Trending Islam

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Trending Islam

Cases from Southeast Asia

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
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CONTENTS

Part III: Influencers Driving Trends

FOREWORD

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Introduction

To appreciate contemporary trends, one must appreciate historical origins, for they continue to define and influence the evolution of religious observance. Thus, there is a need to understand the ways in which Islam initially came into what is now Southeast Asia, especially the power of trade and proselytization in precolonial times, the impact of European colonial competition and imperial administration, followed by the impact of postcolonial nation-building.

Although only three countries in Southeast Asia have Muslim-majority populations, the narratives of Muslim-minority communities form a vital part of Southeast Asian Islam. For example, there are the Rohingya in Myanmar, the Chams of Cambodia, the Muslims in the former Sultanates of Pattani or Maguindanao, and the Malays in Singapore.

Proper treatment of this topic also demands a thorough grounding of regional geopolitics and an intimate knowledge of the domestic politics within specific countries. The nexus between religion and politics has grown in intensity all around the world, even in nominally secular countries such as the United States or India. Whether one is referring to evangelical Christianity, resurgent Hindutva, or Islamism allied with ethnic supremacy, we can see how almost every area of public policy has become infused with religious rhetoric: in justifying national budgets, tax policy, education policy, international relations, trade rules,

housing and neighbourhood regulations, abortion rights, regulation of Islamic Finance which now includes fintech, and the administration of justice itself.

This edited volume showcases some of the emerging trends in Southeast Asian Islam. There are many ways of reading this book: one may choose to read the chapters to have a deeper understanding of the trends surrounding Islam in specific countries in the region—mainly Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei—or one can compare cases across state boundaries given that all these societies are now confronted with a new mode of religious transmission in the form of social media. The faithful are no longer studying religion solely from the mosque or *madrasah*, but they are doing so through the Internet and social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok.

Malaysia

I am rather inspired by Professor Komaruddin Hidayat's incredibly insightful piece on Indonesia (Chapter 2), so this Foreword will focus on Malaysia.

Malaysia was known for a long time as a tolerant Muslim country, and there were many affirmations of this. Many Muslim countries marvelled at Malaysia's physical infrastructure, obviously burgeoning middle class, apparent political stability, and multicultural, multi-faith harmony. I genuinely do recall a time when there was a feel-good zeitgeist about being Malay, Muslim, and Malaysian at the same time.

Of course, today I know that my experience was not necessarily representative of others' experiences, and more importantly, to the extent that there was a shared experience, there has since been much movement in how Malaysians think of themselves. If ever there was a halcyon period of consensus about "Bangsa Malaysia", that has now been distorted by social, economic, and political pressures as a result of explicit government initiatives from Vision 2020 to Islam Hadhari to 1 Malaysia to Keluarga Malaysia, and of course its antecedents in the form of the National Culture Policy, Rukun Negara, and of course the Federal Constitution itself. All of these things had their own inputs into the shaping of Malaysian identity, and naturally triggered responses from other actors in society as well, sustaining into the twenty-first century the pre-Malayan Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda dichotomy of a century before (Roff 1994).

Added to the mix of course were two other important phenomena. First, the sociological aspect, as the rapid urbanization of a developing economy brought traditionally rural communities into cities. Second, the rise of political Islam often symbolized by the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and its repercussions, both in terms of new oil money being invested in Muslim institutions across the Sunni world, and domestic political shifts as parties felt the need to compete on the grounds of religiosity, in Malaysia encapsulated by the hitherto secular United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) increasingly adopting Islamic vocabulary to keep Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) at bay (Norani Othman, Puthucheary and Kessler 2008). It is important to note that PAS was not static either; both parties dabbled with different formulations in defining their desired electorates.

Political competition, accompanied by ever increasing concentration of power in the Executive, the centralization of power from the states to the federal government, and the curtailment of check and balance institutions meant that the project of politically motivated Islamization could flourish with the Prime Ministers' approval, with new institutions being created or vastly expanded—Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, JAKIM) being the obvious example—in order to pursue it (Liow 2009). And today, its actors are equally invested in the patronage structures that surround the Malaysian state, from appointments in Government-Linked Companies (GLCs) to its associated perks including titles and overseas trips.

The intellectual justifications seemed alluring and able to be invoked by politicians even without the important academic caveats. Seeing Al-Attas' "Islamization of Knowledge" as a philosophical *tour de force* for the long-term advancement of Muslims and others is a world away from politicians superimposing their own supposedly "Islamic" bent on nation-building. The same can be said about the habit of politicians seizing upon anything with perceived scholarly value in order to defend government policy. The opposition to International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the Rome Statute is one relatively recent example. Furthermore, some professors may end up being seen as complicit in political objectives, further eroding faith in academic independence.

