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# Shifting Trends of Islamism and Islamist Practices in Malaysia, 1957–2017

Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid\*

This article seeks to analyze the evolving development and contestations regarding the interplay of Islam and politics in Malaysia's public space for a period of 60 years (1957–2017) since its independence as a nation-state. A crucial element in this discourse is the official position of Islam as the “religion of the federation” in the Malaysian Constitution, which simultaneously guarantees the freedom of other religions embraced by almost half of the country's population. The population became even more diverse ethnically and religiously upon the formation of the Federation of Malaysia, which replaced Malaya, on September 16, 1963. Closely related to the discourse of political Islam in Malaysia, the evolving concepts of “religion” and “secularism” in Malaysia's Islamic context have undergone considerable shifts as a result of constant public engagement by an assortment of politicians, commentators, scholars, bureaucrats, and civil society activists. As the argument develops, Malaysia's interaction with Islam has been essentialized by political interests such that boundaries are hardened between what is considered Islamic and un-Islamic. The increasingly rigid positions adopted by Islamic stakeholders have arguably worsened both interreligious and intra-Muslim relations, with progressive Muslim voices increasingly finding themselves marginalized in the state-controlled political environment.

**Keywords:** Islam, Islamism, political Islam, Malaysia, secularism, Mahathir Mohamad, Federal Constitution, hudud, Salafi

## Introduction

A “plural society” *par excellence* (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972, 20), Malaysia<sup>1)</sup> gained independence from Britain on August 31, 1957 as the Federation of Malaya. The major-

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1) On September 16, 1963, the nation-state of Malaysia was founded out of the merger between Malaya, known today as Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak—two states on Borneo island—and Singapore, forming a single federation. In August 1965, Singapore left the federation to establish an independent country of its own.

ity Malays, who are constitutionally defined as Muslims, consistently constitute between 50 percent and 60 percent of the total population, but their numerical dominance does not easily translate into political hegemony. Belying Malaysia's reputation as a Muslim-majority stronghold of Islam in Southeast Asia, where the position of Islam is protected by the state, the country's political positions on Islam, even among its Muslim populace, display a great deal of diversity in spite of state-orchestrated attempts to homogenize Islam in both theory and practice. Malaysia's fragile ethnic composition has meant that ethno-religious demands in favor of greater Islamic input in governance have always faced challenges not only from the non-Muslim minorities but also from Muslims of varying orientations with respect to Islam.

In colonial Malaya, secularization, understood primarily in terms of enforced separation between religion and state in the British-administered body politic, acquired inexorable momentum with the signing of the Anglo-Perak Treaty in Pangkor in 1874. This Pangkor accord stipulated that Malay Sultans seek and act upon a British Resident's advice on all matters except Malay religion and custom. A succession of legal, administrative, and educational reforms followed throughout Malaya as other Malay states concluded similar agreements with the colonial authorities, the net effect of which was to sideline the role of Islam in colonial governance (Ahmad Fauzi 2004, 22–30).

Promulgation of a Federal Constitution in 1957, by crystallizing such separation between religion and state, effectively established secularism as a governing principle despite no explicit verbal reference to it (Rosenthal 1965, 288). Although the word "secular" is not mentioned in the constitution, the secular basis of an independent Malaya was arguably affirmed by parties deliberating the drafting of the document. Tunku Abdul Rahman (1903–90), leader of the Alliance coalition and later the first prime minister of independent Malaya, assured fellow members among the Working Party who reviewed the draft prepared by the British-appointed Reid Commission that the whole exercise of framing the constitution was undertaken on the understanding that the resultant federation would be a secular state (Fernando 2006, 259–260, 265–266).

Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution pronounces that "Islam is the religion of the Federation but that other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation" (Malaysia 1998, 1). As clarified by a legislative white paper, however, such a declaration in no way affected Malaya's position as a "secular state." This status was later affirmed by serving chief justices' statements and judgments qualifying the meaning of Islam's formal status as pertaining to rituals and ceremonies on official occasions rather than being prioritized over the secular legislative framework (Suffian Hashim 1962, 8–11; Ahmad Ibrahim 1985, 213–216; Fernando 2006, 250, 262). Article 3(1), moreover, has to be read together with Article 3(4): "Nothing in this Article derogates

from any other provision of this Constitution” (Malaysia 1998, 1). Freedom of religion is guaranteed by Article 11, according to which every individual has the right to profess, practice, and propagate his or her own religion although the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among Muslims may be legally controlled or restricted, and all religious groups possess authority to manage their own religious affairs, to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes, and to acquire, possess, hold, and administer property in accordance with the law (*ibid.*, 6–7).

Since the premiership of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003), totally new contexts concerning the political role of Islam in defining Malaysia’s character and trajectory as a nation-state, with a special focus on the country’s purported transformation into an Islamic state and ramifications arising from the ascendancy of Islamism—referring to a political ideology that demands true Muslims seek to establish a juridical Islamic state governed by the sharia (Islamic law) in order to realize the ideals of Islam as a complete way of life (*din al-hayah*)—have appeared in Malaysia’s Islamic discourse. This article discusses the narrowing of the social space in the practice of Malaysian Islam as reflected in government policies and how interested parties constitutionally interpret them. It traces the ways and means of shifts in the understanding and practice of Islam in a more overtly politicized sense, with potentially devastating consequences on the sociocultural fabric of Malaysia’s plural society.

### **Political Islam in Postcolonial Malaysia: An Overview**

In most postcolonial Muslim states, the delinking between Islam and governance of new nation-states was embodied in the subordination of the sharia to the broader national legal system. A residue of the sharia, catering for Muslim family and personal needs, was reformulated into and codified as a set of Muslim laws tailored to suit particularistic interests rather than all-encompassing Islamic requirements. The framework of reference for post-independence sharia-based Muslim lawyers was the nation-state, in which Islamic laws were subordinated to civil laws rather than the *umma* (global Muslim community) (Hooker 2004, 199).

Tacit collusion between the colonial masters and the “rightist” stream of Malay nationalists, overwhelmingly consisting of English-educated bureaucratic elites whose religio-political outlook was solidified in a secular environment, eventually delivered independence to Malaya (Ahmad Fauzi 2007a, 389). At the other end of the political spectrum was the “leftist” stream of Malay nationalists who had absorbed many facets of Islamic modernist-reformist discourse and whose take on religion and secularism was

more sophisticated and less rigid. One such example was the consummate Malay politician-cum-thinker Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy (1911–69), who saw Islamic political aspirations as blending both theocratic and secular ideals, “secular” insofar as they corresponded to Islamic doctrine that condones application of the rational faculty and democratic consultation known as *syura* (Kamarudin 1980, 209–210).

