

ISSN 0219-3213

2017 no. 1

Trends in  
Southeast Asia

JOHOR REMAINS THE BASTION OF  
*KAUM TUA*

NORSHHRIL SAAT

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

# Trends in Southeast Asia

*The **ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute** (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) was established in 1968. It is an autonomous regional research centre for scholars and specialists concerned with modern Southeast Asia. The Institute's research is structured under Regional Economic Studies (RES), Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS) and Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and through country-based programmes. It also houses the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC), Singapore's APEC Study Centre, as well as the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (NSC) and its Archaeology Unit.*

2017 no. 1

Trends in  
Southeast Asia

JOHOR REMAINS THE BASTION OF  
*KAUM TUA*

NORSHHRIL SAAT

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

Published by: ISEAS Publishing  
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119614  
publish@iseas.edu.sg <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

© 2017 ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission.

The author is wholly responsible for the views expressed in this book which do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher.

---

### **ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

---

Norshahril Saat.

Johor Remains the Bastion of *Kaum Tua*.

(Trends in Southeast Asia, 0219-3213 ; TRS 1/17)

1. Salafīyah—Malaysia—Johor.
2. Islamic fundamentalism—Malaysia—Johor.
3. Islam and politics—Malaysia—Johor.

I. Title.

II. Series: Trends in Southeast Asia ; TRS 1/17.

DS501 I59T no. 1(2017)

January 2017

ISBN 978-981-47-6288-5 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-47-6289-2 (e-book, PDF)

---

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press Pte Ltd

# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The **Trends in Southeast Asia** series acts as a platform for serious analyses by selected authors who are experts in their fields. It is aimed at encouraging policy makers and scholars to contemplate the diversity and dynamism of this exciting region.

## *THE EDITORS*

Series Chairman:

Tan Chin Tiong

Series Editors:

Ooi Kee Beng

Lee Hock Guan

Editorial Committee:

Terence Chong

Francis E. Hutchinson

Daljit Singh

Copy Editors:

Veena Nair

Kenneth Poon Jian Li



# Johor Remains the Bastion of *Kaum Tua*

By Norshahril Saat

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Many scholars on Malaysia have recognized that Salafism-Wahhabism has penetrated substantially into the country's political and social life.
- The southern state of Johor has always been considered, and remains, the bastion of *kaum tua*, with its religious institutions dominated by *ulama* (religious scholars) who are traditionalist in character but tolerant of religious practices that are infused with local culture and mysticism. These scholars have also tended to maintain conservative attitudes on gender issues, inter-religious relations, and intra-faith differences.
- The Sultan of Johor appoints the Mufti whose primary role is to issue *fatwas* (religious rulings) and be the ex-officio of the Johor Islamic Religious Council, the highest Islamic body in the state. Johor's Muftis are dominantly political quietists, and loyal to the ruling family.
- Occasional interventions by the Sultan of Johor in the religious sphere have proved crucial in ensuring that the state maintains its Malay character. The Sultan also acts to protect the state's religious institutions from encroachment by the federal government.





# Johor Remains the Bastion of *Kaum Tua*

By Norshahril Saat<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In 1916, Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah,<sup>2</sup> an Islamic religious scholar (*ulama*) from Sumatra, made a sneering remark about the Mufti of Johor. “To become a Government Mufti in Malaya is a great glory,” he said. “You have an official uniform, with a whole banana-comb of epaulettes on the shoulder, a *jubbah* [Arabic-style garment] embroidered with gold thread, a silk turban, and your own car. The *ra’ayat* [people] fear and obey you, eat the scraps from your table, your spat of *sireh* [betel leaf]. And if you want to get married...*Bismillah* [anytime with God’s consent].”<sup>3</sup>

Muftis are religious scholars (*ulama*) whose role is to provide guidance to the Muslim community and issue *fatwa* (religious rulings). In Malaysia, Muftis are appointed by the Malay Rulers. Ideally, an *alim* (singular for *ulama*) must not blindly serve the interest of ruling elites; instead, they must be pious individuals who protect the interests of the religious community. Haji Abdul Karim’s harsh words showed that he must have felt strongly that the Johor Mufti of his time had been falling far short of those ideals.

---

<sup>1</sup> Norshahril Saat is Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. He wishes to thank the Mufti of Johor, Sahibus Samahah Datuk Hj Mohd Tahrir Bin Dato’ Kiyai Hj Samsuddin for sharing his thoughts, the Mufti Department of Johor and the Johor Archives for facilitating my research.

<sup>2</sup> Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah is the father of the well-known Indonesian religious scholar Hamka.

<sup>3</sup> William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 67.

To be sure, Haji Abdul Karim and the then-Johor Mufti came from rival schools of thought.<sup>4</sup> Haji Abdul Karim was a key player in the reformist/modernist movement in Sumatra, which called for Indonesian Muslims to return to the fundamentals of the Quran and the Hadith (sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad). The movement appealed for “pure” Islam in Indonesia, one that was erased of local beliefs coloured with mysticism and irrationalism.

The reformists’ position on theology, rituals and cultural practices was in fact quite similar to that held by Salafi-Wahhabi scholars. Salafism is a Sunni orientation that can be traced back to the theologian Ibn Taimiyyah (b.1263–d.1328). It urges Muslims to return to Islam’s pristine past, and considers the first three generations after Prophet Muhammad’s death as the ideal period for Islamic societies to copy. Salafis believe that ideas and scholarship generated by savants of these three generations should therefore be applied in contemporary social and political life. One of the main tenets of Salafism is its rejection of Islamic innovations. Its followers can however be either progressive or regressive in their religious outlook. For progressive Salafis, reliving the system of the first three generations after the Prophet means the upholding of its values and principles. They embrace modern social life and scientific knowledge, but promote ideals such as justice, gender equality, and human rights. Some Salafis are even tolerant of Sufism, a religious experience that promotes spirituality and metaphysics.

