

*Moinul Khan***EXPLAINING THE RISE OF ISLAM IN MALAYSIA: CONTEXT PRECEDES IDEOLOGY****Abstract**

Malaysia, since the 1970s, saw a trend of increasing adoption of Islamic values both at private and public levels, often referred to as the Islamic resurgence. This has led to an academic interest whether this upsurge of Islam in that country has been driven mainly by Islamic ideology that aims at establishing a universal Islamic order or other circumstances specific to Malaysia. This paper seeks to provide an illuminating explanation to this riddle. Having reviewed the trends of Islamic profile and the main reasons behind it, this paper finds that the ethnic conflict over material interests between the local Malays and non-Malays, political rivalry between two main parties, UMNO and PAS and the consequences of widening gap between the rich and the poor as a result of massive economic programmes, have all prompted the urge for mounting Islamic profile. Had there been no such competition, Islam would have remained marginalised as happened till the 1970s. However, in later times, Islam came as a means or instrument to express discontent by these competing interest groups towards each other. The key element of this analysis is to show that it is context that has largely stimulated the profile of Islam in Malaysia rather than eagerness, the inherent association with Islamic ideology, to establish an Islamic state and a universal order. Findings of this paper reinforce the view that Islam is not necessarily one and uniform and is not essentially linked to politics of ruling and resisting.

**1. Introduction**

When Malaysia achieved independence in 1957, there was a view that the country would follow the secularist model in politics, throughout, subordinating the religious issues. The main reason of this line of thinking was that the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which pioneered the independence, was led by the Western-educated liberal think-tank and represented by a wide variety of groups, including religious minorities. This leadership was in favour of Western-style development that advocates secularism and more pertinently the marginalisation of the role of Islam in politics. The other reason was that the non-Malays who were mostly Chinese and Indians were non-Muslims and had significant stakes in the Malaysian contexts including businesses and politics. The rise of Islam, in any form, may largely cause alienation of those minorities in nation-building. However, this thesis has, as this paper demonstrates, proved a sham. Islam appears to have become "progressively more important in the daily lives of Malaysian Muslims and in the country's politics".<sup>1</sup>

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This paper seeks to explain this riddle as to why this is the case. While reviewing the rise of Islam, this paper also argues that it is primarily the contexts in Malaysian politics, not the ideology in Malaysia, that have led the course of what is called 'Islamic resurgence'.<sup>2</sup>

The main objectives of this paper are to find answers to the following questions:

- What explains the major trends of the phenomenon of the rise of Islam in Malaysia?
- What are the inherent factors that contribute to the Islamic resurgence in this muslim country?
- Do they have necessary connection to the traditional notion of uniform and monolithic Islamist ideology that seeks to establish a global order?
- If not, how are they specific to the Malaysian contexts?

In doing so, this paper has been organised into five sections. Following introduction, section two gives an overview of the major trends of the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence in Malaysia since the 1970s. Section three deals with a discussion of inherent factors that have contributed to the Islamic resurgence. Section four highlights that these factors are more specific to this country than a commitment to the Islamic ideology. Section five concludes the discussion.

## 2. An Overview of the Islamic Resurgence

Malaysia saw a shift towards the resurgence phenomenon since the 1970s, particularly with the advent of *Dakwah* (proselytising) movement in late 1960s, which began with the initiative of the university students led by Anwar Ibrahim who later

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<sup>1</sup> John Funston, "Malaysia", in Greg Fealy and Virginia Hooker (eds.), *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia: A Contemporary Sourcebook*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> Islamic resurgence denotes the adoption of some Islamic values in both private and public life. Malaysian eminent politician-turned-academic Chandra Muzaffar characterises this phenomenon as referring to a number of manifestations including an effort to bring "Islamic values, practices, institutions, laws, indeed Islam in its entirety, in the lives of Muslims everywhere". See Chandra Muzaffar, "Islamic Resurgence and the Question of Development", *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1986, p. 57. A variety of forces have contributed to the higher profile of Islam in Muslim countries and beyond since the 1970s. The main objective of such resurgence is to recreate a social order based on Islamic religious values dictated in the Qur'an and Hadith (saying of the Prophet). Such trend has prompted political implications in international relations, including an attempt to rule and resist with the Islamic ideals. See Jean-Paul Carvalho, "A Theory of the Islamic Revival", available at <http://tuvalu.santafe.edu/~bowles/TheoryIslamicRevival.pdf>, accessed on 20 July 2013; Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2003; Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

became Deputy Prime Minister of Dr. Mahathir Mohammad.<sup>3</sup> The movement got impetus with the establishment of *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM, Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) in 1971. There were other similar groups who advocated conservative approaches of Islam at the personal and political levels. This *Dakwah* movement gave rise to the embracing of living in accordance with conservative interpretation of Islam in the society and polity.<sup>4</sup> For example, by the 1980s, many Malay women wore Islamic attires including mini-*Telekung* which is “a triangular head-dress that comes down to the chest or a round one that comes down even further to the waist” along with *Hijab* which is made of “an ankle-length one piece long sleeve robe .... Only the face and hands are visible, the robe hiding completely the shape of the body.”<sup>5</sup> Similar picture was also evident in other personal life of most Malay muslims.<sup>6</sup> John Funston sums up this trend:

