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Political Islam and the Recent Rise of Islamist Conservatism in Malaysia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- While Malaysia's 1957 Constitution establishes Islam as the state religion, the precise implications of such a provision were never made clear. Its vagueness meant that successive political leaders were given free rein over the employment—or neglect—of Islam as a political tool. Contemporary Malaysia has witnessed vigorous drives towards multiple visions of political Islam.
- Interpretations of Islam have arisen among successive generations of Malaysian Muslims in both doctrine and practice. In addition, the Islamisation of Malaysia has developed at different trajectories with the last manifestation being Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's Islam Hadhari.
- Since the assumption of power by Najib Razak, the initiative of defining the Islamic framework of the nation has been effectively delegated to the official Islamic bureaucracy which has focused on Islamist uniformity rather than a religiously acceptable Muslim plurality. The impact of such power delegation highlights the espousal of UMNO's socially divisive turn towards conservatism in the aftermath of Malaysia's Thirteenth General Elections held this year.

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- Fearing a massive loss of support from the vast numbers of Bumiputera Christians in Sabah and Sarawak affected by the recent Court of Appeal decision to overturn the High Court's 2009 verdict on the use of 'Allah', a damage limitation exercise has been conducted affirming the limited applicability of the verdict.
 - For an Islamist state to materialise in the near future, given current developments, the threat would come from UMNO and its religious proxies in state institutions rather than from PAS and its allies in the Pakatan Rakyat.
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INTRODUCTION

Since gaining a foothold in Southeast Asia around the thirteenth century, Islam has been a major influence on political life in the region. A wide variety of interpretations and schools of thought has characterised Islamic scholarship in the Malay world as can be seen in the willingness to accommodate the intricacies of local customs known as *adat*. A main factor behind this tendency was the pervasive role played by Sufis or Muslim mystics well-known for their penchant to offer layered interpretations—rather than depending on a literal understanding of scriptural texts—in the propagation of Islam in Southeast Asia (Ahmad Fauzi 2002).

The arrival of Wahhabi puritanism—inspired by the reformation movement of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792 AD) in the Arab Peninsula—initially caused friction within Malay-Muslim society as manifested in the conflict between Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda during the early twentieth century. The Kaum Muda shared doctrinal affinity with the Wahhabi-Salafi movement which was gaining traction in the Middle East. However, unlike the latter whose protagonists were allied with the Saud family, the Kaum Muda were deprived of political power. Instead, the Kaum Tua *ulama* (religious scholars) filled official bureaucratic posts in the Majlis Agama Islam (Councils of Islamic Religion) and Jabatan Agama Islam (Departments of Islamic Affairs) sanctioned by colonial officialdom (Roff 1967: 73-74).

In states with a progressive Majlis Agama such as Kelantan, the Kaum Muda were allowed to publicly articulate their views as in the 1937 debate on whether a dog's saliva was considered impure or not (Roff 1983). But in states where the Majlis Agama was dominated by the conservative *ulama*, it was not uncommon for the Kaum Muda to be labelled as deviant and to be held parallel to the Qadianis who rejected the finality of the Prophet Muhammad's revelations (Roff 1967: 80, Rahimin Affandi 2006: 101).

Upon the Federation of Malaya gaining independence from Britain on 31 August 1957, the newly inaugurated Federal Constitution installed Islam as the state religion via Article 3(1). However, the precise implications of such a provision were never made clear. Documentary evidence can be put forward to argue that the drafters of the Constitution had never intended the clause to mean Islam undertaking a comprehensive role in the running of affairs of the nation (Fernando 2006), but its vagueness also meant that political leaders were given a free rein over the employment—or neglect—of Islam as a political tool.

FROM TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN TO ABDULLAH BADAWI

Under the country's founding father Tunku Abdul Rahman, Islam was politically marginalised in Malaysia. In 1965, he notoriously clamped down on the opposition

Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS: *Parti Islam SeMalaysia*) by authorising the Internal Security Act (ISA) detentions of its President Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy and Vice-President Raja Abu Hanifah. Whatever Tunku seemed to be lacking at home, he sought to compensate with Islamist activism abroad. Tunku Abdul Rahman was arguably the first Muslim head of government to float the idea of an Islamic commonwealth in 1961, giving rise to a series of Islamic conferences which culminated in the establishment of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) under the patronage of King Faysal of Saudi Arabia. Tunku's inaugural leadership of the OIC in 1971 to 1973 was reflective of the increasing importance Malaysia gave to Islamic unity among Muslim nation-states in the wake of humiliating losses suffered during the Six Day War of 1967 which led to the annexation of Jerusalem (*Al-Quds*).

