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# Negotiating Modernity

2018 marks the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's 50th anniversary. Initiated in 1968 by then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, ISEAS has since been dedicated to research and scholarship on Southeast Asia.

The two essays featured here are condensed chapters from the upcoming book entitled *Islam in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Modernity?* This book is edited by Norshahril Saat and is the end-product of the 'Islamic Developments in Southeast Asia Workshop' held at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in 2015. Its aim is to understand some of the contemporary socio-cultural and political challenges facing Islam in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Its underlying theme is how Muslims come to terms with modernization and the social changes that have impacted laws, politics, ideas, and consumption patterns. It is a modest attempt to take stock of recent developments facing the three countries. The book comprises nine chapters written by local scholars and activists. Chapters cover the political Islamist divide in contemporary Malaysia; the behaviour of Malaysian muftis; Saudi Arabian influence on Malaysian education; the 'Aksi Bela Islam' protests against former Jakarta governor Ahok in 2016; the Middle East impact on Indonesian campus movements; progressive responses to radicalism in Indonesia; the rise of capitalistic Islam; and syariah revivalists in Singapore.



Masjid Sultan, or Sultan Mosque, Singapore.

## Syariah revivalism in Singapore

Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman

Southeast Asia has witnessed the emergence of religious resurgence amongst the Malays, popularly referred to as the 'dakwah movement' since the 1970s. Essentially an urban phenomenon, it is marked by an assertion of Islam in the public sphere that differs radically from how religion has been understood and experienced in the past. Characterised by a defensive, authoritarian and puritanical understanding of Islam in response to the problems of change and modernity, it is strongly manifested in the domain of Muslim law known as 'syariah'. While there has been considerable research on syariah revivalism in neighbouring countries, the same cannot be said for Singapore where the Muslims are subjected to the same laws as non-Muslims in all areas except in matters pertaining to the domains of marriage and inheritance.

Syariah revivalism emerged in Singapore about a decade after Independence in 1965. For the community already mired in socio-economic problems under colonial rule,

adaptation to the new demands and changes of a young nation proved highly challenging. The early decades of urban development and resettlement also exacerbated tension and insecurity as changes impacted on how religious teachings had been understood and practiced.

In their attempts to alleviate the problems of the community, the Malay elites constantly evoked religious values and cultural traditions, an effort reinforced by the government's emphasis on multiculturalism in its search for national identity. The turn to Islam as ballast for the community was neither novel nor unexpected given its strong influence on the lives of the Malays. However, amidst anxiety in the face of change, the constructive role of religion was impeded by the emergence of revivalism with its distinct religious orientation in the bid to preserve and safeguard Malay/Muslim identity against what was seen as the onslaught of modernity from the west. In revivalist discourse the west is strongly caricatured as embodying a host of negative ideologies and values. Stakeholders

assume sole guardianship of Islam and are also intolerant of intra-community opposing thoughts and perspectives drawn from competing Islamic traditions. Unlike theologians who had the monopoly of religion in the past, revivalists generally emerge from disparate upwardly mobile groups, the product of modern education or Islamic studies.

### Syariah revivalism, the Malaysian connection and other influences

Syariah revivalists in Singapore are strongly influenced by the larger discourse of their counterparts in the Muslim world and Malaysia facilitated by, among other factors, technological advancement in communications. Their discourse reveals strong demands for an alternative state and systems including law, which they deem as indispensable to Islam's comprehensiveness (*ad-deen*), though they are exempted from

implementing them given their minority status. Nonetheless they offer their 'Islamic' alternative as a solution to what they allege are the moral ills of man and society resulting from modernity and development, which they attribute to the impact of the secular west. For more than three decades, the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) has persisted in its political project to introduce *hudud* [Islamic penal laws] in the northern state of Kelantan as part of its agenda of establishing an Islamic state. The conflation of religion and politics has but boosted this fixation. In the bid to undercut Malay support for PAS, UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) has introduced various measures and backed laws that have expanded the scope and power of religious bureaucracy over matters pertaining to Islam with serious consequences on the supremacy of the constitution and individual rights and liberties of Muslims as citizens. While the conflation is absent in the calls for syariah in Singapore, rhetoric on syariah nevertheless reveals similar traits with those of their Malaysian counterparts in terms of themes and perspectives.