On the other hand, the Wahhabi interpretation of Salafism is a traditionalist one. This article uses the term Salafi-Wahhabi to describe this puritanical orientation. Founded in eighteenth century Arabia by Muhammad Ibn Abdul Al-Wahab,<sup>5</sup> Salafi-Wahhabism has been

---

<sup>4</sup> This rivalry between the *kaum tua* and the reformists extended to name-calling. Haji Abdul Karim’s son, Hamka, also criticized the Johor Mufti for wrongly representing modernists (*kaum muda*) as “communists” and “stooges” of Christian missionaries in Indonesia. See Hamka, *Teguran Suci & Jujur Terhadap Mufti Johor*, reprinted ed. (Shah Alam: Pustaka Dini, 2009). Originally published by Persatuan Muhammadiyah in 1958.

<sup>5</sup> Natana J. Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and reform to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

seeking to cleanse Islamic beliefs of “innovations”, a teaching that when applied to the Malay world means the forbidding of rituals such as: the *slametan* (mass prayers and communal feasting); participation in *tariqah* groups (Sufi groups engaging in devotional rituals such as rhythmic repetition of Allah’s virtues); *ziarah kubur* (visit to graves of pious Muslims); and *maulid Nabi* (celebration of Prophet Muhammad’s birthday). The Wahhabis considered these practices alien to the Prophet and his companions, and to be without basis in the Quran and Hadith. Ibn Abdul Al-Wahab and his followers destroyed many tombs including those of key Muslim personalities and heroes.<sup>6</sup> Following in the footsteps of their ideologue, Salafi-Wahhabism in Southeast Asia has sought to end practices such as visits to tombs of pious Muslims and Sufi saints, which are common in the Malay world. The tenacity of Salafi-Wahhabis in Malaysia and Singapore has alarmed some academics in Malaysia and Southeast Asia, who believe that the ideology contributes to extremism and even terrorism.<sup>7</sup>

The Johor Muftis, however, have always adopted what is known in the region as the *kaum tua* tradition. They condone Sufi practices and rituals which Salafi-Wahhabis condemn. Historically, their role has always been tied to the royal house and to Malay aristocracy. Today, Johor still houses traditional *pondok* or *maahad* schools (boarding schools) which train religious teachers and *hafidz* (those who memorize the thirty chapters of the Quran by heart), and most are shaped by the Sufi tradition. The Islamic Religious Council of Johor today continues to allow many *tariqah* networks to practise.

Given the perceived rise of Salafi-Wahhabi ideas in Malaysia, one needs to ask if Johor has managed to remain the bastion of *kaum tua*. I argue that Johor’s religious discourse, at the least, remains strongly

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, articles by Syed Farid Alatas, “Battle against extremism within Islam”, *Straits Times*, 5 April 2014; and Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, “ISIS in Southeast Asia: Internalized Wahhabism is a Major Factor”, *ISEAS Perspective*, 16 May 2016.

*kaum tua*. The Johor Muftis seem crucial players in preventing Salafi-Wahhabi-oriented clerics from proselytizing in the state. Moreover, the overt intervention of the Sultan Ibrahim Sultan Iskandar in the state's religious affairs means that its religious institutions are protected from encroachment by federal Islamic institutions, especially JAKIM (Department of Islamic Development). However, this Sultan-Mufti alliance does not necessarily mean that only progressive *fatwas* are passed in Johor. On many aspects, including women's role in society, religious minority rights, and intra-faith diversity, many of the *fatwas* or opinions passed by the Johor Muftis are traditionalist in nature.

The Johor case does contribute fruitfully to the ongoing debate about countering extremism in Islam. Some analysts equate Salafism-Wahhabism to intolerance,<sup>8</sup> and Sufism to progress and as the remedy for terrorism.<sup>9</sup> The reality, however, is much more complex.

The Johor religious bureaucracy makes an important case study, especially for those interested in understanding the impact of Malaysian religious discourse in Singapore. Johor is the Lion City's closest neighbour and historically, many members of Singapore's religious elite studied in religious schools in Johor. Moreover, the Johor religious elite, including the Muftis, often go over to Singapore to preach, and speak at forums organized by Singapore NGOs and mosques.

The Johor Islamic institution is also unique in Malaysia in portraying itself as the bastion of Sufism at a time when scholars are associating Malaysia with Arabization and Salafi-Wahhabism. Johor is also seen as a state that retains its Malay character effectively, led by a strong royal institution.

---

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, the work by Khaled Abou El-Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from The Extremists* (New York: HarperOne, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> See Jason Webster, "Sufism: Natural Antidote to Fanaticism" <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/23/sufism-natural-antidote-fanaticism-the-sufis-idries-shah>> (accessed 8 December 2016); *Times of India*, "Sufism can act as antidote to terrorism: Arjun Meghwal" <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jaipur/Sufism-can-act-as-antidote-to-terrorism-Arjun-Meghwal/articleshow/54862205.cms>> (accessed 8 December 2016).

