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ARTICLE

Ministering to the Middle: Christian Megachurches and Minoritarian Politics in Southeast Asia

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Abstract
Christian megachurches have been growing in members, organization, and financial resources in the large cities of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines and in Singapore. However, they remain as religious minorities facing an asymmetrical balance of political power due to the Islamization of politics, strong state secularism, or the close entanglement of the political elites with majority Catholicism. We propose a framework of minoritarian politics to understand the actions adopted by the churches to defend and advance their interests. While the scholarship on religion and politics tends to focus on churches' direct engagement with political elites and the mobilization of grassroots movements, we argue that the megachurches prefer to minister to the middle by forging outreach networks to accumulate social capital with a broad range of intermediaries. This is not just due to theological conservatism, but also because ministering to the middle has been the effective strategy given the political circumstances.

Introduction

"Some commentators online have also said dark suggestions of a Christian conspiracy, they have a hold on Government; Government bowed to their power; over-representation of Christians in institutions of power," said the Singapore Minister for Home Affairs as he debunked beliefs in the Christian capture of the state and defended the government's cancellation of a concert permit for a Swedish black metal band after complaints from Christian groups (Parliament of Singapore 2019). Similar fearful speculations of Christianization are rife in other parts of Southeast Asia, where Christians are often thought of as exercising a political influence far greater than their minority status would indicate. In 2015, non-Catholic Christianity made up 4% of the population in Malaysia, 9% in Indonesia, 14% in the Philippines, and 15% in Singapore (Johnson and Zurlo 2019). In Malaysia, Muslim hardliners have accused the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party of a Christian conspiracy to take over the state because several prominent leaders

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are Christian. In Indonesia, protests in Jakarta stoked by Islamists that brought down the former Chinese Christian governor were revived after the 2019 presidential elections on rumors that President Joko Widodo was a closet Christian. In the Philippines, where the Catholic Church is a constant in political life, political endorsements by megachurches and the electoral participation of Protestant pastors have provoked controversies.

This article seeks to understand the strategies used by Christians in Southeast Asia to navigate the asymmetrical balance of power stacked against them in what we term as *minoritarian politics*. The existing literature on religion and politics tends to focus on two relationships—religious groups' relationships with political parties and electoral influence and their relationships with grassroots organizations and political mobilization. We acknowledge these two relationships as strategies in *elite engagement* and *grassroots galvanization* in our framework. However, we show that Southeast Asian Christians in recent years prefer the mode of *ministering to the middle* when they are involved in minoritarian politics.

Ministering to the middle refers to a complex series of communicative actions undertaken to forge outreach networks and building up of social capital with a broad range of political intermediaries, who are usually professionals, technocrats, and the intelligentsia from the middle classes. As resource-rich minorities, Christians are wont to protect their interests. But political vulnerabilities and ideological constraints on the national stage and the conservative legacy of American missionaries have nudged Christians to take up less publicly confrontational stances. Ministering to the middle empowers Christian leaders to attain a measure of political influence without alienating their own congregation and the majorities surrounding them. The following section locates our theoretical framework in the literature on religious institutions, political mobilization, and social capital.

Our direct observations and interview data are based on a fieldwork study from 2018 to 2020 of 40 non-Catholic churches in the cities of Manila in the Philippines, Jakarta, and Surabaya in Indonesia, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Kuching in Malaysia, and Singapore. We selected megachurches of at least a thousand members led by local pastors, many of them forming independent denominations and some adopting Pentecostal practices in varying degrees, but all of them with historical lineages that could be traced to American missionary influences and focused on the evangelical mission of proselytization. We chose these megachurches in the urban centers of these countries because this is the fastest growing and most organized and resourced sector in Southeast Asian Christianity in recent decades.

For this article, we conducted a comparative study combining our direct observations and interview data with existing sociological work on Christianity in these countries. We argue that the megachurches prefer the mode of ministering to the middle across all four countries, but the political intermediaries vary according to national political and social circumstances. In the Philippines and to some extent Singapore, we found that the megachurches tended to adopt the other two approaches of engaging the elites and galvanizing the grassroots to supplement the mode of ministering to the middle, unlike in Malaysia and Indonesia which are Muslim majority countries. We make the case in the conclusion that we need to better understand how religious groups invest and reproduce social capital to protect and advance their

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political interests in postcolonial societies, especially when they are the demographic minority with political power stacked against them.

Toward A Theory of Minoritarian Politics

Social scientific accounts of religion and politics have centered on the question of the relationship between church and state, specifically institutional religion and the secular state. The oft-cited secularization thesis posited that as society modernizes, religion is increasingly differentiated from the secularizing public realm, which includes the state, civil society, and the public sphere. Religion becomes a matter of private practice, and in liberal systems, individualized as the personal right to belief and non-belief. A common addendum to the thesis and expectation is that modernizing society would see a growing segment of the population professing no religion or not attending church regularly.

In recent decades, this thesis has been revised by scholars, who have pointed to religious revivals and the entwining of religion and politics in secular states around the world. Early critics include Wuthnow (1991), who argued that the thesis had not factored in "religious restructuring," where cultural and institutional adaptations by religious actors to the secularizing environment have produced dynamic situations. It has been observed that the thesis does not apply well to non-Western societies. Sanneh (1991) argued that religious groups in non-Western societies very often act as moral and social critics of governing authorities and are a source of political renewal. A global survey by Fox (1989) shows the entwinement stemming from the other direction, that governmental intervention in religion was widespread in the world.

The last point is especially important for the study of religion and politics in Southeast Asia. As Fox (1989, 181) notes, there is much diversity in religious identity and the relationship between religion and the postcolonial state. This diversity can be seen in the four countries of our study. Fox (1989, 181–217) classifies Malaysia as having an active state religion, Islam, which the majority Malays of the country profess, supported by state institutions, while the practice of other religions is accorded constitutional protection. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, guided by its state Pancasila ideology that rejects atheism, recognizes the major world religions and registers religious organizations for preferential treatment. The Philippines, a largely Catholic country, provides general support for religion, with provisions for the Muslim minority in the south. Singapore, a multi-religious city-state, is seen as hostile to religious participation in the public sphere, controlling religious activities strictly to prevent inter-religious and inter-ethnic tensions.

