Potential Threats to Social Harmony in Johor, Malaysia

Bagong Suyanto

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universas Airlangga, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the potential threats or conflicts shadowing social harmony in Johor Malaysia. The State of Johor is inhabited by plural, yet, segregated ethnic groups, thus making them prone to communal conflicts. The process of data collection was conducted between 2010 and 2012 through interviews with 1,000 respondents from 10 regions as well as extensive field observations. The study shows that notwithstanding the conflict potential is confined to low-intensity and sporadic quarrel, the impact of tension which has frequently occurred within families and relatives can lead to clashes in a larger community. In turn, this incites various kinds of prejudice among the fragmented communities. Worse still, the individual perception about tolerance in respect to religious aspects is quite concerning, albeit not demonstrable in the context of inter-ethnic relations. Nonetheless, two most sensitive issues perpetrating social incompatibilies are detected as to the construction of worship places and defamation against different religious identities.

Keywords: Conflict, tolerance, social harmony, ethnic, prejudice

INTRODUCTION

This research discusses social harmony and potential conflicts in Johor, a state in Malaysia. As a developing industrialised state (Spybey, 1992; McQuarrie, 1995; Ishiyama, 2004), inhabited by a plural, yet, segregated society, Johor shows a degree of conflict vulnerability which may turn into an

open conflict (manifest conflicts), especially due to the multi-ethnic, inter-religious, and conflicts among ideological-political parties (Lee, 1980; Horowitz, 1985; Brass, 1991; Brown, 1993; Bowen, 1996; Mitsuo et al., 2001; Farouk, 2005).

Johor, or officially called Johor Darul Takzim, is a state located in the Malaysian Peninsular with an area of 19219 square kilometers. Johor is divided into 10 regions with Johor Baru being the capital city. As a state which has the second largest population in Malaysia, Johor is famous for its ethnic

diversity. However, rather than having a developed sense of unity and national spirit in their everyday life, current happenings indicate Johoreans are fragmented and segregated along the lines of ethnicity, social class, political ideology, school, culture, and even residential area and lifestyle.

In Johor, it can be observed that ethnic groups such as Malays, Chinese, Indians, and others are communally divided, living in separate enclaves. They seem to be more segregated than ever before. According to Department of Statistics (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia), in Johor, the Malays are the largest ethnic group accounting for 51.1% of the total population there with most of them being Muslims. The Chinese form the second largest group accounting for 35.4% of the population in Johor. They are mainly Taoists and Confucianist. The Indians make up about 6.9 % of the population while the rest are categorised as the other having Middle Eastern ancestry. Despite the fact the Malays form the largest ethnic group, economic activities are dominated by the Chinese and those of Middle Eastern descent belonging to the middle class; the majority of Malays belong to the lower class. Thus, it is likely that the root of social conflict lies in the economic discrepancy among the three ethnic groups.

Over the last five years it can be witnessed that trivial incidents involving individuals from different ethnic background can easily spark social tensions. Literature reveals that small issues as accidental body contact on the road, quarrels among children and dispute between people escalate into manifest conflict among ethnic groups (Baron, 1977). Indeed, this is contrary to the spirit of the nation-building project in Malaysia which expects that all ethnic groups live in peace and harmony (Seah, 2000).

With a population of 3,385,200, Johor has fragile social relations among members of its society. The context is similar to that of Ambon, Indonesia (Susan, 2009) which opens up the possibility of dissension and violent conflict causing damages and casualties. The fragile social relations form a weak foundation to establish a safe, comfortable and peaceful society. This is illustrated in incidents such as the destruction of places of worship, inter-ethnic fights, and exchange of insults between religious groups. In the unchanging and closed social structure inherited from the Mahathir era until now, conflict has been heavily suppressed in order not to destabilise the state (Himes, 1980; Hilley, 2001).

According to Singh (2010, p. 43), ethnic conflict is basically a group phenomenon. It arises when social collectives express fundamental differences over the authoritative allocation of values. Here, the cause of the conflict goes beyond the gap among social classes. The root of the problem is closely related to cultural, political, and interest factors, as well as prejudices that have been passed down from generation to generation. In a conflict triggered only by economic factors, disputes will undoubtedly be resolved quickly when the available sources of production are fairly distributed or when social relations

are based on mutualism, that is when a mutually beneficial relationship without being initiated by cultural acculturation are established. However, it is different from the conflict caused by differences in ideology, interests, cultures, revenge and long term feuds which have never been completely resolved (Dugan, 1982; Singh, 2010; Saad et al., 2012).

