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The Impact of Islamic Civil Society Organisations on Malaysian Islam and Politics

By

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Islam is an important aspect in the state governance of Malaysia. The religious identity of the majority Malay ethnic group, who are predominantly Muslims, is highly relevant in how the principle of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance) is expressed in contemporary Malaysian politics. Not only does *ketuanan Melayu* establish Malay political dominance, it also elevates the position of Islam in society. Constitutionally, the Malay rulers are recognized as heads of the religion of Islam, Islam is the official religion of the country, and Islamic courts and institutions can be formed to regulate Muslims (Salleh, 2000).

From early on, the UMNO-led government, which has been in power since independence, has seen it prudent to regulate Islam so as to influence the expression of Malay religious identity. Early efforts to do this include the state-sponsored religious missionary organisations that were formed in the 1960s such as the *Persatuan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia* (PERKIM, Islamic Welfare Organisation) and the *Tabung Haji* (Pilgrim's Fund). These organisations were intended primarily to provide education on Islam and to support Muslims' pilgrimage to Mecca (Sani, 2015).

The post-independence focus of the government was to manage economic and social issues, which especially took precedence after an incident of inter-ethnic violence in 1969. Political contestations between the government and its main political rival, the Islamist party *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS), during this period were largely framed around ethnic rather than religious issues. Even though Islamic rhetoric was used by both political parties to level criticism at each other, the main contention then was disagreement over governmental concessions to non-Malays, which was perceived by PAS as a capitulation of the principle of *ketuanan Melayu* (Liow, 2009). This would change after the 1970s.

Islamic Revivalism and Early Islamic Civil Society Organisations

During the 1970s, several citizen-led Islamic-oriented organisations emerged that were focused on *da'wah* (missionary) activities. These organisations acted collectively to lobby the government to adopt Islamic values into policy. Several factors contributed to this development. First, changes in governmental policies enabled many Malay Muslims to study abroad in the Middle East and in Western countries, where they were introduced to the ideas of Islamic revivalism thinkers. Returning students were instrumental in propagating these ideas and raising the Islamic consciousness of young Malays. Groups such as the *Jamaat Tabligh* and *Darul Arqam* attracted Malay graduates educated in Arabic or Islamic studies - of importance to these groups were matters of personal

morality, such as sex, liquor, gambling, and clothes. Another group, the *Angkatan Belia Islam* (ABIM) attracted secular educated graduates from the West and the Middle East, who had been exposed to Islamic revivalist ideas (Abu Bakar, 1981). Second, Malays grew weary of the politicking between UMNO and PAS (Kessler, 1980) and were drawn to arguments that advocated a return to an Islamic way of life as a solution to societal rifts. Third, external developments in the wider Muslim world such as the Islamic revolution in Iran increased the desire for Malay Muslims to identify with the Muslim *ummah* (community) worldwide.

Politicisation of Islam

The UMNO-led government responded to lobbying from these early Islamic civil society organisations. It co-opted ABIM leader, Anwar Ibrahim into public office; embarked on an “Islamisation of government machinery”, which included the establishment of Islamic banks, insurance, and economic foundations, International Islamic University, Islamic Medical Centre and an upgrading of the Islamic bureaucracy; and also developed a foreign policy oriented to the Muslim world (Mutalib, 1990).

PAS too responded accordingly, and placed Islamic issues at the forefront of its election campaigns, and recruited leaders with strong Islamic credentials. The government’s promotion of Islam strengthened the influence of state religious officials, expanded state-led religious administration, and gave greater autonomy to Islamic courts. A number of PAS leaders hailed from Islamic civil society organisations such as ABIM and the *Jemaah Islah Malaysia* (JIM).