These observations still stand today but would require two additional specifications for the purposes of our study. In the last 30 years, these countries have moved in the direction of democratization. This was uneven among the four countries. The two largest states, the Philippines and Indonesia, have democratized furthest, but in recent years populist authoritarian trends have emerged with Duterte's presidency in the Philippines, while the Islamization has intensified in Indonesia. Malaysia is a flawed democracy. Political fragmentation and instability have wrecked Malaysia since the opposition Pakatan Harapan won the general election in 2018 and

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was deposed two years later by an internal coup. While the public sphere has liberalized and the small opposition has gained some ground, Singapore remained an illiberal state governed by the long-ruling People's Action Party. Nevertheless, the extent of democratization in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, and limited liberalization in Singapore, interacts with longstanding state management of religion to produce the specific context for minoritarian politics in each country.

The second trend is the growth of Protestant Christianity, most visibly in the rise of megachurches in urban centers following the economic boom in the mid-1990s led by local pastors. Hoon (2013) notes that Protestant Christianity in Indonesia is differentiated into the three distinct movements of Ecumenical, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches in Indonesia. This is not just in terms of organizational affiliation and identity, but also in how the churches in each movement responded to the pluralism emerging in democratizing Indonesia, with the Evangelicals and Pentecostals focused on proselytization and Ecumenicals seeking social engagement with non-Christians. In general, we found Hoon's distinction to be true in all four countries, but we focus on megachurches that belonged to either Evangelical or the Pentecostal streams, or sometimes both because of minoritarian politics. Due to their cohesiveness and attraction of members from the upwardly mobile and new middle classes, these megachurches are almost without exception financially and organizationally well-resourced. Studying how they respond as religious minorities against oftentimes hostile majorities with more political power allows us to see more clearly their strategies, especially in the different contexts of varying degrees of democratization and liberalization across the four Southeast Asian countries.

In the wake of opposition against authoritarian regimes and democratization in Europe and South America through the Cold War and into the post-Cold War era, scholars have developed a political economy approach to understand religion and politics (Gill 2001; Norris and Inglehart 2011; Fox 2013). In this approach, ideational factors such as doctrinal beliefs and cultural practices are less important than the interest-based political actions of religious institutions. These political actions are enabled by the resource mobilization of voters, funds, social networks, and other resources, and involve the deployment of non-state actors such as lobby groups and faith-based organizations. Indeed, Warner (2000) has recast the Catholic Church in 20th-century Europe as an interest group. Steven (2009) has gone further to argue that the Church, once dominant, is now a faith-based organization among others in the European Union. Understandably, given its rationalist framing, the tendency for scholars using the political economy approach is to focus on electoral behavior, the relationship between religious lobby and political parties, and religious influence on the structuring of state institutions (Grzymala-Busse 2012).

The insights of the political economy approach are recognized in our theoretical framework as strategies of grassroots galvanization and elite engagement adopted by minority Christian groups in our study. Elite engagement refers to political action that gives groups direct access to the levers of policymaking. These actions may take the form of straightforward bids for political office, which in parliamentary systems, may entail the participation or sponsorship of a major political party or coalition of parties, the dispensation of electoral endorsements to individual politicians or parties, or the assumption of the role of spiritual adviser to key political figures.

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Grassroots galvanization can manifest itself in terms of street rallies or mass petitions, using group membership to display a show of force. The agenda advanced in this type of political action tends to be narrow and focused on events of immediate urgency. Hence, these activities are largely disconnected from electoral cycles. The agents that launch these movements are unlikely to be in total control of the eventual consequences, as they depend on politicians reacting in ways that can placate their demands.

However, there is yet a third set of strategies adopted by the minority Christians in our study. Ideational factors become more central in these strategies compared to the previous two. In the political economic approach, religious beliefs, doctrines, and theologies are important insofar as they motivate and legitimate the political behavior in the first place, but they do not constitute the political actions (Fox 2013, 214). In some instances, especially with regards to the comparison between Islamic and Western societies, cultural values are emphasized as important but only insofar as they influence culture wars and identity politics regarding sexuality and women (Norris and Inglehart 2011, 154–55). However, when the perspective turns to religion in civil society and the public sphere, the theoretical lens tilt toward the moral and intellectual leadership of religious actors, whereby meaningful communicative action is emphasized over interest-based rational action (Casanova 1994). This deepens with the onset of new media and the further liberalization of the public sphere (Herbert 2009).

The handful of studies on Christian minorities responding to democratic politics in the Philippines and Indonesia highlight the growing participation of Protestant Christians in the public sphere, forming coalitions and forging links with civil society organizations and other religious groups through practical communicative actions. In the post-authoritarian era after the Catholic Church mobilized its grassroots to bring down the Marcos regime, Lim (2009) finds that Filipino Evangelicals have overcome their political conservatism and indifference to play a potentially significant "vocal minority" role in the democracy. Budijanto (2009) witnesses the same with younger Indonesian Evangelicals, who through workshops and seminar have developed new vocabularies of democratic citizenship after the Suharto regime collapsed during the Asian Financial Crisis. Hefner (2017) observes that in the face of increasing attacks on Christian groups by Islamists and the persistence of persecutory laws such as the blasphemy law in Indonesia, minority Christian leaders have chosen the practical strategy of working with the majority Muslims in the language of multicultural Pancasila citizenship.

