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**HOW DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES AMONG
DISTINCT ISLAMIST STRANDS OF THOUGHT
INFLUENCE MALAY-MUSLIM POLITICAL
ACTORS AND POLITICAL OUTCOMES IN
MALAYSIA¹**

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Abstract

Different strands of Islamic thought and practice have long existed among the diverse populations that make up Muslim civilisation. Such cosmopolitanism has been examined by historians and social scientists who study Islam and Muslim societies. Yet, little attention has been given to how such societal variations influence the political behaviour of Muslim political actors, including the voting public. This paper is a modest attempt to look into how different Islamist streams—referring to the ideological expression of Islam as politics rather than theology—impact voting decisions among modern Malaysians. Since attaining independence as the Federation of Malaya in 1957, Malaysia has experienced several Islamist waves, the most significant of which has been the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology that fuelled the Islamic resurgence in the 1970s and 1980s. Of late, since the 2010s, a traditionalist comeback has been evident within Malaysia's Malay-Muslim communities. Focusing on Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15) and its immediate aftermath, this paper explores how different streams of Islamism play out in the various political parties that Malay-Muslims become members of and vote for.

Introduction

Islam is widely acknowledged as one of the main political influences on Malay-Muslims in multiethnic Malaysia. Socio-political fault lines among Malaysians, at least in Peninsular Malaysia, have mostly focused on ethnic divisions, which coincide further with religious differences among the country's principal ethnic groups. Therefore, social scientists who study Malaysia tend to divide the Malaysian society along ethno-religious lines, i.e., Malay-Muslim, Chinese-Buddhist, and Indian-Hindu; while in Sabah and Sarawak, Muslim and Christian Bumiputera (sons of the soil). Religious demography has, however, changed with time. For instance, with the industrialisation and modernisation of Malaysia, more ethnic Chinese and Indian Malaysians have converted from their ancestral religions to Christianity, with mixed Chinese-Indian families making up a growing percentage of the Christian population. As for the Bumiputera population, Malays are generally forbidden by law to convert out of Islam, while the Orang Asli aborigines have either remained animists, as they have been for generations, or converted to Islam or Christianity.

Commentators, politicians, and even some scholars have grown accustomed to treating a particular ethno-religious bloc in Malaysia as made up of homogeneous voices with fairly uniform demands and expectations. Within scholarly circles, the tendency to pigeonhole ethno-religious groups into fairly rigid sociological categories increases due to consociationalism, or an assumption of ethnically-pillared postcolonial polities.² Decades of ethnically-slanted political discourse in Malaysia have led many stakeholders to take for granted religion's mobilising role as a social cleavage aligned with ethnicity. Observers assumed Malay-Muslims' identities as Malay and Muslim in particular are inseparably intertwined, based on Article 160 of the Federal Constitution.³ They considered chances of intra-Muslim conflict remote; socio-political discourse in post-colonial Malaysia has invariably pivoted around a 'Malay versus non-Malay' theme, which assumes that even non-Malays of different ethnic and religious identities share similar political habits and preferences.

Malay-Muslim Political Actors in Peninsular Malaysia

For the first 40 years of Malaysia's independence, the fissure between the 'Malay nationalist' United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the 'Islamist' Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS: Parti Islam SeMalaysia) dominated Malay-Muslim politics. UMNO was the party of Malay aristocracy and Malay-Muslim elites, many of whom were educated in secular institutions established by British colonists.

² Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Eric A. Nordlinger, *Conflict Regulation in Divided Societies* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972).

³ Article 160(2) defines a "Malay" as 'a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom....'; see Laws of Malaysia, *Federal Constitution: Incorporating all amendments up to P.U.(A) 164/2009*, p. 130, https://www.jac.gov.my/spk/images/stories/10_akta/perlembagaan_persekutuan/federal_constitution.pdf

It was to this group of right-wing nationalists that independence was delivered, almost by default.⁴ PAS, meanwhile, received support from the bulk of Malay-Muslims residing in the countryside, whose lives revolved around *pondok*⁵ education, agriculture, and kampung life.⁶

In this working paper, Islamism is referred to as a political ideology that demands the establishment of a juridical Islamic state governed by sharia (Islamic law) for practising Muslims to realise the ideals of Islam as a comprehensive way of life (*din al-hayah*). This politically slanted definition of Islamist must be differentiated from Islam as a religious faith per se. Accordingly, Muslim thinkers and activists who espouse Islamism are called Islamists. In differentiating between Islam and the religionised politics of Islamism, Bassam Tibi proposes six definitive features of the latter: (i) deeply reactionary vision of the world political order; (ii) embrace of genocidal antisemitism; (iii) predicament with democracy; (iv) use of violence; (v) shari'atization of law; and (vi) a puritanical search for authenticity.⁷ Islamism, Tibi sums up, "is not the religion of Islam, even though it emanates from Islam"⁸ Rather, it is the political interpretations of Islam that give rise to Islamism. While there are limitations to conceptualising ideal type notions through potentially biased language, this paper contends that the employment of concepts such as Islamism and political Islam serve as no more than methodological tools in situating the discourse within the realm of contemporary political science

In Malaysia, however, the demarcation between Islamist and secular politics has never been watertight. UMNO was not altogether devoid of Islamism, nor was Malay nationalism absent from PAS' agenda. In fact, PAS, which originated as a breakaway faction of UMNO's *ulama* (religious scholars) wing, had overlapping members with its elder sibling from very early on.⁹ Just as some *ulama* stayed with UMNO, there were Malay intellectuals and technocrats who remained with PAS.¹⁰ PAS even joined the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition from 1973 to 1977, following the tragic racial riots in May 1969. Following disagreements over the choice of the Menteri Besar for the state of Kelantan, PAS and UMNO then parted ways again and remained apart until late

⁴ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "Malay Anti-Colonialism in British Malaya: A Re-appraisal of Independence Fighters of Peninsular Malaysia", *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 42, no. 5 (2007), 389. DOI: [10.1177/0021909607081115](https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909607081115)

⁵ Literally 'hut' in Malay, *pondok* refers to religious boarding schools which used to be pre-dominant in rural northern and northeastern Malaysia. The word is derived from the Arabic *funduq*, meaning a place of temporary residence.

⁶ Clive S. Kessler, "Islam, society and political behaviour: some comparative implications of the Malay case", *British Journal of Sociology* 23 (1972), 40-45

⁷ Bassam Tibi, *Islamism and Islam* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. vii, xiii, 6.

⁸ Tibi, *Islamism and Islam*, p. 50.

⁹ N.J. Funston, "The Origins of Parti Islam Se Malaysia", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 7, no. 1 (1976), 71. DOI: [10.1017/S0022463400010262](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463400010262)

¹⁰ In fact, after the initial leadership provided by UMNO *ulama* figure Haji Ahmad Fuad Hassan from 1951 until 1953, PAS's presidency was held by medical doctor Dr Abas Alias (1953-1956), by anti-colonial left-wing nationalist Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmy (1956-1969) and by right-wing nationalist Mohamad Asri Haji Muda (1969-1982), before passing on to Young Turks *ulama* inspired by the Iranian revolution

February 2020. Following the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan (Pact of Hope) administration due to defections by Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Malaysian United Indigenous Party) members of parliament and some leaders from Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party), PAS and UMNO leaders found themselves together again in a new Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance) coalition government.

