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Politicizing Islam in Malaysia

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Southeast Asia
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The ruling party in Malaysia, the United Malays' National Organisation (UMNO), has set up a website to demonstrate its various jihad efforts. The mere act of creating such a website – regardless of its content – reveals much about the competition for 'being Islamic' in Malaysia these days. Since it is primarily political parties that are the protagonists in this competition, Islamization in Malaysia has become a highly political issue rather than a direct outcome of Islamic social movements. UMNO and PAS, the Islamic Party, oppose each other vehemently.

There is an underlying societal demand for stronger Islamic commitment on the part of Malay politicians. The term 'Malay' should be stressed in this context, as it is mainly the ethnic Malays (55% of the Malaysian population) who consider themselves *the* Muslims of the country. Among the other ethnic groups – Chinese (30%), Indians (7%) and indigenous people – Muslims form a minority. A Malay is defined by the religion of Islam, and since the political power is in the hands of the Malays, Islam has been constitutionally declared the official religion of Malaysia. The semantics of Islam have transcended the aura of Malaysia's mosques, *suraus*, and private Muslim spaces and entered into the realm of the political public as a whole.

In a column headlined 'Dr M: PAS "jihad" a disservice to Muslims' in the (government-friendly) mainstream newspaper, *The Star*, on 12 August 2000, the Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was quoted complaining that what PAS committed was not a holy war, but were rather activities that advocated a split in the (Malay) community. On the other hand, he held that UMNO's struggle could be considered a real jihad, 'more structured and long term in nature, and aimed at both developing the country and empowering the community with the latest knowledge and skills to ensure that Muslims were respected by others.' The reason for hoisting the battle flag is the fear of disunity among the Malay community. A disunited Malay community poses a potential threat to political stability, hence to the balance of ethnic power relations.

Loss of hope

Responsible for the change of tide are the recent domestic developments which have affected the Muslim as well as the non-Muslim public. In particular, the sacking of and verdict on former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim provoked a cry of indignation. When Anwar was co-opted into UMNO in 1982, he had been known in the country as an extraordinarily charismatic leader of the Islamic Youth Movement ABIM. In view of the multi-ethnic society in Malaysia, Anwar introduced a model of a civil society that was devoted to the acceptance of the diversity of religions and traditions. In his writing on *masyarakat madani*, he emphasized that a multi-ethnic nation-state such as Malaysia necessitates civil and societal integration, while at the same time accentuating his personal affiliation to Islam which has played a pivotal role in his political career.

A Muslim youth leader, Anwar could be integrated perfectly into the programme of modernization and Islamization the Malaysian government sought to carry out. Until Anwar's being dismissed in 1998, the Mahathir and Anwar orchestra performed a symphony of mutually sustainable and beneficial concerns. By the mid-1990s, Malaysia had become considerably Islamized without getting caught in the trap of Islamist extremism. When Anwar joined the government as Deputy Prime Minister, the dominant reference in the state's agenda was a

combination of 'Malay' and 'Islamic' with a developmentalist orientation. It was urbane, modernist and democratic in character, and bound to an Islamic and ethical framework. The ousting of Anwar from government and from UMNO is still viewed as a dismissal of reformist Islamic and democratic principles. Muslim morale has been severely affected by the fact that Anwar was accused of sodomy. Malays cried shame on Prime Minister Mahathir for this accusation – regardless of whether there was some truth to it or not – non-Malays also joined in supporting Anwar as the most integrative figure of the ethnically heterogeneous society. Putting him in jail for 15 years symbolized the loss of hope that half a nation had until then maintained for political change embedded in Islamic moral principles.