In both Indonesia and the Philippines, the megachurches were not motivated by ideational factors but were compelled to defend their interests in the new democratic environment by adopting communicative action to reach out to non-state actors. We describe this set of strategies as "ministering to the middle," consisting of a spectrum of communicative actions seeking to mold the discursive horizons of political intermediaries, who are usually professionals, technocrats, and the intelligentsia from the middle classes. Ministry to the middle also connects to elite engagement and grassroots galvanization, as it allows a church to undertake engagement with political elites and mobilize grassroots support one step removed through the intermediaries who independently constitute themselves as civil society, advocacy groups,

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formal lobbyists, or professional associations. "Ministering to the middle" then is akin to a political and spiritual investment in power groups or potentially influential groups to profile, accentuate, or align megachurch interests and values with such groups. The benefits for the minority Christians are the ability to protect their vulnerabilities while minimizing their political exposure through indirect action. In many cases, the megachurches could also preserve their institutional integrity and ideological coherence as political conservatives, while advancing progressive politics that would improve their operational environment.

There is a need to work toward a theoretical framework that captures both the interest-based institutional factors highlighted by the political economic approach and ideational factors to understand these complex minoritarian politics. We argue that Pierre Bourdieu's field theory applied to religion, politics, and society (Swartz 1996; Rey 2004) works well here, as it allows us to specify the competitive social environment the Christians are embedded in as characterized by related actors holding different species of capital that could be strategically deployed for defense or gain in one's position. Ideational factors are constitutive of this field, as symbolic, conceptual, and knowledge elements of beliefs, doctrines, and theologies that need to be wrought as cultural capital. We believe that Bourdieu's concept of the field is suitable because struggle between actors is a key phenomenon, thus allowing us to identify relative positions of power and the negotiations necessary for achieving respective interests. In engaging the elites and galvanizing the grassroots, churches have to spend economic capital and cultural capital to gain political currency in the electoral system. But in ministering to the middle, churches are spending both to gain social capital that could be activated for various political purposes in the future. In this regard, we use social capital differently from the Putnam-inspired studies of the link between religiosity and participation in voluntary associations (Norris and Inglehart 2011, 180–95). We are also circumspect in positing further species of capital such as religious and spiritual capitals (Stark and Finke 2000; Verter 2003), as they tend to focus on individual choices in a religious market of church membership and could obfuscate the capital conversion processes cutting across religious institutions, civil society organizations, and the political system.

The Philippines: Political Reticence and Marketplace Ministry

Among the four cases in our study, the Philippines has the most open democratic system where religious institutions participate freely in public affairs. From American colonial tutelage since 1901 to the establishment of the independent republic in 1946, the Catholic Church adapted to the democratic system by exercising its mass political influence through all three sets of strategies. Ties between the Church and the political elite continued to be so close through the 20th century that in 1956, President Ramon Magsaysay would read an act consecrating the people of the Philippines to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, despite Protestant protestations. In 1986 and 2001, the Church flexed its grassroots muscle, utilizing its radio and media outlets to mobilize demonstrators along the EDSA Highway, toppling Presidents Ferdinand Marcos and Joseph Estrada, respectively. The Church has been a key civil society voice as well, particularly on education and reproductive health legislation.

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Due to theological resistance, most Filipino Protestants have been reticent in taking advantage of the open political environment despite their growing numbers and social power. Up until the People Power revolution in 1986, Protestant churches, many established by post-War American missions, concentrated on conversion and church expansion. The churches formed the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC) in 1965, but there was no active program for political engagement. Only the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship Philippines (IVCFP) articulated interest in public affairs. In 1970, IVCFP General Secretary Isabelo Magalit gave a speech, pronouncing that Christians "are needed not only in the pulpits and in the seminaries but also in the universities […] where the leaders of our nation come from," and articulating a vision of committed Christians represented across the professional world and the political arena (Adeney 2009, 12–13). This was an expression of ministering to the middle, calling on Protestants to grow their social capital of influence, rather than a call to influence politics directly. The conversion of the social capital to political capital remained miniscule. Following the 1983 assassination of Benigno Aquino, only five out of 200 Protestant groups agreed to sign a joint statement condemning the Marcos regime, including the IVCFP and the Institute of Studies in Asian Church and Culture (ISACC) (Lim 1989, 29).

Eddie Villanueva, who leads the Jesus is Lord megachurch, is an exception that proves the point. During the 1992 presidential elections, Villanueva endorsed Fidel Ramos and served as his unofficial advisor. He would later form the Citizens' Battle Against Corruption and the Bangon Pilipinas Party, under which he unsuccessfully ran for president in 2004 and 2010, as senator in 2013, before becoming a Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives in 2019. Combining elite engagement and grassroots galvanization using his Jesus is Lord base, he only achieved some success after nearly three decades. Furthermore, it is not clear that Villanueva's actions would leave a lasting institutional legacy, as much of the gain in political capital has been linked to his person and reflects populist personality politics. In our interview with the leader of a prominent Protestant group engaged in civil society, she said that Villanueva was political in a disagreeable way, "because he models himself after the American Religious Right, making public statements against President Duterte's alleged blasphemy and LGBT rights, but not about extrajudicial killings"[1] in the latter's war on drugs. According to her, Villanueva ran his electoral campaigns like a charismatic preacher, turning prayer rallies into campaign stops.

Using an interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 that stresses Christian obedience to secular authorities because they are placed there by God for purposes they might not fathom, most megachurches shun Villanueva's approach. This reticence despite the ample political opportunities at hand and the plentiful political resource at their disposal is grounded in this theology of obedience to the secular order. During the charter change debates in 1997, Cesar Conde, senior pastor of the Bread of Life megachurch, wrote extensively against the direct political involvement of clergymen (Lim 2009, 263). In 2016, Christ's Commission Fellowship strenuously denied that it endorsed the Liberal Party presidential candidate, after a photograph was circulated in social media depicting the candidate being prayed over by church leaders. Many churches limit their political engagement during elections to the offering of

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non-partisan pastoral advice. The same theology underpins the general apolitical stance toward Duterte's war on drugs taken by the megachurches, which have intervened by supporting the war through rehabilitation programs for drug users (Cornelio and Marañon 2019).

