

Piety and Politics

Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia

JOSEPH CHINYONG LIOW

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2009

Preface

When queried about the possibility of creating an Islamic state in Malaysia immediately after independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's first prime minister and the country's *Bapa Kemerdekaan* (Father of Independence), famously quipped that to do so he would have to "drown every non-Muslim in Malaysia." Some forty-five years later, Malaysia's fourth prime minister and the architect of Vision 2020, Mahathir Mohamad, openly declared that Malaysia was already an Islamic state. While Mahathir's comment could be partly attributed to the need to shore up his Islamic credentials as his party engaged in the politics of brinkmanship with an Islamic opposition, it was in fact the culmination of several decades of gradual Islamization of Malaysia that had been engineered, paradoxically enough, by the very party and government that Tunku led many years ago. How did this shift come about, and what does it portend for Malaysia?

Malaysia has a population of approximately 22 million people. Of these, close to 60% are Muslims, who are virtually all ethnic Malay. Since independence, the country has undergone tremendous transformation. Once primarily a rural backwater, several decades of urbanization and industrialization have created the tenth largest economy in Asia, one that quickly joined the ranks of the original "Asian tigers." Modernization of the economy was a key policy objective of the Mahathir administration, the foundation of his "Vision 2020" plan to make Malaysia a developed country by the year 2020. Much of this modernization hinged on policies that encouraged an influx of foreign investments and multinational corporations into Malaysia. This foreign influx was so critical to the government's development

strategies that it was prepared to make exceptions to various aspects of its affirmative-action policies, which required firms based in Malaysia to allot a specified number of jobs and a certain percentage of ownership to *bumiputera* (“sons of the soil,” a term that refers primarily to ethnic Malays). Its track record of development and steady economic growth has made the Malaysian economy one of the most vibrant in the Muslim world today.

Malaysia’s admirable economic growth was to a great extent made possible by an equally admirable record of social and political stability since the end of World War II. During an immediate postwar period in which Southeast Asia was widely known as a “region in revolt,” Malaysia (known as Malaya until 1963) stood out as an oasis of relative calm. Still, ethnic tension was simmering beneath the surface, as Malay political parties sought to enshrine Malay racial primacy in the political constellation of postcolonial Malaysia, a problem compounded by the existence of a recalcitrant Chinese-dominated Communist insurgency. This move was intermittently challenged by non-Malay minorities, particularly opposition political movements. These included the Singapore-based People’s Action Party (PAP), which fronted the Malaysian Solidarity Convention, an umbrella organization that championed a “Malaysian Malaysia”; and the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which inherited this mantra following Singapore’s separation from Malaysia.

Ethnic tensions notwithstanding, the creation of a multiethnic governing coalition and sound economic and investment-friendly policies ensured that, apart from the riots of 13 May 1969, no major outbreaks of interethnic violence occurred in Malaysia. In the Southeast Asian context, the relative peace in Malaysia contrasted starkly with the Communist coup and countercoup in Indonesia, ethnic separatist violence in Burma, multiple military coups in Thailand, and the institution of authoritarian rule in the Philippines. A broader comparison of Malaysia with the Muslim world during this period makes for a similar contrast, particularly with respect to the Middle East and North Africa.

Despite an acute sense of ethnic identity that has occasionally been manipulated by political interests, relations among ethnic groups in Malaysia have largely remained stable. In Malaysia there has traditionally been close interaction among ethnic groups. Indeed, the very notion of the Peranakan Chinese—Malaysians of mixed Chinese and Malay parentage, known colloquially as the *Nyonya* or *Baba*—is indicative of the extent to which cultural groups have interacted and integrated in Malaysia. Among older generations of Malaysians, anecdotal evidence abounds of how ethnic and religious festivals were celebrated in an inclusive manner and how bonds between families and individuals often transcended ethnic, racial, and religious boundaries. Underlying this stability was the minorities’ tacit acceptance of Malay-Muslim primacy and a reciprocal preservation of minority rights and freedoms on the part of the Malay-Muslim majority.

Against this broad cultural tapestry of traditional Malaysian society, and the continued centrality of Malay-Muslim identity in national affairs, recent trends of Malaysian Islamization are striking. In this regard, the obvious point of entry is the question, raised recently by a number of political leaders and repeated in public discourse, of whether Malaysia is essentially a secular or Islamic country.

Even though freedom of worship is constitutionally guaranteed in Malaysia, Islam is enshrined in the nation's constitution as the sole official religion of the country. Moreover, constitutional articles, such as the controversial Article 121 1(A), accord Islamic *shari'a* law equal status with civil law in jurisprudential matters in the private lives of Muslims. The constitution grants Islam further dominance by stating that being Muslim is one of the chief criteria for being Malay. The relationship between ethnicity and religion is so intimate that the popular term for having converted to Islam, *masuk melayu*, means having "become a Malay." Islam's role at the core of Malay identity is more salient than ever because the two other pillars of Malay identity, language and royalty, no longer carry the weight they did several decades ago. The Malay language remains important politically, but for precisely this reason the state implemented an education policy establishing the language's primacy in the national curriculum. The result of this policy is that knowledge of the Malay language is no longer the exclusive prerogative of Malays. Similarly, royalty in Malaysia today has a highly problematic relationship with the Malay ruling elite, who see constitutional monarchs as competitors for legitimacy in the eyes of the population. Royals have also further undermined their own legitimacy in the public eye as a result of a number of recent controversial episodes and scandals.

The centrality of Islam in Malaysian culture is further augmented by the prevalence of a state-orchestrated discourse of Malay dominance encapsulated in the concepts of *ketuanan melayu* (Malay primacy) and *bumiputra* rights. These concepts have given rise to Malay-Muslim demands for privileged status and access in the realms of politics and economics, effectively turning members of other ethnic groups and religions into second-class citizens.¹ In fact, while ethnicity has long been seen as the primary identity marker for Malays in Malaysia, recent research indicates that identity criteria may be shifting away from ethnicity and toward religion, with Malays seeing themselves first as Muslim rather than Malay.²

Finally, in the context of Malaysia's federal system of governance, it is telling that significant aspects of Islamic strictures come under the direct purview and jurisdiction of local state governments. This arrangement came about by way of colonial-era juridical norms bequeathed to the postcolonial state. Even as British colonial authorities arrogated political and economic power to themselves, they made an important (if merely symbolic) concession to local

authorities, permitting sultans and rulers to remain the heads of religion in their respective states.³ The continuation of this tradition, provided for in the constitution, has effectively meant that several aspects of religious matters are controlled within the various states by local *mufti*, religious departments, and state administrations, at least at the level of policy formulation. That is not to say, however, that the lines between federal and state jurisdictions are clearly defined. Indeed, as ensuing chapters will illustrate, the questions of who legislates on matters of religion, who implements the ensuing requirements, and who polices them have caused considerable confusion and tension within the larger Malaysian polity. Compounding the confusion are the facts that Islam is the religion of the Federation, Malays are constitutionally defined as Muslims, and, notwithstanding the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom, no Muslim can opt out of the jurisdiction of *shari'a* laws, administered by state religious authorities.

Given the historical, cultural, constitutional, and functional factors that codify Malay dominance in Malaysia, it follows that Malay-Muslim identity must determine the shapes, contours, and trajectories of Malaysian politics. Against this backdrop, political Islam has taken center stage in Malaysian politics, because the objective of “safeguarding” Malay rights invariably means preserving and defending the status of Islam. This was made abundantly clear when former Prime Minister Mahathir openly contested the description of Malaysia as “secular”: “Many Muslims will of course disagree with us and try to make out that we are secular. We are not going to argue with them because we know that debating with them or opposing them will not convince them that we are right. But we believe and we are equally convinced in our beliefs that what we do is in the service and in accordance with Islam.”⁴

With the structure and historical process of Malaysian politics sketched above, it should be no surprise that Islam has become firmly entrenched in the Malaysian political psyche today. In relation to non-Muslims, Islam is defended as religion and race. Within the Malay-Muslim community, Islam provides reference points for questions of authority and legitimacy. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (Islamic Party of Malaysia, or PAS), and elements within the Malaysian state itself have internalized the discourse and vocabulary of the Islamic state, turning Islam into an organizing principle of Malaysian society and politics. In other words, Islam has emerged to supplement—and, in certain respects, to supplant—the paradigms of race and ethnicity that for so long provided the basis for Malaysian politics and dominated political discourse in Malaysia. This book, then, is an attempt to understand how this shift came about and how Islam—in particular its ideological and institutional expressions—informs the configurations of power, the nature of legitimacy, and the sources of authority in Malaysian politics and society today.

Contents

Abbreviations, xvii

Introduction, 3

1. Genesis of an Islamist Agenda, 19

2. The Malaysian State and the Bureaucratization of Islam, 43

3. Reconstructing and Reinforcing Islamism, 73

4. “Popular” Political Islam: Representations and Discourses, 113

5. “Securing” Islam in a Time of Turbulence, 149

Conclusion, 177

Epilogue, 195

Notes, 205

Glossary, 243

Selected Bibliography, 247

Index, 255

Introduction

More than two decades after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the tragic events of September 11, 2001, have thrust political Islam to the forefront of policy and academic interest yet again. The concomitant “global war on terror” targeting radicals, militants, Jihadis, and terrorists who claim legitimacy in the name of Islam for their heinous actions is taking place concurrently with a critical interrogation and examination of political systems throughout the Muslim world, which is thought in many quarters (correctly or otherwise) to spawn extremists. Events in more recent years—such as riots involving disenfranchised Muslim youths in France, the return of conservative, anti-Western elements to power in Iran, the increasing popularity of radical Muslim parties in Bangladesh, persistent separatist violence in Muslim-majority provinces in Thailand, and the triumph of Hamas in free elections in Palestine—have served only to focus greater attention on political developments in the Muslim world.

Against this seemingly tumultuous backdrop, Malaysia appears to stand out as an oasis of calm. With its stable, developing economy and relative social and political stability, the country is widely celebrated as the epitome of progressive, moderate Islam by the international media and major Western governments. No doubt with one eye cast toward foreign investments, Malaysian leaders regularly announce that religious radicalism and “deviancy” from the state-defined “norms” of Islamic practice are not tolerated in a society where ethnocultural harmony reigns within a sociopolitical configuration based on Malay-Muslim dominance. This representation of Malaysia is nested in a wider discourse, promulgated and carefully tended by

former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, of Malaysian ambitions to be a fully industrialized, modern, developed country by 2020.

To be sure, this message has more than a modicum of truth to it. Compared to other multiethnic, multireligious countries, Malaysia has witnessed an admirably low rate of racial and religious conflict. Save for the race riots of 13 May 1969, which in any case had little immediate association with religious issues, Malaysia has managed to avoid major outbreaks of violence. Impressive economic growth rates over the past three decades strengthen Malaysia's image as a Muslim country firmly committed to economic development and modernization. These facts have convinced many that Malaysia will play a major role in international affairs as a model of Muslim governance. Indeed, Malaysia has won accolades for its tough stance on terrorism and has been extolled in many Western capitals as a "beacon of stability" and valuable ally in the war on terror, while at the same time receiving an equally impressive "report card" from the countries of the Organization of Islamic Conferences (OIC) for its model of Islamic leadership and governance.

Beneath this surface, however, lies a striking paradox. Beyond the energetic world of Kuala Lumpur, defined by consumerism and a vibrant night life worthy of any capital in the Western world, Malaysian society on the whole has been experiencing a swing toward Islamic conservatism in ways that would undoubtedly disturb the very same Westerners who have endorsed the country as the epitome of moderate Muslim governance. More important, this swing seems to be gaining momentum, as demonstrated by the increasing popularity of *shari'a* in public discourse, state-sanctioned curtailment of civil rights and liberties in the name of Islam, the incapacity of civil courts to challenge controversial *shari'a* court decisions, increasing incidences of moral policing by Islamic religious authorities (including policing of non-Muslims in some instances), and the alarming regularity of references to the "Islamic state."¹ Tellingly, the increasing visibility of Islam in Malaysian society and politics is being driven not only by the Islamist opposition party *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (Islamic Party of Malaysia, or PAS), as one would anticipate, but also by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), whose members were presumably the architects of Malaysia's brand of progressive, moderate Islam.² In addition, alternative actors such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups are increasingly weighing in on the discursive politicization of Islam in Malaysia today. In certain respects, this active engagement in Islamic discourse and counterdiscourse is eclipsing mainstream political parties in terms of intensity.

