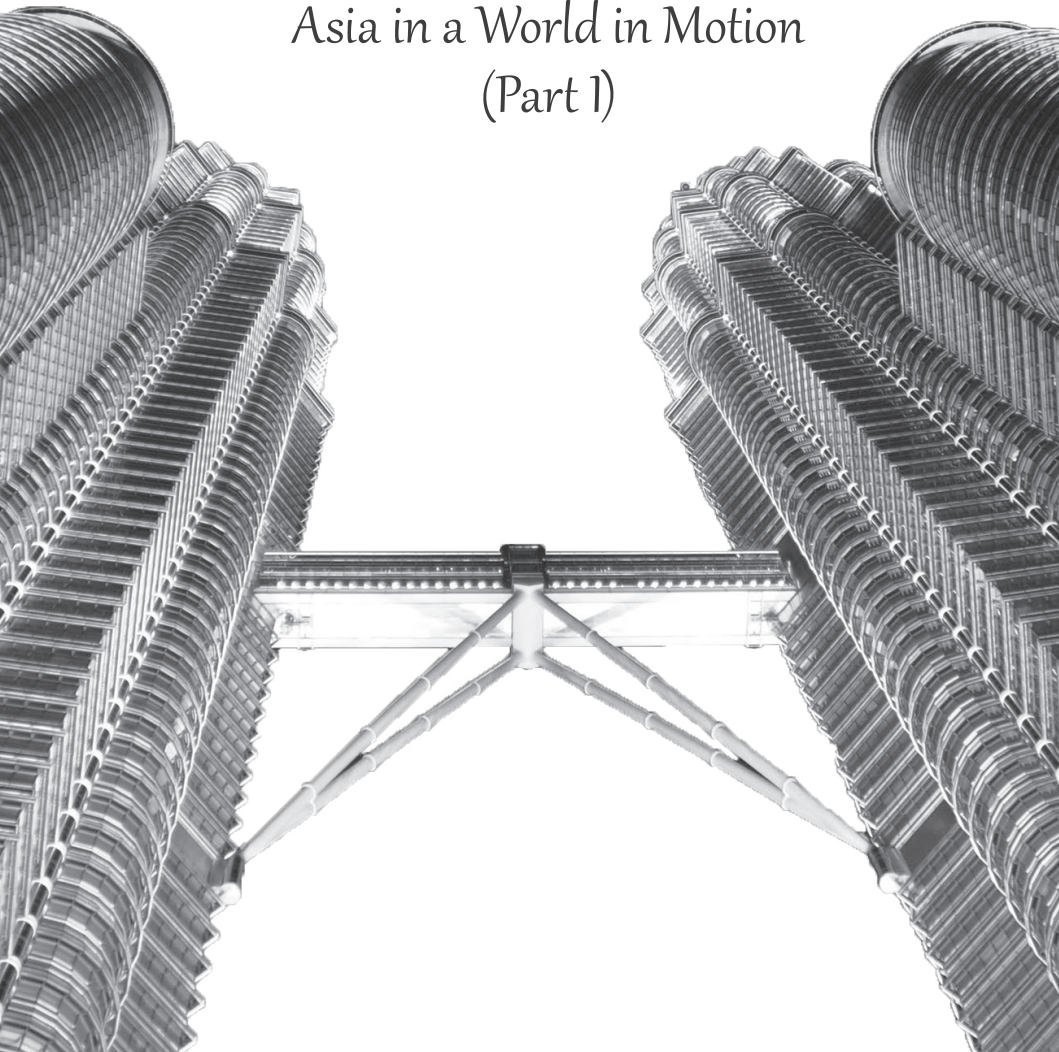◆◆◆◆◆◆◆

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Asia in a World in Motion
(Part 1)

The experience of moderation in Malaysia: what is it exactly?

Shamsul A. B.

Introduction: of terms, concepts and understanding

The term "moderation," philosophically, implies "epistemic pragmatism," a position in an epistemological continuum between "pure pragmatism" and "extreme pragmatism."

