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Funded by the Social Science Research Thematic Grant of the Singapore Ministry of Education, Terence Chong at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute and Daniel Goh at the National University of Singapore set out to conduct research on the growth of Pentecostalism in Southeast Asia between 2016 and 2020. They had three main objectives.

First, they wanted to understand the reasons for this growth and the ways in which these churches navigate the changing political and economic environment. Second, they sought to examine these churches' participation in national debates and identify the strategies used to deal with their marginal status. Finally, the researchers were interested in tracing transnational connections between the churches within Southeast Asia and beyond.

The fascinating results of their study are summarized in the following essay. They begin by charting the waves of Pentecostalism in Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore, thus providing the wider context for its non-linear growth. They then introduce the term 'minoritarian politics' to explain the way in which this mostly ethnic Chinese and wealthy Christian community advances its interests.

Finally, the authors provide a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of mall Christianity, moving beyond the idea that these megachurches celebrate consumer capitalism. The study finds that there are, in fact, various practical and strategic reasons for their choice of location depending on the country and demographics.

In all, the article provides a timely and refined description of the way in which Pentecostal megachurches in a number

of Southeast Asian countries respond organically and strategically to the challenges of the state, other religions and the market.

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Navigating Hostile Landscapes: Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia

Terence Chong and Daniel Goh

In a ballroom of a popular mall in central Jakarta under coloured spotlights, the young suited Indonesian pastor raises his hand to quiet his musicians. He speaks softly in Bahasa Indonesia, and then whispers in English for the Holy Spirit to descend on to the congregation. As if on cue, the congregants, with outstretched arms, begin to speak in tongues. The noise reaches a crescendo and then fades into silence. "I believe God is here with us this morning," says the pastor.

Over the last three decades, economic development in Southeast Asia has ushered in material affluence and heightened connectivity with global forces. These trends have laid the conditions for the growth of Christianity in Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore. These countries have seen an increase in Protestants, Pentecostals, and Catholics as their national economies become more intimately intertwined with the global market. Indeed, the expansion of the middle class in these countries has seen a strong correlation with the expansion of this faith community.

The growth of Christianity in this region will impact national culture and politics in different ways. At stake are the faith community's relationship with other religions, both monotheistic and polytheistic; the demographics of its congregations and the suspicions they may arouse from the state or other institutions; the way in which it may exploit local or national politics for growth or even participate in the political sphere, whether overtly or covertly; the production of urban and civic spaces that may affect secularism and traditional religious identities; and its bearing on the multicultural identity of these countries.

To date there has not been a comprehensive survey and sociological examination of contemporary Pentecostalism in Southeast Asia. Indeed, much of the scholarship on the region has either been

initiated by western academics or applied to single countries, thus depriving us of a big-picture approach to the faith as it engages distinctively in different national landscapes. Beyond the need for comparison, the single country focus does not allow for the study of transnational connections that have fed much of the growth of Christian churches in each locality.

We embarked on our research on independent Pentecostal churches in Southeast Asia in 2017 with support from the Social Science Research Thematic Grant from the Ministry of Education, Singapore. Extensive fieldwork was conducted in the urban centres of Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Singapore to understand

how different conditions and politics gave rise to a heterogenous form of Pentecostalism in the region.

We were interested in several overarching questions, all of which are broadly concerned with historical explanations for the growth of Pentecostalism in Southeast Asia. We sought to investigate the political, economic, and cultural reasons for the growth of Pentecostalism in the region. How did Christian leaders or communities navigate sometimes hostile landscapes as minority groups? What were the strategies and tactics employed by independent Pentecostal churches in circumventing unreceptive Islamic groups or the state? We were also interested in whether or not Pentecostal churches participated in

national debates and if they used their faith to alleviate their marginal status in society. How did their presence influence the production of sacred spaces in urban communities?

Finally, we were interested in mapping the transnational connections between churches within Southeast Asia and with those beyond the region. The transnational circulation of guest speakers, Christian literature and music, theological teachings, and immigrants within the region for work and study, has made it possible to speak of a Southeast Asian Pentecostalism that is constantly shaped by economic patterns, digital technology, linguistic cultures, and developmental aspirations.¹



Fig. 1 (right): Praise and worship at Graha Bethany, Surabaya, Indonesia (Photo by Terence Chong, 2019).