This older network of Islamic civil society organisations influenced the landscape of Malaysian politics in several ways. First, these Islamic civil society organisations were able to presurise the government and PAS to adopt more overtly Islamic policies and posture. Second, many activists within these civil society organisations found it more effective to effect change by joining the mainstream Malay political parties such as UMNO and PAS. Former ABIM leaders such as Dr Zambry Kadir and Sanusi Junid became important figures in UMNO while others such as the late PAS President Ustaz Fadhil Noor and current PAS President Hadi Awang are important figures within the Islamic party (Awang, 2016). Likewise, JIM leaders such as Saari Sungib and Khalid Samad were important leaders of PAS until their departure to the newly formed *Parti Amanah Nasional* (PAN). Third, these organisations suffered internal divisions and problems as a result of their direct involvement in electoral politics. Members of these groups who have joined mainstream parties have become entrenched within their respective political position and have more or less forsaken their initial objectives of propounding their Islamist ideologies within these parties. Fourth, organisations that maintained its own political position, such as the *Al-Arqam* movement, were banned and curtailed (Hamid, 2003). The banning of *Al-Arqam* meant that the only viable politically independent movement was eliminated leading to the dominance of political parties in the realm of political Islam.

Emergence of Contemporary Islamic Civil Society Organisations

For much of the 1990s and early 2000s, both the UMNO-led government and PAS increasingly engaged in an “Islamisation race” to maintain political legitimacy and vie for Malay electoral support. This is largely due to the partisan role of the government, whose aim is to subvert PAS’s Islamist agenda by implementing its own pro-Islam initiatives and promoting Islamic philosophy that is conducive to economic development and inter-ethnic relations (for example, Prime Minister’s Abdullah Badawi’s *Islam Hadhari* (moderate Islam) concept in the early 2000s). However, a combination of factors - emboldened state religious officials pushing for more rigid Islamic policies, the growing religious conservatism of Malaysian Muslims and political rivalry - have complicated the government’s efforts to temper Islamic expression in the political and social spheres.

Additionally, the secular emphasis of the pro-democracy movement spearheaded by the opposition political alliance in the 2008 and 2013 general elections that included both PAS and Malay-based *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR), has caused dissatisfaction in a segment of the Malay middle class over the possible erosion of *ketuanan Melayu*, along with a loss of Malay special rights and the diminished status of Islam.

In this context, religious freedom court disputes (e.g. apostasy and religious conversions) have been particularly controversial as contemporary Islamic civil society organisations emerged to defend the position of Islam in Malaysia against the perceived “secular-liberal” onslaught. In addition to religious education initiatives, these organisations attempt to dominate public discourse on Islam, and even participate in electoral politics. While the role of the older Islamic civil society organisations and political parties in the discourse of Islam is well-documented, there has been considerably less studies on newer movements and their role in both the political and social realms.

Contemporary Islamic Civil Society Organisations and their Impact on Malaysian Politics

Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA, Muslim Solidarity Front)

One of the more prominent Islamic civil society organisations is ISMA, which projects itself as politically non-partisan. It was officially formed in 1997, and has roots with the Malay students who interacted with Muslim Brotherhood (MB) activists in Egypt and in the UK during the late 1970s and 1980s (Hamid and Razali, 2016). ISMA has active branches outside of Malaysia, including Egypt, Jordan and in several Western countries. ISMA has reportedly 20,000 members comprising of mostly middle class Malay professionals and students in the Selangor area. In addition to activities organised in its 26 Malaysian branches, ISMA also organises specialised programs through its youth and women’s wings.

It is only in recent years under its president, Abdullah Zaik, who has a degree in Islamic Law from Egypt, that ISMA has grabbed national attention with its rhetoric on Malay rights. While ISMA’s official agenda is upholding Islamic principles in society, it frames its arguments in pro-Malay terms. Of concern to ISMA is the erosion of *ketuanan Melayu* principle, which ISMA perceives as akin to the diminishing of Islam’s status in society. Since the majority of Muslims in Malaysia are Malays, ISMA regards the two issues as irrevocably linked.

After the UMNO-led coalition lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority at the 2008 general elections, Prime Minister Najib Razak attempted to placate non-Malays with the “1Malaysia” slogan, where a common Malaysian national identity was emphasised. The government even toned down its *ketuanan Melayu* discourse. Najib also spearheaded the Global Movement of Moderates movement in 2012 to advocate for moderate Islam both at home and abroad. For all of Najib’s efforts, little was actually done to change the system, and the UMNO-led government suffered further losses in the 2013 general election; while managing to retain the government, the UMNO-led coalition lost the popular vote for the first time due to a massive shift in non-Malay votes to the opposition.

