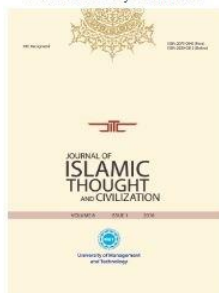


Volume 9, Issue 2



Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization (JITC)

Volume 9, Issue 2, Fall 2019

pISSN: 2075-0943, eISSN: 2520-0313

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc>

Issue DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.92>

Homepage: <https://www.umt.edu.pk/jitc/home.aspx>

Journal QR Code:



Islam and Politics in Malaysia since 1957: Fluctuation between Moderation and Radicalisation of the State, Society and Religion

Article:

Author(s):

Elmira Akhmetova

Published:

Fall 2019

Article DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.92.01>

QR Code:



Elmira Akhmetova

Akhmetova, Elmira. "Islam and politics in Malaysia since 1957: Fluctuation between moderation and radicalization of the State, Society and Religion." *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 9, no. 2 (2019): 01–19.

To cite this article:

[Crossref](https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.92.01)

Copyright Information:

This article is open access and is distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution – Share Alike 4.0 International License

Publisher Information:

Department of Islamic Thought and Civilization,
School of Social Science and Humanities, University
of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.

Indexing
Partners



For more

[please
click here](#)

Islam and Politics in Malaysia since 1957: Fluctuation between Moderation and Radicalisation of the State, Society and Religion

Elmira Akhmetova*

Department of History and Civilisation
International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship in post-independence Malaysia between the state, civil society and the country's dominant religion, that is, Islam. When Malaya obtained independence from the British in 1957, many expected that Islam would lead to social and economic decline. The constitution states that Islam is the state religion, although it also states that religious freedom for non-Muslims is assured without discrimination. Since then, religious affairs have remained a state responsibility and Malaysia has been hailed for decades as an oasis of moderate Islam. However, during the last few years religiously motivated hatred has become prevalent and popular in Malaysia for many reasons. This paper underlines the factors that have led to the growth of hate and the decline of the moderate Islam previously found in Malaysia. It proposes that the radicalisation of Malaysian Muslims should be evaluated within the framework of current geopolitics and the impact on the well-being of the Muslim world, rather than localising it into regional and national faults. The paper argues that Islam in Malaysia is an instrument that shapes the political behaviour of the public and the ruling elite. Lastly, the paper proposes that effective governance and ensuring that citizens' rights are respected are some of the most effective ways of eliminating extremism and preventing radicalisation.

Keywords: good governance, Malaysian General Elections 2018, Malaysian nation-state, politicisation of Islam, religious challenge, religious extremism, religious pluralism, terrorism

Islam and Politics in Malaysia since 1957: Fluctuation between Moderation and Radicalisation of the State, Society and Religion

The link between Islam, politics and society has been heavily influenced by several dramatic events that have happened since the 1970s. For example, the Iranian revolution in 1978-9, the 1979-88 struggle of *Mujahedeen* against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, Taliban rule in Afghanistan, September 11th, and the

*Correspondence concerning the article should be addressed to Elmira Akhmetova, Assistant Professor, Department of History and Civilization, International Islamic University Malaysia, elmira@iium.edu.my

current presence of extremist militant groups in the Muslim world such as Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and the so-called Islamic State (ISIS or DAESH in Arabic) in Iraq and Syria. These groups have committed brutalities that violate the core values of Islam and humanity. As early as 1987, Marshall Bouton warned that placing too much emphasis on radical events, although significant ones, can perpetuate peoples' misperceptions regarding Islam.¹ Consequently, Islam is generally viewed today as violent, anti-Western, and politically and socially reactionary. Also, as Bouton highlights, the focus placed on isolated events prevents people from observing the bigger picture and understanding the positive aspects of the relationship between Islam and society.² By recognising the need to step beyond stereotypes and headlines, this paper focuses on the lesser studied facets of the relationship between Islam and politics by evaluating the role of Islam in Malaysian state politics.

When the Federation of Malaya (now known as Peninsular Malaysia or West Malaysia) obtained independence from the British in 1957, the idea of Islam playing a dominant role in national affairs was rejected in favour of more western style secularism. The governing alliance was established in 1946 and was led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). The coalition comprised members that were western educated and they strongly emphasized national economic development. However, since then Islam has become progressively more critical not only in the daily lives of Malaysian Muslims but also in the state's politics.³ Such developments do not necessarily lead to the radicalisation of Muslims. On the contrary, Malaysia has for decades been an example of a tolerant, moderate, and plural Muslim society.

However, recent public opinion in Malaysia indicates increasing sympathy towards extremist sentiment, especially following the events of 9/11. The USA based Pew Research Centre found that in 2015, 11 percent of Muslims in Malaysia expressed a favourable stance towards ISIS.⁴ According to a study conducted in 2018 by the research firm Merdeka Centre, Malaysia "surprisingly scored the highest in terms of support for ISIS at 5.2 percent, as well as for the regional group

¹Marshall Bouton, "Preface," in *Islam in Asia: Religion, Politics, and Society*, ed. John Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), v.

