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## **Progressive Islam: A Tussle of 2 Visions**

By Terence Chong

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SINCE Islam Hadhari's highly publicised emergence in the run-up to Malaysia's elections last year, politicians have stretched its definition and meanings with admirable elasticity.

Yet one recurrent theme in its various presentations is the idea of progressiveness. This, of course, begs the question - progressive for whom?

If progressive Islam is the attempt to reconcile contemporary socio-cultural norms with religious doctrines for the perceived betterment of society, then this synthesis is not new to the Malaysian political landscape.

Different parties and organisations with different visions of a 'better' society have, at different times, endeavoured to fuse contemporary social and political concerns with Islam.

Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), for example, began life in 1951 by championing democracy and a post-colonial state founded on the teachings of Islam.

The Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (Abim), established in 1971, used Islam to articulate contemporary social issues such as rural poverty, uneven wealth distribution and government corruption.

Later in the 1990s, former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad took every opportunity to reconcile Islam with modernisation and economic development.

These different deployments of Islam have one thing in common - they have sought to co-opt the idea of progressiveness for moral and political legitimacy.

Islam Hadhari is no different.

Its 10 principles, articulated by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi at this year's Umno General Assembly, reveal typically broad nation-building values needed to, on one hand, generate a sense of inclusiveness and yet, on the other, remain elusive enough for the government to go about the business of governing unfettered by ideological constraints.

As a government-endorsed Islam that advances the state's definition of progress, it is no surprise that Islam Hadhari continues to accentuate the need for economic development in order to meet global challenges.

It exhorts dedication to one's chosen profession, emphasises the responsibilities of citizenship and extols the virtues of multiculturalism and ethnic harmony - all of which go a long way in making the state's task of governance easier.

Islam Hadhari, meanwhile, has little to say about the empowerment of civil society, liberal democracy, freedom of speech and human rights since potentially disruptive issues are rarely deemed progressive by Asian states.

PAS, on the other hand, in taking advantage of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim's imprisonment and the Reformasi movement in the run-up to the 1999 general elections, made uncharacteristic calls for human rights, thus demonstrating the way in which political interests influence notions of progressiveness.

Receiving less attention is Datuk Seri Anwar's Islam Madani (modern). Islam Madani, as described in Datuk Seri Anwar's *The Asian Renaissance*, is a more humanist and individual-centred interpretation of Islam.

According to Datuk Seri Anwar, 'South-east Asian Muslims are neither compromising the teachings and ideals of Islam nor pandering to the whims and fancies of the times. On the contrary, such an approach is necessary to realise the societal ideals of Islam such as justice, equitable distribution of wealth, fundamental rights and liberties'.

Islam Madani draws its intellectual impetus from the humanist post-classical Muslim scholar Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), who formulated his notion of khudi (or self) by drawing from Western philosophers like Nietzsche and Islamic teachings to empower the Muslim individual. Here, self-discovery, intellectual empowerment and personal liberties are integral to notions of progress.

This individual-centred brand of Islam was articulated as early as 1996 but it took a backseat to Tun Dr Mahathir's economically oriented Islam, content to remain dormant if only because its most articulate advocate was installed in the upper echelons of power.

But with Datuk Seri Anwar's sacking and re-emergence in the public sphere, Islam Madani may soon find a role in civil society.

The fundamental difference between Islam Hadhari and Islam Madani echoes the age-old debate between societal and individual progress as well as the decisions a society should make if they come into conflict.

Both these interpretations of Islam will compete for the mantle of 'progressiveness' in a Muslim country that seeks to be a model for the Muslim world.

The sites of conflict will include issues such as the legitimacy of the Internal Security Act. Anti-ISA campaigners, in seeking religious imprimatur, may rally under Islam Madani to champion freedom of speech and human rights.

How the government engages with civil society activists and anti-government initiatives will reveal the character of Islam Hadhari's progressiveness.

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