

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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## **Johor Survey 2017: Attitudes Towards Islam, Governance And The Sultan**

*Norshahril Saat\**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- A recent survey of registered voters in Johor polled respondents' views on the role of Islam, on governance and on the Johor Sultan.
- A majority continue to hold the Johor royal family in high esteem. However, they may not necessarily agree with the Sultan's views on Arabisation, the federal religious bureaucracy JAKIM, and Islamisation.
- The survey results reflect a rising conservatism among Johor Malays, who prefer to see Muslims holding key leadership positions in the Johor government and the implementation of hudud (punitive Islamic laws which includes stoning, amputation, and whipping) in the state.
- Johor residents are divided along religious lines. Political parties eyeing seats in the upcoming elections will need to take a moderate stance on religion, and not play to the conservative Malay ground. Playing the Islamic card may win more Muslim votes but only at the expense of non-Muslim ones.

*\* Norshahril Saat is a fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. The author wishes to thank Ms Pearlyn Y. Pang, research officer, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, for her research assistance.*

## INTRODUCTION

In March 2016, the Sultan of Johor, Ibrahim Iskandar, expressed concern over rising Islamic conservatism among Malaysian Malays. He feared that they were losing their cultural identity by imitating Arabs and neglecting Malay cultural practices.<sup>1</sup> The Sultan remarked: “If there are some of you who wish to be an Arab and practise Arab culture, and do not wish to follow our Malay custom and traditions, that is up to you. I also welcome you to live in Saudi Arabia.”<sup>2</sup> The Sultan also expressed worry over growing Islamisation in the country and the rate of JAKIM’s expansion.<sup>3</sup> He asked why JAKIM needed a budget of RM 1 billion (S\$322 million) when Islam is a matter for the state (*negeri*) and is not under the purview of the federal government.<sup>4</sup>

There are two central questions here. First, do Johor residents agree with the Sultan’s views on Islam, and what does this mean for the Sultan’s authority? According to the Constitution, the administration of Islam falls under the Malay Rulers. Hence, the Johor Sultan has the power to appoint members of the Islamic Religious Councils and the mufti (Chief Ulama or religious scholar).<sup>5</sup> In addition, Johor has always been the bastion of traditionalist Islam.<sup>6</sup> The state’s religious leaders are open to infusing Islamic beliefs with Malay cultural practices, rituals, and arts.

Second, what does growing religiosity mean for politics in Johor? To be sure, how Johor Malays prioritise their Islamic identity may affect the strategies political parties adopt in the next elections. So how will UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and Malay-dominant opposition parties—PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia), Amanah (National Trust Party), and PBBM (Malaysian United Indigenous Party)—respond to growing religiosity among Johor residents?

In 2017, the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute commissioned the Merdeka Centre in Malaysia to conduct a survey to understand political, social, and economic trends in Johor. Among

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<sup>1</sup> The Sultan opined that the Malays are no longer using Malay words such as *hari raya* (a day of celebration at the end of Ramadhan) and *buka puasa* (the breaking of the fast); instead they prefer the Arabic translations *eidul fitri* and *iftar*.

<sup>2</sup> Malaymail Online, “Stop aping Arabs, Johor Sultan tells Malays,”

<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/stop-aping-arabs-johor-sultan-tells-malays#QQWbrX7314Cz5s4U.97>, (accessed: 26 September 2017). The Sultan’s comments mirror some analysts’ growing fear that the Malay/Muslim community in Malaysia is becoming exclusivist. Islamic leaders from Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu have already asked for *hudud* laws (punitive Islamic laws that include stoning, caning, and amputation) to be implemented in their states. Johor politicians may also propose similar laws if Johor Muslims ask for them.

<sup>3</sup> JAKIM is a federal Islamic department.

<sup>4</sup> Malaymail Online “Johor Sultan: Why does JAKIM need RM 1b budget,”

<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/johor-sultan-why-does-JAKIM-need-rm1b-budget#HMrGDIEK34aZ6g5C.97> (accessed: 27 September 2017)

<sup>5</sup> According to the Malaysian Federal Constitution, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (King) oversees Islam for Malacca, Penang, Sabah, Sarawak and the Federal Territory—states not helmed by any Malay Ruler.

<sup>6</sup> Norshahril Saat, *Johor Remains a Bastion of Kaum Tua, Trends in Southeast Asia*, No 1 (Singapore: ISEAS, 2017)

other issues, it studied Johor Muslims' religious orientation, perceptions of Arabisation, Islamic bureaucracy, identity and shariah laws. It looked at Johor residents' perception of their Sultan and his influence. This 2017 survey is a follow-up to a similar one conducted in 2013.

## **METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE**

This survey was conducted in May-June 2017. A sample of 2,011 respondents were interviewed via fixed-line and mobile phones. The respondents consisted of Malaysian citizens aged 18 and above who resided in Johor. They were selected based on random stratified sampling across district of residence, controlled by quota for ethnicity, age and gender. A 'Johor resident' is defined as one who is registered as a voter in the state. There were 1104 (55%) ethnic Malay respondents, 758 (38%) ethnic Chinese respondents, and 149 (7%) ethnic Indian respondents. 340 respondents were between the ages of 21-30 years old; 455 respondents were between the ages of 31-40 years old; 546 respondents were between the ages of 41-50 years old; 409 respondents were between the ages of 51-60 years old; and 261 respondents were 61 years old and above. The survey's estimated margin of error is +2.18.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF THE SULTAN**

