

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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## **Should Malaysia Expect an Islamist Backlash?**

*Serina Rahman\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- After Malaysia's 14<sup>th</sup> General Elections (GE14), there have been increasing rumbles of concern at the grassroots level of threats to Malay/Muslim identity and religion, with people perpetuating the myth that the new Pakatan Harapan government 'is controlled by the Chinese'.
- Widespread frustration with rising costs of living, the Goods & Services Tax (GST) and then-Prime Minister Najib Razak may have been the issues that gave the victory to Pakatan Harapan and not Malay voters looking past ethnic issues.
- Impatience with a perceived 'liberal' government that 'gives too many opportunities' to non-Malays could entrench ethnic divisions and increased Islamic conservatism, laying the ground for easy impregnation of radical thought, particularly in marginalized, rural communities.
- The Pakatan Harapan government needs to reinstate a more moderate approach to Islam that celebrates pluralism yet demonstrates continued support for Islamic causes, backed up with solid socio-economic assistance to all communities in need, especially the rural Malay communities who voted for them in what was possibly a spur-of-the-moment one-off vote.

*\* Serina Rahman is Visiting Fellow in the Malaysia Studies Programme at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.*

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's 14<sup>th</sup> General Elections (GE14) resulted in a widely unexpected outcome; the downfall of a coalition that had been in power for 61 years and the first time that Putrajaya changed hands. Mahathir Mohamed, formerly of the deposed Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, instead helmed the Pakatan Harapan opposition coalition, comprising members of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM), Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). They all, however, stood as candidates in GE14 under the PKR banner.<sup>1</sup>

Most analysts expected BN to continue on its downward slide, a pattern that had occurred since the 2008 election cycle, but hardly anyone (including the campaigning parties themselves) expected such a spectacular fall from grace.<sup>2</sup> BN and its dominant UMNO component even lost the jewel in the crown and UMNO's birthplace, Johor, as well as other BN strongholds such as Melaka and Negeri Sembilan to Pakatan Harapan. It was a result that many had hoped for but few had dared to imagine.

Contrary to most expectations, the Islamic party, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) did not get obliterated in GE14, but instead retained Kelantan and regained Terengganu, as well as a substantial number of seats in Kedah and Perak.

In the immediate aftermath of the elections, analysts were quick to celebrate the breaching of ethnic boundaries as it seemed like voters had finally voted beyond racial limits.<sup>3</sup> A closer look at the numbers, however, reveals that many Malay voters had in fact stayed within their comfort zones. A Merdeka Centre study<sup>4</sup> shows that the Malay vote was evenly split between PH, BN and PAS. The research showed that 65-73% of the Malay votes went to either BN or PAS, which in turn means that about 70% of the Malay voting populace did **not** support PH and voted within racial and religious lines.<sup>5</sup>

Post-election conversations that I had with rural Malay folk revealed bewilderment and surprise that BN had lost so many states, including Johor and Sabah, its usual stalwarts. Those in rural Johor who had secretly voted for the opposition did so out of exasperation with rising costs of living. Many said they just wanted to get rid of the GST and Najib Razak's excesses. Several felt that there was nothing inherently wrong with BN, but it needed new leadership and they believed that voting against them was the only way to make it happen. Some seemed guilty that they had contributed to BN's unexpected fall; they were concerned that the new government would violate Malay rights and jeopardise Islam's position as the main religion of the country. Most were also worried that the new government would not help them the way UMNO did in the past; PH is known to have a weak rural support network. As a form of self-assurance, several commented that if the new government were to fail the Malay people, they would happily bring UMNO back into power.

On the ground it seemed there were two interim responses to BN's loss of power. Not unlike loud claims by UMNO politicians, many spoke as if PH taking over government was but a minor aberration and that their time at the helm was limited.<sup>6</sup> Even with appointments of new Pakatan Harapan representatives, the old guard maintains control<sup>7</sup> and new appointees seem to be isolated and side-lined.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, there were those who agitated to see how they could quickly exhibit support for the new powers, in anticipation of continued opportunities and

access from new streams of influence.<sup>9</sup> This was akin to politicians who quickly jumped ship and withdrew from BN in order to pledge allegiance to the new PH government.<sup>10</sup>