Many Muslim men now grow beards. It is no longer sufficient for food to be pork-free; it must be strictly *halal* (prepared in accordance with Islamic prescriptions). Attendance at mosques and attention to prayer times are much more rigorously adhered to. Islamic programs take up a large part of radio and television time. And alcohol is no longer served at government functions, which now invariably start with prayers. ... Federal and state Islamic departments often seek to provide protection against such evils [as sites of Western music and television programs], regularly raiding night-clubs and other centres of vice and arresting Muslims for consumption of alcohol or (in the case of women) immodest attire.<sup>7</sup>

At the public level, this picture is quite apparent particularly with regard to the interpretation of the Constitution and its use in political purpose. Mahathir’s statement at the 1982 UMNO General Assembly, indicating the reinforcement of Islamic values, is an example of such emphasising higher profile of Islam at the public life.<sup>8</sup> When the Constitution was drafted, Islam was made as ‘the’ religion of the country, but at the same time, the religious freedom of other faiths was guaranteed. The Constitution also left the responsibility of Islam in the hands of the states<sup>9</sup> rather than in the federal

<sup>3</sup> Mahathir Mohammad was the architect of modern Malaysia. He administered the country for about 22 years from 1981 to 2003. Mahathir is known for the adoption of modernisation programmes which steered the economic growth of the country which has later assumed the label as an ‘emerging tiger’ in Southeast Asia.

<sup>4</sup> John Funston, *op.cit.*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>5</sup> Zainah Anwar, *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah among the Students*, Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1987, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Barry Wain, *Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohammad in Turbulent Times*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 219-220.

<sup>7</sup> John Funston, *op.cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> At the 1982 UMNO General Assembly, Mathathir Mohammad stated that “the biggest struggle [s] is to change the attitude of the Malays in line with the requirements of Islam in this modern age... UMNO’s task now is to enhance the Islamic practices and ensure that the Malay community truly adheres to Islamic teachings.” See Barry Wain, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

<sup>9</sup> Malaysia, which obtained independence in 1957 from the British colonial legacy, is a federal constitutional monarchy. It consists of thirteen states located in two regions, Peninsular Malaysia and Eastern Borneo. These states are: Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Pahang, Perak, Selangor, Terengganu, Negeri Sembilan, Perlis, Melaka,

system. These provisions have had implications for the role of Islam in public life in Malaysia in later days. More significantly, the label of Islam as the state religion in the Constitution has created a debate as to whether Malaysia would be an 'Islamic state'. The state control over the Islamic affairs has also made it open to politicisation by different groups competing for power. These provisions have provided a space to green the Islamic profile of Malaysia.

Despite the freedom of religion guaranteed in the Constitution, it has later been qualified within that religious provision. All ethnic Malays are regarded as Muslims who are subjected to Sharia courts and they are in a sense denied to leave Islam or convert to other faiths. In fact, apostasy or conversion to other faiths is treated as a punishable offence in most states with fines or jail sentence or both. Although the terms of the references of the Constitution specify the secular status of the federation, the declaration of Islam as official religion has become instrumental for "the government to fund certain Islamic activities – building mosques, holding Qur'an-reading competitions and organizing the hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia that every Muslim is expected to make at least once."<sup>10</sup> The other gestures by the government to show its commitment to Islam include introduction of the *Azan*, the call to prayer over state-run radio and TV, publication of Islamic literature and establishment of an Islamic Research Centre and an Islamic Missionary Foundation, sponsoring *Dakwah*, missionary groups which found fertile grounds especially among Malaysian young, educated, urban middle class.<sup>11</sup>

Barbara D. Metcalf points out that Malaysia saw growing activities including state support for an Islamic university, Islamic economics, Islamic courts and civil law that uphold Sharia having little regard to the common 'life world' for all Malaysians.<sup>12</sup> The most notable of such state sponsorship of Islam was the placing of the Sharia courts independent of the jurisdiction of the civil courts including the High Courts and taking over from the states reorganised on a federal basis in 1988 in the Office of the Prime Minister. An important move was the formation of *Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia* (IKIM, Malaysian Institute for Islamic Understanding) in 1992 under the Office of the Prime Minister, which is a think-tank that organises high-level conferences on Islam, authors regular columns in both English and Malay language newspapers, runs television programmes and is generally responsible for articulating government policy on Islamic affairs. The powers of the Islamic departments of the states have been increased to administer the enforcement of Islamic laws and regulations. After the independence, the federal government did not have any major role in the Islamic

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Penang, Sabah and Sarawak and the three federal territories are Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Labuan.

