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## **Reflections on the method of discourse analysis in area studies by the example of the religious freedom debate in Malaysia and Indonesia**

### **I The debate on religious freedom/apostasy – a media analysis<sup>1</sup>**

Given its multireligiosity and multicultural setting, Malaysia serves as a good example for the struggles that many post-colonial countries have to deal with. With its impressive economic record, it enjoys a great deal of respect within the Muslim world and is thus often referred to as a role model for heterogeneous societies with a Muslim majority.

The people of Malaysia have been debating the role of religion in the public sphere for decades, actually for long before the current nation state of Malaysia even came into existence in 1957. The discussion was intensified by Mahathir's declaration in 2001 that Malaysia already is an Islamic state. This declaration was confirmed by then Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak and later Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in 2007 within the context of a high profile conversion case.

The debates related to the country's multireligiosity range from fights between families on the one side and authorities on the other over how a deceased person whose religious affiliation is contested should be buried, to the discussion on who is entitled to use the word 'Allah'. Often, the public debate is sparked by particular legal cases, one of the most famous being that of Lina Joy, a Muslim-Malay born convert to Christianity who tried to get her conversion recognised by dropping the word 'Islam' from her identity card. She lost her final appeal in May 2007. Shortly after this incident, then

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<sup>1</sup> This paper summarises my Magistra thesis and reflects some thoughts on the methods employed.

vice Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak confirmed Malaysia's status as an "Islamic state" in a public statement.

The significance of religious categorisation has increased over time. A citizen born to parents who are categorised as Muslim will fall under *Sharia* law when it comes to matters related to marriage, inheritance and personal morality. One can argue that equality before the law, an important element of democracy, is not given. Additionally, observers witness growing communitarianism along religious lines. At the same time, the dominant component of the governing coalition, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and their main rival for votes of those classified as Malays, the Islamist opposition party Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), compete in establishing their own respective version or brand of Islam. This 'holier-than-thou-race' has led to an overall more conservative character of the public discussion on Islam.

The topic of religious freedom, or - depending on the discourse - apostasy, is the crystallisation of a number of moral and political statements from influential groups and public intellectuals. This particular debate brings together some of the most important actors of Malaysian public discourse.

### **Religious freedom in Malaysia's political and legal system**

Most scholars of political studies agree in calling Malaysia a semi-democracy or a (semi-) autocratic system. The political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way identify 'competitive authoritarianism' as "one particular type of 'hybrid' regime" and classify Malaysia as such (Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way 2002).

While the elections themselves are predominantly free, they are usually not considered fair (Crouch 1996).

Of great significance is the dual law system with its two legal systems running almost parallel: a federal civil legal system and a state Islamic legal system. The reality of the 'dual jurisdiction' (Vivienne Wee and Asma Beatrix 2007)

leads to an opaqueness that not only concerns the individuals involved but also fuels into the inter-communitarian tensions.

Despite constitutional guarantees for religious freedom, it is subject to a raft of restrictions, some on the legal, and some on the practical level. Hassan Saeed identifies three objectives of these restrictions: “first, to prevent the spread of religions other than Islamic; second, to ensure the government’s hegemony over religion and religious institutions; and third, to maintain the purity or the government-sanctioned version of Islam, which is a version of Sunni Islam” (Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed 2008:128).

### **The role of ethnicity and religion**

Following independence, the government has continued the colonial categorisation of the population into four groups: *Bumiputera* (mainly Malays)<sup>2</sup>, Chinese, Indians and Others. Malays/*Bumiputera* have been secured a special position in the Constitution (Article 153(2)) and have been granted numerous privileges since the 1970s.

The linkage of religion and ethnicity is legally ingrained. A Malay is constitutionally defined as someone who speaks the Malay language, practices Malay customs and professes the religion of Islam (Art.160). The applicability of Sharia is therefore directly linked to being categorised as Malay. This ‘knot’ of ethnicity and religion in this institutionalised form is a special characteristic of the Malaysian case.