## THE JOHOR ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS BUREAUCRACY

As a rule, the Malay Rulers appoint all key positions in the Islamic institutions in their states (in contrast from the federal religious institution, JAKIM). This is in accordance with the Federal Constitution. The constitution of each state also maintains that the Ruler must be a person of Islamic faith, and that Islam is the official religion of all the states except Sarawak.<sup>10</sup> The Malaysian King (Yang di-Pertuan Agong) is the head of Islam for states that do not have a sultan — Malacca, Penang, Sabah, Sarawak, and the Federal Territories.<sup>11</sup> The key appointments in the religious bureaucracy include members of the Islamic Religious Council (Majlis Agama Islam Negeri) and the Mufti, who is the ex-officio of the Council, which has the important role of issuing *fatwas* (Islamic rulings). In many Muslim countries, *fatwas* are not legally binding, but in Malaysia, once a *fatwa* is published in the state gazette, it is enforceable. The Ruler has the final say on whether a *fatwa* gets published or not. A *fatwa* applies only to Muslims, and the maximum punishment for a sharia offence is a fine of RM5,000 (S\$1,660), six strokes of the cane, and three years' imprisonment. In late 2016, plans have been presented by the federal government, taking the lead from PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) president Abdul Hadi Awang, to harden syariah punishments by amending Act 355 or Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965.

The federal Fatwa Committee of the National Islamic Council (JKF-MKI) consists of all the Muftis, and some other ulama. This body discusses issues of national concern, after which in some cases leads to a collective *fatwa*.

---

<sup>10</sup> Shad Saleem Faruqi, “The Malaysian Constitution, The Islamic State and Hudud Laws”, in *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by K.S Nathan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali, pp. 256–77 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), p. 274.

<sup>11</sup> The position of the Yang di-Pertuan-Agong rotates among the nine Malay Rulers once every five years.

The state of Johor was in fact one of the earliest to delineate the powers of the Ruler, the Islamic Religious Council, and the Mufti. In 1895, the Undang-undang Tubuh Kerajaan Negeri Johor (Johor State Constitution 1895) introduced new laws and departments into the administrative service. It spelt out the authority of the Sultan of Johor as the Head of Islam in the state, and his right to appoint members of the Majlis Agama Islam Negeri Johor (Johor Islamic Religious Council) and the Mufti. The law declared Islam the religion of the state, and also introduced the Jabatan Agama Islam Johor (Islamic Department of Johor). It also specifies that all religious queries should be directed to the Mufti, while the *qadi* (meaning either a judge, administrator, or mediator) and his assistants will run the religious affairs of the state.<sup>12</sup> Most of these provisions remain to this day. Under Section 4 of Enactment No. 16/2003, it is stated that “There shall be a body known as the ‘Majlis Agama Islam Negeri Johor’ to aid and advise His Majesty the Sultan in matters relating to the religion of Islam.”<sup>13</sup> According to section 6 of the Enactment, the Council shall aid and advise the Sultan on all matters relating to the religion of Islam in the state of Johor, except on matters of *Hukum Syarak* (jurisprudence) and administration of justice. It is the Mufti who has *authority over hukum syarak* while the administration of justice falls under the sharia courts.

The Majlis Agama Islam is presided over by eight members: the Chairman; the Vice-Chairman; the state legal advisor; the state finance officer; the Mufti (ex-officio); deputy Mufti; Qadi Besar Johor (sharia court judge), and Chief Assistant Director of Religious Education. On matters relating to Islamic legal opinions, a separate *fatwa* body, chaired

---

<sup>12</sup> Hasnan Kasan, *Institusi Fatwa di Malaysia* (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2008), p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> Enactment No. 16 of 2003, Administration of the Religion of Islam (State of Johor) Enactment 2003 <[http://www2.esharia.gov.my/esharia/mal/portalv1/enakmen2011/Eng\\_enactment\\_Ori\\_lib.nsf/100ae747c72508e748256faa00188094/a079fdb33f522cdf482576c000093a03?OpenDocument](http://www2.esharia.gov.my/esharia/mal/portalv1/enakmen2011/Eng_enactment_Ori_lib.nsf/100ae747c72508e748256faa00188094/a079fdb33f522cdf482576c000093a03?OpenDocument)> (accessed 19 September 2016).

by the Mufti, plays an important role.<sup>14</sup> According to section 48, a *fatwa* is prepared by the committee before it is presented by the Mufti to the Council, which will then discuss and make recommendations to the Sultan. If royal assent is given, the Council then instructs the state government to publish the *fatwa* in the gazette in *Jawi* (Malay written with Arabic alphabets). This procedure means that a *fatwa* can become law without going to the state assembly.

In general, the Muslim community looks to the Mufti for religious guidance. For queries on religious rulings, members of the religious community may call, email, or write to the Mufti department directly. The Muftis also attend state and palace functions to recite prayers. The following table lists Johor Muftis from the colonial period to the present.

## JOHOR MUFTIS SINCE THE NINETEENTH CENTURY<sup>15</sup>

Table 1 reveals several aspects of the religious and political orientation of the Muftis. First, the earlier Muftis were mostly involved in the administrative service. Apart from being judges, they were members of the state's Executive Committee (equivalent to Ministers of the State government). Interestingly, the fifth Mufti, Hassan Yunus, ran for office and became Chief Minister of the Johor from 1959 to 1967. Second, the earlier Muftis showed how the Arabs, particularly the "Syeds", played an important role shaping the religious discourse in Johor. The "Syeds" are well respected by the populace in the Malay world and in the Middle East for being descendants of Prophet Muhammad. Interestingly, the fourth Mufti, an Arab, went into hiding during the Japanese occupation,

---

<sup>14</sup> Before 1978, the power for issuing religious opinion rested only with the Mufti. The Islamic Religious Council only acted as a rubber stamp. After 1978, the Johor government formed a *fatwa*-making body to assist the Mufti, called Lujnah Fatwa. At any one time, the body consists of not more than four clerics, and is chaired by the Mufti. Hasnan Kasan, *Institusi Fatwa di Malaysia* (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2008), p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> Azman, Zahari, Nur Salida, and Adel, *Biografi Mufti-Mufti Malaysia* (Negeri Sembilan: Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 2008), pp. 1–13.