In the ethnically segmented society of pre-independence Malaya, Burhanuddin also adopted a less racist and more open policy of absorbing non-Malays into the “Malay” category.<sup>2)</sup> This was vividly demonstrated in the 1947 People’s Constitutional Proposals, which he masterminded as leader of the Malay-dominated Pusat Tenaga Ra’ayat (Centre for People’s Power) in alliance with the non-Malay All-Malayan Council of Joint Action (Ahmad Fauzi 2011, 82). Unfortunately, despite having engendered a kind of pre-nationalism in the 1930s, by the 1940s modernism-reformism had lost most of its appeal among the lay Malay populace, eclipsed by the pressing need for political freedom under the general impression of an enveloping non-Malay threat to Malay hegemony (Ahmad Fauzi 2007a, 381). From 1956 until Burhanuddin’s death in 1969, his political talent was channeled to society in his capacity as president of the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, later known as the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia).

Insofar as the secular relates to this world rather than the next one, the corporeal rather than the metaphysical realm, the Federal Constitution exhibits unabashedly secular characteristics. For instance, rather than being upheld for its intrinsic value as a faith that connects humans with God, Islam is foregrounded to serve a secular purpose, i.e., that of ethno-culturally determining the identity of a “Malay” as defined in Article 160(2): “a person who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom” (Malaysia 1998, 113). Through Article 153 Malays, together with natives of Sabah and Sarawak following the formation of Malaysia in 1963, are regarded as the indigenous Bumiputera (lit.: sons of the soil) group, who qualify for secular benefits under the “special position” clause (Means 1978, 393–394; Malaysia 1998, 107).

Under the “Bargain of 1957” the aforesaid privileges, together with provisions to ensure the position of Islam as the religion of the federation, of Malay Sultans as heads

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2) While it has been axiomatic to speak of Malaysia’s population in terms of the “Malay-Chinese-Indian” ethnic divisions, groups like the Eurasians and various Orang Asli (lit.: Original People) tribes have long been part of the country’s diverse racial makeup, predating independence in 1957. Upon the formation of Malaysia in September 1963, the Bumiputera (lit.: sons of the soil) category was created, subsuming the Malays, all of whom are legally Muslims; the Orang Asli, indigenous groups of Sabah and Sarawak—both Muslim and non-Muslim; and other non-Malay ethnic groups considered native to Malaysia, such as the Siamese of northern Peninsular Malaysia and the Portuguese of Malacca.

of the various states, and of Malay as the national language, were *quid pro quos* for non-Malay demands for relaxed conditions for citizenship, the continued use of the English language in official matters for 10 years, and the preservation of the free market economy (Milne and Mauzy 1986, 28–30). As with other temporal matters, the terms of the Bargain were understood by interested parties of the time to be temporary, i.e., not binding beyond prevailing circumstances where socioeconomic segmentation along ethnic lines was widespread (see Chapter 9). Buoyed, however, since the late 1970s by UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) calls for defending “Malay supremacy” (Ketuanan Melayu)—a notion that appeared only after the New Economic Policy (NEP) had institutionalized affirmative action to empower Bumiputera (Ariffin 2003), the Bargain acquired socio-psychological standing as a “social contract,” a transgression of which was considered to be betraying the terms and conditions on which the nation was supposed to have been founded (Puthucheary 2008, 12–23). This period when the NEP was nearing its end in 1990 coincided with the height of Islamic resurgence in Malaysia (Nagata 1984; Chandra 1987), so much so that Malay supremacy was often conflated as Islamic dominance in spite of the concept’s religiously spurious basis (Muhammad Haniff 2007, 294, 306).

In the immediate post-independence period, the position of Islam as amounting to no further than the country’s official religion was upheld by UMNO leaders such as Tunku Abdul Rahman, who asserted, “. . . this country is not an Islamic State as it is generally understood, we merely provide that Islam shall be the official religion of the State” (quoted in Ahmad Ibrahim 1985, 217; cf. Tunku Abdul Rahman 1977, 246). Jurisdiction over Islam was left to the various states that formed the federation, each of which instituted a Council of the Islamic Religion (Majlis Agama Islam) to aid and advise their Malay rulers in their capacity as heads of the Islamic religion,<sup>3)</sup> a Department of Religious Affairs (Jabatan Agama Islam) to handle daily affairs of Muslims, and sharia courts to adjudicate in Muslim matters (Ahmad Ibrahim 1985, 216). The authority of the sharia courts covers only Muslim personal law—a successor to the Muhammadan law of the colonial era, subsuming only family law, charitable property, religious revenue, places of worship, and religious offenses such as adultery and other forms of sexual misconduct, defamation, non-payment of alms, and consumption of liquor (Abdul Majeed 1985, 229–235). Even then, sharia courts can only mete out punishments that do not go beyond the stated maximum imprisonment or fine under federal law, making it impossible for them to

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3) In the case of states without hereditary Sultans—Malacca, Penang, Sabah, Sarawak, and the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan—the role of the head of the Islamic religion was assumed by the Yang diPertuan Agong, the constitutionally appointed monarch whose position is rotated every five years among the nine rulers.

impose the Quranic hudud<sup>4</sup>) code. The restrictions on sharia courts, collectively known as the 3-6-5 safeguards, ensure that punishments they impose do not exceed a maximum of three years' imprisonment, six strokes of the cane, and RM5,000 in fines (Abdul Hadi 2002, 30).

On account of such limitations, Malaysia's sharia doyen Ahmad Ibrahim held the view that "the provision that Islam is the religion of the Federation" was of little consequence (Ahmad Ibrahim 1974, 6–7, 11–13). In fact, prior to the onset of Islamic resurgence, the general consensus was that Malaysia's politico-legal makeup was secular in intent even if not fully secular in practice by virtue of the various ways in which the powers that be applied Article 3(1) to their political advantage (Norani *et al.* 2008, xvi–xvii). Nowhere in the Federal Constitution is it mentioned that law in Malaysia is interpreted by recourse to sharia; on the contrary, Article 160(2) defines law as including "written law, the common law in so far as it is in operation in the Federation or any part thereof, and any custom or usage having the force of law in the Federation or any part thereof" (Malaysia 1998, 113). What Malaysia operates is a hybrid system in which there is a gray line between secularity and Islamicity.