### **Malaysia’s media**

Although freedom of speech and freedom of press are enshrined in Article 10 of the Constitution, Malaysian media face restrictions on two major levels. First and foremost, there are legal restrictions. Second, the structure of media ownership is directly and indirectly controlled by the government or government-linked individuals (Jun-E Tan and Zawawi Ibrahim 2008).

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<sup>2</sup> *Bumiputera* means literally ‘sons/children of the soil’ and includes Malays as well as other ‘native ethnic groups’ in Sabah and Sarawak. The definition has grown to incorporate smaller minorities, yet it largely comprises those identified as Malay.

In an annual report by the organisation Reporters without Borders, the Press Freedom Index, Malaysia moves from rank 124 in 2007, via 132 in 2008, to 131 in 2009.

While some critics deny the potential of media as tools for democratisation, it is generally accepted that the space they offer for the formation of public opinion is vital and essential for a meaningful democracy, meaning politics that act in accordance with the voters' preferences.

Zawawi Ibrahim and Jun-E Tan, in their study of the Malaysian blogosphere, conclude that "(f)or these reasons, then, the Internet has been welcome for marginalized voices as an outlet for their political views because of the government stranglehold on the mainstream media" (p16) They call the internet the "Final Frontier". Even though bloggers are regularly and publicly accused of lying or being biased and the government does to a certain extent try to apply the traditional laws on bloggers, and despite the fact that online media are mainly accessible to urban Malaysians, the impact of new media should not be underestimated. Around 16 Mio people, ca. 60% of the population, have internet access.<sup>3</sup> Online media are believed to have played a vital role not only in galvanising the *reformasi* movement<sup>4</sup> (Jun-E Tan and Zawawi Ibrahim 2008), but also in the 2008 watershed elections, when UMNO's dominance was seriously challenged on the electoral level for the first time in Malaysian history. The traditional media react to this development. Newspapers such as the English language *New Straits Times* and *The Star* have begun to give space to critical voices and often react to reports published by alternative media. The rise of alternative online media thus also transforms the traditional print media landscape.

### **Discourse analysis: material and processing**

As aforementioned, an important background to the recent debate is the discussion on Malaysia's character as an Islamic or secular state.

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<sup>3</sup> CIA World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/my.html> (13.02.2010)

<sup>4</sup> The years around 1998 are referred to as the 'reformasi' period.

As the discussion was intensified by Mahathir's declaration in 2001 that Malaysia already is an Islamic state and this declaration was confirmed by Deputy Prime Minister Najib in 2007 within the context of the Lina Joy judgement, these dates mark the beginning and end of the analysis of the debate on religious freedom in the *New Straits Times* (NST).

By ending the analysis here, I follow Clive Kessler's (2008) interpretation of an accomplished change of UMNO to a party that offers no real alternative to PAS.

The NST was chosen because of its mainstream character, representing not only the viewpoints of those who are close to the government, but also a certain segment of society, namely readers from the English educated upper middle class.

Having observed the debate, several key words were determined. These were then employed in the archival search for more articles. After an initial scan of all titles and headlines the most relevant articles were chosen, mainly according to representability.<sup>5</sup>

Due to a focus on internal debates, articles regarding foreign affairs were neglected. Although these are of course indirectly related to the portrayal of the national situation, they are not as significant as the articles from the section on national politics, particularly because of the actors or voices involved. NGOs and intellectuals who play an important role within the society seldom comment on issues regarding foreign affairs. However, some significant reports about foreign issues have remained in the pool.

The key words used were "religious freedom", "apostasy", "Article 11", "Islamic State" and the names of individuals involved in high profile cases regarding religious freedom, such as "Lina Joy", "Shamala", "Moorthy", "Wong Ah Kiu" and "Revathi". These keywords cover the large majority of articles related to the topic of religious freedom.

