First, they wanted to understand the reasons for this growth and the ways in which these mega-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 mega-churches 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

Fig. 1 (right): Praise and worship at Gashi Bethany, Surabaya, Indonesia (Photo by Terence Chong, 2019).
Protestant Christianity is arguably the fastest growing religion in Southeast Asia. From a low base at the turn of the 20th century, non-Christian Christians have grown to over 9 percent of the population in Indonesia, almost 1 percent in the Philippines, 2 percent in Malaysia, and close to 15 percent in Singapore in 2015.1 This adds up to almost 50 million Protestants in Southeast Asia today, comprising a religiously diverse, Muslim majorities, and historical eras of colonialism, decolonization, national identity, 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 new identities), the colonial impulse (the desire for autonomy from Western theological and ecclesiastical authority), and transnationalism (the emergence of global identities and overlapping memberships across border expansions and networking).

The first wave, the colonial wave, took place in the early 20th century and saw Asianizing missions and evangelical movements spreading, in part to make sense of modernization. Meanwhile, colonization ushered in new political and social practices as elements of modern civilization, Southeast Asians adapted and indigenized many of them through their own church movements. 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 secured an understanding of Christianity through local cultures. Returnees were those who traveled to colonial metropoles, converted to Christianity overseas, and sought to translate their identity and theologies back to their homelands. Migrants, on the other hand, were those who traveled to new countries of Malaysia and Indonesia, and the Philippines. Many megachurches rose to prominence in these colonial settings, and the national and international stage, with the will and power to affect political, social, and economic landscapes. Returnees and migrants inspired innovation from the West, churches in the region started to more consciously learn from success stories among the West, and to innovate new practices and theological content.

Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, for instance, were key countries in the Charismatic Renewal Movement’s 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 ascendency redefined political landscapes, producing political fault lines that were clearly drawn by then. Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, respectively, welcomed or rejected American ascendancy, and were in a transitional period of geopolitical tensions and national identity formation. In Indonesia, the second wave, the Cold War wave, coincided with the Cold War, where the Cold War fault lines were clearly drawn by then. The struggle between communism and anti-communism, a struggle that affected Southeast Asia, was played out through various forms of political violence, economic pressure, and social marginalization. The Cold War period was a time of geopolitical tension, where branches of megachurches from North America and Europe were an important element of modernization and networking.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Indonesia experienced a period of Cold War-related tension, with the growth of Indonesian nationalism and the emergence of the Indonesian Communist Party. This period was marked by a series of anti-communist movements and campaigns, leading to the 1965 Indonesian Civil War. The war resulted in the death of an estimated 500,000 to one million people and the displacement of millions of others. The war marked a significant shift in the political landscape of Indonesia, leading to the establishment of the New Order regime under President Suharto. The New Order regime implemented a series of policies aimed at suppressing the spread of communism and promoting national unity, including the suppression of political opposition and the detention of thousands of suspected communists. The period was marked by a heightened sense of national identity and the consolidation of a pro-Western, anti-communist regime in power.

The period of the New Order regime in Indonesia marked a significant shift in the political landscape of the country. The new political order was characterized by a strong emphasis on national unity, anti-communism, and modernization. The regime implemented a series of policies aimed at suppressing the spread of communism and promoting national unity, including the suppression of political opposition and the detention of thousands of suspected communists. The period was marked by a heightened sense of national identity and the consolidation of a pro-Western, anti-communist regime in power.

The New Order regime’s policies had a significant impact on the development of civil society in Indonesia. The regime implemented policies aimed at suppressing the growth of civil society organizations, including labor unions, political parties, and other social movements. The regime’s policies were characterized by a strong emphasis on national unity, anti-communism, and modernization.

During the period of the New Order regime, civil society organizations experienced significant challenges. The regime’s policies were characterized by a strong emphasis on national unity, anti-communism, and modernization. The regime implemented policies aimed at suppressing the growth of civil society organizations, including labor unions, political parties, and other social movements.

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Malaysian Christians, including evangelicals, responded by forming associations and social organizations. Each ethnic group came together to form the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) in 1982 at Luther House. It was largely a self-help body founded together with members of other non-Muslim religious groups to form the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, and Sikhism, with the inclusion of Taoists (MCCBCI) in 2006. In 1994, the Christian Fellowship of Malaysia (CFM) was founded, comprising the NECF, the NCF, the Church, and several other non-Muslim religious communities of Malaysia. These associations became the public faces of the non-Muslim religious communities, writing open letters, issuing press statements, and advising the government on discriminatory policies and regulations. Unlike Indonesia, Malaysia had a federal state, in which state recognition of religion offered a legitimate space for non-Muslim associations. Malaysian evangelicals were very clear about their differences with other Christians and other faiths to develop political intermediaries. This was because the institutionalized Malaysian government demanded a stronger platform for non-Muslim groups if they wished to be heard and accorded a status. Evangelical leaders we spoke to favored signing up with NECF because it had the clout to “deal with government authorities.” Compared to the previous practice of registering with the Registrar of Societies, which meant the government could easily dismiss the group, the notion of voluntary associations was the safer way to register as a church.

Evangelicals in Singapore have also been involved in associational activities, registering with the Registrar of Societies. The different reason, instead of joining with other churches and Christian organizations to defend their religious interests, was the desire to avoid the threat of their being absorbed in the state, their collective interests being subsumed into the state, as advancing a “secular fundamentalism,” state against its imminent capture by liberal and sounded for, a law against the practice of these two networks were responsible for most of the megachurches in Singapore. The megachurches are seen as revealing in the context of the development of a new non-Muslim presence in Indonesia. The megachurches use secular spaces to grow their sacred communities. Again, we limit our discussion here to Indonesian and Malaysian megachurches.

It is a common impulse, in both academic scholarship and popular media, that mail Christianity is becoming widespread. Megachurches and other fast-growing churches, many of them denominationally independent Pentecostal churches led by charismatic pastors and members, have located their churches in shopping malls, convention centers, and commercial complexes in urban centers across Indonesia. This is the older practice of building standalone facilities, often in the middle of residential neighborhoods, from the streets and embedded in local communities. Many associate this mail Christianity withganja and its unacceptable practices. However, the megachurches are seen as revealing in the context of the development of a new non-Muslim presence in Indonesia. The megachurches use secular spaces to grow their sacred communities. Again, we limit our discussion here to Indonesian and Malaysian megachurches.

The associational activism was made possible by the concentration of churches that had been taking place since the 1990s. In 1995, the The purpose of these two networks was to avoid the threat of their being absorbed in the state, their collective interests being subsumed into the state, as advancing a “secular fundamentalism,” state against its imminent capture by liberal and sounding for, a law against the practice of these two networks were responsible for most of the megachurches in Singapore. The megachurches are seen as revealing in the context of the development of a new non-Muslim presence in Indonesia. The megachurches use secular spaces to grow their sacred communities. Again, we limit our discussion here to Indonesian and Malaysian megachurches.

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