However, as judges whose educational experience coincided with the period of Islamic resurgence gradually entered the judiciary, more court rulings departed from the traditional view of Islam's constricted role within Malaysia's constitutional framework, to the extent of compromising constitutionally guaranteed fundamental liberties (see Chapter 6). In his 2001 High Court ruling in *Lina Joy v Majlis Agama Islam Wilayah & Anor*, Justice Faiza Tamby Chik (2004, 128), despite acknowledging the existence of a previous case that established Malaysia as a secular state permitting the implementation of sharia laws insofar as they did not contradict the Federal Constitution, adopted the trailblazing view that

Article 3(4) does not have the effect of reinforcing the status of the Federation as a secular state. . . . Malaysia is not purely a secular state like India or Singapore but is a hybrid between the secular state and the theocratic state. The constitution of this hybrid model accord [*sic*] official or preferential status to Islam but does not create a theocratic state like Saudi Arabia or Iran. . . . Article 3(1) has a far wider and meaningful purpose than a mere fixation of the official religion. (Faiza 2004)

Faiza's verdict opened the floodgates for a flurry of rulings that broadened the interpre-

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4) Hudud punishments are criminal penalties instituted by the Quran and Sunna (exemplary traditions of Prophet Muhammad) after lawful conviction in a court of law, such as amputation of the hand for thieves, flogging of 80 lashes for consuming intoxicating liquor, flogging for libel, stoning to death for adultery, and flogging of 100 lashes for fornication.



tation of Article 3(1) such that serious doubts were thrown on Malaysia's "secular state" status. As the argument goes, although the Federal Constitution refrains from explicitly mentioning Malaysia as an Islamic state, the fact that it authorizes the setting up and management of Islamic institutions and the enactment of Islamic by-laws by state assemblies is proof that Malaysia cannot be categorized as a secular state (cf. Norizan 2007; Zainul Rijal and Nurhidayah 2007; Aidil 2014; Concerned Lawyers for Justice 2014). As the legal expert Shad Saleem Faruqi (2005, 270–275) notes, the existence of constitutional provisions that institutionally empower Islam, such as those that legitimize the posts of *mufti*<sup>5)</sup> and *kadi*<sup>6)</sup> and enable the federal government to disburse preferential funds toward the advancement of Islam, would be impossible in a secular state. Article 11(4) even mandates state legislatures and parliament in the case of federal territories to "control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam" (Malaysia 1998, 107). In 1988 a landmark decision was made by amending Article 121 so as to include clause (1A), which prevented federal courts from exercising any "jurisdiction in respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of the Syariah courts" (*ibid.*, 79). Article 121(1A) effectively raised the status of sharia courts and judges to be on a par with their civil counterparts. However, within one decade it had caused disquiet among non-Muslims following a spate of high-profile court cases involving disputed conversions into and out of Islam and claims made by state Islamic authorities to bodies of the alleged converts upon their deaths, on which civil courts were reluctant to interfere, thus leaving non-Muslim litigants with no legal recourse (Ooi 2007, 184–186; Marzuki 2008, 162–169, 172–181).

The shift in legal thinking toward a more all-encompassing understanding of Islam as pertaining to the constitution appeared to have been triggered by greater political will on the part of ruling politicians. At the peak of his power in September 2001, having outflanked a determined challenge to his rule from his former deputy Anwar Ibrahim—whom he had dismissed from UMNO and the government three years earlier—Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad shockingly declared in front of delegates to the annual assembly of UMNO's coalition partner Malaysian People's Movement (GERAKAN, Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia) that Malaysia had, to all intents and purposes, already become an Islamic state. Astonishing as it was, one should not ignore the fact that immediate

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5) A *mufti* is a religious scholar authorized by a government to issue fatwa—an authoritative legal opinion that provides guidance for Muslims. In Malaysia, however, a fatwa is more than just an opinion; it is binding upon Muslims of a particular state after being passed and gazetted by the state legislative assembly. Noncompliance with a fatwa is criminalized, leading to the possibility of being charged and convicted in a sharia court.

6) A *kadi* or *qadi* is a religious scholar qualified to be a judge or jurist or magistrate and based in sharia courts or religious offices that perform extrajudicial functions.



political calculations were foremost in Mahathir's mind. Mahathir's declaration was merely a direct response to PAS President Fadzil Noor's challenge (Liew 2007, 112–113) and intended to pinch the Islamic state agenda away from PAS, whose collaboration with Anwar Ibrahim's National Justice Party (KEADILAN, Parti Keadilan Nasional)<sup>7)</sup> and the non-Muslim dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) had eroded a huge chunk of Malay Muslim votes from UMNO and the National Front (BN, Barisan Nasional) ruling coalition in the 1999 general election (Maznah 2003, 75–79).<sup>8)</sup>

Indications that Mahathir was bracing for his Islamic state pronouncement may be found in an Islamic State Discussion (Muzakarah Daulah Islamiah) hastily convened slightly over a month earlier and chaired by his religious adviser, Dr. Abdul Hamid Othman. Gathering 70 religious scholars and notables, the Muzakarah concluded that Malaysia unequivocally qualified as an Islamic state on the basis that its administrative, political, and religious affairs were controlled by Muslims, regardless of whether hudud was implemented or not (Saifulizam 2001; JAKIM 2008). That Mahathir was being politically expedient more than anything else is underlined by his insistence that despite his declaration, non-Muslims had every right to continue to perceive Malaysia as being a secular state (Asuki and Nizam 2001). The Islamic state he had in mind, in other words, was not meant to be generically applied to all. Exploiting the Islamic sentiments of the Malay Muslims, it was a rhetorical device to convince them that Islam and their fate were

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7) By 2001 Anwar Ibrahim was languishing in jail after having been found guilty of corruption and sodomy in 1999. In 2003 KEADILAN merged with the socialist-oriented People's Party of Malaysia (PRM, Parti Rakyat Malaysia) to form the People's Justice Party (PKR, Parti Keadilan Rakyat) led by Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, as president.

8) Since 1974 Malaysia's federal government has been helmed by BN, a multiethnic coalition of 13 component parties whose precursor, the Alliance (Perikatan)—made up of UMNO, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)—ruled the country from 1957 until the suspension of parliamentary democracy following racial riots in May 1969. Two former opposition parties, GERAKAN and PAS, which had defeated Perikatan in the states of Penang and Kelantan respectively in the 1969 general elections, were part of the original BN setup, but while GERAKAN remains in BN until today, PAS was expelled in 1977. In the wake of Anwar Ibrahim's expulsion from UMNO and the government in 1998, BN was challenged in the 1999 general election by the Alternative Front (BA, Barisan Alternatif), comprising KEADILAN, DAP, PAS, and PRM. BA, however, lasted only until 2001. In 2008, immediately following the opposition parties' success in denying BN a two-thirds parliamentary majority and wresting the state governments of four other states besides Kelantan, which had been under PAS's control since 1990, the People's Pact (PR, Pakatan Rakyat) was formed to unite DAP, PKR, and PAS. PR broke up in 2015 due to an internal rupture in PAS, whose progressive faction then founded the National Trust Party (AMANAH, Parti Amanah Negara), which continues to cooperate with DAP and PKR in a newly constituted coalition called the Pact of Hope (PH, Pakatan Harapan). Of the three opposition-ruled states in Malaysia today, Kelantan has been a solitary PAS administration since 2015, while Penang and Selangor are officially PH- and previously PR-led governments marshalled by DAP and PKR respectively.

safe in the hands of UMNO. In June 2002 Mahathir reinforced his stance by projecting Malaysia to be a “model Islamic fundamentalist state” rather than a “moderate Muslim state” (Ooi 2006, 176).