Under Tunku's successor, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, there was an outpouring of petro-dollars from friendly Middle Eastern states which helped to fund a cornerstone of Tun Razak's domestic policy: the formulation of a National Cultural Policy (*Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan*) of which Islam became an integral part of a triumvirate ethos. The two other ethos were based on the importance of native culture and the acceptability of other non-indigenous cultural elements as part of national culture so long as they were appropriate (Mandal 2008: 277-278). **State-supported Islamic projects** such as the *Pusat Islam* (Islamic Centre) and the Islamic *Dakwah* Foundation of Malaysia (YADIM: *Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia*) became major recipients of aid distributed under the overseas development programmes of oil-rich Muslim nations such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Libya (Nair 1997: 62, 105; Hussin Mutalib 1990: 93). **By the late 1970s, Prime Minister Hussein Onn was bold enough to initiate a government-funded National *Dakwah* (Propagation) Month (Tasker 1979).**

Upon assuming the Premiership in July 1981, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad swiftly announced a slew of projects which are now deemed to have Islamised the country once and for all. These included the introduction of Islamic banking, insurance and pawnshop systems (1981-83), declaration of an official policy of 'instilling Islamic values into the government machinery' bearing the memorable slogans of *kepimpinan melalui teladan* (leadership by example) and *bersih, cekap dan amanah* (clean, efficient and trustworthy) (1984), the upgrading of the status of *sharia* courts and judges so as to be on par with their civil judiciary counterparts (1988), and the founding of Islamic think-tanks and educational institutions such as the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) (1983), the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC) and the Institute of Islamic Understanding of Malaysia (IKIM) (1992), (Hussin Mutalib 1990: 134-139, 142-144; Camroux 1996: 860-862). Under this Islamization drive, the rapidly expanding Islamic bureaucracy faithfully served the political elites' demands for uniformity. In 1997, the nerve of the federal government's Islamic policies, the Islamic Centre, was elevated to the Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (JAKIM: *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*) under the Prime Minister's Department.

Mahathir's successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, promulgated Islam Hadhari or 'civilisational Islam' as a fundamental tenet of his administration. By this time, however, the wheels of Islamic bureaucracy were already well-oiled and ever-prepared to act in adherence to politically slanted *fatwas* (Ahmad Fauzi 2009: 181-183). Since its implementation was almost entirely at the behest of this coterie of religious officials, Islam Hadhari became a repressive mechanism which effectively legalized wanton abuse of power against both non-Muslims and unorthodox Muslims.

Islam Hadhari was already a spent force before Abdullah's tenure as Prime Minister expired. *Barisan Nasional* (BN: National Front) and UMNO's disastrous election results in 2008 effectively ended the Islam Hadhari programme. In his final press conference as Prime Minister, Abdullah candidly voiced disappointment that Islam Hadhari had metamorphosed into a repressive tool of the state.¹ Unfortunately for Abdullah, the Islamist intelligentsia entrusted with making Islam Hadhari a success lacked both the intellectual sophistication and fortitude in portraying and applying the grand scheme as transcending ethno-religious barriers and suitable for all ethno-religious groups.² The lamentable fact was that Islam Hadhari failed in large measure due to the rise of reactionary Islamist conservatives made up essentially of UMNO ultra-conservatives, religious bureaucrats and a nascent Islamist civil society which colluded as a united force against the inclusive Islamic message that Abdullah Badawi had wanted to champion.

ENTER NAJIB RAZAK

Since assuming power on 2 April 2009, Najib Razak has introduced the 'One Malaysia' programme to reclaim support from non-Muslim voters disenchanted with the Islamist trajectory taken by Abdullah's administration. Najib is also aware of the need to maintain a semblance of Islamism and has sought to justify his 'One Malaysia' vision on an Islamic basis by categorically quoting from the Quran.³ In addition, Najib has been at pains to mollify stances adopted by Islamist conservatives who at times seem to threaten the moderate and inclusive path of his One Malaysia scheme. Having witnessed at first hand Abdullah Badawi's bitter removal by his own party comrades, Najib has chosen to emphasize his reformist credentials on the one hand and placate conservative factions within UMNO and the Islamist civil society on the other.

UMNO conservatives and Islamists are united in their stance that Malaysian Islam is under siege despite constitutional provisions safeguarding it. The clout of Islamist conservatives was earnestly demonstrated when, upon Tan Sri Harussani Zakaria's

¹ 'Pak Lah's final interview with the media as PM', *The Star*, 1 April 2009.