²*Ibid.*, v-vi.

³John Funston, "Malaysia," in *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia: A Contemporary Sourcebook*, eds. Greg Fealy & Virginia Hooker (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 51.

⁴J. Poushter, "In Nations with Significant Muslim Populations, Much Disdain for ISIS," *Pew Research Centre*, November 17, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/facttank>.

Jemaah Islamiah (18.1 percent), which aims to establish an Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia.”⁵ While the majority of Muslims in Malaysia continue to adhere to moderate versions of the faith, the presence of religious extremism in Malay society is alarming. This is especially significant in the light of governmental and political transition that has been taking place since the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal in 2015 and the defeat of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition by the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition. The new coalition rules under the leadership of 93-year-old Dr Mahathir Mohamad and they have been in power since winning the 14th Malaysian General Elections (GE14) on 9 May, 2018. This paper analyses the potential link between the rise of Islam in the Malaysian political sphere and the growth of radicalism among the general public.

2. Islam and Malaysian Governmental System

Malaysia is a federal constitutional elective monarchy. It is the only federation in Southeast Asia and consists of 13 states and three federal territories. The system of government is modelled on the Westminster parliamentary system, an inheritance of the British colonial rule. The head of state is the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, commonly referred to as the Sultan (King). The Sultan is elected to a five-year term by nine hereditary rulers of the Malay states. The other four states which have titular governors do not participate in the selection.

Compared to other developing countries, the political and governmental system of Malaysia is regarded as being relatively well-established. The prime minister leads the government and the parliament consists of two chambers: the *Dewan Rakyat* (House of Representatives) and *Dewan Negara* (Senate). The *Dewan Rakyat* has 222 members who serve a maximum term of five years and are elected from single member constituencies. All 70 senators sit for a three-year term; 26 are elected by 13 state assemblies and the remaining 44 are appointed by the Sultan based on the recommendations of the prime minister. The parliament follows a multi-party system and the government is elected through a first-past-the-post system. From 1957 till May 2018, Malaysia was governed by a thirteen-party coalition known as the *Barisan Nasional* (BN).⁶ The unexpected victory of

⁵Shannon Teoh, “Merdeka Center Poll Found Muslims in the Philippines More Open to Violence than Those in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia,” *The Straits Times*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/s-e-asia-survey-sheds-light-on-attitude-towards-extremism>

⁶Z. Anwar, “Government and Governance in Multi-Racial Malaysia,” in *The Changing Shape of Government in the Asia-Pacific Region*, eds., J. W. Langford and K. L. Brownsey (Canada: The Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1988), 101.

the *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) coalition led by Dr Mahathir Mohamad ended more than sixty years of rule by the BN. The transition process to install the new government went smoothly and without incident.

According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia (Census 2010), the total population is approximately 28.3 million of which 91.8 percent are Malaysian citizens and 8.2 percent are non-citizens. Malaysia's population comprises many ethnic groups, though people of Austronesian origin make up the majority of the population. They are known as the *Bumiputras* (67.4%) and are indigenous to the Malay Peninsula. There are large Chinese (24.6%) and Indian (7.3%) populations which descend from the people who arrived during the British colonial rule. Malays and/or the *Bumiputra* consider Malaysia to be their land and since the race riots in 1969, the *Bumiputra* have enjoyed certain privileges in the country.

The Population and Housing Census 2010 figures reveal that Islam is the most widely professed religion in Malaysia with 61.3 percent of the total population adhering to it. Other religions that are practised are Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%) and Hinduism (6.3%); while 1.3 percent practice Confucianism, Taoism or other traditional Chinese religions.⁷

As the figures show, Malaysia is a multi-religious country and Islam is the faith with the biggest following. The constitution guarantees religious freedom for all citizens, and even though Islam is the state religion, the first four prime ministers stressed that Malaysia could function as a secular state.

Islam in Malaysia is represented by the *Shafi'i* branch of *Sunni* theology and jurisprudence. It was brought to the Malay Peninsula in the twelfth century by traders and scholars from China, India and the Middle East and it became the dominant religion in the region in the fifteenth century. The Sultan of Malacca, Muhammad Iskander Shah, accepted Islam in 1414 CE and made it the court religion. This act contributed significantly to the spread of Islam as the Sultanate established its influence throughout the peninsula.⁸ Since then, Islam has played an important role in administration and politics.

⁷“Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010,” *Department of Statistics Malaysia*, August 5, 2011, <https://www.statistics.gov.my>.

⁸Funston, 52; and Von Der Mehden, “Malaysia: Islam and Multiethnic Politics,” in *Islam in Asia: Religion, Politics, and Society*, eds., John Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 178.