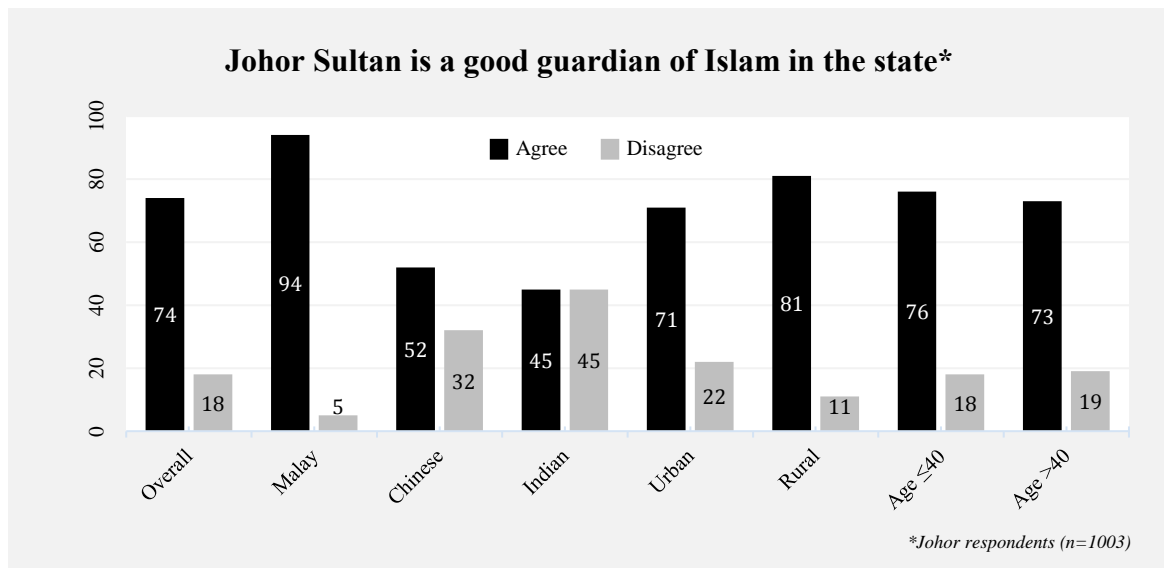
In all states (*negeri*) in Malaysia, the Malay Rulers are heads of Islam and Malay culture. And in that position, the Johor Sultan appoints members of the Majlis Agama Islam Johor (MAIJ or Islamic Religious Council of Johor) and the Johor mufti, who is also the council's ex-officio member. MAIJ's role is to issue fatwas (legal Islamic rulings). These are published in the state's gazette and can be enforced as law by the Islamic religious bureaucracy. The relationship between the Johor mufti and the royal family is close with the former being involved in almost every court ceremony.<sup>7</sup> The Mufti also leads prayers in formal events held at the palace. However, when the Sultan told Johor Malays not to mimic the Arabs, the Johor Mufti did not issue any comments.

The willingness of the Johor Sultan to speak assertively on Islam may stem from the trust he enjoys from residents to safeguard Islam. Respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement "The Johor Sultan is a good guardian of Islam in the state". An overwhelming 94 percent of Malay respondents agree with the statement (see Figure 1). The Johor Sultan is unique in that he is one of very few Malay Rulers who speak authoritatively, alongside his own Mufti, on Islam and its issues.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, in 2015, during the coronation of the current Johor Sultan, Mufti Dato' M Tahrir Samsudin placed the crown on the Sultan's head. See *Bernama*, "Istiadat Kemahkotaan Berlangsung Gilang Gemilang," 23 March 2015

**Figure 1**



The 2017 survey also revealed that the Johor Sultan was viewed favourably by respondents in terms of leadership. Specifically, the survey asked respondents to rank the leadership of public figures ranging from the Sultan, Khaled Nordin the Mentri Besar of Johor, their legislative assemblymen, their members of Parliament, the opposition members in their legislative assembly and Parliament. 46 per cent of respondents ranked the Johor royal family first in terms of leadership, above Khaled Nordin (see Figure 2). 50 per cent of respondents from the eastern parts of Johor, mostly the rural Malays, also felt that the Johor royal family performed better than the Chief Minister and politicians (see Figure 3). In fact, more than 83 per cent of Johor residents across all ethnic backgrounds expressed their satisfaction with the royal family, with nine in ten Johor Malays shared their happiness with the Ruler’s performance too (see Figure 4).

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**Figure 2**

**Performance of Johor political leaders\***

Leaders	1st	2nd	3rd
The Johor royal family	46%	14%	5%
Khaled Nordin as current Menteri Besar of Johor	19%	34%	6%
The state legislative assembly person in your area	5%	6%	23%

\*Johor respondents (n=1003)