Section 1: Three historical waves of growth of Protestantism in Southeast Asia

Protestant Christianity is arguably the fastest growing religion in Southeast Asia. From a low base at the turn of the 20th century, non-Catholic Christians have grown to over 9 percent of the population in Indonesia, almost 14 percent in the Philippines, over 4 percent in Malaysia, and close to 15 percent in Singapore in 2015.² This adds up to almost 40 million Protestants in a region characterized by ethnic and religious diversity, Muslim majorities, and historical eras of colonialism, decolonization, nationalism, democratization, and globalization.

This growth has not been linear or progressive. The history of Christianity in Southeast Asia is a history of Asianizing practices, transnationalizing innovations, and independent formations. Southeast Asian Christianity experienced three distinct waves of growth: the late colonial period, the Cold War period, and the contemporary inter-Asian period. These three waves were driven, respectively, by the revivalist impulse (innovating practices that engage changing social contexts to produce or renew identities), the postcolonial impulse (the struggle for autonomy from Western theological and ecclesial authority), and transnationalism (the way churches secure strength as vulnerable minorities through cross-border expansions and networking).

The first wave, the late colonial wave, took place in the early 20th century and saw Asianizing missions and evangelical movements rising to make sense of modernization. Meanwhile, colonization ushered in Western knowledges and practices as elements of modern civilization, Southeast Asians adapted and indigenized many of these to create an Asianizing modernity. With respect to Christianity, there are three groups of Asianizing agents, namely, natives, returnees, and migrants. Natives encountered the Gospel in their homelands through contact with missionaries and sought to understand its truths vis-à-vis local cultures. Returnees were those who traveled to colonial metropolises, converted to Christianity overseas, and sought to transform local societies upon their return. Finally, colonial trade networks brought an influx of migrants from East, South, and Southeast Asia, some of whom, especially the Chinese, embraced Christianity through their own cross-border networks. The influence of the early Asianizers was certainly not uniform across the region. Natives played a greater role in the East Indies and the Philippines, for instance, whereas the role of migrants was more pronounced in the East Indies and Malaya. Returnees made their mark in Malaya and the Philippines.

The second wave, the Cold War wave, came at the height of geopolitical tension, when American evangelical revivals and the Charismatic Renewal Movement made their presence felt and paved the way for the emergence of independent megachurches. In the two decades after the Second World War, decolonization, economic rebuilding, and American ascendancy redefined Southeast Asia. New nation-states were established, with the Philippines leading the pack in 1946. Indonesia followed after a brief revolution against the Dutch in 1949. Malaya was formed after the suppression of the communist uprising in 1957, giving way to Malaysia when it federated the Malayan states, Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore in 1963. Finally, Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965. Cold War fault lines were clearly drawn by then. The Americans intervened in Vietnam after the French colonial forces were defeated in the First Indochina War. Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore were drawn into the American

orbit and formed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967.

Cold War politics pulled the churches in various directions. In the 1970s, Christians in the region were left with three sets of choices. In the political realm, Christians had to choose between ecumenical social action, anti-leftist ideology, or apolitical conservatism. The choice made would result in either investing church energies in active proselytization which reflected the latter two or focusing on community church building which reflected the former. The Charismatic Renewal presented the question of whether to reject Pentecostalism, accept some changes to modernize the liturgy, or embrace it totally. These decisions had to be made in order to better position the Church to respond to the changing political and economic environment. It was a time when authoritarianism and American support gave rise to economic development, urbanization, and the growth of the middle classes. New theological outlooks and relations with the state were needed to respond to consumer capitalism and the pressures of democratization.

The third wave, the inter-Asian wave, is the contemporary period in which the limits to church growth and the challenges of being a religious minority are met by renewed missions and intensifying inter-Asian Christian networking. At the turn of the 21st century, independent megachurches, fueled by Christian growth among urban youth, became Christian success stories in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines. Many megachurch leaders rose to become influential public figures on the national and international stage, with the will and power to affect political, social, and religious trends. Rather than seeking inspiration from the West, churches in the region started to more consciously learn from success stories amongst themselves and to innovate new practices and theological content.

However, by the 2010s, they began to hit the limits of growth. The aggressive met with backlash. In the Muslim-majority countries of Malaysia and Indonesia, increased Islamization had heightened inter-religious and ethnic sensitivities, and the Islamic pushback took on increasingly violent expressions in recent years. Even in self-consciously multi-religious Singapore, similar misgivings about church growth and the insensitivity of its methods, such as proselytizing to Muslims, were raised.

At present, megachurches are faced with the pressure to calibrate their growth and outreach strategies in order to retain their social standing whilst indulging their instinct to expand. Despite the backlash, some churches have doubled down on conversion efforts within their home countries. These efforts are often city-centric, directed at marginalized and vulnerable urban groups, or young Christians whose changing needs are not met by their old churches.