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<sup>5</sup> After a general scanning and rough analyses, the researcher chooses representative articles according to her evaluation. Siegfried Jäger, Ed. (2008). Wie kritisch ist die Kritische Diskursanalyse? Münster, Unrast-Verlag.

Cases related to the offence of 'apostasy' and their ensuing debates are discursive incidents in Jäger's sense. This is especially so since there had been similar cases before in the 1990s, which were not as intensively debated (see Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed 2004).

This archival research produced around 600 articles, of which all headlines and most first paragraphs were read in order to choose approximately 120 relevant articles. Articles were neglected that only slightly touched the subject or were not representative, as they expressed singular viewpoints. The articles identified as significant and representative were read and structurally<sup>6</sup> analysed in full.

### **Discursive actors and strategies**

Due to the close government links of the New Straits Times, an analysis of actors within this frame is of course limited. Most prominent are voices from the government camp, often from the legal sphere or a religious authority. Spokespersons from the Islamist opposition party PAS are often referred to, as are spokespersons of secular and Islamic<sup>7</sup> NGOs and groups. Often, their opinions would be commented on by representatives of the government or closely linked institutions.

During this analysis, several discursive motifs were identified that are repeatedly reproduced. Given the controlled and regulated environment in which these motifs are generated and reproduced, one could call them strategies, even if the outcomes of discourse are never exactly what initiators originally intended.

The most important strategies, which themselves are interconnected, are the frequent use of racial categories, their linkage to the category of religion, the

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'structural analysis' describes a rough analysis, including collective symbols, content and the like. See footnote 178 in Siegfried Jäger (2004). Kritische Diskursanalyse - Eine Einführung. Münster, Unrast-Verlag.

<sup>7</sup> The adjective 'Islamic' is hereby used to underline that the respective individuals and groups base many of their arguments primarily on the traditional Islamic sources.

linguistic perpetuation of the idea 'once a Muslim, always a Muslim' and the rhetoric of crisis and fear.

A reminder of the riots in May 1969, which are usually referred to as 'ethnic riots' in Malaysian historiography, is frequently employed. The government is portrayed as the preserver of peace and stability, without which not only the different 'ethnic' groups would attack each other, but especially those classified as Malay would lose their position.

Examples:

Headline: "CM: 'Pas' aim to set up Islamic state will divide the country'" (18.02.2001)

Headline: "'PM: Religious tolerance vital'" (14.05.2001).

As aforementioned, the racial division is perpetuated in many aspects of daily life and daily language as well as being a continuous theme in the media. The frequent use of racial categories is increasingly complemented by the synonymous use of religious categorisation. Very often, "race and religion" and the formulation "multi-racial and multi-religious" are mentioned together as if they were an inseparable tandem. This gives the impression that the lines run congruently.

"They (Christmas carols) are certainly not out of place in an Open House, which Rais correctly describes as "a joyous occasion where people of all races and religions can get together and partake of the celebration."  
(Joyous Sounds of Christmas, 21.12.2004).

This formulation unnecessarily includes the word 'race' and thereby suggests that there are 'racial' festivities, or that festivities are likely to be celebrated only with people of your own 'race'. The religious festivals of course claim universality and as a matter of course are neither race-bound nor bound to any other political or social community other than the religious.

Several other examples show this synonymous use:

„The Prime Minister said religious tolerance among the various races was vital in preserving the country’s peace and harmony“ (PM: Religious Tolerance is vital, 14.05.2001).

Here, rather than saying ‘among the various religious communities’, the word ‘race’ is utilised to suggest the congruence which is mentioned above.