While the megachurches have eschewed elite engagement and grassroots galvanization, they have innovated outreach programs in what is generally known as marketplace ministry. Christ's Commission Fellowship organizes annual Holy Land trips targeted at professionals, with a steep price of US$5,000 a head, and the requirement to participate in daily Bible studies led by its senior pastor, Peter Tan-Chi. It has also been running a ministry for civil servants called Government Movers Enlightening the Nation. At one service we attended, Tan-Chi asked for government workers to identify themselves and got congregants to applaud for them. The ministry was publicized and Tan-Chi called for volunteers to join the ministry. The week's sermon was on the Book of Daniel and the prophet was cast as a faithful civil servant in a Godless state. Tan-Chi also said that 90% of congregants are likely to be "in the marketplace" and should adopt a noble character like Daniel wherever they might be.

Combining government officials and business functionaries in marketplace ministry is a common practice among the megachurches in our study, who saw the secular order as constituted by both the state and the capitalist economy. A pastor we interviewed said his megachurch does not "prejudice against another segment" in church growth strategy, but it consciously targets business owners and government officials, because of the belief that the church's influence would trickle down. He said, "God places each of us in certain pockets of the market […] in order for us to permeate [and] to influence."[2] Similarly, New Millennium Evangelical Church's popular bimonthly BizPro seminar event features prominent speakers from the private and public sectors. The event usually involves coffee fellowship and is a forum for social networking between church leaders, businessmen, and civil servants.

At Victory Christian Fellowship, the ambition to cultivate the middle classes has spilled over into its mission strategy. The church was set up in 1984 by two American missionaries after they travelled to the Philippines with over 60 American university students on a one-month summer mission trip. It has since grown into a Philippine megachurch with strong Filipino leadership and over 150 branches in key Philippine cities, drawing over 130,000 attendees each week. It has also internationalized as Every Nation ministries, present in 80 countries. Its mission statement is, "We exist to honor God by establishing Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered, socially responsible churches and campus ministries in every nation." We were told in an interview with its church leaders that Victory's mission strategy shifted "from reaching nations to reaching cities within those nations," targeting cities with major university campuses, "where future leaders are."[3] Victory Fort Bonifacio, its main church, is nestled among international schools next to a high-end commercial district. Every Nation Campus, its campus ministry arm, has over 400 campus missionaries active in over a thousand high-school and university campuses.

Like other megachurches, Victory is reticent about political engagement. We were told Victory has two modes of political engagement, pray for government officials and encouraging members to run for office. Once or twice a year, Victory organizes a breakfast for officials who are part of the church to be prayed over. In 2020, this

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would be expanded to become a quarterly event. Sometimes, Victory would go into government offices to pray with the officials. For Victory, encouraging righteousness is a key objective of the political engagement, which it sees as to be in short supply among government officials at the moment. Engagement is non-partisan and done across political parties. In this respect, ministering to the middle, by cultivating members who would be future civil servants, leads to elite engagement, as the government officials who are church members reach out to the political elites for influence. Victory is also cultivating social capital for grassroots galvanization. Real LIFE Foundation, the church's NGO arm, targets underprivileged high school students, seeing them through college. It has over 700 scholarship recipients on the books and graduated 400 recipients at the time of our interview, many of whom have joined the church. A church leader told us of how he gained access to a 3,000-strong high school, where half of the youths came from single families, which the leader blamed for causing delinquent behavior.[4] Every Nation Campus offered to provide spiritual help to the youths and set up a 4-week experimental workshop for 450 students, which it would expand and scale up if successful.

A small number of megachurches, especially those with younger Filipino leaders, have become more socially conscious in recent years and seem poised to leave their theological conservativeness behind. This is linked to the human rights abuses of the Duterte government, as the war on drugs enact extreme violence on lower income communities the megachurches are trying to convert. They are starting to position themselves as fellow custodians, along with liberal Protestants and Catholics, of the secular order for the sake of the nation, responsible for strengthening the democratic process using the political resources they have. One of the megachurches whose leaders we interviewed was negotiating with ISACC to establish a school of leadership and politics to train would-be politicians and civil servants in making ethical decisions when in power. The same church also supports the interdenominational People's Choice Movement, which is working to educate grassroots communities in the lead up to the 2022 elections. This church had been investing in sustained outreach to lower-income communities from its base in the upper middle classes. All these are done quietly in the backroom, as the church leaders are worried that overt political action would lead to church splits by conservative factions among well-heeled members. The megachurches are deepening their strategies for ministering to the middle but remain politically reticent, keeping to this set of strategies and accumulating social capital.

Indonesia: Existential Security and Complex Patronages

Indonesia is second to the Philippines in having an open, democratic system where religious institutions participate in the political system, albeit less freely than the latter. There are two key differences. The first is that democracy has deeper historical roots in the Philippines due to the nationalist revolution against Spain in 1898 and American colonial tutelage thereafter, with the first general election taking place in 1907. After independence from the Dutch in 1945, Indonesia transited from liberal to guided democracy under President Sukarno until the coup events of 1965 inaugurated the Suharto dictatorship. Full democratization began only in 1998 after Suharto was deposed in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis.

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The second is that political Islam played a deeper role in shaping politics in Indonesia than the Catholic Church in the Philippines. Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, the two largest Islamic organizations accounting for an estimated over 100 million members between them today, were formed in 1926 and 1912 respectively and played a big role in fostering reformist modernization underpinning nationalism during the colonial era. Both operate as socio-religious organizations running educational, welfare, and charity institutions, with unofficial but close links to Islamic political parties. While Nahdlatul Ulama officially tilts toward the accommodation of local culture and pluralism, it has a checkered past of transforming itself into a political party that championed an Islamic state and supported Suharto against left-wing secularists (Arifianto 2017). Muhammadiyah opposes syncretism and has veered toward conservative fundamentalism, but has stayed clear of partisan politics. Overall, the continuing strength of the two is derived from a growing Islamization of everyday life and identity among Muslim Indonesians, which has given Islamic factions greater influence in post-Suharto democratization (Menchik 2016).