ISMA responds to these political developments with provocative pro-Malay rights discourse and positions itself against secular-liberalism, which is advocated by pro-democracy activists and the opposition. Governmental attempt to moderate public discourse is met with strong pushback by ISMA. For example, in early 2015 when Najib publicly rejected the usage of *pendatang* (immigrant) by pro-Malay rights activists to describe non-Malay Malaysians, ISMA’s president warned UMNO against sidelining Malays with a “liberal, multiracial” agenda; he also reminded UMNO that Malay voters had helped it retain power in the 2013 election.

ISMA's pro-Malay rights and anti-liberalism rhetoric is likely a bellwether of UMNO's political focus in the lead up to the 2018 general elections. The UMNO-led government faces a political crisis over Najib's handling of the indebted state fund 1MDB and corruption allegations. Since the crisis, Najib has overtly called for Malay support against criticism by political opposition and pro-democracy civil society groups by using similar rhetoric as ISMA. For example, after the 2015 *Bersih* protest that was widely portrayed as Chinese-dominated, Najib endorsed a pro-Malay rally organised by National Silat Federation (Pesaka) and spoke about upholding Malay rights; and at the UMNO convention in December 2015, Najib warned members that failure of the Malays to support UMNO at the next general election would place the country's Malays and Muslims at the hands of a DAP-dominated opposition coalition that is "anti-Islam and anti-Malay".

As Najib consolidates his power within the party by removing internal dissenters, he has vested interests in aligning more with ISMA's pro-Malay rights refrain so as to rally Malay Muslim support ahead of the next elections. This is a tried and tested strategy used by UMNO in previous elections. However, although there is a convergence of interests, this does not necessarily mean that ISMA would endorse UMNO at the next election. ISMA regards UMNO as a colonial construct, which needs to be changed to fulfil Islamic agenda. A few of ISMA's members contested the 2013 elections against UMNO (and lost), and may very well do the same in the next election.

Pertubuhan Ilmuwan Malaysia (Association of Malaysian Scholars, ILMU)

A 2015 Merdeka Center survey indicated that a majority of Malay voters want Islamic credentials in their leaders. The Islamist party PAS has politicians in its ranks that meet this Malay voter criteria, and it represents UMNO's strongest challenger for the Malay vote. After PAS's disappointing show in the 2013 general elections where it lost in the Malay Muslim majority areas, hardline PAS members suggested the main reason was due to PAS's accommodative stance to the secular-oriented pro-democracy push represented by the opposition coalition.

PAS has since left the opposition coalition after it renewed its push for Islamic *hudud* law, and an internal party vote in 2015 strengthened PAS *ulamas* (religious scholars) over the moderates. PAS's departure from the opposition coalition has weakened it, and although UMNO has made overtures to PAS for possible cooperation on basis of Malay unity, PAS has largely been non-committal. It is likely that both parties will renew its long-standing rivalry for the Malay vote in the next general election, and the Islam factor will dominate their political contestation.

To that end, UMNO has already made moves to strengthen its Islamic legitimacy by recruiting several high-profile *ulama* into the party's young *ulama* wing in 2010. These *ulama* are from the *Pertubuhan Ilmuwan Malaysia* (Association of Malaysian Scholars, ILMU), which focuses on teaching the Salafi interpretation of Islam. Although UMNO and ILMU have very different ideas on governance of Islam (for example, ILMU seeks the establishment of a Malaysian Islamic State, which is opposite to UMNO's position), the Salafi *ulamas'* willingness to work with UMNO stems from their wish to propagate their ideas and influence the state system from within. As such, ILMU conducts religious education classes for UMNO members and the wider community.

Despite the existence of a long-standing anti-Salafi stance by the religious bureaucracies in Malaysia, UMNO has nonetheless seen it fit to associate with the Salafi *ulama*. In UMNO's estimation, the Salafi *ulamas* can help provide the Islamic legitimacy it needs to defend itself against PAS (Osman, 2014). This might be particularly useful in the current context where UMNO has a huge trust deficit with the Malaysian populace, including the Malays, over Najib's corruption scandal and his subsequent actions in quelling internal party dissent.

