

**Editorial:**

**HOW THE CENTRE OF MALAYSIAN POLITICS  
SHIFTED TO THE ISLAMIST REGISTER 1969-2009**

One of the most obvious observations that can be made about the form and content of Malaysian politics, political discourse and political culture today is how the country has shifted to a visibly more Islamist register, with the symbols and vocabulary of political Islam gaining prominence and visibility over the past four decades. This is particularly true in the case of Malaysia's civil society space, which was once dominated by secular Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), mass movements and lobby groups. Today, however, we are looking at the relatively new phenomenon of a Malaysian civil society space which is increasingly being dominated by Islamist civil society movements that operate within the constitutional framework of the country but which are pushing for a clearly religious-communitarian agenda, namely the Islamisation of Malaysian society and politics. How did this come about?

The country that began as a constitutional democracy with an ostensibly secular-democratic political culture has now become considerably more Islamic in appearance as well as in its daily modes of governance. Historians who are familiar of the first decade of Malaysia between 1957 to 1969 will recall how religion in general and Islam in particular did not feature so prominently then as it does now, and how even the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) was then more concerned with political and ideological issues such as the struggle for independence and the fight against global militarism and the neo-colonialism of the former imperial powers. The ruling UMNO party then was likewise a mainly secular nationalist party, with nation-building as its primary goal.

Since the late 1960s, following the inter-ethnic clashes of 13 May 1969 and the introduction of affirmative action policies under the auspices of the New Economic Policy (NEP), the Malaysian state has become the primary actor in the process of foregrounding Islam and Muslim concerns on the national stage of politics.

During the Mahathir era between 1981 to 2003, the Malaysian government radically re-oriented its foreign policy towards the Arab states and the Muslim world at large; inaugurated a number of policy changes that were intended to placate the needs and concerns of the Malay-Muslim majority constituency; initiated a number of institutional initiatives that were meant to further enhance the place and space of Islam in the public domain – including the creation of numerous Islamic think-tanks, research centres, universities and Islamic finance; and further bolstered the standing and authority of the Islamic courts and the parallel Islamic legal system in the country.

Most political analysts have focused on the political-institutional dimension of these changes, working on the basis of a structural analysis that takes into account the political economy of the Islamisation process in Malaysia. There remain fewer studies that have looked into how these institutional and structural changes were introduced in order to satiate demands that were newly emerging in the Malay-Muslim public domain, and fewer studies on how this Malay-Muslim constituency itself had undergone changes over the decades that led up to the present.

The papers collected in this special edition focus mainly on the inter-related themes of Islamisation from below, the response of the state and the politics of Islamic discourse and praxis in Malaysia from the 1960s to the present.

Farish A Noor's paper looks at how the Islamisation process in Malaysia was partly the result of a host of variable factors that were unforeseen by the political elite of Malaysia in the 1950s and 1960s. During the first decade of post-colonial development, many of the Western-educated elite of Malaysia continued to see the West – notably Great Britain and the United States – as exemplary models of development to be emulated. Consequently, tens of thousands of Malaysian students were sent to both countries and the rest of Western

Europe to pursue their higher education at the government's expense. What the Malaysian political elite had not accounted for, however, was how the very positive image of the West as the repository of the ideas and values of the Enlightenment project would eventually be overturned thanks to the internal contradictions in the Western model of development itself, and as a result of the rise of political Islam that grew out of a reaction against Western cultural, economic and political hegemony. Ironically it was in the West that Muslim students from countries like Malaysia would meet and organise themselves into student networks that were inspired not by the ideas and ideals of Rousseau, Descartes and Kant, but instead by the writings of Islamist thinkers and intellectuals such as Maudoodi, Syed Qutb and the Ayatollah Khomeini. The West – notably the universities of the United Kingdom and North America consequently became the incubator for a form of 'Islamisation by degrees' that was led by the new generation of Western-educated but Islamist-inclined Malaysian students who would later come back and form the rank and file of many of the Islamist movements and political parties of Malaysia.

The next paper by Sophie Lemiere looks at precisely one of these movements – the Islamic Representative Council, IRC – that was formed and led by Malaysian Malay-Muslim students who had studied in the United Kingdom, and how this movement grew out of an independent initiative led by the students themselves who were mainly educated in the field of hard sciences and who were inspired by the ideas and beliefs of the Islamist thinkers en vogue at the time. Lemiere's paper looks at how the IRC initially began as a semi-clandestine underground Islamist network of Malay-Muslim students who used the time and opportunity at their disposal while studying abroad to educate themselves in the norms and ideology of political Islam, as a means to prepare themselves for a life of dedicated political activism upon their return to Malaysia in the late 1970s and 1980s. From its humble beginnings as a semi-underground student movement in the 1960s, the IRC later grew in prominence as the Jama'ah Islah Malaysia (JIM), one of the wellsprings of Islamist intellectual activism in Malaysia, with many of its founder-leaders later becoming prominent social activists during the 'reformasi' era of 1998-99 and who today

have assumed the role of politicians in Malaysia's national politics.

