
Islam Hadhari in Malaysia

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In the Muslim world Malaysia is bigger than its physical size would suggest. The Southeast Asian nation of 24 million people is known for its stability, tolerance, and steady economic gains over the last 30 years. Malaysia does not take that reputation for granted; it has strived to live up to it. The latest and most ambitious effort comes by way of “Islam Hadhari,” or “civilizational Islam,” a political and ideological campaign introduced by Abdullah Badawi shortly after he was named prime minister in 2003 that stresses technological and economic competitiveness, moderation, tolerance, and social justice.

In October, U.S. Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes praised Islam Hadhari as a “powerful example” to all Muslims, and Badawi’s deputy Najib Razak assured Mrs. Hughes that Malaysia was prepared to share Islam Hadhari with the rest of the world. At home, meanwhile, the government has started promoting 10 points of Islam Hadhari, including a just and trustworthy government and protection of the environment. Badawi says Islam Hadhari is not a new concept but an attempt to bring the Muslim community back in touch with the true essence of Islam. And like Islamic movements elsewhere, it envisions a restored and empowered Umma.

Islam Hadhari is to some extent a logical outgrowth of social, political and Islamic realities in Malaysia. The government has long stressed moderation and economic equity in order to keep peace between the Muslim Malays, who make up about 60 percent of the population, and the indigenous tribes and sizeable Chinese and Indian minorities, most of whom are not Muslim. Malay concerns, however, have always been central to government policy. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which has ruled the country for forty-plus years, has promoted Malay supremacy since before independence. At its founding, UMNO envisioned a Malaysia ruled by Malays and where Malays would be granted special rights and privileges.¹ UMNO continues to champion a positive discrimination program that benefits the

majority of Malays. This commitment first and foremost to the Malays has been a key to its hegemony. But it has required a conspicuous investment in Islam, for in Malaysia to be Malay is to be Muslim; Malays are born into the faith. And while pulls toward religion and ethnicity have complicated Malay identity, politically these two forces are inextricable: Islam in Malaysia is racialized. Hence, to appear “un-Islamic” is also to be “un-Malay”—a political liability.

Islam Hadhari was created with this highly politicized terrain in mind and in its short existence has served UMNO well. It was introduced months before parliamentary elections in 2004, giving Badawi’s promise to tackle Malaysia’s endemic corruption and promote reform a progressive Islamic face. Its emphasis on tolerance appealed to Malaysians of all stripes. The UMNO-led national front went on to post one of its best showings in history, winning 90.4 of Malaysia’s 219 national parliamentary seats and 64 percent of the popular vote, and roundly defeating the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).

But Islam Hadhari should not be viewed merely as a political instrument.² Prime Minister Badawi envisions Islam Hadhari as an antidote to the tide of extremism ravaging the larger Muslim world, at a time when many Muslim nations are struggling to reconcile piety with modern realities. “It is our duty,” Badawi said at a conference last year, “to demonstrate, by word and by action, that a Muslim country can be modern, democratic, tolerant and economically competitive.”

That fight begins at home, where an undercurrent of Islamic fundamentalism has begun to challenge Malaysia’s reputation as a “model” Islamic nation. The influence of conservative religious teachers has grown. Fewer men are shaking women’s hands.³ A growing number of minorities are opting for private education as public schools have become more Islamized. More Malay women are wearing the headscarf. The call to prayer is more ubiquitous, occasionally heard channeled into elevators and over the islands at gas stations. The Muslim moral police, known by the acronym “JAWI,” have become more brazen and officious, detaining couples for holding hands and threatening to send “deviant” Muslims to rehabilitation centers.⁴ In January, JAWI police raided a nightclub and rounded up all Muslim patrons while allowing non-Muslims to carry on. Those arrested described JAWI officers as “abusive” and “overzealous.” In July, a mob of masked persons in robes attacked a commune run by a Malay apostate. The mob reportedly threw Molotov cocktails, broke windows and slashed car tires. Malaysian police have not arrested anyone involved in the attack, but a day later the state religious department

arrested 58 members associated with the sect for practicing a deviant religion.⁵ In June, two young Muslim brothers were sentenced to a whipping for sipping Guinness stout.

These developments have been cumulative, and they pose a challenge to the realization of Islam Hadhari. But to what extent? For clues, it is necessary to consider the history of Malaysian Islam.

