

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 5 July 2016

Exclusivist Attitudes in Malaysian Islam Have Multifarious Roots

*Norshahril Saat*¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Islam in Malaysia is currently seen to be driven by two separate trends. First, there is increasing concern that Malaysian Islam is becoming “Arabised” (showing an inclination towards Middle Eastern culture, values, and most importantly, puritan ideas stemming from Wahhabism/Salafism). Second, there is growing disquiet about the exclusivist behaviour of the religious elite, especially the muftis (state-appointed religious scholars).
- Be that as it may, the Middle Eastern impact on the religious elite is very varied, and the perceived Arabisation of Malaysian Islam and its assumed role in promoting conservatism and exclusivism, is generally a multifaceted matter.
- Religious conservatism and exclusivism do not emerge from influences coming from the Middle East alone, but also from an orientation within Malaysia’s feudalistic political culture, which continues to be promoted by Malay Rulers and the dominant party, UMNO. The Islamic resurgence that has since the 1970s been championing an Islamic alternative to the existing political, social and economic order, also had a profound impact.
- The nexus between Wahhabism/Salafism, puritan ideology, and exclusivism is a complex one, and case studies of Malaysian muftis suggest that there in fact exists on this issue differing and competing modes of thought. This contest is widely found among the general population of Malaysian Muslims as well.

¹ Dr Norshahril Saat is Fellow at the Regional Strategic and Political Studies programme, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. This paper was originally presented at the Islamic Developments in Southeast Asia Workshop, organised by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute on 16 November 2015.

INTRODUCTION

Recent writings on Malaysia's religious elite—an assemblage that includes the *muftis* (state-appointed persons with religious authority), *ulama* (religious scholar) and religious bureaucrats—show that the group as a whole is becoming more conservative, authoritarian and exclusive.² It should be noted though, that the behaviour of the elite is necessarily a reflection of how the masses practice Islam.

Academics and activists have posited that members of this elite are influenced by the puritan version of “Middle East” Islam, namely Wahhabism/Salafism. For example, Marina Mahathir, a human rights activist, opined that Malaysia is undergoing an Arabisation of Islam because the way the Malays dress, behave, and think no longer reflect Malay identity.³ She claims that Malay women under the age of 50 no longer know how to tie the *baju kurung* (Malay costume), for example. Similarly, Norani, Zainah and Zaitun describe this trend as an “importation of fundamentalist ideology” which is displacing indigenous identity with that of the Arabs.⁴ Alatas also argues that extremist ideas (he refers to Salafism) from the Middle East have influenced the *ulama*'s thinking and behaviour.⁵ At a forum, he stated that the Malays show a lack of self-confidence in believing that they become more authentic Muslims through copying Arabs.⁶ The Sultan of Johore, Ibrahim Iskandar, also joined in to criticise the Malays for imitating the Arabs. He declared, “If there are some of you who wish to be an Arab and practise Arab culture, and do not wish to follow our Malay customs and traditions, that is up to you. I also welcome you to live in Saudi Arabia.”⁷

To be sure, the behaviour of the religious elite, including the *muftis*, contradicts the way Malaysian Prime Ministers Abdullah Badawi (2003-2009) and Najib Razak (2009-present) had sought to portray the country's practice of Islam: that Malaysia practices *Islam Hadhari* (progressive and civilisation Islam) and *Islam Wasatiyyah* (moderate Islam). And recent controversies involving the religious elite, such as book bans, the persecution of religious

² Farish A Noor, *From Majapahit to Putrajaya: Searching for another Malaysia*. (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2005); Norani, Zainah, & Zaitun, “Malaysia: Islamization, Muslim politics and State Authoritarianism,” in N. Othman (Ed.), *Muslim Women and the challenges of Islamic extremism* (pp. 78-108), (Kuala Lumpur: Sisters in Islam, 2005)

³ Boo Su-Lyn, “Marina Mahathir: Malaysia undergoing ‘Arab colonialism’ 23 May 2015 <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/marina-mahathir-malaysia-undergoing-arab-colonialism> (Date accessed: 9 November 2015)

⁴ Norani et al, p.89

⁵ Syed Farid Alatas, “Battle Against Extremism Within Islam.” *The Straits Times*. 5 April 2014.

