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“Malay Capitalists: Ambassadors for Moderate Islam”,

**By Terence Chong**

*The Straits Times*, 27 September 2004

In his speech at the 55<sup>th</sup> Umno general assembly, Prime Minister Badawi spoke of Islam Hadhari and the need for a globally competitive Malay community. He announced that “Islam Hadhari is complete and comprehensive, with an emphasis on the development of the economy and civilisation, capable of building Malay competitiveness”.

Islam Hadhari was a winning ticket for Umno during the 2004 general elections even though the concept was used back in 2001 when Mahathir proclaimed Malaysia an ‘Islamic state’. As a campaign tool, it countered PAS’s brand of Islam as well as its calls for an Islamic state. Since then Islam Hadhari has been interpreted as ‘progressive Islam’, ‘Islamic governance’ and ‘Islamic civilisation’. According to Dr Abdullah Md Zin, Minister of Religious Affairs, Islam Hadhari is “*wasatiyah* or a balanced approach to life”.

With the general elections over and PAS stunned into temporary retreat, Islam Hadhari now has a new purpose – to strengthen the cultural identity of the modern Malaysian Malay capitalist class as it takes its place in the global economy. The Malaysian Malay identity is generally accepted to consist of three pillars - language, royalty and religion. Of the three, religion continues to be the definitive feature of the Malay capitalist identity, accentuated perhaps by the waning importance of the former two.

The Malay capitalist class for example are bilingual, comfortable with both Malay and English. Indeed, it is their fluency and effectiveness in English, the language of international business and finance, that distinguishes them from other sections of the Malay population. And while the Malay language remains important to cosmopolitan Malays, their global-orientation makes it only part of their wider repertoire of cultural skills. Royalty is also less of a defining feature for the Malay capitalist class. Capitalist regimes, practices and rewards, for example, are far more relevant to the modern Malay capitalist than the monarchy even though its symbolism remains respected. Furthermore, Mahathir's amendment of the constitution has curtailed the Sultan's powers, thus further eroding the Malaysian monarchy's presence in the political sphere.

This leaves the interpretation of Islam as the key issue for the Malay capitalist class as it seeks to globalise its ambitions and interests. Will Malaysia's brand of Islam accommodate, even encourage, business, trade and scientific enquiry? Or will its *raison d'être* be narrowly confined to the implementation of *syariah* laws and *hudud* bills? Islam Hadhari then is nothing less than a means for the Malay capitalist class to serve, unfettered by domestic religious squabbles, as an engine for national modernisation.

No doubt Umno realises the stakes of the game. There are already plans to institutionalise Islam Hadhari. There will be courses conducted by the Syariah Judicial department to introduce Islam Hadhari to its officers. The institutionalisation of Islam by Umno is not new. It is part of the on-going battle between Umno and PAS to secure the Malay middle class vote; a battle that saw Umno's co-option of Anwar Ibrahim in 1982 from ABIM (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement). ABIM was until then a trenchant critic of Umno's Islamic credentials.

It is also clear that Prime Minister Badawi sees the Malay capitalist class as global ambassadors for a 'moderate' Islam. The post-September 11 world has put Islamic societies under a harsh and unforgiving microscope. Malaysia's international position as a moderate and progressive Muslim society demands that it be seen to balance Islamic

principles with a 'Western' modernity. This balancing act has now the responsibility of the Malay capitalist class.

*The writer is a Fellow at the Institute of South-east Asian Studies*