Of course, one could reply that this dichotomy, striking though it is, may not amount to much in the larger scheme of things, particularly when compared to other, less palatable models of Islamist governance. Nevertheless, the gradual Islamization of Malaysia and this uneasy paradox it has spawned will transform the complexion of Islam and politics in the country in substantive,

fundamental ways. This book, then, is an attempt to unpack and unravel this dichotomy and examine its implications for politics in Malaysia. Put differently, this book is an attempt to understand the shape of Islamism and its institutional expressions as it has evolved.

Islamism as Political Ideology

Most discussion and analysis of political Islam begins by pointing to the fact that Islam is inherently “political.” Proponents of this logic have noted that Islam is *ad-din*, a way of life that encompasses *din wa dawla*, or faith along with polity—religion and state. The essentially political character of Islam was categorically demonstrated, if not in doctrine, then certainly in the development of the faith. The Prophet Muhammad established the first religiously governed polity in Medina; soon after his death in 632 A.D., internecine conflict emerged within the Muslim community over questions of succession and legitimacy. The rule of the first four caliphs was a highly politicized epoch of Islamic history, defined by competition over power, authority, legitimacy, authenticity, and the driving seat of Islam vacated by the Prophet. Indeed, it is this fusion of religion and politics that has captured the imagination of generations of Muslim intellectuals, from the reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the rise of Islamism in the wake of the failure of Arab nationalism in the 1970s, then to the Iranian Revolution, and right up to the current post-September 11 milieu and beyond. By definition then, to an Islamist, a Muslim cannot be indifferent to politics.

At the same time, Islam is also *tawhid*, oneness and unity in the name of Allah. Yet the theological notion of *tawhid* belies an extraordinary diversity in popular expression and practice of Islam, often determined by cultural and historical contexts. This diversity is driving an energetic intellectual debate over the universal and particularistic characteristics of Muslims—and, some would argue, of Islam as well. The uneasy conjunction of *tawhid* and diversity explains the wide variety of social-political discourses and movements that claim authenticity and legitimacy in the name of Islam.

According to conventional wisdom, Islamism is at its heart a social-political phenomenon that has a history traceable to Muslim anticolonial movements but whose modern permutation came about in reaction to the failure of Arab nationalist states to empower their Muslim populations. In contrast to the romanticized legacy of the Prophet’s seventh-century construction of an Islamic society or the precepts of *ad-din* and *tawhid* that ostensibly transcend time and space, Islamism today is a decidedly modern phenomenon dictated by its contexts. Its origins as a reaction to perceived injustice in the social, political, and economic spheres made it attractive as a populist civic phenomenon, which explains its rapid expansion as a social-political ideology (or, as

Yusuf Qaradawi would have it, an “Islamic solution”) in the 1970s and early 1980s among disenfranchised Muslim populations throughout the world. As authoritarian structures of power gradually loosened, Islamism also became an outgrowth of democratic processes as a counterhegemonic social movement, and it flourished as a voice of dissidence in contemporary politics.

In light of these historical and intellectual roots, for our purposes Islamism can simply be defined as the ideological politicization of Islam.³ In this manner, Islamism is as much a study of Muslims as peoples, communities, and societies with political ideals and aspirations as it is of Islam as a religion. It should also be noted that while Islamism is essentially revivalist in nature, it is nevertheless different from other forms of Islamic revivalism represented by missionary groups and Islamic charity organizations, which understand change as a longer-term process occurring outside the realm of politics. If Islamism is the ideology, then “political Islam” is its institutional expression: the institutional mobilization of this ideology—and the religious symbols and idioms that draw from and build on it—toward political ends. It follows, then, that the hallmark of political Islam is its quintessentially political agenda; it is a political order that is articulated in religious terms, the politicization of Islam through the aligning of structures of governance and society with Islamic strictures. It is on this basis that social scientists often view and refer to political Islam and Islamism interchangeably.

There is a tendency in some quarters to conflate Islamism with fundamentalism and Islamists with fundamentalists. This tendency must be addressed. While there are undoubtedly some shared characteristics between the two groups, and while some Islamists can certainly be categorized as fundamentalists in terms of their outlook, there are also substantive distinctions between the two which need to be recognized. The major distinction between fundamentalism and Islamism is, again, the question of politics. Fundamentalism can be understood as “a particular mode of thought and logic, a distinctive style of discourse or rhetoric . . . that . . . purveys a particular worldview, a binary universe of good and evil with no nuances in between.”⁴ Islamic fundamentalism implies an outlook that idealizes the “golden age” of Islam and offers a return to this golden age through the restoration of primary values and rules of social and personal behavior on the basis of timeless precepts. The fundamentalist agenda, however, need not be political in nature. Research conducted by the International Crisis Group, for instance, has suggested that the strictest Salafi fundamentalists are religious activists, not political ones, who in fact eschew political allegiances.⁵ This is understandable given that to many fundamentalists, involvement in politics causes rifts and divisions within the Muslim community and diverts resources and attention from the more important task of *dakwah* (proselytization).⁶ Islamism, on the other hand, is a decidedly political phenomenon. Islamists believe that any return to the “golden age” can in the final analysis only be possible with the establishment of an Islamic state,

although the precise form it should take and the process through which this is to take place remain matters of great debate among Muslims. Azza Karam sums up this dichotomy when she writes: “Whereas a fundamentalist may or may not become engaged in political thought, debate and activism, an Islamist, by definition, does. Political engagement is the *sine qua non* of being an Islamist.”⁷

While there are obvious common denominators of Islamism among most, if not all, Islamist movements, Islamism need not be considered a unitary phenomenon, at least not in terms of the scope, extent, and process of its institutional expression, for Islamism might originate from different causes and serve different purposes in each particular instance. Thus, it is imperative that analysis of Islamism and Islamist movements also elucidate the contingency and variety within them, taking into account the complexity generated by contemporary and contextual social and political factors. This complexity and variety are clearly demonstrated by the Malaysian case, where Islamism has found several modes and avenues of expression, by the broader literature on Islamism, and more generally by the applicability of prevailing conceptual frameworks to the subject.

Malaysia and the Study of Islamism

The literature on political Islam has long been dominated by empirical studies centered on the Middle East and North Africa, despite the fact that only 14 percent of the global Muslim population lives there. This belief in the “authenticity” of Arab and Middle Eastern Islam as a model for Muslim politics ignores the vibrant historical and intellectual tradition of Islam in Southeast Asia, where a substantial number of Muslims reside, and where, as Michael Laffan has noted, indigenous Muslims “have long been primary actors rather than the passive subjects of a global discourse.”⁸ Indeed, on closer inspection one realizes that the conditions for Islamism are entirely different in Southeast Asia.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the growth of Islamism was largely a response to the state on two counts: the prevalence of autocratic and authoritarian regimes on the one hand, and the failure of secular pan-Arab nationalism on the other. It has also been suggested that Islamism in this region was a reaction to the denial of economic opportunities and social mobility. In Southeast Asia, on the other hand, Malaysia offers a compelling case for the emergence of Islamism under different circumstances and along different trajectories. First, rather than a reaction to the state, the mobilization of Islamic vocabulary, idioms, and symbols for political ends was very much a process orchestrated and structured by the state since the 1980s. Second, Malaysian Islamism was not the response to the bankruptcy of modernization projects that appeared to drive the phenomenon elsewhere. The economic

deprivation and uneven distribution of wealth that are thought to be so instrumental to the Islamist project of discrediting the state were relatively absent from the economic landscape of Malaysia.⁹ On the contrary, the politicization of Islam was taking place in tandem with economic growth and under the watchful eye of the Mahathir administration; it was in fact mobilized to justify industrialization and development policies, which in turn were premised upon the Malay-Muslim community being benefactors of a state-driven affirmative-action program that gave them privileged political and economic access.¹⁰ In other words, if, according to received wisdom, the rise of Islamism in Muslim societies stemmed from the younger generation's alienation from a state that seemed no longer to offer them viable prospects, then Malaysia, with its affirmative-action support of the Muslim majority through the provision of education, exclusive scholarships, job placement, and prospects for career advancement, should not be witnessing trends toward Islamism. Yet this is certainly not the case.

This book is essentially an in-depth investigation into the contours of Islamism in Malaysia, but it does not claim that the Malaysian case has been insulated from developments elsewhere in the Muslim world. While Malaysia may be exceptional in the sense that all narratives of Islamism are ultimately conditioned by their own unique social, political, historical, and economic settings, the country has also been exposed to external forces that have helped shape internal dynamics and frame Muslim politics within the local milieu. A case in point is the impact of the global Islamic resurgence, which, as this book will endeavor to demonstrate, had a pervasive impact on the increasing "Islamization" of politics in Malaysia since the early 1970s. Consider also the instrumental role that early-twentieth-century Islamist political thought played in providing ideological fodder for the Malay anticolonial movement in the pre-war years; Malaysian Islamists' establishment and maintenance of ties with transnational movements such as the *Ikhwanul Muslimin* (Muslim Brotherhood), ties that continue to this day; the existence of a Malaysian Muslim student diaspora across the Middle East and South Asia (demonstrated by the existence of Malay *kampung melayu* communities in Cairo and Malay *halaqah* study circles in Mecca); and the impact of such events as the Iranian Revolution. In short, while Islamism within contemporary Malaysia has by and large been shaped by specific, local conditions, the transnational nature of Islamism in general needs to be appreciated in terms of how it inevitably (and predictably) generates cross-border influences, where global developments affect the local context.

Conceptual Points of Entry: Islamists, Politics, and the State

In the study of Islamism today, one of the most widely accepted conceptual frameworks argues for the mitigating effects that mainstream democratic

political processes have on strident Islamist political agendas. According to the proponents of this school of thought, participation in the political process will inevitably blunt the dogmatic edges of Islamist political parties as they carve out their own spaces in the public domain, get socialized into the political game, and internalize the pragmatism required to survive as relevant political actors. Piscatori argues, for instance, that Islamists will find in a democracy that they “are unable to dominate over others, they must compromise and engage in the give-and-take of electoral politics common everywhere.”¹¹ Others, such as Esposito and Voll, further suggest that “processes of democratization and Islamic resurgence have become complementary forces in many countries.”¹²

These persuasive arguments are undoubtedly a necessary riposte to the essentialist and orientalist literature that portrays Islamism as a monolithic expression of a fundamentalism that is the antithesis of democracy. At first glance, the suggestion that Islamists have to negotiate their agendas in order to survive politically resonates to some extent with developments in Malaysia, where, as the book will demonstrate, doctrinaire positions taken by the Islamist opposition PAS, for instance, often proved to be their undoing, particularly when the party was confronted with the challenge of making itself relevant to non-Muslim constituencies.

This resonance notwithstanding, this argument explains only part of the picture in Malaysia. Indeed, upon closer investigation several conundrums emerge. The argument that participation in the political process will dilute the Islamist agenda is a structural one that assumes a mainstream political sphere that is inherently, if not explicitly, a secular space. The argument also assumes that society itself, which provides the context in which Islamist parties operate, is equally committed to secularism or is at least ill-disposed to Islamism. This may not necessarily be self-evident in contemporary Malaysia, where the vocabulary and praxis of mainstream political contestation has in fact become discernibly Islamic in character. In this manner, the (hypothetical) question of whether PAS might mitigate its Islamist agenda if it gains political power and leverage in Malaysia is complicated by the fact that the incumbent, UMNO, and the state over which it presides have already defined the terms of engagement in Islamist fashion. In other words, PAS is entering and operating on a terrain that is already “Islamist” in many ways. This should hardly be surprising, given the fragmentation of authority and the contestations over who speaks for Islam that define much of Islamism today.

Second, the overemphasis on party politics distracts from equally important and indicative subterranean trends. The focus on state power and partisan politics leaves out, for the most part, Islamic actors and organizations whose most important “political” act is to seek to sidestep the “unclean” business of politics and the influence of those who seek to wield state power to control the organization and practice of Islam. Even though the state and mainstream political parties play important roles in defining the parameters of Islamism,

civil society groups (political and nonpolitical ones) and popular discourses (expressed in blogs, e-mail discussion lists, and other alternative media) have come to assume mounting importance in negotiating these parameters. Given the growing popularity of Islamic activism across the Muslim world and the broad consensus that the rise of Islamism was traceable to the Islamic resurgence of the late 1960s and early 1970s (which was essentially a bottom-up phenomenon), popular perspectives on the direction of Islam as represented by these alternative voices simply cannot be ignored.¹³ In fact, it is worth noting here that in Malaysia, these shades of gray are captured in the recent emergence of a decidedly Islamic civil society that has proven strikingly strident in its use of Islamist vocabulary during its engagement in political discourse. This development is indicative of a gradual but discernible shift of Malaysian Muslim society toward the conservative end of the religious spectrum. Consequently, any study of Islamism will have to account for the role of a burgeoning and increasingly influential parallel Islamist civil society and popular discourse. This parallel society's contribution to the rise and trajectory of Islamism highlights the fact that the Islamist agenda is neither unitary nor unilinear, nor is it confined to political parties; it is in fact highly contested, both within as well as across the boundaries of mainstream politics.