For example, Malaysian revivalists' demands for the restoration of syariah based on the notion that Islamic law had long been observed and implemented in Malay society, and would have remained so had it not been 'robbed' of its status by colonial powers, are uncritically adopted in Singapore. So has the notion that Malay rulers were the protectors of Islam and law and had struggled for it to be a basis of unity and collective identity of the Malays, hence its significance in the definition of Malay in the constitution. Such a view is incongruent with Malay legal history, which reveals an admixture of Islamic law with, for example, feudal customary laws that promoted and entrenched the interest of the ruling class. These contravened the rule of law and basic values of equality central to Islamic teachings. It also deviates from historical evidence and judgement of superior courts in Malaysia on the meaning and status of Islam in Article 3 of the Malaysian Constitution. The lack of awareness of ideological motives behind legal texts reinforces the problem as it negates how legal texts serve as instruments in boosting the power of the feudal elite rather



than as evidence of actual implementation of Islamic law. Such misunderstandings prevent an objective appraisal of Islamic law in Malay legal history. Suspicions are also similarly cast on activists and scholars who have been labelled as deviant back home.

Apart from the influence from Malaysia, Singapore's syariah revivalism is also conditioned by other influences. While in the early period, the impact of South Asian and Middle Eastern revivalist thought was stronger, today the turn towards Muslim migrants in the west for assertion of Islamic identity is more evident. The importation of Qardhawi's minority *fikh* [Islamic jurisprudence], and the related 'fikh of priorities', into the local context provides evidence of its dominance.

### Major issues in revivalist discourse in Singapore

Syariah revivalists' discourse reveals a host of issues that lack relevance to the community. It dabbles on the significance of syurah understood by them as the law making institution in Islam despite the fact that it is unable to demonstrate on the basis of principles why the parliamentary system is unIslamic. Its rhetoric that Parliament can pass any law with majority support unlike syurah, which can only legislate what has not been determined in the Koran, reveals lack of insight and understanding of both Islamic legal history as well as the system of parliamentary sovereignty. Its fixation on hudud as integral to faith provides further evidence of the fact that stakeholders share similar values and orientation as their counterparts in Malaysia and beyond. Fear mongering by proponents that discourages questioning of hudud as it "can lead to apostasy", or that those who do not implement it "have strayed from Islam", is not uncommon. Nevertheless, syariah revivalists in Singapore have shied away from making clear if they believe that the punishment for apostasy should be death, a punishment supported by PAS in Malaysia. Instead, their overriding concern lies with impediments in the enforcement of hudud. They delve at length into who can implement hudud, the stages of its implementation, grounds for exception and prioritisation of needs for minority Muslims in Singapore who are unable to implement it. While these issues are confined to the rhetorical plane, it has serious implications on the image and understanding of Islamic law and the religion. It also deflects attention from vital problems confronting Muslims, including poverty, corruption, and authoritarianism, all of which cannot be resolved by fixation on law and punishment.

Again like their counterparts, they denounce competing views on Islamic tradition that favour human rights, gender equality, freedom of belief and other basic liberties as unIslamic. Their non-critical support for minority *fikh* also overlooks its legal opinions enunciated that fail to treat Muslims equally with non-Muslims, for example, in the realm of marriage and inheritance. Some of these *fikh* even promote negative stereotypes against them, which affect adversely the well-being of pluralistic society.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, revivalists' discourse deflects attention from the challenges of administering the actual Muslim law in operation. Their rhetoric and fixation with an imagined syariah are not productive in alleviating genuine problems pertaining to Islamic law in Singapore but, instead, compromise urgent attention to reforming the existing syariah for modern life. Instead of helping ordinary Muslims adapt and contribute to the development of good law on the basis of principles, revivalists' puritanical, essentialist and 'asociological' understanding of syariah reinforces exclusivism. This tendency must be checked for the well-being of not just the Malay community but larger society as a whole.

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## Religious exclusivism in Malaysia

Norshahril Saat

Malaysia's Islamic elite have been promoting conservative and exclusive ideas lately. This group consists of individuals trained in the religious sciences, and includes *muftis* (state-appointed persons with religious authority), *ulamas* (religious scholars), popular preachers, religious teachers and religious bureaucrats.

Academics and human rights activists in Malaysia have associated this elite with Wahhabi-Salafism (puritanical brand of Islam). For example, Marina Mahathir, a women rights activist, opined that Malaysia was undergoing an Arabisation of Islam because the way the Malays dress, behave, and think no longer reflected 'Malay identity'. Prominent sociologist Professor Syed Farid Alatas also argued that extremist ideas from the Middle East have influenced the *ulama's* thinking and behaviour. The Sultan of Johor, Ibrahim Iskandar, recently criticised Malaysian Malays for imitating the Arabs, declaring, "If there are some of you who wish to be an Arab and practise Arab culture, and do not wish to follow our Malay customs and traditions, that is up to you. I also welcome you to live in Saudi Arabia."