² 'Konsep Islam Hadhari sesuai semua kaum', *Mingguan Malaysia*, 2 December 2007.

³ See excerpts of an interview with Najib, 'Ikrar bawa pembaharuan', *Utusan Malaysia*, 14 October 2009.

admonition of Najib for attending the Hindu Thaipusam festival in Batu Caves in February 2012, Najib had to seek an audience with the Perak Mufti to explain his actions. Harussani had argued that the visit compromised Najib's Islamic faith.

Unlike Abdullah Badawi and Mahathir Mohamad, Najib has been severely handicapped in terms of Islamic legitimacy. Many Malay-Muslims regard Najib's intermittent references to Islam as mere lip service to allay fears of the Islamist constituency that he would be more sympathetic to a liberal and pluralist understanding of Islam. Furthermore, there was no significant mention of Islam in Najib's iconic policy declarations such as the ones on One Malaysia, the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) roadmap and the recent Bumiputra Economic Council (MEB: *Majlis Ekonomi Bumiputera*).

It is very likely that Islamists and UMNO conservatives alike are cognisant of Najib's weaknesses. As a result, they take it upon themselves to champion causes which they see as defending Islam's interests. The overall discursive turn of UMNO's religious wing in a more puritanical direction is worrying. Some young religious scholars previously identified by Malaysia's intelligence police as having links to the international Al-Qaeda network have chosen to join UMNO and were, apparently, welcomed by Najib with open arms (Al-Ghari 2011: 94).

In its newly found crusade, UMNO has been supported by a host of Islamist non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which have emerged in response to what they perceive as the whittling away of Islam's sovereignty as partly signified by the proliferation of liberal Muslim and secular humanist NGOs fighting for the human rights of groups marginalised in Malaysia's increasingly Islamist polity. These Islamist NGOs, on their part, invariably support the unofficial dogma of Malay supremacy which Najib neither clearly disowns nor espouses. Najib understands that verging to one of the extremes would be politically suicidal.

Ethno-religious relations in Malaysia have taken a downturn with these developments. Issues involving Malaysian Christians are a case in point. The 31 Dec 2009 High Court decision to permit the usage of the nomenclature 'Allah' as the Malay language reference to God in the Catholic publication *The Herald* triggered arson attacks on churches around the Klang valley in January 2010 (Maznah Mohamad 2010: 521-523). Following *Utusan Malaysia's* headline news on a conspiracy by an opposition party and a group of priests to turn Christianity into Malaysia's official religion, the Organisations for the Defence of Islam (PEMBELA: *Pertubuhan-pertubuhan Pembela Islam*) issued a statement claiming that Islam was under grave threat by aggressive Christian evangelism. The Malay rights NGO, the Organisation for Empowered Indigenous Peoples of Malaysia (PERKASA: *Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia*) also raised tensions by declaring its readiness to launch *jihad* against subversive Christian influence.

On 14 October 2013, the Court of Appeal momentarily overturned the High Court's 2009 verdict. In ruling that the word 'Allah' cannot be used by Christians as a

reference to God in the Malay language section of *The Herald*, the three-judge bench opined that the term 'Allah' was not integral to the faith and practice of Christianity. The judicial decision immediately put the vast numbers of Bumiputera Christians of Sabah and Sarawak in a dilemma, as they had been using the term in their native language liturgies for generations even before the incorporation of their states into Malaysia. Catholic Archbishop Murphy Pakiam was forthright in denouncing the ruling as amounting to a persecution of Christians.⁴ Fearing a massive loss of support from indigenous Christians who had overwhelmingly backed BN in the two most recent elections of 2008 and 2013, cabinet members from the Borneo states sought to assure them that the verdict applied only to *The Herald*, without affecting their religious practices in local churches.⁵ The Home Minister later joined the damage limitation exercise by affirming the limited applicability of the verdict,⁶ but such antics were dismissed by opposition figures as desperate attempts to salvage the Sabahan and Sarawakian vote banks.⁷ Retired legal experts including former Attorney General Abu Talib Othman, have, however, reiterated that all Malaysians are bound by the Court of Appeal ruling on the Allah issue.⁸

THE 13TH GENERAL ELECTIONS AND ITS AFTERMATH

Malaysia's 13th General Elections (GE13) held in May this year dealt a heavy blow to Najib Razak and the ruling BN coalition. While BN managed to retain power at the national level and snatch the state of Kedah away from opposition hands, its success was quickly over-shadowed by figures which showed that its tally of slightly more than 47 per cent of popular votes was less than the 51 per cent of popular

⁴ 'Statement on the Court of Appeal ruling – Archbishop Tan Sri Murphy Pakiam', <http://news.malaysia.msn.com/tmi/statement-on-the-court-of-appeal-ruling-%e2%80%93-archbishop-tan-sri-murphy-pakiam>, 21 October 2013 (accessed 22 October 2013).