⁶ Syed Jaymal Zahiid, “Forum explores creeping ‘Arabisation’ among Malays,” Malaymail Online, 24 May 2016, <http://m.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/forum-explores-creeping-arabisation-among-malays> (Date Accessed: 25 May 2016)

⁷ Today, “Stop aping Arabs, Johore Sultan tells Malays,” 24 March 2016. <http://m.todayonline.com/world/asia/stop-aping-arabs-johor-sultan-tells-malays> (Date Accessed: 25 May 2016)

minorities (such as the Shias), and the prevention of non-Muslims from using the word ‘Allah’ for ‘God’, do not help Malaysia maintain an image of Muslim moderation. In the same vein, political observer Farish Noor compares contemporary Malaysian religious officials as “religio-fascists” for raiding night-clubs.

This paper agrees that Malaysian Muslims are indeed becoming more conservative and that the behaviour of their religious elite has contributed to it. Also, it posits that Middle Eastern influence, particularly Wahhabism/Salafism, on elite and societal behaviour cannot be ignored. The general traits of Wahhabism/Salafism, long associated with Saudi Arabia, include the banning of veneration of saints; visitations of graves of saints, and celebrating the Prophet’s birthday—all of which are commonly practised in Malay society. However, it is also argued here that the influence of Middle Eastern Islam on Malaysia is a multifaceted one. While there is an increasing number among the religious elite who reflect elements of Wahhabism/Salafism, there are also many (such as Muslim Brotherhood sympathisers) who are influenced by revivalist ideas that have been popular since the 1970s, and by Sufism (interpreted as mysticism or as a devotional/spiritual orientation). These variants interact with local beliefs and Islamic orientations, reflecting the heterogeneity of the religious elite as a social group.

On the one hand, one can blame the Middle East for the elite’s conservatism: they continue to receive their training in its universities; and there is greater promotion of Wahhabism/Salafism by the Saudi Arabian government funded by petro-dollars. Globalisation has also allowed greater exchange of ideas between the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Yet, it would be a mistake to discount the role of the dominant Malay party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Malay rulers who with their continuing patronage over the ulama, in shaping the latter’s political and religious behaviour. The dynamics of this do not reflect a significant break from feudal thinking. For example, there is still a deep fear of authority in general, a strong emphasis on rituals and mysticism, and little regard for universal Islamic values such as equality.⁸ Thus, crediting the Middle East alone for the country’s conservative bent ignores the historical, institutional, and political conditions under which the ulama functions.

Highlighting the religious and political behaviour of some muftis (chief ulama of the Malaysian states)—such as Harussani Zakaria (Perak state); Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin (Perlis state); and Yusof Ahmad (Negeri Sembilan state)—entertains several interesting combinations of thought. Although the three muftis as case studies may not represent Malaysian society at large, they are enough to demonstrate the complex nature of Malaysian Islam. One interesting finding from this comparison is that not all so-called Wahhabis/Salafis are extreme in thought, even though they may exhibit that tendency in aspects of rituals and in jurisprudence.

⁸ Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas of Development: From Feudal Lord to Capitalist* (Singapore: Times Book International, 1988)

Conversely, followers of competing ideologies to Wahhabism/Salafism are also clearly guilty of extremism. In general, Malaysian muftis are exclusivist in their religious discourse, and adopt an unquestioning and literal stance towards religious texts, and this is a lasting by-product of the Islamic resurgence movement of the 1970s.⁹

SOCIO-HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF EXCLUSIVISM

To understand the modes of religious thinking of Malaysian Malays, one has to understand the behaviour of the country's religious elite, and the socio-historical factors that conditioned their styles of thinking. Islam was introduced into Southeast Asian societies that were largely feudal. As depicted in the Malay Annals or *Sejarah Melayu*, the religious life of Malay feudal society was coloured by magic and fear of authority, and the Malay ruling elite was not especially concerned about principles such as social justice, equality, and education for the masses. Colonialism did introduce modern sciences to the Malay world and yet reforms in the religious educational institutions were not forthcoming. The religious schools continued to teach feudal romances and myths rather than the hard sciences, and the few that promoted change were closed for lack of community support.