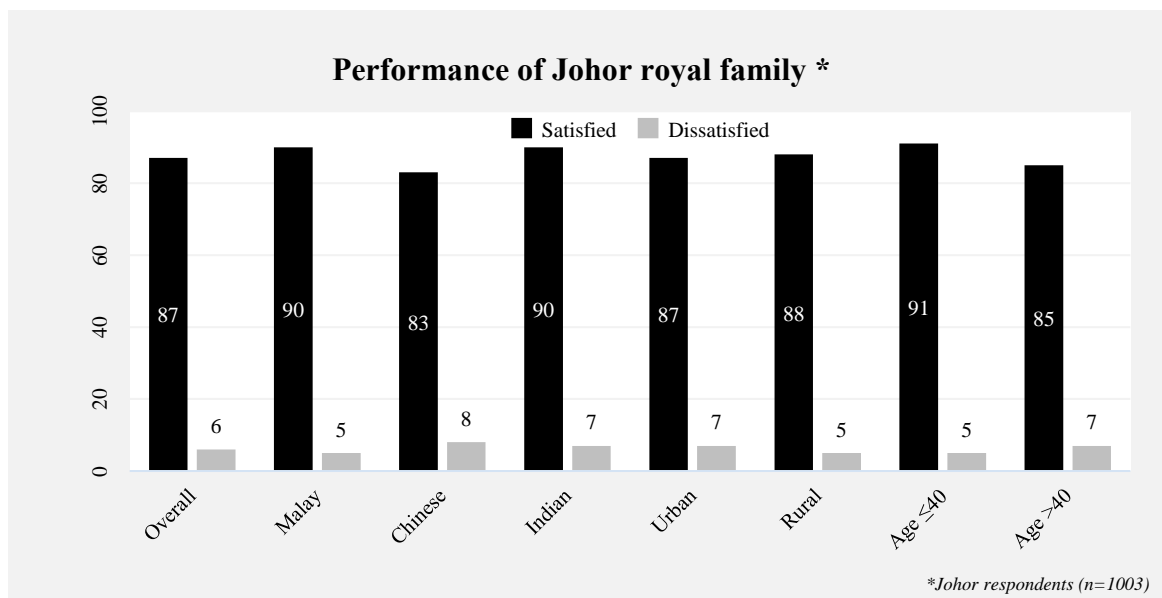
**Figure 3**

**Performance of Johor political leaders by East respondents\***

Leaders	1st	2nd	3rd
The Johor royal family	53%	13%	8%
Khaled Nordin as current Menteri Besar of Johor	23%	39%	7%
The state legislative assembly person in your area	5%	9%	25%

\*East respondents (n=300)

**Figure 4**



\*Johor respondents (n=1003)

However, the survey findings suggest that the Sultan’s high approval ratings does not indicate Johor residents’ endorsement of his views on Islam. The differences between the Sultan’s and respondents’ views on Islam largely lie in the role Islam should play in affairs of state. In the following sections, I juxtapose the Sultan’s views on Islam that have been expressed publicly with how Johor residents appear to view similar issues.

## ARABISATION OF MALAYSIAN ISLAM

The 2017 survey reveals that Johor residents, particularly Malay respondents, are becoming more religious, if not more conservative. 51 percent of Johor residents living in the eastern parts of the state regard their religious identity to be most significant compared to their identity as Malaysians or Johoreans (see Figure 5).<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 5**

**Personal identities for East Respondents\***

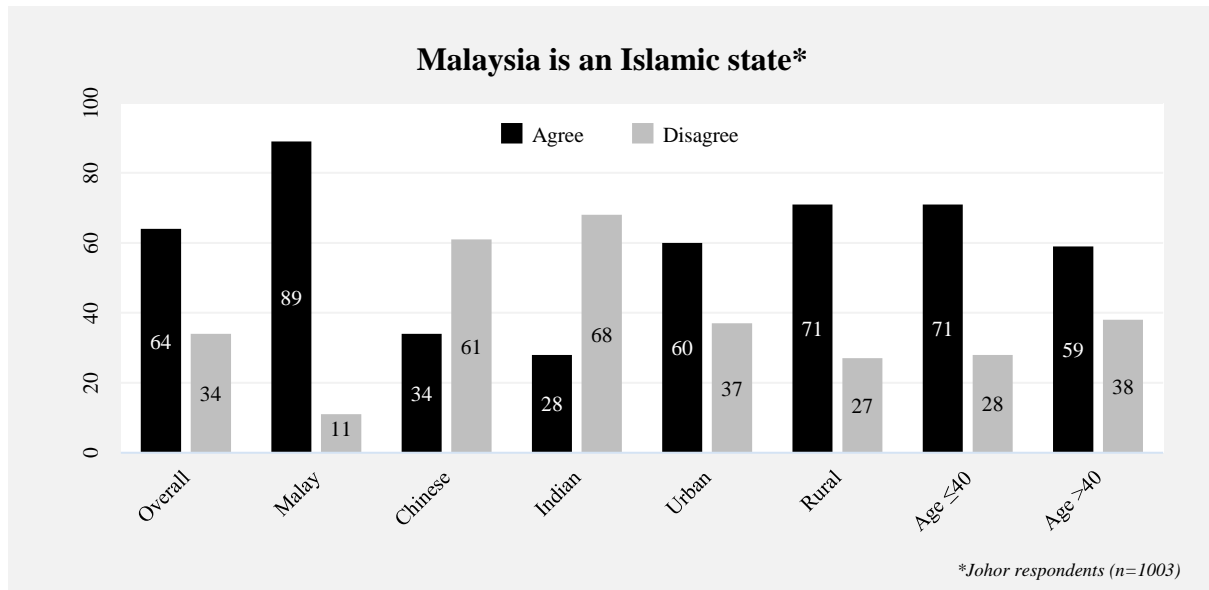
<b>Identities</b>	<b>1st</b>	<b>2nd</b>	<b>3rd</b>	<b>4th</b>
Religion (Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, others)	51%	16%	16%	10%
Bangsa Johor	19%	41%	29%	7%
Malaysian citizen	25%	22%	27%	22%
Ethnicity (Malay, Chinese, Indian, others)	4%	18%	20%	51%

\*East respondents (n=300)