<sup>10</sup> Barry Wain, *op.cit.*, p. 218.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, "Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia: History, Community, Morality", in Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvath (eds.), *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*, Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawai Press, 1997, p. 313.

affairs. However, the Council of Rulers (the State Sultans) constituted the *Majlis Kebangsaan Bagi Hal Ehwal Ugama Islam Malaysia* (Malaysian National Council for Islamic Affairs) in 1968 with a secretariat in the Office of the Prime Minister. The Council chaired by the Prime Minister is responsible for formulating major policies on Islamic affairs. The activities of the Council include: supervision of federal government's Islamic research centre and Islamic missionary foundation; supervision of federal government's Islamic schools and the publication of Islamic materials. Later, a full minister has been appointed since 1997 to oversee its activities.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, the individual state authorities have sought to out-Islamise each other by religious legislation and activities. In 1988, Selangor passed the compulsory two years provision for rehabilitation for new converts and 15 years old cannot convert without parental permission. In Sabah, the term of rehabilitation was extended up to 3 years.<sup>14</sup>

However, renowned scholar on political Islam Riaz Hassan in his book, *Inside Muslim Minds*, notes that although a greater emphasis is noticeable on the role of Islam in public life, the "Malay Islam still continues to adhere to its moderate and malleable inclinations."<sup>15</sup> Funston observes that Malaysian Muslims have generally eschewed extreme form of Islam and the government has dealt with extremists with iron hands.<sup>16</sup> This is true in the case of dealing with a popular *Darul Arqam*<sup>17</sup> organisation which was accused of militancy and later banned in 1994 with detaining its prominent leaders under the Internal Security Act. The government was also successful in containing the extremists belonging to the Kumpulan Militant/Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM, Malaysian Militant/Mujahidin Organisation) or *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) largely through arrest

<sup>13</sup> John Funston, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-57; Barry Wain, *op. cit.*, pp. 218-222.

<sup>14</sup> The legal/bureaucratic developments, just noted, created a strong debate and media attention over a case involving a young woman, Lina Joy, born as Azlina Jailani to Malay parents and so raised as a Muslim who wished to convert to Christianity. After a long bitter administrative/legal battle in May 2007, the Federal Court rejected her appeal stating that a person who wished to change his/her religion must do so in compliance with the existing practices of that particular religion. See Yang Lai Fong, "Framing Religious Disputes: A Comparative Analysis of the Lina Joy Controversy Reported by Malaysian Newspapers", *The Journal of the South East Asia Research Centre for Communication and Humanities*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2011, p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Riaz Hassan, *Inside Muslim Minds*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2008, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> John Funston, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> *Darul Arqam* was founded in 1968 by a charismatic leader, Ashaari Muhammed. The movement was marked by conservative approaches to Islam, that advocated the members eating Arab-style, the men wearing green robes and turbans and the women in *Purdah* (covering) most of the time. The members set up self contained commune with houses, mosques, schools, clinics and vegetable plots, their factories producing items for sale in their own shops. They administered 250 kindergartens and grade schools and operated enterprises of about RM 300 million. In the face of a challenge to the government, the organisation was declared a 'deviant sect' by a government body, the National Fatwa Council. Its leaders were detained for charges of endangering security under the Internal Security Act allegedly for their involvement in the training of a military wing in Thailand to wage a war on the Malaysian government and was later banned in 1994. With membership increasing, the *Darul Arqam* seemed to have presented a real challenge to the government which also sought an opportunity to contain it. See Barry Wain, *op.cit.*, p. 226.

and seizures. This helps in keeping Islam on a moderate course despite the trend of upsurge in that Muslim majority country.

### 3. Why the Islamic Upsurge in Malaysia?

Having reviewed the trends of higher Islamic profile, the paper now turns to explain the reasons behind it. The key to this explanation is that the rise of Islam has largely been a response to the contexts specific to Malaysia.

#### 3.1 *Ethnic Rivalry, Islam and Malay Identity*

Malaysian population has been deeply divided between three groups, the local Malays, the Chinese and the Indian immigrants. The Chinese were brought by the British in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and began concentrating in and around Singapore, Penang and Malacca. The growing economic power and influence of the Chinese being patronised by the British was a cause of discontent among the ethnic Malays, causing anti-British movement among them. Before the 1960s, the Chinese were the numerical majority; however, afterwards the Malays started to gain slight majority.<sup>18</sup> Despite their majority status, their socio-economic conditions have not been at par with those of the Chinese population. While the local ethnic groups are in politics and bureaucracy, the Chinese are mostly in control of the Malaysian businesses and trade. Mark Mancall observes, "...economically, socially, and educationally, the Malays always were at a disadvantage in comparison to the Chinese. They (the Malays) lived in the *Kampong* [village]; they were peasants."<sup>19</sup> So after independence, it has always been a priority for the government to adopt a policy to favour the local Malays with the objective of improving their socio-economic conditions. This has provided a necessary condition to bring the Islamic profile in politics.