Even as generational UMNO supporters either consolidated their positions or wriggled into new roles, several continue to express concern that there is no longer a party in power than can genuinely champion the Malays and Islam. News of job losses by civil servants<sup>11</sup> and the end of salaries and allowances for more recent recruits for the national volunteer corps (RELA)<sup>12</sup> are taken as evidence that the ‘Chinese government’ is working to disempower the Malays.<sup>13</sup> Discussions at coffeeshops in UMNO strongholds are rife with unsubstantiated rumours of other ethnic groups disrespecting the Malays and Islam, with responses ranging from a need to “go to [the location of the alleged incident] to fight” to “persist with the struggle because there are only Chinese representatives [in government]”.<sup>14</sup>

Rabblerrousing such as this by UMNO supporters and Malay supremacist NGOs<sup>15</sup> earn only dismissive responses in urban areas as a more sceptical electorate question the validity of sweeping comments and denounce incendiary prose. Most blame UMNO cybertroopers for dissent in the social media space and deem provocative comments by politicians as desperate attempts to cling to power.<sup>16</sup> In rural areas, however, these diatribes actually gain traction and sow seeds of discontent amongst those who continue to struggle to put food on the table even though the goods and services tax (GST) has been abolished and petrol prices have stabilised.<sup>17</sup> As the country moves beyond the third month after GE14, what is the trajectory of those who live on the fringes, for whom visible submission to the tenets of Islam and the predominance of Malay rights are at the core of their being, but whose daily toil is survival in the face of rising costs of living and unemployment? The remainder of this paper explores a number of possible scenarios.

## **FURTHER RETREAT INTO RACE AND RELIGION**

Post-election analyses show that about 70% of the Malay voters opted to remain with either UMNO or PAS.<sup>18</sup> In spite of widespread dissatisfaction with issues such as cost of living, GST and allegations of impropriety among the then-ruling elite, it seems that these voters preferred to prioritise concerns related to race and religion. While Amanah and PPBM are also Malay-dominant or Islamic parties, they are deemed to have been sullied by their alliance with the DAP. PKR on the other hand, has always campaigned on a multi-racial platform and was deemed to be a ‘secular’ (and thus less trustworthy) party.<sup>19</sup>

While PAS did not make as much headway in central and south peninsular Malaysia,<sup>20</sup> it was deemed a more credible opposition to Barisan Nasional than the Pakatan Harapan coalition in the northern states. Some attribute this to the Islamic party’s emphasis on the professional qualifications of its candidates,<sup>21</sup> but there is no longer a need for PAS to prove its Islamic credentials (unlike other political parties) as it has been an unquestionably Islamic option since its founding in 1951. In GE14, it merely had to demonstrate that it had candidates who were capable of running a government in order to widen its appeal for those who were also concerned about daily difficulties, beyond their desire for Islamic principles in policy-making. PAS could then just focus on campaigning on bread and butter issues. In contrast, then-opposition candidates in Bangi (renamed Sungai Ramal), for example, had to emphasise their Islamic credentials in order to take over the seat from the incumbent PAS representative.<sup>22</sup> In essence,

Islam in Malaysia has been greatly politicised, with several political parties trying to outdo each other to win the Malay/Muslim vote. This reflects voters' increasingly conservative attitudes.<sup>23</sup>

Malaysian Muslims are known to have a singular, often more conservative, approach to Islam that has become increasingly strident and intolerant.<sup>24</sup> A 2010 study of Malaysian youth aged 15 to 25 by the Merdeka Centre indicated that more than 70% wanted the Quran to replace the federal constitution; and almost 80% of the respondents saw themselves as Muslims first, above other ethnic or national identities.<sup>25</sup> Even in the more inclusive Johor state, a 2017 survey of Johor residents by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute indicated that 75% of Malay respondents were in support of hudud law for Muslims, and 90% of Malay respondents felt that increased Islamic religiosity was a positive development for Malaysia.<sup>26</sup> Malaysia's more conservative Islamic movement is known to have begun in and around Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s with the return of graduates from Egyptian and Arabic universities,<sup>27</sup> and the spread of more conformist practices spearheaded by the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), co-founded by Prime Minister designate Anwar Ibrahim. Even amongst seemingly 'liberal' urban Malays, there is a strong need to demonstrate an observance of Islamic principles. Amongst Malays, it seems, it is important to be seen to abide by Islamic laws and support all that is deemed Islamic, such as the *hudud* law.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of his having initiated the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) and myriad Islamic institutes and universities in his first stint as prime minister, Mahathir Mohamed is known to be a more moderate face of Islam.<sup>29</sup> Parts of the electorate unhappy with his moves for a more ethnically-inclusive cabinet and government<sup>30</sup> may be happy to wait for Anwar Ibrahim to take over.<sup>31</sup> The latter's reign as prime minister could be seen as potentially more in line with conservative Malay/Muslim desires given his Islamic credentials, good relations with the Sultans and close friendship with international personalities such as Recep Tayyip Erdogan, president of Turkey.<sup>32</sup>