Islam arrived in the Malay peninsula in the 15th century. It was at first mostly comprehended and accepted only by Malay aristocrats, but became more of a general identity marker in the 19th century when large numbers of non-Malays began to migrate to Malaysia.⁶ A pronounced recent shift in Islamic identity that reverberates through to the present came with the Islamic revival in the 1970s, known as the “Dakwah Movement.” Catalysts included the Chinese-Malay racial riots of 1969 and the establishment a few months later of the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM). ABIM provided young Muslims with an avenue to pursue *dakwah*, or preaching and missionary activity (in Arabic, *dawa*), through universities and in the public sphere. The major consequence of this “rebirth,” “reassertion,” or “rediscovery” of Islam was that Islam came to be seen as the pillar of Malay identity. The Dakwah sought to resist the pressures of modernization, reinvent and reconstruct tradition, express anti-imperialist sentiment and promote spiritual renewal.⁷ External forces such as the Iranian Revolution and the Dakwah movement in neighboring Indonesia breathed fresh life into Malaysia’s Dakwah, as did, around the same time, the appointment of Mahathir Mohamed to the post of prime minister in 1981. In the course of his 22-year rule he would oversee Malaysia’s dramatic transformation from an agrarian backwater into an industrialized export-driven nation (Malaysia is the U.S.’s 10th largest trading partner). The era would also be scarred by a politically charged, sanctimonious battle for the soul of Islam.

Mahathir showed dedication to Islam from the outset of his premiership. In his first year, he established several committees to address law, education, economics, science and technology, as they pertain to “The Concept of Development in Islam.” Other clear policy shifts included a declaration to restructure Malaysia’s economic system according to Islamic principles, and the establishment of Islamic economic institutions like the Islamic Bank and Islamic Economic Foundation. He also brought ABIM’s leader Anwar Ibrahim into UMNO, promised to bring the national legal system more in accord with Islamic law, and boosted Islamic content on radio and television.⁸ No less important, he made it official policy not to allow economic development to happen at the expense of spiritual progress—but his failure to achieve this

last point, and his increasingly desperate measures to compensate for the shortcoming, fomented the Islamic revival in a way that divided the country and has undermined Malaysia's "progressive" vision for itself.

By the mid-1990s it was becoming abundantly clear that capitalism was Mahathir's top priority and Islam was merely a vehicle by which to sell his vision. Ostentatious mega-projects, including the world's tallest buildings, a hub-aspiring airport and one of the world's most expensive administrative capitals, became symbols of the new Malaysia. A large Malay middle-class had developed. Unemployment and poverty had reached single digits. Mahathir waxed ebulliently of a "*Bangsa Malaysia*" (Malaysian race) and about Malaysia becoming a fully developed country by 2020. But many rural Malays felt they were not sharing in the country's success, and came to doubt how Islamic Mahathir's vision really was. The boom was seen to be disproportionately benefiting the elite. UMNO became synonymous with corruption. An intra-ethnic divide surfaced, in which a growing number of Malays saw Islam as the way to restore justice and accountability. But Mahathir and UMNO did not rise to the Islamic challenge. He dismissed allegations of rampant cronyism and nepotism. In so doing he helped pave the way for "radical" Islamic elements to vie for the heart and soul of Malaysian Islam.⁹

This process was compounded by Mahathir's tendency, particularly during political rough spots, to lambaste the West. He blamed the Asian economic crisis on a "cabal of Jews." He warned Malaysians that given a chance the West would re-colonize Malaysia. Whether it was through championing "Asian values" or his "Look East" policy, which sought to hold Asian countries like Japan up as models of how to progress, Mahathir repeatedly drew distinctions between people and societies during his rule. To confuse matters, his vision for Malaysia, with its skyscrapers, sky trams, hi-tech "cyber" cities and superhighways, had begun to look and feel eerily Western—so that Malaysians were being told to reject Westernization while their prime minister invested heavily in it.

These dual realities shaped the whole of Malaysia but left the deepest mark on the Malay community, for through Islam Malays professed to a system of values that the Islamic revival had taught them was often irreconcilable with Western notions of progress.

In the 1999 elections, a web of social, political and economic factors saw PAS win control of two northern states (or 34 percent of the popular vote, a 14 percent increase from its showing in the 1995 election.)¹⁰ The election results reemphasized the pivotal role Islam often plays in Malaysian politics, and UMNO subsequently worked more aggressively to prove its Islamic

credentials. Hence in 2001, shortly after the September 11th attacks, Mahathir declared Malaysia “an Islamic State,” intensifying a long-running battle between UMNO and PAS to out-Islamize each other (at least rhetorically). Meanwhile, Mahathir began to close madrasahs and jail “dissidents” suspected of preaching hate. Not a few in Washington deemed him an exemplary ally in its war against Islamic extremism. In response to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, however, Mahathir’s anti-Western rhetoric returned to the fore, and has continued with him into retirement.