In addition to exploring the problems revolving around social harmony in Johor, this research is intended to explore a number of potential factors leading to social conflicts. Why are the problematic situations causing such kinds of conflict is present in Johor? What are the root causes of problems and what are the latent causes triggering manifest social-politic conflicts in Johor? What is the tolerance level among the population of Johor in negotiating these differences and conflicts? The objective of this research is to describe existing conditions and explain how Johor people perceive differences among them as well as the causes which trigger the conflict among the local community. The outcome of this research is expected to help the local government and related institutions to observe social practices and cultures in Johor in light of preventing ethnic and religious based conflicts.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a survey method aimed at describing the issue of harmony and social conflicts in Johor. This research also employed a number of methods to collect information and data in each stage. The first step involved reviewing a number of related studies as well as theories relevant to socio-political conflicts. The review is pivotal to gain explanation and understanding about the potential root problem of the conflicts. The problem and the theoretical factors are seen to have great influence on social dynamics and socio-political conflicts in society, particularly those related to historical aspects of social, cultural, and religious activities of Johoreans.

The second step was collecting primary data regarding the potentials and the roots causes of socio-political conflicts from a number of respondents and key informants in Johor. This research involved 1,000 respondents from various regions in Johor. The interview was conducted with the guidance of prepared questionnaire. Most respondents were from Johor Baru (525 respondents). The rest were from Muar (120 respondents), Segamat (103 respondents), Kluang (72 respondents), Pontian (50 respondents), Kulaijaya (47 respondents), Mesing (42 respondents), and from Batu Pahat, Kota Tinggi and Ledang (41 respondents). The survey was necessary to obtain data relating to several variables including local people's opinions and attitudes towards the causes of the conflict, and the limit to which people can tolerate differences and emerging potential conflicts.

In order to obtain more detailed data, the study also conducted Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving a number of key informants including informal community leaders, religious leaders, government officials and youth leaders.

Information unearthed in the FGD not only discussed the root causes of conflicts, but also models of conflict management that evolved and was being developed in the community.

In this study, data was processed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. Data tabulation and its process are shown in a form of tables to help the reader understand the issues discussed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several studies have shown that a nation composed of various ethnic groups, religions, races, and ideologies and characterised by a rigid class structure, will undoubtedly suffer a great potential for conflict if all the differences and gaps that exist are not well managed (Susetiawan, 2000; Sihbudi & Nurhasim (Eds.), 2001; Santoso, 2002). It is not impossible for a society characterised by a number of differences witnesses sudden manifest conflict which is triggered by a trivial matter (Barrash & Webel, 2001).

Conflict can be defined as an interaction between at least two individuals or groups who have different goals (Nicholson, 1972). Conflict is also widely understood as a situation where there is a competition to meet the objectives between different groups (Miall, 1999) Conflicts can occur at any time when thoughts, words, and deeds are clashed and individuals or groups are unable to find a solution.

Conflicts can be theoretically explained from different analytical approaches. Broadly speaking, there are three most common approaches on the sociology of conflict. The first is primordial approach to conflict analysis. Conflicts are deemed as implications of group identities and their various interests in the social structure (Giddens 1992, p. 162). This approach is called the primordial approach as it observes the conflict as a result of conflict of interest and friction between ethnic-based and religious-based identities.

The second approach, instrumental approach, puts forward the notion that the presence of a strong impetus from political interests and the emergence of a provocateur in a society have specific purposes in a chaotic society. Communal identity is manipulatively utilised to achieve hidden political agenda. This perspective sees cultural identity as result of manipulation and mobilisation by political elites to achieve their interests and agenda (Brass, 1991). Socio-ethnic values, cultural forms, and ethnic traits become important political sources for the elites in the competition for political power and economic gain. The elites exploit ethnic sentiment and mobilise people to benefit from the chaotic situation created.