## **WHEN INCREASED RELIGIOSITY COULD LEAD TO EXTREMISM**

If the electorate's unhappiness with the PH government's efforts at inclusivity boils over into greater fears of loss of Malay identity and religion, voters could turn to PAS (in the event of an UMNO collapse) or to an UMNO-PAS coalition (if that becomes an eventuality).<sup>33</sup> In the race to demonstrate Islamic qualities, it is possible that rhetoric and attitudes could become even more intolerant and exclusivist. While PAS has made some effort to distance itself from extreme Wahabi teachings, it does practice strictly literal interpretations of Islam, as demonstrated by laws enacted in Kelantan and its continued desire to push through Act 355. With Mahathir Mohamad still in power, PAS is not likely to force Shariah law on the country, but that then might drive brewing dissatisfaction with a more seemingly 'liberal' government underground.<sup>34</sup> It is possible that this might then intensify rumbling sympathies for the Islamic State of Iraq & Syria (ISIS).

With increasing conservatism in Malaysia, there is scant concern over rising Islamic extremism and some support for the expression of violence towards non-Muslims. In a 2015 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, only 48 percent of the Malaysian Muslims surveyed expressed concern about Islamist extremism.<sup>35</sup> Malaysian nationals are currently featured in ISIS recruitment videos and

in 2017, 300 individuals were arrested for their links to ISIS.<sup>36</sup> While some analysts believe that most ISIS sympathisers and recruits come from comfortable educated backgrounds, others have noted that a pattern has emerged of those who come from situations of economic marginalisation and inequality. Some of these include internally displaced populations and other situations of perceived injustice.<sup>37</sup> A prime example of these are rural or coastal communities where homes, land and natural habitats (on which they rely on for traditional livelihoods) are taken or damaged as a result of development and urbanisation. Many of these areas in rural Malaysia are (or were) UMNO strongholds. Apart from plotting a route to bringing UMNO back into power, some of these populations (all of which make up 125 parliamentary constituencies or 56 percent of a total of 222 constituencies)<sup>38</sup> might be receptive to going a step further.

Rural Malay communities are usually highly patriarchal. With livelihood losses (usually borne by the men), women face more pressure to provide food and other family needs through alternative sources, and sometimes endure domestic violence.<sup>39</sup> Research has shown that where there is severe patriarchy, coupled with socio-economic difficulties and other pressures, as well as women's need to create agency, there is increased susceptibility to radicalisation.<sup>40</sup> My observations in rural Malaysia have shown that where women suffer extensive patriarchal and societal controls outside of the home, they use religion as a tool within the domestic sphere to exert power over their spouse and children.<sup>41</sup> This is especially the case in areas where communities are marginalised, suffer severe social changes due to urbanisation and development, and where there are few alternative voices on religion. It is in situations like these that it will be easy for radical thought to fester and be perpetuated. In many cases of families who decide to support or join ISIS, it has been seen that it is the women who are "more determined than the men".<sup>42</sup> Indeed, women are known to be successful recruiters for ISIS, adding on to their usual role of reproducing and raising God-fearing combatants.