Badawi and his brand of Islam are widely considered a welcome change from Mahathir’s divisive and ostensibly contradictory style of rule. And yet Badawi’s more tolerant approach may inadvertently be emboldening conservative government arms, like JAWI and the State Religious Councils. Badawi is not the micromanager that Mahathir was. Mahathir artfully centralized power during his rule. He had the clout to question these conservative authorities and often did, checking their power in the process.¹¹ Since the nightclub raid mentioned above, Badawi’s government has issued new regulations to stem the power of JAWI. It has also pressed Malaysia’s 14 states to adopt a uniform Islamic code. (Islam, according to the Malaysian Constitution, is a state as opposed to a federal matter.) But Badawi and his party have been reluctant to condemn the expanding reach of conservative Islam, lest they give PAS an opportunity to denounce UMNO as un-Islamic. UMNO’s religious affairs specialists have avoided condemning the idea of an Islamic criminal code, instead maintaining that the time is not right.¹²

Islam Hadhari, it is hoped, will temper these developments. But is it sufficient to stem Malaysia’s conservative tide? Most Islam Hadhari promotion efforts thus far have come through seminars, state run press and speeches by the prime minister.¹³ The principles have not been put into law or formal practice. And Islam Hadhari may ultimately suffer because of its top-down approach. Grassroots movements, such as the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, each with memberships in the tens of millions, have proven more effective in promoting moderation in the Muslim world.¹⁴ Indeed, most Malaysians would be hard-pressed to name but a couple of Islam Hadhari’s 10 points. To the average Malaysian, Islam Hadhari remains a nebulous concept.

Some observers count Islam Hadhari’s vagueness among its strengths—to be vague is to be inclusive. As a general concept Islam Hadhari makes for a legitimating canopy against crude efforts to Islamize Malaysia. It provides an accessible terminology to counter Muslims who claim that the only way to be a good Muslim is to support the full implementation of *sharia* law.¹⁵ Islam

Hadhari does not seek to be a doctrinal equivalent to the prescriptive, ritualistic nature of fundamentalism. Rather, says Badawi, it is a practical approach consistent with the tenets of Islam.¹⁶ According to Boston University's Robert Hefner, "Badawi is coming out and showing people in long gowns that you can welcome Americans and investment and still be a good Muslim."¹⁷

However, it could be argued that UMNO and Badawi's approach to governing has often been in conflict with the principles of Islam Hadhari. Among its 10 aims are a just and trustworthy government, a free and independent people and mastery of knowledge. Badawi ran on a platform to stamp out corruption and under his leadership a few high-profile cases have been brought to court. But he has failed to curb the culture that breeds corruption. A veteran UMNO official called the party's 2004 elections the worst case of money politics in the party's history. Certainly undoing a practice that became endemic during the Mahathir era may take years to correct, but so far Badawi's campaign has been less aggressive than many had hoped. The Anti-Corruption Agency remains under the watch of the central government, while cases against several long serving UMNO officials widely suspected of corruption have stalled or been dropped. Press freedoms continue to suffer under Badawi, even on the Internet, which Mahathir said the government would not interfere with. Last year Badawi's government threatened to take action against a blogger after a contributor posted a statement to the blog equating Islam Hadhari and money politics with feces and urine.

Whether these developments embolden PAS and the opposition remains to be seen. They have raised questions about Badawi's commitment to reform and whether Islam Hadhari is the genuine article, and in that sense can't hurt PAS.

Islamist Radicals

By most accounts the number of Islamic radicals residing in Malaysia is minimal. Indeed, Malaysia has not experienced a large-scale terrorist incident. But several of the September 11 hijackers met in Malaysia. The radical cleric Abu Bakar Bashir moved to Malaysia and lived there for 13 years beginning in 1985 to avoid more jail time in Indonesia. Hambali, believed to be the leader of the regional militant group Jemaah Islamiah, moved to Malaysia around the same time. He was believed to have lived there for 10 years and toured the country, frequently recruiting young Muslims to join his struggle to establish a pan-Asian Islamic state, before being arrested two years ago in Thailand. Earlier this year, the suspected mastermind of separatist violence in southern Thailand, Abdul Rahman Ahmad, was arrested in Malaysia. Azahari bin Husin, a bomb expert who allegedly helped orchestrate a number

of bombings in Indonesia before being killed in a shootout with Indonesian security forces in East Java in November, was Malaysian.