In the 1970s, the Malays experienced an Islamic resurgence. The movement, though made up of many different competing groups, had a common goal—to introduce an alternative Islamic way of life which was all-encompassing. This meant introducing Islamic finance, Islamic banks, Islamic state, Islamic dressing, Islamic development and many more. This attitude had impact at a deep level, for example in perpetuating an “Us versus Them” attitude between Muslims and non-Muslims. The movement also believed that all modern problems could be resolved through reference to the Quran and Sunnah. While all Muslims believe that their religion is a spiritual guide, the resurgence movement sought an Islamic order that was fixed and immutable. In their writings, leaders of the resurgence for example portrayed the West as a monolithic civilisation in decline. Interestingly, these are not the people heading the key Islamic institutions in Malaysia today.

THE HETEROGENEITY OF THE WAHHABISM/SALAFISM

As mentioned above, academics have been warning against the rise of Wahhabism/Salafism among the Malay masses. However, such blanket blame being placed on Wahhabism/Salafism in explaining exclusivist attitudes among members of the Malay elite should be cautioned against, and for two good reasons: first, there are instances of members of the elite who are attracted to Wahhabism/Salafism but who at the same time demonstrate

⁹ Norshahril Saat, “Deviant” Muslims the Plight of Shias in Contemporary Malaysia.” In *Religious Diversity in Muslim-majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict* 506 (Singapore: ISEAS, 2014), pp 359-378.

clear respect for a diversity of views; and second, they can also be victims of exclusivism practised by competing groups.

One case worthy of study is Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin (known as Maza by his followers), who was appointed Perlis mufti in 2006. He left the post after two years in office, but in 2015, was reappointed to the position. He is popular among the young and is very visible on social media, runs a blog, *Tajdid Minda*, and has published many books on Islam.

In general, Mohd Asri's critiques claim that his views conform to Wahhabism/Salafism, even though he is uncomfortable with the label. However, during his first stint as Perlis mufti, he published books that reflected Wahhabi/Salafi concerns: that were anti-*mazhab* (a school of jurisprudence); that were critical of *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet) fabrications; and that condemned Sufi practices. He considered these phenomena not to be in line with "pure" Islam, and urged Muslims to return to Islam's true teachings. The sources he cited were also often those referred to by those conforming to the Wahhabi/Salafi school of thought, such as Ibnu Taimiyah (b.1263-d.1328) and Ibnu Qayyim al Jauziyah (b.1292-d.1350).

Mohd Asri continues to write books, and deliver sermons condemning Shiism. His anti-Shia sermons are also widely circulated in social media, particularly on YouTube. He continues to hold this position against Shiism even though several prominent Malaysian leaders have signed the Aman Declaration, which upholds both Shiism and Sunnism as mainstream Islam.

The following is a list of some of his books expressing the themes mentioned above, all published by Karya Bestari:

Title	Year
<i>Menilai Tarikat dan Kesufian dengan Syariat Allah</i>	2004
<i>Bida'ah Hasanah: Istilah yang disalah fahami</i>	2005
<i>Arus Tajdid: Fikrah Merentasi Jemaah</i>	2007
<i>Hadith Palsu: Kesan Terhadap Imej Islam</i>	2007
<i>Fanatik Mazhab: Kesan kepada pemikiran umat</i>	2007

While Mohd Asri may be conservative on many aspects of religious rituals, he is receptive of alternative opinions. Some of his views on women's rights, religious freedom, and religious worship are largely recognized to be progressive. This debunks the view some scholars have of a direct correlation between Wahhabism, violence and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). He also urges Malaysian Muslims not to accept the Shafie School as the only source of law, but to be more receptive of other schools of jurisprudence. This position departs from the one advocated by the ulama in the Nusantara region, which largely adopts the Shafie School of jurisprudence.

Many in the National Fatwa Committee (JKF-MKI) do not agree with his thinking on many issues, and Mohd Asri admits that he had often had unpleasant encounters with members of the ulama. He recounted how seniority matters in JKF-MKI meetings, which to an extent marginalises young muftis such as him:

In the JKF-MKI, there is no equality. In the meetings, they are not happy with my ideas, even though they are based on sound religious arguments... Some of my evidences and arguments are ignored because the members argue on the basis of seniority of the muftis.¹⁰

Disagreements between Mohd Asri and other muftis have often been played out publicly. Muftis and religious bureaucrats in other states have attempted to prevent Mohd Asri from speaking in their states, and in 2009, he was detained by religious officials for preaching in Selangor without permission and without proper accreditation from the religious authorities there. This was despite him being a mufti himself.