However, it remains to be seen if the Salafi *ulamas*, who as part of its teachings stress on the importance of loyalty to the prevailing government, would be able to garner Malay voter support for UMNO. Salafism is still regarded as a minority viewpoint in the Malaysian context, where traditional Islam and Sufism dominates. In an indication that the Salafi *ulamas*' religious clout might be limited, several high-profile Salafi *ulamas*, including Fathul Bari, a Salafi *ulama* in the UMNO youth executive council, were banned from preaching in the state of Johor for spreading "deviant teachings" earlier this year.

Fathul Bari has played an instrumental role in facilitating meetings for Salafi scholars with Malaysian leaders. A recent example of this would be the visit by a number of Saudi scholars to meet the Sultan of Johor (Mat Jahaya, 2016). It is notable that this visit came shortly after the Johor Islamic Religious Department banned a number of Salafi preachers from speaking in the state. As one of the key leaders of ILMU, Fathul Bari has gained traction within UMNO. At the 2013 UMNO General Assembly meeting, he captured the highest number of votes at the UMNO Youth assembly meeting, which reflects his increasing influence especially amongst the party's grassroots (Tan, 2014).

ILMU represents an interesting example of a new Islamic civil society organisation that seeks not only to influence Malaysia politically, but to also promote a particular strand of Islam that is more puritan. In fact, it would appear that the key objective of ILMU is to use the political space it has been accorded after it joined the UMNO-led government, to promote a Salafi interpretation of Islam.

Group of 25 (G25)

The Group of 25 (G25) is the only Islamic civil society organisation that seeks to limit the role of Islam in politics. The group came to prominence after it published an open letter that called for a rational and open discussion on Islam in the public realm in Malaysia.

The group's letter stated that "Members share a common value that, while recognising Malaysia is a predominantly Muslim country with Islam as the official religion, we believe that its administration should be in line with the constitutional provisions regarding the role of Islam guaranteeing all citizens their fundamental rights to freedom of expression and worship. To this end, we are all agreed that Islam must be administered in a manner that ensures justice to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, as this is crucial for peace and stability in our multiracial country." (G25 Website, n.d.)

The key people involved in G25 are retired senior Malay civil servants. The leading voice of G25 has been Dato' Noor Farida Ariffin, a former senior judge. G25 positions itself as a civil society organisation and seeks to play a constructive role as the voice of moderation on Islam. Since its formation, G25 has organised two major conferences in Penang and Kuala Lumpur. The group has also published an edited book that compiled academic articles on the state of Islam in Malaysia. G25 members have propounded their views on a number of different issues including the need for the *Shariah* (Islamic law) court in Malaysia, the secular nature of the Malaysian Constitution, moral policing and most importantly, the plans to implement Islamic criminal laws in the country. One example of this was the group's call for the *khalwat* laws in the country to be reviewed (Boo, 2015).¹ In this regard, G25 has also been an important advocate for improved ties between Muslims and non-Muslims in the country. Beyond its focus on Islam, the group has been in the forefront to advocate for change and reform in the country's institutions of law and order, as well as to improve the standards

¹ *Khalwat* refers to the offences committed in Malaysia when a man and a woman who are not family members are found in close proximity. The couple could be in a room or in a public park. See Enactment No 3 of 1964 Administration of Muslim Law Enactment 1964. See http://www2.esyariah.gov.my/esyariah/mal/portalv1/enakmen/Eng_enactment_lib.nsf/100ae747c72508e748256faa00188094/3e7ad01824e8b532482573950029705c?OpenDocument.

of governance. In line with these objectives, G25 has joined a number of movements that call for political reforms, such as the *Bersih* movement.