Malay-Muslim Political Divisions in GE15

Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15) divided Malay-Muslim political loyalties into three major blocs: (i) Barisan Nasional; (ii) Perikatan Nasional; and (iii) Pakatan Harapan. Under UMNO Vice President Ismail Sabri Yaakob (August 2021 to November 2022), Barisan Nasional may have been considered the incumbent administration despite having formed a tenuous alliance with Perikatan Nasional, against which it won the state legislative elections in November 2021 in Melaka and March 2022 in Johor. Perikatan Nasional consisted chiefly of PAS and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, which was founded by ex-Prime Minister Dr Mahathir in 2016 in response to Malay grassroots networks disappointed with UMNO's increasing indulgence in corruption. Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia reflected a coalition of forces associated with Dr Mahathir and former UMNO Deputy President-cum-Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin who was expelled from the party for questioning Najib Razak's alleged financial wrongdoings in the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal. Dr Mahathir had insisted from Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia's outset that the party's *raison d'être* was its eventual replacement of UMNO as the cardinal political party representing ethnic Malays.¹¹ An uncompromisingly Malay nationalist party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia had provided Malaysia with two Prime Ministers: Dr Mahathir in his capacity as Pakatan Harapan chairman (May 2018 to February 2020) and Muhyiddin Yassin as leader of Perikatan Nasional (March 2020 to August 2021).

On the left of the Malay-Muslim political spectrum we could situate Parti Keadilan Rakyat, the core Malay party in Pakatan Harapan. The origins of Parti Keadilan Rakyat can be traced back to 1999 when Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party) was founded to redress injustices faced by Anwar Ibrahim who was dismissed as Deputy Prime Minister and UMNO Deputy President by Dr Mahathir in September 1998. Following Anwar on his political journey were loyal comrades, some from Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) who provided an Islamist flavour to Parti Keadilan Rakyat. Anwar balanced that with a secular flavour derived from civil society activism, where the momentum created by his Reformasi agitation resulted in an unprecedented convergence between Malay-Muslim and non-Malay interests.¹² In 2003, the left-oriented Parti Rakyat Malaysia (People's Party of Malaysia) was dissolved to allow its members to be absorbed by Parti

¹¹ Wan Saiful Wan Jan, *Why Did BERSATU leave Pakatan Harapan?*, Trends in Southeast Asia Monograph Series issue 10/2020 (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2020), p. 7.

¹² Meredith L. Weiss, "The Malaysian human rights movement", in *Social Movements in Malaysia: From moral communities to NGOs*, eds. Meredith L. Weiss and Saliha Hassan (London & New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 146–147.

Keadilan Nasional, which later morphed into Parti Keadilan Rakyat. Ideologically, Parti Keadilan Rakyat has also been influenced by liberal ideas as expressed by young Malay-Muslim intellectuals raised in the independently coordinated erudite settings of the Institut Kajian Dasar (Institute for Policy Research), the Institute for Leadership and Development Studies, the Universiti Bangsar Utama, and the Jalan Telawi Community in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur.¹³

On the farthest right of the Malay-Muslim ethno-religious spectrum is Parti Pejuang Tanah Air (Homeland Fighter's Party), whose origins may be traced to the apparent fall-out between Dr Mahathir and Muhyiddin Yassin over the latter's decision to take Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia out of Pakatan Harapan in February 2020. Chaired by Dr Mahathir upon its formation in August 2022 until his departure in February 2023, Parti Pejuang Tanah Air became a member of the nativist Gerakan Tanah Air (Homeland Movement) of which Dr Mahathir also became chairman. Gerakan Tanah Air included three other parties: (i) Parti Bumiputera Perkasa Malaysia (Organisation for Empowered Indigenous Peoples of Malaysia); (ii) Parti Perikatan India Muslim Nasional (Indian Muslim National Alliance Party); and (iii) Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front) whose ticket was contested by members of far-right party Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (Muslim Solidarity Front).¹⁴

Except the Gerakan Tanah Air bloc, all three major Malay-Muslim GE15 blocs had their respective non-Malay partners. Parti Keadilan Rakyat had the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party as its main component in Pakatan Harapan, Perikatan Nasional had Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Movement Party) as its third component behind Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia and PAS, and Barisan Nasional relied on the Malaysian Chinese Association and Malaysian Indian Congress to strengthen its multiracial image

¹³ Mohd Azizi Jaeh and Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, "Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) dan Intelektual Liberal: Kelahiran dan Evolusi Idea" [Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Liberal Intellectuals: The Birth and Evolution of Ideas], *Akademika* 90, no. 1 (2020), 165-179. DOI: [10.17576/akad-2020-9001-14](https://doi.org/10.17576/akad-2020-9001-14)

¹⁴ On Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia and non-violent extremism in Malaysia, see Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and Che Hamdan Che Mohd Razali, "Nativist Expressions of Non-Violent Extremism in Malaysia: The Case of *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia* (ISMA: Muslim Solidarity Front of Malaysia)", in *Routledge Handbook of Non-Violent Extremism: Groups, Perspectives and New Debates*, eds. Elisa Orofino and William Allchorn (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 150-165.

GE15 Results: The Malay Dimension

The principal highlight of GE15, as far as Malay votes were concerned, was PAS and by extension Perikatan Nasional's sterling performance in Malay-majority areas. This happened parallel to UMNO's staggering decline to just 26 parliamentary seats, reinforcing Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia's earlier claim of becoming the de facto voice of the Malay masses—a claim now being lent credence at a time when Dr Mahathir had ironically been given the boot by the party. Perikatan Nasional swept comfortably all parliamentary seats in the Malay heartland states of Kelantan and Terengganu, and only conceded one in Kedah. Overall, Perikatan Nasional grabbed 74 parliamentary seats, a close call to Pakatan Harapan's eventual 82-seat winning tally, but still not enough to form a government on its own. It was commonly assumed that Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, who for four years had been continuously in government under separate Pakatan Harapan and Perikatan Nasional administrations, supplied funds to finance Perikatan Nasional's campaign while PAS' machinery did the necessary groundwork.¹⁵ Perikatan Nasional's resurgence after its drubbing in Melaka and Johor a few months earlier was also PAS' way of rebuking Dr Mahathir, who until the end criticised PAS for the negative impact it would have on Malaysian Islam should it be given the chance to rule again.¹⁶ What Dr Mahathir had failed to consider was how more than two and a half years in government had helped to cement PAS' credibility at the federal level in the eyes of the Malay masses.

The biggest deficit Pakatan Harapan had to carry into government was the widespread perception that it was an administration elected primarily by non-Muslim voters. An early estimate done by Bridget Welsh, based on "macro data at the seat level, rather than more granular polling stations,"¹⁷ put Pakatan Harapan's support among the Malay-Muslims at a bare 11 per cent, in stark contrast to Perikatan Nasional's 54 per cent and Barisan Nasional's 33 per cent. On the other hand, non-Malay votes for Pakatan Harapan reached record levels, with 94 per cent of Chinese and 83 per cent of Indian voters supporting the party.¹⁸ Nearly three months into his premiership, Anwar Ibrahim claimed that based on more detailed studies, Pakatan Harapan received support from 31 per cent of Malay-Muslim voters.¹⁹ No matter what the actual figure is, the perception that Pakatan Harapan is not the country's majority Malay-Muslim community's government of choice persists. The Malay-Muslims seemed to have migrated in droves from backing Barisan Nasional to voting for Perikatan Nasional, convinced that UMNO was a party mired in corruption. It was not so much the 1MDB affair itself but rather UMNO's decision to back former Prime Minister Najib Razak during its subsequent

¹⁵ James Chin, "Anwar's long walk to power: the 2022 Malaysian general elections", *The Round Table* 112, no.1 (2023), 7. DOI: [10.1080/00358533.2023.2165303](https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2165303)

¹⁶ Imran Hilmy, "GE 15: Islam will be abused if PAS gets power, says Dr Mahathir", *The Star Online*, 12 November 2022, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/11/12/ge15-islam-will-be-abused-if-pas-gets-power-says-dr-mahathir>

¹⁷ Bridget Welsh, "A divided electorate: Preliminary analysis on ethnic voting", *Malaysiakini*, 25 November 2022, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/645661>

¹⁸ Bridget Welsh, "A divided electorate: Preliminary analysis on ethnic voting".