**Table 1: Johor Muftis since the Nineteenth Century**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Mufti</b>	<b>Highlights</b>
Before 1873	Tuan Syed Salim Ahmad Al-Attas <sup>16</sup>	In 1873, he was appointed a member of the State Council. The role of the Mufti then was different from today. Back then, the Mufti assisted the judge in trials.
1899–1907	Dato’ Haji Abdullah Bin Musa	He was a former judge and Executive Committee member in the Johor state government.
1907–33	Datuk Syed Abdul Kadir Bin Mohsin Al-Attas	Like his predecessor, he was a former judge and Executive Committee member in the Johor state government.
1934–41	Dato’ Syed Alwi Bin Tahir Al-Haddad	Of Hadrami (Yemen) descent, he left the position of Mufti during the Japanese occupation and resumed the position in 1947.
1941–47	Tan Sri Datuk Haji Hassan Bin Yunus	Studied in Mecca and Egypt (Al-Azhar). In 1957, he ventured into politics and was elected member of parliament for Bukit Serampang. Between 1959 and 1967, he was Johor Chief Minister.

---

<sup>16</sup> Abd Jalil Borham, *Majalah Ahkam Johor: Latar Belakang, Pelaksanaan dan Komentari* (Johor Darul Ta’zim: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Skudai, 2002).

1947–61	Dato' Syed Alwi Bin Tahir Al-Haddad	He resumed the Mufti position after the Japanese occupation.
1961–64	Tan Sri Dato' Abd. Jalil Hassan	His was the shortest stint. He then ventured into academia, and served as Chairman of National <i>Fatwa</i> Committee at the Federal Level.
1965–77	Dato' Haji Rahim Bin Yunus	He is the brother of Hassan Yunus, and a graduate of Al-Azhar University (Egypt).
1977–81	Datuk Syed Alwee Bin Abdullah Al-Hadad	He studied mainly in Johor Islamic schools before heading to Al-Azhar University (Egypt)
1981–99	Dato' Haji Ahmad Bin Awang	He studied at Al-Azhar University. Upon his retirement in 1999, he was appointed Advisor to the Islamic Religious Council of Johor.
1999–2008	Dato' Haji Nooh Bin Gadot	He served in several key institutions at the state and federal levels. Upon his retirement, he served as Advisor to the Islamic Religious Council of Johor.
2008–present	Dato' Haji M. Tahrir Bin Dato' Kiyai Hj Samsudin	He is the current Mufti.

suggesting that he had worked closely with the colonial government. The dominance of Arabs in Johor religious affairs also demonstrates the entrenchment of Sufi-oriented *kaum tua* ideology. Historically, the Hadrami Sufis (who came from the region that is today's Yemen) played a significant role in spreading Islam to the region.

Finally, most of the Muftis received their early education in religious schools in the state, and later moved to Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Al-Azhar is the most prestigious institute of higher learning in the Islamic world. Though Al-Azhar is a traditionalist institution, its graduates are less sympathetic to Salafi-Wahhabi when compared to their counterparts in Saudi Arabia. To this day, Al-Azhar continues to discuss the different Islamic sects with its students, including schools that many Malaysian ulama consider deviant, such as Shiism and Mu'tazilite (rationalists).<sup>17</sup>

## **MAHATHIR'S STRENGTHENING OF FEDERAL ISLAMIC INSTITUTIONS**

Although the Constitution declares that Islam is a state matter, federal Islamic institutions underwent massive upgrading in terms of infrastructure and powers under the Mahathir administration (1981–2003). In 1984, the Federal Territory Administration of Islamic Laws Enactment was passed to streamline the administration of Islamic laws in all states. The shariah courts were strengthened, and in the federal territory, they were expanded into three levels: the lower court, high court and appeal court. In 1991, the shariah courts in the other thirteen states followed suit.

One of the key federal institutions that Mahathir upgraded was the Islamic Affairs Unit in the Prime Minister's Office, BAHEIS (Bahagian Hal Ehwal Agama Islam, Jabatan Perdana Menteri, Malaysia). In 1997,

---

<sup>17</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Sunnah-Syiah: Bergandengan Tangan Mungkinkah?* (Ciputat: Lentera Hati, 2007), p. 3.

this became JAKIM. The body continues to serve as the secretariat of the National Islamic Council (Majlis Kebangsaan Bagi Hal Ehwal Ugama Islam Malaysia or MKI) and handles inter alia research, *fatwa* management, the coordination of Islamic legal matters across all Malaysian states, and publishing. The MKI also hosts the aforementioned JKF-MKI. JAKIM also determines what constitutes the correct interpretation of Islam, censorship of publications, and halal certification. There have been instances when JAKIM prevented scholars from speaking in public events. JAKIM officials are known to be intolerant of those spreading pluralism, liberalism, feminism and Shiism. In October 2014, JAKIM forbids a roundtable discussion featuring Indonesian scholar Ulil Abshar Abdalla because he was seen as promoting liberal Islamic thinking. In another instance, JAKIM was proactive in banning books by laureate Faizal Musa (or Faizal Tehrani) for promoting Shiism. The extent of JAKIM's powers is in fact significant to such an extent that the Constitutional provision that Islam is a state-level matter is called into question.