Nonetheless, Mahathir’s Islamic state pretensions emboldened a host of doctrinaire Islamists,<sup>9)</sup> many of whom were by now part of the Islamic bureaucracy which had expanded by leaps and bounds during his tenure in power (Norani *et al.* 2005, 90–91; Maznah 2013), to discursively essentialize Islam and secularism in bifurcated terms as binary opposites of one another. In the public space, concepts and ideologies such as “secularism,” “liberalism,” “humanism,” “capitalism,” and “pluralism” were being played out as antitheses to Islam, carrying similar “anti-religious” baggage (cf. Mohamed Elfie 2008; Soon 2008).

Amendments to extant statutory laws were justified by recourse to the sharia as the *Grundnorm* or “cardinal foundational principle” with supposed eternal authority over Malay Muslims (Norani 2008, 46–47). Islamism, referring to a political ideology that urges Muslims to erect a sharia-governed Islamic state in order for them to be able to comprehensively practice Islam as a way of life (*din al-hayah*), was bringing the two hitherto political foes, UMNO and PAS, closer together ideologically, in fact close enough to alarm non-Muslim civil society and political leaders into mobilizing openly against the very idea of an Islamic-oriented polity (Riddell 2005, 182–184). In defense of non-Muslim rights, religious Christians, for instance, were cornered into a position of unabashedly defending the secular state, as defined in contradistinction to an Islamic state (Yeoh 2011, 87–93). UMNO-PAS convergence on Islamist matters appeared in the form of a discursive shift from whether Malaysia should be an Islamic state, to when and how an Islamic state could be achieved to best serve the Malay Muslims (Kessler 2008, 63–64).

Mahathir’s successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s promotion of Islam Hadhari (civilizational Islam)<sup>10)</sup> during his premiership (2003–9) failed to defuse the polarizing polemic pitting the Islamist and secularist camps. Deprived of intellectual credibility and perennially suffering from poor implementation and weak infrastructural support from the government’s own Islamic officialdom, Islam Hadhari lost the discursive battle against an ascendant Islamist conservatism which perceived Islam Hadhari as a re-incarnation

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9) “Islamist” is used here to refer to the political ideology of Islamism rather than to Islam per se as a religious faith. On Islamism, see the next paragraph.

10) Guided by 10 universal precepts, Islam Hadhari calls for values and principles of a state to be compatible with Islam, without necessarily forging a state that incorporates the Islamic legal framework, understood as being constantly prone to change and not fixed. In practice, Islam Hadhari necessitates a reappraisal of past judgments based on independent reasoning (*ijtihad*s) so as to make them relevant to contemporary developments; see Ahmad Fauzi (2009, 178–179) and Ahmad Fauzi and Muhamad Takiyuddin (2014, 162–163).

of “liberal Islam” (*ibid.*, 71–76; Ahmad Fauzi and Muhamad Takiyuddin 2014). Haji Abdul Hadi Awang (hereafter Haji Hadi), who assumed the leadership of PAS in 2003, castigated Islam Hadhari as being a “hybrid religion” that permitted the simultaneous practice of compartmentalized Islam alongside un-Islamic elements and was thus a potentially deviant *bid’ah* (religious innovation) (Abdul Hadi 2005, 24–34, 50, 90, 130, 196). In response to Islam Hadhari, Haji Hadi outlined four defining features of an Islamic state that he claimed were derived from the Quran and Prophet Muhammad’s traditions: a congregation (*jamaah*) that upholds Islam as the state creed and internalizes it in individual and social lives; an independent and sovereign country; a constitution that exalts the sharia; and citizens administered by Islamic laws’ absolute justice regardless of their religious affiliation (*ibid.*, 54–55). Haji Hadi’s Islamist vision manifestly rules out any legal dualism such as that which Malaysia has been practicing in some jurisdictional areas since independence.

Abdullah Badawi’s Western-educated deputy, Najib Razak, aggravated the developing tension by categorically affirming Malaysia’s Islamic state status to the point of denying that Malaysia had ever been—or would ever be—a secular state, igniting protests from non-Muslim religious and political leaders (Lim 2008; Norani 2008, 49–50; Tan 2008). While Abdullah quickly tried to mitigate the damage by repudiating both a theocratic and secular state designation for Malaysia (Vinesh 2007), the country’s chief justice and attorney general appeared more willing to act on Najib’s than Abdullah’s cue. The chief justice and attorney general floated the idea of a sharia-based code to supplant English common law as the basis of Malaysia’s legal system, triggering voices of disapprobation from the Bar Council, among others (Koshy 2007; Norila 2007; *Star Online* 2007). As the golden jubilee of Malaysia’s independence neared, Faruqi (2007) summed up the worrying state of affairs enveloping Malaysia’s legalscape:

... a critical mass of Muslim lawyers, judges and politicians has adopted the view that Islam is the core, central, overriding feature of the Constitution. . . . State Assemblies have been enacting laws and authorising administrative actions that violate the human rights guarantees of Articles 5–13, imposing penalties far beyond their powers, and trespassing on federal jurisdiction. Because all this is done in the name of religion, politicians look the other way. Most judges are reluctant to test these laws or actions on the yardstick of the Constitution. Painful dilemmas are arising in cases where one of the litigants is Muslim and the other non-Muslim. (Faruqi 2007)

Paradoxically, the Malaysian-style shariaization, understood here as the institutionalization of sharia-based values, norms, and categories in the discourse and practice of Malaysia’s legal corpus, was proceeding apace while the country’s sharia institutions were still very much part of the larger constitutionally mandated judicial framework (Ahmad Fauzi 2016a, 32). The gradual incorporation and codification of sharia-based

statutes were dependent on secular structures, personnel, and rationalization, hence enabling one to question whether Malaysia's sharia laws, having themselves been subjected to secularization, were fit to be accorded a hallowed status (Maznah 2010, 512). Seven years after Malaysia's 50-year anniversary of independence, the situation took a turn for the worse in Faruqi's view:

Article 3(1) on Islam is trumping all other provisions of the Constitution, including the chapter on fundamental rights. . . . Are syariah authorities subject to the Federal Constitution? Or is it the case that once they invoke the holy name of Islam, hukum syarah [*sic*], fatwa or a State Syariah Enactment, they have a blank-cheque power to do whatever is necessary to promote good and prevent evil? (Faruqi 2014)

Efforts undertaken by PAS to implement hudud in the states it controlled—Kelantan (since 1990) and Terengganu (1999–2004)—similarly involve human agency. Opinions have diverged, for instance, on the suitability and timing as well as the nature and quantum of punishments prescribed by hudud laws (cf. Kamali 1998; Ahmad Fauzi 2009, 170–176). Even though political dynamics have been more important than one would imagine for issues as central to Malay-Muslim religious lives as that of installing “Divine law” (Ahmad Fauzi 2015), skeptics of hudud were lampooned as diehard defenders of secularism. The question of the extent to which hudud was urgent in a multireligious polity like Malaysia caused a huge split within the ranks of PAS during its General Assembly in June 2015, leading to PAS's professional faction leaving the party en masse and forming a splinter party, Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH, National Trust Party). Of the many allegations levelled by PAS President Haji Hadi against these deserters who formed AMANAH, the most serious was that they wanted to transform PAS into a secular party (Khalid 2015). In Malaysian Islamists' imagination, hudud has now become the definitive criterion of an Islamic state, with increasing overlapping perspectives between PAS, UMNO, and religious bureaucrats (Norshahril 2014, 54–59).

After several abortive attempts during Najib's premiership (since 2009) to introduce private members' bills to pave the way for the implementation of hudud in Kelantan (Ahmad Fauzi 2015, 209–213), in late May 2016 Haji Hadi managed to present in parliament a bill that would dispense with the 3-6-5 safeguards. Dubbed the “hudud Bill,” the Sharia Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Bill 355 (RUU355, Rang Undang-undang 355) seeks to amend Section 2 of the Sharia Courts Act (Criminal Jurisdiction) 1965 (Act 355), thereby empowering sharia courts to mete out heavier penalties than imposed at present against Muslim perpetrators of offenses listed under Schedule Nine of the Federal Constitution, except the death penalty. Although the debating of the bill was postponed to the next parliamentary session, the fact that it could make itself heard on the final day

of the parliamentary session, jumping the queue over government bills listed in the Standing Order, was by itself unprecedented. Speculation had been rife for months that relations between Najib Razak and Haji Hadi had warmed to such an extent that PAS might cooperate with BN after the breakup of the People's Pact (PR, Pakatan Rakyat) coalition, but their tacit collusion over the tabling of RUU355 still caught UMNO's non-Muslim coalition partners by surprise (Chan and Mazwin 2016; Cheng *et al.* 2016).

The latest hudud affair has driven the wedge further between advocates of the secular state on one side of the religio-political divide and its opponents on the other, with non-Muslim members of Najib's cabinet even threatening to resign should RUU355 be passed. This was despite Najib's and PAS's assurances that RUU355's contents did not amount to hudud and would not affect non-Muslims (Adam 2016; Hanis 2016). As far as detractors of RUU355 are concerned, the whittling away of secularism implicit in RUU355's breaching of constitutional guarantees for equal protection of citizens before the law would constitute a fundamental change to Malaysia's politico-legal structure, thus paving the way for it to become a full-fledged Islamic state in the future (cf. Mohamad Siddiq and Fatimah 2016; Singh 2016; *Star Online* 2016).

### **Political Islam and Its Discontents: Shifts in Islamist Approaches and State-Led Practices of Islamism in Post-Mahathir Malaysia**

Over the last two decades, religio-political discourse in Malaysia has ossified in a manner that pits Islam (read: Islamism) and secularism against each other as binary opposites, as institutionally represented in a juridical Islamic state and Malaysia's extant federal state respectively. Society has been polarized along this line, with support for each camp cutting across partisan affiliations. If we take the two extremes of the opposite poles, the ideological positions of PAS under Haji Hadi's leadership and the avowedly secular DAP have reached such irreconcilable proportions that the Anwar Ibrahim-led PR coalition, which both parties participated in and through which they contributed to the opposition's electoral advances in the 2008 and 2013 general elections, broke up in June 2015.

To Haji Hadi, secularism is intimately connected to Christianity in deviant form, Freemasonry, a global Zionist conspiracy, and colonialism (Abdul Hadi 2007, 9–16). Tracing the origins of secularism in the *umma* to the colonial era, the separation of religion and state and the privatization of religion represent the most damaging aspects of secularism on Muslim lives (Abdul Hadi 2008, 173). Haji Hadi is the author of an infamous 1981 tract, *Amanat Haji Hadi* (Haji Hadi's mandate), which has been blamed for causing rampant Malay-Muslim disunity by effectively apostatizing UMNO members for retain-

ing an infidel constitution and separating religion from politics (Badlihisam 2009, 67–73). Despite receiving sustained rebukes over violence allegedly arising from the *Amanat*'s inflammatory message, Haji Hadi has never disowned it. In a treatise defending the *Amanat*, Haji Hadi lambasted secularism for dragging Muslims into committing greater idolatry (Arabic: *shirk Akbar*)—an unpardonable sin in Islam. It was obvious, though, that the secularism Haji Hadi had in mind was the hard anti-religion version practiced by Kemal Ataturk (1881–1938) in early-twentieth-century Turkey (Abdul Hadi 2002, 26–27). In his refutation of Islam Hadhari, Haji Hadi referred to the thoughts of, among others, the Indo-Pakistani Islamist thinker Abul A'la Maududi (1903–79), whose thinking has been influential in shaping the minds of generations of Malaysian Islamists (Kamal Hassan 2003, 430–440), and the Egyptian Ikhwan al-Muslimun (MB, Muslim Brotherhood) ideologue Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), who was himself ideologically influenced by Maududi (Abdul Hadi 2005, 20–21; Wiktorowicz 2005, 78).

It has been noted, however, that in Maududi's worldview secularism is understood as a "religionless" ideology or one embodying "irreligiousness" and is thus but another expression of infidelity (Arabic: *kufir*) (Adams 1983, 103, 113–114; Mazhari 2012, 66–67). This Maududi-cum-Qutb strand of Islamism, embracing a Manichean worldview between good (read: Islam) and evil (read: ignorance [*jahiliyyah*], aka non-Islam) and elevating sharia as part of belief (*aqida*), opened the door for *takfir*—the excommunication of unobservant Muslims (Mohamad Fauzi 2007, 58, 102–109, 132–133). Qutb-cum-Maududi's Islamist formulations dominated the agendas of *usra*<sup>11</sup> sessions—frequently more powerful in impact than classroom-based religious lessons, in schools, colleges, and universities. Left uncontrolled, such radical Islamism could provoke rebellion and instigate violence, as when a group of PAS villagers in Memali, Kedah, ideologically driven by *Amanat Haji Hadi*, were involved in a bloody showdown with security forces in November 1985, resulting in 18 deaths (Ahmad Fauzi 2007b, 10–16).