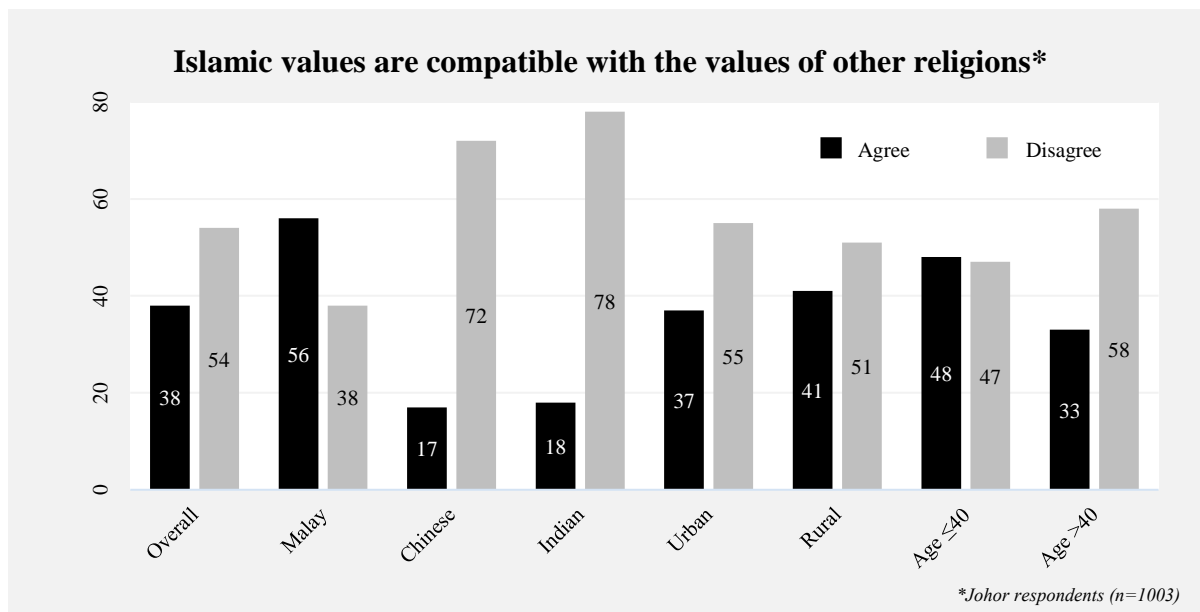
When asked if Malaysia is an Islamic state, 89 percent of Malay respondents surveyed believe that it is, compared to 34 percent of Chinese respondents and 28 percent of Indian respondents (see Figure 6). A majority of the Malays respondents (56 percent) also agree with the statement “Islamic values are compatible with values of other religions”, while only 17 percent and 18 percent of Chinese and Indian respondents, respectively, agree (see Figure 7). The Malays may be referring to the Quranic view that Islam is an all-encompassing religion (*ad-deen*). Yet, it is unclear whether they are acknowledging the religion’s universal values such as human rights, freedom of belief, and right to privacy; or downplaying the other religions by suggesting Islam’s supremacy over them. If the Malays continue to uphold the second interpretation, this could mean greater religious segregation in the future, and a denial of the rights of non-Muslims.

<sup>8</sup> By contrast, more than 35 percent of Johor residents identify themselves as Malaysian citizens first, more than those who identify themselves as Johor residents first.

**Figure 6**



**Figure 7**

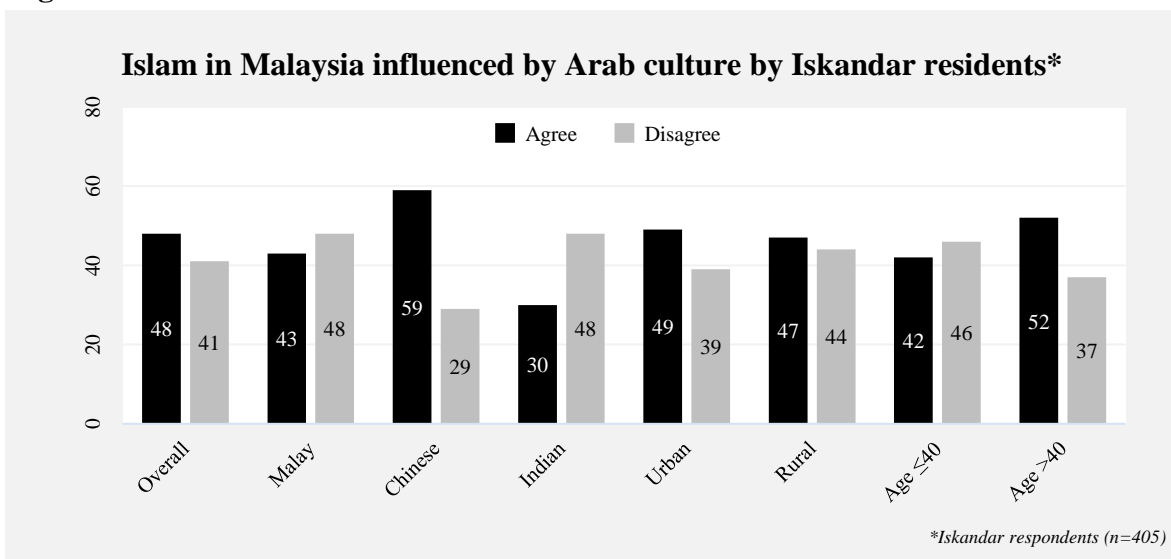


The 2017 survey also asked if “Increased Islamic religiosity is a positive development in Malaysia?”. Unsurprisingly, 90 percent of Malay respondents agree with the statement. Conversely, 79 percent and 68 percent of Chinese and Indian respondents, respectively, disagree with the statement. These patterns generally apply across Johor, regardless of whether the respondents are from rural or urban parts of the state. To be sure, there are groups in Johor lobbying for Islam to have a greater role in state affairs. After all, Johor