Social construction approach is the third approach commonly used in analysing the sociology of conflicts. This approach views conflict as dialectical reality within society. Individuals and social groups recognise that conflicts exist in their daily lives and thus, conflicts become a social process to change or maintain the social order. This approach is involved in the discussion of social process of

par excellence daily experience, interaction, and actions emerging as the imperative form of the structure of consciousness .

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a state populated by various groups and social classes, Johor is not only prone to conflicts, but also to social disintegration. In the last few years, Johor experienced potential conflicts triggered by trivial matters, which did not happen only once or twice. Horizontal and vertical conflicts, as the present study found, occurred in various regions on a limited scale. However, it is not impossible that one day it could burst into an explosive conflict if not properly managed (Steger & Lind, 1999; Kalyvas & Mosoud, 2008).

Horizontal conflict is a conflict triggered by differences in ethnicity, religion, profession, race, custom and region. On the other hand, vertical conflict is due to differences in social class and social polarisation which are quite sharp (Nasikun, 1984, p.30). As a matter of fact, it is not uncommon that conflicts which are triggered by differences in class and economic interests become more profound as they are aggravated by differences in ethnic background, religion as well as social differentiation.

Potential, Form, and Trigger of Conflict

In Johor, it is quite easy for social harmony to be shaken as people are not ready to accept unity in diversity or minor differences; some trivial disputes often spark ugly incidents. Manifest conflicts involving two different ethnic groups such as between Malays and Chinese are not sporadic events. It starts with minor disagreements between individuals such as children or adults arguing but however it often leads to a massive altercation that involves not only individuals abut also their in-group.

Based on data gathered, there are a number of factors which cause friction, disturbance, and even conflict between communities in different regions of Johor. In the last two years, it was reported that in the areas where the respondents were surveyed, manifest conflicts happened at least once or twice (81%). In fact, in certain areas, the intensity of the conflict in the last two years was up between 3 and 5 times (17%) and even 6 or 9 times (2%). The series of conflicts indicate that they are more likely to happen when political and economic interests as well as interference of groups aggravate the situation.

Forms of conflict in Johor include arguments, insults or yelling at each other to express displeasure or offending people

Table 1

Forms and Intensity of Conflicts Occurring in the Community (n= 606 Respondents)

Forms of Conflicts	Often	Sometimes	Never
Arguments and insults	53.0%	26.0%	21.0%
Physical fight	17.0%	46.0%	37.0%
Violence, threats and	10.0%	46.0%	44.0%
lawsuits	2.0%	0.0%	98.0%
Others			

when faced with other people's attitudes and behaviour considered as disturbing. More than half (53%) of the respondents said arguments and insults often occurred in their neighbourhood. The more violent forms of conflict, such as physical fights (17%) or other violence (10%), were less likely to happen. Only a small number of respondents observed physical fights or other acts of violence in their neighbourhood. Small-scale conflicts, such as berating each other, in reality, do not always result in an increased intensity in clashes. Conflicts at this elementary level are still present, and sometimes help to prevent the conflict from becoming uncontrollable.

In some cases, verbal conflicts in the form of arguments and insults could ignite a riots on a bigger scale. On the other hand, verbal conflicts between individuals in the form of invective seem functional in preventing conflicts from becoming more prevalent because it is the most popular mode as well as a means for people to vent pent-up frustrations and anger in a way which does not damage the balance of the overall system (Coser, 1995). By expressing dissatisfaction through verbal conflicts, emotion and the potential latent conflicts, more or less, obtain an outlet channel, without having to fall into conflicts which damage the overall system. One Malay informant claimed to have had a dispute with a Chinese because they were involved in a traffic accident. Because he pleaded not guilty, he then asked for compensation. However, the Chinese person involved in the dispute with him did not want to admit

guilt or pay the damage incurred. He became angry and curse the Chinese who grazed his car. The informant admitted he was upset and cursed because at least he had expressed his anger without having to engage in fisticuffs. Unlike the physical conflicts that cause injury and death, conflicts in the form of spewing invectives are often seen as more effective in preventing smouldering conflict because at that level, reconciliation can be rebuilt immediately between parties involved without prolonged resentment (Kalyvas et al., 2008).