This stress on contingency and agency is important for the way it illuminates how governments deal with the Islamist challenge. Mohammed Ayooob has noted that references to Islamism and the state within prevailing academic discourse produce at least three different ontological registers in which this relationship can be positioned: co-optation, competition, and suppression.¹⁴ Co-optation of the Islamist agenda provides the state with publicity and attention, while suppression drives Islamists underground and possibly to violence. As for competition, Ayooob suggests that it could lead to the surrendering of rhetorical ground to Islamists and ultimately places the regime in a precarious position of "failing to live up to their own words." It is likely that state responses oscillate among these three strategies, and combinations of some or all of the three may well have been pursued by any given state toward its Islamist opposition over time. One will also often find that some strategies invariably flow into others; for example, competition can lead to suppression if the former strategy fails to blunt the influence of the Islamists. Underlying this typology of responses to Islamism is a single assumption: whether by virtue of ideology or politics, Islamists and the state are polar opposites. Before discussing this assumption, it is perhaps appropriate to first consider in greater detail the three strategies elucidated and how they illuminate the nature of relations between Islamism and the state in several Muslim contexts.

A cursory survey of Muslim politics might suggest that co-optation is the most popular strategy. Ruling governments across the Muslim world have at some time or other "co-opted" Islamists for the very reasons cited above, namely, "publicity and attention," not to mention more fundamental interests such as

augmenting incumbent legitimacy. Attempts at such strategies were evident, for instance, in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's model of "Islamic Socialism" in Pakistan, where his 1970 election campaign platform—"Islam is our faith. Democracy is our polity. Socialism is our economy."—allowed him to dispense of Islamist opposition in the form of the Muslim League and *Jamaat-e-Islami*. They were evident also when Hosni Mubarak co-opted the *Ikhwanul Muslimin* in Egypt during the early years of his tenure, where "by legitimizing the Brotherhood as the primary representatives of centrist Islam, Mubarak could place militants outside the mainstream. Once they were isolated, he could take forceful measures against them with little protest from Egyptians sympathetic to the centrist Islamist."¹⁵

Similarly, there is abundant evidence, too much to detail here, of suppression of Islamist movements across the Muslim world. One thinks immediately of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's policy of sidelining and cracking down on Islamist opposition in Turkey, a legacy that arguably carried on to 1997 when the Turkish military launched a coup against the Welfare Party of Necmettin Erbakan; Sukarno's clampdown on the modernist Islamists from the Masyumi Party in Indonesia in the 1950s, and Suharto's marginalization of Islamist forces during the early New Order period; the heavy-handed approach of the Nasser administration toward its Islamist opposition in Egypt; and, more recently, the crackdown on the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria in the early 1990s.

Strategies of competition rest on assumptions similar to those undergirding co-optation and suppression, namely, that the state is confronted by an Islamist "threat" from beyond its institutional borders. The state responds to the threat by competing with it, rather than by co-opting or suppressing it, even if the state is sometimes ill-equipped to do so. This conceivably occurred in Algeria in the 1980s, Turkey in the early 1990s, Indonesia in the post-Suharto era, and, more recently, Lebanon and Palestine. In all cases, incumbents competed head-on with Islamist parties in political elections on the basis of discernibly divergent political agendas. What should be noted, however, is that the normally fragile state of relations between Islamists and ruling elites in these instances, as well as the generally constricted nature of political space in many of these Muslim countries, caused these strategies of competition to lead to suppression, especially when the incumbent was unable to dispense of the Islamist challenge at the ballot box. Indeed, with the exceptions of present-day Indonesia and Palestine, this appears to be the case in all of the above examples, to say nothing of others.

While the depictions of relationships between governments and their Islamist oppositions provided by this typology are for the most part convincing and relevant, there are several issues that warrant clarification if we are to understand the contours of Islamism in Malaysia. First, the notions of co-optation and competition, as represented by the prevailing literature, tend to reify the state as a secular entity by definition. According to this logic, Islamists and

the state are necessarily polar opposites: Islamism is political opposition or an extra-state actor that stands mostly at the margins of mainstream politics, while the state consolidates power and circumscribes Islamists through a combination of coercion and conciliation. The reification of the state as secular stems from the Enlightenment-tradition assumption that the state is an inherently secular institution; thus, the state will not and indeed cannot evince Islamist traits and tendencies unless it “imports” Islamism. In this conception, Islamism can only originate from outside the state, and the two are entwined in an action-reaction relationship.

Yet interactions between states and Islamists may not be so straightforward. Consider, for instance, the matter of what happens to the complexion of the state after Islamists have been co-opted. While some have made the persuasive argument, discussed earlier, that such a strategy might “tame” Islamists and socialize them to the “mainstream,” others would contend that it is equally conceivable that this might instead be tantamount to letting the fox into the henhouse. More important, a distinction of this nature does not allow for the possibility that the process of Islamization of societal structures and institutions may well be engineered by the state itself without reference to Islamist forces outside it. In other words, the state may not necessarily be forced by Islamists to react or compete. In Malaysia, as this book will argue, instead of religion being subservient to the state, an Islamization process emerged from within the establishment, accounting for the gradual Islamization of the bureaucracy. Rather than having its hand forced by Islamists situated outside of its institutional and ideological fold, in Malaysia the state itself has been part of—and, to a large extent, has orchestrated—aspects of the Islamist project. Put simply, the state didn’t so much co-opt Islamists as it became Islamist. Thus, the politicization of Islam cannot be described as merely the response of an otherwise secular and disinterested state to a stout challenge from oppositional Islamists. Such a rationale is insufficient to explain the shape, tenor, and trajectory of Islamism in Malaysia, where the state has clearly become its vehicle, if not its architect.

In the same vein, while some are inclined to caution (in almost teleological fashion, it appears) that competition with Islamists might ultimately doom the state to failure with dire consequences, the question remains: What if these strategies succeed, particularly if one accepts that the state can compete with the opposition on distinctly Islamist terms, thereby “out-Islamizing” the Islamists?¹⁶ What are the consequences (or costs) of success, particularly for a pluralist society where protection of minority rights are supposedly the responsibility of the state? The Malaysian case is striking not only because state-orchestrated policies and politics appear to have succeeded in deepening Islamism in the country, but also because the Islamist opposition has consequently been forced to raise the stakes in the contest. Consider Jan Stark’s prescient observation: “Politically, PAS soon found itself in a similar situation as

the government when it came to the implementation of Islam: bound by constitutional and multiracial predicaments, PAS had to abide by the same standards as Mahathir whom it had often criticized for introducing Islamic symbols into politics without thoroughly changing the system.”¹⁷ This argument is a challenge to the received wisdom that suggests UMNO’s Islamization strategy was essentially a reaction to PAS. According to Stark, the relationship is in fact reversed—PAS has been compelled to react to UMNO, not least because of UMNO’s “successful” politicization of Islam. This observation agrees with Salbiah Ahmad’s contention that “the PAS electoral victory in the state of Kelantan in 1990 marked *the beginning of a challenge* to Mahathir’s Islamization agenda,” and Stark’s further suggestion that after 1990 “PAS had to shape an even more decisively Islamic profile to counter Mahathir’s Islamic policies.”¹⁸

Indeed, one tends to forget that while states certainly do instrumentalize Islam and mobilize its attendant metaphors and symbols to bolster their legitimacy, so too do Islamist parties, whose objectives are ultimately to seize power. In any case, it is also debatable whether the Islamist opposition in Malaysia ever posed such an existential threat to the popularity and legitimacy of the ruling government that it required a vigorous rejoinder on the part of the state.¹⁹ In this regard, none should overlook the Mahathir administration’s occasional penchant for “securitizing” all sources of threats to regime legitimacy, be they Islamist or secularist in nature, and consequently mobilizing physical and legal instruments of coercion to address them. This consideration is crucial, for it calls into question the relevance of popular assumptions, highlighted above, that are premised on the problematic notion that while opposition forces may be Islamist, the state is always assumed to be secular, and that if states do embark on Islamization programs, it is purely for the calculated and reactionary purpose of fending off pressure from Islamist political opposition.

It can be argued that while there are traces of all three of the abovementioned strategies in the Malaysian context, the primary dynamic has been one of competition, albeit a competition that is not expressed in the dichotomous manner assumed in the literature. Rather, the defining feature of the connection between Islamism and state power in Malaysia is the government’s attempt to “outbid” the Islamist opposition by taking a proactive approach to Islamization and becoming more Islamist than the opposition, even as the government uses its arsenal of tools to constrict avenues of political expression for Islamist elements in the opposition and civil society.²⁰ While the terms of the “competition” between the state (incumbent government) and the Islamist opposition in Malaysia are dyadic, they are not antithetical but rather mutually reinforcing. This is evident in how the state fought to define, protect, and promote Islam and claim Islamic legitimacy through “piety-trumping,” where the points of reference are decidedly Islamist. The apex of this process was surely Prime Minister Mahathir’s declaration that Malaysia was an “Islamic state” (a declaration that was repeated by Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak) and the

attempt of his successor, Abdullah Badawi, to refine this Malaysian “Islamic state” with the concept of *Islam Hadhari* (Civilizational Islam). Such declarations on the part of UMNO leaders are significant when considered alongside developments in other Muslim countries. For instance, in Egypt the concept of the Islamic state is associated with the *Ikhwanul Muslimin* and not the Mubarak regime. In Algeria, it is the Islamic Salvation Front and not the government that mobilizes around the Islamic state. While Morocco is constitutionally an Islamic state, the king has outlawed parties with a “religious, ethnic or regional base.”²¹

It is precisely this mobilization of decidedly Islamist referents on the part of the UMNO-dominated government that has facilitated the entry of conservative and exclusivist trends into the state’s discourse and practice of Islamism. This resonates partially with Seyyed Vali Nasr’s contention that states that have chosen the path of Islamization “have done so not merely in reaction to pressure from Islamist movements but to serve their own interests. State leaders have construed Islamism as a threat, but at times also as an opportunity, and in so doing have found added incentive to pursue Islamic politics.”²² While a valuable assertion, Nasr’s argument still assumes an implicit dichotomy between Islamism (the religious) and state (the secular), thereby reflecting the church-state (or mosque-state, as it were) separation bias. Returning to an earlier point, this relationship may not be as polarized, and may be more dynamic, than is often understood. Indeed, Nasr himself concedes that “Islamism defies the facile religion versus secularism conception that has been prevalent in the social sciences. As a religious idea that has internalized many aspects of modernity and seeks to operate in the modern world, Islamism shows that religion is adaptable to ideological change and will do so in a continuous dialectic with society.”²³ Here he is right on the mark.

Central Arguments

Using the above discussion as its conceptual point of entry, this book argues that tectonic movements and subterranean shifts that underscore the gradual politicization of Islam and the rise of Islamism in political discourse have long been at work in Malaysia, despite popular media representations of Malaysia as being the epitome of moderate, progressive Islamic governance—a characterization that is regularly proclaimed by its leaders as well. While the opposition PAS party is widely regarded as the main Islamist player in the drama, the ruling UMNO regime has proven equally strident in its Islamist predilections, such that sometimes there is little to differentiate the regime from the Islamist opposition. At the same time, even as the majority of its religious leadership persists in conservative renditions of Islamic politics, certain quarters within the leadership of the fundamentalist and “parochial” PAS

have also demonstrated democratic and perceptibly conciliatory tendencies in their attempts to negotiate the complexities of mainstream politics in pluralist Malaysia against the backdrop of UMNO hegemony and Malay-Muslim primacy.²⁴ On balance, however, the net effect of UMNO-PAS contestation has been the accelerated politicization of Islam. Islamic credentials have assumed greater importance for politicians, and Muslim attitudes and perspectives have in general become discernibly more conservative.

The final point in the preceding paragraph leads to another major contention asserted here. Notwithstanding their considerable political power, mainstream political players have not been the sole actors in expanding the Islamist agenda. Most studies of Muslim politics in Malaysia are confined to the UMNO-PAS “Islamization race” and locate this relationship at the center of their analysis.²⁵ While such an approach has obvious merits, it creates the impression, first, that UMNO and PAS lie at opposing ends of the spectrum of Islamism, with ideologies as fundamentally divergent and antagonistic as their political relationship; and second, that it is only this political contest that dictates the shape and tenor of political Islam in Malaysia. The picture is in fact far more complex.