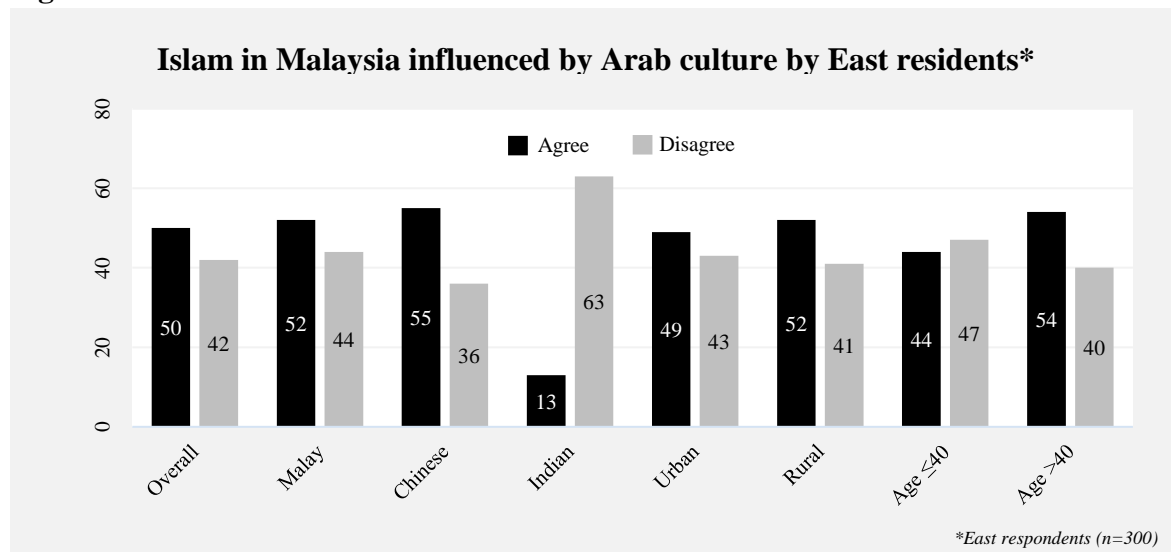
Malays seem to concur with the federal government’s recent move to enhance Malaysia’s Islamic identity by raising shariah standards.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps more instructively, the 2017 survey broached the issue of Arabisation. As mentioned earlier, the Sultan had expressed concern that Malays are losing their cultural identity because they are copying dressing and ideas from the Middle East. The survey asked if respondents agree or disagree with the statement “Is Malay culture becoming Arabised?” Malay respondents from urban areas do not see Islam in Malaysia as being influenced by Arab culture (see Figure 8), however, though more rural Malay respondents agree with the Sultan (see Figure 9).

**Figure 8**



**Figure 9**



<sup>9</sup> Here, I am referring to Prime Minister Najib Razak’s support for PAS Private members’ bill in parliament to increase the punishments for ACT 355.



Arguably, Malay respondents perceive Arabisation differently from how analysts, scholars, and the Sultan view the issue. The latter group sees Arabisation as a negative development while the Malay respondents may consider Arabisation as either positive or neutral. This could also be a sign that the latter is out of touch with the views of the masses. One must go back to the history of Islamisation in Johor to understand the Malay perspective. The Hadramis (Arabs from Yemen) had shaped the religious life of Johor Muslims for centuries. In bringing Islam to the Malay world, they emphasised sufism and tariqah orders. Four of its past 12 muftis were Sayyids having links with Hadrami families and were descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. These muftis come from prominent al-Haddad and Al-Attas families.<sup>10</sup>

As such, Johor Malays do not equate Arabisation with Wahhabi-Salafism as is commonly perceived. Johor’s religious authorities have published several books emphasising the importance of tariqah orders, spirituality and sufism, which Wahhabi-Salafi followers frown upon. They are also open to grave visits, the celebration of Prophet’s birthday (*maulid*), and communal feasting (*kenduri*) which puritans declare as “innovations” (*bid’ah*) and which are therefore forbidden in Islam. MAIJ has banned Wahhabi-Salafi-inclined preachers in Johor, and these include prominent scholars such as Ustaz Rasul Dahri; Perlis Mufti Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin; and UMNO politician Dr Fathul Bari Mat Jahaya.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, the survey found that Johor residents, regardless of ethnicity, see Middle East countries as role models. 23 percent of Johor residents rate Saudi Arabia as their number one model country, followed by Egypt and Turkey (see Figure 10). For urban Johor residents living in the North-west and the Iskandar region, Egypt is ranked higher than Saudi Arabia. Indonesia is at number four, followed by Pakistan. Iran appears to be the least favoured country. The fact that Iran falls behind other countries is not due to how it is viewed in terms of level of development, but more of its Shia identity. Shiism is seen as a deviant sect by many religious authorities in Malaysia.