Other megachurches have decided to focus on overseas expansion. For example, as a favored destination for many regional immigrant workers, Singapore is a place where branches of megachurches from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines are present to offer services in the home language. No longer content to remain national or even regional organizations, these churches have made deliberate efforts to translate their identity and theologies across an assortment of local contexts. The church leaders and members are thinking and acting in increasingly inter-Asian ways, transcending old ethnic boundaries and national identities.

These three historical waves of growth of Christianity in Southeast Asia set the scene for the contemporary study of Pentecostalism in the region.



Fig. 2 (above): Praise and worship at Calvary Church, Calvary Convention Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Photo by Terence Chong, 2018)

Section 2: Evangelical Christians and 'minoritarian politics' in democratic Southeast Asia

As a minority but often affluent community, Protestant and Pentecostal Christians in Southeast Asia have often been targets for suspicion and abuse. In Singapore, the government has had to debunk beliefs in the Christian capture of the state. In Malaysia, Muslim hardliners have openly accused the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party of a Christian conspiracy to take over the state because a number of its prominent leaders were Christians. In Indonesia, the 2016 protests in Jakarta – stoked by Islamists against the former governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Chinese Christian popularly known as “Ahok” – were revived after the 2019 presidential elections when rumors spread that President Joko Widodo was a closet Christian.

How has the Christian community navigated hostile landscapes to survive and, in some cases, even flourish? What types of strategies are deployed to circumvent the asymmetrical balance of power stacked against them? We looked at churches in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore to understand how they leverage prevailing structures, economic forces, and local practices to advance their own interests in what we term ‘minoritarian politics’.

Indonesia: existential security and complex patronages

Indonesia enjoys a relatively open, democratic system in which religious institutions participate in the political system. However, political Islam plays a big role in shaping political discourse in the country. Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah are two of the largest Islamic organizations in the country, estimated to comprise over 100 million members between them. They were formed in 1926 and 1912, respectively, and played a big role in fostering reformist modernization that underpinned nationalism during the colonial era.

Interfaith relations have deteriorated because of the increasing Islamization of politics and the growth in evangelical churches. This has led to a heightened sense of existential insecurity for all Christians. In response, Christians have sought to improve their security in various ways. In general, mainline Christians have continued to engage the political elites by directly participating in politics and the public sphere, while evangelicals have sought to minister to the middle political ground by cultivating social capital at two levels: governmental and local community. Instead of entering the political arena themselves, Indonesian evangelicals have opted for patronage relations with the

political elite. Some younger evangelical pastors have become local board members of political parties; but as scholars have argued, these memberships have occurred upon invitation from political parties that wish to burnish their pluralistic image. Evangelicals also use well-connected congregants to establish important contacts within the political elite and administrative bureaucracy for support during periods of emergency. A couple of pastors we interviewed in Surabaya mentioned that “being nice” to these non-Christian authorities, which may involve gift-giving, has been instrumental in protecting their churches from hostile Islamists. In a 2014 youth concert organized by the National Prayer Network, a retired army general was invited to attend, his presence used as insurance against potentially unruly Islamists.

Developing patronage relations with local communities is a more common strategy. Many churches provide aid to local communities as a way of cultivating Muslim goodwill. Pentecostal churches in Jakarta reach out to neighboring local communities through free clinics, donations of food and cattle during Islamic Eid al-Adha holidays, and pro-bono law assistance. Others reach out to villages to provide sources of clean water and electricity. Some churches in Surabaya run accredited kindergarten, elementary, and junior high schools, which are open to non-members to serve the broader community. The schools also offer tuition-free classes to children from the surrounding Muslim community every Saturday morning.

The price of being embedded and accepted by local communities so that evangelism can be fulfilled is the investment of funds and efforts into 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 into goodwill during normal times.

Malaysia and Singapore: racial politics and associational activism

Malaysia experienced an acceleration of Islamization processes in society and politics from the 1980s onwards, triggered by the Islamic revolution in Iran. Unlike in Indonesia, where political elites have resisted the Islamization of the state, the Malaysian government under Mahathir Mohamad, who became prime minister in 1981 and again in 2018, embraced the Islamization of government.