This is not to say that rural Malaysian women who do not vote for PH are potential suicide bombers, even though family suicide bombing has already occurred in Surabaya, Indonesia.<sup>43</sup> However, it is often the women, whether mothers or wives, who can spot a pattern of extremism in their families.<sup>44</sup> Should the women themselves be inclined to support the ISIS cause, even if they were not to actively encourage participation in violent action, at the very least, they may hide or deny radical behaviour in their offspring or spouse. More women have been arrested for ISIS links in Malaysia recently. Security think tank The Soufan Centre notes that of the 91 Malaysians currently in ISIS ranks, 12 are women and 17 are children.<sup>45</sup>

## **PREVENTING EXTREMISM: SUGGESTIONS FOR THE PH GOVERNMENT**

The picture painted above is in itself somewhat extreme. But global and domestic conditions are ripe for radicalisation, spurred on by incessant haranguing by those bent on stoking religious and racial discord in order to regain or expand political power. This last section puts forward some suggestions that may help to reduce susceptibility to radicalisation.

The concerns of rural Malay communities that have traditionally been BN-UMNO stalwarts cannot be lightly dismissed. There is a huge disconnect between urban and rural Malaysia, and most are unable to understand the thought processes, conditions or difficulties of the other side. Appeasement of these communities need not necessarily go back to the cronyism and cash

handouts of regimes past. PH needs to demonstrate new equitable ways of governance that enable access through fair effort. Ensuring that those who need help the most get that help is vital. Even under past BN-UMNO governments, Malays in need only attained assistance if they had the right connections.<sup>46</sup>

These efforts for equity and fair allocation of resources need to be linked back to Mahathir's approach to a more moderate version of Islam and a 'theology of progress'<sup>47</sup> in which material success through individual effort is encouraged through his interpretation of *fardhu kifayah* (the communal duty of all Muslims to bring the community forward materially). His is also a practical Islam, in which an individual is to use his *aql* (common sense and rational thought processes) to apply Islamic teachings in a contemporary setting. In order to facilitate this, PH will need to dismantle the Islamic bureaucracy that Mahathir himself established, allowing a broader space for the discussion of varied Islamic views and the lifting of stringent bans of alternative voices. Religious leaders should not be allowed to use their positions to cling to power and other benefits. Instead of exclusivity, the plurality of Islam that enables mutual respect and learning, as described by Maszlee Malik (2016), needs to be reinstated<sup>48</sup>. The PH government needs to actively engage with the Council of Rulers and encourage the approach of rulers such as Johor's Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar<sup>49</sup> to ensure peace and understanding between all citizens.

At a more practical level, government representatives need to ensure that the average citizen has direct access to their offices and channels of assistance to prevent cronyism and corruption. Grassroots-level UMNO members need to see that they too can engage with and have access to benefits from the new government. Effort needs to be made for gender-specific empowerment, helping rural women get financial, psychological and other support that they need to cope with difficult times and irreversible change in their communities. Real stakeholder engagement beyond village hierarchies needs to be conducted so that power and access are not concentrated in the hands of a few, and office-bearers must understand that they are at the service of the average villager who voted for their government.

Once the old ways have been effectively dismantled and new approaches to both governance and Islam been put into place, the new processes and systems needs to be institutionalised in some form so that when a new Prime Minister takes over, Malaysia can keep moving forward and mitigate the risk of falling back into intolerance and kleptocracy.

## **CONCLUSION**

As Malaysia begins to get used to news ways of administration and a more vocal electorate, there are several trajectories that the country could stumble into. Restless murmurs amongst UMNO stalwarts could lead to broad dissatisfaction and even set the stage for social unrest and extremist acts of violence if left unchecked.

New approaches to governance that authentically meets rural concerns and a more inclusive and contemporary version of Islam that celebrates plurality need to be reinstated. And, when new systems are ironed out and voters are able to see that old ways can be forgotten, these more positive processes need to be institutionalised so that conservative factions that may be waiting in the wings are unable to revive departed regimes and intolerant attitudes