This politically motivated Islamization project was increasingly conflated with Malay identity, to the extent that our history curriculum

equates the beginning of Malay civilization with Islam (Barr and Govindasamy 2010). In this regard we have much to learn from our Egyptian, Indonesian, and Jordanian friends who celebrate the Pyramids of Giza, Borobudur, and Petra respectively without any diminishing of their Islamic credentials.

However, the cues for this social change were evident for many years. The increased use of the hijab through the 1980s and 1990s, and the charge of "Arabization" began to be made when the ubiquity of *baju Melayu* and *baju kurung* was challenged by *jubbahs*. Of course, there are now very famous (and less famous) brands of hijabster fashion houses that first established themselves on social media through influencers and eventually made their way to trendy malls. All sorts of products are now marketed as particularly Muslim-friendly, well beyond the halal certification that was once deemed sufficient. And again, social media plays a big part in marketing and reviewing products, and also creating communities of customers.

Speaking of social media, the most successful preachers in Malaysia—well, indeed the world—now use YouTube, Instagram and TikTok to disseminate their *fatwa* and commentaries, being orders of magnitude more popular than the official videos of *tazkirahs* (short speeches) in mosques. Indeed, these preachers represent the "2.0" of the Islamization project started decades earlier, acquiring a life of their own that now supersedes the influence of the original advocates of the project.

And certainly, the commentary and tone of this community—which really boils down to the few very successful, very popular preachers given the nature of the algorithms that govern social media feeds —sets the atmosphere whenever controversial debates arise in public.

The perceived "insults towards Islam" trigger the most vociferous reactions from self-appointed defenders of the faith, and each incident is an opportunity to advocate for more punishment through existing or new laws.

Indeed, the existence of punitive legislation is sometimes seen as a benchmark of how "Islamic" a society is, as we can see in the discourse surrounding RUU 355, the bill to amend the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965. Over time, these calls have an incremental effect that normalizes such reactions and makes it more difficult for those who disagree to air their disagreements publicly for fear of being ostracized or labelled as a *munafik* (hypocrite), Muslim liberal, and so on. Ideas

of compassion and mercy are absent from the discourse, as Sharifah Nurul Huda Alkaff discusses in her assessment of Instagram comments on the accounts of celebrities and social media influencers (Chapter 8).

Another casualty of this wider phenomenon is in our popular culture. It is only thanks to the legendary status of P Ramlee that we are still sometimes able to see Malays drinking gin and tonic (or *iblis* and tonic in the clip from *Labu Labi*), or the summoning of "mambang tanah, mambang air, mambang api, mambang angin" (spirits of the land, water, fire, and wind) and so on in *Pendekar Bujang Lapok.* Of course, there are still some very good Malay films both in terms of story and production values—but references to alcohol and the supernatural are now tightly regulated. The same goes for our music, art and batik, where abstract forms have completely replaced mythical creature designs, although Indonesian batik retains such iconography. And even in the palaces, *keris* (daggers) with animal hilts have been eschewed in favour of simpler designs, and carved bird heads atop even humble fishing boats in Terengganu are no more.

And as much as one thinks that Hari Raya has been celebrated in the same way since time immemorial, the official terminology used by the Keeper of the Rulers' Seal remains Hari Raya Puasa and Hari Raya Korban respectively, not Aidilfitri and Aidiladha. Even more absent in the public consciousness is the ritual of *mandi safar*. The practice has several origin stories, among them commemorating the last time the Prophet Muhammad was able to bathe, but video evidence suggests it primarily consisted of Muslims going to the beach for the day; FINAS has uploaded a retrospective on YouTube which is worth watching. After just one generation, *mandi safar* is now totally erased from the public consciousness.

Some inexplicable contradictions exist in Malaysian society, such as the love for horror films and sightings of *pontianak* and *toyol*, a continued belief and use of black magic (famously practised even by senior politicians), or the routine contradictions of celebrities expressing their supposed piety while flogging luxury designer goods. The survival of these quirks indicates that there is hope yet for Malaysia, in that they show that divergence even of a religious kind can be tolerated.

The contradictions in Malaysia's foreign policy are unfortunately more jarring. Malaysia's political leaders go on at length about defending their Palestinian brothers and sisters, and similarly much has been said about ongoing persecution of the Rohingya. But even

low-hanging fruits like signing the 1951 United Nations (UN) Refugee Convention—that would actually help people from those countries already in Malaysia—remains elusive. While it is unlikely that Israel's recent rapprochement with more of its Arab neighbours will change Malaysia's official attitude towards that country, Wisma Putra's recent engagement with Myanmar's National Unity Government, the first by an ASEAN country, was impressive. Perhaps the best example of Malaysia actually acting on Muslim solidarity was with the Bosnians in the 1990s, resulting in an entire cohort of Bosnian alumni from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) who are leaders in politics, business, diplomacy, and civil society in that country. Yet, compared to the Palestinians, Rohingya and Bosnians, outrage about the persecution of Uighurs remains comparatively silent. Whether this is due to acceptance of official explanations of the situation, or because of trade concerns, remains to be addressed.