¹⁹ Ida Lim, "Anwar: Pakatan has support of 31pc Malay voters, not 11pc as claimed", *Malay Mail Online*, 6 February 2023, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/02/06/anwar-pakatan-has-support-of-31pc-malay-voters-not-11pc-as-claimed/53675>

special assembly after he was sent to prison in August 2022 that convinced fence sitters that the party was beyond repair.²⁰ The so-called 'green wave' was unstoppable in heavily Malay areas as Perikatan Nasional romped home to a resounding 16,260-vote majority victory at the Padang Serai by-election in December 2022, wresting the constituency from Pakatan Harapan. Among all the political parties, Perikatan Nasional and especially PAS have repeatedly advocated a Pakatan Harapan government with a slender majority propped up by non-Muslims rather than the dominant Muslim majority.²¹

Doctrinal Influence on Muslim Political Actors in Peninsular Malaysia

While Islamism is not the only ideology influencing Malay-Muslim voting behaviour, it is an important dimension. As the Malay-Muslim voter base gets more fragmented, it becomes increasingly intriguing to study the relationship between Malay-Muslim voting behaviour and specific types of Islamism. The most general category of voters would be the traditional conservative, whose understanding of Islam is rooted in tradition and respect for conventions. In the case of Malaysia, this essentially means theology or credal teachings associated with those of medieval Iraqi scholar Abu Hassan al-Asha'ari (874-936); *fiqh* or jurisprudence as taught by the eponymous school founded by Muhammad Idris al-Shafi'e (767-820); and *Tasawwuf*, or Sufism, as practised by many orthodox *tariqahs* (mystical orders) throughout the Malay world. Such a tripartite understanding of Islamic knowledge is reified as *fard 'ain*, or doctrinal and ritual obligations incumbent upon every adult male and female Muslim. Historically, what defined Malay-Muslims' political outlook was loyalty to one of many Malay sultanates, while common use of the Malay language as a *lingua franca* shaped their socio-cultural perspective.²² Atop the educational hierarchy are the *ulama*, who while traditionally served as advisers to the Sultans, retained their independence otherwise. Today, we consider subscribers to such a concept of Islam to be 'traditionalists' within the broad *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* (ASWAJA) or Sunni tradition, or 'orthodox Sunnis.' The majority of Malay-Muslims are still in this category though they may not realise it, for they merely follow what they have inherited from past generations.

The second group of Malay-Muslims is the Salafi reformists. First appearing in Malaya in the form of the Kaum Muda (Young Faction) modernist movement in the 1930s, these reformists

²⁰ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and Che Hamdan Che Mohd. Razali, 'Malaysia's 15th General Election: Malay-Muslim Voting Trends and the Rise of PAS', *RSIS Commentary* CO22126, 6 December 2022, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/malaysias-15%e1%b5%97%ca%b0-general-election-malay-muslim-voting-trends-and-the-rise-of-pas/#.Y5Bgr3ZBzb0>

²¹ Latifah Arifin, "PAS dakwa konsep Malaysia Madani tersasar daripada teladan Rasulullah SAW" [PAS claims that the Malaysia Madani concept strays from the example the Prophet PBUH], *Berita Harian Online*, 13 February 2023, <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/politik/2023/02/1063485/pas-dakwa-konsep-malaysia-madani-tersasar-daripada-teladan-rasulullah>

²² Osman Bakar, *Islamic civilisation and the modern world: Thematic essays* (Gadong: Universiti Brunei Darussalam Press, 2014), p. 268.

generally subscribe to the *Salafiyyah*²³ methodology of revitalising the *ummah*. Their puritanical search for authenticity led to the extirpation of *bid'ah*, or heretical innovations, that allegedly corrupted Islamic practices. Another key feature of the *Salafiyyah* methodology was its insistence the Quran and Sunnah (Tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad as direct sources of reference from which jurisprudential inferences are derived and rulings are extracted. Such a methodology automatically relegated to the background the legal schools of Shafi'e, Maliki, Hanafi, and Hanbali, which Muslims have revered for generations. The chief influence behind this new trend among Malay-Muslims was Cairo's Al-Manar circle comprising Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), and Rashid Rida (1865–1935), whose ideas early Kaum Muda pioneers such as Syeikh Tahir Jalaluddin (1869-1956) and Sayyid Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi (1867-1934) enthusiastically propagated in Malaya.²⁴

The Kaum Muda protagonists made determined efforts to generate reforms throughout the tradition-bound Malay society, as evidenced by the flurry of publications they produced in early 20th century Malaya. However, they failed in their immediate battle of ideas against their Kaum Tua rivals. Their failure to penetrate the heart of Malay society was ideological as it was tactical, as the Kaum Tua had resorted to using authority as much as discourse in neutralising their opponents.²⁵ Not only were the Malay-Muslims unprepared for what were seemingly revolutionary changes in their religious practices, the Kaum Muda also failed to break Kaum Tua's grip on the royal palaces, where political loyalties of the Malay-Muslims lay and whose consent was required to control the Majlis Agama Islam and the various Jabatan Agama Islam (Islamic Religious Departments). Only in Perlis, where Salafists had built long-time networks with the state's local UMNO politicians and royals, did the reformists prevail.²⁶ But the Kaum Muda did leave a significant imprint by politicising Malay-Muslims in an anti-establishment direction, even if movements which later took shape out of such politicisation became disconnected from their religious roots.²⁷

Salafi reformism is today most conspicuous among leaders of PAS, especially alumni of Egyptian universities. It has been chronicled, for instance, how future PAS leaders such as Zulkifli Muhammad (1927-1964) and Yusuf Rawa (1922-2000) were drawn towards the Salafi-centric thoughts of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) and especially of Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb (1960-1966) while studying in Egypt and Saudi Arabia

²³ Deriving from the word *salaf*, which carries the literal meaning of 'those who precede'—i.e., predecessors. *Salaf* is commonly paired with the word 'salih' or 'soleh', meaning 'pious' or 'righteous', to form the term *salaf al-salih*—i.e., pious predecessors. *Salaf al-salih* are understood to be faithful Muslims who lived in the first 300 years following Prophet Muhammad's demise in 632, while *Salafiyyah* denotes terms, concepts and methods that supposedly derive from the *salaf al-salih*.

²⁴ Yuki Shiozaki, "The Historical Origins of Control over Deviant Groups in Malaysia: Official *Fatwá* and Regulation of Interpretation", *Studia Islamika: Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies* 22, no. 2 (2015), 219. DOI: [10.15408/sdi.v22i2.1917](https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v22i2.1917)

²⁵ William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 79-87.

²⁶ Maszlee Malik and Hamidah Mat, "The historical development of the "*Sunnah*" reform ideology in the State of Perlis, Malaysia", *SAGE Open* 7, no. 3 (2017), 1-12. DOI: [10.1177/2158244017726356](https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017726356)

²⁷ Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, pp. 87-90.

respectively.²⁸ The family pedigree of long-time PAS *Mursyid al-'Am* (General Guide) Nik Aziz Nik Mat (1931-2015) connected him to Deobandi reformism of the Indian sub-continent; he himself was a student at Darul Ulum, Deoband, before enrolling at Al Azhar University in Cairo.²⁹ Present PAS *Mursyid al-'Am* Hashim Jasin was among the first group of PAS students sent to Iraq in 1964 to further their studies. There, he received direct tutelage from a Muslim Brotherhood instructor on *tarbiyyah haraki* (movement-based training).³⁰ Of PAS' early leaders, only Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmy (1911-1969) had a strong background in and record of supporting Sufism, but his detour into Kaum Muda reformism during his younger days was well-known.³¹ In any case, his credentials as an anti-colonial nationalist had more significance in landing him the top job in PAS.

