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“Peaceful Salafism” in Malaysia: Legitimising Comfort for Radicals

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Synopsis

Revived political Salafist discourse in Malaysia invokes the idea that non-violent Salafism is peaceful. “Peaceful Salafism” arises to assuage existing fears about Salafism and provides a legitimising sense of comfort for radical. Salafis have to end the dogma of hate in their multi-religious society to curb radicalisation.

Commentary

SALAFISM IN Malaysia has garnered renewed attention with the increasing presence of Salafi ulama within the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) youth wing. Although it is unlikely that these new UMNO Salafis would uproot the largely traditionalist Islamic bureaucracy and institutions in Malaysia, their presence has reinvigorated the nexus between Salafism, politics and extremism. Their emergence is accompanied by the attempt by scholars to define modern Salafism and elucidate its nuances and strands – Modern Salafism, Islamist Salafism, Puritanical Salafism and Militant Salafism.

This attempt clarifies the interplay between particular behaviours, habits and tendencies of modern Salafis and their parent ideology or worldview. To be sure, blanket terms, including Salafism and Islamism obfuscate our understanding of the reality of modern Salafism and result in heuristics that link Salafis, scholars or laymen, with horrific mental images of the atrocities carried out by Salafi jihadis. Inversely, a blanket term such as “Peaceful Salafism” hides the presence of extremists, radicals, terrorists and their supporters and perpetuates a false sense of comfort that non-violent Salafis should be uneasy about.

Peaceful Salafism

To contrast non-violent Salafism with Jihadi Salafism, the term “Peaceful Salafism” has been bandied about by pundits. While not meant as a serious analytical category, it attempts to describe the non-violent Salafi imagination in Malaysia, regardless of whether one is a political or quietist Salafi. Quietists are perceived to be peaceful because they shun street activism and focus their activities on proselytisation. Political Salafis are perceived so because unlike their violent counterparts, they attempt to achieve their end – an Islamic utopia – through political participation rather than armed strife. Peacefulness is either being unchallenging of the political status quo or pursuing ends through the means of peaceful politics.

But it is not incontrovertible that peaceful Salafism is all that peaceful. While field research by Maszlee Malik and Khalil al-Anani (2013) shows that political participation has tamed radical Salafi elements in Egypt, the same cannot be said about political Salafism’s foray into the mainstream of Malaysian politics. Despite having an Islamist space in social and political arenas, Malaysia has hosted local and regional radical groups such as Al-Ma’ulah, Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia and Jema’ah Islamiyah.

The mechanism that encourages peacefulness among groups that decide to lay down their arms for the political process is the promise of continued or even increased relevance and popularity in society. This mechanism is not foolproof. As long as a total and radical Islamisation of Malaysia towards the end of an iconographic Islamic utopia is not fully achieved, radicals and supporters will feel unsatisfied and seek to realise “*Daulah Islamiyah Baqiyyah wa Tatamaddad*” (an Islamic State that is forever lasting). This was revealed in a Facebook posting on armed jihad written by a Malaysian Abu Sayyaf fighter who encouraged his followers to pursue armed jihad all over the world, from Syria to Pattani, Ambon-Poso and Mindanao.

Not all peaceful

Radicals like him may be militant or Jihadi Salafists, but radical followers and supporters, numbering in the thousands, are from the different strands of Salafism. What ties them together is a subscription to an exclusivist position on the Salafist doctrine of *Al-Wala’ wal-Bara’* (Loyalty and Enmity) that draws narrow theological boundaries between oneself and the putative ‘Other’. This duality is at odds with the Malaysian society they live in, which is democratic--ostensibly a heinous innovation--and multi-religious. When confronted with their cognitive dissonance, they either put aside their worldview, or concur that Malaysia is yet to be *Darul Islam*.

Now that UMNO has co-opted the Salafi ulama for religious legitimacy, there is a rekindling of political discourse within the Salafi worldview. For instance, Fathul Bari, the current Executive Committee member of UMNO youth who once elaborated on his taxonomy of *kafirs* (infidels) before he joined UMNO, has recently expressed his displeasure regarding “*Puji Kafir, Hina Islam*” (praising infidels while insulting Islam). Fathul Bari argues that, despite the value deficiencies of Muslim societies and governments, such as corruption and poor governance, placing a positive value upon the perceivable good of infidel societies and governments is an act of *shirk* (idolatry).

The Islamist party, PAS also legitimises its electoral fights with UMNO by arguing that UMNO does not satisfy their vision of Muslim rule. PAS and UMNO engage in piety-outbidding through the contention of the Islamic-ness of Malaysia. Otherwise, another example of piety-outbidding between PAS and UMNO centres on the confusing debate over the legitimacy of teaming up with non-Muslims in their respective coalitions, because, as ideologues like Fathul Bari would argue, some *kafirs* are *Kafir Harbi* and meant to be fought and opposed, especially if the latter oppose their understanding of Islam. The problem with this discourse is that it falls neatly into the already highly-racialised politics in Malaysia, encouraging racist rhetoric and allowing UMNO Supreme Council member Annuar Musa to brag that his “racism is based on Islam”.

Trajectory of Peaceful Salafism

Salafi scholars have to rescind the hate in their rhetoric. Peaceful Salafis cannot be ambivalent to the presence of Jihadi Salafis and their followers who dwell safely within the Malaysian “Political Salafi” and “Peaceful Salafi” climate; otherwise they would be seen to harbour jihadi hopes – no matter how latent--for an Islamic utopia in Malaysia. Jihadi Salafism and elements of Salafism that encourage *kafir* hatred should not be left unchallenged. Put in the context of a racialised, multi-religious society, non-Muslims and not-so-Muslims around the world, especially in Malaysia, Syria, Pattani, Ambon-Poso and Mindanao, are at risk if hatred is given a womb in which to percolate an IS brand of 100% Islam: Jihadi Salafism.

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