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- <sup>1</sup> Some discussion on the decision to stand under the PKR banner can be found in ‘Opposition parties say they will contest under PKR logo’ (*The Straits Times*, 7 April 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/opposition-parties-say-they-will-contest-under-pkr-logo>)
- <sup>2</sup> On the eve of the elections, pollster Merdeka Centre predicted that BN will not win the popular vote, but would still be able to retain the government: ‘Malaysia election: Pollster Merdeka Centre expects BN to win poll, but not popular vote’ (*The Straits Times*, 8 May 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-election-pollster-merdeka-center-expects-bn-to-win-poll-but-not-popular-vote>). A discussion of BN’s progressive decrease in support since the 12<sup>th</sup> General Elections in 2008 can be found in the article, ‘Once dominant, Malaysia’s BN records lowest-ever share of 36.4% in 2018 GE’. (*Today Online*, 11 May 2018, <https://www.todayonline.com/malaysian-ge/3642-cent-bn-records-lowest-popular-vote-history>)
- <sup>3</sup> ‘Commentary: Malaysia reborn? Does GE14 spell an end to racial politics?’ (*Channel News Asia*, 10 May 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/malaysia-general-election-race-card-costs-of-living-concerns-10220262>)
- <sup>4</sup> Refer to ‘Most Malaysian Chinese voted PH in polls, but Malays in 3-way split’ (*The Straits Times*, 14 June 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/most-malaysian-chinese-voted-ph-in-polls-but-malays-in-3-way-split>)
- <sup>5</sup> A recent article in the *Straits Times* (12 August 2018 – First 100 days of Malaysia’s new government: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/first-100-days-of-malysias-new-government>), a Merdeka Centre study was cited in a claim that more Malays (roughly 50%) support the new PH government. This is an improvement from the 25-30% support during the elections. However a more detailed analysis of the results (*Malaysian Insight*, 14 Aug 2018, “In new Malaysia, Malays still worry over race and religion”: <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/87555>) corroborate my observations in rural areas. More importantly, 66% of the respondents in this study were in urban areas, with only 21% living or working in rural villages. This indicates that the rates of dissatisfaction with decisions made by the PH government could actually be higher once rural areas are taken into account.
- <sup>6</sup> Refer to “‘Shaky’ Pakatan will fall before GE15, Zahid predicts’ (*Malay Mail*, 25 June 2018, <https://www.malaymail.com/s/1645493/shaky-pakatan-will-fall-before-ge15-zahid-predicts>). These views are parroted by UMNO grassroots members.
- <sup>7</sup> Personal observation of community behaviour in Johor where new village representatives are not given access to systems and procedures, or regular community members are told to go through older (now replaced) representatives in order to get things done (instead of newly appointed ones) for various reasons.
- <sup>8</sup> Also refer to ‘Wan Azizah to civil servants: Serve govt of the day or else...’ (*The Star Online*, 22 June 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/06/22/wan-azizah-to-civil-servants-serve-govt-of-the-day-or-else/>)
- <sup>9</sup> Personal observation of community behaviour in Johor where former UMNO supporters discussed how they should move over to PH so that they can continue to receive ‘project benefits’ and other opportunities. These discussions were held immediately after the elections as people tried to work out how to stay on the gravy train with a new government in power.
- <sup>10</sup> Party-hopping by politicians who are part of a losing party is a common practice in Malaysia. Allegations of bribery and opportunistic alliances are often thrown at those who engage in the practice (usually referred to as ‘frogs’). More discussion on this can be found in ‘Party-hopping betrays voters, Bersih warns’ (*Free Malaysia Today*, 12 May 2018, <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/05/12/party-hopping-betrays-voters-bersih-warns/>)
- <sup>11</sup> Media reports of civil service job losses such as ‘Nur Jazlan claims contracts of civil servants nationwide terminated’ (*The Star Online*, 15 May 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/05/15/nur-jazlan-claims-contracts-of-civil-servants-nationwide-terminated/>) played on Malay fears as this ethnic group makes up the largest percentage of the civil service. The terminations were actually focused on only politically appointed contracts.

<sup>12</sup> An official letter from the office of the Malaysian volunteer corps (Pejabat Jabatan Sukarelawan Malaysia (RELA)) announcing the termination of salaries and allowances for its members was circulated (personal observation). Conversations with RELA members, however, revealed that this only applied to recruits who joined the organisation in an escalated recruitment programme under the former Prime Minister and were quickly allowed to earn salaries without having to undergo training. The letter did not apply to older members of more than 10-15 years who have undergone training and are regulars with the organisation. RELA is an office under the Home Ministry of Malaysia.