In October 2016, JAKIM asked for its annual budget to be increased to RM1 billion (S\$328 million), something it claimed was needed to reflect its expanded role. The Deputy Minister in the Prime Ministers Department, Datuk Dr Aysraf Wajdi Dusuki, argued that JAKIM needed the extra amount in order to combat ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), liberalism, pluralism, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) issues. JAKIM Director-General Datuk Othman Mustapha further stated that part of the increment will be distributed to state Islamic religious departments.<sup>18</sup> This request was strongly criticized, also by the Sultan of Johor.

---

<sup>18</sup> Aizyl Azlee, "JAKIM says will comply with Johor Sultan's demand for it to explain RM1b funding", Malay Mail Online <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/jakim-says-will-comply-with-johor-sultans-demand-for-it-to-explain-rm1b-fun>> (accessed 18 October 2016).

## JOHOR MUFTIS AND THE *KAUM TUA* ORIENTATION

The official reason for expanding the power of the federal Islamic institutions has been the need for uniformity between state religious institutions. Mahathir was however also suspected of aiming to dilute the authority of the Malay Rulers.

In truth, to make Islamic laws uniform across all states would be futile because the Muftis do not speak with one voice. They are factionalized between the *kaum tua* and *kaum muda* (modernists) orientations. States in the southern part of the peninsula such as Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Pahang, and also northerly Perak, are more at home with *kaum tua* thinking, while others, especially Perlis, are oriented towards reform (both liberal and at times, Wahhabi). In fact, some states with *kaum tua* orientation have prevented Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, the Mufti of Perlis, from speaking in their states. In 2010, he was detained for speaking without a permit in Selangor, and in February 2016, he was listed as one of sixteen speakers banned in Johor.<sup>19</sup> Another individual who is banned is UMNO politician, Dr Fathul Bari Mat Jahaya, who is seen to hold Salafi-Wahhabi views.

Datuk Tahrir Samsudin, the current Johor Mufti, exhibits *kaum tua* thinking in many ways, and as with his predecessors, he is also sympathetic to Sufism. During my interview with him, Datuk Tahrir defended the *tariqah* groups in Johor, even though the religious department is keeping a close eye on them for departing from “true” Islamic teachings.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the Mufti emphasizes his commitment to promoting *tariqah* groups in the state. He does not deny that Salafi-Wahhabi ideas are gaining traction in Malaysia, especially when these are propagated through the social

---

<sup>19</sup> Malay Mail Online, “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>> (accessed 25 October 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Sahibus Samahah Datuk Hj Mohd Tahrir Bin Dato’ Kiyai Hj Samsuddin, 23 October 2016.

media, but considers Johor the bastion of the Sunni tradition. He admits though, that the arrival of Salafism-Wahhabism has led to some disunity in Johor.

The Mufti also says that Johor ulama feels that since they inherited their religious traditions from pious Muslim scholars, they can never be misguided in upholding Sufism.<sup>21</sup> In April 2016, he presented a paper pointing out that Johor ulama should follow the methods of the earlier Johor Mufti, Datuk Syed Alwi Tahir al-Haddad when issuing a *fatwa*, although this did not mean that the new *fatwa* should not differ from al-Haddad's.<sup>22</sup> Syed Alwi was Mufti between 1941 to 1934 and 1947 to 1961, and wrote many *fatwas* condemning Wahhabism and the modernists.

The dominance of the *kaum tua* orientation is also seen in the publications of Johor's Islamic Religious Council. The Mufti Department of Johor runs an e-books series that is downloaded by the public. These contain anti-Salafi-Wahhabi ideas, as the discussion below on two of these publications demonstrates.<sup>23</sup>

The first e-book is entitled *Sambutan Maulidur Rasul Bid'ah Dhalalah?* (Celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday: A Forbidden Innovation?), written by Haji Jainal Al-Jauhari, Chief Executive of the Islamic Religious Council of Johor. The book was vetted by Nooh Gadot, the former Mufti.<sup>24</sup> In essence, it attacks the Salafi-Wahhabi position that celebrating Prophet Muhammad's birthday is an innovation and un-Islamic. Jainal argues that the practice is allowed by the Sunni school of jurisprudence (Ahli Sunnah wal Jamaah), which is the only school allowed in Malaysia. He underscores how such celebrations could bring

---

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Sahibus Samahah Datuk Hj Mohd Tahrir.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Sahibus Samahah Datuk Hj Mohd Tahrir. Datuk Tahrir disagrees with al-Haddad's *fatwa* on some issues.

<sup>23</sup> See Jabatan Mufti Negeri Johor website <<http://Mufti.johor.gov.my/v3/mautturun>>.

<sup>24</sup> Haji Jainal Al-Jauhari, *Sambutan Maulidur Rasul Bid'ah Dhalalah?* (Johor: Majlis Agama Islam Negeri Johor, 2008).

the religious community closer to the teachings of the Prophet. He claims that the celebration is an expression of happiness over the birth of the Prophet, and it has been practised by savants of the past, for example, under the rule of Salahuddin Al-Ayubi between 1171 and 1193. The celebration normally includes reciting verses from the Quran and singing praises to the Prophet, and would often end with a feast. The common practice in Malaysia is for a *maulid* to be accompanied by a procession. The book also points out that the celebration is Islamic and should be encouraged because it can unite Muslims and strengthen their faith.