If we were to render this into everyday parlance it means a position between "purity" and "extremism," expressed best in Mary Douglas classic anthropological monograph *Purity and danger* (1966), a study of words and meaning of "dirt" in different countries and cultures. She successfully challenges the Orientalist notion of "pollution," through

a complex and sophisticated reading of ritual, religion and lifestyle in many countries, thus making clear the context and social history is essential in making sense of the relative nature of "dirt" or "pollution."

In comparison, the genesis of the present use of the term "moderation" as promoted by the prime minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak, that led to the formation of the Global Movement of the Moderate (GMM) Foundation is more recent and less complex.

It is a post-9/11 concept, inevitably, both political and populist in nature and meaning. It is a concept introduced as one that is opposite to the extremist violent-prone orientation of many fundamentalist Islamic groups, such Al-Qaeda. What it also wants to convey by using the term "moderate" is that the world should focus not on the one per cent of Muslims who are violent terrorists but instead on the 99 per cent of peace-loving and moderate Muslims.

Najib indirectly also wants to showcase that Malaysia, as a Muslim-led majority country, practices the principles of moderation which he argues the factor that has brought about a stable, peaceful and harmonious Malaysian society, in spite of its multi-ethnic and culturally diverse characteristics. He claims that his notion of "moderation" has affinity with the Islamic concept of *wasatiyyah* (see Appendix 1).

The term *wasatiyyah*, literally, comes from the Arabic root word "*wasat*" that means middle or balanced or moderate. Indeed, *wasat* is a synonym for virtue because virtue is defined as the mid-position between two bad extremes, say, between niggardliness (extreme stinginess), and ex-

travagance (extreme spendthriftness). Viewed from a sociological perspective, this understanding of *wasatiyyah* is behaviorist in nature and it's a value that should be practiced by an individual.

Whether it is a collective societal value that is embraced and practiced daily by Muslims, in general in the global context, is yet to be proven empirically, at least in Malaysia. This necessitates a serious research before further claim could be made as to the widespread adoption of this value amongst Malaysian Muslims as a social collective. But without doubt, this value has been promoted and enunciated so often in speeches, *khutbah* (sermon) and religious lessons to Muslim audience, at least in Malaysia that I know of, by the learned ones as well as their leaders.

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In a cognitive sense, one could say that there is a general awareness amongst Muslims of *wasatiyyah* as a much-revered personal and collective value, including among Malaysian Muslims. However, for the sake of argument, one could say that the continued presence of radical groups, though small and some with terrorist tendencies, indicates that not every Muslim or group of Muslims accepts *wasatiyyah* as an esteemed value that they are obliged to observe.

If we take into account another relevant context, could we say *wasatiyyah* as a revered personal and collective value is understood and practiced by non-Muslims, as some Muslims do, especially in Malaysia? Most likely it is not. They may understand and practice moderation, not in the *wasattiyah* sense, in their daily life, but in the context of a consumerist life style they live in and within the limit of

their social class. Do they then practice moderation in the political sense, avoiding making "extreme racist" remarks and holding prejudice, stereotype and showing intolerance towards other social groups. Some do, some don't.

It could be argued that term "moderation" and "*wasatiyyah*", in the Najib's context, has been used interchangeably, because he is addressing simultaneously the local and global constituency whenever he talks of GMM and his long-term hopes of what GMM could achieve in the international arena. In the domestic context, he has used both terms to address Muslims and non-Muslims separately and simultaneously, motivated by the same GMM message and hope. It is imperative, the dialectics of the moderation-*wasatiyyah* nexus and discourse have to be elaborated epistemologically, ontologically and methodically by GMM, when the two terms are the same and when they are different.

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While we wait for GMM to achieve what Najib has promised us, the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), of the National University of Malaysia (UKM has offered its explanation and model, indeed developed an instrument, to elucidate the origin, nature and practice of "moderation," as practiced within the Malaysian society based on the empirical data that we have accumulated in the last six years, and indeed some have been gathered more than a decade ago by individual researchers who are now in KITA, without the lavish research funding that others enjoy.

What we have time for through today's presentation is only a very brief summary-cum-introduction regarding the shape of "moderation" in Malaysia. Anyone interested in a

deeper and detailed elaboration he/she is welcomed to contact us, as the UNDP has recently done in its preparation of the first ever country report or a National Human Development Report of Malaysia 2013. This report has has been published recently.