<sup>13</sup> Personal observation of Johor rural communities with strong UMNO support: the current PH government is frequently referred to as ‘that Chinese government’ – implying that Mahathir Mohamad is only a puppet being controlled by the DAP. This gels with pre-election chatter on the ground where voters insisted that a vote for PH is a vote for Chinese takeover and control of Malaysia (through the DAP component party).

<sup>14</sup> Comments translated verbatim from Bahasa Malaysia. Personal observation of conversations in rural Johor where Whatsapp news of minor incidents such as a non-Malay asking a mosque to lower the volume of its sermons escalates into rabid flaming of racial discord and open encouragement to physically fight against non-Malays in a bid to hasten the toppling of the government.

<sup>15</sup> A rally held in Kuala Lumpur on 28 July 2018 is an example of how Malay nationalist parties and NGOs are able to gather support through the claim that Malay/Muslim interests are at stake. Also refer to ‘2000 attend Kuala Lumpur rally to defend Malay rights’ (*The Straits Times*, 28 July 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thousands-attend-kuala-lumpur-rally-to-defend-malay-rights>)

<sup>16</sup> In the build-up to the Sg Kandis by-election, UMNO politician Tajuddin Abdul Rahman accused DAP of a Christian agenda. Excerpts of the speech can be found at ‘Tajuddin fires ‘Christian DAP’ salvo to close BN’s Sg Kandis campaign’ (*Malaysiakini*, 3 Aug 2018, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/437314>).

<sup>17</sup> The abolishment of the GST and the stabilising of petrol prices are partial fulfilments of two points on the PH 100 day manifesto. With the abolishment of the GST, however was also a promise to reduce the cost of living, and with the stabilisation of petrol prices was a promise to provide targeted petrol subsidies to low-income citizens. The latter halves of these promises have yet to come to fruition. Dissatisfaction with the government has escalated in rural areas with a recent announcement that BR1M (financial assistance scheme for the poor) will be eventually phased out, ‘PM: Cash handouts to stop eventually’ (*The Star Online*, 26 August 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/08/26/pm-cash-handouts-to-stop-eventually-people-should-not-depend-on-govt-to-get-money-without-working-sa/>)

<sup>18</sup> Refer to ‘PAS exploited weak UMNO, Pakatan for Terengganu victory, say analysts’ (*Malaysian Insight*, 24 June 2018, <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/56595>).

<sup>19</sup> Personal observation and communication during pre-election study. Please refer to Rahman, S. *Malaysia’s General Elections 2018: Understanding the rural vote*. Trends in Southeast Asia 2018/9. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

<sup>20</sup> ‘What to make of PAS’ mixed performance in election’, *The Straits Times*, 25 May 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/what-to-make-of-pas-mixed-performance-in-election>

<sup>21</sup> ‘PAS to prioritise ‘loyal, professional and religious candidate’ for GE14’, *New Straits Times*, 8 February 2018, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2018/02/333398/pas-prioritise-loyal-professional-and-religious-candidate-ge14>.

<sup>22</sup> Hew, W.W. ‘The struggle for political Islam in ‘new Malaysia’’. *New Mandala*, 25 June 2018, <http://www.newmandala.org/struggle-islamisms-new-malaysia/>

<sup>23</sup> Refer to Liow, J.C., 2004. Political Islam in Malaysia: problematizing discourse and practice in the UMNO-PAS ‘Islamisation race’. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 42:2, 184-205; Malik, M., 2016. *Turning Malaysia off inter-faith strife*, Perspective, 2016/61, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute; Hew, W.W., 2017. *Malay politics meets Islamist activism in Malaysia’s Act 355*. Perspective 2017/21, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute; and Ahmad Fauzi, A.H. and Muhamad Takiyuddin, I. 2014. Islamist conservatism and the demise of Islam Hadhari in Malaysia. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 25:2, 159-180. In Johor, UMNO’s dominance, Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar’s more tolerant approach to



Islam and the Bangsa Johor philosophy have prevented PAS from garnering as much ground as it did in the north. Voters in this state were not averse to choosing Amanah as an 'Islamic' option (unlike those in Kelantan and Terengganu) and were thus able to opt for PH as a whole.