Ecumenical mainline churches also played a big part in the formation of the nation-state, especially in the early years (Van Klinken 2003). Ecumenical Christians formed a political party, the Partai Kristen Indonesia (Parkindo), and their clergymen participated in the legislature of the early Republic. Laypersons, such as Prime Minister Amir Sjarifuddin, took on elite positions in the government. From 1959 to 1984, the chairman of the Ecumenical association, the Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia (PGI), was formerly the chief of staff of the Indonesian Armed Forces. Christians among the political elites were often called upon to mediate when local inter-faith violence flared up. Many Ecumenicals also set up resource centers, such as the Pustaka Lewi in Surabaya, to alleviate inter-communal tensions through community education.

Two trends reduced the Ecumenicals' political influence. The first was the growing political power of the Islamists, which started to boom in the later years of the Suharto regime. To contain the Islamization of government and politics, Suharto declared that Pancasila and the commitment to pluralism was to become the sole foundation for all political and social organizations in 1982. A few years earlier, Suharto's government issued decrees regulating the propagation of religion, including the banning of the proselytization of a member of another state-recognized religion. The dreaded blasphemy laws were also increasingly used by Islamists against Christians (Tyson 2021). In 2016, during his re-election campaign, Governor of Jakarta Basuki Tjahaja Purnama was accused of blasphemy in a video clip of his speech that went viral on social media. He eventually lost the election and was imprisoned. Two years later, a similar accusation was lodged against Grace Natalie, the Christian leader of the reformist Partai Solidaritas Indonesia (PSI), just before the 2019 general elections.

The other trend is the growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal megachurches. The focus of the two movements on uncompromising proselytization has led to tensions with Islamists as well as with Ecumenicals. Bambang Subandrijo, a professor at the Jakarta Theological Seminary has equated the Pentecostals with the Islamists for being absolutist and intolerant of local cultures. Social scientific experts on

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Christianity at the government's Indonesia Institute of Sciences we interviewed echoed the view that the Evangelicals' aggressive discipling and proselytization threatens peace and pluralism. Researchers at Pustaka Lewi, the Christian civil society group promoting interfaith understanding and inter-communal peace in Surabaya, told us that Evangelicals and Pentecostals have refused to participate in church surveys and discussion seminars.[5] According to the researchers, Ecumenicals focus on grassroots activities such as camps for Christian and Muslim students to forge interfaith understanding, while Evangelicals and Pentecostals tend to stage publicity events attended by religious elites.

The decline of Christian political influence and deterioration of interfaith relations have led to the increased sense of existential insecurity for all Christians. This was brought home in the fatal terror bombings of three churches in Surabaya in May 2018. When we visited the Surabaya churches for fieldwork in 2019, the attack was still fresh in the minds of our respondents and they spoke with grave anxiety, as churches heightened security measures all round. Christians have sought to improve their existential security through various ways. In general, Ecumenicals have continued to engage the political elites by directly participating in politics and the public sphere, while Evangelicals and Pentecostals have sought to minister to the middle by cultivating social capital at two levels: governmental and local community. The latter can be seen in the work of the two national church associations other than the ecumenical PGI. Persekutuan Gereja-gereja Pentakosta Indonesia (PGPI) represents the Pentecostal churches and is the most resourced by government funding among the three. In interview, PGPI leaders said that they focus on cultivating goodwill with the national government by attending official events and helping the government to implement policy initiatives among church members.[6] Persekutuan Gereja-gereja dan Lembaga-lembaga Injili Indonesia (PGLII) represents the Evangelical churches, receives lesser government funding, and focuses on speaking out against attacks on Christians and reaching out to the Muslim community leaders to counter radicalization.[7]

Like their counterparts in the Philippines, Indonesian Evangelicals and Pentecostals face theological resistance to get involved in politics. Instead of entering the political arena themselves, megachurch leaders have opted for patronage relations with the political elite. Some younger pastors have become local board members of political parties, but as Budijanto (2009) argues, these memberships have occurred upon invitation, for political parties to burnish their pluralistic image. A researcher at the Indonesia Institute of Sciences cited the example of current Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan offering a megachurch the opportunity to conduct a mass Easter service at the National Monument, to clear his sectarian image and portray himself as an inclusive leader.[8] Megachurches also make use of well-connected congregants to establish important contacts within the political elite and administrative bureaucracy, so that these could be emergency numbers to call during periods of insecurity. A couple of pastors we interviewed in Surabaya mentioned that "being nice" to these secular authorities has been instrumental in protecting their churches from hostile Islamists.[9] In a 2014 youth concert organized by the National Prayer Network, a retired army general was invited to attend, his presence an insurance against potentially unruly Islamists (Hoon 2016, 424).

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The cultivation of patronage relations with local community leaders is a more common strategy, as most megachurches prefer to avoid politics altogether and focus on proselytization. The head of the Indonesian Evangelical Theological Seminary in Surabaya told us his lecturers emphasize to students that Christians as a wealthy minority should be strategic in interacting with their neighboring communities by being sensitive and providing social assistance to the needy.[10] The seminary requires its undergraduates, mostly Evangelical and Pentecostal leaders, to plant a church and baptize 15 people as part of their final project. Many megachurches provide aid to local communities to cultivate Muslim goodwill. Gereja Bethel Indonesia Mawar Saron in Jakarta reaches out to neighboring local communities through free clinics, donations of food, and cattle during the Islamic Eid al-Adha holidays and pro-bono law assistance. Jakarta Praise Community Church has a social welfare foundation that reaches out to villages to provide sources of clean water and electricity. Masah Depan Cerah church in Surabaya runs its own accredited kindergarten, elementary, and junior high schools, which are open to non-members to serve the broader community. The schools also offer free tuition classes to children from the surrounding Muslim community. This is a departure from both the Ecumenical emphasis on social justice and its calling to serve the poor and the oppressed and the older Evangelical practice of giving aid to the poor as incentive for conversion to become "rice Christians" (Hoon 2013). The focus in this contemporary practice is to cultivate social capital with Muslim community leaders to protect megachurch interests and continue proselytization.