Apart from the Qutb-cum-Maududi framework, another underlying influence behind the *Amanat*'s *takfiri* disposition came from the writings of Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz (1910–99), who became *mufti* of Saudi Arabia in 1993–99 (Abdul Rahman 1998, 363). It was at the hands of the growing numbers of Saudi alumni in Malaysia that Malaysian Islam became gradually Salafized, referring to the exclusivist trend closely connected to Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi<sup>12</sup> school, which seeks to emulate the pious *salaf* generations who lived within

11) Literally meaning "family" in Arabic, *usra* refers to MB-inherited cell-like groups to discuss ways and means of practicing Islam as a way of life, often conducted outside of official working hours. For details, see Nabisah *et al.* (2015).

12) Referring to the puritanical stream pioneered by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92) of Nejd in the Arabian Peninsula.



300 years of the Prophet Muhammad's demise. Powered by Saudi petro-dollars, the impact of Salafization has been deadly to the type of tolerant Islamic discourse that was once the distinctive feature of Malaysian Islam. The tenors of both interreligious and intra-Islamic relations have been marred as Salafi-centric *ulama* increasingly influenced policy making by penetrating UMNO and Malaysia's Islamic bureaucracy (Mohamed Nawab 2014). At the grassroots level, Salafi discourse in contemporary Malaysia is propped up by such nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as the Ibn Qayyim Institute (IQ Malaysia n.d.), the Association of Malaysian Scholars (ILMU, Pertubuhan Ilmuan Malaysia) (ILMU n.d.), Al-Khaadem Association (Pertubuhan Al-Khaadem n.d.), and Al-Nida' Welfare Organization (Pertubuhan Kebajikan Al-Nidaa' Malaysia n.d.), and championed by such figures as the two-term Perlis *mufti* Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, prominent missionary of Chinese descent Hussain Yee, and UMNO Youth executive committee member Dr. Fathul Bahri Mat Jahaya (Ahmad Fauzi 2016b). Mohd Asri, Hussain and Fathul Bari effectively helm the Ibn Qayyim Institute, Al-Khaadem Association, and ILMU respectively.

While Qutb's and Maududi's visions dominated the mindsets of Malaysia's mainstream Islamists in the 1970s–1980s, such as the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia), which Anwar Ibrahim led from 1974 to 1982 (Abdul Rahman 1998, 389), their radical perspectives were balanced by an eclectic reading of thoughts of other scholars such as Syed Naquib Al-Attas (b. 1931) and Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi (1921–86), both of whom laid rival claims as pioneers of the “Islamization of knowledge” project (Wan Mohd Nor 2005, 332–338). Both Al-Attas and Al-Faruqi towered above others as intellectual mentors who shaped Anwar Ibrahim's Islamist outlook (Esposito and Voll 2001, 181; Allers 2013, 46–48), but it was the latter who purportedly convinced Anwar to join UMNO and Dr. Mahathir's government in 1982 in a strategy to Islamize the state from within (Badlihisam 2009, 50).

In their examination of Al-Attas's and Al-Faruqi's rival schemes, Rosnani Hashim and Imron Rossidy (2000, 37) conclude that both are guilty of overgeneralizing “the West as though composing of a particular school of thought, in particular the logical positivist.” While still bearing exclusive connotations, Al-Attas's paradigm vis-à-vis Al-Faruqi's is philosophically “more elaborate and convincing” and his definition of Islamization of knowledge “more coherent and more rooted in the theory of Islamization in general”—not least due also to his methodological incorporation of the Islamic mystical tradition or Sufism (Arabic: *tasawwuf*). By contrast, Al-Faruqi and Maududi display antipathy toward such spirituality (Rosnani and Imron 2000, 33, 35–36). However, in practice, the educational principles of Al-Faruqi and Maududi rather than Al-Attas prevailed among Malaysian policy makers in the form of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM),



founded in 1983 as a model Islamic university that promotes integrative knowledge interrogated through the prisms of Islamic values and epistemology (Moten 2006, 190–191). Al-Faruqi enjoyed close relations with both Anwar Ibrahim and Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, during whose premierships Malaysia co-opted Islamization as part of its national zeitgeist (Milne and Mauzy 1983; Allers 2013, 72; Schottmann 2013, 61).

As for Al-Attas, whose work *Islam and Secularism*—originally published in 1978 by ABIM—has reached iconic status in the worldview of Malaysia’s Islamist activists (Norshahril 2012, 109–110), he was given carte blanche in 1987 to develop his brainchild, the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), a research centre for excellence affiliated to IIUM. Such cordial relations with the government made him vulnerable to criticism of being an apologist for state-centric Islamism (Farish 2009, 215–216). Despite hardly making any direct reference to the concept of an Islamic state, Al-Attas’s epistemological deconstruction of such concepts as secularism and secularization has been cited time and again by Islamists as the intellectual justification for the erection of an Islamic moral and political order uniquely derived from Islamic, as opposed to secular, origins (Azhar 2016). Al-Attas’s discourse became a tool to legitimize the Islamist initiatives of the Malaysian state under Dr. Mahathir’s premierships (1981–2003), particularly during the years of Anwar Ibrahim as minister of education (1987–91) and deputy prime minister (1994–98). Decrying the misappropriation of his attacks on secularism and secularization for political purposes rather than as the philosophical program Islamization of knowledge was intended to be, Al-Attas (1993, xv) later admitted that Islam recognized no dichotomy between the sacred and profane and that an Islamic state could be neither wholly theocratic nor fully secular. Al-Attas’s version of Islamism was an attractive alternative to Maududi-Qutb’s scheme, which many Islamists had come to recognize as being way too radical for Malaysian Islam (Abdul Rahman 1998, 365), but it did not survive Anwar Ibrahim’s ejection from the ruling circle. In 2002 ISTAC’s autonomy within the IIUM structure was revoked and Al-Attas’s contract as ISTAC director was terminated, and in 2015 ISTAC effectively closed down following the absorption of all its programs by IIUM’s Faculty of Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (Dalia 2016; IIUM n.d.a). Its replacement, the Ibnu Khaldun International Institute of Advanced Research, no longer adheres to Al-Attas’s lofty Islamist vision of producing a “good man” rather than merely a “good citizen” (Al-Attas 1984, 79–80; IIUM n.d.b).