Malaysian Christians, including evangelicals, responded 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 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, writing open letters, issuing press statements, and advocating against discriminatory policies and regulations. Unlike Indonesia, where the *Pancasila* framework of state recognition of religion offered a legitimate space for non-Muslim associations, Malaysian evangelicals were compelled to join hands with other Christians and other faiths to develop political intermediaries. This was because the Islamization of the Malaysian government demanded a stronger platform for non-Muslim groups if they wished to be heard and accounted for. Evangelical church leaders spoke to favored signing up with NECF because it had the clout to “deal with government authority.” Compared to the alternative – registering with the Registrar of Societies, which meant the government could easily disband the church – joining voluntary associations was the safer way to register as a church.

Evangelicals in Singapore have also been involved in associational activism, but for a different reason. Instead of joining with other churches and Christian organizations to defend their collective interests against the state, evangelicals in Singapore seek to defend the state against its imminent capture by liberal and progressive forces. Such forces are seen as advancing a “secular fundamentalism,” a term coined by Thio Li-ann, a law professor and Nominated Member of Parliament in 2009. Such antagonism increased after evangelicals from an ultra-conservative church carried out a hostile takeover in 2009 of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), a feminist civil society organization. The takeover sparked a bitter fight between evangelical activists and progressives calling for the enforcement of secularism in the public sphere.

The associational activism was made possible because of intensive networking between evangelical churches that has been taking place since the 1990s. In 1995, the LoveSingapore movement was launched, led by the Faith Community Baptist Church (FCBC), the largest megachurch at the time. 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”³. 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 public servants.

The political reticence of evangelicals is a key driver of their minoritarian politics in the cases above. These evangelicals prefer to focus on church growth, proselytization, and inward-looking discipleship. In all of these cases, the degree to which evangelicals shed their political reticence depends on the severity of the threat to their practices or their very existence. The direction of the political action is towards the source of the threat, whether it is the government (Malaysia), local communities (Indonesia), or a liberal civil society (Singapore). Our study shows that scholars need to look closer at the sociology of social capital formation in the complex exchanges between churches, local communities, civil society, and the political system. Doing so increases understanding of the underlying social networks and connective actions of religious minorities so as to avoid simplistically painting evangelicals in Southeast Asia as irrevocably politically conservative or apathetic.

Section 3: Megachurches navigating Southeast Asian cities

We noted above that Indonesian megachurches – opting not to cultivate social capital with government officials and local communities to secure their interests – tended to withdraw into securitized shopping malls. Here, we consider this relationship in the larger process through which megachurches seek to navigate the cities they are located in. Southeast Asian cities have seen phenomenal growth in tandem with the economic boom that accompanied globalization in the past few decades. The rapidly growing megachurches have not only ridden this economic boom and urban explosion; they have also had to manage their growth in an often hostile urban landscape. How did the megachurches use secular spaces to grow their sacred communities? Again, we limit our comparisons to Indonesian and Malaysian megachurches.⁴

It is a common impression, in both academic scholarship and popular media, that mall Christianity is becoming widespread. Megachurches and other fast-growing churches, many of them denominationally independent Pentecostal churches led by charismatic pastors attracting young members, have located their churches in shopping malls, convention centers, and commercial developments in booming Asian cities. This is a departure from the older practice of building standalone facilities, often with splendid grandeur, out in the streets and embedded in local communities. Many associate this mall Christianity with the teachings of the Prosperity Gospel. Thus, the megachurches are seen as reveling in the consumer capitalism that their middle-class members indulge in, giving spiritual meanings to new-found wealth.

What we found was more complex. Firstly, megachurches were responding to hostile Muslim-majority neighborhoods that did not welcome the presence of new church buildings. This is most evident in Indonesia, where permits to build a place of worship entailed a strenuous bureaucratic process of approval from the municipal authorities with the consent of the local community. The highly popular Jakarta Praise Community Church is housed in the Kota Kasablanka mall in Central Jakarta. When we visited in early 2018, one of its pastors provided one of the reasons why they preferred to be located in a mall: “Muslim radicals are much less likely to protest outside to demand that developers close down the mall.” In Surabaya, Masa Depan CERAH church stopped using its building in the neighborhood for services, which were now held in the Ciputra World mall a short distance away, in a ballroom tucked away in the upper floor. We found multiple churches housed in Lenmarc Mall and the nearby Pakuwon Mall, the largest in Indonesia. The churches, such as the highly popular Gereja Mawar Sharon with just the tagline “Welcome Home” emblazoned on the wall, had shopfronts that looked ordinary and shorn of religious symbols. The malls were gated facilities with security guards.