Civil Society

There are two ingredients which I think will contribute greatly to Islam in Malaysia. The first is the ever-increasing permanence and influence of civil society organizations (CSOs), particularly those that emerged in the last two decades or so, espousing progressive and democratic positions (Lee 2010). Of course, new conservative ones also sprouted, but arguably their added value to the landscape was minimal because in truth they already existed in some form prior, including within the establishment itself.

The Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) is one of the earliest independent think tanks in Malaysia, in the sense that it is not affiliated to any political party and took no government money. It is allied to what it sees as the vision of liberty and justice espoused by Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1957 and again in 1963—when Singapore too established Malaysia. There is virtually no area of public policy in which it has not been active through research and advocacy—from education, housing, transport, agriculture, tax, budget transparency, parliamentary reform, open government and the like—and although it is clearly not a religious-based think tank, there have been many areas where it has cooperated with organizations that are religious-based, especially in the areas of children's and women's rights and refugee issues.

Indeed, if one of the consequences of Malaysia's religious transformation is the pervasiveness of conservative Islamic vocabulary in the formulation of public policy, then one logical consequence of the growth of civil society is the injection of progressive Islamic vocabulary in its critique. Although Malaysian democracy since 2018 has seen pendulum swings, one long-term change for the better is the permanence of civil society. Not only are there now so many organizations around, but their boards and advisors are stuffed full of distinguished people—or members of the elite—that would make it difficult for the government to quickly shut everyone down. Selected persecutions may still exist, but not against civil society in general.

Indeed, after the Sheraton Move in February 2020, newly empowered politicians have been very keen to engage with civil society. They recognized their lack of electoral legitimacy and sought to acquire it by showing their engagement with civil society instead. Indeed, on numerous occasions the government will test a policy by citing the work of think tanks, de facto normalizing the process of debate, research and advocacy that has enabled a proposal to get that far in the first place. In 2018, many such ideas made it into party manifestoes and some of those even became law, perhaps most famously Undi18 and automatic voter registration. Increasingly, universities, including publicly-funded ones, have become natural partners in this process too.

In tandem with other reforms, civil society will certainly grow as a trendsetter in Malaysian Islam. For instance, unjustified party-hopping was one of the scourges of Malaysian democracy, and legislative efforts to prevent changes of government through leaders bribing opposition legislators to their side were enacted. This has only been made possible because finally, the politicians see that the practice is undermining all of them. Individual Members of Parliament (MPs) do not want to continually hedge their bets as to who will be in power, and to be ready to change parties, and then be eternally condemned for doing so. Thus there is an opportunity now to stop the practice while politicians feel it is more valuable to remain loyal than possibly jump ship.

Alongside this is political financing reform, so that donations to campaigns and candidates are fairer and more transparent. IDEAS is secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Political Financing, which would have been inconceivable several years ago. This has only been made possible by the introduction of Parliamentary Select Committees—which was a manifesto commitment that IDEAS had long

championed—and efforts such as the Speakers' Lectures Series which set a precedent for CSOs to be involved in parliament.

The reason for this example is to suggest that increasingly, politicians may conclude that trying to out-Islamize each other in the political space will be a race to the bottom, too. Indeed, it is somewhat of a paradox that the more Malay politicians talk about Malay unity, the more Malay division results, and today we have UMNO, PAS, Parti Pribumi Bersatu (Bersatu) and Pejuang—and of course we can ask whether the ostensibly multi-racial parties really are multi-racial in composition and attitude.

Already civil society engagements with politicians, including from Malay-Muslim parties, have succeeded in achieving progressive policy stances in certain cases, such as the introduction of the Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill. Perhaps one day this evolving dynamic between civil society, parliament, political parties and civil servants will enable an important new trend in the administration of Malaysian Islam.

Monarchy

To be sure, in Malaysia's constitutional setup, there is an existing mechanism that can prevent any further slides towards exclusion and extremism. That institution is the monarchy. The Federal Constitution makes clear that the Rulers are Heads of Islam in their states, or the Yang di-Pertuan Agong in respect of the four gubernatorial states (Abdul Aziz Bari 2013).

