

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **The State of Pentecostalism in Southeast Asia: Ethnicity, Class and Leadership**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The independent Pentecostal movement has been growing rapidly in Southeast Asia in recent decades. This is significant for several reasons. Firstly, to a large extent the Pentecostal movement is driven by upwardly mobile, middle-class ethnic Chinese. In countries where the ethnic Chinese are in the minority, Pentecostal churches and cell groups are crucial spaces for social networking, business contacts and identity-making.
- Secondly, the movement's appeal to the middle class suggests that this growth is not going to taper off in the face of increasing economic development and mass consumerism in the region. Just as important, however, is the movement's attraction for the poor and the working class in urban centres like Manila. This suggests a broad appeal across economic strata.
- Thirdly, the central stature of the charismatic leader in Pentecostal churches means that senior pastors enjoy great deference and sway over large congregations. The charismatic leader may either be a 'Joshua Generation' leader or one with a 'redemption' biography. Both types are deeply authoritarian in character because the charismatic leader is supposedly entrusted to articulate God's will and vision for the church.



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- In actual terms this has equipped these churches with the ability to mobilise financial capital; and the conflation of politics, business and religion to varying degrees raises the spectre of religious nationalism, that is, the alignment of theology with specific political values or nationalist ideologies.

## INTRODUCTION

The independent Pentecostal movement has been growing rapidly in Southeast Asia in recent decades, benefitting from the broader expansion of charismatic Christianity from the 1980s onwards in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as further afield in Taiwan and South Korea. There are several reasons why the growth of this movement in this region is important. Firstly, to a large extent the Pentecostal movement has an ethnic face. The majority of Pentecostals in urban centres like Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Surabaya, Jakarta and Manila are, with some notable exceptions, upwardly mobile, middle-class ethnic Chinese. In countries where the ethnic Chinese are in the minority, Pentecostal churches and cell groups are crucial spaces for social networking, business contacts and identity-making. Secondly, it has a wide economic appeal suggesting an ability to tap into different concerns and aspirations. For while the megachurch, the most popular incarnation of independent Pentecostalism, is often associated with the middle classes, it has great attraction for the poor and the working class in urban centres like Manila. Thirdly, the central figure of the charismatic leader in Pentecostal churches means that senior pastors enjoy great deference and sway over large congregations. In actual terms, this has meant the ability to mobilise financial capital; and the conflation of politics, business and religion to varying degrees raises the spectre of religious nationalism.

A 2011 Pew Research Centre study estimated that there are 279 million Pentecostals worldwide, comprising 12.8 per cent of all Christians.<sup>2</sup> There are no accurate estimates for the number of Pentecostals in Southeast Asia but the percentage of Christians (including Catholics) in Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Singapore are 13.2 per cent, 8.8 per cent, 85 per cent, and 18 per cent, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The exact number of Pentecostals are difficult to pin down for two reasons. Firstly, most country censuses do not differentiate between the larger Christian community except for Protestantism and Catholicism. Secondly, as a movement, Pentecostalism does not have strict doctrines or hierarchy, and may exist as distinct congregations as well as fringe congregations in mainline denominations. The conventional definition of 'Pentecostalism' is the emphasis on the deeply personal spiritual experience of God, baptism of the Holy Spirit, expressive worship, belief in signs and miracles, and the speaking of tongues or *glossolalia*. Nonetheless, according to estimates, there are 7,300,000 Pentecostals in Indonesia; 2,200,000 Pentecostals in Philippines; 206,000 Pentecostals in Malaysia; and 150,000 Charismatic Pentecostals in Singapore.<sup>4</sup>

## PREDOMINANTLY BUT NOT EXCLUSIVELY ETHNIC CHINESE

Christianity is by large an ethnic Chinese faith in Malaysia and Singapore, and has a more multiethnic complexion in Indonesia and the Phiippines. Colonial legacies as well as the conflation of Islam with ethnic Malays in Malaysia and with indigenous Indonesians such as Javanese and Madurese have resulted in predominantly ethnic Chinese Pentecostal

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-movements-and-denominations/> (accessed 10 May 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Various censuses.

<sup>4</sup> Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. 2010. *World Christian Database*. Leiden/Boston: Brill

congregations in the major urban centres of these three countries. The reason for this strong attraction of ethnic Chinese to Pentecostalism is two-fold.