But while the majority of PAS leaders have been Salafi reformists, many of their loyal followers at the grassroots level have been ASWAJA traditionalists. For many lay Malay-Muslims, this affiliation to a particular school is often a matter of family upbringing and societal norm rather than a conscious or individual choice. Since ASWAJA traditionalism has been the main Islamic tradition in the Malay world, Malay-Muslims are conventionally brought up in that tradition before becoming exposed to reformist Islam and revivalist Islam in the mould of Salafi reformism and Salafi conservatism respectively at secondary and tertiary educational institutions.³² Being under constant pressure to justify traditionalist beliefs has compelled some ASWAJA diehards to turn to neo-traditionalism, which is considered to be more modern and less pro-state than typical ASWAJA traditionalism.

This 'traditionalist versus Salafi' divide has presented a dilemma to many PAS leaders, who upon returning home, had to compromise as they struggled to accept certain practices that Middle Eastern Salafis frown upon but traditionalist Malay-Muslims approve. But so long as these politicians perform their duty of safeguarding Islam well,³³ Malay-Muslims could generally tolerate minor

²⁸ Mohamad Fauzi Zakaria, *Pengaruh Pemikiran Sayyid Qutb Terhadap Gerakan Islam di Malaysia* [The Influence of Sayyid Qutb's Thoughts on Islamic Movements in Malaysia] (Kuala Lumpur: Jundi Resources, 2007), pp. 125-126.

²⁹ Mohd Radzi Othman and O.K. Rahmat, *Gerakan Pembaharuan Islam: Satu Kajian di Negeri Perlis dan Hubungkaitnya Dengan Malaysia* [Islamic renewal movements: A research in the State of Perlis and its relations with Malaysia] (Penang: USM Press, 1996), p. 225.

³⁰ Mohamad Fauzi, *Pengaruh Pemikiran Sayyid Qutb Terhadap Gerakan Islam di Malaysia*, p. 128.

³¹ N.J. Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of the United Malays National Organisation and Party Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd, 1980), p. 118.

³² For a broad outlook at these socialisation processes, although missing out on the specific doctrinal formulations, see A.B. Shamsul, "Inventing certainties: The *dakwah* persona in Malaysia", in *The Pursuit of Certainty: Religious and Cultural Formulations*, ed. Wendy James (London & New York: Routledge. 1995), pp. 117-129.

³³ 'Safeguarding Islam' in contemporary parlance would be taken to mean shielding the Malay-Muslim masses from arbitrary threats emanating from within and without the Muslim community. The former threat consists of those labelled as purveyors of 'liberal Islam,' the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community and a slew of heterodox Muslims including Shi'ites. The latter threat comprises Freemasons, Hindu extremists, Jews aka Zionists and Christians especially 'radical evangelists' accused of converting Muslims to Christianity; see the video Engku Ahmad Fadzil – The Original Page, "Inilah Sebab Kenapa Arwah IKSIM Dibunuh" [This is Why the Late IKSIM was Killed Off], *Facebook*, 20 March 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2774976645948613>

differences in jurisprudential matters.³⁴ An example of this pertains to differences of opinion regarding the permissibility of commemorating Prophet Muhammad's birthday, with Salafists generally dismissing it as *bid'ah dhalalah* (bad innovation) while traditionalists accepting it as *bid'ah hasanah* (good innovation). Another point of contention is the practice of *talqin* or specific death rites at graveyards to accompany the burial of the deceased, with Salafists generally opposing it and traditionalists openly supporting it.³⁵

Furthermore, Malay-Muslims were not fully averse to the changes Salafists were bringing about to Malaysian Islam. Two aspects of these changes are worth mentioning here. First is the Salafi quest for purity which is behind the *halal* (permissible) conduct that underlies all aspects of Muslim life, particularly on Muslim dietary habits and eating practices. On the one hand, this has had deleterious consequences in terms of Malay-non-Malay intermingling in public functions and social integration; on the other hand, halalisation has spawned a whole new industry, complete with an unprecedented set of rules and regulations, trademarks, and market players. Second is the Salafi methodological rule of prioritising evidence derived from the scripture, which has led to a widespread tendency to interpret historical events and texts from the era of the Prophet Muhammad in a literal manner. This has resulted in the Arabisation of Malay norms and cultural behaviour, especially clear in the realm of everyday dressing where a rising number of Malay-Muslim youths choose to don Arab-looking apparel once only identified with Muslims who have been on the pilgrimage to Mecca.³⁶

However, societal acceptance of Salafi-induced norms did not mean that masters of the *pondok* tradition could bear all of the changes. Held at state level, a Muzakarah Ulama (Ulama Meeting) in December 2021 and an Ijtimak Guru-Guru Pondok (Pondok Teachers' Assembly) in March 2022 issued demands to the Kelantan government to enforce a hitherto neglected provision of the constitution by recognising only the Asha'arite-Maturidite³⁷ tradition as the true bearer of the ASWAJA creed. The resolutions adopted included having the state government vet election candidates to ensure that they are not subscribers to non-ASWAJA traditions, especially the Salafi-

³⁴ Rahimin Affandi Abd. Rahim, "Traditionalism and Reformism Polemic in Malay-Muslim Religious Literature", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17, no. (1) (2006), 96. DOI: [10.1080/09596410500400090](https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410500400090)

³⁵ Mohd Radzi Othman and O.K. Rahmat, *Gerakan Pembaharuan Islam: Satu Kajian di Negeri Perlis dan Hubung Kaitnya Dengan Malaysia*, pp. 153-157, 189, 199, 215-216.

³⁶ Kamarulnizam Abdullah, "Navigating Against Salafi-Wahabi Expansion in Malaysia: The Role of State and Society", *Studia Islamika: Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies* 29, no. 1 (2022), 19. DOI: [10.36712/sdi.v29i1.25213](https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v29i1.25213)

³⁷ The Maturidite tradition refers to the eponymous school founded by Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (853–944) of Samarkand in present-day Uzbekistan. This is the only other mainstream theological school normatively accepted as part of orthodox Sunni Islam.

Wahhabi³⁸ tradition, which are deemed to be at variance with the Asha'arite-Maturidite theology.³⁹ Clearly, there is some disquiet at the grassroots level regarding some PAS leaders whom party members suspect of being proponents of an unorthodox form of Islam.

This brings us to the third group of Malay-Muslims, the Salafi conservatives, a.k.a. Salafi-Wahhabists. This group emerged in the 1980s as a result of young Malay-Muslims socialising with ideas primarily from Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, other Middle Eastern countries such as Jordan and Kuwait. Malay-Muslim Salafi conservatives went on to play active roles in the burgeoning Islamic revival back home. This *dakwah* (propagation) phenomenon had benefited from the outpouring of petro-dollars that accumulated after the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) crises of 1973 to 1974. OPEC injected these funds into a host of Islamic activities such as the publication of reading materials; organisation of conferences and meetings; building of mosques and other Islamic infrastructure; training of Islamic missionaries; and caderisation programmes at multiple levels of society. Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, then led by Anwar Ibrahim, was one of the many public and private institutions that received large donations from conduits of Salafi-Wahhabism around the world such as the Muslim World League and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth.⁴⁰

Equipped with higher academic qualifications and proficiency in the Arabic language, Malay-Muslim Salafi conservatives could penetrate the expanding Islamic bureaucracy. In the administration led by Dr Mahathir Mohamad that sought to foreground Islam as one of the planks of its governance in the 1980s and 1990s,⁴¹ Malay-Muslim Salafi conservatives carved a niche for themselves as religious experts, slowly transforming the Islamic terrain of Malay-Muslims from a religiously tolerant society to a strict and unaccommodating one. This could be seen, for example, in the changing nature of *fatwa*⁴² the National Fatwa Council had passed. The fact of the matter is that Salafi-Wahhabism espouses theological positions that regard the long-held Malay-Muslim conceptions of Ashaa'rism as deviant. For instance, one of the primary Salafi stalwarts in the UMNO hierarchy, Saudi-educated Dr Fathul Bari Mat Jahaya, has openly refuted the religious basis of the *Sifat Dua Puluh* (Twenty Attributes of God) precept of Ashaa'rite theology.⁴³ A less rigid variation of Salafi-Wahhabism, such

³⁸ The origins of Salafi thought is conventionally traced to the unorthodox teachings of the controversial theologian Ibn Taimiyyah (1263–1328), whose paradigm in turn influenced the Nejd-based revivalist Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (1703–1792), from whose name we derive his eponymous puritanical stream that collaborated with tribal leader Muhammad ibn Saud (1710–1765) in founding three Saudi states run on Wahhabi religious principles. Marrying both currents as Salafi-Wahhabism differentiates it from other Salafi strains such as the Afghani-Abduh-Rida Al-Manar reformist circle.