Another pattern repeatedly observed is the mention of ‘non-Muslims’ preceding references to the Chinese:

“He said Pas’ stand on the matter was also causing fear among *non-Muslim communities*. Ong said the *MCA and Chinese* (emphasis mine, SLS) accepted and respected Islam as the official religion, but, this was not applicable to Pas’ plans.” (MCA against PAS’ Islamic state plan, 16.07.2001)

“Malaysian Chinese have been assured that they will not lose their rights and privileges despite the recent statement by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that the country is an Islamic state.” (Ling: Our rights are assured, 21.10.2001)

Another similar example:

“Non-Muslim parties in the country today welcomed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s assurance yesterday that Islamisation will not hurt *non-Muslims*. *MCA* Youth secretary-general Liow Tiong Lai (emphasis mine, SLS) said non-Muslims should regard Islam ‘holistically’ as a dynamic and progressive religion that would take the

country forward.” (Non-Muslim parties hail PM’s assurance, 25.02.2004).

“(DAP leaders) felt they suffered as a consequence of Pas’ insistence on its brand of an *Islamic* state for Malaysia, which *pushed Chinese* (emphasis mine, SLS) voters towards MCA and Gerakan.” (See more results for PKR playing both ends against the middle, 23.06.2007)

In all cases, an antagonism between Islam (and thus Muslims) and Chinese is built, despite the fact that Islam as a universal religion is as a matter of course not bound by ‘race’, and despite the existence of large Muslim communities in China and that of Muslim Malaysians of Chinese origin, including converts as well as members of families who have been Muslim for hundreds of years. This pattern probably has its origins in the strong linkage of the categories ‘Malay’ and ‘Muslim’ as described earlier. Some examples:

“The survey, conducted in late December, also indicates that *while non-Muslims* are generally comfortable with the level of Islamisation in Malaysia, *the Malays* (emphasis mine, SLS) want more” (Malays trust ulama to tell the truth more than anyone else, 29.02.2004).

“Q: What about certain ongoing issues which are race-sensitive?

A: (For instance) when one wants to leave Islam, it raises a lot of questions. This is a new experience to us.” (Behind closed doors, sometimes, 13.05.2007)

“(…) 500 people who gathered to disrupt the Article 11 forum here last year shouted Islamic slogans which caused anxiety to other races.” (Protesters caused anxiety to other races, 07.08.2007)

This connection of race and religion is obvious in the cited examples. Another one from an article on the Lina Joy judgement: "On April 23, 2001, the court dismissed her application on the grounds that the issue should be decided by the syariah court. It also held that as a Malay and a Muslim, she could not convert." (Lina must go to syariah court, 31.05.2007.) The racial and religious categories are completely self-evidently used together, demonstrating their indivisibility in state-centred Malaysian understanding.

The connection between Islam and Malay identity is of growing importance, as the initially race-based politics are increasingly religion-based (Farish A. Noor 2008). It is striking that in the media, Islam is not nearly as often discussed in religious as in political contexts. The shift of emphasis from ethnicity to religion especially becomes evident in the reiterated differentiation between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Regarding the coverage of the conversion cases, it is interesting how language reflects the very idea of being born a Muslim and staying one: "(Lina Joy) is a Muslim woman who became Christian and who wants to delete the word 'Islam' as her religion from her identity card" (Das: Denial of right an injustice, 29.06.2006).

"Joy, who claims she has converted to Christianity, is seeking to have the word 'Islam' deleted from her identity card" (*Pas Youth following keenly*, 04.07.2006).

While Lina Joy has been stating for many years now that she is not a Muslim, the newspaper still refers to her as such, while at the same time referring to her conversion.

The religious identity marker has become so intertwined with the racial one that the two are often used synonymously and it could be argued that the religious marker is slowly replacing the ethnical. I have called this strategy the synonymisation of race and religion.

Keeping in mind Foucault's decentred and non-personified notion of power, it would be too simplistic to conclude that the government regulates discourse through the media and thus dominates the public discourse.

To draw conclusions about the public discourse beyond a medially filtered debate, one would have to look at different sources, and especially different actors and the interaction of the discursive and non-discursive threads and incidents. The discourse perspective has demonstrated the multiple facets of the debate on religious topics in Malaysia. The positions in debates vary to a large extent and the lines run neither so much between Muslims and non-Muslims, nor between the government and the opposition, rather between liberals and conservatives, who can be found across ethnic and religious communities.