Since the majority of the people are Muslims, their politics has become imbued with Islamic identity for ameliorating their poor conditions. Mark Mancall maintains, "Malay identity has, to a great extent, depended on Islam."<sup>20</sup> This identity has greatly allowed the Islamic institutions and practices to develop within the government and the Malaysian society. In turn, this identity has also created the conditions to advance "the economic, social and political aspirations of the country's Malay majority" largely

<sup>18</sup> According to ethnicity, Malays constitute 50.4 per cent while Chinese 23.7 per cent, indigenous 11 per cent, Indian 7.1 per cent, others 7.8 per cent. At the same time, in terms of religion, Muslims (or Islam - official) make up 60.4 per cent, Buddhists 19.2 per cent, Christians 9.1 per cent, Hindus 6.3 per cent, Confucianism, Taoism, other traditional Chinese religions 2.6 per cent, other or unknown 1.5 per cent, none 0.8 per cent (2000 census). See CIA's World Fact Book, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/my.html>, accessed on 10 July 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Mancall, "The Roots and Societal Impact of Islam in Southeast Asia", *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 2, Summer, 2002, p. 116.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

through “the form of state contracts, licenses, and development grants to the Malay *Bhumiputra* [sons of the soil]”<sup>21</sup> Judith Nagata labels Malayness ‘unimaginable without Islam’ which is pushed to centre stage in response to marginal conditions of the Malays. The outcome of redefining this identity is expressed in “the form of greater public attention to Islam.”<sup>22</sup>

The Malay identity is also related to the focus of Malayness expressed in the Malaysian Constitution which defines its characteristics “by language, custom and the (Muslim) religion.”<sup>23</sup> The Constitution requires that Malays be Muslims, indicating the primacy of Malay status deeply connected with Islam. The adherence to Islam is mandatory provision to claim Malay identity and rights as per the Constitution.<sup>24</sup>

K. J. Ratnam contends that Malay identity became prominent and linked with Islam as communal politics gained currency as a consequence of competing interests between Malay and non-Malay communities. In such competition, Islam has become the chief unifying factor among the Malays in their effort to secure and promote their pre-eminence in the country. However, such identity was absent in British Malay lands before independence since communal competition was kept to a minimum level.<sup>25</sup> The importance of religious appeal has only increased and become more pronounced in politics as the Malays saw their communal interests were under threat from the non-Malays. In the absence of such communal interests, the religion would have played no or lesser role in Malaysia. K. J. Ratnam, thus, reinforces this view:

... religion does not derive its political significance in Malaya from the conflict between different faiths. The issue must be viewed primarily as a component of the more general rivalry between the Malays and the non-Malays. Religious appeals for political ends are confined to the Malay community and are, in the main, directed at unifying that community by emphasizing its separate identity and interests. Religious and anti-non-Malay slogans almost always go hand in hand and are aimed at persuading the Malays to be more

<sup>21</sup> Wan Kamal Wan Napi, “*The Islamization of Politics in Malaysia: How Religious Political Opportunities and Threats Influence Religious Framing and Counterframing*”, Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA, 2007, p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Nagata, “How to be Islamic without being an Islamic State: Contested Models of Development in Malaysia”, in Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (eds.), *Islam: Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> This is evident in the state Islamisation of bureaucracy which aimed at articulating a majority right out of legal authority for Muslims as recognised in the Constitution and delineated by laws. This provides a basis of identity connected with Islam to form a Malay-Muslim majority constituency in Malaysia. See Judith Nagata, *ibid.*, p. 27; Johan Saravanamuttu, “Introduction: Majority-Minority Muslim Politics and Democracy”, in Johan Saravanamuttu (ed.), *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia*, London: Routledge, 2010, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Before independence, the local Malays had full authority over religious matters and local customs. The non-Malays, Chinese and Indian immigrants, were essentially a transient population and did not involve themselves to any great extent in local political affairs. The representative institutions were also missing in the British Malay states. As a result, the communal politics did not have any major appeal in the daily lives of the Malay people. See K. J. Ratnam, “Religion and Politics in Malay”, in Ahmad Ibrahim, Sharon Siddique and Yasmin Hussain (eds.), *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985, p. 143.

vigilant in safeguarding their pre-eminence in the country's political life and, as a corollary, to be less compromising in their relations with the other communities. ... the most crucial factors that explain the political importance of religion are to be found not in the traditional versus modern but rather in the Malay versus non-Malay continuum. The conflict between traditional and modernizing interests might have become the dominant factor only if the Malays had constituted the entire population (or at least a very substantial part of it), or if the communal differences between the Malays and non-Malays had failed to assume much political significance.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, Johan Saravanamuttu<sup>27</sup> and Maznah Mohamad<sup>28</sup> incline to call the Islamisation in Malaysia as inherent to majority-minority politics and a result of the competing interests between the Muslim Malays and non-Muslim groups for political authority over statehood. Both argue that the underlying objective of the rise of Islam in the Malaysian context is to articulate a 'racial state' rather than a religious state or anti-secular posture. This has been manifested in institutionalising Malay-Muslim supremacy in politics through various state sponsorships to the Muslim programmes and activities, including the government's affirmative action policy to promote Malay interests. The mandated connection between the ethnicity and religion is a particular case in point with Islam as the official religion. Such articulation of ethnic majority becomes prominent because the Muslim makes up 'not-so-large' majority while the non-Muslims constitute a 'not-so-small' minority. This has placed Islam as the chief instrument of creating statehood based on Malay ethnicity.