**Figure 10**

**Top 3 Muslim countries as role models for Malaysia\***

Countries	1st	2nd	3rd
Saudi Arabia	23%	20%	10%
Turkey	12%	11%	18%
Egypt	19%	9%	7%
Indonesia	11%	9%	7%
Pakistan	2%	5%	5%
Iran	2%	5%	4%

\*Johor respondents (n=1003)

<sup>10</sup> Norshahril Saat, *Johor Remains a Bastion of Kaum Tua*, Iseas trends, No 1 (Singapore: ISEAS, 2017)

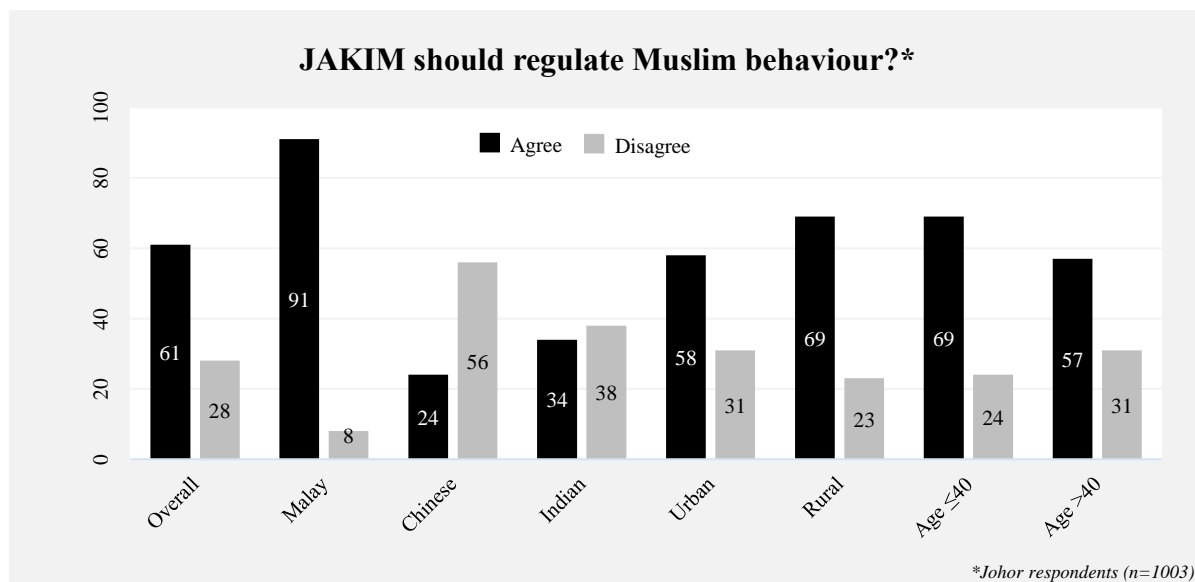
<sup>11</sup> The Malaymailonline, “Mufti Perlis, exco Pemuda Umno dilarang ceramah di Johor,” <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/projekmmo/berita/article/Mufti-perlis-exco-pemuda-umno-dilarang-ceramah-di-johor> (Date Accessed: 25 October 2016).

The high ratings given for Saudi Arabia can be interpreted in many ways. First, this could be a sign of Malay respondents’ attachment to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The rise of middle class Malays means that they are better travelled, with Saudi Arabia being one of their top destinations. Second, their regard for Saudi Arabia can be economically driven. In 2017, the Saudi government promised huge investments in Malaysia’s oil refinery industry. Saudi oil company, Aramco, agreed to purchase 50 percent of Petronas’ Refinery & Petrochemical Integrated Development (RAPID) project to be situated in Pengerang Johor. Johor will be a regional hub for oil and gas refinery.<sup>12</sup> This means that Saudi investments guarantee job opportunities for those living in the state.

### ISLAM AND PUBLIC POLICY

Expressing a deep commitment to religion, Malay respondents across the state want the federal religious authority JAKIM to regulate Muslims moral behaviour. This can be interpreted as a desire for the government to boost the authority and finances of Islamic religious departments and councils, both at the state and federal levels. As such, the survey findings seem to countat odds with the views of the Sultan of Johor, who demands greater accountability for JAKIM’s RM 1 billion (S\$322 million) budget. Instead, Malays respondents want JAKIM to play a greater role in the affairs of the state while Chinese and Indians respondents reject the call for an increased role for JAKIM in regulating Muslim behaviour. Johor residents living in the rural parts of the state want JAKIM’s role enhanced more than those living in the urban areas (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11**

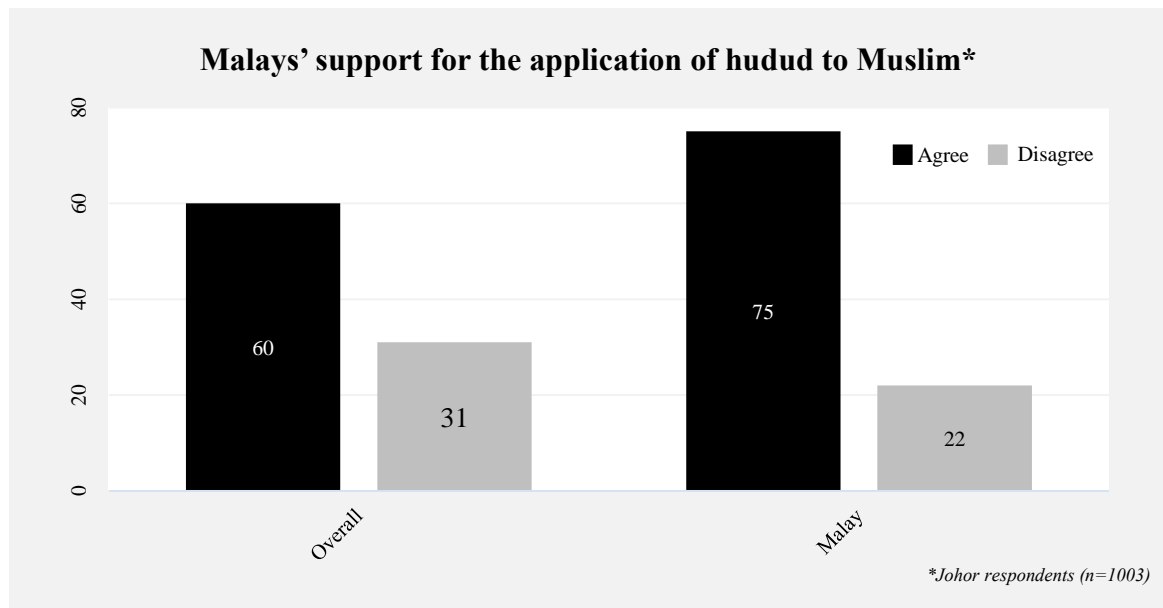


Reflecting the growth of religious conservatism among the Malays, three quarters of the Malay respondents surveyed demand that hudud laws be applied to Muslims (see Figure