The price of being embedded in local communities so that proselytization can be practiced is the investment of funds and effort in the cultivation of complex patronages with local government and communities. The resulting stock of social capital can be converted into emergency contacts during extraordinary periods and goodwill during normal times. The cost of not investing in social capital is withdrawal of the church into defensive spaces such as shopping malls and business districts. One pastor told us that he was more at ease with planting a church in business districts than in residential areas, because of how the latter drew opposition from local government and communities that would need a lot of effort to overcome.[11] Another noted that holding services in commercial malls, away from the public gaze, gave his congregation a sense of security as well as being relevant to the contemporary culture of urban youths.[12]

The cost is the lack of opportunities to engage in proselytization. One church that was based in a high-end shopping mall adopted a clandestine missionary program to set up house churches in Muslim neighborhoods. However, for the house churches to remain operational, the missionaries had to contextualize and adapt Christianity to local cultures and converts from the working classes. As a result, the church had not been able to bring the converts back to the main church for fear of cultural clashes and church splits. Safe and secure in the mall, the church was alienating itself from its evangelical practice. Therefore, for those megachurches that preferred such defensive spaces, they were also containing themselves to a social class bubble that limited their effectiveness in pursuing local growth and pushed them toward the prosperity gospel blurring the boundary between Christianity and capitalism (Hoon 2018).

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Like their counterparts in the Philippines, Indonesian megachurches have fostered networks with Christian businessmen and professionals. Interestingly though, the social capital being cultivated here is more defensive than it is to spread megachurch influence among the economic middle-classes. For example, Jakarta Praise Community Church's Marketplace, arguably the most prominent business network among the Indonesian megachurches, focuses on mentoring Christian entrepreneurs to grow their businesses and runs a catalogue of over 250 Christian businesses to connect them with each other and Christian consumers. Compared to Victory Christian Fellowship in the Philippines, Jakarta Praise aims not to increase its influence in the next generation of political and economic leaders of the country, but to create a safe, shared space for budding businesses to grow as *Christian* businesses, without the need to hide their identity from the Muslim majority.

Malaysia and Singapore: Racial Politics and Associational Activism

Among the four cases, Malaysia and Singapore would rank as illiberal states, the former democratizing and the latter barely liberalizing. Both cases are burdened by the same history of racial politics pitting Malay nationalists against Chinese and Indian migrants who settled in the country under British colonialism. Singapore was initially excluded from the Federation of Malaya when the latter became independent in 1957. Singapore joined the expanded Federation of Malaysia in 1963. Singapore left the federation in 1965 after deadly riots broke out between Chinese and Malays during the annual procession to celebrate Prophet Muhammad's birthday, stoked by political fighting between the alliance led by the Malay nationalists governing in Kuala Lumpur and the multiracial People's Action Party in Singapore.

Subsequent riots between Malays and Chinese in Kuala Lumpur in 1969 shifted the political dynamic in Malaysia. The ruling coalition tilted toward Malay primacy that favored affirmative political and economic action to uplift the Malays against the wealthier Chinese and Indians. This dynamic also favored the growth of political Islam, where the overwhelming percentage of Malays are Muslims. This challenged the Malay nationalists in two ways through the 1970s. First, the Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) grew and expanded from its base in the rural northeastern peninsular states. Second, a youthful *dakwah* reform movement inspired by liberal Islamic modernism grew among the new Malay urban middle classes benefiting from the affirmative action. Unlike in Indonesia, where the political elites have resisted Islamization, the government under Mahathir Mohamad, who became prime minister in 1981, embraced the Islamization of government. The Mahathir government banned the printing, publication, and possession of the Malay-language Bible, the Alkitab. In a surprise move, it also sought to coopt the Islamic reform movement by recruiting its leader, Anwar Ibrahim, into the ranks of the political elites. Anwar rose to become deputy prime minister but was deposed by Mahathir in 1998 after he challenged the latter in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis. Anwar then led the opposition reform movement. The Mahathir regime deepened Islamization to hold on to power.

Christians responded to the Islamization of government by forming associations and civil society organizations. Evangelicals came together to form the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) in 1982 at Luther House Chapel. A year

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later, the NECF banded together with members of other non-Muslim religions to form the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism, with the inclusion of Taoists (MCCBCHST) in 2006. In 1986, the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) was founded, comprising the NECF, the Catholic Church, and the ecumenical Council of Churches of Malaysia. These associations became the public faces of the non-Muslim religious communities, advocating against discriminatory policies and regulations. These associations were different from the national associations in Indonesia, which were formed in collaboration with the government under the Pancasila framework of state recognition. In contrast, Malaysian Evangelicals stepped up to join hands with each other, with other Christians and other faiths to develop political intermediaries, because the Islamization of government was more extensive and warranted greater investment in social capital to defend collective interests. Evangelical and Pentecostal church leaders we spoke to favored signing up with NECF as member churches, as NECF had the clout to "deal with government authority." It was the safer way to register as a church, the alternative being to register with the Registrar of Societies, which meant the government could easily disband the church.

We interviewed one of the founding leaders of the NECF at his megachurch in Kuala Lumpur who is himself an exemplar in the practice of ministering to the middle and the cultivation of social capital.[13] In the early years, he sat on the board of multiple Christian organizations because of his corporate background, and he used the contacts he developed as board member to help found the NECF and spearhead the formation of the CFM and MCCBCHST. He has since retired from the associational work. These days, he mentors young Christian executives who work in the entertainment industry, sports sector, and the political arena. The latter includes leaders of the DAP, the Chinese-dominated liberal party in the opposition movement. He also mentors senior pastors of other churches through reading groups. These mentoring sessions take place at his church, which is styled as a community center open to everyone and hosts an eatery and a café serving pork-free food.

