# Overview-Opinion Pieces

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# The Politics of Islamic Discourse in Malaysia

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In 1987, academic and political observer Chandra Muzaffar published a seminal work, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*, analysing the rise of religiosity in Malaysian society and its impact on Malaysian social, economic and political life. The community's outlook was undergoing change: more urban dwellers wanted to be in touch with religious values, and this meant embracing conservative teachings. Chandra defined Islamic resurgence to mean "the endeavour to establish Islamic values, Islamic practices, Islamic institutions, Islamic laws, indeed Islam in its entirety, in the lives of Muslims everywhere. It is an attempt to re-create an Islamic ethos, an Islamic social order, at the vortex of which is the Islamic human being, guided by the Quran and Sunnah."[1] The causes were multifold. Malaysia was undergoing political and economic changes with Mahathir Mohamad taking over as the country's prime minister in 1981. The country was also undergoing rapid urbanization and industrialization, and those from the working class sought to strengthen their religious values so that they could have some form of spirituality to fall back on. Second, international events that seemingly oppressed the Islamic world—such as Arab

wars, the Palestinian issue and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979—led to Malaysian Muslims wanting to be part of the global *ummah* and to stand up against imperialists. Islamist literature is used to strengthen anti-colonial sentiments. The Iranian revolution of 1979 was also significant because it inspired many Muslims to believe the leadership of the ulama (Islamic religious elites) could generate social change. The Iranian revolution sparked interest in many Islamic societies, including Malaysia, because they saw Islam as a force to unite fragmented societies against the West and oppression. This also meant the ulama could lead a revolution and provide the necessary leadership to mitigate their hardships.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Islamic institutions were built and expanded. While the Malaysian government intended to out-Islamize PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia)—which was also undergoing reforms after infighting in the 1970s—some of these institutions supported Mahathir's pro-capitalistic, industrialization and development models. It was during this period that the state began to support Islamic finance, banking and the halal economy.

The discourse promoted by the Muslim resurgence glosses over past cleavages between the traditionalists and modernists. For centuries the two camps have not been able to settle differences over rituals. The traditionalists, broadly, are close to the Malay courts and practise rituals such as mass prayers for the dead, celebration of the prophet Muhammad's birthday (*maulid*), visitations to graves of pious Muslims (*ziarah*), and special supplications during morning prayers (*qunut*). The modernists frown upon these practices. While such contestations still exist, even between the religious officials and ulama (mufti), both camps agree on the need for the public dominance of Islam. They however cannot agree how to operationalize the vision of an Islamic state and society.

Malaysia is undergoing an era of post-Islamic revivalism today. The promotion of sharia-based ideas, instruments and institutions is no longer a struggle, but has been integrated into the social psyche of the masses. In fact, society has become so overzealous in guarding Islamic institutions and revivalist ideas that it is no longer possible to argue against them. For example, there have been instances of Muslims not wanting to consume food without halal labels, even though this is permissible on religious grounds. Interestingly, even bottled water is

produced with halal labels. Malaysian Muslims are becoming overly sensitive to the issue of food and halal labelling. In 2016 the media covered a controversy over Auntie Anne's "pretzel dogs" snack. Jakim (Malaysia's Federal Department of Islamic Development), which oversees halal certification, initially refused to issue the certificate because the name of the sausage contains the word "dog".[2] To be sure, halal certificates did not exist prior to the 1970s, and the idea is still foreign to many Islamic societies in the Middle East.

At the discursive level, Malaysia has gone down the route of Islamizing knowledge. Malaysian Islamic universities (or Islamic faculties or departments) have adopted this approach in their curricula. The idea may have originated with Ismail Faruqi, but in Malaysia it was popularized by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas through his book *Islam and Secularism*. Modules on Islamization of modern sciences were offered in Malaysia, and students have been taught to integrate the sciences with theology. These ideas have then been exported to neighbouring Indonesia and Singapore. The promoters of the idea, which began in ISTAC (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization), based in IIUM (International Islamic University Malaysia), have now moved to the Centre for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science, and Civilisation (CASIS) of the Malaysian Technological University (UTM). CASIS offers such courses as the Islamic philosophy of science and the Islamization of contemporary knowledge.

## State Responses to Islamization

Past Malaysian prime ministers have portrayed the country as practising moderate Islam. Mahathir, for example, in 2001, during his first term as prime minister (1981–2003), pointed out that Malaysia is an Islamic state. His vision to amalgamate Islam and development earned him significant respect from the international community. US president George W. Bush hailed him as a moderate Islamic leader in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.[3] The Abdullah Badawi government (2003–9) invested heavily in promoting civilizational Islam, called Islam Hadhari, which highlighted ten principles, including piety and faith in Allah, a just and trustworthy government, mastery of knowledge, cultural and moral integrity, and protecting the environment. Islam Hadhari however

remained at the discursive level and had only a minimal impact on the masses. Under Pak Lah's leadership (what Abdullah Badawi is affectionately called), there were complaints by minority groups of their rights being disrespected. A major complaint against his government was the neglect of minority Indian communities, leading the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) to garner support, as well as a failure to clamp down on conservatives.