The case of Mohd Asri demonstrates two points. First, one can be labelled a Salafi/Wahhabi in outlook, particularly on matters concerning faith and rituals, without undergoing religious training in Saudi Arabia, the country known to uphold that ideology most prominently. Second, a Wahhabi/Salafi can be progressive on many issues not concerning religious rituals, even more so than the traditionalists and Sufis (to be discussed shortly). Mohd Asri received most of his religious training in Malaysia despite being labelled a Salafi/Wahhabi. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Arabic from Jordan University, a Master's Degree in Islamic Studies from the Malaysian Science University (USM); and a doctoral degree from the International Islamic University of Malaysia.¹¹ He is particularly critical of mysticism, a dominant religious orientation of Malaysian Malays which pays scant attention to modern scientific knowledge.

THE ROLE OF MALAY RULERS AND UMNO

Without a doubt, the Middle East has in recent times had an impact on religious discourse in the Malay world. A large number of Malaysian students has studied in Middle Eastern universities such as al-Azhar in Egypt; Medina University in Saudi Arabia; and Yarmouk University in Jordan. On their return, these students understandably have a tendency to refer to their Middle Eastern mentors and to interpret Malaysian matters according to the situation in the Middle East.¹² Yet, focussing too much on the Middle Eastern influence diverts our attention away from the local and regional factors that also shape the thinking of the

¹⁰ Interview with Mohd Asri, Mufti of Perlis, 21 April 2013.

¹¹ Azman, Zahari, Sahida, N., & Aziz, A. M. A, *Biografi Mufti-Mufti Malaysia*. (Negeri Sembilan: USIM, 2008), p.65

¹² Zainul Abidin Rasheed and Norshahril Saat, "Moderate Islam in Singapore – In Conversation with Hbabib Syed Hassan Al Attas," *Majulah: 50 Years of Malay/Muslim Community in Singapore*, (ed.) Zainul Abidin Rasheed and Norshahril Saat, pp. 239-242 (Singapore: World Scientific, 2016).

Malaysian Muslim elite. For example, in religious affairs, the Malay rulers have the prerogative to decide who gets appointed to their state's religious councils and who becomes the mufti. In the same vein, UMNO also has the authority to lobby personalities into the religious councils, especially in the states that it governs. In most instances, UMNO wants a mufti that is friendly to the party. The following paragraphs demonstrate how UMNO and Malay rulers continue to remain neutral towards exclusivist attitudes among the religious elite.

Harussani Zakaria, the mufti of Perak, is a case study that reflects how one can garner personal power and prolonged stay in the religious bureaucracy by being close to the Malay ruler. He has been serving as the Perak mufti since 1985. The Sultan of Perak had over the years conferred many titles and state honours on him. In 2008, Harussani was named *Tokoh Maal Hijrah 1430* (Maal Hijrah Person of the Year), a prestigious recognition awarded to Muslims for their contributions to Malaysia. In 2009, he became a "Tan Sri," a title that only 75 individuals in Malaysia can hold at any one time. These awards were in addition to many he had received much earlier in his career.¹³ The Perak royal family has thus retained Harussani's services for three decades, and despite the fact that Malaysia produces hundreds of Islamic Studies graduates and PhD holders every year with the qualification to replace him.

Having been so long in service, and having protection from the Perak royal family, Harussani has the freedom to express his views without fear of retribution from the state or from UMNO. Harussani admittedly stated:

The government mainly pointed out the cases [that requires a religious ruling], and my job is to issue a fatwa. I have never been forced to adopt the position of the government. I have never been influenced by the government. If I say it is permissible and the Sultan says it is okay, then we gazette the fatwa. This is law.¹⁴

This is true enough. As the mufti of Perak for over 30 years, Harussani has indeed expressed his conservative ideas publicly without any sanction or expression of disapproval from the state. He has issued controversial statements through the mainstream media—including the UMNO-owned *Utusan Malaysia*—which have embarrassed the state.

During the Abdullah Badawi government, many of his remarks ran counter to the government line. On 8 July 2006, Harussani made the unsubstantiated remark that 100,000 Muslims in Malaysia had become apostates. This elicited responses from both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.¹⁵ Even though no evidence was cited, YADIM's Patron, Mohd Nakhaie

¹³ Azman et al, p.62.