<sup>12</sup> *Utusan Malaysia*, “Perjanjian R31b dimeterai,” 1 March 2017.

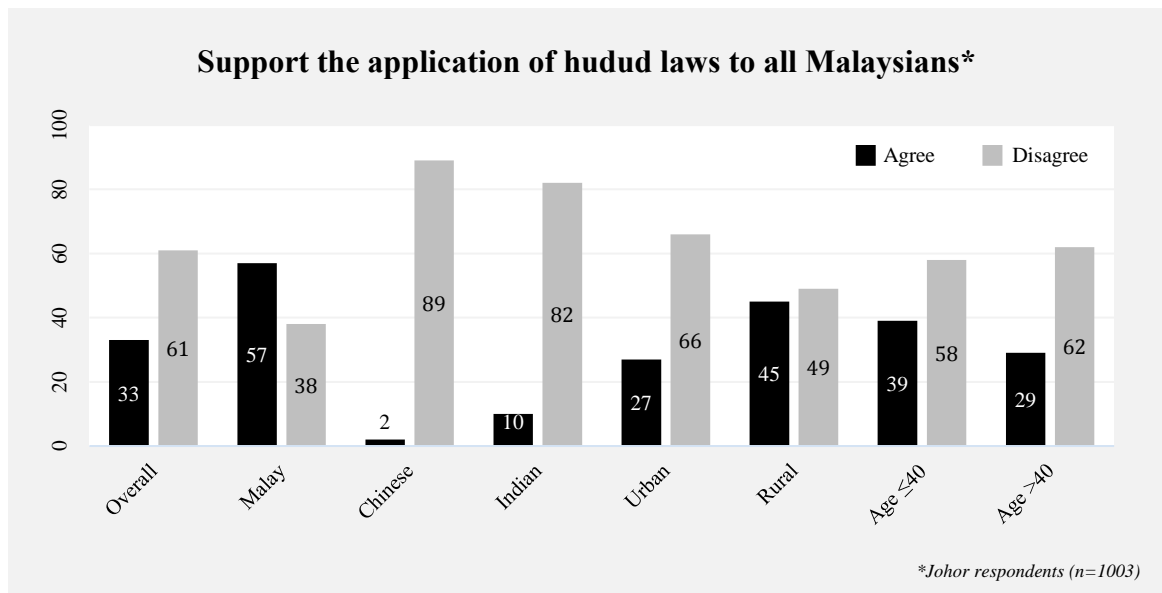
12). They believe that the ancient laws remain relevant even though criminal laws have evolved. Hudud punishments are mentioned in the Quran but some scholars have pointed out that the laws were relevant in societies when the Quran was revealed 14 centuries ago. Progressive scholars also highlight the fact that the punishments were rarely executed during the time of the Prophet Muhammad who often forgave sinners. Yet, Malay respondents continue to believe in the necessity for such laws. Interestingly, the survey shows that even Johor Malays, considered more urbanised and developed, are calling for the punitive Islamic laws to be implemented by the local government.

**Figure 12**



In fact, 57 percent of Johor Malays want hudud laws to be applied to all Malaysians, regardless of religion (see Figure 13). This view is clearly expressed by Johor Malays living the East, and they are mainly rural Malays. Such opinions question Johor Malays' view towards religious freedom, and they seem eager to push their beliefs on non-Muslims. This high percentage spells that intolerance is brewing in the state, especially when what is perceived as Islamic law to be imposed on those who do not believe in the religion.

