A central problem in any multi-ethnic and multi-religious society is to deal with conflicts caused by the co-existence of many different groups living in close proximity. If these conflicts are not resolved, the very existence of the state can be tenuous. Clifford Geertz (1963: 153) correctly argued that primordial sentiments or ethnic loyalties tend to generate inter-ethnic hostilities which can threaten the very survival of these plural societies. Similarly, Chiew (1978:130), writing on Singapore, noted; “the political elites often have to take action in order to overcome the divisiveness of the primordial sentiments of race, culture, language or religion between ethnic groups”. In many parts of Asia, religion and ethnicity have, and continue to provide, the focus of communal hostility. This can be seen in the India-Pakistan conflict, the Muslim separatist groups in Southern Thailand and the Philippines, the Hindu Tamils and the Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Given the capacity for religion to arouse strong emotional sentiments and communal feelings, a situation where there is an integral linkage between religion and ethnicity poses a serious threat for the state. They can reinforce each other and become rallying points whenever a group perceives itself to be in a disadvantaged or threatened position vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in the society.

Racial riots which erupted in Singapore in 1950s and 1960s were often started through the exploitation and incitement of sentiments related to ethnicity and religion. This chapter will briefly look at the turbulent racial and religious conflicts. It will then focus on the various efforts by the political leaders to transform Singapore into a peaceful and harmonious society and some of the issues which have arisen from the state’s religious management strategies. Finally the chapter will highlight new challenges which seem to indicate that despite the enormous efforts at promoting religious tolerance, issues of religion and ethnicity can continue to be potent rallying points for an ethnic community, which feels that it is being discriminated against or threatened.
1. **EThnic and Religious Conflicts in Singapore**

In the two decades after the Second World War, Singapore experienced a series of social upheavals. Internal political strains, communist activity and race riots were prevalent. One of the more serious racial clashes was the Maria Hertogh riots which occurred in December 1950 (See Clutterbuck, 1984). Maria Hertogh was a young girl of Dutch-Eurasian heritage. She was born in 1937 and was baptized as a Catholic. During the Second World War, her parents were arrested in Java by the Japanese and were subsequently interned. Their daughter was then cared for by a Muslim family who later moved to northeastern Malaya and brought Maria up as a Muslim. After the war, Maria’s parents found out her whereabouts and wanted to reclaim her. In May 1950, the Dutch consul in Singapore obtained a court order for Maria’s custody. However due to legal technicalities, the order was reversed in July and Maria returned to her foster parents. She then went through a marriage ceremony with a Muslim. Although the marriage was legalized under Muslim law, it was contrary to Dutch and British law. The case aroused protests in Holland and among the Christians in Singapore. The Court made a decision to annul the marriage and sent Maria to a Catholic convent. Maria’s husband appealed to the Supreme Court and it was during this hearing that fighting broke out. Already, relations between Muslims and Christians, especially Europeans and Eurasians, had become strained over the court case.

Muslims who were campaigning for Maria’s custody started a demonstration outside the courtroom. This gathered momentum and by afternoon, unruly mobs began a rampage all over Singapore, dragging Europeans and Eurasians from cars and buses. Nine people were killed and twenty-six others seriously injured. To restore order, the army was mobilized. Nine other people were killed by the army and police. By 13 December 1950, 18 people were killed in all, 173 were injured, 72 vehicles were burnt and another 119 damaged (Clutterbuck, 1984).

When Singapore achieved internal self-government from the British, the new government of Singapore was faced with a two-pronged threat. There was a fear of the communist take-over through the exploitation of Chinese sentiments. The Communists were perceived as a political threat by both the colonial administration and later, the People’s Action Party (PAP) government of then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. The Malayan Communist Party (CPM) was able to