Interestingly, G25 has not come under direct criticisms from senior UMNO leaders such as Prime Minister Najib Razak or Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, although the Prime Minister has snubbed meeting requests from members of G25. The G25 group's main detractors are the religious bureaucracies, right-wing Malay nationalist groups and Islamist movements. Ibrahim Ali, the infamous leader of the Malay right-wing group, Perkasa, chastised the G25 group for not having the credentials to speak about Islam after G25 issued a statement referring to Perkasa and the Muslim right-wing group ISMA as "extremist, immoderate and intolerant" voices ("Defending Perkasa", 2016). Likewise, Malaysian religious minister, Jamil Md Khir has criticised the G25 group for its attacks on the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) and noted that such criticisms served to only weaken the Muslim community.

Due to the G25 group's stance against the implementation of *Shariah* in Malaysia, G25 has faced condemnation from PAS leaders. In an article written by Nik Abduh Nik Aziz, the PAS Youth Chief, he argued that G25 is trying to interpret Islam according to a Western construct (Nik Aziz, 2015). He added that G25 group's ideas run contrary to Islamic teachings. While G25 has declared itself as non-partisan, it is obvious that the group has a stronger relationship with the Malaysian opposition parties. Many of the statements issued by G25 has been critical of the government and at least one of its conference was co-organised with the Penang Institute, which is closely linked to the DAP-led Penang state government.

The religio-political influence of G25 remains limited due to a number of reasons. First, the G25 group is viewed as being elitist and their message seems to resonate with those who already share their views. There has been little outreach effort on their part at the level of the Muslim masses. Second, the G25 has little traction within UMNO and PAS, the two main Malay-Muslim political parties. UMNO and PAS members view G25 as a liberal group that seeks to undermine Islam (Mohamed, 2016).

Regardless of these limitations, the profile of its members gives credence to the group. The social network of its members have seen G25 being given both the political space to propound their views and extensive media coverage. The group has also been successful in lending its voice to debates on political, social and religious issues in the country. The fact that both former Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamed and former Deputy Prime Minister, Muhiyiddin Yassin met G25 members to secure the group's support in their campaign to oust Prime Minister Najib indicates the group's importance. Likewise, the group has met with several Malay rulers to discuss their proposals on how the implementation of Islamic law in the country could be reformed (Ariffin, 2015). The fact that Islamic matters are under the jurisdiction of the Malay rulers demonstrates the possibility that G25 can influence policy changes. G25 also represents a new strand of Islamic civil society in Malaysia which is advocating for a more rational reading of Islamic law.

New Islamic Civil Society and Malaysian Islam

There are several traits that define the new Islamic civil society groups. First, these groups are more likely to pursue their ideological objectives rather than be subsumed within the mainstream Islamic parties. Even in the case of ILMU, the Salafi scholars are more focused on spreading their ideology within the government and the larger Malaysian society. Much of ILMU's emphasis has been about changing government policies and transforming the Muslim society to one that accepts Salafism as the dominant and mainstream sect of Islam. Likewise, both ISMA and G25 have stayed away from electoral politics and remain in the civil society sphere to propound their respective position. This could be contrasted with the Islamic civil society groups of the 1980s and 1990s that joined UMNO and PAS and were involved in electoral politics.

Second, the Islamic contestation in the public sphere taking place today is different from the previous contestations. Islamic civil society in the 1980s and 1990s were focused on countering ideologies such as nationalism and secularism purportedly espoused by UMNO. These past movements had also agreed on the twin objectives of establishing an Islamic State and implementing all aspects of Islamic law, even if they differed on the best methodology to achieve these objectives. However, contemporary Islamic civil society groups have different objectives and are often at loggerheads with each other. ISMA has chastised ILMU for the group's alleged eagerness to issue Islamic edicts. Both ISMA and ILMU labelled G25 as a liberal movement that sought to undermine Islam from within. G25 considers ISMA as a racist organisation that does not embody the Islamic spirit of tolerance. This ideological battle is taking place in the civil society sphere and not in the political sphere, as was in the case with the older Islamic civil society groups.

In sum, the contemporary Islamic civil society organisations represent a myriad of different religious orientations and will continue to play an important role in shaping the future direction of Islam in Malaysia. These organisations will also play a key role in shaping the on-going debates in the Malaysian political sphere ranging from the implementation of Islamic criminal law to the rights of religious minorities within the Malaysian state.

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