affairs’ claim that “Malaysia rejects LGBT and will not recognise the third gender”.

‘Outing’ the Muslim commissioners in this way helped polemicise the issue through the lens of religious identity. Soon, netizens left comments claiming that the problem with Suhakam was that the majority of the commissioners were non-Muslims (even though all Suhakam chairpersons have historically been Muslims). Aminuddin also called for action against Suhakam, including changing the line-up of its commissioner to include more Islamic scholars (the *ulamas*).⁵³ Doxing attacks also befell a Suhakam staff member whose face was appended on articles that called him out for saying that state-enacted Syariah laws can be criticised because they are ultimately “man-made”.⁵⁴

These naming and shaming tactics were effective because they exploited Suhakam’s precarity and exposure to state manipulation on the one hand and populist anger on the other. Notwithstanding its stature as Malaysia’s NHRI that comes with certain safeguards of institutional autonomy, the government often subjects Suhakam to its pressure and influence. For example, in 2016, Suhakam had to endure a 50 per cent funding cut from the Najib administration that had proclaimed “human rightism” as its enemy

⁵⁰The article is muted, however, in explaining how exploring the issue of non-binary genders in research infringes the Malaysian Constitution.

⁵¹Pembela started out as an ABIM-led movement agitating over controversial court cases involving Muslim converts and apostasy. See Abdul Hamid (2008: 228–232). In October 2022, Aminuddin Yahaya left his post as Pembela’s President to run as an election candidate of GTA, which ISMA’s affiliate Berjasa was also part of, in Malaysia’s 15th General Elections. Despite claiming to be non-partisan, like ISMA, Pembela’s Facebook page kept echoing GTA’s ultranationalist narratives of the Malays and Islam under threat.

⁵²*Rupanya SUHAKAM diterajui Profesor Syariah, Tokoh Maal Hijrah, ahli majlis agama’ – tapi mana mereka?* [So Suhakam is led by Islamic law professor, prominent Islamic figure, and member of the Islamic council- but where are they?], *beritamelayukini*, 18 October 2021. Available at <https://beritamelayukini.com/2021/10/18/rupanya-suhakam-diterajui-profesor-syariah-tokoh-maal-hijrah-ahli-majlis-agama-tapi-mana-mereka> (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁵³Facebook post by Aminuddin Yahaya, 25 June 2021.

⁵⁴*Tuhan Tak Turun Bersidang Di DUN – Ketua Undang-Undang dan Perjanjian Antarabangsa SUHAKAM* [God Does not Sit in State Assemblies- Head of Suhakam’s International Law and Treaties Division], *samudera.my*, 13 December 2021. Available at <https://www.samudera.my/tuhan-tak-turun-bersidang-di-dun-ketua-undang-undang-dan-perjanjian-antarabangsa-suhakam/> (accessed 18 May 2022).



Figure 1. GPS's 'exposé' of the Suhakam Commissioners⁵⁵

(*The Edge* 2015; Müller 2016: 435). Even the elected PH government that was more amenable to the human rights agenda had continued the opaque practice of appointing Suhakam commissioners without any parliamentary oversight (*Free Malaysia Today* 2019). Suhakam's porosity to state intervention renders it more vulnerable to media campaigns and institutional capture mounted by conservative and right-wing elements. Moreover, significant quarters within the state—whether politicians, academics,

⁵⁵Facebook post by GPS, October 15, 2021. GPS is a social media page managed by ISMA (see Fn.15).



Figure 2. The Image Accompanying MACSA’s Protest of Suhakam’s Research on a Third Gender⁵⁶

or civil servants—have long considered the agency too pro-Western and anti-Islam. Such scepticism of the human rights agenda is evident in a paper co-authored by the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Home Affairs that counts “fanatical human rights groups” as one form of “violent extremism” (Abdul Aziz *et al.* 2021: 1). Thus, ‘pushing out’ the commissioners who owed their (re)appointment to a government that contained an Islamist partner⁵⁷ achieved two motives: (i) exposing the commissioners to public shaming, and (ii) shoring up public expectations for the appointment of more ‘Islamically-compliant’ commissioners in the future.

Without the state showing support or making any guarantees of protection, these pressure and intimidation tactics, even if mainly on social media, appeared to have worked.⁵⁸ On 15 December 2021, to the shock of many human rights activists, Suhakam released a statement clarifying its stance on religious rights and the LGBT issue, conceding vaguely to the Islamists’ and cultural relativists’ positions. For example, the statement asserts that enactments against Muslim apostasy are legitimate in Malaysia

⁵⁶‘Third Gender Recognition’, Photo appended on MACSA’s Facebook Post, October 18, 2021.

⁵⁷When this article was written, PAS was still part of the BN-PN government that ruled Malaysia from February 2020 to October 2022. However, after the General Elections on 19 November 2022 where no coalition managed to achieve a simple majority, the new PH-led government has, as of writing, not incorporated PAS. However, the political situation remains fluid and PAS may very well return to government if the current government collapses.

⁵⁸Suhakam was also faced with attacks from within the government, especially from the then Minister of Islamic Affairs from PAS and JAKIM. See Nadia (2021).