A megachurch that remained in the neighborhood had security guards checking our bags when we visited in 2019. It was housed in an ordinary shophouse row without religious symbols, and the name did not even sound like that of a church. The pastor we interviewed told us that the church was still quietly concerned after the suicide bombing of three churches by a local branch of the Islamic State in the city the year before. One activity of the church was the provision of educational and social services to the surrounding local communities, which was seen as a crucial way to minimize hostility, so as to continue its operations in the neighborhood. The megachurches did not embrace mall Christianity unreservedly. A pastor of one of the churches housed in the mall told us that they continued to preach and plant house churches in the neighborhoods. He was rather anguished about the urban stratification along class,

ethnic, and religious lines that separated the church from local communities.

The hostility of neighborhoods was less marked in Kuala Lumpur. There, the metropolitan region of Klang Valley was demographically balanced between Malays and non-Malays, and much of the population was made up of new residents from increased internal migration to the capital region in recent decades. Therefore, the location of megachurches was more diverse. Calvary Church moved its main services from its old church building in the gentrified suburb of Damansara Heights to its newly built Calvary Convention Center. With its 5000-seat auditorium, the church envisions it to be a convention and meeting hub for globalizing Kuala Lumpur, with both religious and secular events taking place there. Three other megachurches – Full Gospel Tabernacle, Full Gospel Assembly, and Damansara Utara Methodist Church (DUMC) – constructed simple, functional buildings with few religious symbols in the neighborhoods. DUMC’s Dream Center is styled as a community center with classrooms, a cafeteria serving no-pork food, and a bookshop for the local neighborhood to enjoy. Its fastest-growing congregations are those attending the Mandarin and Myanmar services, showing that the church is attracting the Chinese-speaking working classes and migrant workers. Another church, Collective, is based in a converted warehouse in a light industrial estate. Among its members are many Malaysian college students who migrated to the capital region in the 2000s and then settled down with families.

These megachurches tend to have an aging profile relative to the youthful character of Asian megachurches in general. Younger congregants are flocking to new churches that have adopted new approaches and are based in trendy shopping malls in Damansara and Sunway districts. For example, Kingdomcity offers rave-style concert services, focuses on personal healing, and employs livestreaming video connections to link up its different locations in Malaysian cities as well as branches in other Asian, Australian, and African cities. Meanwhile, Acts Church has its central building – called Dream Valley Community – located in an upper floor in The Summit Mall in Subang Jaya, complete with a hipster booksore and café. These churches are strategically housing themselves in the shopping malls not to avoid hostile neighborhoods but to target the current generation of young people who have grown up in malls and neighborhood squares.

The examples in Kuala Lumpur show that mall Christianity is not the default option for the megachurches and that the Christian subjects of our study are actively exercising their agency to navigate the multifaceted new urbanism emerging in the booming cities of Southeast Asia. The same can be said of the Indonesian megachurches, whose actions are deliberate and purposeful and cannot be reduced to the fear of hostile neighborhoods and the need for camouflage and security. Their anguish about being separated from local communities and their attempts to overcome urban stratification suggest that



Fig. 3: Pastor GT Lim praying for congregants, Sarawak Blessed Church, Kuching, Malaysia (Photo by Terence Chong, 2019)

they are seeking to engage this specific feature of Indonesian urbanism. Finally, it should be observed that the megachurches are not merely responding to the urbanism; they are also actively helping to forge it, contributing to gentrification, stratification, and attempts to overcome these, as well as spiritualizing shopping malls and the urban mobilities flowing through them.

In conclusion, the expansion of Pentecostal megachurches in Southeast Asia must be contextualized with the historical waves of growth and revivalism in the region. As historical cases have demonstrated, the nature of such expansions is dependent on how the Church has responded to the prevailing political, economic, and socio-culture conditions as various countries made the transition from colonial to postcolonial status from the 1950s to the 1960s. The emergence of the Pentecostal megachurch in the 1990s may be seen as the response to capitalism and mass consumption; a reconciliation of spirituality and materialism. As a highly organic institution blessed with theological nimbleness, the Southeast Asian Pentecostal megachurch will continue to respond to challenges and leverage on contemporary trends as it navigates hostile landscapes in the region.

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Notes

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- 2 Johnson, Todd M. and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. *World Religion Database*. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2019.
- 3 LoveSingapore, <http://www.lovesingapore.org.sg/curiousaboutus2.html> (accessed 23 Dec 2021)
- 4 A comparison of the megachurches in Jakarta, Surabaya, Kuala Lumpur and Manila and detailed theoretical explication is currently under review with an academic journal.