By contrast, Malaysian Prime Ministers Abdullah Badawi (2003-2009) and Najib Razak (2009-present) have portrayed Malaysia's brand of Islam as a moderate one. However, recent controversies involving the Islamic elite, such as book bans, the persecution of religious minorities (the Shias), and the prevention of non-Muslims from using the word 'Allah', do little to support notions of Muslim moderation. Instead, since 2016, the Najib administration has worked closely with the Islamic opposition party, PAS, to strengthen syariah laws in the country despite protest from opposition parties and other groups.

### The influence of Middle Eastern Islam

To what extent has Middle Eastern Islam crept into the Malaysian Islamic discourse? Is it even correct to link the exclusivist attitudes of Malaysia's Islamic elite with Middle Eastern Islam in the first place? Generally speaking, a case can be made for how Wahhabi-Salafism has influenced the behaviour of some Islamic elite in Malaysia, particularly those who continue to receive their training in Middle East universities. They frown upon the following



Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. Image: Wikimedia Creative Commons.

acts which used to be commonly practised in Malay society: veneration of saints, visitations of graves of saints, and celebrating the Prophet's birthday. There is greater promotion of Wahhabi-Salafi ideologies by the Saudi Arabian government funded by petro-dollars. Globalisation has also allowed greater exchange of ideas between the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

### Local and national factors

However, one should never discount local and national factors. In this case, the role of the dominant Malay party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and the Malay rulers in shaping the religious elite's political and religious behaviour. In Malaysia there is still a strong emphasis on rituals and mysticism in Malay society with little regard for universal Islamic values such as equality. Hence, blaming the Middle East alone for the country's conservative bent ignores the historical, institutional, and political conditions under which *ulamas* function.

The truth of the matter is that exclusivism in Malaysia draws support from wherever it can. What Malaysians need to be wary of is the exclusive faith-based attitude in general. This means being wary of those who are ultra-defensive of particular ideas, who display authoritarian views towards diversity, and who condemn alternative voices as 'liberal' or 'deviant'. Such exclusivist attitudes are found across different theological orientations, be they Wahhabism, Salafism, Sufism, or traditionalism.

In addition, the patronage of Malay rulers remains crucial in defining the political behaviour of some Malaysian *muftis*. Some scholars have suggested that Wahhabi-Salafi modes of thinking are more marginal to Malaysian society than previously thought.

After all, the majority of Malaysian *muftis* remain Sufis and conservative in outlook, just like the Perak and Negeri Sembilan *muftis*. The Selangor religious council, for instance, defends Sufi practices that are frowned upon by Wahhabi-Salafists. In fact, the Malay rulers, who are constitutionally the custodians of Islam in each state have consistently backed the Sufi-oriented religious elites.

In some instances, Islamic institutions send mixed signals. For example, in 2014, the Pahang Religious Council banned Wahhabi-Salafism from being preached in the state. The grounds for the ban was that the ideologies sowed disunity among Malaysian Muslims. On the surface it suggests that the religious council was combating exclusivism. However, more recently, the Pahang *mufti* Abdul Rahman Osman made hostile remarks towards the opposition Democratic Action Party. He declared the party as *kafir harbi* (non-believers who can be slain) for opposing Islamic laws. He was also quoted to say that working with the opposition party was a sin according to Islam. Again, such exclusive views were not related to Wahhabi or Salafi thought.

### Conclusion

In summary, the way forward should be for Malaysian Muslims to be critical of any form of exclusive attitudes in religious discourse, rather than to single out particular religious doctrines. An exclusivist is an exclusivist, regardless of whether he is a Wahhabi-Salafi, Shia, Sufi, Sunni or a self-declared liberal. Common spaces for debate over religious ideas and values are needed.

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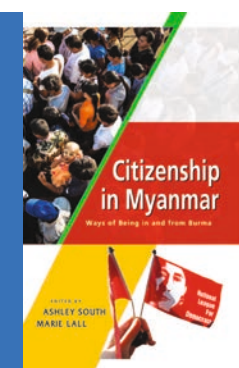
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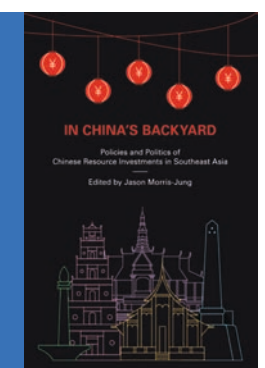
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