To be sure, there is a tide of conservatism and distinctly exclusivist Islamism emanating from both UMNO and PAS, as noted earlier, even as segments in both parties also strive to demonstrate moderation. But the UMNO-PAS Islamization race is as much shaped by the dynamics of Islamism as it is a driver of it. Hence, in order to fully appreciate the kaleidoscope of Islamist politics, one must consider not merely the UMNO-PAS contest but also other actors, institutions, and movements through which broader trends of Islamism have come to be expressed, as well as historical trajectories and variations in Islamism in postcolonial Malaysia; the contributions of civil society, NGOs, and non-Muslim communities to Islamic discourses and narratives; and the relationship of Islamism with the practice of democracy and pluralism in the context of Muslim-dominated politics in Malaysia. The point to stress here is that while UMNO and PAS have been instrumental in facilitating the rise of Islamism in Malaysia today, they are by no means the only agents in this scenario. Increasingly, civil society groups and NGOs, not to mention a burgeoning public discourse, are playing an important role either engaging, expanding, or at times even constricting the parameters of the Islamist debate in Malaysia.

These developments raise a number of issues pertaining to the prospects for Islamism, pluralism, and secularism in Malaysia. First, “piety-trumping” may prove very difficult to manage, let alone reverse, as the line between instrumentalism and ideology becomes increasingly blurred and the process begins to assume a life of its own, particularly given the rise of “alternative” Islamisms embedded in the discursive sphere of civil society, outside the parameters of mainstream politics. Once escalated, this process will be difficult to de-escalate without having the legitimacy of the state and ruling party, or of opposition

parties for that matter, called into question. Consider for instance, the declarations made by UMNO leaders that Malaysia already is an Islamic state. While skeptics may dismiss these declarations as mere showmanship (and there is no doubt that such statements are articulated partly for popular consumption), it is difficult to fathom how such discourse, once initiated, can be reversed or even moderated. Put differently, with the genie out of the bottle, it is difficult to conceive of future UMNO leaders rescinding such declarations or revoking Islamic laws that have been formulated by various state governments. Hence, while political elites are culpable for initiating the process, they might gradually lose their ability to control and dictate its parameters or trajectory. Telltale signs of this loss of control are already apparent, as later chapters will discuss, in the nature, tenor, and politics of popular discourses on topics such as *murtad* (apostasy), where dangerously vituperative positions are increasingly articulated not by government leaders or political opposition but by civil society groups and members of the general population with no immediate stake in the political process.

Second, because the process cannot but be conceived as an endgame, it constricts the maneuvering room for other players even as they emerge to engage with the narrative of the main Islamist protagonists. Though this book does not take the position that Islamism is inherently antithetical to democracy, developments in Malaysia have caused democratic processes to give rise to patently undemocratic outcomes. To be sure, this state of affairs may have materialized in part because the incumbent regime's Islamization program has reduced the social and political space available for alternative voices. What is more interesting, however, is the fact that the emergence of undemocratic tendencies may also stem from a curious paradox embedded in political Islam in Malaysia today: an increasingly active nonpartisan civil society debate has emerged to further narrow and polarize debate, even though by their very presence such participants represent a welcome expansion of voices and actors of consequence. There are now more Islamic civil society groups and NGOs actively engaging in the debate today, but because they mostly share the positions of the primary protagonists (UMNO and PAS), in many instances their voices have reinforced dominant Islamist narratives, if not outright setting the agenda for these narratives, rather than providing alternatives to them. At its current pace, this phenomenon might well entrench further the highly political and exclusivist Islamism that lies at the heart of the UMNO-PAS "Islamization race."

At the heart of the issue in this respect then, is the question of whether the role of Islam in configuring Malaysian society and politics proves constructive, where Islam provides a platform for reform and democratization in a way that reassures non-Muslims and neutralizes the corrosive effects of highly politicized racial discourses, or whether it polarizes by taking on increasingly insular and exclusivist forms that undermine fundamentally the erstwhile "consociational democracy" in Malaysia and in so doing further alienate and marginalize already apprehensive non-Muslim Malaysians.

Structure of the Book

To make its case, this book is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 looks at the genesis of the Islamist agenda in Malaysia from the perspective of both PAS and UMNO. Using the history of the Islamist opposition PAS and UMNO's concomitant early responses to its rise as a lens through which to perceive the early tenor of Islamism in the Malaysian context, the chapter will demonstrate how the party underwent several metamorphoses as it evolved to locate Islamism at the heart of its social-political agenda.

The second chapter investigates at closer analytical quarters the phenomenon of Islamization in Malaysia and the creation of institutions of Islamic governance by the UMNO-led Malaysian government, in a process that can aptly be described as the "bureaucratization" of Islam. This process is important, for it effectively put in place the levers of Islamic governance in Malaysia, eventually facilitating the "Islamic state" proclamations by some of UMNO's senior leaders. The chapter also identifies and discusses in greater detail two prevailing contradictions that arose out of this move to bureaucratize Islam, the first between federal and state administrations, and the second between civil and religious law.

Chapter 3 explores attempts to "reframe" Islamism in the 1990s by both PAS and UMNO. The chapter investigates the contours of the ongoing debate between PAS and UMNO, and within PAS itself, over the nature and expression of Islam as an organizing principle for society and politics in pluralist Malaysia. The chapter also examines how Malaysia's non-Muslim community has responded to this renovation and negotiation exercise that these main Islamist parties have been engaged in.

The fourth chapter takes the discussion beyond the boundaries of mainstream party politics and systematically sets out the civil society agenda that has both engaged and countered the discourse of Islamism in Malaysia as propounded by the main Islamic political parties. In particular, the chapter provides a survey of major civil society groups in Malaysia that have engaged the Islamization debate in recent times from various angles, particularly in relation to legal issues such as Islamic family law, *hudud*, and apostasy. To capture the full range of positions, it discusses groups that span the spectrum from conservative to liberal, anti-establishment to pro-establishment, and also includes non-Muslim and fringe Muslim groups. The chapter also looks at popular discourses and representations of Islamism in Malaysia expressed in English, Malay, and Mandarin-language blogs, alternative media, and Internet chatrooms, which represent a separate source of "popular opinion" and space for debate (but one that has thus far eluded analytical attention).

Chapter 5 explores expressions of Muslim militancy and extremism as they have emerged in Malaysia. While small in numbers and increasingly enervated

as an ideology, militant extremism is nevertheless an important expression of Islamism that has occasionally surfaced in Malaysia to influence thinking on trends and patterns. The chapter scrutinizes the Malaysian government's confrontation with Islamic militancy in its domestic political sphere by investigating its operational and ideological countermeasures against the backdrop of an escalating Islamist political discourse. Important as it is to map this militant fringe in the spectrum of Islamism in Malaysia, one should note that political activity in the country will hinge not on these extremists and their activities but on the tension between the various manifestations and articulations of the Islamist agenda described in the preceding chapters. Chapter 5 also discusses the Islamic factor in Malaysian foreign policy as another means by which the UMNO-led government bolsters its Islamic credentials, and it discusses how PAS has developed its own foreign policy agenda for similar purposes.

The book concludes with reflections on the idea of pietization and politics after the transition from the Mahathir administration to the Abdullah administration in the government, as well as from the reformist leadership of Fadzil Noor in PAS to the fundamentalist leadership of Abdul Hadi Awang. The intensification of contested authenticities between UMNO and PAS that these changes heralded is also discussed. In addition to a careful critical deconstruction of the Islamic discourse and praxis of the main political protagonists, the conclusion will draw further attention to the cultural context, meanings, and practices of contemporary Islam in Malaysia, particularly with regard to how these factors interact with mainstream elite politics as encapsulated in the UMNO-PAS "Islamization race." By listening to the voices of those outside the elites who have responded to the effects of UMNO's and PAS's mutually reinforcing Islamist politics, the conclusion further assesses the contributions of society (in contradistinction to the state and the political apparatus, as represented by these dominant political parties) either as an alternative vehicle for or as a buffer against Islamization.

I

Genesis of an Islamist Agenda

The emergence of Muslim political consciousness and the onset of Islamic political activism in Malaysia had several points of origin. Religious teachers, scholars, and students—particularly those who had ventured to the Middle East and North Africa in the early twentieth century, where they imbibed the reformist ideas centered on the writings and teachings of the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abduh and his Syrian student Rashid Rida—were instrumental in bringing back to the Malay Peninsula these transformative ideas that provided the intellectual foundation for Islamic social and political movements.¹ They viewed Islamic reform as a social-political force for regenerating what was perceived to be a Malay-Muslim identity eroded by Western colonialism. George Kahin noted the impact of Islam on Malay-Muslim political activism when he observed that in the politics of the Indo-Malay world, “the Mohammedan religion was not just a common bond; it was indeed, a sort of in-group symbol as against an alien intruder and oppressor of a different religion.”²

Through journals such as *Seruan Azhar*, *Al-Imam*, and *Al-Manar*, students from the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago regularly reproduced and commented on the works of Arab scholars glorifying the Islamic reformation and disseminated them not only to the Malay student diaspora in Cairo but also in local circles in Indonesia and Malaya.³ However, as was often the case elsewhere in the Muslim world during the process of decolonization, Islamist elements in British Malaya were also closely associated with socialist and nationalist movements, with which they shared the primary objective of independence.

Emergence of Organized Political Movements

Notwithstanding its precedents in the Islamic reform movement, the organized Islamist movement in colonial Malaya appears to have emerged out of the cauldron of Malay socialism and nationalism spearheaded by the Malay Nationalist Party (MNP). Formed in 1945, the MNP was the successor of the prewar *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (Young Malays Union) and was the first postwar political movement to champion the cause of independence. Among its leaders were prominent socialists such as Ishak Haji Mohammad, Moktarrudin Laso, and Musa Ahmad, who would later assume the post of chairman of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). The MNP also had a religious wing, though its existence is often overlooked by scholars who focus on its socialist leanings.⁴ A prominent member of this religious faction was Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy, a reformist Aligarh-trained philosopher and homeopath who would later assume the presidency of *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS, or the Islamic Party of Malaysia). Among Burhanuddin's earliest and more enduring contributions to the emergence of Islamism in Malaysia was the Malay nationalist and religious leaders' conference (*Persidangan Ekonomi-Agama Se-Malaysia*) held in March 1947 at Gunung Semanggol in Perak, which he organized for the purpose of detailing the role of Islam in Malayan politics. Attendees included Islamist dissidents disillusioned with the reluctance of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) to give Islam sufficient prominence in its political ideology after the party's formation in 1946.⁵

Following the Gunung Semanggol meeting, the *Lembaga Islam Se Malaya* (All-Malaya Islamic Council), later renamed *Majlis Agama Tertinggi Malaya* (MATA, or the Malayan Supreme Religious Council), was formed to agitate for the separation of religious matters from the control of state authorities and Malay rulers, the latter of whom were accused of not properly discharging their duties as defenders of the Islamic faith.⁶ In particular, the Muslim leaders of MATA could not countenance Britain's proposals to establish an Islamic Religious Council headed by a British governor who was a Christian. MATA was described as "the first institutionalization of the Islamic reformist stream in Malay nationalism."⁷ It is important to note, however, that despite its overtly political inclinations (which were partly inspired by the activism of their Indonesian *ulama* counterparts), MATA was not an official political party at its inception, but was rather a welfare organization.⁸

In response to Britain's Malayan Union plan of 1946, which attempted to plot the future of the Malayan state to which Britain would eventually bequeath administrative control, MATA called for a Malay Congress in March 1948 to discuss issues such as the formation of an Islamic political party and the establishment of an economic bureau and an Islamic university. It was at this Congress that *Hizbul Muslimin*, a reformist party and the first overtly

Islamist political organization in Malaya, was formed. At the heart of *Hizbul Muslimin's* political agenda was independence for Malaya through the creation of an Islamic state and society anchored by Malay dominance. Because of the close association between its members and those of the nationalist party MNP, *Hizbul Muslimin* has been considered the "Islamic wing" of Malay nationalism.⁹ Not surprisingly, the party was inspired not only by the perceived inability of the UMNO elite to secure a predominant role for Islam in the making of the nation and state, but also by the aspirations and struggles of international Islamist movements, most notably the Egypt-based *Ikhwanul Muslimin* (Muslim Brotherhood).¹⁰ By August 1948, *Hizbul Muslimin* had established party branches in all the states on the Malay Peninsula. Its meteoric rise was facilitated both by an extensive network built around alumni of El-Ehya Asshariff School, a hotbed for radical Malay nationalists, and by leftist Malay organizations such as the MNP and *Pembela Tanah Ayer* (PETA, or Defenders of the Fatherland).