Another e-book that reflects the Mufti's Sufist thinking is written by Muhammad Fuad, entitled *Kepentingan Tariqah dan Tasawwuf* (The Importance of *Tariqah* and Islamic Spirituality).<sup>25</sup> The *tariqah* is a Sufi order that mainly teaches spirituality (*tasawwuf*) through *zikr* (chanting verses from the Quran or repeating praises to the Prophet). There are many such Sufi orders in Malaysia, including the Naqshabandiyah and Ahmadiyah Idrisiah. These are headed by *murshids* (spiritual leaders) and their followers pledge allegiance to their masters before becoming part of the group (*bai'ah*). Some *tariqah* groups promote mysticism, spirituality and metaphysics, practices that are also frowned upon by the Salafis-Wahhabis for the same reasons they are against the celebrating of the Prophet's birthday, i.e. that they are not found in the Quran and that these groups therefore practice innovations. The book mainly supports the existence of *tariqah* groups in Johor because these are within the spirit of the religion and are in accordance with the teachings of the Prophet.

Some scholars, including some from the West, posit that Sufism is a more tolerant orientation than Salafism-Wahhabism, and this has become an ever more dominant view after 9/11. Sufism is considered by them to be the solution to terrorism. But what we see is that the embracing of Sufism by the Johor Muftis has not made them more progressive. In fact, they are basically traditionalists. Sociologist Robert Towler defines

---

<sup>25</sup> Muhammad Fuad Kamaludin Al-Maliki, *Kepentingan Tariqah dan Tasawwuf* (Johor: Majlis Agama Islam Negeri Johor, 2008).

traditionalism as a mode of thinking that holds on to old ways, and resists change and is marked by an unquestioning celebration of its own certainty.<sup>26</sup>

Many views expressed by the previous Mufti Nooh Gadot are traditionalist in essence. In 2006, Nooh Gadot published an article suggesting that the state come up with guidelines for how women should dress in public. He also said that although women can join the workforce, they have to prioritize their role as mothers.<sup>27</sup>

The Johor religious elite's traditionalism also leads to exclusivist thinking, especially on relations with non-Muslims. In 2014, Nooh Gadot was quoted in *Berita Harian* condemning opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim for allowing non-Muslims to use the term "Allah". Malaysia has since the 1980s been debating whether the term Allah is exclusive to Muslims. Malay-speaking Christians, especially from Sarawak have traditionally been using the term in their Bible. According to Nooh Gadot, Anwar was disrespectful of the *fatwa* issued by fourteen Malaysian Muftis in 1986 which claimed the term for exclusive use by Muslims.<sup>28</sup> Nooh Gadot continues to play an important religious role in Johor, and is a trusted ally of the Sultan. Upon his retirement, he was made Advisor to the Islamic Religious Council of Johor and to the Sultan.

Two other e-books warn Johor Muslims of the Shia and the liberal Islam "threat", and mirrors the general trend among Malaysian religious elite that Shiism is a deviant ideology and that liberalism is a threat to Islam.<sup>29</sup> They call on those who harbour these trends of thought to repent.

---

<sup>26</sup> Robert Towler, *The Need For Certainty: A Sociological Study of Conventional Religion* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henly: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 90–91.

<sup>27</sup> Nooh Gadut, "Pandangan Islam terhadap pencapaian wanita". In *Memahami Kedudukan Wanita dari Perspektif Islam*, edited by Siti Fatimah Abdul Rahman, pp. 19–36 (Kuala Lumpur: MPH and IKIM, 2006), pp. 34–35.

<sup>28</sup> *Berita Harian*, "Dua Mufti lagi kecam Anwar", 19 February 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Wan Adli Wan Ramli, *Bahaya Liberalisme dan Pluralisme Agama Terhadap Akidah Belia Muslim* (Johor: Majlis Agama Islam Johor, 2012); Jainal Sakiban, *Kebatilan Akidah Syi'ah* (Johor: Majlis Agama Islam Johor, 2012).



In truth, Sunni Muslims in many parts of the world have lived peacefully alongside the Shias. Moreover, many ulama around the world, including those in Indonesia, have pointed out that Shiism should be seen as part of mainstream Islam.<sup>30</sup>

## THE SULTAN OF JOHOR: RESISTING FEDERAL INTRUSION

Johor Muftis tend to participate in royal events. In March 2015, the Mufti played an important role during the Sultan's coronation ceremony. He placed a 1.6-kilogram crown — capped with sapphires, emeralds, rubies, and diamonds which included an Islamic crescent — on the Sultan's head, performing a role similar to that played by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who would normally do the same during the coronation of a British Monarch.<sup>31</sup> The same was done for Princess Raja Zarith Sofiah.<sup>32</sup>

In March 2016, the Mufti was also present at the Sultan's birthday celebrations.<sup>33</sup> On 4 August 2016, he read the opening prayers for the Sultan's grandson birth rituals,<sup>34</sup> and in September 2016, allowed Muslims to join mass prayers for Bangsa Johor (the Johor Nation), which involved non-Muslims. At the end of the ceremony, participants went to

---

<sup>30</sup> 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*, edited by Bernhard Platzdasch and Johan Saravanamuttu, pp. 359–78 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Francis E. Hutchinson and Vandana Prakash Nair, *The Johor Sultanate: Rise or Re-Emergence?* Trends in Southeast Asia No. 16/2016 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute), pp. 15–16.

<sup>32</sup> *Bernama*, "Istiadat Kemahkotaan Berlangsung Gilang Gemilang", 23 March 2015.

<sup>33</sup> *myMetro*, "Tanda taat setia", 24 March 2016.