The spreading orthodox mood

During field work in Malaysia, two years after this watershed-like incident, it became clear that changes had taken place but in quite another direction than was intended in the late 1990s. Observing the scenes at public universities, the drastically increased number of female students wearing the *tudung* (headscarf) and male students wearing the *kopiah* (skullcap) was striking. Teachers admit that a trend of demonstrating one's Muslim identity has emerged and that it has become exceptional even for female Malay teachers not to wear the *tudung*. Campus events such as annual gatherings are accompanied by loud *nasyid* music, the Malay version of Islamic pop music, whereas proposals to celebrate the Chinese lantern festival on the campus are declined by university authorities. The 'new juvenile theocracy' at the public universities, as political scientist Farish Noor has dubbed them, mirrors the atmosphere of a rapidly growing Islamic assertiveness and conviction among the Malay populace. In a do-it-yourself manner, ultra-conscious Muslims seem to be determined to counterbalance the indecent liberties that are expected to arrive with the free use of IT and the internet. In a Malay-dominated primary school, new rules on non-*halal* food have been declared which remind the non-Muslims not to bring in such food during break time. This continued to the extent that reminder notes were placed on the canteen pillars. On the other hand, no one shows concern when Muslim pupils happily munch their beef sandwiches while sitting next to classmates of Hindu-Indian origin.

The spreading orthodox mood and assertion reflect non-material demands of a society which has become increasingly aware of the arbitrariness of state power in times of crises. Asking young urban Malays why they are fond of the Islamic party, the reply is that PAS leaders are able to attract the people spiritually. Spiritual attraction can translate beliefs into action, and for many Malays this is exactly what is required to lead the nation out of its current crisis. Non-Muslims also appear to appreciate the rhetoric of PAS, despite some highly provocative remarks of party leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat. Nik Aziz almost regularly draws the attention of the nation and the media towards himself by expressing that, for example, pretty women should not apply for good jobs because they can be married by rich men who are able to care for them, and that women who

expose their belly buttons in public must not be surprised when they are raped by men. He does not have to wait long before the voices of protest make themselves heard, but still his party enjoys an increasing number of followers and huge audiences wherever PAS leaders address the people. A popular saying holds that UMNO leaders pay the audience for attending a convention, whereas in the case of PAS, the audience pays for attending.

New opportunities

For those who want to discuss and to be informed but do not have access to non-mainstream media, let alone the internet, the mosque is the place to go. Censorship is hardly extendable into the mosques, and if it were, a mass exchange of *imams* would have to occur to replace the current ones with exclusively 'non-political' ones. The humiliating fate of Anwar Ibrahim and the consequent formation of a large opposition movement have given birth to a coalition of forces opposed to the government – and PAS is an important part of it. Together with, among others, the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), the multi-ethnic People's Party (Parti Rakyat Malaysia, PRM), which is preferred by many intellectuals, and the National Justice Party (Keadilan), PAS forms the Alternative Front (Barisan Alternatif). What keeps the coalition together is the opposition to the ruling coalition (of which UMNO is the de facto ruling party) and the struggle for an accountable, transparent, and pluralist political system.

Holding such divergent parties together is not an easy task, particularly when multi-ethnicity is to a large extent associated with a multi-religious setting. The government camp tries to take advantage of the internal conflicts in the opposition coalition and reunite the Malays under UMNO's roof. For this reason, the ruling party is now committed to jihad.

The current competition for religious and ethical merit and distinction forms a fertile ground for all sorts of religious-political ideologies to spread, be it in the direction of Islamic radicalism or politically-enriched cults and mysticism.

The possibility of articulating interests in an Islamic rhetoric and the aggregation of these interests through parties, organizations, and networks offers a political opportunity structure which the existing political system does not provide. Functioning as a valve to release emotions that have been bottled up, non-Muslims can utilize this opportunity structure as well. Through a process of 'Islamic lingualization' (islamische Versprachlichung, R. Schulze), a political discourse that lacked public recognition has now been brought before a mass audience. By way of a coalition, a symbiosis of reform movement and Islamic movement has evolved. Whether this symbiosis is heading in an 'exclusive' or 'inclusive' direction remains to be seen. An exclusive direction would mean that the Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia remain separate from each other once the aim of toppling the current government has been achieved. This would no doubt add fuel to the fire of those who sternly believe that politics in Malaysia are ethnically divided – and they are many. An inclusive direction would mean that the opposition forces would be able to form a vi-

able multi-ethnic coalition. For the time being, the nation is witness to a competition between the two major Malay parties, UMNO and PAS, both seeking to win the 'best Muslim party' award. Sadly, the ethnically and culturally integrative and progressive ideas of a civil society, embedded within an Islamic ethical framework, are increasingly ridiculed in politically instrumentalized jihads and by radical ideologues that take advantage of the attractiveness of Islamic rhetoric. ◆

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