At the other end of the political spectrum, in line with its post-2008 Malay outreach strategy, DAP revamped its political stance by dispensing with democratic socialism in favor of a more religion-friendly social democracy, and adopting a centrist “Middle Malaysia” posture that no longer questioned the constitutional positions of the Malays, Islam, and the national language (Lim 2010; Wan Hamidi 2011). While DAP remains vehemently

opposed to an Islamic state as conventionally understood by Islamists (Lim 2002), it insists that it is far from being anti-Islam. The secular democratic governance that it espouses, long-time party supremo Lim Kit Siang explains, contrasts with typical notions of “secular”; it “is not atheist, anti-Islam, or anti-religion but trans-religion . . . a system of governance which upholds the spiritual and ethical values which are common to Islam and other great religions” (Lim 2001, 54, 73). Such a polity, claims Lim, would in fact be “morality-based and pro-Islam, pro-Christianity, pro-Buddhism, pro-Hinduism and pro-Sikhism in defending and enhancing the multi-religious characteristics and diversity of the Malaysian nation” (Lim 2012). While secularism *à la* DAP does not imply the relegation of religion to the private realm, it advocates state neutrality toward all religions—a notion that would incite protests from PAS, UMNO, and state-connected Islamists who demand that Islam be given a preferential position over other religions.

Importantly for the Malaysian context, DAP launched its own non-communalist vision of an Islamic polity by discursively engaging progressive Islamic intellectuals through the Penang Institute, a think tank of the Penang state government that DAP has controlled since March 2008 (Mustafa Kamal 2017). Although falling short of endorsing an Islamic state *per se*, DAP advances the idea of an Islam that is friendly to good governance, democracy, liberalism, and human rights, thus contesting the official state-sponsored discourse on Islam that often conflates Islamic sovereignty with Malay ethno-nationalist supremacy. As for its stance regarding hudud, DAP believes that its application in a modern context would be meaningless if higher objectives of the sharia (*maqasid syariah*)<sup>13</sup> are not fulfilled (Zairil 2016). This position is in sync with the stance taken by Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi and Abdullah Badawi through his Islam Hadhari scheme (Ahmad Fauzi 2009, 178–179; 2016a, 36). In fact, DAP surmises that terms such as “secularism” and “liberalism,” unilaterally tagged to UMNO’s political rivals, have been deliberately made punching bags by ruling elites in a bid to frighten Malay Muslims from voting for opposition parties, for fear of getting entangled with “anti-Islamic” forces (Zairil 2014).

Interestingly, in adopting a *maqasid*-based approach to sharia, DAP has gravitated closer toward recent positions adopted by ABIM, AMANAH, and another professional-based Islamist movement, Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia—*de facto* successor of the Society for Islamic Reform (Jamaah Islah Malaysia), which effectively served as the channel through which student activists of the British-based Islamic Representative

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13) According to the medieval scholar Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), whose thought has been influential on Malaysian Islam, *maqasid syariah*, at its barest minimum, entails the protection of one’s faith (Arabic: *din*), life (Arabic: *nafs*), intellect (Arabic: *aql*), family (Arabic: *nasl*), and wealth (Arabic: *mal*); see Hasan (2015, 60–62).

Council continued their Islamist struggle upon graduating and returning to Malaysia (Maszlee 2014; 2017). In line with the thought of veteran Tunisian thinker Rashid Ghannouchi, who recently announced his departure from Islamism and embrace of Muslim democracy (Ghannouchi 2016), a *maqasid*-oriented approach to upholding the sharia prioritizes such concepts as human dignity (*karamah insaniyah*), freedom (*al-hurriyah*), justice (*al-'adalah*), good governance, democracy, and plural coexistence with non-Muslims within a citizenship (*muwatanah*) framework that recognizes equality (*al-musawah*). These ideas behind civil nationhood are regarded by second-generation Islamists to be as important as were the notions of hudud and the juridical Islamic state among first-generation Islamists (Rane 2011). PAS seems to be stuck with first-generation Islamism.

In the civil society realm, Muslim endorsement of the secular state has been forthcoming from the Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF), launched in December 2009 and led by the surgeon Ahmad Farouk Musa (Ahmad Fauzi and Che Hamdan 2016, 10). Together with the Muslim women's rights group Sisters in Islam, IRF has become the standard-bearer of liberal Islam in contemporary Malaysia, much to the consternation of mainstream Islamists, both pro-state and anti-state, who see them as acting in complicity with enemies of Islam (Melati 2017). IRF cooperates closely with the Group of 25 (G25), a loose grouping of former high-ranking civil servants who were catapulted into the limelight by their public letter expressing concern over the encroachment of the sharia into areas where the Federal Constitution is supposed to hold supreme, such as inviolable fundamental liberties (*Star Online* 2014). Both IRF and G25 have been accused by the Department of the Advancement of Islam of Malaysia (JAKIM, Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia) of importing undesirable preachers whose liberal ideas are a threat to Malaysian Islam as rooted in orthodox Sunni traditionalism (Aina 2017). Both have had their recent publications banned (Amar Shah 2017; FMT Reporters 2017), which is not surprising in view of their open promotion of a neo-rationalist theology that questions the credibility of the whole Malay-Muslim religious worldview (Liber TV 2017). But both also cultivate a cordial understanding with Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, whom they regard as a progressive rather than conservative Salafi scholar (Oorjitham 2017). This has brought them at odds with traditionalist scholars, most of whom control Malaysia's state-level Islamic bureaucracies except in Perlis, the Federal Territory, and Terengganu. Many of these traditionalists have organic linkages with resurgent conservative groups determined to defend a culturally conditioned Malay-Islamic *kerajaan* led by the various Sultans as heads of the Islamic religion. Among these new organizations are the Malaysian Association of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaah (ASWAJA, Pertubuhan Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah Malaysia), led by Home Ministry official Dr. Zamihan Zin Al-Ghari; and the Association of Authori-

tative Sufi Orders of Malaysia (PERTAMA, Pertubuhan Tarekat Muktabar Malaysia), led by ex-civil servant As'ari Haji Ibrahim (Pertubuhan Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah Malaysia n.d.; Pertubuhan Tarekat Muktabar Malaysia n.d.). Both ASWAJA and PERTAMA, with overlapping memberships,<sup>14</sup> have come out strongly against what they see as an ongoing Salafi-cum-liberal onslaught against the fundamentals of Malaysian Islam (Anne 2016; Muhammad Saufi 2017).