This analysis has pointed at some detailed observations drawn from a specific medium and raises some questions about the more general character of Malaysian discourse.

## **II Gains and losses - reflections on the method**

For the question as to what role religious freedom plays in contemporary Malaysian society and how this topic relates to the overall question of the relationship of Islam and politics in the country, the method of discourse analysis was chosen because it promised to provide access to a great variety of levels. Coming from the multi-disciplinary area studies, I often found it helpful to look at several aspects of society simultaneously. Often, not only would political changes correspond to legal amendments, so too representations in other public contexts, like for instance art, would reflect and sometimes even predict political developments.

Keeping in mind once again Foucault's notion of power, de-centred and de-personalised, it is assumed that power is to a large extent realised through the production of knowledge. While discourse is not the only framework within which, and by use of which, power is exercised, it plays a key role in understanding a society's power relations.

Since one significant 'discourse plane' (Siegfried Jäger and Florentine Maier 2001) of discourse formation is media, the analysis of a medially filtered debate enables the researcher to identify important incidents, actors and strategies.

An analyst of political and legal institutions who is not aware of a society's broader/wider political discourse might misinterpret the sudden emergence of institutions. Often, institutions emerge and legal changes occur that would be surprising without background knowledge of the public debate behind them. Knowing the debate is crucial for being able to understand major institutional changes. An example for this is the quasi ban of the Ahmadiyah, a Muslim splinter group, in Indonesia in 2008. The ban by the secular government came as a surprise for those who focussed entirely on institutions. It followed after constant lobbying and protest by Muslim groups usually categorised as extremist, like the Front Pembela Islam (FPI). Notwithstanding the fact that these groups enjoy little support among the general public, critics argue that their demands for further Islamisation and their campaigning against the Ahmadiya finally resulted in the ban. In this case, it was clearly the public discourse that pushed forward a certain agenda and caused its translation into a policy. And again, it is necessary to understand public discourse to see that the ban does not have full support by the majority of the citizens. A mere look at the legal or political level would not suffice here.

Knowing the discourse surrounding such institutional changes helps to understand and analyse them meaningfully. To be able to estimate the impact of legal changes it is important to know what certain lobbyists have actually aimed at/been campaigning for and what resistance had been formulated. Who were those lobbyists, what role did they play?

Only with this background information is it possible to trace back developments and sometimes to even identify their source.

Furthermore, the approach enabled me to identify some important actors that would otherwise probably have been neglected. An example of this is the role of religious authorities, which would, from a Western-centric starting point, be underestimated if at all taken into account. Coming from a

Western-centric political science perspective, the actors commonly taken into account are political parties. Even though concepts of civil society have filled in the analytical gap between the governmental and institutional level and the individual, the role of religious organisations and authorities is often underestimated or misinterpreted. For instance, regulations and fatwas<sup>8</sup> issued by religious authorities may be seen as a traditional and backward way of dealing with problems, but might actually be a recent phenomenon in the society, or one that has only recently gained popularity and importance, and thus forms an aspect of modernity.

Employing discourse or media analysis in area studies could be seen as an attempt to take the 'observed object' seriously: instead of relying solely on one's own observations as a foreigner, one places a focus on the various local perspectives. How are problems viewed and dealt with; how is communication within the society structured; who speaks, who doesn't; what can be said and what can't? Of course, to take the approach of discourse seriously also means acknowledging the fact that the researcher herself is at no point located 'outside' the discourse. The general problem of subjectivity is not solved, but in the least confronted, and if the researcher takes the theoretical assumptions behind discourse analysis seriously, she will document and lay open her own assumptions to the largest extent possible. I will come back to this in the conclusion.