⁵ 'Allah not exclusive to Muslims, government declares ban only applies to Herald', <http://news.malaysia.msn.com/malaysia-news/allah-not-exclusive-to-muslims-government-declares-ban-only-applies-to-herald>, 15 October 2013 (accessed 16 October 2013); 'Court's ruling on Allah does not affect East Malaysia, say Sabah ministers', <http://news.malaysia.msn.com/regional/court%e2%80%99s-ruling-on-allah-does-not-affect-east-malaysia-say-sabah-ministers>, 17 October 2013 (accessed 18 October 2013); 'Okay for Bahasa services in peninsula churches to continue using Allah in worship, says minister', <http://news.malaysia.msn.com/tmi/okay-for-bahasa-services-in-peninsula-churches-to-continue-using-allah-in-worship-says-minister>, 21 October 2013 (accessed 22 October 2013).

⁶ 'Home Minister insists Allah ban exclusive to Herald', <http://news.malaysia.msn.com/tmi/home-minister-insists-allah-ban-exclusive-to-herald>, 21 October 2013 (accessed 22 October 2013).

⁷ Cf. 'Wan Junaidi's remark on Allah issue is "complete trash", says Tony Pua', <http://news.malaysia.msn.com/malaysia-news/wan-junaidi%e2%80%99s-remark-on-allah-issue-is-%e2%80%9ccomplete-trash%e2%80%9d-says-tony-pua>, 16 October 2013 (accessed 16 October 2013).

⁸ 'Allah judgment flawed, can jeopardise Najib's job, say jurists', <http://news.malaysia.msn.com/malaysia-news/allah-judgment-flawed-can-jeopardise-najib%e2%80%99s-job-say-jurists>, 16 October 2013 (accessed 16 October 2013); 'Allah decision binding on all Malaysians, says retired AG Abu Talib', <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/allah-decision-binding-on-all-malaysians-says-retired-ag-abu-talib>, 19 October 2013 (accessed 26 October 2013); 'Putrajaya desperately back-peddalling over Allah issue, say constitutional lawyers', <http://news.malaysia.msn.com/malaysia-news/putrajaya-desperately-back-peddalling-over-allah-issue-say-constitutional-lawyers>, 21 October 2013 (accessed 22 October 2013).

votes bagged by the Anwar Ibrahim-led *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR: People's Pact) alliance. Nonetheless, UMNO still managed to improve on its performance by contributing 88 out of BN's 133 seats as compared with 79 out of 140 in 2008. UMNO had actually benefited, at the expense of its non-Muslim partners, from its discursive slide towards Islamist conservatism which struck a chord among Malay-Muslims who resided in favourably represented electoral semi-urban and rural areas (Chin 2013).

The GE13 campaign served to highlight the espousal of UMNO's socially divisive turn towards conservatism. Reacting to the ethnic Chinese voters' desertion of BN, Najib unhesitatingly employed the term 'Chinese tsunami' to describe the outcome of GE13 (Tan 2013). Rather than chiding *Utusan Malaysia* for flashing the racially inflammatory headline, 'Apa lagi Cina mau?' (What else do the Chinese want?), Najib Razak sought to divert attention to the equally divisive statements issued by the Chinese press, thus absolving *Utusan* of effective blame. Najib Razak had earlier endorsed PERKASA Deputy President Zulkifli Nordin's candidacy as BN-UMNO's candidate in a high-profile duel against PAS leader Khalid Samad for the Shah Alam parliamentary seat at a time when controversy surrounding Zulkifli's purported statement demeaning the Hindu religion, which went viral over the internet, was still fresh in the minds of many people.

Since GE13, the discourse strewn by the UMNO-linked vernacular media has dangerously slid down the path of ethnocentrism and intolerance. Several tense episodes related to alleged intensification of Christian missionary activities in the country and the misuse of Muslim prayer facilities for non-Muslim worshipping purposes were interpreted by spokesmen of official Islam as being pre-meditated in spite of arguments by open-minded Muslim scholars and public figures cautioning against the Islamic officialdom's over-reaction. In the words of Dr. Abdul Shukor Hussein, Chairman of the National Fatwa Committee, "Denigration of Islam is rising in this country because of lax law enforcement. As a result, adherents of other religions are not afraid of mocking Islam which is this country's official religion."⁹