It must be stressed that *Hizbul Muslimin's* objectives, though decidedly Islamist in orientation, were not articulated in dogmatic fashion. Funston has noted that the *Hizbul Muslimin* leadership was prepared to negotiate its Islamist objectives in the wake of objections and concerns raised by both Muslim and non-Muslim participants at the Congress. Funston also notes that, according to *Hizbul Muslimin* leaders, "while *Hizbul Muslimin* pursued the aims of both Malay nationalism and Islam, the former had precedence over the latter."¹¹ This tension between Islamist and ethnonationalist interests would prove to be an enduring trait of Muslim politics in postcolonial Malaysia, as would Malaysian Islamists' capacity for negotiation and compromise.

Hizbul Muslimin's functional ties with Malay radicals proved to be a double-edged sword. While the party leveraged its networks and organizational capabilities, it soon found itself under the scrutiny of British colonial authorities, who had launched their counterinsurgency campaign, commonly known as the Emergency, against the MCP in June 1948. Despite spirited protests and vehement denials of links with Communist elements, *Hizbul Muslimin* was caught in the crossfire between the colonial authorities and the leftist movements, which included their radical Malay nationalist counterparts. Guilty by association, *Hizbul Muslimin's* relations with the left proved detrimental to their cause; the president and most of the executive committee were arrested under Emergency regulations as the colonial administration moved swiftly to curb the party's activities.¹²

While Islamist reformists and Malay radicals were extending and institutionalizing their collaboration against colonial authority, the mainstream nationalists of UMNO were also attempting to establish their own religious identity. UMNO came to power with the protection of the Malay race as its *raison d'être*. Given the demographic constraints at the time of independence, when a substantial proportion of the population of British Malaya was non-Muslim,

UMNO could not afford to take a dogmatic position on the matter of the role of religion in the postcolonial state for fear of alienating this substantial constituency—and, more important, antagonizing the British colonial administration, which wanted assurance that UMNO could oversee a moderate governing structure that would maintain multiracial stability. UMNO's caution was evidenced in its constitutional deliberations with the Reid Commission, tasked with drafting the constitution of an independent Malaya. The UMNO-led Alliance submitted a memorandum indicating that while the religion of Malaya would be Islam, this fact would not prejudice the secular nature of the state.¹³

In an obvious concession to more radical Islamist elements in UMNO, the final constitutional document deliberately avoided characterizing Malaya as secular. Under the administration of Tunku Abdul Rahman, numerous assertions were made to the effect that it was unrealistic to consider postcolonial Malaya an Islamic state. Be that as it may, early concern about the presence and activism of *Hizbul Muslimin* threatened to further fragment an already fragile Malay community whose loyalties were divided along ideological and class lines. UMNO awoke to the potentially critical role that Islam would play in the shaping of Malay politics and in 1946 established an *ulama* wing under the leadership of Shaikh Abdullah Pahim. An UMNO Religious Affairs Department was also established, and its Advisory Committee was chaired by Haji Ahmad Fuad Hassan, who would later become the first president of PAS.

Some have suggested that the emergence of this religious wing in UMNO had less to do with the immediate need to assert an Islamic imprint than with differences between UMNO's two senior leaders, Dato Onn bin Jaafar and Tunku Abdul Rahman, over the question of Malay primacy and concessions to the non-Malay population.¹⁴ While the UMNO leadership were skeptical about the sultans' fitness as religious leaders, their criticisms of these traditional structures of authority were decidedly measured compared to the radicalism associated with Islamists from *Hizbul Muslimin*, MATA, and MNP. Moreover, given the party's great reluctance to support the Singapore Malay Union's call to situate the establishment of an Islamic state at the heart of UMNO's decolonization program, it was apparent that UMNO's commitment to an Islamic political agenda was at first fairly weak. At that stage the party was far more concerned with the leftist challenge. This, however, did not stop the UMNO leadership from making symbolic gestures of Islamic leadership in the immediate postindependence years, which included building some two thousand mosques and prayer houses within the first decade of independence, conducting annual Qur'an-reading competitions, and launching various state-sponsored initiatives for the conduct of the *haj* pilgrimage.¹⁵

Gaining support from Islamic religious leaders was a major strategy for UMNO to shore up its religious flanks. To that end, the Education Act of 1956 provided for an Islamic religious teacher for all public schools that had twelve or more Muslim students. While a number of these teachers were locally

trained at university Islamic studies departments, the vast majority were state-sponsored religious students who had attended tertiary Islamic education institutions in North Africa and the Middle East. Locally, the government actively supported the creation of an Islamic religious school system and provided financial assistance for private religious institutions.

In February 1950, UMNO sponsored its own Islamic conference in Johore, which was attended by *ulama* from the party and various other state religious councils. While several issues concerning education and the general welfare of the Muslim community were discussed, by far the most significant outcome of that meeting was the decision to form *Persatuan Ulama Se-Malaya* (PUM or the Ulama Association of Malaya), a body tasked with spreading the message of Islam under the UMNO umbrella. In August of the following year, a second Ulama Conference was held in Kuala Lumpur, at which it was decided to make PUM an organization independent of UMNO. This conference was further noteworthy for the attendance of several former *Hizbul Muslimin* leaders such as Ustaz Osman Hamzah, Baharuddin Latiff, and Khaidir Khatib, who were evidently invited to bolster UMNO's Islamist credentials.¹⁶ Several months later, in November, a third Ulama Conference was held in Butterworth, Penang, in which PUM's name was changed to *Persatuan Islam Se-tanah Malaya* (Pan Malayan Islamic Association, or PMIA). Ironically, it would be "this small, marginalized body, made up of a number of *ulama*, *imam* and conservative nationalists from both within and without UMNO" that would form the "nucleus of the Malayan Islamic party which later developed and came to be known as PAS."¹⁷

Widening the Schism: Malay Rights and the Islamic State

From the beginning, the PMIA was an ardent supporter of Malay rights and privileges, owing to its origins within UMNO. Still, PMIA members were not afraid to actively criticize the Malay nationalists, which they vehemently did in opposition to what they saw as UMNO's excessive concessions to non-Malay communities. PMIA rejected the granting of Malayan citizenship and voting rights to non-Malays on the basis of *jus soli* (birthright), a move that UMNO was then considering in the course of negotiations with its non-Malay Alliance counterparts. PMIA further criticized a number of clauses in the constitution for being threatening to Malay-Muslim primacy. These included the absence of an explicit ethnic requirement for major government posts, including that of the prime minister, and the constitution's alleged endorsement of economic policies that disadvantaged the Malay-Muslim community. PMIA also took UMNO to task for adopting economic policies that privileged elite and non-Malay interests, and for relying on the latter for financial support during elections. UMNO's rural projects came under heavy attack for introducing

developmental schemes at a pace that rural Malay communities could not keep up.¹⁸ UMNO responded to PMIA's criticisms with counterproposals such as one that urged the government not to approve non-Malay business-operating licenses in Malay *kampung* (villages).¹⁹

While concerned with the Malay cause, PMIA also saw itself as a champion of Islamism in Malaya. It criticized UMNO for not instituting Islamic administration even as it paid lip service to Islam as the religion of the state, and for not designating the Qur'an and *sunnah* (the religious actions of the Prophet) as the chief source of public law in the land. To the PMIA, the Islamic laws that UMNO had implemented to demonstrate its religious credentials, such as anti-*khalwat* legislation, were welcome but insufficient gestures toward the implementation of Islamic governance.²⁰ The party further denounced UMNO's support and provision of aid to churches and temples, actions which to the PMIA's mind raised questions about UMNO's commitment to Islam.

PMIA's attempt to marry Islam with Malay primacy was given expression in its 1951 constitution, which listed among its objectives the realization of a union of Islamic brotherhood; the unification of constitutional and religious administrations in Malaya; the defense of Islam's honor and of the rights and interests of the *ummah*; and cooperation with other political organizations whose principles and objectives were not opposed to Islam.²¹ The centrality of religion was further emphasized in PMIA's declaration of intent to establish a society and government that abided by and upheld Islamic values as it sought to champion the independence of the country. This was to be achieved by way of the propagation of Islam through *dakwah* (proselytization); the introduction of religious values in political, economic, social, and educational realms; and the propagation of Arabic, the language of the Qur'an. To oversee these initiatives, a *Dewan Ulama* (Ulama Council) was formed to play an advisory role in the overall hierarchy of the organization.²² As for the preservation of Malay primacy, this was to be guaranteed through the promotion of Malay as the sole national official language, the establishment of Malay culture as the core of a national culture without undermining Islamic teachings, and the protection of the rights and interests of the Malays in the broader context of interethnic harmony.²³ Despite its strident commitment to Islam and Malay nationalism, the PMIA leadership also demonstrated a capacity for political pragmatism where necessary. For instance, the PMIA resolved to cooperate with other organizations in the spirit of democracy and human rights as long as this cooperation did not oppose the teachings of Islam.²⁴ This resolution would prove portentous of the party's participation in numerous political coalitions in the years to come.

The backbone of PMIA's intellectual leadership consisted of rural populists and religious scholars, with scores of them coming from the ranks of *Hizbul Muslimin* and MNP. Many disillusioned religious leaders from UMNO also flocked to the organization and assumed positions of leadership. These

included Haji Ahmad Fuad Hassan, Ahmad Badawi (father of the current prime minister), and others from UMNO's Bureau of Religious Affairs. The rank and file of the party consisted mostly of religious teachers and students from the *pondok* (traditional Malay religious boarding school) system of religious education.²⁵

The PMIA's early influence was primarily confined to the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. It was not until 1953 that the party began expanding into Kelantan and Terengganu on the east coast, the current strongholds of its successor, PAS.²⁶ This is not surprising, given the genesis of Malay-Muslim political activism at Gunung Semanggol, Perak (a state on the west coast). A dual-membership policy that permitted PMIA members to maintain their membership in UMNO further prevented the consolidation of the movement and stymied its institutional and ideological development as allegiances wavered. Even so, it was not long before the party began to distance itself from UMNO. At the fourth Ulama Conference in Kepala Batas, Penang, the PMIA leadership issued a call for the implementation of Islamic law in Malaya, signaling the first instance of Islamists articulating their agenda with explicit reference to the formation of an Islamic state in the peninsula.²⁷ Indeed, PMIA's defense of Malay rights and agitation for an Islamic state would dominate its platform for the 1955 federal elections, the first popular election that it would contest. It was on the eve of nomination day for this election (31 May 1955) that PMIA reregistered as the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP) or *Parti Islam Se-Tanah Melayu* (PAS). The name change came about because the registrar of societies ruled that in order to contest elections PMIA had to incorporate the word "party" into its name.²⁸ With this change in nomenclature, PAS officially came into being.

While PAS had its roots in a range of organizations and parties, including UMNO, by the early 1950s it was clear that PAS was trying to package itself as the antithesis of its former nationalist and socialist associates with regard to matters of ethnicity and religion. When UMNO president Tunku Abdul Rahman questioned the formation of PAS as an Islamic alternative to UMNO, Haji Ahmad Fuad Hassan, the first PAS president, retorted by claiming that "the party's aim was to fulfil what UMNO could not accomplish."²⁹ Ahmad Fuad's comment portended a complex, titanic struggle between his party and UMNO for the hearts, minds, and votes of Malaysia's Malay-Muslim population for many decades to come.

First Forays into Politics

As the PMIA had done before it, PAS projected itself as the voice that represented both Islam and Malay interests, as exemplified by its repeated references to the need for the integration of more Islamic values into governance (including

the occasional refrain of the need for an Islamic state) as well as its activism on ethnocultural issues, such as its strident opposition to the National Language Bill proposed by UMNO and its demands that Malay replace English as the sole official language. PAS tried to discredit UMNO as a secular nationalist party that had in fact “sold out” Malay interests to the non-Malay community. The PAS political machinery was anchored by religious teachers who played an important role not only through their stature in the community but also through their network of *pondok* and *masjid* (mosques). The party’s infrastructure was generally weaker than UMNO’s, so these informal networks would prove even more critical to mobilization and ideological indoctrination. Equally important for the party’s political strategies was the welfare work that PAS had engaged in during its previous incarnation as PMIA, which proved instrumental in expanding its rural base and securing popular support.³⁰ To further exploit these informal networks, PAS relied on *ceramah* (dialogue sessions) in *kampung*s and small towns rather than public rallies to get their message across to the masses. These *ceramah* would be led by a PAS member, usually a *tok guru* (religious teacher from the *pondok*) or *alim* (religious leader). The *ceramah* would begin with a religious lecture before launching into politics through the application of analogy. Unlike public rallies, the more intimate *ceramah* setting offered the opportunity for questions from the audience, which further allowed party leaders to clarify their positions on respective issues and build rapport with followers. By using *ceramah* sessions as its chief vehicle of propaganda and mobilization, PAS laboriously expanded its support base between 1951 and 1955.³¹ The *ceramah* model has been so successful that it continues to be the cornerstone of the party’s strategies of mobilization today.