<sup>34</sup> *Berita Harian*, "Sultan Johor hadir majlis akikah cucunda", 4 August 2016.

the palace Istana Bukit Serene to release 100 birds in accordance with Chinese customs.<sup>35</sup>

There have been instances when the Sultan has publicly made a stand on religious issues. In late 2013, he was instrumental in reinstating the Islamic week starting 1 January 2014. This means that working days for the state are now between Sunday and Thursday. The rationale for this is to allow Muslims more time to complete their Friday prayers. Johor had in fact been practising this Islamic week since the colonial period, until it was reversed in 1993 by Chief Minister of the state.<sup>36</sup> The Sultan's reinstatement of the Friday and Saturday off-days boosted his image as a protector of Islam. In an exclusive interview with *The Star* in 2015, he iterated that it was he who was the authority of Islam in the state and that JAKIM could only advise the religious councils. He explained that he had the final authority to appoint members to the religious council, and that only he could approve *fatwas*. To be sure, he had occasionally questioned *fatwas* and sought further clarification, and emphasized that JAKIM had no authority to meddle in the state's religious affairs. He has also questioned JAKIM's request for a bigger budget and has asked for the breakdown of their spending at the Conference of Ruler's meeting.<sup>37</sup>

Recently, the Sultan also publicly criticized Malays for mimicking the Arabs in their religious orientation. He urged them to stick to their culture: "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."<sup>38</sup> It has

---

<sup>35</sup> *Berita Minggu*, "Ribuan rakyat jayakan Program Gabungan doa bangsa Johor", 18 September 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Francis and Nair, *The Johor Sultanate*, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Wong Chun Wai and Nelson Benjamin, "Johor Ruler: I'm above politics", *The Star*, 27 December 2015 <<http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/12/27/johor-ruler-im-above-politics-the-interest-of-the-rakyat-always-comes-first/>> (accessed 27 December 2015).

<sup>38</sup> *Straits Times*, "Johor Sultan to Malays: Stick to your own culture", 25 March 2016.

also been noted that the Sultan prefers to use Malay words such as “Hari Raya” (a day of celebration upon the completion of the fasting month) and “*buka puasa*” (breaking fast) instead of the recently popularized Arabic equivalents of “Eid al-fitr” and “*iftar*” respectively.<sup>39</sup>

In February 2016, while opening the *Majlis Tilawah Al-Quran* (Quran Recitation Competition), the Sultan emphasized that members of the religious elite preaching in the state must obtain accreditation from the Islamic Religious Council of Johor. He added that even speakers who are popular and credible must respect this because that has been the law since 1895, when the Ruler was established as the Head of Islam in the state.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, in May 2016, a popular preacher from Singapore, Ustaz Rasul Dahri, was fined for RM5000 (S\$1,690) and jailed by the Islamic Religious Department of Johor for teaching there without proper accreditation.<sup>41</sup> He was also accused of spreading views that are not in line with the Sunni school of thought.

The Sultan emphasized that Johoreans must be proactive in tackling both extremism and deviant teachings, and should therefore study religion from teachers recognised by the state. Interestingly, he positioned Salafi-Wahhabi teachings alongside Shia, liberalism and pluralism as deviant ideologies.<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Overall, there has been continuity in the religious and political behaviour of the Johor Muftis. They remain committed to upholding Sufism, and

---

<sup>39</sup> *MalaymailOnline*, “Stop aping Arabs, Johor Sultan tells Malays”, 24 March, 2016 <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/stop-aping-arabs-johor-sultan-tells-malays>> (accessed 3 November 2016).

<sup>40</sup> Badrul Kamal Zakaria, “Pendakwah ke Johor perlu tauliah MAIJ”, *Berita Harian*, 24 February 2016.

<sup>41</sup> “Pendakwah S’pura dipenjara di Johor”, *Berita Harian*, 7 May 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Ahmad Fairuz Othman, “Sultan Johor: Learn Islam from those with credentials”, *New Straits Times*, 31 March 2016.

are active in stopping Salafi-Wahhabi ideas from entering the state. Sufi values are promoted in the *fatwas* passed by the Islamic Religious Council, and through publications.

The Sultan's interventions in religious affairs also ensure that the Johor Mufti and the religious institutions under his charge are protected from federal encroachment. The Ruler acts as the gatekeeper for Johor Islamic identity, preventing Salafi-Wahhabi thinking from penetrating the state's religious discourse.

Nevertheless, being close to Sufism does not mean that Johor Muftis have not expressed exclusivist tendencies. This is evident in their views towards women and to alternative discourses.

What becomes clear in Johor is that the contestation between *kaum tua* and Salafi-Wahhabi has not ended despite many decades of debate. In fact, it remains in the interest of the Johor Mufti to maintain Johor's reputation as the bastion of *kaum tua*.

## REFERENCES

- Abdul Hamid, Ahmad Fauzi. "ISIS in Southeast Asia: Internalized Wahhabism is a Major Factor". *ISEAS Perspective*. 16 May 2016.
- Al-Jauhari, Haji Jainal. *Sambutan Maulidur Rasul Bid'ah Dhalalah?* Johor: Majlis Agama Islam Negeri Johor, 2008.
- Al-Maliki, Muhammad Fuad Kamaludin. *Kepentingan Tariqah dan Tasawwuf*. Johor: Majlis Agama Islam Negeri Johor, 2008.
- Azman, Zahari, Nur salida and Adel. *Biografi Mufti-Mufti Malaysia*. Negeri Sembilan: Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 2008.
- Borham, Abd Jalil. *Majalah Ahkam Johor: Latar Belakang, Perlaksanaan dan Komentari*. Johor Darul Ta'zim: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Skudai, 2002.
- Delong-Bas, Natana J. *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and reform to Global Jihad*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- El-Fadl, Khaled Abou. *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from The Extremists*. New York: HarperOne (2005).
- Faruqi, Shad Saleem. "The Malaysian Constitution, The Islamic Satta and Hudud Laws". In *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century*, edited by K.S Nathan