The first concerns identity-consolidation in Chinese-minority societies where these churches are seen as alternative places to a less than welcoming political climate. Scholars elsewhere have shown how the precarious existence of Indonesian Chinese under Suharto played a part in their attraction to Christianity, and Pentecostalism in particular. Koning argues that the systematic alienation of Chinese identity and culture made Pentecostal-Charismatic churches one of the natural places for convergence.<sup>5</sup> More recently, studies commissioned by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute show that the political marginalisation of Malaysian Chinese has endowed Pentecostalism with the capacity to act as a vehicle to consolidate Chinese identity as a modern and individualised subject within the country.<sup>6</sup> It is also noted that in a nation where Muslims are in the majority, Malaysian Chinese are differentially inclined to Christianity and specifically the Pentecostal church where the church and its various groups provide social solidarity and support. Nevertheless, it must be noted that Malaysian Chinese do not make up the largest portion of Christians in the country. The non-Malay *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) group comprise the bulk of Christians at 64.3 per cent; followed by the ethnic Chinese at 27.3 per cent; and finally the Indians at 6.6 per cent. These non-Malay *bumiputeras* reside largely in Sabah and Sarawak while Chinese and Indian Christians reside mainly in the peninsula.

The second reason offers a more socio-economic explanation for the Pentecostal-Chinese link. Here, the minority status of ethnic Chinese in all of Southeast Asia, bar Singapore, has made the Pentecostal church an important place for social and business networking. More than that, these churches flourish because they provide contact opportunities among Chinese professionals and entrepreneurs. These commissioned studies also demonstrate the link between business and the ethnic Chinese. The Rose of Sharon Church, led by Pastor Jacob Nahuway, recently inaugurated a sanctuary in a Chinese-majority residential suburb in North Jakarta which seats 10,000 worshippers.<sup>7</sup> This ability for financial mobilisation differs from the Catholic or Protestant denominations which are generally top-down and institutional in nature. The building of Pentecostal megachurches is thus a demonstration of efficient mobilisation of financial capital from its congregants independent of any institutional oversight beyond the individual church.

The Rose of Sharon Church is also one of the few Pentecostal churches that have secured official permit to build a dedicated church, and the capital and network needed to build the monumental structure attest to the extensive connection and social capital between the authorities and wealthy entrepreneurs. The exclusive gated-community where the church is located also reflects the demography of its worshippers, who are mostly upper-middle class ethnic Chinese. Nevertheless, Indonesian Pentecostalism, like Malaysian Pentecostalism, is

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<sup>5</sup> Juliette Koning (2009), "Singing yourself into existence: Chinese Indonesian entrepreneurs, Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, and the Indonesian nation state". In *Christianity and the State in Asia: Complicity and Conflict*, ed. Julius Bautista and Francis Khek Ghee. London: Routledge

<sup>6</sup> Jeaney Yip, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> Hoon Chang-Yau, forthcoming.

diverse. The same commissioned studies have also problematized these neat categories. In Surabaya, for example, Indonesia's second largest city, the term "ethnic Chinese" must be less rigorously defined because the ethnic Chinese has had a history of intermarrying with the pribumi, forming creolized communities despite the colonial legacies.<sup>8</sup>

The decades of Chinese assimilation into Indonesian culture has meant that while there is a discernible Chinese community within the Pentecostal faith, much of the latter has a multi-ethnic complexion. Consider the statistics: the total percentage of self-identified ethnic Chinese is only 1.2 per cent of the Indonesian population, or 2.8 million, although this may be an underestimation as many do not self-report their ethnicity. Meanwhile, only about 35 per cent of ethnic Chinese profess to be Christians. In other words, there are about a million Chinese Christians in Indonesia, and it is safe to say that they are in the minority since there is an estimated seven million Pentecostals in the country.

### **A MIDDLE CLASS CHURCH THAT APPEALS TO THE WORKING CLASS**

As an off-shoot of the Methodist's Holiness movement in rural America, Pentecostalism began at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a series of revivals among the urban poor. The 1906 Azusa Street revivals in Los Angeles among the predominantly African-American community is traditionally seen as the genesis of the movement and was distinguished by its economically marginal status and unorthodox styles of worship. Post-war Pentecostalism began to make inroads into urban churches with white congregations. The neo-Pentecostal wave in the 1970s and the rise of televangelism in the 1980s strengthened the association between Pentecostalism and the middle class.