Until the late nineteenth century, the administration of Islam on the Malay Peninsula was village based and headed by local *imams*. Later, to strengthen the Malay society against the British colonial rule, some sultans began enacting *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) for Muslim subjects and started unifying Islamic institutions under the state bureaucracy. In 1915, a *Majlis Agama Islam dan Isti'adat Melayu* (Council of Islamic Religion and Malay Customs, often known as *Majlis Agama*) was established in the state of Kelantan. It functioned as a central religious council with sweeping administrative and coercive powers that were limited only by the final authority of the Sultan. Other Malay states subsequently adopted a similar model, a process that John Funston claims helped to foster a close relationship between the state sultan and Islam from the early twentieth century onwards.⁹

Majlis Agama Tertinggi Sa-Malaya (MATA, the Pan Malayan Supreme Religious Council) was established in 1947 and was then followed one year later by *Hizbul Muslimin* (Muslims' Party). Their agenda was to obtain independence and create an Islamic State (*Dar-ul-Islam*). In 1951, *Persatuan Islam Sa-Tanah Melayu* (the Pan Malayan Islamic Organisation, later called *Parti Islam Se Malaysia* – PAS, The Islamic Party of Malaysia) was established and attracted the conservative members of the religious elite as well as members of the opposition. The party presented a more substantial challenge to UMNO following independence.

3. The Position of Islam in Malaysia

When UMNO obtained independence on 31st August, 1957 Islam did not play a prominent role in the governance of the state. The UMNO was established on the 10th May, 1946 at the Third Malay Congress in Johor Bahru. Datuk Onn Jaafar was the first leader of the party and he promoted nationalist policies that looked out for the interests of the Bumiputra along with religious freedom and tolerance. In 1954, a coalition was formed between UMNO and MCA (Malayan Chinese Association), which quickly expanded to include the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). The primary objective of the coalition was to gain independence and after its achievement, it played a vital role in forming the new nation-state government and drafting the constitution.

UMNO determined the constitutional role of Islam in post-independence Malaysia in conjunction with the non-Malay partners in the alliance. In 1955, a memorandum was submitted to the Reid Constitutional Commission, which was

⁹Funston, "Malaysia," 53.

the body responsible for preparing the constitution of an independent Malaysia. The constitution states that Islam is the religion of the state, although religious freedom for non-Muslims is assured without discrimination and Malaysia is not considered a 'secular' state. UMNO ensured that under Malaya's federal system, Islam remained a state rather than a national responsibility, making it one of the few areas of power left in the hands of the individual states.¹⁰

Since the 1950s, Islamic affairs have remained a state responsibility and the Malaysian system has been viewed as a shining example of moderate Islam. The state Islamic departments (*Jabatan Agama Islam*) were established to take responsibility for Islamic affairs and they involve supervising mosques and religious schools, maintaining Islamic law with moral police which enforces religious regulations related to fasting, praying, attire and the prohibition of non-*halal* products and deeds, collecting *zakat* and ensuring that only the authorised preach.

The Sultan is the head of Islamic affairs in all states but substantial power is also in the hands of the *mufti*, who issues definitive rulings (*fatwa*). In the early years of independence, the federal government had minimal involvement in Islamic affairs. In 1968, the Council of Rulers (*Sultāns*) created the *Majlis Kebangsaan Bagi Hal Ehwal Ugama Islam Malaysia* (Malaysian National Council for Islamic Affairs) with a secretariat in the Office of the Prime Minister. Later, an Islamic research centre and missionary *Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia* (YADIM, Islamic Preaching Foundation of Malaysia) was established in 1974. It underwent further expansion and in 1997 became the Malaysian Department of Islamic Development (*Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*, JAKIM).¹¹

Accordingly, the role of Islam in Malaysian state affairs has gradually intensified since its independence. The secular orientation of governance did not mean the diminution of religious and traditional influence in state affairs and the educational sphere. Intellectuals' commitment to secularism is commonly measured as an indicator of a society's approach towards modernity and industrial urbanisation. A survey on "The Religious Orientation of Intellectuals in Malaysia" conducted in 1977 showed that regarding religiosity, eighty-one percent of the Malaysian intellectual elite described themselves as at least "moderately religious". One-quarter of these (28/108) declared themselves "very religious". These results mean that only eighteen percent of intellectuals view themselves as

¹⁰Ibid., 54.

¹¹Ibid., 55.

secular.¹² A more recent survey conducted by the University of Malaya in 2006 revealed that Islam has become a defining element of the Malay identity and has penetrated all aspects of the Malay culture like food, dress and language. In a study of 1,000 Malaysians, over 70 percent viewed themselves as Muslims first, Malaysians second, and Malays third.¹³ However, despite the religious orientation of Malaysian intellectuals and the growing importance of religion in society, it has not restricted Malaysia from becoming a modernised and moderate society. Despite having a relatively small population (28.3 million according to Census 2010), today Malaysia is among the most important countries in the Muslim world. Furthermore, owing to rapid economic development and sustainable growth, Malaysia is the most successful of the ‘non-Confucian’ Asian tigers.