Figure 3. GPS's Attack on Nik Salida, a commissioner of Suhakam⁵⁹

under state-level Syariah laws, contravening Suhakam's longstanding position on religious freedom. The statement also claims that, even as the Federal Constitution guarantees fundamental rights for the LGBT community, such rights...

...are not amenable to them practicing a lifestyle that is contrary to the cultural and religious norms of this nation. Besides individual rights, human rights law should also protect collective rights and be balanced with the imperative to safeguard Malaysia's multicultural peace.⁶⁰

Additionally, Suhakam's commissioner line-up has tilted towards the conservatives. The new chairperson appointed in mid-2022 has argued against Malaysia joining the Rome Statute and ICERD. One of the new commissioners was a former director-general of JAKIM, an agency that often butted heads with human rights NGOs because it accused the agenda of being anti-Islam (CSO Platform for Reforms 2022). It would appear that in return for their activism to push out the more 'liberal' commissioners,

⁵⁹Facebook post by Usrah Gabungan 2, 15 October 2021. The image cannot be found on GPS's Facebook page anymore, but their logo is on the image.

⁶⁰"Pendirian Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia Berkaitan Isu Kebebasan Beragama dan Hak Kumpulan LGBT [Suhakam's Position on Issues Concerning Freedom of Religion and LGBT Rights]", *Suhakam.org.my*, 15 December 2021. Available at <https://suhakam.org.my/2021/12/pendirian-suruhanjaya-hak-asasi-manusia-malaysia-berkaitan-isu-kebebasan-beragama-dan-hak-kumpulan-lgbt/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

right-wing Islamists were rewarded with appointments more sympathetic to their conservative Islamist cause.

Given the aggressive lobbying and personal attacks, it is difficult to take this concession as simply an outcome of civil debate between particularistic and universalist proponents of human rights, which the normative literature on human rights tends to assume. The tussle was hardly ever framed in theoretical or philosophical terms, nor did one treat the other as a worthy, equal dialogue partner. Suhakam's precarious position as an NHRI holding relatively liberal positions within a conservative Malay ethno-nationalist regime that included an Islamist governing partner (2020–2022) rendered it almost defenceless in the face of these attacks, more so when the political parties in the opposition were hesitant to support the agency for fear of a conservative backlash. The harnessing of social media's galvanising potential also helped these right-wing actors penetrate the insular and bureaucratic world Suhakam usually operates in, forcing the agency and its leadership out of their comfort zone to face semblances of majoritarian pressure as these right-wing activists claimed to be speaking for the 'silent' conservative Malay-Muslim majority. They mounted these networked and seemingly coordinated attacks against Suhakam across multiple platforms (e.g., mainstream newspaper articles, pseudo-news portals, social media, and petitions), creating a wave of (largely online) populist anger Suhakam alone seemed ill-equipped to respond. Most notably, these interlocutors kept questioning Suhakam's legitimacy in representing the interest of the majority Malay-Muslim community as a state-funded body, blithely dismissing Suhakam's mandate as human rights agency and not a communitarian one.⁶¹

Conclusion

This paper's objective lies in identifying novel strategies of 'human rights' activism that turned human rights discourse into a cover for undermining it. These strategies include appropriating human rights rhetoric to soften elements that belie ethnoreligious supremacist thinking, tapping into one's proclaimed status as a human rights defender to deflect criticisms for advancing positions that violate human rights, and maintaining a technocratic sheen to convey legitimacy for one's activism. By strategically promoting revisionist and majoritarian-friendly interpretations of human rights, right-wing actors further undermined the precarious legitimacy and limited autonomous space that Malaysia's embattled human rights activists and the NHRI occupy. Put another way, they attenuated the enormous challenges already faced by these human rights activists in their struggle to advance civil liberties and to preserve the nation's multicultural social fabric (International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) 2019).

This article has opted for a two-step analysis to untangle these developments. First, I discussed its historical context, namely the rise of right-wing ethnoreligious forces in the face of increasing political instability in Malaysia. Second, I highlighted two tactics right-wing NGOs employed to position themselves as legitimate 'human rights' defenders. For heuristic purposes, I name them strategies of 'getting in' and 'pushing out'. The former entails institutional participation and social media campaigns that position CENHRA and MACSA as *bona fide* human rights stakeholders and experts. The latter refers to aggressive and networked campaigns of 'outing' that name and shame Suhakam and other established human rights NGOs as un-Islamic, overly liberal, and uncritically parroting the 'Western' agenda. These strategies operated in tandem to rally sympathetic opinion from conservative elements within and without the state to pressure Suhakam to accept a majoritarian, cultural relativist understanding of human right. They also gradually excluded proponents who held 'liberal' views from state institutions and engagement.

