



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (120/2006)

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## **Where to Islam Hadhari?**

*Mohamad Nawab Mohd Osman \**

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THE recent UMNO General Assembly is yet another manifestation of the increasing Islamisation trend in Malaysia. As delegates at the assembly asserted the constitutional position of Islam as the official religion of the country, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi had to step forward to clarify the concept of Islam Hadhari which he promoted upon coming to office.

### **Islam Hadhari: The Ideal**

In 2004, the government introduced Islam Hadhari as a comprehensive approach for the development of mankind, society and country based on the perspective of Islam as a civilization. Islam Hadhari was borne out of a committee comprising religious scholars such as Nakhaie Ahmad, Abdullah Zin and others. Islam Hadhari emphasises the development of the economy and civilization to build the competitiveness of the Muslim community. At the same time, the Islam Hadhari model was formulated in a way that would not cause anxiety among any racial or religious groups within the multiracial and multi-religious setting of the country. One of its ten principles is the protection of the rights of minority groups and women.

The introduction of Islam Hadhari was supposed to pave the way for the development of Malaysia as a bastion of Islamic moderation. The Malaysian government has sold Islam Hadhari as a model for development for other Muslim countries. It is seen by observers as a possible alternative to the more conservative approach to Islam in some parts of the Arab world. At another level, Islam Hadhari is also invoked and wielded to assert the political legitimacy of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) to thwart the support of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) among the Malay-Muslim electorate. In the 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysian general election in 2004, Prime Minister Abdullah and his team switched their strategy. Instead of attacking the PAS approach to Islam, they offered a model of Islamic governance to compete with PAS' vision of Malaysia as an Islamic state. In facing the PAS drive towards the creation of an Islamic state, Islam Hadhari has proven to be a useful concept drawn from the principles of the religion. However despite the government's rhetoric about the implementation of a moderate form of Islam, various developments and events in Malaysia seem to suggest a more conservative form of Islam emerging.

### **Islam Hadhari: The Reality**

Since the introduction of Islam Hadhari, some religious officials have taken this policy as a cue for the further Islamisation of society and to 'safeguard the position of Islam', sometimes

at the expense of the rights of other religions. A case in point is the 2005 controversy when officers from the Federal Territory Religious Department (JAWI) raided a nightclub. Muslims were then asked to take breathalyzer tests to check whether they had drunk alcohol, and Muslim women were paraded before the officers to ensure that they were not dressed indecently. The raid has sparked debate on the enforcement powers of religious officers and on the legitimacy of enforcing public morality.

In another instance, the case of Everest climber M. Moorthy or Mohammad Abdullah, his Muslim name, had created fear amongst non-Muslims about their position in Malaysian society. A controversy had broken out due to the ambiguity over the deceased's religion. The *Shariah* court of Malaysia ruled that he was a Muslim. His wife's appeal to claim his body for funeral rites in accordance with Hinduism was dismissed by the High Court on the ground that it had no jurisdiction over the *Shariah* court cases. Subsequently, the nine non-Muslim Cabinet ministers, following the lead of the religious and legal bureaus of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), presented a memorandum to Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi for a review of Article 121 (1A) of the federal Constitution. The article states that civil courts "shall have no jurisdiction in respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of *Shariah* courts". The memorandum was promptly rejected by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi.

Following the memorandum incident, cabinet minister, Nazri Abdul Aziz warned that non-Muslims who interfered in Islamic affairs could be charged with sedition as the constitutional position of Islam should not be questioned. Another cause for debate was when Malaysian police made it compulsory for all policewomen attending official functions to wear the traditional tudung headdress, regardless of race or religion. The government said this headdress policy, applicable for formal occasions only, was to inculcate discipline within the force and not to impose Islamic standards. Further examples of this trend are the warnings by members of UMNO Youth against any attempts to alter the position of Islam and the Muslims as enshrined in the Federal Constitution; their warning to the "Article 11" group, which advocates greater rights for non-Muslims to be enshrined in the Constitution, to stop questioning issues on Islam; and their rejection of a move to set up an Inter-faith Commission.

### **Explaining the Gap**

The gap between the ideals of Islam Hadhari and its actual implementation could be attributed to the difference in the way the country's leadership and its *ulama* understand the concept. For many *ulama* and religious officials implementing Islamic guidelines in Malaysia, Islam Hadhari is a passport for further Islamisation of the society. To them the elevation of Islam Hadhari as the official guiding principle of the state meant that for the first time in Malaysian history, the government was acknowledging that Malaysia is not a secular state but a moderate Islamic state. At the same time, for sections of the country's religious bureaucracy, the sentiments and values of Prime Minister Abdullah's Islam Hadhari have not gained ground, if not in fact being openly rejected. Despite working for the government, some of these *ulama* and officials hold their sympathies and political support for PAS. This could be seen from the large numbers of ex-government *ulama* who subsequently become members of PAS. At another level, many of the UMNO members themselves are conservative and support the implementation of stricter Islamic guidelines. The declaration of the UMNO Youth is an example of this growing conservatism within the party.

It appears that while the Malaysian government is promoting Islam Hadhari, the realities on

the ground in Malaysia suggest a shift towards a narrower, literalist and more conservative brand of Islam. Whether this will continue to be so remains to be seen.

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\* *Mohamad Nawab Mohd Osman is a research assistant at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.*