<sup>24</sup> Refer to Steele, J., 2018. *Mediating Islam*. NUS Press, Singapore for a discussion on how Malaysia's approach to Islam is dictated from the top, with no avenue for alternative interpretations or discourse. Also refer to Malik, M., 2017. 'Kafir Harbi' in Malaysia: Another path to polarization. Perspective 2017/4, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore; Saat, N., 2016. *Exclusivist attitudes in Malaysian Islam have multifarious roots*. Perspective 2016/39, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore; and 'Johor's Malays tilt towards conservative Islam: Survey', *The Straits Times*, 19 Nov 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/johors-malays-tilt-towards-conservative-islam-survey>.

<sup>25</sup> Southeast Asia Muslim Youth Survey 2011 – Malaysia & Indonesia. Merdeka Centre. (downloaded from [www.merdeka.org](http://www.merdeka.org) on 8/8/2018)

<sup>26</sup> Saat, N. 2017. *Johor Survey 2017: Attitudes towards Islam, governance and the Sultan*. Perspective 2017/83, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. Research has shown, however, that during surveys, respondents may feel pressured to answer in a certain way. A more accurate understanding of the nuances of their sentiments and their actual thoughts can sometimes be better extracted during longer (informal) conversations and focus group discussions. These research methods were used to supplement and/or corroborate the findings in these surveys where relevant, and are shared in other parts of this publication.

<sup>27</sup> Refer to 'Rising conservatism in Malaysian Islam not just from Arabisation'. *Today Online*, 16 July 2016, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/rising-conservatism-msianislam-not-just-arabisation> and Frisk, S. 2009. *Submitting to God: Women and Islam in urban Malaysia*. NIAS Press, USA.

<sup>28</sup> This refers to the implementation of Act 355 which is a strengthening of Shariah or Islamic laws in Malaysia. Personal observation has shown that a façade of Islamic obedience is important in both rural and urban areas.

<sup>29</sup> Schottmann, S. A. 2011. The pillars of 'Mahathir's Islam': Mahathir Mohamad on being Muslim in the modern world. *Asian Studies Review*, 35/3: 355-372.

<sup>30</sup> In an unprecedented move, the new Pakatan Harapan government and Mahathir Mohamad have appointed an ethnic Chinese Finance Minister, Lim Guan Eng, an ethnic Indian and Christian Attorney-General, Tommy Thomas, and an indigenous Kadazan Chief Justice, Richard Malanjum. These appointments generated much backlash from Malay nationalists.

<sup>31</sup> Also refer to "Anwar Malay voters' choice for PM, survey finds" (Malaysian Insight, 14 August 2018, <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/87551>) where it was reported that 42% of the Malays surveyed supported Anwar as the next Prime Minister, even though many who responded positively did not vote for PH.

<sup>32</sup> Erdogan is also seen to be an Islamic conservative, and is believed to be moving formerly firmly secular Turkey into greater Islamism. 'In long-secular Turkey, sharia is gradually taking over'. The Washington Post, 16 February 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2018/02/16/in-long-secular-turkey-sharia-is-gradually-taking-over/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.4410cd7c6d64](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2018/02/16/in-long-secular-turkey-sharia-is-gradually-taking-over/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4410cd7c6d64).

<sup>33</sup> A collaboration between UMNO and PAS was recently announced by Lokman Noor Adam of BN ('UMNO working with PAS to protect race, religion, rulers, says Lokman', *The Malaysian Insight*, 25 August 2018, <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/90536>).

<sup>34</sup> This is given all the other indications of increased conservatism discussed in earlier parts of this paper. Also refer to Saat, N., 2018. *Will PAS governments in Kelantan and Terengganu push through Islamic laws?* Perspective 2018/3, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

<sup>35</sup> Ahmad Fauzi A.H. 2016. *ISIS in Southeast Asia: Internalized Wahhabism is a major factor*. Perspective, 2016/24. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. Also refer to Malik, M., 2017. 'Kafir Harbi' in Malaysia: Another path to polarization. Perspective 2017/4, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore and Saat, N. 2017. *Johor Survey 2017: Attitudes towards Islam, governance and the Sultan*. Perspective 2017/83, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. In the latter it is explained that even in a state like Johor where its leaders are inclusive and particular about racial and religious relations and

inclusivity, a substantial number of Malay respondents do not see ‘Arabisation’ as a problem, identify themselves as Muslim first and are in support of the hudud law. Of the Malay respondents, 89 percent already see Malaysia as an Islamic state and 90 percent agree that increased Islamic religiosity is a positive development.