There has been a steady stream of younger Christians who have entered politics on the side of the opposition movement, but this is done on a personal basis and not endorsed by the churches. When the movement won the 2018 general election and regime change beckoned, there was both fear and jubilation on the part of megachurches. When we conducted fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur a few months after the election, most churches declined to speak to us, citing their preference to keep matters private within the church. We were a lot more successful in subsequent fieldtrips. A leader of a newer megachurch we spoke to was convinced the win by the reformists had "brought dead bones alive" and cited prominent Christian politicians such as Hannah Yeoh, a member of Kingdomcity, and Yeo Bee Yin from Every Nation, who had become cabinet ministers, as cause for optimism.[14] But this elite engagement strategy was a double-edged sword, as it had led to scaremongering from the Malay political elites warning of the Christianization of the country. This scaremongering extended to all Christian actions, even those of an apolitical nature. A youth pastor of Chinese-speaking Pentecostal megachurch recounted to us that the police shut down an outdoor faith-healing event involving a thousand participants that his church organized.[15] This was because police reports were filed by Muslims

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accusing the group of seeking to Christianize Malaysia because of promotional materials that had phrases such as "take possession of the land." While such terms were part of the "spiritual warfare" discourse adopted by more activist Pentecostals in Malaysia, Indonesia, as well as in Singapore (Goh 2018), they do not imply an attempt to infiltrate politics, but rather a desire to engage the political language of the state and prove themselves as loyal citizens of the nation.

Most megachurches prefer associational activism by forming networks and civil society organizations to direct engagement with politics. Again, this is because of the need to defend collective interests in the face of governmental threat. Thus, even with the open civil society environment in the Philippines, resourceful megachurches there have no incentive for associational activism and remained politically reticent, while Malaysian megachurches have been coming out to organize despite the illiberal political milieu. Also, compared to the Indonesian megachurches, who cultivated social capital with local community leaders to counter the Islamization threat coming from the grassroots, Malaysian megachurches take to civil society to counter Islamization of the government. At the federal level, megachurches have set up civil society organizations, such as the Kairos Dialogue Network and the Oriental Hearts and Minds Study Institute, offering platforms for interreligious interaction whilst also conducting seminars on issues relating to governance and citizenship. At the state level, they established associations, such as the Love Penang Network and the Sarawak Evangelical Christian Association, targeting state government engagement. Since the 2004 elections, churches themselves have been giving political guidance to their congregants using resources provided by the CFM advising Christians to "vote wisely" (Liow 2016, 153).

In another indication that the megachurch investment in social capital is directed to associational activism vis-à-vis the government, a pastor who left his megachurch to set up an outreach ministry told us that membership of the Love Penang Network has declined to a handful of churches after it shifted its focus to provision of welfare aid to migrant workers.[16] In turn, this shift happened in the context of the change in state government in Penang from Gerakan, a political ally in the Malay nationalist-led coalition, to the DAP. We also spoke to a megachurch pastor who was a leader of the Penang chapter of Prayer United Malaysia. The latter organized bimonthly prayer meetings attended by nearly 300 church leaders, with member churches taking turns to host the meetings. A few senior pastors led the meeting in prayer on specific topics relating to the state and the nation, with each meeting focused on a theme set by NECF. The last theme when we spoke to the pastor was on women and girls in the nation, "not just that women will rise to their potential in church, but also in the business world, in the marketplace, and politics."[17] The next meeting, he told us, would focus on the anniversary of the new reformist national government.

Megachurches in Singapore have also been increasingly involved in associational activism, but for a different reason, to deal with a regulatory government that sees racial sentiments and religious viewpoints as inherently dangerous for a pluralistic society and social liberalization linked to advanced globalization of the city. Racial politics affects Singapore differently, in that it justifies strong state intervention to secure the multiracial peace. In the late 1980s, the government cracked down on Christian activists championing the social gospel and then enacted the Maintenance of

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Religious Harmony law empowering the government to proscribe pastoral and preaching activities, including proselytization. From the late 1990s onwards, the state embarked on transforming Singapore into a global city of finance and innovation. Attitudes toward LGBT identities softened. Then, in 2005, plans to develop two casino facilities to establish Singapore as a convention hub were announced.

The latter changes in governmental posture caused megachurches to move away from the same political reticence grounded in the theology of civil obedience shared with megachurches in the Philippines and Indonesia. The National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS), formed in 1974, which had previously limited its actions to backroom lobbying on specific concerns affecting individual churches, issued official statements urging the government to reconsider the changes and maintain the status quo. This transformed the role of NCCS closer to the work done by similar associations in Malaysia.

The difference with the associational activism in Malaysia however, was that the Singaporean megachurches saw it necessary to defend the state against what they believe to be its imminent capture by liberal forces advancing a "secular fundamentalism," a term coined by a law professor who was also an Evangelical thought-leader when she spoke against civil society progressives in parliament in 2009 as a nominated member of parliament. This took place after Evangelicals carried out a hostile takeover of the feminist civil society organization, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), sparking a bitter fight between Evangelical activists and progressives calling for the enforcement of secularism in the public sphere (Chong 2011). The Evangelicals' sought to use AWARE as a vehicle to neutralize LGBT political influence in civil society. The government stepped in to stop the Evangelicals and the progressives regained control of AWARE.

The associational activism was made possible because of intensive networking between Evangelical and Pentecostal megachurches that has been taking place since the 1990s. In 1995, the LoveSingapore movement was launched, led by the largest megachurch then, the Faith Community Baptist Church (FCBC). The movement's vision was to "catalyze Kingdom transformation in the Seven Gates of Cultural Influence in Singapore," from the intimate sphere of Family and Home to the highest echelons of Government and Leadership (LoveSingapore 2006). LoveSingapore was also the inspiration for the Love Penang Network. In 2010, Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship Singapore, a network for Christian businessmen, was renamed Gatekeepers Singapore, inspired by Biblical passages that saw gates as key sources of influence on cities and nations. Associates of these two networks were responsible for other initiatives such as the Daniel Fellowship, a prayer meeting for civil servants that gathers twice a year.