What I described in the Malaysian case is not unique domestically or globally. Domestically, the right-wing human rights activism I highlighted is not an isolated venture but part of a broader revisionist project right-wing actors undertook to selectively appropriate intellectual currents popularised in the West, such as decolonisation, to perpetuate majoritarian fears. Ironically, despite its strong anti-West sentiments, these right-wing Islamist-led projects often pantomime far-right movements in the West that

⁶¹For example, the chairperson of MACSA, Lukman Sheriff, shared an online panel with Pembela's Aminuddin Yahaya and the head of *Persatuan Pengguna Islam Malaysia* (the Muslim Consumer Association of Malaysia, PPIM) to discuss the 'relevance' of Suhakam. See the Facebook video on Demi Malaiu, 25 June 2021. PPIM and Aminuddin were the key organisers of a nativist 'Buy Muslim First' campaign in 2019 that exhibited subtle but certainly notable anti-Chinese sentiments. See Hew (2020a; 2020b).

also deploy conspiracy theories such as white genocide and the Great Displacement to propagate a narrative of victimhood to justify white supremacy and xenophobia (Farinelli 2021; Wilson 2020). Whereas Malaysia's situation is not as worrying as that of Europe or the United States, outlandish theories such as 'Malay genocide' are present in the mainstream if one knows where to look for them.⁶²

In other Muslim-majority states, similar trends occur too. The veiled anti-Chinese sentiments in Malaysia's right-wing Islamist human rights narratives are not unfamiliar to those who have read Hadiz's account of Muslim populism in Indonesia, which often reimagines the ethnic Chinese Indonesians as the persecutors of the marginalised *ummah* (Hadiz 2016). CENTRHA's and MACSA's "neo-conservative rationality", which conceives the heteronormative family as "the kernel of social order" and its strengthening as the "effective remedy" for various social problems, has surfaced in Turkey as well (Acar and Altunok 2013: 18). In Turkey as in Malaysia, such neo-conservative thoughts emerged as the neoliberal state receded from providing welfare and regulating economic relations. Alas, despite the worsening inequality (Lee and Abdul Khalid 2020), these right-wing Islamists primarily confined their calls for state interventions to the cultural sphere instead of socioeconomic ones, rendering them unable to energise an 'elite vs masses' form of populist politics that may lead to greater democratisation and genuinely redistributive outcomes (Weiss 2020a).

This dragging of Malaysia's 'cultural wars' into the human rights domains by right-wing actors also sustains three further observations that shed light on the future of human rights politics in the country. First, the conventional understanding that human rights activism is the monopoly of urbane, cosmopolitan, and progressive liberals no longer stands true. Whereas one can undoubtedly use the first two descriptors to characterise the protagonists identified in this paper, the seeping of neoconservative ideas into the human rights arena also reflects the rise of a new class of Muslim professionals who can capitalise on their resources and access to funds, research, and lobbying to redefine the ethical grounding and political priorities of the human rights project.⁶³

Second, the mainstreaming of a revisionist and majoritarian-friendly interpretation of human rights also foreshadows more trouble for progressive human rights NGOs. Due to the progressives' ideological, historical, and institutional distance from the state, political elites continually desire to replace them with a more regime-friendly set of human rights 'defenders', especially when lobbying efforts from the conservatives are underway. Malaysia's democratisation, which has not produced the more liberal civil society political scientists hoped for, exacerbates this situation. Instead, the political fragmentation amongst the Malay-Muslim parties, which led to greater uncertainty in their electoral fortunes, has produced two outcomes: the increased influence of the Malay-Muslim-dominated civil service (including the largely conservative religious bureaucracy) and politicians' willingness to engage with fringe influencers and radical ideologues to widen their appeal as they grapple with the seemingly impossible task of securing a majority from a fragmented Malay-Muslim vote base (Wong 2021). These developments led to considerable ideological hardening in state religio-cultural policies on alcohol, censorship, gender and sexuality rights, apostasy, public decency, and intellectual freedom (Roy 2012). The proximity between these right-wing NGOs and those in the corridors of power also raises the prospect that their activism, even if largely civil by method (though one may question if the vociferous personal attacks against the Suhakam commissioners highlighted above are indeed *civil*), will lead to outcomes that are inherently uncivil.

Lastly, right-wing actors' appropriation of the human rights agenda also underscores the discourse's recognition and moral capital, including amongst conservative and nativist actors who have long felt alienated from the agenda's purported Western liberal biases. However, if this double-play of rhetorical approval and content subversion continues, by the time these right-wing actors earned their

⁶²See, for example, this book published by an ISMA-affiliated think tank entitled *Colonial Urbanisation and the Elimination of the Malay Race in Malaysia* that argues that the Malays are facing 'genocide' from first the British, and later the ethnic Chinese (Mohd Salleh *et. al.* 2021). This use of an 'academic' veneer to propagate and buttress racist, unethical, and academically dubious positions in Malaysia is nothing new. Rahman (2020: 9), for example, counts up to "119 academic articles published in unscientific, questionable, and/or unaccredited journals" in support of conversion therapy and transphobia.

⁶³One sees such resourcefulness in how CENTRHA provided ten research grants that covered areas such as "children's rights, freedom of speech, statelessness, migrant workers, refugees, human trafficking, business and human rights, and freedom of religion" (Amin 2021b).

long-yearned-for status as ‘human rights defenders’, the human rights agenda—one defined by a fierce commitment towards minority protection, universal rights, and constraining authoritarianism—will look very different from where it started.

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