This middle class association is popular because of the characterization of Pentecostal megachurches as trendy places of worship. They are effective in their deployment of marketing strategies to advance their brand of Christianity through rock concert-like worship sessions and televised sermons. Their use of the powerful visual aesthetics and the technologies of pop culture encourages a highly intense personal religious experience in a mass setting. They are "not only very large churches that experiment with tradition, liturgy and doctrine, but also draw on popular culture and a consumerist logic in order to attract an audience more familiar with rock and roll, shopping malls, and self-help culture than with traditional church liturgies, hymns, or symbols."<sup>9</sup>

In Southeast Asia the strong link between Pentecostal megachurches and the upwardly mobile middle class is strong. This link is underpinned by the fact that the minority ethnic Chinese communities in various countries are over-represented in the business and professional class. In Singapore for example, where the ethnic Chinese are in the majority, the Pentecostal community was as well-educated and well off as the broader Protestant community, if not more so.<sup>10</sup> The Pentecostal megachurch's so-called 'prosperity gospels'

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<sup>8</sup> Chao En-Chieh, forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Ellingson, "New Research on Megachurches: Non-denominationalism and Sectarianism," in *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 247.

<sup>10</sup> Chong, Terence and Hui, Yew-Foong. 2013. *Different Under God: A Survey of Church-going Protestants in Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

either justify wealth and well-being as divine favour or offer them as reward for faithfulness to God, thus making it popular with the middle class. It has been argued that this popularity comes from the ability to measure the immeasurable.<sup>11</sup> It is crucial to younger professionals who have experienced class transition and who desire a linear and quantifiable perspective of their journey with God. In correlating the spiritual with the material, there is a rationalization of the irrational, such that the notion of being a “faithful” or “obedient” Christian may be calculable by material blessings received. This logical relationship is a familiar one for the transitional class who knows what it is to invest, to be measured, to be judged and, finally, rewarded.

In Malaysia for example, it was found that the majority of Calvary Church’s congregation is comprised of middle and upper middle class ethnic Chinese.<sup>12</sup> Around this Chinese core are ethnic Indians, while newer members include transnational workers like Filipinos, Nigerians, Cambodians and Dutch. Calvary Church’s ability to justify the possession of wealth and well-being as a symbol of God’s favour, which should be repaid back to community and nation-building, has made it popular with the middle class. The church as an organisation too, reflects middle class consumption aspirations where the idea of growth is realised through new, modern and most importantly, large buildings for worship.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that Pentecostal appeal is limited to the middle classes. Echoing the origins of the movement, Pentecostalism in the Philippines includes a large swathe of the working class, alongside members of the middle class. The Jesus is Lord (JIL) church is one of the country’s largest Pentecostal churches. Founded in 1978, JIL began as a series of Bible study sessions at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. In addition to English and Filipino, JIL’s pastors preach in local languages and dialects in order to reach out to the working class in the suburbs and rural areas. This is in contrast to other megachurches that focus primarily on the Metro Manila vicinity. Attention to the working class Filipino is crucial to the indigenisation and widespread relevance of Filipino Pentecostalism since this provides it with a much broader base in a country where more than half the population is considerably poor.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, while many of JIL’s pastors are well educated, the church makes the point to assign pastors who have themselves come from urban poor or rural communities to these very communities. This allows for rapport between pastor and congregation. JIL’s appeal to the broader working class also comes from evangelistic activities and music that expresses nuances and emotions that resonate with local Christians. For example, JIL members show a strong Filipino imprint through the use of local words such as *hipo* (touch) which, though they may evoke sexual connotations, refer to a unique encounter with God.<sup>14</sup> This helps indigenize the religious experience and Pentecostalism for communities.

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<sup>11</sup> Chong, Terence. 2015. “Megachurches in Singapore: The Faith of an Emergent Middle Class”. *Pacific Affairs* 88(2):215-235

<sup>12</sup> Jeaney Yip, forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> Jayeel S. Cornelio, forthcoming.

<sup>14</sup> Aguilar Jr. F.V. 2006. Experiencing Transcendence: Filipino Conversion Narratives and the Localization of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity. *Philippines Studies* 54(4): 585-627.

## THE CHARISMATIC LEADER AND RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

Perhaps the most distinguishable feature of the Pentecostal movement, particularly its independent megachurch manifestation, is the importance of the charismatic leader. Many of these leaders are founders or children of the founders of these independent Pentecostal churches. There are a few types of charismatic Pentecostal leaders.