¹⁴ Interview with Harussani Zakaria, the Mufti of Perak, 7 May 2013.

¹⁵ Liow, J. C. (2009). *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia*: Oxford University Press, USA, p.51

Ahmad, later echoed this point.¹⁶ Harussani's views on apostasy have helped shape public opinion about Christian proselytization and evangelism, and his alarmist overtone is likely to have deepened mistrust between Muslims and non-Muslims. Several Islamic NGOs such as ISMA (Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia or Malaysia Muslim Network) and ABIM have since publicly pressured the federal government to ban all attempts to convert Muslims out of Islam.

Despite occasional disagreements with the ruling party, Harussani's views suggest he wants to keep the status quo for as long as possible. In 2009, Harussani resolutely defended the Sultan of Perak at the height of the Perak constitutional crisis. This crisis was precipitated by three Pakatan Rakyat (PR) state assemblymen leaving their party to become independents who in effect would support the Barisan Nasional (BN). The Perak Sultan allowed the BN to take over the Perak government from PR, leading to claims that the Sultan's move was unconstitutional. Harussani was quick to defend the Sultan, declaring those who criticised the Perak Sultan to be *menderhaka* or treacherous.¹⁷ The Sultan's actions were also met with demonstrations, and he was accused of having overstepped his role as a constitutional monarch. In response to the protests, Harussani remarked:

The Malays do not defy the Sultans. As Malays, they (demonstrators) should not be cursing, swearing, and destroying other people's property as Malay culture is refined. How can we say we are struggling for Islam when we behave in such an un-Islamic way?¹⁸

What lay behind Harussani's resolute stand in support of the monarchy on this occasion? One can perhaps point to Saudi clerics and their quietist approach towards the Saudi monarchy that in return allowed the clerics space to be guardians of religious matters. However, Harussani never received his religious training from any Middle Eastern university. Instead, he graduated with a diploma from Malaya Islamic College.

Under the purview of Harussani, the Perak religious council tolerates religious rituals which Wahhabis/Salafis would consider "innovations" and un-Islamic. In other words, while Harussani is conservative in his views on women, Shias, and liberal Islam, for example, he is not concerned about Islamic innovations. In 2015, Harussani declared that gymnastics is not for Muslim women because they are required to wear costumes that do not meet Islamic guidelines.¹⁹ He made this remarks about the Malaysian gymnast Farah Ann, who won a gold medal at the 2015 SEA Games in Singapore.

¹⁶ *myMetro*, "Gejala murtad tinggi," 27 July 2008

¹⁷ *Utusan Malaysia*, "Tidak taat pada Raja adalah derhaka—Mufti," 7 February 2009

¹⁸ *Bernama*, "Act that goes against Islamic culture and Islam teachings," 6 February 2009

¹⁹ AstroAwani, Isu Farah Ann: Gimnastik bukan untuk wanita Islam—Mufti Perak,

<http://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/isu-farah-ann-gimnastik-bukan-untuk-wanita-islam-mufti-perak-62368>, 13 June 2015, (Date Accessed: 13 June 2016)

Harussani is one case of a Muslim leader who is exclusivist and intolerant on religious matters without being influenced by Wahhabism/Salafism, and without receiving any training from the Middle East. By contrast, Harussani's loyalty to the Perak Sultan shows strong traits that are reminiscent of the feudal past of Malay culture and that have continued into present religious discourses.

EXCLUSIVIST ACROSS IDEOLOGIES

Exclusivism is undoubtedly becoming a dominant orientation in Malaysia today. Yet, what most analysts fail to observe is that exclusivism cuts across theological divides. While the Wahhabi/Salafi school may clearly be promoting exclusivism, such is also the case among certain Sufi groups. The paragraphs below demonstrate how muftis of the state of Negeri Sembilan exhibit an exclusive orientation despite being Sufi oriented.