Causes of the conflict in the respondents' neighbourhood varied. However, the conflicts were generally triggered by the disruption of social order (37%) and fights among children (21%). In some areas, the conflict was partly triggered by disagreement regarding the location of the construction of places of worship (16%). Although the proportion is not too large compared with factors involving political ideology or ethnic differences, conflicts triggered by religious differences have a higher tendency to trigger manifest conflicts which involve a greater number of citizens. A number of informants stated that in Johor, tolerance limits on matters related to religious life differences, such as the establishment of places of worship considered too flashy, often triggered conflicts manifest. One Malay informant admitted as follows:

> *""In my neighbourhood, local people protested and forced to shut down a place of worship of Chinese people because of no permit. There was already a place of worship*

nearby, but they just kept building a new one. Who would visit the place of worship? You can't just, because you have abundant fund, then build places of worship without restraint..."

Based on the 1,000 respondents interviewed, the study found that the category of conflicts that often occurred in the respondents' neighbourhood was caused by religious differences (32%). Compared to conflicts triggered by ethnic differences (24%) and differences in political ideology (24%), conflicts due to religious differences were more sensitive and more likely to happen because the tolerance limit of people towards different religions are still relatively low. Although in some areas inter-religious relations seemed quite harmoniously intertwined, when the boundary demarcation between religious communities reached an intolerable point, the conflict can no longer be avoided. From the result of FGD, it was found that of religion is a very sensitive matter which often triggers conflicts among people. A number of religious figures who were invited to participate in focus group reported that they often received complaints about cases where people were considered being overly aggressive in disseminating their religious beliefs and building overly big or fancy religious symbols or buildings.

Although the majority of respondents claimed not being disturbed (48%) when there was an establishment of other faiths' place of worship, this research found that quite a lot of respondents (26%) openly admitted that they actually felt disturbed, and even 9% of respondents stated unequivocally that they felt disturbed if there are other houses of worship built in their neighbourhood. For some respondents, the construction of other religious communities' worship houses, in some cases, is sometimes understood as a form of threat and a violation toward their space and privacy because that establishment is considered as a form of intervention or media propaganda that threatens the integrity of their religion.

At an individual or personal level, in various regions of Johor, the respondents said they could accept anyone who is different from them as part of their diverse community. Yet, it is different when prejudice against different groups, in terms of ethnicity or religion, thrives in the community. Past experience in various areas in Johor tended to show how friction and conflict were more likely to explode because there was a sense of in-group and attitudes reluctant to accept differences in the mind of each group. The present study found that there was a Chinese who personally had good relations with people of other ethnic groups, whether Malay, Indian or others. However, as part of a larger community, he often behaved differently because he had racial prejudices that had settled for years in his mind. In Johor Baru, for example, the study found just because of a Chinese fighting Malay, the interpersonal conflict grew into a mass conflict because of strong in-group feelings.

In Johor, this study found that some Chinese do not have a problem living in

a Malay dominated environment as they have been able to live there peacefully. As long as they know each other well, then they would not be so much affected by prejudice and conflicts that occur in other places. However, when someone from Chinese background is travelling to another area where the others do not know them, while at the same time conflict is happening there, then it is likely for each of them to label people based on their background and despise them as they represent the ethnic background that they despise.

Theoretically, in a community where people live separately on the basis of ethnicity, religion and economic status, undoubtedly a latent potential for conflict will get stronger, and when there is a small trigger, the greater the likelihood of conflict be ignited (Haque, 2003; Susan, 2009). Differences and prejudice between Chinese and Malay, for example, are one of the social problems that have not been resolved in Johor and Malaysia in general. It can be a time bomb which will explode into a manifest conflict if not managed well. As told by a number of informants, in today's Malaysia, Chinese supremacy is not only in economics, but also has started to extend to politics, so that their power and wealth caused Malay to be resistant and become increasingly distant from them. In terms of numbers, the conflicts between economic classes (10%) and political conflicts between people against the state (21%) in Johor were generally much smaller than horizontal conflicts, such as inter-ethnic conflicts (36%), conflicts between religious communities (18%) or conflict between followers of political parties (15%). When the conflicts among classes and conflicts with horizontal nature overlap, it is not impossible that conflicts that arise will be greater, especially when there is a third party taking part to exploit the situation.