Islam in Malaysia is seen as moderate, enlightened, and rejecting extremism in any form. Islam has peacefully co-existed with the 40 percent of the non-Muslim population in Malaysia. Compared to other Muslim majority countries, women in Malaysia have high social status and participate actively in politics, business and academia. Literature published in the late 1970s and 1980s described Malaysia as a pluralistic country.¹⁴ Fred R. Von Der Mehden observed that “the very pluralism of the system has led to a society in which ethnicity and religion have become intimately entwined and in which social, policies, politics, and economics are heavily influenced by communal considerations.”¹⁵ However, in the decades following independence, Islam has become increasingly politicised in Malaysia.

4. The politicisation of Islam in Malaysia

The secular orientation of the Malaysian governance was shaken by the ethnicity and race based turbulence in the late 1960s. The government decided to reintroduce Islam as a political instrument to normalise the situation. Following the riots of May 1969, Malaysia emphasised Islam as a tool to build solidarity among Malays. As a result, racial stability and social harmony prevailed. ‘Malay’ began to signify ‘Muslim’, and vice versa. ‘Muslim’ means ‘Malay’ in modern Malay society. There is a high level of attachment between ethnic and religious identity.

¹²John Lent, *Cultural Pluralism in Malaysia: Polity, Military, Mass Media, Education, Religion and Social Class* (Special Report Number 14) (U.S.A.: Northern Illinois University, 1977), 46.

¹³C. Hong, “Malaysia: Increasing Religiosity in Malaysia Causes a Stir,” *SITNews*, September 5, 2006, <http://www.wluml.org/node/3196>

¹⁴Lent, *Cultural Pluralism*, vii.

¹⁵Von Der Mehden, “Malaysia: Islam and Multiethnic Politics,” 177.

UMNO was Malaysia's dominant party until 2018 and it laid the foundation of promoting the aspirations of Malay nationalism, the dignity of race, religion and country. The party also aspired "to protect the Malay culture as the national culture and to uphold, defend and expand Islam across Malaysia."¹⁶

Interestingly, UMNO's chief political opponents were mostly the Malay Muslim parties who similarly displayed religious credentials as the source of their legitimacy. UMNO struggled to maintain power by focusing on religious credentials; the role of religion became heavily politicised and was viewed by many as a zero-sum game.¹⁷ Since the victory of the *Pakatan Harapan* coalition in May 2018, Islam has become an even more contentious topic because UMNO and PAS have resorted to increasingly polarising racial and religious politics in an attempt to win back the support of Malays. The employment of more extreme tactics has resulted in negative consequences as the main political parties essentially try to 'out-Islam' each other. The effects of these tactics include the tightening of ethnic boundaries, particularly those separating Chinese and Malay, class antagonism within Malay society, and divisiveness in Muslim communities because of differing beliefs regarding what differentiates 'right' from 'wrong' for Muslims. The pluralistic nature of society was a reality in Malaysia until the early 2000s. Changes began to occur when the rule of Tun Mahathir bin Mohamad, who was the 4th Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981-2003), came to an end in 2003.

When the USA began the war in Afghanistan following the tragedy of 9/11 in 2001, there were large protests in Kuala Lumpur in front of the US embassy. Pundits and western press repeatedly referred to Malaysia as a 'staging area' or 'launch pad' for terrorist attacks against the United States. According to Peletz, despite the embassy demonstration and other external signs that may have suggested Islamic radicalisation in Malaysia post-September 11th, "most Muslims in Malaysia continue to be quite moderate and democratically oriented."¹⁸

A considerable blow was dealt to the moderately religious and ethnic character of Malaysia in 2008, when Malaysia's Home Ministry banned the Herald's use of the word 'Allah' in its Malay language editions, reasoning that the use of the

¹⁶"Perlembagaan," *Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu Atau UMNO*, October 18, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120229132114/http://umno-online.com>

¹⁷Joseph Liow, "Malaysia's ISIS Conundrum," *Brookings*, April 21, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/malaysias-isis-conundrum>

¹⁸M. Peletz, "Islam and the Cultural Politics of Legitimacy: Malaysia in the Aftermath of September 11," in *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization*, ed., Robert W. Hefner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 242.

Arabic word may offend some Muslims. In 2015, at the end of a long run legal battle, Malaysia's top court dismissed a final bid by the Catholic Church to use the word 'Allah' in its newspaper, highlighting the debate on non-Muslims using the word in a climate of rising religious tensions.¹⁹

Joseph C. Liow suggests that non-Muslims are marginalised in Malaysia as the dominant parties try to 'out-Islam' each other. According to him, "Islam casts a pale shadow over Malaysia not because it is Islam, or even Islamism, per se, but because its proponents (and 'defenders') are articulating a particular brand of Islam that is divorced from the religion's historically enlightened traditions"²⁰ and which does not encourage pluralism or compromise. Rather than extolling the virtues of Islam such as balance, moderation and justice, many Malay Muslim political leaders have instead chosen to use religion to amplify differences, "to reinforce extreme interpretations of Malay Muslim denizen rights, and to condemn the 'other' (non-Muslims) as a threat to these rights."²¹ Liow accordingly suggests that such a climate of religio-political discourse in Malaysia lends itself to the proliferation of extremist ideas.