After coming to power in 2009, Prime Minister Najib Razak introduced the 1Malaysia concept to emphasize the country's multicultural outlook. On Islam, the prime minister hailed Malaysia as promoting Islam Wasattiyah (or moderate Islam). Najib's attempts at promoting an image of moderation, and for that matter progressive Islam, was no different from those of his predecessors Abdullah Badawi and Mahathir Mohamed (1981–2003). The two earlier leaders had also played the foreign policy card for domestic gains—by portraying Malaysia as the voice of moderation in the international community—in order to out-Islamize the opposition party PAS. Nevertheless, it was under Najib's government that book banning was common. Several of Dr Faisal Tehrani's novels were banned. Also banned was a compilation of articles by a group of academics and retired bureaucrats calling themselves G25. As will be discussed in the chapters in this section, progressive voices were restricted under Najib's watch.

Academics and activists in the county may have a counter view about the country's moderate image, and their contention not only centres on security issues. On the one hand, the threat of radicalization is real. There have been reports of Malaysians sympathizing with the cause of the international terrorist group ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), including some in the civil service and the army. The Malaysian police have been keeping a close watch on some members of the armed forces after it detected some security personnel sympathizing with the radical group.[4] The government is wary of youths being attracted to ISIS ideology. So far the Malaysian police have arrested more than 150 people suspected of having ties to ISIS.[5]

Besides security threats and radicalization, scholars have painted a generally gloomy picture of moderate Islamic thought in Malaysia. Some have expressed their disappointment that Malaysia is undergoing a conservative turn. Others have mentioned that Malaysia is undergoing Arabization, meant in a negative light, that the Malays are neglecting

the essence of their culture and mimicking Arabs. Leading the charge that Malays are becoming Arabized—particularly with reference to the rise of Wahhabi/Salafi ideology—have been activists and the Sultan of Johor Ibrahim Iskandar. Comments made by the Sultan of Johor should not be taken lightly, given that in Malaysia the Malay Rulers are the custodians of Islam and Malay culture. However, the growing assertiveness of the federal religious bureaucracy—namely, JAKIM—has eclipsed the authority of the rulers on religious matters. Under the Najib Razak administration, the institution's budget was reported to be as high as a billion ringgit, surpassing what is necessary, given its role. Ultimately, the strength of this federal bureaucracy resulted from the Islamization agenda that began under the first Mahathir government in response to the Islamic resurgence movement.[6]

Given the alleged rise of puritan ideas in Malaysia and the strengthening of the authority of federal religious institutions, there are doubts whether alternative discourses can flourish in the country. In general, groups and individuals presenting counter viewpoints have been targeted by the religious authorities. According to the Malaysian constitution, Islam is the religion of the federation, and other religions have the right to exist in the country. However, recent incidents, such as the ruling against the use of the term "Allah" by non-Muslims; the debates on ACT 355, which is intended to increase the maximum punishments for sharia laws; and the right to convert minors to Islam after one of their parents has converted to the religion seem contrary to the religious freedom accorded by the constitution. In fact, in 2018, Malay-Muslims staged a huge protest against Pakatan Harapan's plans to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Non-Muslim groups are not the only ones targeted by the religious elites; Muslims who hold different viewpoints are also penalized. Overall, only those who adhere to the Sunni school of thought are allowed to preach in states. Groups holding views the religious authorities define as liberal or feminist are also targeted and harassed by the religious elites.

Resurgence ideas and thought, and the support given to these by the previous governments, have resulted in it being a challenge for progressive ideas to penetrate society. If they remain uncurbed, these ideas may penetrate key institutions further. Much hope rests on the current Pakatan Harapan government to reverse these trends and for

subsequent governments to follow up to ensure that the multicultural and multi-religious space of Malaysia can be preserved.

## Notes

1. Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti Sdn Bhd, 1987), p. 2.
2. Norshahril Saat, "The Key Forces underlying the 'Pretzel Dogs' Controversy", *Straits Times*, 25 October 2016.
3. The first Mahathir government co-opted key Islamic figures into the government and developed Islamic institutions and think-tanks to promote the government's Islamic agenda.
4. "Malaysia Police Keep Tab on Armed Forces after Detecting ISIS Sympathisers: Report", *Straits Times*, 6 December 2014.
5. Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, "ISIS Recruitment of Malaysian Youth: Challenge and Response", 3 May 2016, Middle East Institute, https://www.mei.edu/content/map/isis-recruitment-malaysian-youth-challenge-and-response (accessed 11 September 2017).
6. Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence*.