In Johor, the potential or likelihood of conflicts is more likely to occur among people who are poor or low in economy. Compared to horizontal conflicts, potential conflicts of class-based distinctions is less likely to occur. However, the data showed that the low-economic class people were generally the most vulnerable to be manipulated by third parties for the benefit of their political and economic interests because poverty condition makes their tolerance tend to be low.

From the FGD, it was found that ethnic and religious conflicts are often volatile and unresolved because there are some who use the situation to exploit others for their own political and economic interests. The issue which is initially appeared trivial and frivolous will likely be used as an ammunition for a particular group as an attempt to project their political interest against the State or the establishment. Similarly, racial and religious conflicts are exploited by those who also attempt to secure their economic interests. In Johor, according to the focus group participants, there is a group of 'secret society' that take advantage of the chaotic situation to achieve economic benefits for themselves and exploit mass sentiments. These "pragmatic" groups in reality are the ones who feast

on exaggerating the reality of the conflict itself (*hyper reality*) and thus, trapping the community to live in the shadow of potentially never-ending conflicts.

Among Johor citizens, the potential for individual conflicts are not severe. Conflicts among them do occur, but if resolved immediately, a conflict is more likely not get bigger. Out of 1,000 respondents surveyed, 44% of respondents said that in their hearts, no feelings of resentment were exacerbated after the conflict. Only 15% of respondents claimed they had an increasing resentment to the counterparty after a conflict. Meanwhile, almost half of respondents (41%) stated that they became even more familiar and understood one another after the conflict, which was later resolved through reconciliation.

Most residents interviewed generally realised that the conflict, in any form, will be detrimental to all parties. Thus, as long as each side could resist, they hoped the conflict would not last long and be immediately resolved by all parties. Though conflict is an inherent phenomenon which always occurs in the community, the majority of the respondents actually admitted that they always attempted to avoid a conflict because any conflict would undoubtedly be detrimental to their lives. One informant said:

> *"Actually we don't like being involved in a conflict. [Both parties] will surely equally lose. But, when I'm out of control, yeah, we just fight to defend our interests which are disturbed. Yes, if it's possible to resolve it amicably, we definitely choose that. We just get into conflict if we have to ...."*

Generally, all respondents surveyed stated that they always sought to avoid conflict. However, when their privacy is disturbed, or the family or a member of their group become victims of other ethnic groups, and so forth, then the awareness of the social status would normally fade. This even raises the feeling of solidarity to defend their group, especially when the trigger is related to their religion and beliefs. Among the communities in Johor, religious issues are often recognised as a trigger for conflict because of conservatism of ideological values embraced by each individual.

Demarcation and Tolerance

For short term, trying to stop the conflict and negate the differences in the pursuit of harmony may be justified and seem to be an effective way to create a peaceful situation. However, being overly allergic to conflict and the real difference is also not a wise attitude because every society actually has the potential and the durability of its own to face differences and hidden future conflicts.

Many previous studies have proven that conflict is a reality that is inherent in society. Conflict is a social reality that will always be present as long as there are differences in social identity, distribution of resources, interests, and ideologies. However, conflicts that occur in society do not always have significant negative impacts that break the existing social system.

When conflicts are properly managed, they can be seen from their functional aspect, namely as a mechanism to enhance the social integration process. Achieving such an understanding would enable a conflict been seen from a more optimistic angle, i.e., as a way to eliminate the disintegration of various elements in order to form a solid community. In this sense, conflict should not be avoided but rather managed in order to find a solution.

At various research sites, the present study found that despite the potential for conflict and growing prejudices in society in addressing the differences, institutions and local wisdoms proved to be functional and effective to make the differences and the potential of conflicts managed properly and not explode into a manifest conflict. To some communities, it may be true that differences on the basis of religion or ethnicity can make the two sides constantly have prejudices and suspicions of each other. To some others, however, the differences are often treated wisely, full of tolerance, and they have lived together for a long time without being disturbed by a conflict (Lederach, 1996).