The coterminous nature between Islam and Malay ethnicity has meant that such anti-Muslim tirade was bound to be inexorably tied to the spectre of an anti-Malay conspiracy to undermine the Malay-Islamic basis of the nation. As one Sharif Tojan exhorted his fellow Malays in *Utusan*, "Forget National Reconciliation. On the contrary, strengthen Malay Unity. Re-activate the National Civics Bureau. This is our last fort against these racist Chinese. Also, learn and adopt Mahathir's strategies."¹⁰ In urging the UMNO Youth and Women's Section to be more aggressive in defending Malay rights, another columnist alluded to the Chinese as having betrayed the

⁹ In the original Malaysian language, "*Penghinaan terhadap Islam semakin menjadi-jadi di negara ini kerana penguatkuasaan undang-undang yg lemah. Berikutan itu, penganut agama lain tidak takut untuk mempersendakan Islam yang menjadi agama rasmi di negara ini*", 'Percaya kes hina Islam dirancang', *Berita Harian*, 13 August 2013.

¹⁰ In its original imprint, mixing English with the Malaysian language, "*Lupakan National Reconciliation. Sebaliknya, Strengthen Malay Unity. Gerakkan semula Biro Tatanegara, This is our last fort against these racist Chinese. Also, Learn and Adopt Mahathir's strategies*," letter to the editor, *Utusan Malaysia*, 7 May 2013.

Malays: “There is no use in pacifying others and neglecting our own race when later they sideline us without any sense of guilt” (Razak Rashid Ghows 2013).¹¹ Ironically, half a century after competing for the loyalties of the Malay-Muslim masses, UMNO and PAS have changed positions in the ‘moderate versus radical’ ideological spectrum. While UMNO appears to be contented with securing and further solidifying its Malay-Muslim base as a regime preservation strategy, PAS has made inroads amongst non-Malays by virtue of its participation in the multi-racial PR alliance. In contrast to UMNO’s perceived hostility to non-Malays who sought to mobilize their communities along religious lines, PAS has been busy building bridges with non-Muslim community leaders (Netto 2013). Some of its more progressive leaders such as Mujahid Yusof Rawa have even risked traditional Muslim sensitivities by conducting inter-faith dialogues in churches.¹² This is a far cry from the prevailing state of affairs since the early post-independence years which saw a liberal UMNO being pitted against a PAS which was constantly portrayed as ethnocentric (cf. Ratnam 1969: 356). This exchange of ideological positions from a moderate to radical UMNO—and from an extremist to moderate PAS—deserves to be remembered as one of the striking paradoxes of modern Malaysian politics. This is notwithstanding the constant internal challenges that PAS reformists have continued to face from the party’s own ulama old guard whose views on the ‘Allah’ issue converge with those of the UMNO conservatives.¹³

CONCLUSION

By virtue of historical antecedents which led to unique constitutional arrangements as Malaya approached independence in 1957, the place of Islam in Malaysian politics has been and will continue to be a *fait accompli*. Successive Prime Ministers have managed Islam in the way they feel best reflect the constitutional provisions pertaining to it. By the time Najib Razak inherited the national leadership from Abdullah Badawi in April 2009, Islamism—i.e. the political face of Islam—was a force that had stealthily made its way deep into structures and institutions which had linkages to the state, government and ruling party. From a *pariah* movement shunned by Western-educated Malays who dominated the levers of power via UMNO, the civil service and the UMNO-linked media, political Islam has today emerged as a pivotal political force intent on changing the face of Malaysia towards a more Islamically-inclined polity.

¹¹ In the original Malaysian language, “*Tiada gunanya kita cuba menjaga hati orang lain dan mengabaikan bangsa sendiri sedangkan mereka mengenyepikan kita tanpa ada perasaan bersalah*”, *Berita Harian*, 10 July 2013.

¹² ‘Why this Muslim goes to churches to build goodwill’, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/why-this-muslim-goes-to-churches-to-build-goodwill>, 5 October 2013 (accessed 14 October 2013).

¹³ ‘Harun Din tegaskan kalimah Allah eksklusif untuk umat Islam’, http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/Dalam_Negeri/20131018/dn_15/Haron-Din-tegaskan-kalimah-Allah-eksklusif-untuk-umat-Islam, 18 October 2013 (accessed 26 October 2013).

For some of its proponents, such an entity necessarily takes the form of a juridical Islamic state. For an Islamist state to materialise in the near future, it would not be too far-fetched to say that—given current developments—the threat would come from UMNO and its religious proxies in state institutions rather than from PAS and its allies in PR.

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