The Malaysian government often advertises that it has adopted a zero-tolerance policy toward extremists. But this does not answer how much influence these covert individuals and their ideologies appreciated before the government took notice of them—what has been their reach? Scant research has been done in this area. What is evident is that foreign Islamic entities have aggressively targeted Malaysia over the last several decades, using tapes, DVDs, pamphlets, the Internet, and formal and informal channels of education to promote forms of Islam that feed extremism. And most jihadi websites are stationed in the West or in Malaysia.¹⁸ Malaysia's Islamic Affairs Division has successfully vetted some of this material, but it remains a daunting task. In 1996 the division "identified the existence of forty-seven deviationist groups, 15 of which were described as active and involving some 1,000 followers."¹⁹

Some government officials have acknowledged that Malaysian Muslims are vulnerable to outside influence because they lack "authentic" knowledge of Islam, and have urged them to follow government guidelines to avoid falling astray. Posing a challenge to this recommended path is the powerful and revered *ulama*, who have shown strong cultural and political affiliation with schools of Islamic thought from the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia.²⁰ Another challenge comes from the covert regional cooperation between militants and their sympathizers. Assistance to the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia, for instance, has been known to come from conservative Muslim groups in Malaysia.²¹

With the September 11 attacks, Muslim governments were left to contemplate the substance of their own societies and the havoc their conservative elements might inspire. Malaysia was no exception. But outwardly it clung to its clean image, steadfastly reminding skeptics of its reputation as a "model Islamic democracy." "We are a very moderate Islamic country," Badawi frequently tells reporters. This ignores the fact that Islamic identity is not static, and has arguably been less so *since* September 11, as many Muslims view America's "war on terror" as anti-Muslim. Outrage over America's foreign policy has not spilled into Malaysia's streets as it has elsewhere, but the restraint cannot be equated with a lack of sympathy. A public diplomacy official with the U.S. government said anti-Americanism is more entrenched in Malaysia than in Indonesia. And whereas the U.S.'s post-tsunami relief efforts improved America's public approval rating in Indonesia and other Muslim nations, no such change occurred in Malaysia.

Islam Hadhari is, indirectly at least, a concession that Islam in Malaysia needs fixing. As a senior UMNO official noted, “The growing conservatism that we are seeing is the thin end of the wedge. If left unchallenged, it will germinate into a radical and reactionary force that rejects modernity, generates intolerance and imprisons the minds of Muslims behind the bars of dogma and blind imitation.”²²

Beneath the tip of the iceberg he speaks of is the recent news that 60,000 Malaysian graduates, most of them Malay, are unemployed, due largely to a lack of pertinent experience and poor English and communication skills. This makes Islam Hadhari, with its emphasis on technology, knowledge, skills acquisition and achievement, seem apt indeed. But if it doesn’t deliver it is likely to be seen as yet another government program designed to co-opt Islam for political gain—a charge PAS is already making.

Where, however, Islam Hadhari may ultimately alienate Muslim voters looking for a greater commitment to Islam, such “shortcomings” may in fact prove to be a strong selling point with non-Muslims. This could, assuming a large chunk of Muslims aren’t abandoned in the process, significantly strengthen UMNO and in turn neutralize the political power of radical elements. In a word, Islam Hadhari will need strong Muslim support to be realized. But realization is not necessary for Islam Hadhari to be effective.

Regarding the prospect of substantial numbers of Malays abandoning UMNO, moderation has long been a hallmark of Malaysian Islam. Local traditions such as animism and Hindu and Buddhist influences have helped prevent a literalist interpretation from taking root, thus minimizing the appeal of Islamist parties like PAS. But likewise, Malaysia is a racially charged society where politicians have used race and religion for political gain. Moreover, the tug of the borderless brotherhood that Islam calls for is strong here, evinced during the *dakwah* revival and more recently in reaction to developments in Palestine and Iraq. State-run media, Internet sites and Arab media pandering to indignation and victim-consciousness have fueled these concerns. (In June the foreign news editor of a top Malaysian TV station said she tended to select footage of the Iraq war that paints Muslims as victims and Western powers as brutal perpetrators, in part to compensate for perceived bias of Western news giants like CNN.) These forces have not consumed Malaysia as they have other Muslim countries. Malaysia has in fact sufficiently resisted them. Malaysian officials want not only to preserve that tendency but to extend it, and see Islam Hadhari as a vehicle by which to do so. As the UMNO-controlled *New Straits Times* reported in July, “[Islam Hadhari] aims to...enable Muslims to excel and be a distinctive and glorious group.”