Theoretically, deterrent factors which have a significant role in reducing conflict are the power of tolerance and the need to live peacefully. Despite different demarcation boundaries of public tolerance, each side still needs a separate space for exclusive living with their own community (Susan, 2009). However, for the majority of respondents, the most important thing is to realise that the conditions of the community or social environment around them are diverse, and,

inevitably, they have to accept the fact that there are others who are different from them, in terms of ethnicity, religion, political ideology, and socio-economy.

Most respondents accepted that Johor consists of a multi-ethnic society, and that there are many people around them who are different in many aspects. Some respondents even claimed that they could accept the difference in a more personal scale: being part of a family. The majority of respondents claimed that people from different ethnic groups (93%), religion (91%), political ideology (77%) and economic class (84%), are an inescapable reality of life in such a multi-ethnic society.

Johoreans in general can accept people from different groups not only as fellow citizens or residents of Malaysia . Moreover, not a few respondents admitted that in everyday life they also had a close friend from different groups. Of the 1,000 respondents surveyed, most (60%) claimed to have a close friend, either from different ethnic group or religion -although not many. As many as 31% of the respondents even claimed to have many close friends from different ethnic group while 22% of the respondents claimed to have many close friends from different religious groups. Only 7% of the respondents admitted having no close friends from different ethnicities and 9% of respondents claimed to have no close friend of different religion. In everyday life, playing and spending leisure time with people from different ethnic group or religion, according to most respondents, was not uncommon.

In an era where awareness of democracy and multiculturalism has grown, hanging out or making friends with people from different ethnic group or religion does not seem to be a problem in Johor. An in-depth interview noted that most respondents basically were not troubled by the origin of or from which groups their friends were from as similarity in lifestyle was deemed more important than group basis. In addition, in choosing their in-group, shared interests seem to be more important than similarity in religious or ethnic sentiments. Among those from different religions, there is in fact a potential for conflict. However, in real life, when those of different ethnic groups and religions have mutual lifestyle and economic class, the potential for conflict at the group level can often be mitigated or even set aside. A Malay informant said:

> *"In business, yes, we are not picky. I myself also have no problem with anyone I hang out. I have many friends of Chinese, Indian or other ethnic groups. It doesn't matter. I happen to do exercise. My exercise mates are from various ethnic groups. Nowadays, there is no point of fighting ..."*

Compared with barriers emerging from ethnic and religious differences, the study found that the society in Johor seemed to be shaped and divided by economic class rather than horizontal segregation. Participants appeared to have faced more difficulty in picking their friends based on differences in economic class rather than along ethnic and religious lines. Compared with choosing a friend on the basis of ethnic differences (31%), differences in political ideology (38%), differences in religion (22%), and differences in the area of origin (39%), the study found only 17.7% of participants claimed to have allies from different economic classes. It means economic barriers are far more difficult to break compared with cultural and ethnic boundaries.

How is the family's attitude when the respondent has a close friend from different group of ethnicity, religion, political party, or economic class? The majority of respondents admitted that their family never questioned them about it. Of the 1,000 respondents surveyed, no more than 10% of families questioned who the respondents' friends were and where they were from. Approximately 14% of the respondents admitted that sometimes family questioned

Table 2

Respondents' Close Friends of Different Ethnic Groups, Religions, Economic Classes, Political Ideologies

Close friends	Yes, I have many close friends	Yes, I have few close friends	I don't have any close friends
Different ethnic groups	31.0%	62.0%	7.0%
Different religions	22.0%	69.0%	9.0%
Different political ideologies	38.0%	39.0%	23.0%
Different regions/states	39.0%	56.0%	5.0%
Different economic classes	17.7%	66.0%	16.0%

if they had friends of different ethnic groups, and 16% of the respondents admitted to be questioned for having close friends of different religions. However, the majority of respondents claimed that in everyday life their family usually never questioned about their friends. The respondents said in the eyes of their family, whether the social environment of the respondents had a negative impact or not was deemed more important. Resistant attitude towards and questioning the differences usually occurred when conflicts between ethnic groups or religions took place. Among the respondents' families, issues related to ethnicity were hardly discussed but it did not mean it was never discussed. Most respondents (68%) admitted that their family sometimes or even often discussed issues related to ethnicity. However, the discussion was limited to mundane conversation to fill spare time in response to news in the media, not leading to a prolonged dispute in everyday life outside the family. As many as 19% of the respondents admitted that their family "often" discussed issues of ethnicity while 6% of the respondents admitted "very often".