As mentioned earlier, it is still the case that it is the Keeper of the Rulers' Seal, not a political figure, who announces the most important dates of the Islamic calendar. Indeed, this was particularly relevant when in 2022, Hari Raya Aidilfitri was celebrated a day earlier in Malaysia compared to Singapore. One might think this is mere symbolism, yet the power of symbolism and ceremony in Malay culture has endured.

However, not every incident in Malaysia happened with the endorsement of the Rulers. In reality, the concentration of power in the Executive in the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with the Islamization as conceived by politicians, made this a technicality. It is only now, with the emergence of greater political competition, that the constitutional intent is being restored.

For example, when in April 2022 JAKIM wanted to ban the Tarekat Naqsyabandiah al-Aliyyah Syeikh Nazim al-Haqqani, a Sufi order that

has been officially recognized in Negeri Sembilan since 2018, it was a statement from the Sultan of Selangor in his capacity as Chairman of the National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs that confirmed the *tarekat*'s (Sufi religious order) continued acceptance. The Sultan of Selangor was also in the news more recently for his defence of the Bon Odori festival in contrast to PAS politicians who wanted to prevent Muslim attendance. There are numerous past instances in different states which have illustrated royal progressiveness. For example, when the Sultan of Johor lambasted a Muslim-only laundry, the many speeches on national unity by the Sultan of Perak and Yang di-Pertuan Besar of Negeri Sembilan, and Negeri Sembilan's initiative to address the issue of unilateral conversion of children to Islam, by requiring the marriage to be dissolved in the civil courts before any recognition of conversion is allowed.

In addition, there are many initiatives to increase multicultural interaction away from the eyes of the media. Royal patronage and participation in sports is one area of unsung success, for it is on sports fields and courts that multiracial, multi-religious respect for rules is nurtured.

Finally, traditions and ceremonies that happen at the state level that in fact celebrate the diversity of Islam continue to hold some degree of significance. Interestingly, the Negeri Sembilan State Constitution defines the religion of the state as "Islam as heretofore practiced in the state", a formulation that implies a nod not only to unique Minangkabau elements such as matrilineality, but also the presence of different Muslim traditions in the state. Mosques within a state usually use *khutbah* (sermons) written in that state—a point that was highlighted some years ago when *khutbah* in the Federal Territories were criticized as being provocative. During the *Maulidur Rasul* (commemoration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday), the Yang di-Pertuan Besar and *Undangs* (Ruling Chiefs elected within their clans within the state's culture of Adat Perpateh) still lead the procession and sing the *selawat* (prayers for the Prophet), unlike in some states where it is now eschewed. *Ya Hanana* continues to be sung by thousands who assemble in fields. Additionally, many mosques still revere the teachings of local *ulama* (religious scholars), such as Tuan Tulis who apparently treated my great-great-grandfather Tuanku Muhammad's illness when he was in London in 1925, despite Tuan Tulis having died in Seri Menanti three years prior!

Although these rituals, practices and stories might seem far removed from the contentious points of policy, their continued existence is in truth vital in demonstrating that diversity can and does exist within Islam in Malaysia. These can still serve as the roots for expanding that diversity once again.

International

By way of conclusion, it is worthwhile to draw attention to international efforts introduced in the name of Islam and diversity. For example, we should remember the 2004 Amman Message which expanded recognition of Muslims by other Muslims. Malaysia has eight signatories. We should read the 2012 Al-Azhar Declaration that spoke of the modern democratic nation-state, freedom of belief, and freedom of expression. We should learn from Morocco's women preachers, the *morchidat*, who advance women's rights there. We should embody the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration that champions the "just treatment of religious minorities in Muslim countries and to raise awareness as to their rights" (2016) and the 2019 Abu Dhabi Declaration between Pope Francis and Sheikh Al-Azhar which called on rediscovering "the values of peace, justice, goodness, beauty, human fraternity and coexistence" (2019). These things speak to the universality of our religion, and yet, will not threaten the traditions of Malaysian and Southeast Asian Islam that the exclusivists would rather see.

In conclusion, there are exciting opportunities for trendsetting in Malaysian Islam. To some extent, Malaysia still tolerates religious divergence. This is a form of social capital that can be utilized to promote a more inclusive and cosmopolitan society. With an appreciation of the history of Malaysian Islam, the combination of increased political competition, the growth of civil society, and the re-empowerment of traditional institutions together can elevate the Malaysian *umma*. More importantly, there are many lessons that can be drawn from the Malaysian experience which applies to other parts of Southeast Asia. While I have discussed the case of Malaysia—a country that I am familiar with—I hope readers will adopt a critical lens when reading the other chapters which cover Malaysia's neighbouring countries. I wish to congratulate the editors of this timely volume and hope for more publications of such nature in the future.

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