Malaysia's Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar has said Islam Hadhari will help Muslim and non-Muslim countries communicate better and avert a "clash of civilizations." He said Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) countries have acknowledged the role that Islam Hadhari could play to correct the image of Islam around the world.²³ One assumes here that Albar expects Islam's image to improve through the spread of moderate forms of Islam like Islam Hadhari and not just through greater promotion of their mere existence. It is the prospect of the former that draws Western officials like Mrs. Hughes and U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick to Islam Hadhari. As the latter said in May 2005, "I had a chance to talk a little about [Islam Hadhari] with the Prime Minister because we think the Malaysian experience is one that is very important—the tolerance, the moderate Muslim majority country, the development of democracy, the rule of law here...we talked about ways in which, perhaps, the government here could share some of its experience with the Iraqis as well as helping the new Palestinian Authority." The U.S. sees Islam Hadhari as a useful resource in combating Islamic extremism and, correspondingly, may prove willing to help promote it, though no formal arrangements have yet been announced.

How great an impact is Islam Hadhari likely to have on other Muslim countries? Popular websites like Islamonline.net have covered it, and Malaysian officials claim that Islam Hadhari continually receives a warm response from Muslims around the world.²⁴ There is, though, little evidence to suggest that it is actually attracting support in other Muslim countries—even in neighboring Indonesia and the Philippines, where it seems Islam Hadhari would be most attractive, given the religious traditions of non-literalist interpretations of the faith. Malaysia is recognized in the Muslim world for its economic growth and social stability. But the *influence* of Malaysian *Islam* has been minimal. It is highly political and polarized, and is seen to lack the depth and "authenticity" of strains found elsewhere. If there is a country in the region that could be described as having clout in the larger Muslim world it would be Indonesia, where Islamic schools of thought are more abundant and diverse and there is a rich intellectual tradition. Malaysian Muslims tend to seek inspiration from Indonesia, not vice versa, and Islam Hadhari does not appear to have changed the fact: it has received scant attention in the Indonesian media, chat rooms and mailing lists, and among Indonesian Muslim groups.²⁵ To take off in Indonesia it will probably need key political support. This is unlikely to come from the ruling government, as the national ideology in Indonesia is secular; Islam does play a political role in Indonesia, and Islamic groups have criticized the government for seemingly non-Islamic

behavior, but presidents do their best to appear above sectarian differences.²⁶ Moving beyond Indonesia, Islam Hadhari's influence may be hindered by the simple fact that different countries have different sets of challenges. Then again, few Muslim governments have formulated let alone articulated a plan to reconcile modernity with the Islamic faith, and fewer still have shown the determination to lead by example, as Malaysia has.

NOTES

- 1 Abdullah, Kamarulnizam (2003) *The Politics of Islam in Contemporary Malaysia*, Bangi, Malaysia: Penerbit, p. 117
- 2 Interview with Robert. W. Hefner, Associate Director of the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs, Boston University
- 3 *International Herald Tribune*, May 12, 2005
- 4 *The American Muslim*, January-March 2005 issue
- 5 Human Rights Watch Report, July 21, 2005
- 6 Abdullah, Kamarulnizam (2003) *The Politics of Islam in Contemporary Malaysia*, Bangi, Malaysia: Penerbit, p. 216
- 7 Hefner, Robert W. and Patricia Horvatich (1997) *Islam in an Era of Nation States*, "Identity Construction, Nation Formation, and Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia" by Shamsul A.B., United States: University of Hawai'i Press, p. 211
- 8 Mutalib, Hussin (1993) *Islam in Malaysia: From Revivalism to Islamic State?*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, pp. 30-31
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- 12 *Economist*, June 2, 2005
- 13 Interview with Patricia Martinez, head of the Intercultural Studies Research at the Asia-Europe Institute of the University of Malaya
- 14 *New Statesman*, September 13, 2004
- 15 Interview with Robert. W. Hefner, Associate Director of the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs, Boston University
- 16 IslamOnline.net, March 3, 2005
- 17 Interview with Robert. W. Hefner, Associate Director of the Institute on Culture, Religion and

World Affairs, Boston University

18 Roy, Olivier (2004) *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 312

19 Nair, Shanti (1997) *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, New York: Routledge, p. 152

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21 *Asiaweek*, March 2, 2001

22 *Time*, March 10, 2003

23 *New Straits Times*, July 19, 2005

24 *New Straits Times*, July 10, 2005

25 Interview with R. William Liddle, Professor of Political Science, The Ohio State University

26 Interview with R. William Liddle, Professor of Political Science, The Ohio State University