Notwithstanding the existence of divergent and sometimes conflicting Islamist tendencies, it is fair to say that in the era of Najib as prime minister, conservative Wahhabi-Salafism has prevailed over other Islamist trends as the main plank of Malaysia's Islamic policies (Ahmad Fauzi and Che Hamdan 2015, 312–321). Malaysia's mainstreaming of Wahhabi-Salafism has effectively overtaken Malaysia's *wasatiyyah* (moderation) agenda, even as Najib continues to tout Malaysia's credentials as a moderate Muslim nation-state that reputedly renounces all forms and manifestations of extremism, as showcased, for example, in its patronage of the Kuala Lumpur-based Global Movement of Moderates (El-Muhammady 2015). Despite the existence of a national fatwa pronouncing Wahhabism as unsuitable for Malaysian society (*Malay Mail Online* 2015), the deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki (2016), defended Wahhabism in parliament as being part of mainstream Sunni Islam. Meanwhile, Najib himself launched a blistering attack on the ideologies of "human rights-ism," "liberalism," "secularism," "humanism," and "pluralism" as growing threats to Islam (Ahmad Fauzi 2016a, 31).

Najib's administration fails to recognize that moderation and pluralism go hand in hand, and that tolerance of both interreligious and intra-religious differences—something alien to pretenders of Salafism, and its violence-legitimizing Wahhabi version in particular (El Fadl 2005, 45–47, 51–53, 139–140, 199)—contributed to the flourishing of Islamic civilizations of the past. On the ground, the debilitating impact of Wahhabi-Salafi-driven Islamism shows in the steady decline of interfaith initiatives (Osman 2009, 69; Rahimin Affandi *et al.* 2011, 95–97). The lukewarm response of Malay Muslims toward calls for more social engagement with non-Muslims stems from a state-orchestrated discouragement of non-Muslims from participating in public discussion of Islam, further reinforcing the exclusionary character of the Islamist narrative (Hunt 2009, 588).

As Islamism spills over into Salafi-jihadism—a doctrine that traces its origins to Sayyid Qutb's revolutionary thoughts that many Malay Muslims grew up admiring—since mid-2014 Malaysians have been jolted by the shocking news that once-"gentle" Malay Muslims are today joining terrorist groups, carrying out suicide attacks, and killing

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14) For example, Zamihan Mat Zin also serves as a member of PERTAMA's central executive committee; see Persatuan Tarekat Muktabar Malaysia (n.d.).

alleged apostates in the most gruesome manner (Tan 2014; El-Muhammady 2016; Utusan Malaysia 2016). These jihadists pose a threat via the “blowback effect” if they return to Malaysia and continue their violent ways closer to home. According to Special Branch Counter-Terrorism Division Chief Ayob Khan, at the turn of 2017, 264 militants had been jailed for crimes connected to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or the Daesh terrorist group, with a further 60 remaining in Iraq and Syria. The numbers of ISIS recruits from Malaysia, however, show an upward trend, with no ready solution in sight as religious authorities, private and public institutions of higher learning, NGOs, and government departments continue to patronize preachers with clear Wahhabi-Salafi sympathies (Farik 2017; Muzliza 2017).

## Conclusion

Many developing Muslim countries look up to Malaysia as a model of a modern nation-state that has successfully synthesized Islam and modernity. In contrast with many post-World War II Arab governments that marginalized religion in policy making (Sharabi 1965), Malaysia accommodated it. Indeed, barring hiccups such as some racialist aspects of its nation building (Muhammad Haniff 2007), Malaysia has generally been presented as an exemplary success story of a rapidly developing Muslim-majority nation-state (Siddiqi 1995, 20–21, 24). Such claims are backed up by statistical figures. In the Islamicity indices developed by Hossein Askari and Scheherazade Rehman of George Washington University, for instance, Malaysia emerges top among Muslim-majority countries in internalizing Quranic values in spheres of real lives such as economic achievement, social progress, human rights, governance, and justice (Rehman and Askari 2010; McElroy 2014). The historian Cheah Boon Kheng (2003, 406) concedes that, despite its rather ethnically skewed approach toward preferential policies, “Malaysia is a striking example of a fairly successful dominant-ethnic model of nation-building.”

With increasing numbers of Malay Muslims gravitating toward exclusivist interpretations of Islam, leading to rising intolerance amidst the widespread belief that an Islamic state is a necessary condition for the comprehensive realization of the ideals of Islam, the rosy picture above is in serious danger of being overwhelmed by Islamist-driven imperatives, which should be differentiated from what has been traditionally understood as Islamic in the orthodox manner. Being constantly embattled by its slender majority, Najib’s government appears to have struck a bargain with Wahhabi-Salafi elements; this not only confers it Islamist legitimacy but also reifies Islam in a more rigid direction. For some time, the government has placed special importance on Malaysia’s bilateral rela-

tions with Saudi Arabia, from whom Malaysia gets generous pilgrimage quotas and an array of other pecuniary benefits. This makes it unlikely that Wahhabi-Salafism will be banned despite increasing evidence of its association with terrorism (Husain 2014; Asmady 2015, 187, 192–195, 207–208). Of all people, Prime Minister Najib himself has made global headlines by willingly becoming a recipient of Saudi Arabia's largesse (Coughlin 2016). Ironically, Malaysia even seeks to emulate Saudi Arabia's deradicalization program of ISIS-related detainees (Bernama 2016), when it is clear that the Saudi state and ISIS share the same Wahhabi-Salafi ideology (Crooke 2015).

At the present juncture, Malaysia's much-cherished multiculturalism and pluralism are gradually becoming inevitable victims of the country's transformation from a rainbow nation to a Wahhabi-Salafi-driven polity that bases a significant degree of its policy making on the political ideology of Islamism rather than on Islam as a religious faith in all its manifestations. In the emerging Islamist body politic, the voices of non-Muslims and unorthodox Muslims are being systematically marginalized. The current phase of Islamization ostensibly still professes fealty to Islam, when it is really Islamism or Wahhabi-Salafi-driven political Islam that is being upheld, to which a little addition of jihadism could dangerously pave the way toward violent extremism. The whole scenario is not helped by the essentialization of contemporary Islamic discourse in a strongly politico-legal direction, thus consigning philosophical and spiritual aspects of Islam to the periphery of the Malay-Muslim religious worldview. Islam is defined, interrogated, and essentialized through thoroughly institutional lenses, invariably taking on a politico-legal color. Religion is internalized more as a series of physical injunctions and prohibitions, with the emphasis placed mostly on Islam's legalistic rather than civilizational aspects. This is proven by ISTAC's forcible closure in 2015, the increasingly peripheral positions occupied by Sufism and philosophy as tertiary-level academic disciplines in Malaysia (Che Zarrina 2007; Wan Suhaimi 2007), and the banning of neo-traditionalist groups such as Darul Arqam that seek to uphold a progressive and pluralist albeit Sufi-centric vision of an Islamic society (Ahmad Fauzi 2005; 2013).

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