### 3.2 *UMNO-PAS Political Rivalry*

The Malaysian politics is dominated by two main opposing political parties, UMNO and *Parti Islam Se Malaysia* (PAS), having different views on Islam. The UMNO, formed in 1946, emerged as the largest political party which ruled the country since its independence in alliance with other ethnic groups, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The UMNO leadership mainly comes from the urban middle class professionals who uphold secular interpretations of Islam and Western ideals including capitalism, culture and modernisation. In short, the UMNO believes in Islam Hadhari or Civilisation Islam<sup>29</sup> that espouses a moderate course in opposition to its conservative interpretations.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>27</sup> Johan Saravanamuttu, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> Maznah Mohamad, "The Authoritarian State and Political Islam in Muslim-Majority Malaysia", in Johan Saravanamuttu (ed.), *Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia*, London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 65-70.

<sup>29</sup> Malaysian first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman first established Islam Hadhari in 1957 which was later promoted by Dr. Mahathir Mohammad. After Mahathir, this concept was also advanced by his successors to drive Malaysia towards moderate interpretation of Islam. See Wan Kamal Wan Napi, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*



On the other hand, the PAS which was formed in 1951 by the defection of UMNO's religious department is mainly represented by the conservative religious elites.<sup>31</sup> The PAS leadership aims at establishing an Islamic state that turns the country in accordance with Islamic values.<sup>32</sup> They seek God's (Allah's) blessings in governance of the country replacing its secular status. It also believes in the Islamic doctrine of "one Ummah" regardless of ethnic background and interprets the state and nation in religious terms having no regard to the territorial boundaries of individual states.<sup>33</sup>

The position on Islam is a fundamental difference between the UMNO and PAS. They are in opposition to each other to appeal to Islam in order to attract the individual voters and groups. Mona Abuza echoes this rivalry between these two competing parties in Malaysia with attempt to appeal with the image of being 'more religious' to discredit each other. They used 'doses of religiosity' in the fight for both legitimacy and opposition with regard to the popular support on certain political issues. For example, in the 1970s the Mahathir government of UMNO engaged in the 'political struggle' by islamising the government machinery with an increase in sponsoring Islamic programmes and policies. Such Islamisation includes encouraging Islamic attire in schools, gender segregating in public places such as cinemas, Islamic centres and Islamic conferences.<sup>34</sup>

The PAS plays as the principal opposition party which "keeps the UMNO constantly on its moral and religious toes". It is always concerned with Malay interests "legitimated by the moral force of Islam".<sup>35</sup> K. J. Ratnam maintains that the leadership of this Islamist party often accused the UMNO of collaborating with the 'infidels' (non-believers) and hence they are not qualified to represent the Malay interests.<sup>36</sup> The PAS, which emerged as the protagonist of an Islamic state, became influential through recruitment of members of the past Islamic movements (*Dakwah*)<sup>37</sup> which surfaced in the political scene in the 1970s with an appeal to Islamic profile.<sup>38</sup> The UMNO has

<sup>31</sup> Islam became prominent after the PAS proved itself as a serious contender in Malaysian politics. The party attracted allegiance from members with varied interests including religious conservatives and Malay nationals who demanded improvement of their socio-economic conditions. In the 1959 elections, the PAS captured two states - Kelantan and Terengganu surprising UMNO and permanently splitting the Malay community on political and more specifically Islamic lines. Although, there was a fluctuation, the party won between 30 to 50 per cent electoral votes in the elections. See Barry Wain, *op.cit.*, p. 219.

<sup>32</sup> The political view of PAS is similar to that of Jamaat Islami of Pakistan and Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, which advocate the idea of Pan Islamic movement. The PAS stands for establishing Malaysia as a state based on the Islamic principles enshrined in the primary sources of the Qur'an and Hadith. The Sharia laws will be the guiding basis to demarcate what is legal and prohibited in the state as visualised by the PAS. See *ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24; K. J. Ratnam, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-147.

<sup>34</sup> Mona Abuza, "The Discourse on Islamic Fundamentalism in the Middle East and Southeast Asia: A Critical Perspective", *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1991, p. 225.

<sup>35</sup> Judith Nagata, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>36</sup> K. J. Ratnam, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>37</sup> *Angkata Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM) is such a movement born as a Malay nationalist student movement and later adopted a more non-ethnic Pan-Islamic stance.