³⁹ Tuan Guru Syeikh Wazir Che Awang, "Bukan kefahaman ulama Salafussoleh" [Not the Salafussoleh *ulama's* understanding], *MyMetro*, 5 July 2022, <https://www.hmetro.com.my/addin/2022/07/858408/bukan-kefahaman-ulama-salafussoleh>

⁴⁰ Maszlee Malik, "Salafism in Malaysia: Historical account on its emergence and motivations", *Sociology of Islam* 5 (2017), 315–318. DOI: [10.1163/22131418-00504003](https://doi.org/10.1163/22131418-00504003)

⁴¹ Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne, "The Mahathir Administration in Malaysia: Discipline through Islam", *Pacific Affairs* 56, no. 4 (1983), 617-648. DOI: [10.2307/2758595](https://doi.org/10.2307/2758595)

⁴² A legal ruling considered to be official law for Muslims in any particular state of Malaysia. In Malaysia, peculiarly, to go against an official *fatwa*, once gazetted, is criminalised.

⁴³ Dr. Fathul Bari, "UFB - Firqah Sesat - Ciri² Asy'ariyah (Ringkas)" [UFB – Deviant Sect – Characteristics of Ashaa'rism (In Brief)], *Youtube*, 8 November 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIMT5Ywn94s>

as the kind we find in PAS President Haji Hadi Awang,⁴⁴ does not reject Asha'arite-Maturiditism altogether, but rather accepts it alongside Salafi-Wahhabism.

However, Haji Hadi has never revoked an Amanat (Message) he delivered in 1981 at Banggol Peradong, Terengganu, in which he condemned his UMNO antagonists for allegedly maintaining an infidel constitution and separating religion from politics, and declared PAS members as martyrs should they lose their lives in the *jihad* (holy war) against UMNO.⁴⁵ The Amanat has had a long-lasting impact, particularly in Terengganu, where families have broken up over partisan differences and UMNO and PAS members held separate congregations for prayers.⁴⁶ Salafi conservatives also typically have a more hostile attitude towards non-Muslims due to the internalisation of the *al-wala' wa al-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal) doctrine, which prescribes a complete division between Muslim and non-Muslim spheres of lives.

As a result of Najib Razak opening the doors to Salafi conservatives, they have been gaining a foothold within UMNO since 2010.⁴⁷ Believed to have done so in an effort to counter rising PAS influence following its successful collaboration with Parti Keadilan Rakyat and Democratic Action Party in the now defunct Pakatan Rakyat (People's Pact) coalition, Najib was quick to convince the public that such gestures would not turn UMNO into an extremist party.⁴⁸ Najib got the ball rolling by accepting 40 *ulama* affiliated to the Pertubuhan Ilmuan Malaysia (Association of Malaysian Scholars) into UMNO in June 2010.⁴⁹ Doctrinally aligned to them was former UMNO Youth Chief Dr Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, who as Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department had defended Wahhabism in Parliament.⁵⁰ In the UMNO polls of mid-March 2023, founding Pertubuhan Ilmuan Malaysia chairman Dr Fathul Bari Mat Jahaya delivered a convincing victory when he defeated former Perlis Menteri Besar, Azlan Man, for the position of Kangar UMNO division chief.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Tuan Guru Haji Abdul Hadi Awang, "Mazhab Salafi Wahabi (1/2)" [The Salafi Wahabi Sect (1/2)], *Youtube*, 25 June 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxibDPkSTOo>

⁴⁵ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "Islamist Violence in Malaysia: Reflections From the Pre-GWOT Era With Special Reference to the Memali and Al-Mau'nah Cases", in *SEARCCT's Selection of Articles 2020*, ed. Chuah Teong Ban (Kuala Lumpur: Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2020), pp. 8–9.

⁴⁶ Kamarulnizam Abdullah, "Navigating Against Salafi-Wahabi Expansion in Malaysia: The Role of State and Society", 13.

⁴⁷ Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, "Salafi Ulama in UMNO: Political Convergence or Expediency?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 36, no. 2 (2014), 206-231. DOI: [10.1355/cs36-2b](https://doi.org/10.1355/cs36-2b)

⁴⁸ The Star, "PM: Ulama in Umno will not make party extremist", *The Star Online*, 27 June 2010, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2010/06/27/pm-ulama-in-umno-will-not-make-party-extremist/>

⁴⁹ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, *The Extensive Salafization of Malaysian Islam*, Trends in Southeast Asia Monograph Series issue 19/2016 (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2020), pp. 18-19.

⁵⁰ Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, "Wahabi bukan ajaran sesat" [Wahhabism is not a deviant teaching], *Facebook*, 27 April 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/drasyrafwajdidusuki/photos/a.148660531830669.27045.116331768396879/1313553488674695/?type=3&theater>

⁵¹ Aizat Sharif, "Umno polls: Ex-Perlis MB Azlan Man loses post to Fathul Bari in Kangar division", *New Straits Times Online*, 19 March 2023, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2023/03/890516/umno-polls-ex-perlis-mb-azlan-man-loses-post-fathul-bari-kangar>

Inbetween the ASWAJA traditionalists and the Salafi reformists are the neo-traditionalists. This is the school of thought that elements within Pakatan Harapan have lately gravitated toward, as a compromise between the passivity of the traditionalists and the rigidity of the Salafists. Basically, neo-traditionalists accept the theological, jurisprudential, and spiritual paradigms of the traditionalists, but differ with them on the necessity of adopting *taqlid* (blind imitation) as a way of safeguarding the essence of religion. On the contrary, neo-traditionalists advocate a measured exposure of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) particularly to *muamalah* (human-to-human interaction), including politics.⁵² A central figure in Islamic neo-traditionalism, the Mauritanian polymath-cum-statesman Abdullah bin Bayyah (b. 1935) is known to advocate the concept of *muwatanah* (citizenship), which provides for equal citizenship between Muslims and non-Muslims within the context of a nation state rather than antiquated notions of *kafir harb* (belligerent non-Muslims) and *kafir dhimmi* (peaceful non-Muslims) that have regulated Muslim-non-Muslim relations since the medieval ages.⁵³ He has also openly refuted the claim of a need to establish the caliphate by force.⁵⁴ A growing percentage of the Malay-Muslim middle class has been expressing interest in such ideas of peaceful co-existence, as evidenced by Malay translations of Abdullah bin Bayyah's books and opinion pieces by Malaysians praising his thoughts.⁵⁵ In 2019, Abdullah bin Bayyah was conferred Malaysia's Ma'al Hijrah (Islamic New Year) award under the international category by the then Pakatan Harapan government.⁵⁶

The four doctrinal categories of Malay-Muslims above, namely, ASWAJA traditionalism, Salafi reformism, Salafi conservatism, and neo-traditionalism, differ politically in attitudes towards the Malay royalty and the extent to which they are prepared to accommodate non-Muslims in a pluralist polity. ASWAJA traditionalists and Salafi conservatives will be most likely at odds with any equitable power sharing schemes with non-Muslims. While these schools of thought might be theologically disparate, both give rise to Malays inclined toward *ketuanan Melayu*, or Malay supremacy. It was not surprising that during GE14, Perlis and Pahang, hotbeds of Salafi conservatism and ASWAJA traditionalism respectively, delivered the remaining two Barisan Nasional state governments.