In the report, KITA is able to suggest and present a schematic examination of how, for instance, "social mobility" has become one of the main drivers of "moderation" in Malaysia. The recent establishment of a National Consultative Council (NUCC) by Najib is a very positive step towards sustaining the moderation we have enjoyed in Malaysia thus far, while at the same time building our resilience.

What Malaysian moderation is made of: a very brief summary

As a pluralistic society characterized by a multitude of diversity that was shaped and consolidated during the colonial era, Malaysia exhibits a great deal of differentiation among its population. Since the end of World War II, there were a number of times when these contradictions ended in violent conflicts resulting in the loss of lives, the last being in May 1969.

More than four decades have passed since the conflict. Malaysians have realised that violence is not an option, because during that period they have enjoyed an increased quality of life and a huge overall reduction of poverty, from 50 per cent to less than five per cent.

The middle class has expanded and Malaysians have embraced consumerism as a way of life. Most significant-

ly, they are all driven by the desire for social mobility—horizontal, vertical and spatial. Education is the key vehicle for social mobility. Peace and stability is necessary to ensure the desired social mobility is achieved, and violence has to be avoided at all cost.

Yet conflict persists in Malaysia, it has merely turned non-violent. This continuity is because of the inherent contradictions that shape the social dynamics of Malaysian society. These non-violent, mostly verbal conflicts are generated by deep-seated grievances, prejudices and stereotypes.

Many are of the opinion that it is appropriate to label the verbal, non-violent conflict among Malaysians as "*suka bertikam lidah, tidak berparangan*" (prefer tongue wagging instead of machete/*parang* wielding*)*. "*Bertikam lidah*" (literally "tongue fighting") can be seen and heard everyday in Malaysia in various forms, in the mass media and at the local coffee shops. The continuous open and public "tongue fighting" or "talk conflict" can be viewed as an attention-seeking phenomenon that, in turn, begets bargaining and negotiations in order to find amicable solutions to any unresolved issue at hand.

The nines "major axes of contradictions" identified by research as being articulated through the "talk conflict" are ethnicity, religion, social class, education, urban–rural identity, gender, language, politics/power and generation (young–old). They are not mutually exclusive—one source of conflict can generate and/or build on another. It is the ethnic contradiction that everyone sees immediately because everyone belongs to an ethnic group and, to a certain extent, therefore, the level of "ethnic consciousness" is quite high.

People forget or ignore the class they belong to, perhaps because everyone, irrespective of class, enjoys government subsidies for many items. Talking about class, especially the middle class, is talking about "guilt." Individuals feel they have neglected the less fortunate *rakyat* (citizens) and must assist the latter in their struggle by organising street demonstrations and other form of protest. The generation gap is considered more significant than class differences. The gap between the urban and rural areas has been highlighted by analysts too when looking at voting patterns in Malaysia.

All the talk about national reconciliation in Malaysia under the 1Malaysia policy is nothing new. The bargaining and negotiation, an exercise of seeking reconciliation in various forms, has been a continuous process in the country. They have become almost a set of subterranean permanent structural features of Malaysia's modern post-independence society.

In spite of these structural features, Malaysia does not enjoy the idealized "national unity" (read "unity is uniformity") that its citizens and politicians dream of. Yet it does enjoy a certain admired level of peace and stability due to its ability to continuously bargain and negotiate on every little thing that its citizens identify as sources of the contradictions listed earlier.

Every Malaysian works hard to maintain this peace and stability so they can carve a successful career and enjoy a high quality of life motivated by social mobility. This ability has produced social cohesion in the last 40 years, especially in the post-May 1969 period.

Amongst Malaysians, there is plenty of "tongue wagging but not *parang* wielding", and Malaysians continuously "talk conflict, but walk cohesion." Yet the media, local and abroad, is understandably interested mainly in the "tongue wagging" and "talk conflict" aspect of Malaysian life.

But to Malaysians, open violent conflict such as that witnessed in Sri Lanka over the last three decades is not an option.