Firstly, especially in the Singapore case, independent Pentecostal churches are typically offshoots of mainline churches. Young church leaders in these conservative mainline churches see themselves as part of the “Joshua Generation” which denotes the passing of the torch from older leaders to younger ones. The Book of Exodus describes the handing over of the guard from Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt, to Joshua who proceeds to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. These Joshua Generation leaders may have come into theological or organisational conflict with their conservative senior pastors and thus broken away from their church, bringing along with them a small group of followers to establish new churches. These include cases such as City Harvest Church and New Creation. As a self-selected group, these young leaders are highly driven individuals with clear and expansionist visions of church development, who command the loyalty and deference of followers.

Another type of charismatic leader is one with a compelling redemptive life-story, typically of vice, immorality, serious illness, and/or socio-economic depravation, who then finds Christ and proceeds to lead life anew. One such life-story is that of Philip Mantofa, leader of Surabaya’s Mawar Sharon, who had a childhood of illness, ethnic marginalisation and crime before he heard the voice of Jesus calling out to him at the church altar and experienced evil spirits leaving his body.<sup>15</sup> Such biographies of redemption are powerful cultural models for congregations. They serve as crucial narratives for Pentecostal conversion among the Indonesian Christian youth where sin and sickness are replaced by salvation, and thus attractive to young urban youths lost in the market economy or the cosmopolitan jungle.

Whether a ‘Joshua Generation’ leader or one with a history of redemption, the charismatic leader is an authoritarian one. Power and authority are centred on the head or senior pastor who is entrusted to articulate God’s will and vision for the church. In this manner, the charismatic leader’s legitimacy is beyond question because it lies with God who has chosen him (and it is usually a masculine position) to shepherd the flock over matters of theological direction, administrative organisation, and even business decisions. The charismatic leader will thus not tolerate dissent or alternative views which may undermine or reduce the relevance of his position.

The unquestioned authority of the charismatic leader allows him to align theology with specific political values or nationalist ideologies, or what scholars have termed “religious nationalism”.<sup>16</sup> Take the LoveSingapore coalition in Singapore for example. A loose group of different churches but with a strong Pentecostal strain, the LoveSingapore coalition formed in 1995 and is led by Pastor Lawrence Khong, senior pastor of the Charismatic Pentecostal

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<sup>15</sup> Chao En-Chieh, forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup> Rogers Brubaker. 2012. “Religion and nationalism: four approaches”. *Nations and Nationalism* 18(1): 2-20.

Faith Community Baptist Church. LoveSingapore cloaks its religiosity with patriotism by praying and interceding for politicians, civil servants and state institutions through its prayerwalks and prayer summits. The objective is to “turn this nation God-ward” thereby staking a Christian claim on the development of politics and nation-building.<sup>17</sup> This has the potential for stoking tension in a multicultural society, and may lead other faith communities to stake the same claims over the nation.

Likewise in the Philippines, JIL is heavily involved in national politics. Members of JIL are behind the political organisation, Citizens Battle Against Corruption (CIBAC), to advance the church’s call for moral renewal. Bro. Eddie Villanueva, head pastor and founder of JIL, was a presidential candidate in 2004 and 2010, and ran for senator in 2013, all unsuccessfully. Interestingly though, his campaigns were supported by celebrities, intellectuals, and even a former Chief Justice with as many as three million people at his political rallies in Metro Manila. Nevertheless leaders and members in the JIL chapters in Canada have left the church because of allegations, among others, that church funds were used for political activities.<sup>18</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As a faith, the Pentecostal movement’s growth in Southeast Asia has been largely ignored by policy-makers because of their focus on political Islam. This could be to the long-term detriment of governments because the growth of Pentecostalism reflects the changing ethnic and class dynamics in urban settings which policy-makers should be cognizant of. Not only is it predominantly ethnic Chinese driven, hence, making it a convenient marker of ethnicity in multicultural societies, it also appeals to non-Chinese and indigenous communities, thus raising sensitivities over proselytization, especially in Malaysia and Singapore. Pentecostalism’s attraction to the middle class suggests that its growth will not taper off.

And yet, it is also drawing in the poor and the working class in urban centres like Manila. Finally, although the church and the state have had a long history of engagement, religious nationalism in the case of independent Pentecostal churches is different. While mainline denominations like Catholicism, Anglicanism or Methodism make decisions as a collective, there is less checking and balancing in independent Pentecostal churches. This does not mean that these mainline denominations do not intervene in the political sphere as Cardinal Sin and People Power in the Philippines have demonstrated. However, the autonomy of these Pentecostal churches means that religious nationalism may be more unpredictable since much rests on the agenda and visions of the charismatic leader.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.lovesingapore.org.sg> (accessed 20 August 2015)

<sup>18</sup> Jayeel S. Cornelio, forthcoming.



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