5. The Growth of Extremism

Recent surveys indicate a rise in the level of extremist tendencies among Southeast Asian Muslims, including in Malaysia, although these tendencies are still at a comparatively low level.²² The survey conducted by USA based Pew Research Centre in November 2015 reveals that 11 percent Malaysian Muslims express a favourable view of ISIS, while only 4 percent of Indonesian Muslims expresses the same feelings.²³ The results of an earlier poll "Muslim Publics Share Concerns about Extremist Groups" conducted on 10 September, 2013 revealed that roughly a quarter of Muslims (27%) in Malaysia hold the view that attacks on civilians are sometimes or often justified. However, if this number is added to the 12 percent who take the view that suicide bombings and other types of violence are "rarely justified" to defend Islam, essentially 39 percent of the Malaysian Muslims surveyed believe that violence is justified against the enemies of Islam.

¹⁹Manirajan Ramasamy, Chong Pooi Koon and Andrea Tan, "Malaysia Catholics Can't Use Allah as Religious Strife Rise," *Bloomberg*, January 22, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com>

²⁰Joseph Liow, "Malaysia's ISIS Conundrum," *Brookings*.

²¹Ibid.

²²A. F. Abdul Hamid, "ISIS in Southeast Asia: Internalised Wahhabism is a Major Factor," *Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective* 24, 4-5. Retrieved May 16, 2016, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg>

²³Poushter, <http://www.pewresearch.org/facttank>

Significantly, Indonesians polled only 18 percent on the same question (1 per cent ‘often’, 5 per cent ‘sometimes’, and 12 per cent ‘rarely’).²⁴

Around 500 Indonesians and Malaysians, including children and women, supposedly joined the ranks of ISIS, even forming its Malay speaking arms known as ‘*Katibah Nusantara*’ and ‘*Katibah Masyaariq*.’ In November 2018, the counter-terrorism division reported that 102 Malaysians have gone to Syria since 2013; at least 11 of them returned to Malaysia, while 37 men were killed in Syria and Iraq. 54 Malaysians – 23 men, 11 women, 12 boys and 08 girls are still thought to be in Syria.²⁵

According to the report released by *Associated Press* on March 26, 2016, in the past two years Malaysian police arrested more than 160 people who were suspected of having ties to ISIS. In March 2016, Malaysian police detained 15 alleged members of ISIS suspected of trying to obtain bomb making ingredients in preparation for terrorist attacks. The suspects aged from 22 years to 49 years and included four women, a police official, an aeroplane technician, a mosque cleric and a student.²⁶ In July 2018, police in Malaysia arrested seven suspected ISIS militants, including one man who allegedly threatened to kill the King and Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad.²⁷

Since late 2015, *Dabiq*, the mouthpiece of ISIS, has repeatedly mentioned Southeast Asian countries, especially Malaysia and Indonesia, as targets for potential terrorist attacks. The magazine states that *Hijrah* (emigration) to ISIS controlled territories is not necessary if the circumstances do not permit it and the text suggests “targeting Rāfidī communities in Dearborn (Michigan), Los Angeles, and New York City? Or targeting Panamanian diplomatic missions in Jakarta,

²⁴“Muslim Publics Share Concerns about Extremist Groups Much Diminished Support for Suicide Bombing Survey: Report,” *Pew Research Centre*, 2013, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2013/09/10/muslim-publics-share-concerns-about-extremist-groups>

²⁵Alief Esmail, “At Least 100 Malaysians Found Interested in Joining False Jihād with ISIS,” (2018, November 25). Retrieved December 26, 2018, from World of Buzz. Web site: <https://www.worldofbuzz.com/at-least-100-malaysians-found-interested-in-joining-false-jihad-with-isis>

²⁶Sani, “ISIS Recruitment of Malaysian Youth: Challenge and Response,” *Middle East Institute*, May 3, 2016, <http://www.mei.edu>

²⁷Hazlin Hassan, “Three Indonesians and four Malaysians Nabbed in a Week, Including a Man who Threatened to Kill King and Mahathir,” *Straits Times*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-police-arrest-seven-suspected-isis-militants>

Doha, and Dubai? Or targeting Japanese diplomatic missions in Bosnia, Malaysia, and Indonesia?”²⁸

According to a report in *The New Straits Times* in May 2016, Zainuri Kamaruddin, who was a former KMM leader renowned for his role in several attempted murders and armed robberies, announced that ISIS planned to ‘lead a charge’ against Malaysia. It is believed that he led the Malay speaking ISIS arm ‘*Katibah Nusantara*’ until his death in January 2017. Zainuri stated in an ISIS propaganda video that he and his men were a part of a ‘righteous army’ and also said that the Malay archipelago would someday be swarming with an army of ISIS fighters, who would bring the fight home, particularly to Malaysia and Indonesia. In the video, Zainuri said that ISIS had declared Malaysia and its people as ‘taghut’ (‘sinners’ or those against the teachings of Allah) and declared that they must be fought.²⁹