<sup>38</sup> The PAS has always won 30-50 per cent electoral votes since 1959. Apart from federal system, it secured the offices in some states and influenced the government policies on Islam. In the 1999 election, the party swept both Kelantan and Terengganu and won 27 seats in the federal parliament. See John Funston, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.

also responded in portraying its face with Islamic credentials in state mechanism in the face of PAS's "crusading spirit of moral righteousness as the true protector of Islam in Malaysia".<sup>39</sup> In a surprise move, Prime Minister Mahathir recruited in 1982 his erstwhile enemy Anwar Ibrahim, the founder and star performer of ABIM, and made him Deputy Prime Minister.<sup>40</sup> This move was apparently intended to raise its "Islamic credibility rating" and promote "a moderate, more innerworldly religious viewpoint conveniently compatible with that of UMNO's own public religious posture".<sup>41</sup> Riaz Hassan echoes this picture during the 22 years long leadership of Mahathir Mohammad "who trumped PAS by successfully wooing the main youth *Dakwah* (propagation) movement headed by the charismatic Anwar Ibrahim."<sup>42</sup> He also notes that their Islamisation programmes include: Islamic banking and insurance and expansion of the role of Sharia courts, increase of Islamic education in educational intuitions and establishment of International Islamic University Malaysia and a number of Islamic centres from rival political postures to outbid each other with regard to Islam.<sup>43</sup> Such rivalry over religiosity is expressed in Nagata's observation: "The religious gauntlet is down, and both sides conduct themselves as defenders of the faith over every public policy, in a game known locally as *Kafir Mengafir*, or mutual excoriation as infidels."<sup>44</sup>

### 3.3 Capitalist Development and Social Injustice

In the post independence period, it was an emphasis for the Malaysian government to 'uplift the Malays' and 'a fully developed Malaysia'. However, the traditional belief of Islam was considered a problem to accommodate this priority. The Mahathir government in particular redefined the interpretation of Islam which not only "take[s] care of the spiritual wellbeing, but to secure material benefits for them as well".<sup>45</sup> This reinterpretation of Islam helped the government to take up policies consistent with modernity.<sup>46</sup> Mahathir's vision was reflected in the government affirmative action programme better expressed in the New Economic Policy (NEP) in

<sup>39</sup> Judith Nagata, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>40</sup> The appointment of Anwar Ibrahim aimed at addressing "the steam out of ABIM" and depriving PAS of a potential ally who would have joined and strengthened the opposition. This increased his Islamic profile and emboldened his position to respond to the *Dakwah* movement. Thus, he appeared to have engaged in political race with the PAS "consciously to fight Islam with more Islam" that further intensified Islamisation in Malaysian politics. See Barry Wain, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

<sup>41</sup> Judith Nagata, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>42</sup> Riaz Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Judith Nagata, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>45</sup> Barry Wain, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>46</sup> Mahathir thought that Islam remains central to Malay value system. However, it is also an impediment to progress and material benefits of the country. The Malay Islam, according to him, is often equated with fatalistic traditions and beliefs that are not consistent with modernity. So he urged to redefine the Islamic teachings which are compatible with the "pursuit of materialism" and modernity. He emphasised that Muslims must be equipped with knowledge and technology of the modern world to gain material benefits along with spiritual values. There is no conflict between profit making and religiosity of Islam, Mahathir noted. This is often called as Malaysian model of Islam that welds Islam with modernity. *Ibid.*, pp. 221-223.

line with the capitalist development.<sup>47</sup> The core theme of these policies is to adopt pragmatism which is progressive and open to foreign investment, technology and modern concepts of capitalist development (e.g. free market, privatisation) and preparedness to learn from the West.

However, this development produced mixed results in the social structure of traditional Malay community. The government has often been criticised with a charge that the development benefitted 'a small group of local and foreign capitalists' and they needed reforms in accordance with Islamic social justice. The capitalist development has created an uneven distribution of wealth in most of the states. For example, in Terengganu the inflow of capital and sophisticated technology produced a coterie of new economic elites who have access to wealth and power. However, the majority people have largely remained weak and voiceless. This has resulted in hardship to the local community as the demand of the new elites has caused the prices of most goods and services including essentials to escalate while the poor are edged out of the markets in most cases. This scenario is also applicable in Kelantan, particularly in Kota Baru, the state capital. The capitalist mode of production also brings out "the growth of an acquisitive, egoistic and materialistic culture" which is "antithesis of religion and religious values."<sup>48</sup>

As it indicates, while Malaysia saw remarkable development, the gains have not evenly been distributed among the common people. Although, many people were better educated and better off than their parents, the vast majority of Malay people have continued their social and economic status as 'have-nots'. On the other hand, the government has often been accused of 'favouritism' and 'cronyism' in creating Malay millionaires. The financial corruption<sup>49</sup> and scandals are endemic to the Malaysian styled development that has generated frustrations among the common people. This is also interpreted as anti-thesis of Islamic social justice and has, in turn, created an appeal of Islam to those people. Barry Wain, thus, brings out this situation pertinently: "While the power and privilege of those in the upper echelons of a prosperous urban-industrial economy were reinforced, the poor and deprived struggled. In brief, the most basic principle of governance in Islam, social justice, was missing."<sup>50</sup>

Mona Abuza contends that the rise of Islam is also connected with the 'feeling of failure and defeat' in Malaysia.<sup>51</sup> Zainah Anwar observes that the majority Malays

<sup>47</sup> This followed the racial riot in 1969 that threatened the supremacy of the Malay community. This put an urge for the government to 'recoup political losses' by redefining the economic and cultural parameters for the Malaysian development.