Area studies, as well as 'Islamic studies' and the various connected disciplines such as Oriental Languages etc., have been undergoing major changes since the expansion of an intellectual discourse often referred to as 'post-colonial studies' or '-theory'. Edward Said, whose publication of 'Orientalism' in 1978 is often seen as a founding work of post-colonial theory, developed his ideas on the basis of the works of Foucault, particularly on the idea that knowledge and power are inseparable. Said and Foucault both aimed their

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<sup>8</sup> A fatwa is a religious opinion concerning Islamic law, usually issued by an Islamic scholar.

argumentations against academic discourses, which are of course not only connected to broader societal discourses, but also feed them with information, assumptions and generalisations. These are often taken up and reproduced in public media, where they influence – and of course are influenced by – other educational and daily discourses.

Post-colonial studies, an integral part of today's area studies, and media analysis based on discourse analysis thus share the same theoretical roots and can complement each other on the empirical level.

Traditionally, a large part of area studies consists in learning the language thoroughly. This is usually done through language courses, but also through the discussion of literature, film and other forms of traditional and contemporary art, which offer access to societal issues. It is generally common to spend longer periods in the region and some universities encourage such stays through co-operations for intensive language courses, home stay or exchange programs. Usually, scholars specialise on certain nation states within the regions and are thus very familiar with specific institutional frameworks and political actors.

One does not have to be a follower of path dependency theories to acknowledge the importance of historical background to contemporary developments. Political scientists who are trained only on the empirical basis of European and North-American societies tend to project insights learned from those contexts to other contexts without actually analysing them in detail.

This shall not be misinterpreted as culturally relativistic argumentation. I rather intend to stress the idea that universality of theories remain incomplete if they are based on empirical findings from only one specific context. Instead, the examination of several different contexts or regions can be helpful.

Practically, it is much easier to embed and meaningfully understand developments if one has knowledge about their background. Political scientists attempting to apply the Western scheme of right and left wing or liberal and conservative parties soon struggle/stumble as they do not know

where to place some Islamist parties in Malaysia and Indonesia. While Malaysia's PAS campaigns against corruption and patronage politics as well as organising free health care tours in rural areas and promoting human rights, they also demand Sharia law and in 2001 showed their solidarity with Afghanistan's Taliban. In Indonesia, the Islamist Party PKS vociferously use their right to protest in numerous demonstrations and have pushed for an 'anti-pornography bill', but are also involved in helping victims of earthquakes and floods and actively support environmentalist campaigns. Prima facie, some of their actions would have them classified as 'leftist' and 'progressive'/'liberal', while other characteristics of these parties would better be categorised as conservative or 'right wing'. Since the Western-centric scheme, which stems from very specific historical circumstances, does not accommodate the Malaysian or Indonesian party system, new perspectives have to be developed to understand the dynamics between different parties. For this, it is crucial to not only look at their campaign pledges, but also at which of these find resonance in local media and other channels.

Another important point is access to subtleties, innuendos and indirect references. Knowing the language, the historical background and cultural contexts is necessary to be able to read between the lines. This is of particular importance in the context of a regulated or censored press system. From my own experience of studying in Malaysia and discussions with academics new to the country, the newspapers seemed completely incomprehensible without some background information. There was no way I could just read the paper like I read my newspaper at home. Some allusions might be the crucial part of an article that otherwise seems pointless. Or one line might turn the whole meaning around. The same is valid for cultural performances and political gatherings, where what is being said can be contradicted or emphasised by a certain dress or the employment of cultural devices. A major discursive incident, if one stretches the notion of discourse to an extent that it includes what is often referred to as a 'dispositif', namely the connection of discursive with non-discursive elements, was the waiving of the *keris* by the

then UMNO Youth Chief Hishamudin Hussein in 2006. The traditional Malay weapon was unsheathed and waived during an assembly of UMNO's youth wing. Hishamudin later apologised, but many observers criticised his action and late apology and blame these as the main reason for the ruling coalition's bad performance at the elections.<sup>9</sup> This example underlines how familiarity with the region will help in seeing connections between discursive and non-discursive mechanisms.