Among people in Johor, talking about or gossiping about issues of ethnicity, religion, and other sensitive topics in private sphere (family), in some ways, are still a common practice. However, many respondents said they had no interest to further engage in various activities that express "distance" or their dislike-ness against other ethnic groups or followers of other religions in the rallies and so forth. Essentially, although

they expressed their displeasure against a particular ethnic group, they tend to discuss it within the family only, without being overly reactive and express their dislike in practical actions such as joining demonstrations against the other ethnic, religious, or political party. Of the 1,000 respondents surveyed, only 9% admitted that within the past two years they were frequently involved in demonstrations against different groups. Most respondents (79%) claimed that during the last two years they had never been involved in rallies that opposed other ethnic groups, religions, political parties, or other different groups. One Malay participant said:

> *"In my family, I often discussed about the Chinese who dominate the economy of Malaysia. They are rich, and sometimes they keep their heads high since they got a lot of financial support as well as political parties. However, we only talk about this matter among family and friends. I never participated in any riot or demonstration against the Chinese. Not every Chinese are bad. Some are nice people. Not all Malays are good fellow, some might be very displeasing…"*

In Johor, when talking about natural instincts regarding choosing friends and which habitat is considered the most secure and comfortable, the people choose a group or a place that has many things in common with them. However, in practice, the choice

of where they live is influenced by many other variables. The main factors taken into consideration in choosing a place of living is not the location that is surrounded by the same ethnic group, but rather on whether their financial condition enables them to afford a house in the desired location. As many as 62% of the respondents said that house price is the main consideration in choosing the location of residence. Only 37% considered the same ethnic group residing in the neighbourhood as the main factor in influencing the choice of residence. Other major factors highly considered by respondents, in addition to the price, are quality of property (47%), infrastructure (52%) and safety of the neighbourhood (55%).

Certain ethnic groups, especially Chinese (32%) and Indian (47%), in the eyes of most respondents, tend to live exclusively in a particular location. Both ethnic groups were also seen to have tendency to restrict interaction with other ethnic groups. However, according to information obtained from the field, as long as it did not interfere with each other, and all interactions could still occur in other zones, such as in the workplace, the marketplace, or other public zones, it was not considered an issue. According to some informants, in addition to issues of neighbourhood and possibly segregated schools, there are other zones that allow citizens to develop social interaction which is functional to neutralise differences. Doing sports activities together or spending leisure time with people sharing similar hobbies regardless of ethnicity or religion, according to a number of respondents, is a good medium for them to meet people from different groups.

In a rigid community where the members are alienated from each other and, thus, never greet their fellows, establishing multicultural life may not be easy (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). However, this study shows that people in Johor are getting used to differences. Furthermore, in some regions, zones or forum allowing people to meet each other have been established, thus helping conflicts in general to be mitigated or kept to minimum. Though, at group level, such thing as prejudices against other groups remained, to some extent, the study found that in many areas in Johor, common lifestyle and economic class as well as the presence of neutral zones which allow people to interact with each other were the key to the development of multicultural life that is dynamic, yet, functional and effective to maintain harmonious relations among the residents (Crouch, 2001; Jeong, 2003; Munusamy, 2012).

CONCLUSION

This research shows that conflicts in Johor is a complex issue. This article has discussed the situation and also the root of the problem that triggers those conflicts. In addition, this article has mapped out how people in Johor tolerate differences that trigger conflicts.

This study that involved 1.000 participants across 10 regions in Johor found that the intensity of conflict is generally quite manifest, and often disturbing. It found that manifest conflict often take place in the

form of verbal conflicts or insults. However, such invective at the level of individual or family often triggers manifest conflicts at the level of larger groups because of their solidarity with fellow members in the group and group prejudices being strongly internalised in the minds of the public.

The study also found that residents of Johor have "vulnerable tolerance" toward religious differences compared with that of ethnic differences. Issues such as construction of places of worship and defaming a particular religion can be manipulated as source and trigger a larger conflict, especially when in a conflictual situation, there are third parties who use it for their own benefits.

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