PAS’s popularity increased among the rural Malay base, but the party was still hampered by several problems in its formative years. As alluded to earlier, the membership of PAS at its formation included a motley crew of Islamo-nationalists from the defunct *Hizbul Muslimin*, socialists from the disbanded MNP, and disenchanted members of UMNO alongside religious scholars and peasants. The ideological incoherence that this conglomeration served up among the rank and file was further aggravated by a slack policy on membership that allowed members not only to possess dual membership with other political organizations but also to assume concurrent leadership roles in a number of them. Party discipline was thus compromised in the early years, and the party itself was hampered in its ability to cobble together a coherent political agenda that could accommodate the variety of interests it represented. Some characterized the early PAS as “an Islamic welfare organization professing no clear political goals.”³² In addition, despite its attempt to discredit UMNO, the party leadership was hard-pressed to plot an agenda to distinguish itself from UMNO and the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP), formed in 1951 by UMNO founder-president Dato Onn bin Jaafar after he

lost the UMNO party leadership to Tunku Abdul Rahman. Finally, much of the party's initial incapacities have also been attributed to a lack of visionary leadership. The first president of PAS, Haji Ahmad Fuad Hassan, was seen as too closely aligned to Onn bin Jaafar of IMP, whose credibility suffered from his vacillation on issues pertaining to Malay and minority rights (which accounted for his forced resignation from the presidency of UMNO in August 1951). Meanwhile, Ahmad Fuad's successor, Dr. Haji Abbas Alias, was an English-educated medical officer deemed to be too moderate and Anglophile in outlook to command any significant gravitas. The consequences of this absence of party discipline, ideological coherence, distinctive political platform, and visionary leadership became abundantly clear in PAS's lackluster performance in its first foray into national politics, the 1955 national elections.

Hoping to capitalize on its grassroots popularity, PAS concentrated its campaign efforts for the 1955 elections on the rural Malay-Muslim heartland. As von Vorys observed, "the PMIP (PAS) shunned public debates in English; it did not even try to make inroads in urban areas."³³ Consequently, the party focused its energies on its stronghold, Perak, as well as the Malay-Muslim dominated states of Kelantan and Terengganu. From its slate of three candidates each for federal and state elections, PAS managed only to secure one parliamentary seat in Perak. The seat PAS won proved to be the only seat won by a non-Alliance party, as the Alliance swept 51 of 52 parliamentary seats. The results of the 1955 elections exposed PAS's institutional and ideological weaknesses, a fact that was not lost on the leadership of the party, which acknowledged the need to recalibrate its political strategy to increase its popularity and garner more votes. This became a major issue at the party's general assembly in 1956, which saw the election of a new party president, Burhanuddin al-Helmy, to replace the ineffectual Haji Abbas.

Burhanuddin brought with him impressive credentials. He was an anti-colonialist par excellence, who had extensive experience accrued from his roles as founder, founding member, or leader of several nationalist organizations.³⁴ He was also an Islamist whose understanding of nationalism was informed by Islamic reformist thinking of the likes of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida.³⁵ Some have suggested that it was precisely Burhanuddin's Islamist credentials that proved a drawback in his early career as an anticolonialist, when he lost the presidency of PKMM to radical Malay nationalist Ishak Haji Mohammad.³⁶ Others however, have argued that Burhanuddin's Islamist credentials were less significant than his overall reputation as an anticolonialist. It has been noted that these Islamist credentials were called into question during the contest for the PAS presidency in 1956.³⁷ Regardless of the ongoing academic debates over the extent to which Burhanuddin was committed to a strict Islamist agenda, his influence derived from his ability to craft a platform and an ideology that was a potent mix of leftist socialism, nationalism, and Islamic reformism, echoing the Indonesian nationalist Sukarno's concept of

NASAKOM (*Nasionalisme, Agama, Komunisme*, or Nationalism, Religion, and Communism), which had captured the imagination of nationalists in the Indo-Malay world.³⁸ Burhanuddin's influence would become abundantly clear by the 1959 general elections, when under his leadership PAS made significant inroads into the northern Malay states of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah, capturing the state government of the first two on a political platform that married Malay nationalism with Islamism.

Although PAS under Burhanuddin emphasized its Islamic roots and traditions in its 1959 campaign platform, Islam merely provided a rallying point for the party's chief objective of a Malay nationalism that was based on a resolute criticism of the Alliance government's changes to citizenship and language laws. If indeed "its championing of Islam was one of the several factors contributing to its success in these states," the party's loyalty to Islam was certainly not the driving force in the wider context, given that the establishment of a theocratic state did not feature prominently in a campaign fixated on the controversial questions of citizenship and language.³⁹ Safie Ibrahim has noted that of the five basic principles enunciated by the PAS leadership at the 1957 party conference to plot an alternative constitution for Malaya, "only one was about Islam."⁴⁰ This was a reflection of the overall political agenda of PAS under Burhanuddin, in which Islam only assumed prominence insofar as the religion was a feature of Malay identity. The defense of this identity, not the advancement of an Islamic state, took precedence.⁴¹

The PAS successes in 1959 also benefited from schisms within the Alliance government over matters of education and minority representation in federal elections.⁴² The Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) had pressed UMNO for the recognition of Mandarin as an official language alongside English and Malay.⁴³ Leaders of the respective parties subsequently resolved these differences, but radicals from the MCA and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) continued to challenge the dictates of UMNO over matters of education, particularly in light of the Education Ordinance of 1957, which appeared to threaten the status of vernacular education.⁴⁴ New constitutional citizenship laws enacted upon independence exacerbated discontent within the Alliance. These laws superseded the restrictive citizenship requirements of the Federation Agreement of 1948, making it easier for non-Muslims to attain citizenship status.⁴⁵ In the eyes of many from the Malay community, the passing of this new legislation was "unnecessary, improper, and a betrayal of the interests of Malays," and PAS capitalized on this controversial policy to devastating effect.⁴⁶

Even though it chose ethnic issues as its main line of attack, PAS was also aware that reference to religion often gained currency and enjoyed widespread appeal among the rural Malay community. Consequently, while its head-on assault against UMNO focused on Malay issues, PAS also worked to outflank UMNO by raising doubts about the latter's commitment to Islam. UMNO leaders were criticized for attending non-Muslim religious ceremonies and

providing financial support for the construction of non-Muslim places of worship. These criticisms were packaged colloquially and published in *Siaran PAS* (PAS Broadcast), the party's mouthpiece. The PAS attacks in *Siaran PAS* sometimes took comic form, but they nevertheless regularly took UMNO leaders to task for helping non-Muslims rather than Malay-Muslims.⁴⁷

UMNO's precarious position in 1959 was worsened by instability within party ranks and by the economic disparities generated by government policies:

The alliance's defeat had more tangible causes: the divisive internal struggle in the Kelantan UMNO; the inability of the powerless UMNO state councillors elected in 1955 to establish any record of achievements; and, more fundamentally, a disillusionment with the Alliance, which with independence had removed power over the Kelantanese peasantry to Kuala Lumpur, and had thus become to the peasants more remote than the British and aristocratic colonial civil servants had been. Seeing the benefits of independence concentrated on the more developed and primarily non-Malay west coast, the Kelantanese resented those Malays who enjoyed power in the new order heedless of the peasantry's concerns.⁴⁸

Relating Islam to these more fundamental motivations, Alias Mohamed noted that as a consequence, "Muslims flocked to their religion in the event of a threat, real or imaginary, faced by their community."⁴⁹ The key point to underscore here is that social and political circumstances endowed PAS with credentials to serve as "a religiously informed popular movement for the defense of (especially) peasant interests."⁵⁰ These cleavages between UMNO and PAS were defined less by religion than by class. Indeed, it was distinctively in this area of relatively slower economic development that the seeds of the campaign for Malay dominance fell on fertile ground.

PAS turned in an admirable electoral performance in 1959, but the party was not able to consolidate that success. UMNO swiftly brought the instruments of the state to bear on PAS in the early 1960s, denying PAS state governments access to developmental funds and mobilizing police powers to deny permits for PAS rallies and religious functions. Equally detrimental to the PAS cause were accusations that some among their leadership, primarily Burhanuddin and Raja Abu Hanifa, were complicit in spreading pro-Indonesia, anti-Malaysia sentiments during the period of Indonesia's diplomatic and military confrontation with Malaysia, better known in the lexicon of international politics as Confrontation or *Konfrontasi*.⁵¹ The Malaysian government alleged that PAS was among the political parties that supported the *Gerakan Pemuda Melayu Raya* (Greater Malaysia Youth Movement), which was established by socialist revolutionaries Ahmad Boestamam and Ishak Mohammad. This movement espoused pan-Malay unity with Indonesia and opposed the UMNO-led Malaysian government.⁵² PAS was dealt a crippling blow when its charismatic

and respected leader, Burhanuddin, was arrested in January 1965. The party's plight was further compounded by the tragic death of its popular deputy president, Ustaz Zulkiflee Muhammad, and the rising tide among Malaysians of reactionary nationalist sentiment against Indonesian aggression. These developments forced PAS to tread cautiously so as not to give the impression that it was supporting anti-Malaysia elements working to undermine the Federation. Consequently, the party assumed a decidedly lower profile in local politics. This resulted in a significant loss of support in the Malay-Muslim heartland, and it was only in 1969, when the Alliance was faced with another crisis, that the Islamist opposition began to assert its presence again.

The Watershed of 1969

The May 1969 general election and its aftermath remains one of the most studied events in postwar Malaysian history.⁵³ This election was the first time that the ruling government lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament. This resulted from a massive non-Malay vote swing to the opposition. This was also the first time in Malaysian history that UMNO was denied more than half the votes of the Malay community. Not surprisingly, PAS was the main beneficiary of Malay discontent.⁵⁴

The dominant themes in academic studies on 1969 in Malaysia have concentrated mainly on communal friction that resulted from non-Malay political assertiveness, which culminated in the race riots of 13 May. It was precisely against this background that PAS managed to regain some measure of influence at UMNO's expense. In the 1969 elections, PAS reiterated its campaign for Malay rights, into which Islam was subsumed. While routine talk of implementation of an Islamic state surfaced on the campaign trail, under the new leadership of the Malay nationalist Asri Muda, the notion of an Islamic state was once again articulated in the context of the "overriding cause": Malay supremacy.⁵⁵ What was at stake more than anything else in 1969 was the constitutional compact between the ethnic communities of Malaysia. Upon close inspection, PAS appears to have benefited again from internal problems confronting UMNO, just as it did in 1959. This time, the problems had arisen from differences within the Alliance over how to balance the demands of the non-Malays with the preservation of Malay political and economic primacy.⁵⁶

In this tense climate, aggravated by the "Malaysian Malaysia" platform of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), battle lines were drawn along ethnic contours. This set the stage for the deepening of an internal crisis within UMNO between moderate supporters of the party's accommodationist policies and Malay "ultras" who openly questioned the government's concessions on matters of language (where familiar debates raged over which languages should be

granted “official” status) and education (where emotive exchanges took place over vernacular education policies). While the UMNO leadership was caught up in internal bickering, PAS marshaled its extensive and proven *ceramah*-based grassroots network across the northern Malay states to expand its web of influence. Explaining the resurgence of PAS, Alias Mohamed surmised: “Neither religion nor poverty was the crucial factor which enabled PAS to succeed in particular areas. It was PAS’ very pragmatic approach which was its real strength.”⁵⁷ This view resonates with analyses of the 1969 elections which suggest that the popularity of PAS resulted less from its Islamist ideology or philosophy than from a particularistic mode of operation premised on the personal approach of its candidates at the grassroots level.⁵⁸ This analysis contradicts generalizations that Islam served as the unifying force of the party in these earlier years.

Islam did make some contributions to the success of PAS in 1969. Religion certainly featured in the PAS campaign, and this was evident in its party manifesto, which emphasized the realignment of laws with the “teachings of Islam” and the need to integrate Islam into mainstream education.⁵⁹ Even then, it was clear that the Islamic state agenda was devised primarily to draw attention to the weaknesses of the Alliance government, framed as neglect of Islamic principles of administration.⁶⁰ However, the potency of the Islamic factor really came to the fore in the context of a strident defense of Malay identity. The PAS leadership portrayed Malay identity as coming under threat from UMNO’s unnecessary concessions to non-Malays, leading to the riots in 1969. By this token, the defining challenge of the PAS manifesto was above all fundamental revision of the constitution “to see that the present constitutional provision concerning citizenship is reviewed so that it will ensure the rights of the natives.”⁶¹ For PAS, Malay identity, of which Islam was but a constituent feature, took precedence.