But during GE15, the large swing from Barisan Nasional to Perikatan Nasional became evident in both states. Perikatan Nasional romped home in Perlis with a clean sweep of all three parliamentary seats and 14 state legislative seats, leaving only one to Pakatan Harapan and none to

⁵² Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "Neo-traditionalist Islam in Malaysia: Neither Salafi nor traditionalist", *Asia Dialogue*, 8 May 2019, <http://theasiadialogue.com/2019/05/08/neo-traditionalist-islam-in-malaysia-neither-salafi-nor-traditionalist/>

⁵³ Marrakesh Declaration, *The Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Countries* (Kuala Lumpur: Ilham Books, 2018), p. 3.

⁵⁴ Shaykh Abdullah bin Bayyah, *This Is Not the Path to Paradise: Responses to ISIS* (Kuala Lumpur: Ilham Books, 2018), p. 10.

⁵⁵ SS Dato' Seri Dr. Zulkifli bin Mohamad al-Bakri, "Qalam Mufti #44: Abdullah bin Bayyah Yang Saya Kenali" [Mufti's Words #44: The Abdullah bin Bayyah that I know], *Mufti of the Federal Territory's Office*, 1 September 2019, <https://muftiwp.gov.my/en/media-menu/tinta-mufti/3668-qalam-mufti-44-abdullah-bin-bayyah-yang-saya-kenali>; Zulkifli Hasan, "*Fiqh al-Ta'ayush* dan *al-Muwatanah* Dalam Naratif Baharu Malaysia", *Zulkiflihasan.com*, 17 September 2019, <https://www.zulkiflihasan.com/2019/09/17/fiqh-al-taayush-dan-al-muwatanah-dalam-naratif-baharu-malaysia/>

⁵⁶ Omar Mohamed, "Abdullah Bin Bayyah di Malaysia pada masa tepat" [Abdullah Bin Bayyah in Malaysia at the right time]. *Malaysiakini*, 3 September 2019, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/490542>

Barisan Nasional. Backed by more than 50 per cent of popular votes, the crucial factor in Perlis appeared to be the defection of Shahidan Kassim—a former Menteri Besar (1995-2008) and UMNO cabinet Minister—from Barisan Nasional to Perikatan Nasional after knowing he was dropped from Barisan Nasional's GE15 line-up of candidates.⁵⁷ Shahidan was a central figure in attracting Dr Fathul Bari Mat Jahaya into UMNO and in maintaining a Salafi bias in the appointment of the Perlis *mufti*.⁵⁸

In Pahang, the tie in state seats between Barisan Nasional and Perikatan Nasional at 17 each was broken by Pakatan Harapan. Winning eight state seats, the party later sided with Barisan Nasional to form a Barisan Nasional-Pakatan Harapan coalition government. In Pahang, the swing towards Perikatan Nasional was influenced by the popularity of PAS Deputy President Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man who won the Cheka state seat and was the Menteri Besar candidate should Perikatan Nasional triumph.⁵⁹ In addition, Muhyiddin Yassin's government's decisions to protect the welfare of Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) settlers after they appeared to have been short-changed by Barisan Nasional in the Felda Global Venture shares sale appeared to have paid off when 12 of the 14 FELDA-majority state constituencies delivered Perikatan Nasional assemblymen.⁶⁰ In addition, it should not be overlooked that many FELDA settlers in the Pahang hinterland were originally from Kedah where Perikatan Nasional won 14 out of the 15 parliamentary seats available, and were thus amenable to familial influences from Kedah's own 'green wave'.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Hazelen Liana Kamarudin, "Shahidan wala' pada PAS" [Shahidan loyal to PAS]. *Sinar Harian Online*, 11 March 2023, <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/249205/berita/politik/shahidan-wala-pada-pas>

⁵⁸ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, *The Extensive Salafization of Malaysian Islam*, p. 19. A *mufti* is a religious scholar officially appointed by a state Ruler to issue authoritative *fatwa* for use in that particular state.

⁵⁹ Radzi Razak, "Pahang no longer Umno stronghold, likely to swing to Perikatan thanks to Tuan Ibrahim's draw". *Malay Mail Online*, 18 November 2022, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/11/18/pahang-no-longer-umno-stronghold-likely-to-swing-to-perikatan-thanks-to-tuan-ibrahims-draw/40527>

⁶⁰ Bernama, "Massive Felda rejection of BN huge factor behind hung Pahang assembly". *Astro Awani*, 21 November 2022, <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/massive-felda-rejection-bn-huge-factor-behind-hung-pahang-assembly-392829>

⁶¹ Azmil Tayeb, *Will Perikatan Nasional's Electoral Dominance in Kedah Persist in the Upcoming State Election?*, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Perspective No. 2, 26 January (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2023).

As Figure 1 below indicates, should religio-political principles be the main determinant of voting tendencies, it is hypothesised that: (i) ASWAJA traditionalists would mainly vote for Perikatan Nasional and Barisan Nasional; (ii) Salafi reformists would primarily be Pakatan Harapan and Perikatan Nasional voters; (iii) Salafi conservatives would mostly be Perikatan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan voters; and (iv) neo-traditionalists would principally be Pakatan Harapan and Barisan Nasional voters. The pattern broadly matches the ‘conservative versus reformist’ gap, with voting patterns of ASWAJA traditionalists and Salafi conservatives broadly mimicking one another, and likewise for those of Salafi reformists and neo-traditionalists.

Doctrinal Categories of Malay-Muslims	Political parties		
	Barisan Nasional	Perikatan Nasional	Pakatan Harapan
ASWAJA traditionalists	Second choice	First choice	Third choice
Salafi reformists	Third choice	Second choice	First choice
Salafi conservatives	Third choice	First choice	Second choice
Neo-traditionalists	Second choice	Third choice	First choice

Figure 1: The political inclination of the doctrinal categories of Malays-Muslims

However, the demarcation of views is not watertight. Quantifying each bloc is an extremely complicated process due to the lack of openness in identifying oneself as ASWAJA traditionalist, Salafi reformist, Salafi conservative, or neo-traditionalist among Malay-Muslims. No study on Malaysian Salafis, to the authors’ knowledge,⁶² has come up with an exact number of Salafists, although rough figures can today be postulated from internet penetration figures, such as the existence of 1.2 million followers on Salafists-run Facebook and YouTube pages.⁶³ But while Salafists’ online presence has undoubtedly been phenomenal since the mid-2000s,⁶⁴ such figures are prone to exaggeration for a number of reasons.

First, most Malay-Muslims would probably see themselves as lying somewhere between the different categories. Hence, one might think of oneself as an ASWAJA traditionalist, but at times make voting decisions triggered by Salafi-like reformist impulses. It is safe to assume, however, that the large majority of Malay-Muslims would be ASWAJA traditionalists by default, on account of the type of education they undergo, both informally and formally, in early stages of their lives. It is only at a later

⁶² Efforts were made as well to contact other experts who have conducted studies on Salafism and Salafists in Malaysia, but they also failed to come up with exact numbers.