Still, social cohesion does not imply life is plain sailing in Malaysia. Peace and stability cannot be taken for granted and perceived as something given or natural. The recent articulations of a perceived "decline in racial relations" in Malaysia have been the result of individuals expressing publicly, through social media, subterranean "racists" stereotypes and prejudices.

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Such "hate" statements are not expressed in the mainstream print media or the on-line news portals, like *Malaysiakini* or *Malaysian Insider.*

This supports the opinion of Abraham Foxman and Christopher Wolf in their recent book, *Viral hate: containing its spread on the Internet* (2013). They argued that the Internet has allowed both individual and collective- initiated hate statements to be made publicly without much legal control. As a result, when the hate statements are repeated many times over online, they seem to become "truth."

"Talk conflict," articulated in the form of "racist" or "hate" statements on ethnic relations in Malaysia in social media, shall continue. It grabs the attention of many because of its apparent newsworthiness. This is a worry and must be addressed, but Malaysians should also look at the other axes

of contradictions: religion, social class, education, gender, education, language, politics/power, spatial and inter-generational. They have to deal with them delicately.

In lieu of a conclusion

The standard question that many Malaysians have to answer has been, "what is the formula of Malaysia's success?"

The urgency of the need for this question to be answered by Malaysians themselves become more imperative if Malaysia continues to be heaped with praises, as recent as last October, by no less than the US Secretary of State, Senator John Kerry, who said, in his speech to a group of young Malaysian entrepreneurs, that Malaysia is "a modern, innovative and multi-faith model for the world."

Apparently, the "standard" answer given my Malaysian to that 64 million dollar question has been "we like to eat and share the same food." This is very true, because we have such a huge variety of delicious food that we keep sharing. But, is this answer enough to explain about "moderation" in Malaysia and of Malaysia's success? The answer is certainly not.

Perhaps Malaysia and Malaysians, without even realizing, has been adopting the "Formula BN" since after the Second World War in the late 1940s. "BN" here doesn't stand for *Barisan Nasional*, or the National Front, the ruling coalition. It stands for "Bargaining and Negotiation."

How BN began peacefully, its mechanism, the painful difficulties we have to endure, the contestations and compromises we have to come to terms with, and the joy of sharing and celebrating our cultural differences, for instance, in terms of the food we eat and entertainment we

enjoy, have been explained, but in a disparate manner, fragmented into reports, personal narratives and hundreds of biographies in various languages.

As a long-term project, KITA is compiling all these in its attempt to present a more balanced but also a nuanced "Malaysian story."

We began, in 2011, with a brief essay entitled *Managing peace in Malaysia: a case study,* by Shamsul and Anis Yusoff, providing a historical-structural backdrop as to why in the context of Global Peace Index Malaysia recorded an impressive improvement, from 38th position in 2007 to 19th position in 2011, a notch below Australia who was on 18th position out of 150 odd countries globally. The essay could have easily been titled "Managing Moderation in Malaysia."

Appendix

Moderate or *Wasatiyyah*: can we make up our mind?*

By Shamsul Amri Baharuddin

Prime Minister Dato' Sri Najib Razak introduced his idea of a "Global Movement of the Moderates" (GMM) in his speech at the UN General Assembly, New York on 27 September 2010.

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* This article appeared in *The New Straits Times*, 16 December 2011.

As he put it:

"…Across all religions we have inadvertently allowed the ugly voices of the periphery to drown out the many voices of reason and common sense. I therefore urge us to embark on building a 'Global Movement of the Moderates' from all faiths who are committed to work together to combat and marginalize extremists who have held the world hostage with their bigotry and bias."

Towards the end of his speech Najib showcased Malaysia as a model of moderateness and "equilibrium"; a country that is multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural and democratic but has ably managed its diversity through the promotion of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, positive interaction and synergies between the various communities and faiths.

"It is this equilibrium that leads to moderation or '*wasatiyyah*' in the Islamic tradition of mutual justice," said Najib.