An important weakness of the particular type of discourse analysis I have summarised above is the fact that the analysis of a medially filtered debate in a newspaper whose content is largely regulated by the government only allows to draw conclusions about one aspect or perspective of discourse. Familiarity with the country and the inclusion of other factors enable me to embed my findings in the larger discussion. However, now embarking on a study of Indonesia, which I know less well, I would not trust this method alone to reveal much about larger societal context. This is especially so if media is censored or highly regulated, but also simply because some issues are more attractive for media than others, even if others might be more important or relevant.

Important non-discursive incidents, as for instance legal amendments (of a state or national constitution) might not be covered in the media; either because of censorship or plain disinterest because there are current, more pressing issues. Media also depends on coincidences and seasons, for instance the 'silly season' might bring up issues that would otherwise have been ignored.

In short, the analysis of media discussions without connecting those to insights gained through other methods could result in a distorted picture of events. The above analysis of the religious freedom or apostasy debate cites several examples of contested legal cases of conversion. Since there is no coverage of any successful conversions, one gets the impression that conversion from

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<sup>9</sup> Hisham's 'keris' apology: Your say, 28.04.2008; <http://malaysiakini.com/news/82020>; per 17.02.2010.

Islam to other religions in Malaysia is not possible. This assumption, however, is challenged when speaking to lawyers who claim to have witnessed successful conversions – but only when nobody is watching and it is done silently. This additional information is necessary to get a more complete picture of not only the practices of conversion, but also the debate on it, because discourse consists not only of what is said, but also of what is not said or not “*say-able*”.

Another example is the recent case of the first Muslim woman in Malaysia sentenced to caning. Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarno was sentenced to six strokes of the *rotan* (rattan stick) in August 2009 for drinking beer in public.<sup>10</sup> The accused has accepted the sentence. Although the carrying out has been postponed, this sentence and the surrounding discussion give the impression that Muslims in Malaysia do not drink in public, which again is a misconception. The fact that Muslims do drink in public adds important information to the evaluation of the sentence and the related debate.

More general weaknesses concern the fact that print media only aim at a specific group of people, namely those who have time and skills to read them; only a certain class of the population is taken into account. This is especially valid when there are media in several languages and one of those languages becomes the focus, as in this particular case. In such a case it is absolutely necessary to embed the media analysis in larger research/ to connect the media analysis with other methods of research. In the above example, the media analysis has been connected to an analysis of the legal discourse.

Of course, as with many methods of qualitative research, the choice of samples and way to interpret them is highly subjective. The effects of this can be allayed by making criteria very clear, reflecting on the researcher’s own

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<sup>10</sup> Malaysia upholds woman's caning, 28.09.2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8279350.stm>, per 13.03.2010.

position and laying open those observations and reflections on one's own position.

**Concluding remarks:**

Taking all these reflections into consideration, I will keep some of the methods and approaches employed so far and additionally make some amendments to the research project I am embarking on from here. I uphold the idea that the approaches of discourse analysis and area studies complement each other very well, as they both aim at combining knowledge/insights on various aspects of a society to draw conclusions rather than focusing on monocausal explanations. However, I intend to embed the analysis of media in research on other discursive fields and non-discursive elements to avoid the distortions which I have explained above. While I would, due to my observation of current developments in Malaysia, probably be able to meaningfully embed a media analysis in a larger picture, this would not be conducted systematically. Systematically embedding would involve taking major political and legal developments into account and focusing on their connections with the respective representations.

To tackle the researcher's own subjectivity, the background discourse of the researcher, the research topic and the academic tradition will have to be taken into consideration. Taking notes about own assumptions and changing perspectives in a research diary could support the aim of positioning the researcher in order not to pretend that she is located/situated outside the research.

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