- and Mohammad Hashim Kamali, pp. 256–77. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005.
- Gadut, Nooh. “Pandangan Islam terhadap Pencapaian wanita”. In *Memahami Kedudukan Wanita dari Perspektif Islam*, edited by Siti Fatimah Abdul Rahman, pp. 19–36. Kuala Lumpur: MPH and IKIM, 2006.
- Hamka. *Teguran Suci & Jujur Terhadap Mufti Johor*. Shah Alam: Pustaka Dini, 2009.
- Hutchinson, Francis E. and Vandana Prakash Nair. *The Johor Sultanate: Rise or Re-Emergence?* Trends in Southeast Asia, No. 16/2016. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016.
- Kasan, Hasnan. *Institusi Fatwa di Malaysia*. Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2008.
- Roff, William R. *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*. 2nd ed. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Saat, Norshahril. “‘Deviant’ Muslims: The Plight of Shias in Contemporary Malaysia”. In *Religious Diversity in Muslim-majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict*, edited by Bernhard Plattdasch and Johan Saravanamuttu, pp. 359–78. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014.
- . “Exclusivist Attitudes in Malaysian Islam Have Multifarious Roots”. *ISEAS Perspective*, 5 July 2016.
- Sakiban, Jainal. *Kebatilan Akidah Syi’ah*. Johor: Majlis Agama Islam Johor, 2012.
- Shihab, Quraish M. *Sunnah-Syiah: Bergandengan Tangan Mungkinkah?* Ciputat: Lentera Hati, 2007.
- Towler, Robert. *The Need For Certainty: A Sociological Study of Conventional Religion*. London, Boston, Melbourne and Henly: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.
- Wan Ramli, Wan Adli. *Bahaya Liberalisme dan Pluralisme Agama Terhadap Akidah Belia Muslim*. Johor: Majlis Agama Islam Johor, 2012.

### **Websites**

- Azlee, Aizyl. “JAKIM says will comply with Johor Sultan’s demand for it to explain RM1b funding”. MalayMail Online, <<http://>

- www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/jakim-says-will-comply-with-johor-sultans-demand-for-it-to-explain-rm1b-fun> (accessed 18 October 2016).
- Enactment No. 16 of 2003. Administration of the Religion of Islam (State of Johor) Enactment 2003. <[http://www2.esharia.gov.my/esharia/mal/portalv1/enakmen2011/Eng\\_enactment\\_Ori\\_lib.nsf/100ae747c72508e748256faa00188094/a079fdb33f522cdf482576c000093a03?OpenDocument](http://www2.esharia.gov.my/esharia/mal/portalv1/enakmen2011/Eng_enactment_Ori_lib.nsf/100ae747c72508e748256faa00188094/a079fdb33f522cdf482576c000093a03?OpenDocument)> (accessed 19 September 2016).
- Jabatan Mufti Negeri Johor Website. <<http://Mufti.johor.gov.my/v3/muatturun>>.
- Mufti Perlis. “Exco Pemuda Umno dilarang ceramah di Johor”. MalayMail Online <<http://www.themalaymailonline.com/projekmmo/berita/article/Mufti-perlis-exco-pemuda-umno-dilarang-ceramah-di-johor>> (accessed 25 October 2016).
- Times of India*. “Sufism can act as antidote to terrorism: Arjun Meghwal” <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jaipur/Sufism-can-act-as-antidote-to-terrorism-Arjun-Meghwal/articleshow/54862205.cms>> (accessed 8 December 2016).
- Webster, Jason. “Sufism: Natural Antidote to Fanaticism” <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/23/sufism-natural-antidote-fanaticism-the-sufis-idries-shah>> (accessed 8 December 2016).
- Wong Chun Wai and Nelson Benjamin. “Johor Ruler: I’m above politics”. *The Star*, 27 December 2015 <<http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/12/27/johor-ruler-im-above-politics-the-interest-of-the-rakyat-always-comes-first/>> (accessed 27 December 2015).

### ***Newspapers***

- Alatas, Syed Farid. “Battle against extremism within Islam”. *Straits Times*, 5 April 2014.
- Berita Harian* [Malaysia]. “Dua Mufti lagi kecam Anwar”. 19 February 2014.
- . “Sultan Johor hadir majlis akikah cucunda”. 4 August 2016.
- Berita Harian* [Singapore]. “Pendakwah S’pura dipenjara di Johor”. 7 May 2016.
- Berita Minggu* [Malaysia]. “Ribuan rakyat jayakan Program Gabungan doa bangsa Johor”. 18 September 2016.

*Bernama*. “Istiadat Kemahkotaan Berlangsung Gilang Gemilang”.  
23 March 2015.

Othman, Ahmad Fairuz. “Sultan Johor: Learn Islam from those with  
credentials”. *New Straits Times*, 31 March 2016.

*myMetro*. “Tanda taat setia”. 24 March 2016.

*Straits Times*. “Johor Sultan to Malays: Stick to your own culture”.  
25 March 2016.

Zakaria, Badrul Kamal. “Pendakwah ke Johor perlu tauliah MAIJ”.  
*Berita Harian* [Malaysia], 24 February 2016.

### ***Interview***

Interview with Sahibus Samahah Datuk Hj Mohd Tahrir Bin Dato’ Kiyai  
Hj Samsuddin, 23 October 2016.

**ISEAS**

**PUBLISHING**

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119614

<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

TRS1/17s

ISBN 978-981-4762-88-5



9 789814 762885