[Wasatiyyah, an Arabic term, has been translated as "intermediacy" by Hamid Ahmad Al-Rifaie, *Al-Wasattiyah: an orthodox pivot for dialogue of cultures,* Series of "To Know Each Other," n. 19, International Islamic Forum for Dialogue, Jeddah, Al-Medinah Press, 2005, p.15. For Dr. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi it refers to "a set of principles on moderate and balanced thought," please see, "The 30 Principles of Principles of Moderate and Balanced Thought," this opinion appeared on 22 February 2010 in http://www.suhaibwebb.com/islam-studies/the-30-principles-of-wasatiyyah/.]

Since September 2010 he has made many more speeches on the global stage (Turkey, Australia, UK, USA) as well as locally (too numerous to list) extolling the virtues of being "moderate" and making known his idea for a GMM.

On 12 November 2011, in a speech at the East-West Centre, Hawaii, Najib spoke about the inaugural International Conference on the Global Movement of the Moderates, to take place in Kuala Lumpur from 17 to 19 January, 2012.

The keyword is "inaugural." It indicates that, whatever has been said in the last year about GMM, or "*wasatiyyah*," was just to test the waters. It is a clear signal that from this conference onwards we would give serious consideration to this matter.

30   Let us scrutinize briefly both the concept and content of the GMM and why it should be known as the GMM, not the GWM (Global *Wasattiyah* Movement). This will encourage a consistent global understanding of the central concept of moderate and avoid confusion occurring among interested international supporters of the GMM.

In the literal, generic and everyday usage of the word, being a "moderate" is a rational and common sense orientation in terms of a person's social behaviour, as opposed to being an extremist and worse still, as a violent extremist. In short, being "moderate" is being "non-violent" and/or "peaceful." This is very much in line with the definition of peace in the Global Peace Index 2011, which is "the absence of violence."

Malaysia was ranked 19th out of 153 countries listed in the Index but it is first in Southeast Asia, second in Asia, behind Japan, and fourth in the Asia-Pacific region, after

New Zealand, Japan and Australia. In 2007, Malaysia was ranked 38th, and its improved position in 2011 only demonstrates an increased intensity in its peace and stability goals, hence the term "moderateness."

People and governments globally are alarmed when violent extremist behaviour escalates into a full-scale war—from the behaviour of an individual to that of a larger social movement based on historical, religious, economic or political justification—which subsequently costs the lives of hundreds and thousands of innocent people. The return to moderateness, therefore, is not only a rational and logical thing to do but also an imperative necessity.

The moot question is, who is going to champion "moderateness" at the social collective level, especially on the global stage?

The answer: Najib and Malaysia. If adopted globally, Malaysia's proposal could re-define and transform the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) into GMM.

GMM is a deceptively simple, rational and logical agenda for the largest of social movements. However, embarking on this task involves complex diplomatic maneuvers and suave *Realpolitik*. The GMM campaign invites a huge risk, both for the Prime Minister and Malaysia, given the reality of a global politics shaped by the prejudiced perceptions of the world's media. In the spirit of NIKE's "impossible is nothing" GMM's possible success ensures a handsome and long-term reward for the global community.

The period of floating the idea is over. Now we are getting down to business!

This fundamental premise of GMM was supported at the 8th ASEM meeting in Brussels in October 2010 and it is now endorsed internationally by the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) 2011 Final Communiqué in Para 7(g).

Para 7 states CHOGM's central agenda in "maintaining their commitment to a stable and secure national and international environment, as a foundation for sustainable growth and resilience for Commonwealth countries and the broader international community."

The CHOGM, in Para 7(g), is committed to improving international security, by taking a number of steps, one of which is by "embracing moderation as an important value to overcome all forms of extremism, as called for in the 'Global Movement of the Moderates.'"

For Najib and Malaysia, it is time to drop the use of the term *wasatiyyah,* however important the term is, politically, for the domestic Malaysian audience, as the "moderate" concept is now relevant in a global context.

Any advertising company worth its salt would say that we cannot continue to use the two words, "moderates" and "*wasatiyyah*," simultaneously or interchangeably. They are connected but carry different meanings when translated from Arabic to English. The world has now endorsed the English concept, as stated in the CHOGM 2011 Final Communiqué.