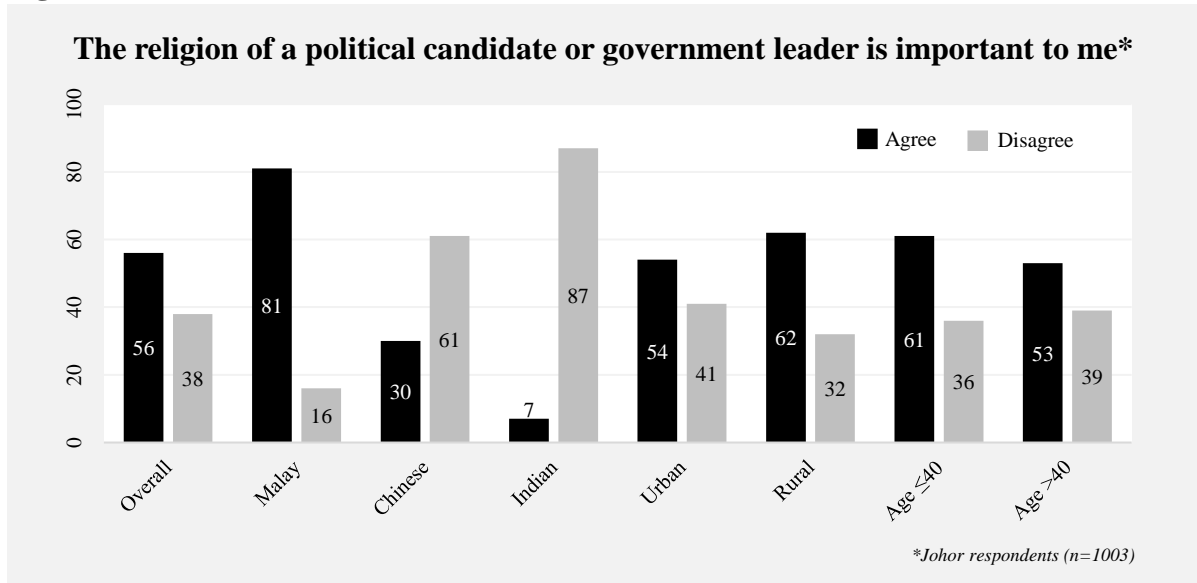
**Figure 13**



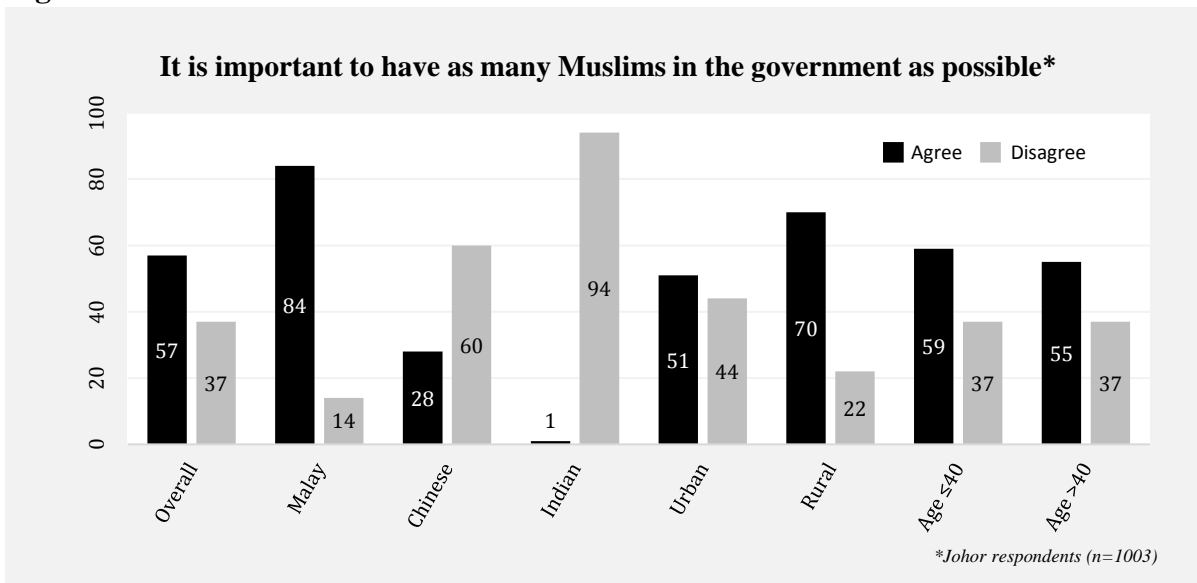
The Chinese and Indian communities have overwhelmingly rejected the move to implement hudud laws. 66 percent of urban Johor respondents are also against hudud laws being applied to non-Muslims. The 2017 survey also reveal that 81 percent Malay respondents feel that the religion of the political candidates is important (see Figure 14). While the Chinese respondents are more likely to disagree with this, Indian respondents tend to agree with the Malay respondents. It must be pointed out that according to the constitutional definition, Malays are Muslims. 84 percent of the Malays respondents also feel that Muslims should occupy a majority of state government seats. 60 percent of Chinese respondents disagree with this, while an overwhelming 94 percent of Indians disagree (see Figure 15). It remains unclear whether the Sultan will entertain such exclusivist ideas on leadership. Recently, the Sultan spoke against a launderette welcoming only Muslim patrons and demanded a public apology from the launderette.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *The Star*, “This is no Taliban state,” 27 September 2017

**Figure 14**



**Figure 15**



## CONCLUSION: STATE-ISLAM RELATIONS IN JOHOR

It is evident from the 2017 survey that Johor Malays are becoming more conservative. In the past, such conservatism was associated only with Malays living in the East coast states of Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah. Johor Malays are also becoming more exclusivist as shown in their views towards Muslim-majority leadership and the implementation of hudud laws. Yet, exclusivism does not necessarily mean attraction to Wahhabi-Salafi ideas. Johor Muslims may be Sufis—a belief linked to spirituality and openness—and yet be exclusivist in outlook. And even though Johor Malays express admiration for their Sultan, they do not agree with him on two fronts: the role of JAKIM and Arabisation.

There is much that political parties can learn from the trends stated above. While Malays are becoming more conservative, Malaysian politicians must not pander to the Malay voters' conservatism at the expense of Chinese and Indian votes. The survey shows that public sentiments remain divided along racial lines. The political parties that may benefit from the Malays' request for hudud and an Islamic state are PAS and UMNO, with both playing their Islamic cards through the ACT 355 issue. However, the move by both parties to win over Malay conservatives may not get the consent of the Sultan who wants to steer Johor away from exclusivism. Finally, urban Malays are more open to other ethnic groups compared to rural Malays in the East. Opposition parties like DAP, PBBM and Amanah may appeal more to urban Malays and to Chinese and Indians. The party that appeals to moderate Malays, as well as the Chinese and Indian voters will do well in Johor.

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