In the early 1970s, Malaysia was still trapped in the mire of ethnic politics, and ethnic/racial polemics framed political conduct. This helps explain PAS’s inability or reluctance to enunciate operational principles for its call for an Islamic state. As Hussin Mutalib notes, in the 1960s “interethnic tension among [Malaysia’s] disparate ethno-religious groups, especially between Malays and Chinese, was still a salient feature of Malaysian daily life. In such a setting, Islam did not make inroads into the political system or into Malay identity politics.”⁶² While it was true that the usual Islamist diatribes were deployed by leaders of both parties, particularly when they criticized each other in terms of “un-Islamic” governance, Islam was essentially a component of broader concerns of ethnic identity, which “serves to demonstrate . . . that Malay [ethnic] communalism and Islam constituted two dialectical strands, which, consciously or otherwise, complement each other in a ‘balance of power’ situation, although in the majority of cases, the former seems to have had an edge in the Malay resolution of their socio-economic problems.”⁶³

The outcome of the 1969 elections heralded a period of unexpected accommodation between UMNO and PAS, which joined the ruling UMNO-led *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), the coalition that replaced the discredited Alliance in 1970. Sensing that its support among Malays had slipped significantly, UMNO moved to regain its hold on the Malay electorate and enacted a number of policies toward that end. In 1971, UMNO leveraged the advantage of incumbency by pushing constitutional changes through Parliament to remove sensitive issues such as the special position of the Malay community and the sovereignty of the Malay sultans from the arena of public discussion. This was followed by the introduction of the *Rukunegara* (Values of the Nation) concept, which was intended to be a national ideology that transcended parochial ethnic loyalties and fostered a sense of national identity. The government also made the Malay language the sole official language of the country.

Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman resigned under pressure a year after the riots, and the new administration of Tun Abdul Razak moved quickly to institute an affirmative-action program to entrench Malay dominance in the political and economic spheres. A National Operations Council was created following the proclamation of a period of emergency and the suspension of Parliament after the riots. Among its key proposals to the government was the implementation of the far-reaching New Economic Policy (NEP), which aimed to reduce and eventually eradicate poverty by raising income levels and increasing employment opportunities for all Malaysians irrespective of race, and to accelerate “the process of restructuring Malaysian society to correct economic imbalance, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic function.”⁶⁴ While crafted in egalitarian and pluralistic terms, the NEP’s key objective was to buttress Malay political and economic dominance.

Insofar as the defense of Malay primacy had always formed the cornerstone of the PAS political agenda, the changes initiated by the new UMNO government presented interesting implications; they brought to fruition much of what PAS had been agitating for over the previous two decades. As a consequence, differences between the two parties, which had essentially been defined by communal motivations, narrowed considerably. In fact, the split in the Malay vote in 1969 belied an “emerging congruence” between UMNO and PAS ideologies, which culminated in an alliance between the two erstwhile antagonists in 1974 as they found a point of convergence.⁶⁵ PAS leaders rationalized cooperation with UMNO as “assisting the cause of Islam”;⁶⁶ others have suggested that the liaison was in fact a conduit for PAS’s subsequent radicalism.⁶⁷ Indeed, a PAS leader suggested that it was only after Tun Razak had sufficiently demonstrated his commitment to place Islam squarely on the state’s agenda (presumably with the announcement of *Rukunegara*) that PAS agreed to cooperate with UMNO.⁶⁸ PAS-UMNO collaboration was also facilitated by the nature of Asri Muda’s leadership of PAS, which paid substantive

attention to Malay nationalism and which was considerably less dogmatic on Islamism.

Whatever the motivation, the liaison proved short-lived, and an acrimonious separation ensued.⁶⁹ Internal dissent brewed within PAS between supporters of cooperation with UMNO, most of whom were members of the PAS old guard, and a growing number of “Young Turks” who felt that such cooperation was against their principles and worked to the detriment of the party’s interests.⁷⁰ By the end of the 1970s, the liaison had collapsed as a result of internal strife within PAS, with profound ramifications for the future of the party and the Islamization of politics in Malaysia. Against this backdrop of the UMNO-PAS “marriage of convenience” and its failure, processes of Islamization were set further in motion.

A New Broom Sweeps Clean: The Islamization of PAS

The repositioning of Islam from periphery to center has been identified as a consequence of the Islamization of Malay society in the 1970s, which witnessed a move to align state and social structures with Islamic teachings. As several scholars have noted, the revitalization of Islam had much to do with the global resurgence of Islamic consciousness that was then engulfing Muslim societies throughout the world.⁷¹ Yet this process was caused not only by external events but also by fatigue within certain segments of the Malay community as a result of the heavily racialized bickering between UMNO and PAS.⁷²

Equally important, the resurgence of Islamic consciousness within Malaysia coincided with the formation of the UMNO-PAS coalition, the consequence of which was “the recognition that Islamic values would be propagated without restriction. The implication of this point was the conferment of legitimacy to various Islamic groups to propagate Islam freely.”⁷³ With the UMNO-PAS alliance anchoring the governing coalition, the seeds of an Islamic bureaucracy were sown with the inclusion of PAS leaders and members in various government organizations, such as the *Majlis Kebangsaan Halehwal Islam Malaysia* (National Council of Islamic Affairs), the *Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia* (Islamic Missionary Foundation), and other key bureaucratic and ambassadorial posts.⁷⁴ The implications of these changes for the configuration of politics in Malaysia would prove far-reaching. Even though PAS was roundly defeated in the elections of 1978 (after leaving *Barisan* a year earlier) as a consequence of internal politicking that UMNO capitalized upon, by then there were already indications that the party was soon to undertake a renewal process that would fundamentally reorient its political trajectory.⁷⁵

The global Islamic resurgence had a catalytic effect on the emergence of a more acute religious consciousness among Muslims in Malaysia. This revival found expression in a general increase in religiosity among the Muslim

population. Indicators included the expansion of mosque congregation sizes, proliferation of religious study groups, a heightened interest in Islamic dress, and the ubiquity of Islamic greetings and *halal* food. The most telling signal of Islamization during this period was the escalation of *dakwah* activism, particularly on university campuses, where the influence of *dakwah* groups was considerable. Some of this “Islamization” eventually precipitated political action. Indeed, PAS deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa offered the following conjecture, which captured the political impact of *dakwah* activism: “The hope is that the *dakwah* that we [PAS] conduct will lead to political support. We make them realise what being a Muslim entails and how important it is to live in an environment conducive to practicing Muslims. And to realise that we have to struggle in order to have that environment. We must win as many Malay-Muslims to our side.”⁷⁶ The political efforts of *dakwah* also extended to Malaysian students abroad. PAS and UMNO leaders made regular trips to campuses in the Middle East, Britain, and the United States at the invitation of Malaysian student associations to deliver talks on Islamization and local politics to large groups of Malaysian Muslim students.

The transnational influence on Islamist politics in Malaysia took a further turn with the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Doctrinal and theological differences—Malaysian Muslims are almost entirely Sunni in orientation, and follow the Shafi’i school of Islamic jurisprudence, while the Iranian Revolution was a Shi’a phenomenon—did not stop the Revolution from serving as a source of inspiration for PAS leaders, particularly those intent on reinvigorating the party along religious lines. Yusof Rawa alluded to the impact of the Iranian Revolution on PAS in his inaugural presidential address:

The fundamental difference between the Islamic Revolution in Iran and other revolutions that have taken place in Muslim countries is the fact that in Iran it was the result of agitation of the Iranian people led by *ulama*. Unlike other instances across the Muslim World, the Islamic Revolution in Iran was not led by the military elite who harboured political ambitions. Because of this, the Islamic Revolution in Iran was firmly grounded on genuine freedom to implement what was necessary in accordance to the sovereignty of Allah in all aspects of life and to shake America out of its arrogance and pride.⁷⁷

The Malaysian ambassador to Iran in the mid-1970s, a period when popular resentment against the regime of Shah Pahlavi was building up at an alarming pace, was none other than Yusof Rawa himself. Rawa’s tour of duty in Iran gave PAS critical firsthand experience of the buildup to an Islamic Revolution and the makings of an Islamic government. Even if its ideological underpinnings were incongruent with Malaysia’s brand of Islam, the Iranian Revolution demonstrated the possibilities and plausibility of Islamic governance in a contemporary age. In the aftermath of the Revolution, several PAS leaders

accepted invitations issued by the Islamic Republic of Iran to visit the country, while others openly admired and celebrated the authenticity of the Iranian model of Islamic governance.⁷⁸ The youth wing of PAS, which stood at the forefront of party reform, sent study groups to Iran to improve relations with the Iranian leadership and study their model of government. The first visit took place in November 1981 and involved Subky Latif, Suhaimi Haji Ahmad, and Ustaz Abu Bakar Chik. PAS Youth chief Haji Mustafa Ali, Rushdi Haji Ariff, and several others made another visit to Iran in June 1982.⁷⁹ Iranian politicians were also invited to attend PAS meetings during this time. In 1982, Fakhur Razzi, an Iranian parliamentarian, was invited to speak at the PAS Youth convention, where he urged PAS to emulate Iran in the establishment of *ulama* leadership and an *ulama* council.⁸⁰

This period of intense activity within PAS resulted in the emergence of a new generation of leaders with impeccable religious credentials. Some scholars have identified Yusof Rawa, Asri Muda's deputy and eventual successor, as the personification of this religious resurgence in PAS.⁸¹ However, this shift to a more Islamist register cannot be attributed to one man, influential though he was. Rather, the shift was a consequence of the influx of an entire team of prominent and inspired Islamists, such as Fadzil Noor, Abdul Hadi Awang, Mustapha Ali, Subky Latif, Yahya Othman, and Nakhaie Ahmad, most of whom had openly sought party leadership positions at the 1978 PAS *Muktamar* (General Assembly). These Young Turks injected a potent combination of Islamist romanticism and activism into PAS politics; many of them were Islamist activists and compatriots of Anwar Ibrahim in their student days at the height of Islamic revivalism. Their enthusiasm quickly infected the rank and file and inspired political agitation against the old-guard PAS leadership under Asri Muda. Explaining the motivations of this new leadership, Kamarulnizam Abdullah said these men "had dedicated their life to the cause of Islam and were very displeased with the manner in which Islam had been subordinated to Malay culture and nationalism. By joining PAS, they believed that they could effectively spread their message."⁸²

Driven by the global Islamic resurgence and strengthened by the vigor of this new movement, a rejuvenated PAS began to push methodically for a more purposeful Islamic political agenda.⁸³ The Young Turks articulated the grievances of the PAS rank and file, most notably the party's youth movement, which had become highly critical of the incumbent leadership's lack of religious zeal. The youth movement of PAS clearly stated that UMNO was not an Islamic party because it was not conducting its affairs "according to the will of God, but the will of political interests within the party."⁸⁴ By 1981, these grievances had stimulated internal party dissent at the highest levels, culminating in Yusof Rawa defeating Abu Bakar Umar (the incumbent and an ally of Asri Muda) for the post of deputy president of the party. Faced with a likely internal coup given the complexion of the new leadership beneath him, Asri Muda

was forced to resign the party presidency at the 1982 PAS Muktamar, when his presidential address was jeered in a virtual vote of no-confidence. He was replaced by Yusof Rawa, the first recognized *ulama* to head the party. With Asri's resignation, PAS leadership finally passed into the hands of the Young Turk *ulama*.

Among the most significant policies implemented by the Young Turks was the creation of the *Majlis Shura Ulama* (Consultative Council of Religious Scholars), a fifteen-member body of religious scholars, led by a *Musyidul 'Am* (spiritual leader) who sits at the top of the party hierarchy. The *Majlis Shura* had the following responsibilities (as outlined in the party's constitution):

1. Elaborate, clarify, and interpret party policies and council decisions in accordance with the party constitution, and ascertain their meanings and purpose.
2. Issue directives and decrees to ensure that policies and decisions are implemented and adhered to by the rank-and-file membership or party committees in the course of the party's activities, movements, and administration.
3. Foster, defend, and regulate party discipline (through a disciplinary committee), and appoint and screen party committee members in accordance with Clause 75 of this Constitution.⁸⁵

While a consultative council in name, the *Majlis Shura* is in effect charged with responsibility over religious matters and remains the highest decision-making body in the party by virtue of its authority to overturn decisions made by the Central Working Committee, thereby signaling a swing in the pendulum of power toward the religious leadership. This marked the institutionalization of *ulama* rule, a characteristically Shi'a tradition that had no historical Sunni precedence and that was likely a legacy of the Iranian model that so attracted the PAS Young Turks. The *Majlis Shura* was led by Haji Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, a respected Islamic scholar who had been associated with Asri Muda earlier in his career but who had gradually distanced himself from that faction as the party further Islamicized. The *Majlis Shura* decentralized power from the party president, a deliberate move on the part of the Young Turks, who had been critical of the concentration and personalization of power under Asri Muda's presidency.