<sup>48</sup> Chandra Muzaffar, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>49</sup> The Islamic groups spearheaded campaigns against government corruption that gained considerable public support and attention. In one such campaign, Harun Idris, the Chief Minister of Selangor, had to resign and eventually faced conviction in the face of public discontent. See Barry Wain, *op.cit.*, p. 220.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>51</sup> Mona Abuza, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

felt that they were “backward and left behind in the machinery of development.”<sup>52</sup> These people often saw Islam as the answer to resolve what they consider societal injustice which resulted from the pragmatic approach of development. Chandra Muzaffar sums up the rise of Islam in the context of such capitalist development:

In the Malaysian case, a portion of the Malay “have-nots” would choose to react to capitalist inequalities through Islam. This is because Islam, in the Malays mind, is associated with the quest for justice. While it is true that the religion has been used to legitimize Malay rule, it has also often acted as an effective channel of protest. It is only Islam which enjoys sufficient credibility in Malay society to allow it to perform this function.<sup>53</sup>

The rise of Islam is often seen as the case of the ‘chickens coming home to roost’ for Malaysian context.<sup>54</sup> The government adopted pragmatic Islam that again provides the catalyst conditions for the disgruntlement among the Malay people. The higher Islamic profile does have its root in the fertile ground of such Malay discontent. The Islamic groups including PAS expanded mainly through exploiting this discontent and gained support at the grass-root levels. This put a pressure on the UMNO’s government to lean more towards Islam and Islamic profile.

Barry Wain also notes that one of the consequences, following the pragmatic economic policies as stated above, was Mahatir’s image crisis as ‘the Great Oppressor, the Cruel One and the Great Pharaoh’. This was compensated by an inclination to Islamic profile to overcome this crisis. Mahathir, consequently, without addressing the sources of discontent attempted to engage in Islamisation with greater emphasis.<sup>55</sup> The declaration of an Islamic state in 2001 by him offers an example of this trend.

#### 4. Context vs. Ideology

The above analysis, thus, demonstrates that the rise of Islam in Malaysia has its origin to a number of contexts, namely ethnic competition between the local Malay Muslims and non-Malay Chinese and Indian population, the political rival postures between UMNO and PAS which have engaged to out-Islamise each other and the feeling of deprivation (as a consequence of the NEP) of the common people who have increasingly sought to find a solution from Islam with societal justice — a norm as enshrined in Islamic teachings. This indicates that the higher Islamic profile is not

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<sup>52</sup> Zainah Anwar, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Chandra Muzaffar, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>54</sup> Barry Wain, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>55</sup> In his statement, Mahathir tried to “... recover Malay affection by ... offering some of the items on the fundamentalist agenda he had always opposed. Encouraged and emboldened, religious bureaucrats flexed their muscles and tried to impose a grim form of Islamic orthodoxy. The sorry saga culminated in a declaration by Mahathir in late 2001 that Malaysia is, in fact, already an Islamic state - a day that in local terms is likely to live in infamy.” See *ibid.*, p. 218.

necessarily a result of a Muslim commitment to Islamic ideology which champions, among other things, to establish an Islamic global order replacing the status quo.<sup>56</sup>

From the ideological point of view, Islam is inexorably connected to politics. Bernard Lewis calls this connection as “the unique Muslim attitude to politics” and asserts that “Islam is not only a matter of faith and practice; it is also an identity and loyalty – for many, an identity and a loyalty that transcends all others”. This view is similar to that of Alain-Gerard Marsot who argues that Islam does not allow the separation of the religion from politics, unlike Christianity which dictates this separation in the New Testament.<sup>57</sup> Bernard Lewis also argues that the inherent mix of Islamic faith with politics has caused the failure of adaptation to modernity and its obvious consequence is the fate of backwardness for Muslim societies. This also brings to highlight the ‘civilization conflict’ between the West and Islam.<sup>58</sup>

However, in case of Malaysia, the Islamic upsurge appears to have been in response to certain contexts that have prompted the urge for the adoption of Islamic values at both private and public life. These contexts are primarily specific to local and socio-political contestation prevalent between rival groups within that country. This underlines the importance of mosaic nature<sup>59</sup> of Islam that may appear to assert in Muslim countries when there exists some pre-conditions — often socio-economic and political in nature. In those conditions, Islam is time and again used as a language or means to express as a sign of discontent or rivalry between interest groups. The Malaysian contexts, chiefly unrelated to Islamic ideology, highlight this variety of contextual Islam while challenging the monolithic interpretation of its universal character particularly as far the connection between the power and faith