As a methodology to attract youth, violence is deliberately employed by ISIS and sensationalised worldwide as a ‘trauma weaponising’ exercise. Emotional trauma is intentionally inflicted to not only infuse fear, anger and hopelessness among populations under its control by ISIS but also to spread impressions of invincibility among the viewing public. Such tactics have been instrumental, as Abdul Hamid suggests, in attracting large numbers of Muslim youths, including those from Southeast Asia, to embark on a lifetime journey of *Hijrah* (emigration) to ISIS administered areas in the Middle East.³⁰ Most are radicalised by propaganda through social media before travelling to the Middle East via contacts made on Facebook, Skype or YouTube.³¹

It is a gloomy scenario when the youth (not necessarily uneducated) respond to radical calls. Thirty-nine percent of Malaysian Muslims believe that violence can be justified against the enemies of Islam and there is ISIS propaganda that promotes terrorist attacks against ‘sinning’ Malaysia. Both of these issues require serious consideration by the government to understand why young people in Malaysia are responding to radicalism and what can be done to prevent it.

²⁸“ISIS in Southeast Asia: A Brief Overview,” *Middle East Institute*, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/isis-southeast-asia-internalized-wahhabism-major-factor>

²⁹Farrah Karim, and Aliza Shah, “Cops Monitoring ‘Righteous Army,’” *New Straits Times*, May 18, 2018, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/05/146284/cops-monitoring-righteous-army-video>

³⁰Abdul Hamid, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg>

³¹Sani, <http://www.mei.edu>

6. Causes of Extremism

Since the 1970s, there has been a shift among Southeast Asian Muslims towards a more radical religious stance caused by the spread of the Wahhabi brand of conservative Salafism in the region. One of the main problems of *Wahhabism* is that public order and stability is related to its *takfiri* ideology and is the outcome of an exclusivist understanding of Islamic monotheism (*tawhid*). This has led widespread bloodshed in many countries against those deemed to have fallen outside of the scope of the Islamic faith. *Wahhabism* promotes a dichotomous worldview of two different sides – Islam and *kufr* (infidelity), the war between them is inevitable until the correct order is established. Khaled Abou El Fadl believes that Islam becomes essentialised as Islamism – a supremacist and ethnocentric dogma that instrumentalises coercion and violence as its most potent weapons.³²

Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid (2016) highlights that

“The problem lies with Islamism rather than Islam per se. Islamists or adherents of Islamism have ideologically politicised Islam such that matters of faith, spirit and morality – cardinal elements of a religion, are overwhelmed by politico-legal considerations to accomplish the ostensibly noble task of erecting an Islamic state (*Dawlah Islamiyyah*). Driven by the belief that Islam provides comprehensive solutions to all problems of life once its systems are implemented, a political Islamist invariably regards a sharia based juridical state on earth as the be-all and end-all of the Islamic struggle.³³”

Joseph Liow and James Chin indicate that the role of the Malaysian state in politicising Islam in narrowly essentialist terms, in contrast with Islam’s grand and pluralistic intellectual tradition, creates a milieu for the acceptance of the extremist interpretations of Islam by the general public. Chin also stresses that the ethnocentric Islamic discourse in Malaysia is obsessed with the idea of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) and is now being branded as *Ketuanan Islam* (Islamic supremacy) aimed at creating a Malay Islamic state. This idea of superiority is the prime source of the radicalisation of Malaysian Islam and threatens Malaysia’s character as a democratic nation-state.³⁴

Wahhabism has also resulted in the ‘Arabisation’ of the Malay society. Cultural assimilation is normal all over the world and the Malays have imported

³²El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from The Extremists* (New York: Harper One, 2005), 198-199; and 206-249.

³³Abdul Hamid, “ISIS in Southeast Asia,” 7.

³⁴See, Abdul Hamid, 5-6.

many cultural and religious elements from the Arabs throughout Islamic history. But the term ‘*Arabisation*’ in this particular context defines the rapid spread of religious conservatism within the Malay community that was once renowned for its progressive understanding of Islamic teachings. The inferiority complex of Malaysian Muslims explains the recent wave of the phenomenon of ‘*Arabization*.’ Syed Farid al-Attas observes that the Malays often feel very low about themselves. They consider the Arabs more authentic Muslims than themselves and accordingly imitate them in every aspect.³⁵ The dilemmas of self-loathing and insecurity are deep rooted in the hearts of the modern Malays and may constitute one of the reasons they are receptive to ISIS propaganda. Due to religious ignorance, they are prone to blindly follow even the most extreme ideas that originate with the Arabs and respect them as authentic Islamic teaching.

Religious credentials have long been used by the dominant political parties, mostly UMNO and PAS, as a source of legitimacy. Hence, Islam has become an essential instrument in the political sphere to secure more of the electorate and increase public support. This political setting creates a perfect milieu to exploit religious credentials at the lower levels of society and government and to create a positive public impression.

The recent radicalisation of some segments of the Muslim population of Malaysia can also be interpreted in a broader context as the reaction to the difficulties occurring in the Muslim world. The Arab Spring, in which people fought for genuine democracy and proper governance, has today morphed into a hotbed of extremism and violence across swathes of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). These upheavals were caused by the persistent neglect of citizens’ rights by their respective governments.