Muftis in Negeri Sembilan are generally known to hold views stemming from Sufism, which in theory are apolitical, moderate, and benign. Sufis claim to promote a soft brand of Islam which emphasises spirituality and rituals. The state's third mufti, Mohd Mustadza Ahmad, a graduate of al-Azhar University, is a follower of the Ahmadiyah-Idrissiyah tariqah, a Sufi school. The mufti department lists nine tariqahs (Sufi orders) on its website, eight of which have received permission to practise in the state and one of which is banned. First among those certified to practise is unsurprisingly *Al-Ahmadiyah al-Idrissiah al-rashidiah al-dandarawiah*, whose leader is the former mufti himself. Tariqah Khidiriah is the one that is banned, the reason being that its leader, Shamsuddin Abdul Rahman, claimed to have dreamt meeting Prophet Khidir. He purports having had this dream in 1987, when he was 28 years old.²⁰

Where the muftis of Negeri Sembilan received their religious training from is rather revealing. The state's first mufti, Ahmad Mohd Said (1950-1964) studied in Malaysia, and later in Mecca. He was in Mecca in the 1920s, at a time when Wahhabism/Salafism was gaining influence in the emergent state known today as Saudi Arabia. Yet, Mohd Said was not influenced by Wahhabism/Salafism. Similarly, Hasan Said, the mufti between 1969 and 1987, also received his training in the Middle East, but spent most of his time teaching in Malaysia. Mohd Murtadza Ahmad, Negeri Sembilan's third mufti, did his studies at Al-Azhar University, and became a leader of the tariqah movement. The current mufti also received his religious education from the same university, and he is also against Wahhabism/Salafism. This suggests that local institutions, more than Middle Eastern ones, played a key role in shaping the religious worldview of some members of the religious elite in Malaysia. The Negeri Sembilan muftis are examples of how religious training in the Middle East had little or no impact on their thinking.

²⁰ Jabatan mufti Negeri Sembilan, <http://www.muftins.gov.my/index.php/arkib2/tareqat-tasawuf/161-tarekat-tasawuf-berdaftar> (Date Accessed: 16 September 2015)

Be that as it may, despite being Sufis, several of Negeri Sembilan's muftis show signs of intolerance and exclusivism. In early 2015, the Negeri Sembilan religious council declared Wahhabism to be contradictory of the Sunni school of thought. The present Negeri Sembilan mufti, Mohd Yusof Ahmad proclaimed that Malaysians should adopt the Shafie School of jurisprudence and should not to be misled into accepting Wahhabism. His reasons are as follows:

The decision by the Negeri Sembilan fatwa committee holds that Wahhabi teachings contradict the Sunni school of thought because the Shafie school does not prohibit Muslims from reciting prayers after their solat (five daily prayers), reciting prayers at cemeteries to the deceased (talkin), and reciting Quran on Friday nights. Wahhabi teachings are different from all these.²¹

In 2014, Mufti Mohd Yusof Ahmad was unhappy with the Federal Court of Appeal's judgement to allow three transgender Muslim men—Muhammad Juzaili Mohd Khamis, Shukor Jani, and Wan Kay—to dress as women. Section 66 of the Negeri Sembilan Shariah Criminal Code 1992 forbids Muslims from dressing as the opposite gender and those who do face up to six months' imprisonment, a fine of up to RM 1000 or both. The three men had been arrested several times for breaking the religious law in Negeri Sembilan, and in October 2012, the High Court informed them that they had to obey those laws since Islam was a state matter. However, in November 2014, the Court of Appeal ruled it unconstitutional to prevent the men from dressing the way they wished, as the constitution protects minority rights. Mohd Yusof disagreed with the Court of Appeal, declaring that that judgement was against Islam.²² The Islamic Religious Department appealed at the country's highest court, the Federal Court, which in August 2015 reversed the verdict of the Court of Appeal. This created an uproar from human rights groups, both locally and internationally.²³ Defending his views, Mufti Mohd Yusof said, "I stand by the Syariah Court in the state [of Negeri Sembilan]. These laws are crafted to uphold Islam more than anything else. Laws in the state are based on Islam, Quran, and Hadith."²⁴

²¹ Syafiq Zulkifli, "Wahhabi bercanggah dengan aliran Mazhab Syafie-Mufti Negeri Sembilan" <http://ikimfm.my/wahhabi-bercanggah-dengan-aliran-mazhab-syafie-mufti-negeri-sembilan/> (Date accessed: 17 September 2015)

²² The Malaysian Insider, 8 November 2014, "Isu lelaki berpakaian wanita, Mufti NS pertikai keputusan tidak berasaskan Islam," <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/bahasa/article/isu-lelaki-berpakaian-wanita-mufti-ns-pertikai-keputusan-tidak-berasaskan-i> (Date Accessed: 3 November 2015)

²³ Reuters, 8 Oct 2015, Malaysia Court upholds ban on cross dressing transgender Muslims," <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/08/us-malaysia-verdict-crossdressing-idUSKCN0S21CE20151008> (Date Accessed: 3 November 2015).