<sup>36</sup> Refer to ‘Malaysia’s reckoning with the Islamic State’. *The Diplomat*, 3 September 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/malaysias-reckoning-with-the-islamic-state/> and Mohd Azizuddin M.S. ‘ISIS recruitment of Malaysian youth: Challenge and response’. Middle East Institute, 3 May 2016, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/isis-recruitment-malaysian-youth-challenge-and-response>.

<sup>37</sup> This does not mean that a state of poverty or socio-economic difficulty alone is a factor for IS recruitment. The emphasis is on the perceptions of inequality or experiences of injustice. Refer to Kharroub, T. *Understanding violent extremism: the social psychology of identity and group dynamics*. Arab Centre Washington D.C., 15 September 2015, <http://arabcenterdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/RP-September-25-2015-TK.pdf> and ‘Muslim radicalisation’s socio-economic roots’. *The Guardian*, 29 April 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/apr/29/islam-terrorism-radicalisation-recession>.

<sup>38</sup> Politweet.org, “The rural-urban divide in Malaysia’s General Election”, <https://politweet.wordpress.com/2013/05/21/the-rural-urban-divide-in-malaysias-general-election/>

<sup>39</sup> When a man is unable to provide for the family as expected by social norms, increased domestic violence can occur as his traditional role is called into question. This is especially so if the woman is able to take over the role of family provider. This is just one factor amongst many in the analysis of domestic violence. Refer to: Alonso-Borrego, C. and Carrasco, R. 2017. Employment and the risk of domestic violence: does the breadwinner’s gender matter? *Applied Economics*, 49(50): 5074-5091.

<sup>40</sup> Badran, M. 2006. *Women and radicalization*. DIIS Working Paper, 2006/5. Danish Institute for International Studies, Denmark.

<sup>41</sup> Rahman, S. ‘To fight radicalisation in Southeast Asia, empower the women’. *The Conversation*, 6 July 2017, <https://theconversation.com/to-fight-radicalisation-in-southeast-asia-empower-the-women-79387>. This is a form of resistance to institutional or public structures of power by creating a domestic sphere of power through the control of behaviour, practices and thoughts within the home.

<sup>42</sup> Refer to ‘Surabaya and the ISIS family’. Lowy Institute, 15 May 2018. <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/surabaya-and-isis-family> and Firdaus, F. The making of a female ISIS bomber. *New Naratif*, 4 June 2018, <https://newnaratif.com/journalism/making-female-isis-bomber/>.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Commentary: Surabaya bombings and the conundrum of family suicide bombers’. Channel News Asia, 16 May 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/surabaya-bombings-islamic-state-sidney-jones-10238872>.

<sup>44</sup> Weingarten, E. Why female extremists perplex us. *TIME*, 21 March 2015, <http://time.com/3751706/female-extremists/>.

<sup>45</sup> Refer to ‘Student, housewife among 15 terror suspects held in Malaysia for planning attacks’, *The Straits Times*, 1 June 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/student-housewife-among-15-terror-suspects-held-in-malaysia>, and ‘ISIS returnees pose major terror threat’, *The Straits Times*, 25 October 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/isis-returnees-pose-major-terror-threat>.

<sup>46</sup> Personal observation: extended fieldwork in rural Johor 2008 to 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Schottmann, S. A. 2011. The pillars of ‘Mahathir’s Islam’: Mahathir Mohamad on being Muslim in the modern world. *Asian Studies Review*, 35/3: 355-372.

<sup>48</sup> Malik, M., 2016. *Turning Malaysia off inter-faith strife*, Perspective, 2016/61, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

<sup>49</sup> Sultan Ibrahim is known to be a vocal proponent of inclusivity. Refer to Saat, N. 2017. *Johor remains the bastion of Kaum Tua*. Trends in Southeast Asia, 2017/1, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore; and ‘Stopping religious exclusivism in Malaysia from taking root’. *The Straits Times*, 14 October 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/stopping-religious-exclusivism-in-malaysia-from-taking-root>.

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