The following paper by Mohamed Nawab shifts our focus to the present, and considers the development of another youth-based and activist-oriented Islamist movement that is relatively new on the Malaysian political scene: the Hizbut Tahrir of Malaysia (HTM). While the Hizbut Tahrir of Indonesia (HTI) is far better known (and consequently better studied) than the HTM, Nawab's study of the origins, development and activities of the HTM are vitally important in that it demonstrates the extent to which the development of Islamist activism in Malaysia today is and remains closely linked to external variable factors and influences that testify to the international linkages and transnational networks that have always operated with and through Malaysia, as with the rest of the Muslim world. While Lemiere's paper looks at the genesis and development of the IRC and its evolution into JIM, Nawab's paper stresses the many points of continuity in the development and momentum of Islamist movements and Islamic political consciousness in Malaysia, that has always been exposed to both internal and external ideological influences.

Put together, the papers by Noor, Lemiere and Nawab effectively help to map out the contours and co-ordinates of the current Islamist political landscape in Malaysia, and help us gain an insight into the broader external linkages and networks that have helped to create and sustain the present range of Islamist political and ideological actors on the Malaysian scene.

The paper by Saskia Louise Schafer, on the other hand, looks at how this contested landscape is further defined and circumscribed by the workings of a statist-elite discourse that seeks to consolidate and control the meaning of key political signifiers such as 'Malayness' and 'Islamic identity' in the face of so many competing enunciators and participants in the broader landscape of public opinion. Looking at how the mainstream newspapers of Malaysia work and how the mainstream media has framed the debate over issues such as freedom of religion, Muslim (and non-Muslim) identity and fundamental civil liberties, Schafer's paper analyses the workings of mainstream media discourse in the manner in which it helps to shape – and by extension control and police – the freeplay of signifiers and signification in political

crucial areas such as the discursive construction of Malay-Muslim identity with regards to the problematic question of freedom of religion.

Aris Widodo's paper on the influential Malaysian Muslim scholar Syed Naquib Al-Attas looks at the manner in which Islam was presented primarily in terms of *din/deen*, as a response to the Western Orientalist framing of Islam. Widodo's paper is instructive in the sense that it frames the debate on Islam in Malaysia in terms of the same oppositional dialectics that juxtaposed Islam and the West, and operated along the same oppositional logic that likewise framed the Islamist ideology of the new generation of Islamist student activists who were deeply influenced by the ideas of Al-Attas in his book 'Islam and Secularism'. As part of the mapping exercise to chart out the landscape of political Islam that emerged from the late 1960s to the present, Widodo's study of the works and ideas of Al-Attas is critical as it maps out the intellectual terrain upon which many of the nascent Islamist movements of the 1970s to the present thrive and function.

Assembled together, this collection of papers offers a series of tentative snapshots of the state of Islamist activism in Malaysia over the past four decades. By tracing the roots and development of the Islamist movements of Malaysia to both the local political environment and the campuses of foreign universities in Western Europe and America, they point to the fact that political Islamism in Malaysia was a long and complicated process that involved a host of internal and external variable factors that were not entirely under the control of the Malaysian government and state. Furthermore by looking at the discursive and ideological underpinnings of these movements and trends, the papers combined give us an idea of the discursive undercurrents that were operative in Malaysia at the time, and how the 'soft' discursive component of this process of social change was later translated to the 'hard' politics of activism and governance.

If Malaysia's civil society landscape today has shifted to a more Islamist register, it should be noted that this process was neither contingent nor accidental. The authors in this volume have sought to demonstrate how and why the rise of Islamist civil society actors from the late 1960s to the present was the result of both discursive realignments as well as real geo-political and economic-structural changes

that have both a strong discursive and material basis to them. It is too early to say whether this trend will continue into the future and whether the secular dimension that once dominated Malaysia's civil society landscape will be eclipsed for good in the long run, but one tentative conclusion can at least be reached now: Political Islamism is a reality in Malaysia today, and one of the areas it has come to be visibly present is the sphere of civil society that was once dominated by secular NGOs and social movements, but no longer.