A further initiative of this new *ulama* leadership was to return the Islamic state objective to a position of prominence on the PAS agenda. This motivation was articulated in the following manner:

Implementing the laws of Allah in the form of *ibadah* [worship] such as fasting, praying, paying *zakat* [tithes], performing pilgrimage and so on is relatively easy but to implement other laws of Allah such as law, economic, political and social systems and so on is not easy,

unless by establishing an “Islamic government.” Based on this fact, it is a reality that power is the main condition in implementing the laws of Allah. For this reason, the struggle for governing power is a must for every Muslim. Hence, it is the governing power that is the political power. It is this political power that has been the struggle of PAS for so long.⁸⁶

Yusof Rawa described this stage of the PAS struggle as one that would now locate the Islamic factor at the heart of the party’s pursuit of political objectives.⁸⁷ This transformation of PAS was supported by student groups in Malaysian universities, who advocated the formation of an *ulama*-led Islamic Republic along the Iranian model and who rejected the “secular” UMNO government.⁸⁸

The introduction of *ulama* rule in PAS was no mere cosmetic change: it heralded a new era in PAS politics, marked by the injection of highly contentious and assertive religious-political rhetoric into the political discourse. This was exemplified most devastatingly in the introduction of the practice of *takfir* to Malaysian politics.

Takfir and the Amanat Haji Hadi

Takfir is the practice of Muslims labelling fellow Muslims as infidels. In Malaysia, *takfir* was first introduced to the political scene by the *ulama* of PAS as a response to UMNO’s close cooperation with its non-Muslim partners, primarily the MCA and MIC. Because the *Barisan* government comprised a significant number of non-Muslims, PAS criticized it as the illegitimate implementation of non-Muslim rule over a Muslim population, despite the fact that the coalition government was headed by UMNO. Ahmad Fauzi traces the earliest PAS public branding of UMNO as *kafir* (infidel) to November 1979, when Mustapha Abu Bakar, a leader from the Kelantan PAS, called UMNO members *kafir* during a *ceramah* in Ulu Besut, Terengganu.⁸⁹ PAS leaders deemed their UMNO counterparts unfit to undertake religious duties such as leading congregational prayers, slaughtering livestock for consumption, and solemnizing Muslim marriages.⁹⁰ Mustapha was eventually tried and convicted in the *shari’a* court for delivering a religious lecture without *tauliah* (formal letter of authority) and for issuing a *fatwa* without *tauliah*, which contravened religious law and convention.

Despite the court ruling against Mustapha, the PAS *Ulama* Council escalated tension by publishing *Islam dan Politik: Hasil Kajian Ilmiah Ulama PAS* [Islam and Politics: Results of Scholarly Research by PAS’s Ulama] and declaring in it that Muslims who condoned the separation of religion from politics or who placed manmade laws above God’s laws were apostates.⁹¹ This declaration was followed by a swift deterioration of relations between Malay-Muslims

of differing political persuasions and loyalties. A wealth of anecdotal evidence describes tensions within many *kampung* leading to the construction of alternative mosques or *surau* (prayer house), one used by UMNO supporters and the other by PAS supporters. Because of this tension, some marriages had to be solemnized twice, once each by an UMNO and a PAS *alim*. Cemeteries were segregated, and families were fractured along party lines.

At its height, *kafir-mengafir* (allegations and counterallegations of being an infidel) was crystallized as a national issue by the controversial speech delivered on 7 April 1981 by Haji Abdul Hadi Awang, a Medina and al-Azhar graduate who was then PAS state commissioner for Terengganu, during a *ceramah* in Banggol Peradong, Terengganu. This speech, which gained notoriety as the *Amanat Haji Hadi* (Edict of Haji Hadi), outlined three major principles that governed the PAS political struggle against UMNO. First, PAS opposed UMNO and the *Barisan Nasional* government it fronted because they had maintained the infidel colonial constitution inherited at independence. Second, given the struggle between PAS and UMNO, speeches and financial contributions of PAS members were all *jihad*, and should they die in the course of fighting UMNO members, they would die as martyrs. Third, one need not officially convert to other religions to become a *kafir*; simply condoning the separation between religion and politics was sufficient to render one an opponent of Islam and worthy of condemnation.

Amanat Haji Hadi further deepened the polarization of Malay society into PAS and UMNO camps. The situation was particularly acute in the rural Malay heartlands of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah.⁹² Burgeoning audiences at PAS-organized lectures prompted the government to step up security measures. Three PAS Youth leaders (Abu Bakar Chik, Bunyamin Yaakob, and Muhammad Sabu) were detained under the Internal Security Act, and rumor had it that PAS members were preparing themselves for an armed *jihad*. A ban was imposed in August 1984 on PAS gatherings in its four stronghold states.⁹³ A live television debate on the *kafir-mengafir* issue, scheduled for 11 November 1984, would have pitted UMNO leaders against their PAS counterparts, but the debate was canceled after the intervention of the *Yang diPertuan Agong* (king).⁹⁴ Further attempts at public discussion of this issue between PAS and UMNO representatives got nowhere.

The National Fatwa Council ruled in December 1984 that the *Amanat Haji Hadi* was contrary to the teaching of Islam. State governments never publicized the ruling, probably because of the controversial nature of the *Amanat* and of the ruling itself, given the highly politicized climate. The government's silence further fueled popular perception that the state was incapacitated by the PAS challenge to its religious legitimacy.⁹⁵ Indeed, it was likely that religious leaders and scholars within state religious institutions sympathized with the PAS leadership on matters pertaining to Islam, even if they moved cautiously on the specific issue of the *Amanat*, given the political freight associated with it.

In 1985, the government issued a white paper titled *The Threat to Muslim Unity and National Security*, which implicated PAS members in the subversive activities of extremist Islamic groups and created the impression that Communists were manipulating PAS to generate rifts that would achieve their antidemocratic aims.⁹⁶

Hostility spawned by the political polarization in the country also led to sporadic outbreaks of violence. An incident in the village of Memali, Kedah, in November 1985 was arguably the most extreme example of the severity of repercussions caused by this escalating political contest (the Memali incident will be discussed in greater detail later). There was also a clash between UMNO and PAS supporters at the Padang Terap by-election in 1985, resulting in one death. These developments put a severe stress on Malay unity. As Alias Mohamed notes: "Since Haji Abdul Hadi Awang's appearance in the political arena, religious issues which once had more or less lurked in the background now loomed large, threatening to destroy the Malay social fabric."⁹⁷ The matter of the *Amanat* was raised again, this time by *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (Malaysian Islamic Development Department), in 2001. The Council of Rulers, vested with constitutional powers to monitor and regulate religious affairs, spoke out firmly in criticism of the *Amanat Haji Hadi*.⁹⁸ Even then, state *mufti* remained reluctant to publicize the decision.

The acute religious turn in the PAS political discourse, and the considerable extent to which extremism appeared to flow from that turn, proved unnerving for Malaysia's sizable non-Muslim community. To assuage these concerns, the *ulama*-led PAS sought to dissociate the party from its tradition of ethnonationalist agitation. The party's religious elite criticized the government's pro-Malay policies for encouraging *assabiyah* (communalism or tribalism), and several leaders went so far as to condemn the NEP as "inimical to the spirit of Islam."⁹⁹

Notwithstanding the saber-rattling and brinkmanship, the first true test of Malaysia's receptivity to the recalibrated agenda of the PAS Islamists would come with the 1986 general election—the first nationwide political contest for the party's *ulama* leadership.

The 1986 Setback

In a striking departure from earlier campaigns, in 1986 Islam began replacing Malay ethnicity as the key reference point for PAS politics. So profound was this change that PAS leaders began criticizing the NEP and condemning UMNO's "un-Islamic ethnic chauvinism" vehemently.¹⁰⁰ PAS leaders issued *fatwa* against the "infidels" of UMNO and called for *jihād* against them as *kafir-mengafir* brinkmanship continued between the two parties.

In 1986 the Islamic state concept took center stage in Malaysian electoral politics for the first time.¹⁰¹ The establishment of an Islamic state had been

a declared objective of Islamists since the 1940s, but for a long time there had been no attempt to define or clarify the terms and conditions pertaining to such a state's formation, and no election campaigns had been focused entirely on that issue.¹⁰² Reference to the idea during election campaigning seldom moved beyond cursory allusions and remarks. Despite this reticence, PAS leaders believed that the Islamic state was a viable and necessary alternative to the Malaysian secularism they accused UMNO of propounding.¹⁰³ The pursuit of the Islamic state gained greater urgency after 1982 under the stewardship of Yusof Rawa and his deputy president, Abdul Hadi Awang, who was the party's unofficial ideologue.¹⁰⁴

Given the demographic landscape of Malaysia, a necessary corollary of the reemphasis on the Islamic state was the accommodation of non-Muslims within the theocratic polity. PAS formed a Chinese Consultative Committee with that concern in mind. In addition, Abdul Hadi himself declared while campaigning that Malays were not entitled to special rights and privileges. Nevertheless, despite the party's attempt to break out of the racial boundaries of Malaysian politics, PAS found it distinctly difficult to reconcile their demands for the implementation of *shari'a* and *hudud* law with their ambitions to be an acceptable alternative to the non-Muslim population. Moreover, the party's alacrity in supporting the preservation of non-Muslim cultural practices proved a double-edged sword, as it created the perception that the PAS Islamist agenda discriminated against Malay Muslims, denying them the option of practicing pre-Islamic Malay traditions and customs that were still practiced and held in high regard in Malay society.¹⁰⁵

Meanwhile, another clear indicator that Islam was making its imprint on the Malaysian political landscape was the emergence of Muslim extremism. By 1984, the Malaysian government had identified six extremist groups that it claimed were plotting to overthrow the government on the way to establishing an Islamic state, and attempts were quickly made to associate them with PAS.¹⁰⁶ The Memali affair of November 1985, when PAS stalwart Ibrahim Mahmood and his supporters engaged government forces in a gun battle that resulted in eighteen deaths (including Mahmood) and thirty-seven injuries, was another incident that drew attention to the radicalization of Islam. The government was quick to label Ibrahim Mahmood a criminal, but PAS eulogized him as a martyr.

In the political contest of 1986, there was a sense that the Islamic resurgence and the discernible shift in the party's ideological and policy orientation toward greater Islamic consciousness would enhance PAS's chances for the general election:

Political observers, domestic and foreign, predicted that the BN, particularly UMNO, would lose numerous seats to PAS especially because of the resurgence of religious extremism among the Malays

and the emergence of a new PAS leadership with their own brand of religiousness and radicalism. . . . PAS had launched an extensive campaign, with the aim of regaining control of at least Kelantan and with hopes of making inroads into the other predominantly-Malay states.¹⁰⁷

Given expectations like these, PAS's actual performance at the ballot box was a major setback.

After an exhaustive election campaign, the Islamists won a grand total of only one out of ninety-nine parliamentary seats contested and fifteen out of 265 state seats contested, its worst-ever performance in a national election. Paradoxically, the party's excessive emphasis on religious issues was identified as a key reason for the debacle. Many Malays, including some PAS supporters, were "upset with PAS's portrayal of the party as 'Allah's party.'"¹⁰⁸ Despite attempts to court non-Muslims, the staunch Islamist language employed in the PAS campaign created the impression that the party was intolerant and conservative, consequently alienating not only non-Muslims but also the average Malay-Muslim voter who was becoming increasingly conscious of Islamic identity but who was nevertheless disturbed by the overly vituperative version of Islamization that PAS seemed to be propounding.¹⁰⁹ Such perceptions were reinforced by the fact that many among the *ulama* leadership appeared obsessed with *kafir-mengafir* confrontation with UMNO. Conversely, PAS's attempted collaboration with the Chinese-dominated DAP was also seen as contributing to its rejection by Malays.¹¹⁰ To the extent that this was true, it indicated that even in the face of Islamic resurgence, political Islam was constrained by the racial polarization endemic to Malaysian politics.

The limitations of doctrinaire Islamist politics became all too evident with PAS's dismal performance at the 1986 polls. Defeat heralded yet another transition in the party, this time in the direction of moderation, defined by an emphasis on civil justice, human rights, and democratization. But a careful examination of UMNO in the mid-1980s would reveal yet another major factor that explained the failure of the PAS Islamist agenda: by 1986, the UMNO-led government under Mahathir Mohamad had already put in place the makings of an alternative model of Islamic governance that effectively took the wind out of the PAS sails.