Perhaps the "National Seminar on Understanding Wasatiyyah & 1Malaysia," a curtain raiser for the UMNO General Assembly 2011 held on 26 November 2011, should

be the last occasion the word *wasatiyyah* was used in connection with GMM. After the disappearance of "*madani*" and "*hadhari*" in the quicksand of Malaysian politics, to drop *wasatiyyah* is wise.

The "Islamic" political mileage notwithstanding, the stark reality is that we need to stick to "moderate" now because globally it is known as GMM not GWM.

The next step is more critical. This concept has to be carefully deliberated and skillfully elaborated, with clear implementable strategies for action, devoid of rhetoric. This is deemed necessary if GMM is to remain on the global stage and to find a permanent place in the landscape of global political idiom and activism, along with "glasnost," "clash of civilizations," "non-alignment," and "sustainable development."

In short, GMM has to have substance.

Najib has showcased Malaysia as a case study and a model of moderateness. He believes that it is the "equilibrium" that exists within Malaysian society "that leads to moderation or *wasatiyyah*."

What is this "equilibrium"?

How do we explain to a leader from Africa or a non-governmental organisation member from Latin America or a high school kid from Japan or a young demonstrator at Tahrir Square, Cairo, about this phenomena called "equilibrium," which is the key to "moderateness"?

Before we can explain this, the PM's team of "thinkers" have to deliberate upon the following: first, the concept of "equilibrium"; second, the methods taken by the Malaysian

government thus far to achieve it; third, the practical steps needed to build and sustain it; fourth, the strategy for monitoring results, in the short- and long-term; fifth, evaluating success, failure and any unintended consequences; and finally, how to put all these in a comprehensive package, for instance, from kindergarten to adulthood, as a procedure which could be applied globally.

Does Malaysia have these to offer to the world on the 17th January 2012? We must assume that we have because the occasion to launch the GMM has such serious global implications.

In the process of producing a credible document and eventually a full-fledged GMM do-it-yourself package for global distribution, we need to clarify the social phenomenon labeled as "equilibrium" by the PM in order to explain the origin and pre-conditions of the state of moderateness that Malaysia has enjoyed so far.

In the logic of causal relations, a situation of "equilibrium" that exists in Malaysia must have been the result of "something else." In other words, Malaysia must have done something right to have successfully created a situation of "balance" in its society, hence "moderateness" in its social outcomes which have led to its position in the Global Peace Index next to Australia.

Sociologically speaking, a state of "equilibrium" or "balance" in a society could only be achieved if sets of "opposites" or "contradictions" that exist within it have been successfully "realigned and arrived at a point of convergence," including the acknowledgement to agree to disagree. These factors are necessary pre-conditions for "equilibrium."

In the plural, fragmented and diversified Malaysian society, this "equilibrium" has been brought about by a surprisingly unrecognized and intense ongoing social process of realignment and convergence called "social cohesion," which, in turn, is the origin and pre-condition of the Malaysian state of "moderateness" that encouraged the PM to launch his GMM.

Perhaps we have been so engrossed in our pursuit of "national unity" that we have failed to recognize our achievements in the last four decades since the May 13, 1969 tragedy, that is, peace and stability, in the form of "social cohesion" created by serious efforts, official and non-official, rooted in a genuine desire to achieve "national unity."

Put simply, "social cohesion" in Malaysia is about how the plural, fragmented and diverse components of our society, characterized by deep opposites and contradictions, have been able, through a continuous process of negotiation, consensus and compromise, to rise above it all in a most mature manner, to embrace peace and reject any form of violence for long-term mutual survival, sustainability and resilience.

The GMM promoted by Najib will showcase Malaysia's social cohesion to the world, not only in terms of how we have managed to bring it about through an endless series of "fire-fighting" efforts, but also how we have monitored and calibrated it through an early warning system which has been constructed, as a pre-emptive and preventive strategy, to suit our peculiar circumstances, with the possibility of it being applied in other societies necessarily in a modified from.

Essentially, the GMM is more than just *wasatiyyah* for it is an integration of tireless top-down efforts and imaginative bottom-up activism of ideas, practices and commitment, by Malaysians for Malaysia, for the rest of the world to share.

This is the message, concept and package we must deliver at the inaugural conference on GMM in mid-January 2012 as a gift from Malaysia to the world.