After the AWARE incident, FCBC's founding pastor Lawrence Khong led the associational activism against LGBT activists. In 2014, he rallied his church and network of megachurches to participate in the Wear White campaign in conjunction with conservative Muslims as a counter-protest to the Pink Dot rally to support LGBT rights. This was after Khong failed to hold a pro-family counter rally, as the government intervened to stop the escalation. The government has upheld the status quo of allowing punitive legislation against gay sexual intercourse to remain on the books to signal the state's pro-heteronormative stance but not enforcing it to allow gays private

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space to live their sexuality. Since then, the state has watched the megachurches more carefully, disciplining pastors who upset the status quo and also becoming more sensitive to their sensitivities, which would cause counter-reactions from progressive secularists, as our epigraph on the banning of a black metal band shows.

Conclusion

The baseline in minoritarian politics in the four cases of our study is that political reticence is the normal state of affairs for the megachurches. Grounded in the theology of civil obedience, the megachurches prefer to focus on church growth, proselytization, and inward-looking discipleship. This is most visibly seen in the Philippines, where opportunities to participate in the vibrant civil society and public sphere are eschewed by megachurches despite their rich endowments in resources and social influence. In Indonesia, megachurches are coming out of their reticence because one of their core activities, proselytization, has been heavily curtailed and many feel existential insecurity coming from being embedded in local communities because of the extant Islamization of these communities. In Malaysia, megachurches came out of their reticence once the Islamization of government became apparent. In Singapore, megachurches are only belatedly coming out in response to the social liberalization of government and society.

In all these cases, the degree to which and character of how megachurches come out of their political reticence depends on the severity of the threat to their practices or their very existence. Political action is directed toward the source of the threat, whether it is the government (Malaysia), local communities (Indonesia), or civil society (Singapore). If they could hide in shopping malls, some churches would choose to do so with some costs, as we show in the case of Indonesia. In the case of the Philippines, the megachurch that was forming links to progressive civil society groups in the backroom was not an exception, as it was doing it in response to the Duterte government adversely impacting on the communities the church was reaching out to.

The other finding is that ministering to the middle to cultivate social capital is by far the most prevalent set of strategies adopted by megachurches coming out of their political reticence. Elite engagement involving the direct participation in electoral or civil society politics is the exception that is conducted as personal undertaking. Church support of such elite engagement has led to backlashes from fellow churches as seen in the cases of Jesus is Lord's Villanueva in the Philippines and from the government as with the AWARE incident in Singapore. Grassroots galvanization is also exceptional, as the preferred mode of interacting with hostile government is through representative associations. Again, grassroots galvanization might invite backlash, which is why the Singapore government disallowed Christian counter-rallies against LGBT activists. More importantly, ministering to the middle builds up social capital that the megachurches can convert to influence with the government on specific issues and goodwill with the majority communities when needed. On this aspect, the Malaysian and Indonesian megachurches have been quite successful with the government and local communities respectively in the face of Islamization.

Our study suggests that scholars of religion and politics need to look closer at the sociology of social capital formation and conversion in the complex exchanges

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between churches, local communities, civil society, and the political system. Scholars who have been developing the concept of social capital in the sociology of religion have focused on individual choices with regards to church membership and volunteerism rather than institutional investments and expenditure in social capital for political purposes. On the other hand, the scholarship on religion and politics tends to focus on more visible manifestations of politics that are captured by strategies we tagged as elite engagement and grassroots galvanization. These are important, but we should also look for the underlying social networks and *connective actions* of religious minorities, as the building up of social capital through the long, quiet game of ministering to the middle can be equally political. We risk missing these hidden politics and misunderstanding some minority groups such as Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians in Asia as irrevocably politically conservative.

We believe that digging into the connection actions of religious minority groups and determining their social capital investments would be able to shed led on minoritarian politics in Asia and other parts of the world. Application to a number of cases in urban Asia would be important, including the struggles of Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and other minorities in the Hindutva takeover of democratic politics in Indian cities (Banaji 2018), and the network resilience of Christian house churches in the face authoritarian repression in Chinese cities (Kang 2016). Conversely, our theory of the centrality of social capital in minoritarian politics could also be fruitfully used to understand majoritarian politics. For instance, the spread and deepening of Islamization in Malaysia and Indonesia involved decades of institutional investment in forging networks and connections with local communities, civil society organizations, and government institutions. To go even further, we contend that this focus on connective action would focus empirical studies of what Asad (2003) and Salvatore (2007) have delineated as diverse genealogies of secularism in non-Western societies. We see the formation of political secularism in postcolonial contexts where modernizing reformist religions, from Islam and Christianity to Buddhism and Confucianism, and through their institutional networks entangled deep into society, played a key role in the shaping of alternative public spheres and nation-states.

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Notes

1. Interview, Manila, December 1, 2019.
2. Interview, Manila, December 1, 2019.
3. Interview, Manila, November 29, 2019.
4. Interview, Manila, November 29, 2019.
5. Interview, Surabaya, February 17, 2020.
6. Interview, Jakarta, June 5, 2018.
7. Interview, Jakarta, June 6, 2018.
8. Interview, Jakarta, June 7, 2018.
9. Interview, Surabaya, January 26, 2019.
10. Interview, Surabaya, February 14, 2020.

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11. Interview, Surabaya, January 26, 2019.
12. Interview, Jakarta, June 4, 2018.
13. Interview, Kuala Lumpur, February 24, 2020.
14. Interview, Kuching, May 12, 2019.
15. Interview, Kuala Lumpur, February 24, 2020.
16. Interview, Penang, March 30, 2019.
17. Interview, Penang, March 30, 2019.

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