During the process of de-colonisation, imperial powers left their former colonies in the hands of local marionette governments, which due to their political spinelessness and vanity depended persistently on the will of their former masters. The current Muslim world is shaped by the ills and misdeeds of the past and continues to be influenced by foreign powers. The public in most of the MENA states suffer under autocratic rulers who fail to respond to the needs of their people or create public trust, appreciation and sincerity between the political elite and the general public. For decades the region was exploited by those who were eager to control resources and wealth and showed little or no concern for their citizens’ welfare. There has been limited opportunity available to amend the unfair systems

³⁵See, S. J. Zahiid, “Forum Explores Creeping ‘*Arabisation*’ among Malays,” *Malaymail Online*, May 24, 2016, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com>

through peaceful Islamic teachings like consultation, participatory system of rule through fair elections, government accountability, and advocacy of people's rights.

The import of modern electoral processes and western type democratic mechanisms of decision making in the Muslim world has also created problems. Most despotic rulers in the Middle East claim to have been democratically elected. However, these elections are not transparent and are usually manipulated by former colonial or western powers.

People in the Muslim world are exhausted from the perpetual cycle of despotism, economic and political exploitations, widespread corruption and poverty. The Arab Spring was many people's hope for a positive change. Sadly, instead of bringing good, it caused more calamity, bloodshed, and social ills. The emergence of ISIS at the tail end of the Arab Spring confirmed that the import of western democracy to the Muslim world is not a cure for the deeply rooted socio-political problems of the region. Such a depressing scenario makes Muslims around the globe devastated and angry, often driving them to search for someone to blame for the failures.

The US as well as the Russian drone attacks against the militant groups also provoke anger and despair in the hearts of the victimised civilians, relatives, friends, and Muslims across the world. Many Muslims have become disillusioned with the consequences of the US led 'War on Terror' and Islamophobia in western countries and the media has also escalated this war since the September 11 attacks. These factors greatly contribute to the divisions felt in the Muslim world regarding 'us' and 'them'. As a result, Muslims, including those in Malaysia, become compassionate and caring about the problems of their fellow Muslims living in other parts of the world.

Religious identity and the feeling of belonging to one united *ummah* (religious community), bar a few rare exceptions, was not reconciled with purely secular national and ethnic identities. The recent division of the world between 'us' and 'them' is an outcome of the US led 'War on Terror' and it has strengthened the loyalty of Muslims to the world Muslim community, who often feel victimised and denigrated. The phenomenon of radicalisation of Malaysian Muslims should be evaluated within the framework of the current geopolitics and well-being of the Muslim world, rather than localising this issue into regional and national faults.

7. Conclusion

After the evaluation of the role of Islam in Malaysian society and politics, this article proposes several concluding remarks. Firstly, the analysis of the relation

between the state and Islam shows that the decline in the role of Islam in national affairs in favour of western style secularism has stagnated in the case of Malaysia. Islam has become progressively important not only in the lives of Muslims but also in political, legal, social and economic spheres. Today, Malaysia is the hub of *halal* manufacturing as well as Islamic banking and insurance industry. The role of Islam in Malaysian society has gradually evolved from being individual to collective, from *masjid* to market, from the pulpit to media, and from spiritual identity to national identity.

Secondly, the revival of Islam in the Malaysian politics and society has not resulted in massive radicalisation of the Malay Muslim population. On the whole, the country remained relatively plural and moderate until the 9/11 attacks and the US led 'war on terror'. The rise of extremism is not necessarily an indication of the lack of secularism. Balance, pluralism and peaceful co-existence remained the norms in Malaysian society for decades and the increasing role of Islam in state affairs helps to uphold a positive relations between Islam and politics. Therefore, the article strongly stresses the necessity to step beyond the existing negative stereotypes and headlines regarding the topic of Islam and politics.

Thirdly, extremism based on racial, ethnic or religious reasons is a serious concern in Malaysia that needs to be addressed urgently to maintain the well-being and security of Malaysian citizens. The radicalisation of some segments of the Malay society is due to the spread of foreign ideas and cultural traits at societal and state level. In the recent decades, the spread of Wahhabism and Salafism has altered the face of Islam in the region. Countering them is a challenge because some influential Muslim personalities and elements within Muslim majority states have themselves embraced aspects of Wahhabism.

Furthermore, the paper stresses a direct link between the problems in the Muslim world and the radicalisation of Muslims, especially young Malaysians. Widespread injustices, corruption, poverty, and government incompetence to guarantee the welfare and rights of their citizens, all generate feelings of hopelessness and anger in the hearts of many Muslims. The high number of civilian casualties due to foreign military interventions in the Middle East and Islamophobic attacks on Muslims significantly contribute to the process of radicalisation and violence.