⁶³ Murray Hunter, “Malaysia: Power Struggle Between Wahhabi-Salafism and Muslim Brotherhood – Analysis”, *Eurasia Review*, 13 June 2022, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/13062022-malaysia-power-struggle-between-wahhabi-salafism-and-muslim-brotherhood-analysis/>

⁶⁴ Muhamad Faisal Ashaari, “Aliran Pemikiran Salafi di Malaysia: Sorotan Terhadap Peranan Internet Dalam Dunia Siber” [Salafi Stream of Thought in Malaysia: A Review of the Role of the Internet in the Cyber World], *Al-Hikmah* 2 (2010), 35–49. <https://spaj.ukm.my/jalhikmah/index.php/jalhikmah/article/view/26>; Maszlee Malik, “Salafism in Malaysia: Historical account on its emergence and motivations”, 323–327.

stage of socialisation at college and university that a Malay-Muslim becomes enlightened to other schools of thought. Nevertheless, what matters most for our present purpose is not to identify their Islamist leanings per se, but rather to map out the implications in terms of voting decisions.

Secondly, many Malay-Muslims may not be even aware of their doctrinal leanings due to ignorance or carefree attitudes towards life. Doctrinal shifts and movements still matter as they affect parties' leaders, who in turn influence voters. Changes in mass voting behaviour will more likely come about through top-down rather than bottom-up influence. Such changes may be permanent or temporary depending on how voters respond to different traditionalist and Salafist persuasions on issues at hand. Online presence may indicate interest out of curiosity rather than commitment per se.

How these changes take place, however, is secondary to the fact that religion remains uppermost in Malay-Muslim political leaders' minds in negotiating terms of peaceful coexistence with their constituents for the coming parliamentary term. These leaders are surely aware of survey findings that broadly confirm the perception of a generally conservative Malay-Muslim society. A survey of Muslim youth the Merdeka Center conducted from 30 October 2021 to 25 January 2022 discovered that of the 1216 youths polled, 92 per cent continued to regard Islam as important to their families and 43 per cent agreed that the Sharia court should be empowered to be of equal standing with the civil court, while a meagre 17 per cent felt that Islam and public matters ought to be kept separate. Yet, they also exhibited neo-traditionalist leanings, with 66 per cent agreeing that all Malaysians should be treated equally, regardless of race and religion.⁶⁵

Post-GE15 Islamist Politics

On the one hand, many observers viewed PAS' ascendancy as proof of Islamism's inexorable rise in Malaysian politics. For better or for worse, as James Chin noted, barely a day after the GE15 results were finalised, "PAS' brand of conservative religious politics has become more attractive; political Islam has become mainstream in Malaysia."⁶⁶ The chairman of PAS' international affairs and external relations council, Khalil Abdul Hadi, ascribed PAS' surprisingly stellar performance dubbed the 'green wave' to first-time young voters who got information from social media platforms such as TikTok, which Perikatan Nasional dominated. He further claimed that irrespective of race, Malaysians in their mid-20s to mid-30s tend to be conservative.⁶⁷ His father, PAS President Haji Hadi Awang, was

⁶⁵ Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, "News Release 16th June 2022", 16 June 2022, <https://sistersinislam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Muslim-Youth-Survey-2022-News-Release.pdf>

⁶⁶ James Chin, "Commentary: GE15 – The rise of PAS as a major power and the end of Mahathir's legacy in Malaysia", *Channel News Asia*, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/malaysia-election-ge15-pas-pn-pakatan-mahathir-3087921>

⁶⁷ FMT Reporters, "GE15 shows political Islam has gained popularity, says Hadi's son", *Free Malaysia Today*, 4 December 2022, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2022/12/04/ge15-shows-political-islam-has-gained-popularity-says-hadis-son/>

similarly upbeat in predicting a continuation of the green wave in the six state elections due mid 2023.⁶⁸

A major problem Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has to contend with is how to rein in a religious bureaucracy filled mainly with ASWAJA traditionalists, while Salafi conservatives make their presence increasingly felt by the day. This was the case even in Pakatan Harapan-controlled states such as Selangor and Penang. The Friday sermon by the Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor (Selangor Islamic Religious Department) on 30 December 2022 titled 'Bahaya Pemikiran Islam Liberal' (Dangers of Liberal Islamic Thought) was accused of harbouring liberal Islamic thinking by Perikatan Nasional. The sermon was clear-cut in its advocacy of Asha'ari-Maturidism as the only acceptable theological framework, an oral gesture that appeared to be directed at Salafi reformists within Pakatan Harapan, even Anwar Ibrahim himself.⁶⁹

This did not mean, however, that Pakatan Harapan was devoid of support from neo-traditionalists. For example, a young scholar named Ustaz Fateh Faiz with quite a significant following⁷⁰ backed Anwar Ibrahim as Prime Minister through social media.⁷¹ Such a pre-GE15 endorsement was important for Anwar to showcase that support for him cut across Islamist ideological leanings and socio-religious barriers; Fateh Faiz's social and educational background made him readily identifiable in public mind with PAS and therefore Perikatan Nasional. But such solitary voices were easily overpowered by other independent *ulama* who issued public statements endorsing Perikatan Nasional as the most viable political coalition capable of protecting Islam, the Malay nation, and Malaysia.⁷² These *ulama*'s issue with Anwar Ibrahim revolved around his alleged indulgence in religious pluralism, against which the positions of both ASWAJA traditionalists and Salafi conservatives appeared to converge. This issue has been continually raised in parliament by Perikatan Nasional Leader of the Opposition Hamzah Zainuddin,⁷³ who is well-known among Islamist

⁶⁸ Dineskumar Ragu, "PAS' 'green wave' will grow in state elections, says Hadi", *Free Malaysia Today*, 10 January 2023, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/01/10/pas-green-wave-will-grow-in-state-elections-says-hadi/>

⁶⁹ JAIS, "Bahaya Pemikiran Islam Liberal" [Dangers of Liberal Islamic Thought]: Tarikh Dibaca: 30 DIS 2022M I 06 Jumadal Akhirah 1444H (Shah Alam: Unit Khutbah, Bahagian Pengurusan Masjid, Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, 2022).

⁷⁰ On Ustaz Fateh Faiz's role in Malaysia's contemporary neo-traditionalist scene, see Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and Amran Muhammad, "From community to the state to individual preachers: The vicissitudes of traditional Islamic studies in Malaysia", in *Islamic-based Educational Leadership, Administration and Management: Challenging Expectations Through Global Critical Insights*, eds. Khalid Arar, Rania Sawalhi, Amaarah DeCuir and Tasneem Amatullah (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), p. 258.

⁷¹ Ust Faiz Fateh al-Azhari, "Calon PM Paling Ideal PRU15" [Most Ideal GE15 PM candidate], *Facebook*, 17 November 2022, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02GUyYr42ShUDaPD9QaVxjwwggQa9RFnSCVzp4GJ5P PuanU4rByK3qxBDzpqZB7JmXI&id=100076389751102&mibextid=Nif5oz

⁷² Cf. "Resolusi Majlis Muzakarah Ulamak Kedah", *Harakahdaily*, 18 November 2022, <https://harakahdaily.net/index.php/2022/11/18/resolusi-majlis-muzakarah-ulamak-kedah/>

⁷³ Agenda Daily, "Anwar digesa perjelas pluralisme dalam Malaysia Madani" [Anwar asked to explain pluralism in Malaysia Madani], *Youtube*, 14 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeZcfsIK82A>

circles for his close links with the Salafi conservative group, Gabungan Ahli Sunnah Malaysia (Union of Sunnah Followers of Malaysia).⁷⁴

