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Malaysia's Ulama in Contention: Case of Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin

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The religious establishment in Malaysia has acted against Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, a young and popular Muslim ulama with reformist views. Malaysian government leaders appear to have taken a 'hands off' approach in the case.

A YOUNG AND popular Muslim ulama in Malaysia, Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, has aroused much political controversy in Malaysia over the past year for his critical views on the Islamic religious establishment in Malaysia. His case shows that there is not only competition between the political parties (UMNO and PAS) over who is doing more for Islam in Malaysia, but also wrangling amongst the ulama (religious scholars) that at times spills over into the political arena.

The Case of Asri

Asri, who is 39, is an Islamic scholar. He is a graduate of the Arab University of Jordan and has a PhD from the International Islamic University of Malaysia. Between 2006 and 2008, he was seconded from Universiti Sains Malaysia, where he is a lecturer, to become the State Mufti of Perlis, the youngest person in Malaysia to hold this important jurist post. Asri became well-known in the country as he authored a column in *Mingguan Malaysia*, the weekend paper of UMNO's *Utusan Malaysia*, and began to appear on Malaysian TV to give his views on Islamic matters. He also gave talks in Singapore. In the process, he earned a reputation as an Islamic reformer, a fresh voice on Islam, at odds with the conservative religious establishment in Malaysia.

Indeed, his views jarred with the religious establishment -- he did not believe in religious officers conducting surprise raids to catch unmarried couples engaged in *khalwat* (close proximity); he was against the obsession with matters of personal hygiene before prayers; and earlier this year he disagreed with the ban on the usage of the word 'Allah' by non-Muslims. Most importantly, Asri was against blind obedience to the Muslim clergy and scholars. He saw as his greatest challenge the

‘overhaul’ of the ‘hold the conservatives have exercised over the Muslim community’.

Opposition to Asri

Asri has friends and supporters in high places. They include former premier Mahathir Mohamad and his daughter Marina, religious officials in Perlis, and an UMNO Supreme Council member. But Asri also has many enemies and they moved against him. In May 2009, he was taken off the weekend column he used to pen for *Mingguan Malaysia*. In Oct 2009, the Syariah Lawyers Association of Malaysia backed by 11 Islamic organisations petitioned the King against appointing him as president of a major missionary organisation, alleging that he had insulted prominent ulama and that his teachings had caused unrest in the Muslim community. Then on 1 Nov 2009, Asri, who was giving a religious talk at a private residence, was arrested by the Selangor Religious Affairs Department (JAIS) for preaching without a permit although he was immediately released on a police bond.

On 22 June, a senior official from the Federal government’s Islamic Training Institute alleged at an official security briefing that Asri held Wahhabist views, similar to those of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an extremist group that the Police had acted against recently. Wahhabism is a puritanical form of Islam that originates from Saudi Arabia and the official briefing given to senior police officers and senior personnel from local universities was about the efforts of the JI to recruit university students into its ranks. (According to media reports, the Islamic Training Institute official had also named two other men close to Dr. Asri, as well as Hadi Awang, the President of the opposition Islamic party PAS, as having Wahhabist views.) This was not the first time that Asri has been labelled a Wahhabist, a charge he has denied, although his stint in Perlis and the common reference to Wahhabism as ‘Sunnah Perlis’, do expose him to charges of supporting Wahhabism.

Ulama in Contention

Asri’s case is of an individual involved in a personal engagement with the religious establishment in Malaysia. But it is also reflective of contention within the ulama community and of the intensity it can reach. Asri’s case spilled over to the political arena where support for him as well as opposition to him cut across party lines. Asri has enemies, as well as supporters, in both PAS and UMNO. He recently revealed publicly that he is close to UMNO leaders and has good friends in PAS. Yet, Asri was labelled a UMNO stooge by the PAS media a few years ago and, according to some reports, his arrest by JAIS last November had the backing of some PAS leaders in Selangor. As for UMNO, there has been speculation that the revival of the ‘Wahhabist’ charge against Asri was an effort to prevent his entry into the party, since there were reliable reports that he was being wooed by UMNO and was about to join the party.

Government’s Role

Government leaders did not seem to have much of a role in the developments related to Asri, virtually adopting a ‘hands off’ approach. When Asri was arrested by JAIS, Premier Najib expressed regret but tried to shift the burden to the Selangor state government ruled by the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) alliance. He noted that the arrest was done by the state religious agency and ‘had nothing to do with the Federal government’. Other leaders both from UMNO as well as the PR raised objections to the arrest but did not appear to do anything more. JAIS carried on with the process of charging Asri for preaching without official permit and the Shah Alam Syariah High Court is hearing the case.

As for the ‘Wahhabist’ charge against Asri and others at the official briefing on the JI last month, the Deputy Education Minister Saifuddin Abdullah was compelled to admit in Parliament that the allegation was not based on facts but he stopped short of censuring the official concerned. The actions against Asri attest to the power that the religious bureaucracy wields in Malaysia both at the federal and state levels on matters concerning Islam.

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