Therefore, the paper highlights the necessity of good governance and respect for human rights and dignity as the main solution for eliminating extremism and radicalisation. The phenomenon of rising Islamic extremism in Malaysia, although it is a non-violent extremism, is a cause of concern for the future of intra-Muslim

and interfaith relations in the region. These developments have the potential to destabilise Malaysia's traditional religio-cultural pluralism; therefore, the Malaysian government should take prudent steps to address and manage the situation.

Acknowledgement

This paper was prepared with the support of the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) from Ministry of Education, Malaysia entitled "A Framework of Good Governance in Regulating Religious Extremism to Improve National Security in Malaysia" (ID: FRGS/1/2017/SSI10/UIAM/03/2).

Bibliography

- Abdul Hamid, A. F. "ISIS in Southeast Asia: Internalised Wahhabism is a Major Factor." *Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective*, 24. 2016, May 16. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg>
- Anwar, Z. "Government and Governance in Multi-Racial Malaysia." In *The Changing Shape of Government in the Asia-Pacific Region*. Edited by J. W. Langford and K. L. Brownsey, 101-124. Canada: The Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1988.
- Bouton, Marshall M. "Preface." *Islam in Asia: Religion, Politics, and Society*. Edited by Esposito, v-vi., New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Department of Statistics Malaysia. *Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010*. Retrieved May 18, 2018. <https://www.statistics.gov.my>
- Hassan, Hazlin. *Three Indonesians and Four Malaysians Nabbed in a Week, including a Man who Threatened to Kill King and Mahathir*. 2018. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-police-arrest-seven-suspected-isis-militants>
- Hong, C. "Malaysia: Increasing Religiosity in Malaysia Causes a Stir." *SITNew*, 2016. <http://www.wluml.org/node/3196>
- El Fadl, K. A. *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*. New York: Harper One, 2005.
- Esmail, Alief. *At Least 100 Malaysians Found Interested in Joining False Jihad With ISIS*. 2018. <https://www.worldofbuzz.com/at-least-100-malaysians-found-interested-in-joining-false-jihad-with-isis>

- Esposito, J. (Ed.). *Islam in Asia: Religion, Politics, and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Functon, J. "Malaysia." In *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia: A Contemporary Sourcebook* (Eds.), Greg Fealy and Virginia Hooker., 51-62. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006.
- Karim, Farrah Naz, and Shah, Aliza. "Cops Monitoring 'Righteous Army.'" *New Straits Times*, May 18 2018. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/05/146284/cops-monitoring-righteous-army-video>
- Lent, John A. *Cultural Pluralism in Malaysia: Polity, Military, Mass Media, Education, Religion and Social Class* (Special Report Number 14). USA: Northern Illinois University, 1977.
- Liow, J. C. *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Liow, J. C. *Malaysia's ISIS Conundrum*. 2015. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/malaysias-isis-conundrum>
- Malik, Maszlee., and Mat, Hamidah. "The Historical Development of the "Sunnah" Reform Ideology in the State of Perlis, Malaysia." *Sage Open*, 2017.
- Mehden, F. R. Von Der. *Malaysia: Islam and Multi-ethnic Politics Islam in Asia: Religion, Politics, and Society*. Edited by John Esposito, 177-201. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Mutalib, H. *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- . "Islamic State Declares War on Malaysia." *FMT Reporters*, May 18, 2016 <https://www.freemalysiatoday.com/category/nation/2016/05/18/is-declares-war-on-malaysia/Peletz>
- M. G. *Islam and the Cultural Politics of Legitimacy: Malaysia in the Aftermath of September 11*. Edited by Robert W. Hefner, *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization*, 240-272. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- . "Perlembagaan." *Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersaty Atau UMNO*. 2010. <https://web.archive.org/web/20120229132114/http://umno-online.com>
- Pew Research Centre. *Muslim Publics Share Concerns about Extremist Groups: Much Diminished Support for Suicide Bombing*. Survey Report. 2013.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2013/09/10/muslim-publics-share-concerns-about-extremist-groups/>

Poushter, J. “In Nations with Significant Muslim Populations, Much Disdain for ISIS.” *Pew Research Centre*. 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/in-nations-with-significant-muslim-populations-much-disdain-for-isis/>

Ramasamy, Manirajan., Chong Pooi Koon, and Andrea Tan. “Malaysia Catholics Can’t Use Allah as Religious Strife Rises.” *Bloomberg*. 2015. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-01-21/malaysia-s-top-court-bans-catholic-use-of-allah-in-newspaper>

Sani, M. A. “ISIS Recruitment of Malaysian Youth: Challenge and Response.” *Middle East Institute*. 2016. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/isis-recruitment-malaysian-youth-challenge-and-response>

Teoh, Shannon. “Merdeka Center poll found Muslims in the Philippines More Open to Violence than those in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia.” *The Straits Times*. 2018. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/s-e-asia-survey-sheds-light-on-attitude-towards-extremism>

Zahiid, S. J. “Forum Explores Creeping ‘Arabisation’ among Malays.” *Malaymail Online*. 2016. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2016/05/24/forum-explores-creeping-arabisation-among-malays/1126197>