Anwar Ibrahim's response to what he sensed was traditionalist discontent with Pakatan Harapan's victory over Perikatan Nasional in the race to form the federal government in the few days following GE15's hung parliament was swift and decisive. He knew very well that lack of support from the traditionalist bloc of *ulama* could become the achilles heel of his administration in the long run. On 11 December 2022, he hosted a gathering with *ulama* and religious teachers (Program Pertemuan Mahabbah Perdana Menteri bersama Ulama dan Asatizah) at Seri Perdana, his official prime ministerial residence. Speakers at the overwhelmingly traditionalist gathering included veteran ASWAJA figures such as Yunan Samad, Khafidz Soroni, Raja Ahmad Mukhlis Raja Jamaluddin, and Engku Ahmad Fadzil Engku Ali, all of whom openly urged the Prime Minister to prioritise the delivery of Islamic knowledge through the prism of Asha'arism, as befitting Malaysia's traditionalist Islamic legacy.⁷⁵ This would entail, for instance, a streamlining of the official Islamic education curriculum to emphasise character building and balanced development between the soul and academia, rather than stressing on rituals. While Anwar avoided giving a blank endorsement to the traditionalist scholars' exhortations, he did promise to review the Islamic studies syllabus so that students will be taught universal values and humanity.⁷⁶

Former Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia President Amidi Abdul Manan who helped co-organise the gathering noted that the Prime Minister himself knew that he is not in the good books of most traditionalist scholars, who have lambasted Anwar in the past for espousing religious pluralism.⁷⁷ Moreover, Anwar was also conscious of the fact that some *ulama* in the audience had close links with Malaysia's royal palaces—another shortcoming of Anwar's politics. In his speech, Anwar aptly referred to how enchanted he was with Syeikh Daud al-Fathani, a renowned 19th century traditionalist scholar, whose final part of his book *Munyatu 'i-Musalli* Anwar transcribed into modern Malay whilst in prison.⁷⁸

This gathering was quickly succeeded by a visit from Professor Dr Syeikh Jamal Farouk Jibreel from Al-Azhar University, Cairo. During the occasion, Anwar promised that his administration would “menjelmakan nilai akhlak dalam tata laksana kenegaraan” [externalise moral values in the

⁷⁴ GASMA, “Multaqā GASMA 2016 - Dato Seri Hamzah Zainudin,” *Youtube*, 13 November 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-6odJ2Rppg>

⁷⁵ Astro AWANI, “[LANGSUNG] Program Pertemuan Mahabbah Perdana Menteri bersama Ulama dan Asatizah | 11 Dis 2022” [Live: Gathering between the Prime Minister and Ulama and Religious Teachers], *Youtube*, 11 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ku7lFvYq5ls>

⁷⁶ Zakiah Koya, “Islamic studies in schools to be reviewed to emphasise universal values and humanity, says Anwar”, *The Star Online*, 26 January 2023, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/01/26/islamic-studies-in-schools-to-be-reviewed-to-emphasise-universal-values-and-humanity-says-anwar>

⁷⁷ Cikgu Amidi, “Pertemuan Mahabbah PM bersama Ulama dan Asatizah”, *Facebook*, 12 December 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/amidimanan/posts/pfbid0QbMmQvgFKk833e3vRPY8HpunDEw8dDQwReciY3bXS9KXsDHqLixKWB4HtEyAavyNI>

⁷⁸ Anwar Ibrahim, *Keadilan Bagi Orang Yang Bersolat* [Justice for a Praying Person] (Kuala Lumpur: Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, 2022).

implementation of statecraft],⁷⁹ thus bringing his nation-building vision in line with his later assertion to “never forget that the primary rationale for public education is character development—its values and ethics.”⁸⁰ This statement appeared more in tune with the neo-traditionalist conception of a ‘compassionate state’ as laid out in documents such as the Marrakesh Declaration (2016), more so than with the typical Salafi-centric notions of a ‘sharia state’ and ‘Islam as religion and state’ (*al-Islām dīn wa dawlah*) as bequeathed by the intellectual traditions of Ibn Taimiyyah and Rashid Rida-cum-Abū al-A‘lā Mawdūdī (1903-1979) respectively.⁸¹

But whether such initiatives will be adequate to placate disaffected Malay-Muslims remains questionable. Recent opinion polls have revealed that in spite of a 68 per cent approval rating for Anwar as Prime Minister, dissatisfaction of Malay-Muslims with his government remains high at 71 per cent.⁸² This gives some basis to argue that, barring the influence of other non-religious factors such as the economy and personal qualities that might endear voters to a particular leader, ASWAJA traditionalism and Salafi reformism hold the greatest religious sway among Malay-Muslims in Peninsular Malaysia, with a discernible move from supporting Barisan Nasional to supporting Perikatan Nasional as the community’s party of choice. Due most probably to the corrupt image associated with Barisan Nasional and the unreliability of Pakatan Harapan with respect to the defence of Malay privileges, the average Malay-Muslim voter now prefers to back the relatively new Perikatan Nasional—previously the second choice of many.

Concluding Remarks

Many past studies on Malaysian politics have correctly diagnosed Islam to be an important, if not the most important, factor in Malay-Muslim political behaviour. Unfortunately, hardly any study has come up with a segmentation of Malay-Muslim political behaviour based on different doctrinal stripes within Islam, or ideological strands within Islamism. Most have treated Islamic voters as a single, monolithic bloc. Worse, some studies end up simplistically equating Islamist politics with only PAS.

This hypothetical study has diverged from past research by attempting to extrapolate different voting behaviour that might arise from distinct Islamist persuasions. Broadly speaking, four schools of thought have been identified: (i) ASWAJA traditionalism; (ii) Salafi reformism; (iii) Salafi conservatism; and (iv) neo-traditionalism. These schools align, however imperfectly, with political parties as spelt out

⁷⁹ Anwar Ibrahim, *Facebook*, 16 December 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/anwaribrahimofficial/posts/730299731784930>

⁸⁰ The Star, ‘PM: Islamic studies in schools to be reviewed to emphasise universal values and humanity’, *Youtube*, 26 January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9WZ5cdYI4E>

⁸¹ Nazih N. Ayubi, Nader Hashemi and Emran Qureshi, “Islamic State”, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 165-175.

⁸² Murray Hunter, “Do opinion polls spell doom for Anwar and his government?”, *Free Malaysia Today*, 28 February 2023, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2023/02/28/do-opinion-polls-spell-doom-for-anwar-and-his-government/>

in Figure 1 above. Anwar Ibrahim recognises his shortcomings when it comes to the Malay-Muslim vote, given his association with mostly Salafi reformists and to a lesser extent Salafi conservatives during his activist years and previous time in government. He is doing all he can to redress this shortcoming, by for example cooperating with ASWAJA traditionalists in religious programmes organised under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Department. However, it is proving to be a tall order as Anwar struggles to shake off a past image associated with radicalism and later liberalism and even globalism.⁸³

In future research, the present authors intend to test their hypothesis on a sample population that is broadly representative of the Malay-Muslim demography and population distribution in Malaysia. The results could later be extrapolated to the Malay-Muslim community in general. But the authors are aware of complications that might arise from an attempt to link Islamist doctrinal differences to voting behaviour and thus election results. In particular, the presence of multiple other factors such as prevailing economic conditions and cultural peculiarities of specific Malay-Muslim sub-communities may influence the findings in ways inconsistent with the predictions of our theoretical proposition. We recognise furthermore that doctrinal positions are seldom constant, and one's so-called doctrinal stand would likely be shifting rather than remaining stationary through time.

⁸³ Cf. The New Atlas, "Malaysia's New Prime Minister: The Impact on US-China Tensions in Asia", *Youtube*, 1 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTdpdFCwff0>

About the Authors



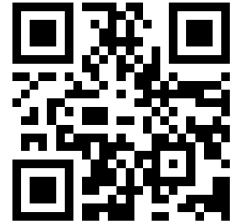
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