<sup>56</sup> According to oriental school of thought, Islam is a universal ideology that covers all Muslims under one platform. In other words, Islam is a monolithic ideology and the Islamic resurgence is often characterised as a response to its inherent connection to a blue-print, drawn from the holy books and the early Islamic values, particularly those of the first four *Caliphs*, representing the ideal model to restore a ‘golden age’ of ‘pure Islam’. Islamic ideology does not recognise the national demarcation of states and looks to transnational authority. The Islamist goal is to establish the supranational arrangement based on Islamic society. The main broad goals of such Islamic ideology are: “1. Eliminating all non-Islamic, especially Christian and Jewish, influences in the Islamic world; 2. Re-creating a worldwide caliphate or Islamic state; 3. Recovering all the territories that were ever under Islamic occupation (including the Iberian Peninsula, Sicily, Crete, most of the Balkans and most of India [also Western China]); 4. Applying a strict interpretation of Islamic law for all Muslims everywhere; 5. Overthrowing governments in Muslim-majority countries that do not accept and apply these conditions; and 6. Embarking on a holy war to enforce these goals.” See Michael Radu, *Major Muslim Nations: Islamism and Terrorist Groups in Asia*, Philadelphia: Mason Crest Publishers, 2010, p. 35.

<sup>57</sup> Alain-Gerard Marsot, “Political Islam in Asia: A Case Study”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (AAPSS)*, Vol. 524, November, 1992, pp. 156-158.

<sup>58</sup> Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage”, *The Atlantic Magazine*, September, 1990, pp. 1-9; Bernard Lewis, 2002, *op. cit.*; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

<sup>59</sup> Vartan Gregorian, *Islam: A Mosaic, Not a Monolith*, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003; Mirza Tirta Kusuma, “Islam is a mosaic, not monolith”, *The Jakarta Post*, 12 October 2010, pp. 1-2, available at <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/10/12/islam-a-mosaic-not-monolith.html>, accessed on 10 June 2012.

is concerned. As noted earlier, had there been no condition, for example, the ethnic competition between the Malays and the non-Malays, the appeal to Islam would not have been created the way it has appeared today. The analysis also put forth another reality that Malaysia has consistently followed democratic traditions and at the same time presents a developmental model, popularly known as a tiger economy, by which the country has experienced a fast and steady economic growth.<sup>60</sup> This does not seem to have confirmed the key assumptions of the ideological thesis such as the intrinsic connection of Islam to 'backwardness' and 'anti-modernity' particularly in the case of Malaysian Islam.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper suggests that the rise of Islam in Malaysia is specific to the country and has little connection with the traditional interpretation of ideological Islam as a monolithic faith. The resurgence phenomenon is evident since the 1970s in the wake of a racial riot in 1969 where the Malay supremacy was felt threatened due to their marginal majority over the non-Malay population. This necessitated the government to link the Malay identity with Islam which increasingly became prominent as the principal factor in the effort to advance Malay interests. The Islamic profile has got a momentum largely due to rivalry between the two competing parties, the UMNO which represents wider interests including the non-Malays and the PAS which advocates promoting Malay interests based on Islamic credentials. At some point, the UMNO-led coalition government employed Islam as an instrument to appeal to Malay voters and raised Islamic profile in an effort to outbid PAS.

The higher Islamic profile has also its root in the consequences of uneven distribution of wealth with a few controlling the means while the vast majority have been living in poverty. This has often been seen as breeding ground for Islam to take root in creating the religious appeal for those who interpret Islam in the light of societal justice. The pragmatic capitalist approach taken up by Mahathir Mohammad who saw no conflict between Islam and modernity backfired in the form of replacing Islam with more Islam resulting in the 'chickens coming home to roost'. Before the independence, Malay states did not experience any religious issue since there were no groups competing for political eminence. However, this has become more pronounced in the post-independence period as the Malays saw their communal interests being marginalised by the non-Malays. The Malay communities began to link their identity with Islam primarily as a means to uphold their interests. Had the Malays constituted the whole population, there would have not been an issue of competing interests to promote Islamic credentials in politics. Hence, the rise of Islam is inherently connected with the local contexts among different competing interest groups mainly between

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<sup>60</sup> See Jan Stark, *Malaysia and the Developing World: The Asian Tiger on the Cinnamon Road*, London: Routledge, 2012.

two communities, the Malays and the non-Malays, rather than a conviction to Islamic ideology with a motivation to establish an Islamic state or a universal Islamic order.

Finally, the paper has demonstrated the mosaic nature of Islam in the Malaysian context while challenging the universal characterisation on a single platform to perceive Islam based on ideology. The findings of this paper reinforce the view that Islam is not necessarily one and uniform. This also highlights the need to reconstruct the global perception of Islam and Muslim countries especially in line with the mosaic nature of Islam.

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