²⁴ Astro Awani. "Mufti Negeri Sembilan pertahankan undang-undang digina Mahkamah Syariah Negeri," 8 Nov 2014. <http://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/mufti-negeri-sembilan-pertahankan-undang-undang-diguna-mahkamah-syariah-negeri-47960> (Date Accessed: 11 November 2015).

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the study of religious extremism in Malaysia should extend beyond its present focus on Wahhabism/Salafism and not stay overly fixated upon it. What Malaysians need to be wary of is the exclusive attitude towards faith in general: defensiveness of particular ideas, authoritarian attitudes in approaching diversity, and relegating alternative voices as being liberal or deviant. The exclusivist attitude towards religion does not derive from Middle East solely, but from local factors as well. It is found across different theological orientations, be this Wahhabi/Salafi, Sufi, and traditionalist.

As this paper demonstrates, the patronage of Malay rulers remains key in defining the political behaviour of some Malaysian muftis. Seen that way, it would seem that Salafi/Wahhabi thinking is more marginal to Malaysian society than what many scholars suggest.²⁵ The majority of Malaysian muftis remain Sufis and conservative, like the Perak and Negeri Sembilan muftis. The Selangor religious council, for instance, defends Sufi practices frowned upon by Wahhabis/Salafis, and the opinions of religious councils are backed by the Malay rulers, who are constitutionally the custodians of Islam in each state.²⁶ Yet, as mentioned, the Selangor authorities have prevented Dr Mohd Asri from speaking because he holds a different theological viewpoint.

Recently, the Pahang mufti, Abdul Rahman Osman, has been issuing exclusivist remarks against non-Muslims who oppose Islamic laws in Malaysia, including the DAP (Democratic Action Party). He declared them to be *kafir harbi* (non-believers opposed to Islam). He was also quoted as saying that working with them is a sin in Islam.²⁷ Again, such exclusive views is not related to Wahhabi/Salafi thought. In fact, the Pahang Religious Council banned Wahhabism/Salafism in 2014 from being preached in the state.²⁸ The grounds for the ban is that the ideology brings disunity among Malaysian Muslims.

The way forward should therefore be for analysts to be critical of any form of exclusive attitude in the religious discourse, rather than to single out particular religious doctrines. An exclusivist is an exclusivist, regardless of whether he is a Wahhabi/Salafi, Shia, Sufi, Sunni or a self-declared liberal. A common space for debate on religious ideas and values is needed. As much as one can be critical of Wahhabism/Salafism for promoting conservatism and exclusivism, one must also be critical of attempts that declare Wahhabis/Salafis as deviants.

²⁵ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, *ISIS in Southeast Asia: Internalized Wahhabism is a major factor*, 18 May 2016 <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/isis-southeast-asia-internalized-wahhabism-major-factor> (Date Accessed: 25 May 2016)

²⁶ Jabatan Mufti Negeri Selangor, "Soal Jawab Agama," <http://www.muftiselangor.gov.my/ms/akidah> (Date Accessed: 27 June 2016).

²⁷ The Straits Times, "Pahang Mufti criticised for 'explosive' remarks," 26 June 2016.

²⁸ Jabatan Mufti Negeri Pahang, <http://mufti.pahang.gov.my/index.php/2012-12-11-06-41-06/2012-12-11-06-44-13/2012-12-11-06-44-58/2014/97-tegahan-dan-larangan-menyebarkan-ajaran-salafiah-wahabiah-dan-seumpamanya-di-negeri-pahang> (Date Accessed: 27 June 2016)

<p>ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by:</p> <p>ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Pasir Panjang Singapore 119614</p> <p>Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p>	<p>ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Tan Chin Tiong Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Lee Poh Onn and Benjamin Loh</p> <p>Assistant Editors: Vandana Prakash Nair, Veena Nair and Michael Yeo Chai Ming</p>
--	---	---